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# ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN LIVING IN CONDITIONS OF POVERTY

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ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN  
LIVING IN CONDITIONS OF POVERTY

by

Terri J. Robinson

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ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN  
LIVING IN CONDITIONS OF POVERTY

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother who was a strong and a wise person. She was my first teacher, who encouraged me to believe in myself. She shared her infectious love and generosity.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The success of this journey would not have come to fruition without my spiritual relationship with God. Therefore, I acknowledge Him for guiding me along this extraordinary, yet challenging path.

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To my dad Thomas, I thank you for listening to me and making an effort to help me over the phone or in person during short visits. Although you could not help me out as much as you would like, I still had to learn the process of this dissertation journey chapter by chapter. My aspiration to earn a doctorate was deeply influenced by your obtaining your own doctorate. I followed in your footsteps and down the same career path in education that almost mirrored yours.

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ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN  
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ABSTRACT

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This study analyzed elementary teachers' perceptions of their challenges working with children who live in conditions of poverty. This study found that teachers often work with children from very difficult situations, including exposure to alcohol, drugs, violence, and abandonment. This study found that no matter the challenges teachers encounter daily, they remain motivated, dedicated and determined to take the necessary steps to meet the needs of their students. One way they do this is by using Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, which attempts to include various aspects of their students' daily lives and interests in the curriculum. The teachers in this study were concerned about the number and frequency of mandated tests, which can take away from instructional time. However, this study also found that teachers valued formative assessments to help them meet their students where they are academically. All the teachers reported that establishing partnerships with stakeholders was important to obtain community support for their schools. Although children from a background of poverty will always present challenges, the teachers in this study remained committed to working with their students



with respect and appreciation and to meet their personal and academic needs in moving these children towards academic success.

Keywords: academic success, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, poverty, elementary teachers, assessments, formative assessments, curriculum, perceptions, attitudes, challenges

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The United States set a record in 2015 of 43.5 million people living in poverty. The 2015 poverty rate was one percentage point higher than in 2007, the year before the most current recession (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). According to the government, the median household income level was \$56,516 in 2015, which is an increase of 5.2 % from the 2014 average of \$53,718. This is the first increase in average household income since 2007. The Center for American Progress (2007) estimates that one in every three people in the United States will spend one point of their lives in poverty. Many people live not far from poverty (Gorski, 2013).

Blank and Greenburg (2008) and Meyer and Sullivan (2012) disagree with the measures the government uses to define poverty. The problem is that the U.S. government has been the using the same system for measuring poverty for the last five decades. Today, families spend around one-eighth of their income on food instead of one-third as they did fifty years ago (Blank & Greenburg, 2008) and also spend much more on childcare and transportation. These expenses are not included in government calculations (Gabe, 2012). The number of people who don't have sufficient resources to address their basic needs—food, housing, healthcare, and clothing—tend to be underestimated by the government (Finley & Diversi, 2010).

According to Ronald Edmonds (1979), “inequality in American education derives first and foremost from our failure to educate the children of the poor” (p. 15). By any

measure, the poverty rate has been gradually increasing in the United States since 2000, when poverty was extremely low and was defined by the government at 11.3% of the U.S. population. The momentum of the growth of poverty has increased since 2007 and through all recent recessions (Gabe, 2012). By 2012, the U.S. poverty rate was 15%, and it was estimated that it would reach its highest point since 1965 by the end of that year. These increases, which are occurring even as U.S. corporate profits are extremely high (Rampell, 2012), originated from a web of economic factors, spanning job losses to low wages to the bursting housing bubble of 2008.

This “other America” consists predominantly of workers who lack advanced skills, children, the disabled, the elderly and their caregivers, and minorities. Farm workers and newly arrived immigrants also often lack advanced skills. Poor people in America are invisible, although they can be found in government reports and statistics and in many low-paying jobs. Many American children live in families who are experiencing poverty.

This study will focus on urban elementary teachers’ perceptions of children who live in poverty. It will examine how their perceptions and their own challenges affect their ability to teach economically disadvantaged students. Because its relevance to distressed, urban settings, Bernard Weiner’s (1985) Attributional Theory of Achievement Motivation and Emotion will be used to illustrate how emotions influence the cognitive process of academic instruction, specifically as related to teaching children living in poverty. Bernard Weiner is one of the most influential researchers of achievement



motivation. His emphasis on emotion in the cognitive process sets apart his theory from earlier theories because it focuses on the importance and effect of emotion within the primary cognitive progression of motivation. How emotions relate to, and modify, a student's level of academic motivation is relevant to the academic achievement of that. Weiner's theory is most important when examining the problem of academic achievement in children who live in poverty. Research indicates that many of these children develop complex levels of emotional problems as a result of negative influences that occur within their surroundings (Fowler, 2003).

### **Background of the Study**

In his 1964 State of the Union address, Lyndon B. Johnson declared a "War on Poverty." Soon after, the Head Start Program for students was established by legislation. This program was aimed at students from low-income households and was intended to increase their readiness skills for school. The initial rationale behind Head Start was that children of poverty entering kindergarten are at risk for low school performance (Brooks-Gun & Duncan, 1997). Head Start tried to give students of poverty access to educational support that would offer them equal opportunity with children from more affluent backgrounds. The government believed that education was one of the solutions needed to break the cycle of poverty, so that by offering students an opportunity to achieve equality in the classroom, they would better be able to succeed (Brooks-Gun & Duncan, 1997). Title I legislation also sought to address this issue by providing additional money to schools that have a large population of children from low income households. According

to the United States Department of Education (2004), the rationale for Title I “is to make sure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (p. 35).

Forty-three percent of children under the age of 18 live in low-income families and 21%—approximately one child in five—lives in a poor family in the U.S., suggesting that children are overrepresented in the number of our nation’s poor. Although children make up only 23% of the population as a whole, they represent 33% of those in poverty. Families with incomes just above the poverty threshold have an abundance of children living at that level (NCCP, 2017).

Parental education, employment, race, and ethnicity are among the many factors associated with childhood economic insecurity. Significantly, however, children whose parents work full-time are less likely to live in a low-income family, in comparison to children whose parents work part-time or only part of the year or who are not working (NCCP, 2017).

The higher the level of parental education, the lower the possibility that a child will live in a low-income or poor family. For children who live with at least one parent who has a moderate amount of college or some additional training beyond high school, 30% live in low-income families, and 12% live in poor families. In contrast, 83% of children live in low-income and 53 % in poor families when their parents have less than a high school degree,

According to family structure, there's a difference with children living in low-income families that consist of one-half of children (47%) 14.3 million and 35% of children in poor families 5.2 million who live with married parents. On the other hand, children who live with parents who are married are less likely to be poor or low-income in relation to children who live with a single parent.

Research conducted by Smith and Smith (2009) for the 2005-06 school year focused on teachers in low socio-economic status, urban neighborhoods and included the teachers' perceptions of both the positive and negative aspects of their teaching experiences. The researchers wanted to understand teachers' day-to-day perspectives of their job responsibilities and environment. The researchers found that the classroom teachers' practices and beliefs were influenced by their students' neighborhoods, behaviors, and attitudes. They observed that teachers' reactions to student responses also reflected their level of comfort with the students and the extent of their association with students outside of the classroom. If the teacher showed some interest in outside activities or felt some connection to the students, this was reflected in the teacher's reactions to their classroom behavior. Students with whom the teacher rarely associated were less likely to respond to whole class discussions or questioning, and teachers tended to disregard them when their responses were incorrect. On the other hand, teachers joked with and gave positive comments to students with whom they had a positive relationship. The teacher rarely called on students who were reserved or with whom he or she did not have a positive relationship (Smith & Smith, 2009).

A relationship exists between poverty and a person's experience with the quality of his or her life and is particularly well defined by the concept of Locus of Control, a moment in a person's life in which he or she decides to change or behave in a certain way (Lever, Pinol, Urlade, 2008). People with an internal locus of control see their lives as being formed by their own behaviors, while people with an external locus of control tend to see their lives as a result of uncontrollable outside circumstances, such as fortune or fate. According to Lever et al. (2008), people with an internal locus of control are more likely to be flexible in making decisions that will affect their futures, will be more focused on their own achievements, and will be better at completing goals. However, "it has been demonstrated that people who have low income, low points of achievement, who experience racial discrimination, and have lack of education are usually associated with having an external locus of control" (Lever et al., 2008, p. 380) and tend to blame others for the situation they are in.

Students are often strongly influenced by the amount of support and encouragement they receive from their parents for their academic achievements, but a teacher's expectations of, and satisfaction with, each student directly influences student performance every day. Docan-Morgan and Manusov (2009) cited Tevan, who explained that, "to maximize learning, it is essential for teachers to develop a good relationship with their students, because the rapport established between teachers and students, in part, determines their interest and performance level" (p. 156).

The study of student-teacher relationships and the powerful effect those relations have on student success helps to explain the classroom dynamic in various ways. “Recognizing the systemic nature of relationships helps explain not only the instructional elements associated with the relationship, but also that the systemic functioning of the relationship works to affect outcomes as well” (Docan-Morgan & Manusov, 2009, p. 183). The conduct of both students and teachers plays an intricate part in the relationship. The ability to confide in one another, use humor in appropriate settings, and feel a natural connection with each other can determine outcomes in the classroom, and these relationships affect the perceptions of both students and teachers, either encouraging or discouraging learning, motivation, and the confidence of both student and teacher (Smith & Smith, 2009).

Poverty is a great impediment to learning (O’Conner, 2010). Living in conditions of poverty means that children frequently go hungry, sometimes to go to school in dirty clothes, and usually do not receive necessary medical attention. Impoverished children under the age of 16 often have to look after themselves at home alone. They may have been abandoned, deserted, or forced to live in dangerous conditions involving drugs, alcohol, or violence. These students, living in such precarious conditions, are often angry, aggressive, or self-harming and may find it difficult to adapt to school or socialize with others (O’Conner, 2010).

Children living in poverty tend to stay in a cycle of poverty. Approximately 50 million American adults do not have sufficient reading skills to fill out a job application

or read to a child (Cooter, 2006). The children's low socio-economic status in school mirrors their families' status at home and in the community (Conley, 1999; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). Schools with the fewest resources end up losing funds because of their students' inability to make adequate improvement on standardized tests (Kozol, 2008; Mahabir, 2010). Students who live in poverty are often subjected to negative views about their academic abilities and are often seen to have lower expectations for their futures (Harry, Klinger, & Hart, 2005).

Multiple-choice standardized tests tend to measure the opportunities students have had, rather than what they are truly capable of doing (K-12 Academics, 2011).

Students' out-of-school access to resources and experiences—such as enrichment camps, books, being read to, or helped with their homework by their parents or guardians—are much more indicative of success on standardized tests than is native ability. Another piece of the opportunity gap has to do with access to education or differences between school and school-related experiences available to families in different economic situations. (Gorski, 2013, p. 13)

Inaccurate, stereotypical assumptions lead to low expectations and low performance:

Poor people are lazy. Poor people do not care about education. Poor people do not have positive role models at home. The problem is that none of these assumptions are true.

“There is no evidence that suggests that poor people on average are lazier, careless about education, or are less likely to have positive role models than anyone else” (Gorski, 2013, p. 13).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The most important objective of education is to ensure that all students, regardless of their race, culture, language ability, or socioeconomic status, achieve academic success and are prepared to become productive adults. The perceptions teachers have of students, ingrained in their own life experiences, might impede the achievement of this objective. These perceptions encompass everything that has impacted them in their lives, both positive and negative, including their upbringing and the image they have about themselves, their students, and the world around them. This study will examine how teachers' perceptions of children living in poverty and their own challenges of working with those children affect their ability to teach poor students and how a change in teacher preparation and practice is needed.

For many teachers, high poverty schools mean urban students—and specifically, students of color. Inequalities of funding exacerbate the many already existing problems in high-poverty schools, including access to preschool; well-funded schools; adequately resourced schools; school support services; affirming school environments; high academic expectations; well-paid, certified, experienced teachers; and student-centered, higher-order curricula and pedagogies (Gorski, 2013).

Ross et al. (2012) state that in 2013 approximately 10.9 million school-age children 5 to 17 years old were from families living in poverty. This research suggests that living in poverty during early childhood is associated with lower-than average academic performance that begins in kindergarten and extends through elementary and

high school. Living in poverty during early childhood is associated with lower than average rates of school completion. A record 47 million people, or about 15% of the population in the United States, live in poverty, based on a 2010 government standard for poverty line income of \$22,400 for a family of four (Kaufman, 2011). Using the same standard, another 30 million people are living just above the poverty line, in constant danger of dipping below it (Gorski, 2013; Luhby, 2014).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways elementary school teachers perceive the challenges they experience working with students living in poverty. The purpose is also to investigate the instructional strategies these teachers use with low-income students and to explore their understanding of the effectiveness of these strategies in elementary schools and whether and how they supplement and support learning.

### **Research Questions**

This study will address the following overarching research question, as well as three sub-questions: In what ways do elementary school teachers perceive the challenges of working with students who live in conditions of poverty?

- In what ways do teachers perceive how poverty affects students' academic achievement?
- What assessment strategies are teachers using to determine the effectiveness of their teaching practices with students living in poverty?



- What pedagogical strategies are teachers using in addressing the academic development of students living in poverty?

### **Significance of the Study**

The study of poverty began in the 1950s as a result of the economic problems of that decade. These studies have increased the understanding of the importance of the basic needs of people—food, clothing, medical care, and childcare. The current study contributes to research in this field by examining the challenges teachers perceive working with children who live in poverty. In particular, these challenges include decreasing learning deficiencies and increasing the achievement of all children; creating better-quality, improved education for preschool and elementary children; and recognizing teacher knowledge and decision-making as key to educational success.

A need exists to examine the elementary teacher from various dimensions. Knowledge generated by this study can assist in developing relevant information that will challenge teachers to deliver quality lessons and positive perceptions to children in poverty. Attribution Theory will be a distinctive resource for those professionals striving to create programs that address both the cognitive complexities of academic motivation among children who live in conditions of poverty, as well as the emotional adversities many of these children face.

## **Definition of Terms**

The following terms and their operant definitions will be used in this study:

*Academic achievement*: A student, teacher, or institution has achieved its educational goals (Hernandez Sheets, 2005).

*Assessments* (aka *Tests*): Tests designed to measure a person's knowledge, skills, understanding and so forth in a given field taught in school (Good, 1973).

*Attribution Theory*: the theory that explains how people link actions and emotions to particular causes, both internal and external (Fiske & Taylor, 1991)

*Capitalism*: A system under which the ownership of land and wealth is for the most part in the hands of private individuals (Lipman, 2011).

*Constructivism*: Constructivism is a theory about knowledge and learning; it describes both what "knowing" is and how "one comes to know" (Fosnot, 1996).

*Cooperative learning*: A strategy for classroom instruction in which small groups of students work interdependently on academic tasks. The tasks range from work on mathematics problems with one right answer to open-ended discussions to long-term investigations to creative problem solving. Students learn how to take responsibility for their own learning and to manage interpersonal relations (Grant & Ladson-Billings, 1997).

*Critical pedagogy*: Includes relationships between teaching and learning (Sandlin & McLaren, 2009).

*Culturally relevant pedagogy*: An approach to teaching and learning that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The cultural referents in this pedagogical perspective are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture, they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1994, 2001).

*Diversity*: Differences such as “ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, exceptionalities, language, religion, sexual orientation, and geographical area” that represent groups of people and individuals (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2006. p. 86).

*Dominated cultures*: Cultural groups that are forcefully made part of a nation by enslavement, conquest, or colonization. Dominated groups in the United States include African Americans, who were forced to come to the United States as enslaved persons; Native Americans, who were conquered by European and United States governments; Mexican Americans, who were living in the southwestern part of what is now the United States at the time of the Mexican American War; and Puerto Ricans, who were conquered by the United States government during the Spanish American War (Ladson-Billings, 1997).

*Hegemony*: Refers to the authority, dominance, and influence of one group, nation, or society over another group, nation, or society; typically, through cultural, economic, or political means (Clark, 2011)

*Formal Assessments:* Refers to a wide variety of methods that teachers use to conduct in-process evaluations of student comprehension, learning needs, and academic progress during a lesson, unit, or course (Abbott, 2014).

*Gentrification:* The misappropriation of working class and low-income neighborhoods and their revitalization for a new middle- or upper-middle-class clientele. An urban strategy and a central agent in the production of spatial inequality, displacement, and homelessness (Hackworth, 2007).

*Marginalization:* A person's position on the periphery of social, political, cultural, economic, and educational life. Persons who see themselves as living on the boundaries of U.S. society may include persons of color; persons living in poverty; people with disabilities; persons who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual; persons who are from language backgrounds other than English; and women (Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

*Oppression:* occurs when individuals are systematically subjected to political, economic, cultural, or social degradation because they belong to a social group ...results from structures of domination and subordination and, correspondingly, ideologies of superiority and inferiority (Charlton, 1998).

*People of color:* Refers to populations that are not part of the white population and are often part of underrepresented groups (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

*Poverty:* Lack of the resources necessary to meet basic human needs. The condition where basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter are not being met (Nalagon, 2004).

*Race, gender, and class:* interlocking categories of experience that affect all aspects of life; thus, they simultaneously structure the experiences of all people in society.

(Anderson, 2008).

*Social justice:* The belief that citizens have a personal obligation, mediated through political obligations, to help create a society in which the concerns for the concrete needs of all persons and the creation of reciprocal interdependence are fundamental (Ladson-Billings, 1997).

*Triangulation:* Triangulation of qualitative data sources means comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means within qualitative methods (Patton, 2002).

In this chapter, I provided a brief discussion of the problem statement, the purpose of the study, research questions, the significance of the study, and definitions of terms. The next chapter will address a review of the literature on how elementary teachers perceive the challenges they experience working with students living in conditions of poverty. Chapter three will describe the methodology used in this study. Chapter four will present the results of the study, and chapter five will discuss the research questions in light of the findings.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the review of the literature is to examine the scholarship on elementary teachers' perceptions of their challenges and responses to working with children living in poverty. I also review the historical/philosophical context of poverty in the United States and how it affects students. Also, the review also includes how the government, as well as organizations and individuals, have attempted to address the issue of poverty and looks at historical data and current research findings that examine the role of teachers in education. Doctoral dissertations and peer-reviewed articles in professional journals that focus on teacher perceptions are integrated into this review.

Table 1

*Outline and organization of the literature review*

<b>Poverty</b>	<b>Historical Foundations of Poverty</b>	<b>Social Justice</b>	<b>Instruction</b>
Overview of Poverty	Federal Legislation	Framework of Social Justice	Studies Relevant to Student Academic Success
Relevant Theories of Poverty	Government Initiatives and Policies Significant to this Study	Philosophical Foundation	Attribution Theory
Poverty Influence on Learning			Factors Associated with Successful Learning
Student Achievement in High Poverty Schools			

## Poverty

**Overview of poverty.** During the latter part of 1964, a plan was in the works for an intensive program for low-income 3- and 4-year-old children. Lyndon Johnson and his antipoverty czar Sargent Shriver organized a group of academics and civil rights activists to follow through with this. The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) created a variety of anti-poverty programs, such as the Neighborhood Youth Corps and Parent and Child Centers for young children. Plans called for Upward Bound for adolescent children and the Job Corps for individuals who were unemployed, both in efforts to directly or indirectly positively influence poor children. Due to the traditional neglect of Black communities by education and social services, the civil rights activists on the group promoted an additional strategy, one that would supplement school during the time when children were young. The psychologists, pediatricians, and sociologists wanted a program that would help children defeat the deprivation caused by poverty. As they began to give shape to the program, the members of the committee, of course, discussed what the program should be called. The civil rights activists, dedicated to the model of recognizing poor populations, recommended “Kiddie Corps” and “Baby Corps,” hoping that the word “corps” would indicate “grassroots political activism.” The academics, working on the assumption that low-income families demonstrated adequate parenting skills, favored “Head Start” instead (Kagan, 2002).

From the beginning, Head Start experienced conflicts that became significant during President Richard Nixon's administration and throughout the 1970s. The founders of Head Start were child psychologists and educators, not social activists, and were affiliated with universities, not with community action agencies. While the government chose the public schools to offer Head Start services, the community action agencies thought of this as one of the more conservative elements of the local government structure they were trying to change. Federal, regional staffs, and contractors, however, controlled the grant process. The demand from Washington was to introduce Head Start programs nationwide, and in many communities, there were no other alternatives to the public school system. To resolve the conflict between community activists and the government bureaucracy as to how the program was to operate, the local school systems adapted federal OEO specifications for providing employment and career support for residents in the community.

The nature of the conflict between Head Start and OEO, however, changed. In the late 1960s through the early 1970s, Head Start flourished while, because of difficult times, the Office of Economic Opportunity declined, but the central conflict continued regarding the amount of control the community would have over Head Start. However, the activities of local community action agencies to control Head Start funds and activities became more difficult to sustain, since Head Start widened its funding and public support (Zigler & Valentine, 1979). Although Head Start experienced several difficulties under President Richard Nixon, throughout the 1970s, a combination of



interest groups provided support and funding for the program, regardless of their sometime different positions on politics and policy.

Both civil rights activists and academics stood behind Head Start, expecting that it would inspire an improvement of public education and help parents become more actively involved in public schools. This cooperation continued, regardless of their differences, over the role of parents in the program (Kagan, 2002). During the years Head Start has been in existence, many academic studies have focused on the views of civil rights activists, targeting policy issues and questioning the program's effectiveness. According to Ziegler and Muenchow (1992), when Head Start first began, more children were living in devastating poverty situations than at any time during the previous century. Head Start was able to involve many people who were concerned with the well-being of children. Because of Head Start, people from a wide range of political backgrounds, including people as different as Jesse Jackson and Orrin Hatch, were brought together and became involved with the issue of children in poverty.

### **Relevant Theories of Poverty**

**Societal barriers.** Sixty years of research on school segregation has shown that “separate” does not mean “equal.” A report from the Center for American Progress identified a loophole in federal district policy, not only regarding property taxes but also regarding local district budgeting systems, both of which generate and sustain inequality. According to the report, “we are living in a world in which schools are patently unequal” (Spatig-Amerikaner, 2012, p. 1). The problem was embedded in the system and solving it

will require rethinking and reshaping policies that unjustly benefit some students at the cost of others (Nieto, 2013).

Something as “simple” as equal education tends to be more political than educational, according to economist Richard Rothstein (2004), who maintained that only a third of the variation in student achievement was attributable to the quality of the school. The rest was due to various aspects of poverty: lack of quality preschool education and after-school programs, low employment, and limited access to health care and housing. Factors outside of school that also impact student achievement include poor nutrition, devastated neighborhoods, and minimal pre- and post-natal care (Berliner, 2009). Many children living in poverty experience these adverse conditions, and the failure of education is one of the many factors that deny them the possibility of achieving satisfying and meaningful adult lives. Rothstein (2011) asserted that current non-school factors, such as a downward economic spiral, low work ethic, and high unemployment have a more significant impact on educational outcomes than do the schools themselves.

**Medical problems and social class.** Berliner (2005) has suggested that direct intervention in children’s health and the provision to all families of adequate income and medical insurance would be a far better policy than dictating academic standards that poor students cannot meet, partly because of medical problems that middle-class children do not have. Many medical issues that plague people in lower socioeconomic classes are easily curable through primary health care and need not hamper school achievement. For example, *otitis media*, a minor childhood ear infection that occurs about the same time

children are developing language, causes hearing deterioration if left untreated. The lack of treatment of *otitis media* is apparently a consequence of poverty and a lack of access to health insurance (Berliner, 2005). Certain aspects of the home environment among the poor most likely lead to many medical problems for children of these families.

Another medical problem associated with social class and poverty is vision impairment. Screening tests offered to the poor in New York and Boston indicated that over 50% of the children tested had some vision impairment that was correctable with eyeglasses but which was not subsequently addressed (Gillespie, 2001). Vision screening tests do not often assess the work students need to do, such as reading, writing, math, and computer-based learning (Gould & Gould, 2003). Asthma also affects a disproportionate number of sick children. Asthma prevents children of all social classes from efficiently studying and even from attending school. More impoverished children, compared to their middle-class counterparts, miss a lot more school because of asthma, as well as other illnesses, and therefore learn less (Berliner, 2005).

Another severe medical problem is mental impairment caused by exposure to lead. According to Michael Martin (2004) of the Arizona School Boards Association, lead is a more significant problem than anyone thinks. In the medical profession, no one disputes that small amounts of lead can reduce intellectual functioning and decrease a child's capacity to learn. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has shown that many children in the United States between the ages of 1 and 5 show high enough levels of lead in their blood to cause cognitive damage (2004). A half million

students in the K-6 population have levels of lead in their bloodstream high enough to cause neurological damage. Although the effects of lead in the system may be minimal or severe, the damage lead does is usually permanent (Berliner, 2005). According to Rothstein (2004), a lead-damaged nervous system causes learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, increased aggression, and lower intelligence. These symptoms among older children are linked to drug use and a higher chance of criminal behavior.

Schools do not understand the complexity of this situation because they do not see children falling ill in the classroom or dying of lead poisoning. Nevertheless, a large number of children find it challenging to perform critical thinking or even line up in the cafeteria because their brains have been damaged by excess lead (Martin, 2004).

**Tax increment financing.** Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is a powerful tool used by municipal governments in the United States to foster and facilitate market-driven urban development (Lipman, 2011). Once TIF selects a district, property tax revenues for schools, libraries, parks, and other public works are kept at their current levels for 23 years. Any increase in profits above this level integrated with a TIF account for economic development (Lipman, 2011). TIF has become an essential resource of municipal debt financing. State and municipal obligations in the United States increased 55% between 2000 and 2005 to \$1.85 trillion (Weber, 2009). Cities put together TIF accounts into TIF bonds. City governments rely on a combination of financial markets that avoid financial exposure and improve the confidence of investors (Hackworth, 2007; Weber, 2009). This

strategy has significant implications for schools. Because TIF redirects tax revenues from universities and other public buildings, it can be money donated to low-income neighborhoods, which may be used to construct new schools (Lipman, 2011).

**Renaissance 2010.** The Chicago Renaissance 2010 (Ren2010) is an influential organization related to neoliberal urban governance and educational policy that is a political and economic development that encourages gentrification. A cross between neoliberal urban governance and education policy, Ren2010 has become another model of market-driven urban school reform in the United States (Lipman, 2011). For example, through education policy, it is assumed that gentrification and displaced low-income communities of color are the result of this political and economic processes. Education markets lead to the reform of urban space. Lipman (2011) further explained Ren2010:

An accountability system based on labeling set the platform for Ren2010, sorting and classifying schools; allocating consequences disregarding disproportions in resources; the opportunity to learn; teachers' ideas; cultural marginalization in curriculum and instruction; the social context of the school; and the strengths children bring to the school setting. Labeling and sorting schools was a necessary condition to identify those to be closed under Ren2010, to turn them over to private operators, and, more recently, to use their students' test scores to evaluate teachers. Under No Child Left Behind, this ranking and sorting process lays the groundwork for a national privatization agenda. (p. 52)

### **Poverty's Influence on Learning**

U.S. policy has a greater effect on student learning and achievement than parental culture. Limited empirical research exists that explores the relationship between children's future income as adults and their parents' marriage, work, and religion. Transformations in these three aspects of family culture will reduce poverty in the children's lifetime much less than the decisions of policymakers (Ludwig & Mayer, 2006).

**Family culture, welfare reform, and generational poverty.** Before the mid-1990s, antipoverty policies focused on improving home environments by providing supplemental income, along with work requirements, to needy families. However, beginning in the early 1990s, the number of single mothers increased, and the use of welfare grew. Policymakers then focused their attention on discouraging women from having children out of wedlock and encouraging women to choose careers outside the

home. Legislation on welfare reform signed by President Bill Clinton in 1996 addressed these issues. According to Besharov and Germanis (2000), authors of “Welfare Reform: Four Years Later,” welfare reform “was focused on decreasing the social and personal dysfunction that is embedded and associated with long-term dependency, therefore ultimately reducing poverty” (p. 17).

**The relationship between language deficiencies and poverty.** Hart and Risley (1995) studied the interaction of language between children and parents in the homes of upper, middle and lower socioeconomic status black and white families. They speculated that language deficiencies in needy children and their families take on a significant role in continuing the cycle of poverty. Their study of vocabulary development found that impoverished children are raised in impoverished language environments that limited their vocabulary development and their achievement in school. The researchers found that federal educational initiatives addressing sick children have been inadequate in preventing the cycle of generational poverty. According to Hart and Risley, “Too many poor children drop out of school and follow in their parents’ path of unemployment or go on welfare, where they raise their children in a culture of poverty” (p. 2).

Hart and Risley (1995) found that there was a significant relationship between the amount of language used by parents and children and their socioeconomic status. For example, they saw that the vocabulary growth of children three years of age correlated with their family’s socioeconomic status. They also reported that the average 3-year-old from welfare families had about 500 vocabulary words, while the average 3-year-old

from the upper class and professional families used more than 1,000 words. These differences changed for the better after children began school and actively engaged in vocabulary development and reading comprehension by the third grade. Hart and Risley associated differences in children's vocabulary with the differences in the language they heard at home from their parents.

According to Hart and Risley (1995), some children knew more words because more words were spoken to them by their parents. They estimated that "by age three the children in professional families would have heard more than 30 million words, children in working-class families 20 million, and the children in welfare families 10 million based on the projection of their data" (p. 132). Compared to welfare families, professional parents not only offered greater vocabulary exposure to their children, but they also used more words in different contexts. When speaking to their children, they used "more multiclaue sentences, more past and future verb tenses, more declarative sentences and more questions of all kinds" (pp. 123-124).

Children living in poverty tend to fail in school due to their homes being deficient in language. They don't live in a print-rich environment of books for children to read or be read to. Overcoming the deficiency of language opportunities during a child's first three years is difficult. The language poor parents impart to their children can lead to a "culture of poverty" (Hart and Risley, 1995, p. 2), which denies poor children the linguistic and cognitive resources needed for school. Interventions from educators become crucial, especially ones that change how parents living in poverty interact with



their children; this seems critical to closing the achievement gap that plagues schools in America.

**Teacher perceptions.** While many prepared teachers receive the necessary support in affluent school districts, in some states many teachers are prepared but not supported in schools that have many low-income students. Research on teaching in schools located in urban settings indicates that teachers' skills and beliefs are limited by lack of available materials (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Many teachers lack high expectations for African American and Latino students, treating them unsympathetically, discouraging their achievement, and reprimanding them disproportionately. While teachers who usually come into teaching with little preparation for working with low-income students may eventually learn from their mistakes, they do not necessarily determine what is right for their students. Teachers may come to inaccurate conclusions that result in unethical consequences (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Teachers who often go into teaching without sufficient preparation for working with low-income students stereotype students and dislike students with whom they do not identify. Stereotyping is particularly the case for teachers who lack knowledge and skills. These issues frequently happen as a consequence of racism, yet the responsibility may lie with programs not preparing teachers to teach in urban settings (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

The conflict between school culture and home culture is apparent. When there is a considerable difference between the students' culture and the school's culture and what

the teachers have learned, teachers can easily misunderstand students' intent or abilities as an outcome of the variation in styles of language use, and ways students interact (Delpit, 1995).

According to the State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce report (2016), the public school student demographic population is expected to increase in diversity. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) expects that white students will represent 46% of public school students in 2024, a decrease from 51% of the student population in 2012. During the same 12-year timeframe, the percentage of Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander students is anticipated to increase. Hispanic public school students are estimated to represent 29% of total enrollment in 2024 (compared to 24% in 2012), and Asian/Pacific Islander students are projected to represent six percent of overall enrollment in 2024 (compared to five percent in 2012). Black students are expected to make up 15% of all public school students in 2024, which is a small decline from 16% in 2012.

However, a lack of understanding of multiculturalism in the preparation of teachers continues (Banks, 1993; Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Delpit, 1995; Fereshteh, 1995; Gay, 2000; Villegas, 2007). To address the achievement and culture gap and to provide effective teaching and learning for an increasingly diverse student population, all teachers need to appreciate and understand the “existing barriers to learning that children from low-income and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds consistently encounter in school” (Villegas, 2007, p. 372).

The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) required that all teachers be highly qualified. Although the criteria emphasized content pedagogy, a strong understanding of multicultural teaching is crucial for teachers. Teachers should be able to relate to the experiences and culture of their students, in addition to providing representations of successful members from the students' cultural background. Despite the requirements, however, even after more than a decade of NCLB, many urban schools have not been able to hire enough qualified teachers.

Discussing values and beliefs can be sensitive issues to bring up in conversations about student achievement. However, it is the teacher's responsibility to address because they associate with student achievement. Delpit (1995) stated that teachers are in an ideal position to make an effort to get all of the issues on the table to initiate authentic dialogue. . . . I suggest that the results of such interactions may be the most powerful and empowering coalescence yet seen in the educational realm for all teachers and for all students they teach (p. 47).

Acceptance of diversity exists when teachers regard the demographics of different cultures as an enhancement to their classes. Students from a variety of cultures are expected to assimilate into the global culture. Administrators, when addressing diversity in their schools, usually contribute to the current policies, procedures, and practices that encourage acceptance of diversity (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbelljones, 2005).

Elementary education is impacted by class inequities that exist in society as a whole. Many teachers and other professionals in schools are not fully aware of how their

class, gender, and race positions help to reinforce and maintain the existing social hierarchy. Some students and parents who come from backgrounds of poverty are not aware of or do not question, this cultural hierarchy or the poor educational results that authority produces. As a result, these students and parents often believe that failure is entirely their fault (McLaren, 1998).

Furthermore, many teachers neither disagree with nor question this situation. For the most part, they are not aware of the role they play in supporting and maintaining society's dominant or macro-culture structures. McLaren calls this unexamined tolerance in the dominant society's structure the process of hegemony (1998):

Hegemony refers to the maintenance of domination not by a sheer exercise of force but primarily through consensual social practices, social forms, and social structures produced at specific sites such as church, the state, the school, the mass media, the political system, and the family. (p. 177)

In educational research, teachers' beliefs are considered "messy" and a difficult subject to study, but according to Pajares (1992), teachers' beliefs influence the manner in which they act and teach. Interpretation of the term "beliefs" varies, as does the way of describing the beliefs of teachers. In his synthesis of educational research on teachers' beliefs, Pajares found many constructs correlated with beliefs. He identified a failure to distinguish adequately between beliefs and knowledge as a root of misunderstanding (cited in Piercy, 2009).

According to Pajares (1992), beliefs provide “elements of structure, order, direction, and shared values” on a societal and cultural level (cited in Piercy, 2009, p. 318). He stated: “People grow comfortable with their beliefs, and these beliefs become their ‘self’ so that individuals come to be identified and understood by the very nature of their beliefs, the habits, they own” (Piercy, 2009, p. 318). Drawing on the work of many researchers, Pajares found a common factor in most definitions of belief and knowledge: “Belief based on evaluation and judgment; knowledge based on objective fact” (cited in Piercy, p. 318).

Nespor (cited in Piercy, 2009) indicated that belief or belief systems have stronger affective and evaluative components than knowledge sources and that these emotional elements seem to operate independently of other forms of cognition associated with known sources. Also relevant to this research, Nespor suggested that knowledge is stored systematically by semantic categories or principles (cited in Piercy, 2009). In contrast, beliefs are comprised of episodes and stored in the memory based on personal experiences or events. Because of this distinction between knowledge and beliefs, researchers cannot directly observe or measure beliefs; they must infer from behavior. To examine a teacher’s belief, the researcher must use methods such as interviews, observations, or recordings that include the teacher’s actions, practices, or words (Piercy, 2009). Also, teacher beliefs may be more difficult than knowledge to identify during interviews or discussions based on their storage in episodic memory and their strong affective component (Piercy, 2009).

## **Student Achievement in High-Poverty Schools**

A school can take many approaches to foster high student performance. Research has determined that a wide variety of strategies exist for improving the achievement of students who are at a disadvantage.

**Characteristics of high-performing schools.** Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) identified 11 characteristics correlated with three general categories that associate with student academic achievement:

- School-level factors: a practical curriculum, challenging goals, and useful feedback, parent and community involvement, a safe and orderly environment, and collegiality and professionalism;
- Teacher-level factors: instructional strategies, classroom management, and classroom curriculum design;
- Student-level factors: home environment, learned intelligence and background knowledge, and motivation.

A review of more than 20 studies of high-performing high-poverty elementary schools by Shannon and Bylsma from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in Washington State (2007) identified nine characteristics found most often:

- A clear and shared focus.
- High standards and expectations for all students.
- Effective school research.
- High levels of collaboration and communication.

- Curriculum, instruction, and assessments aligned with state standards.
- Frequent monitoring of learning and teaching.
- Focused professional development.
- A supportive learning environment.
- High levels of family and community involvement. (p. 35)

According to studies by Barr and Parrett (2007), eight specific strategies and practices are found in successful high-performing, high-poverty schools:

- Ensure effective district and school leadership.
- Engage parents, communities, and schools to collaborate.
- Understand and have high expectations for poor and culturally diverse students.
- Target low-performing students and schools, particularly for reading.
- Align, monitor, and manage the curriculum.
- Collect data and literacy assessment.
- Build and sustain instructional capacity.
- Reorganize time, space, and transitions (p.24).

Hayes (2008) of the Vermont Department of Education found that seven key characteristics surfaced as common across studies of high-achieving, high-poverty schools:

- High expectations for all students.

- Focus on student achievement.
- Frequent assessment of student progress.
- Support for struggling students.
- Staff collaboration.
- Effective school leadership.
- Parent involvement. (p. 7)

This research on factors affecting student achievement has shown an emerging pattern of school improvement strategies and practices for schools with economically disadvantaged students. The combination of these attitudes, policies, and practices are most consistently identified for high-poverty schools attempting to achieve gains in student achievement.

**The importance of relationships.** Schools in which the staff held high expectations, developed positive personal relationships, and genuinely believed that all of their students could learn could transform their school more rapidly and more significantly than schools in which the staff lacked confidence in their students' abilities and were detached from their students. At high-performing schools, students were looked upon as assets, with unique gifts to offer society (Bauer, 1997). Leaders at high-performing schools continually identified high expectations of student learning as the top priority for themselves and their teachers. Teachers needed to be held to rigorous



accountability in their hopes of student learning because students responded to teacher expectations.

Payne, Burkley, and Stokes (2008) noted that a significant relationship between teachers and students must be present for meaningful learning to occur. This means that teachers are persistent in demanding high-quality work and offering support. Covey (1989) referred to an “emotional bank account” for the critical aspects of relationships. When teachers make “emotional deposits” in the students and show them respect, a successful relationship can develop. A school creates and builds relationships and support systems when teachers care about students, promote student achievement, act as role models, and insist upon successful behaviors in school.

The emotional atmosphere in an environment of poverty can be stressful and emotionally draining, depriving children of emotional security and self-esteem and robbing them of motivation to learn (Good & Brophy, 2000). Essential learning, much less academic success, is difficult under these conditions. Pellino (2007) asserted that teachers needed to make children feel that they are lovable, relevant, and acceptable human beings by making them feel secure and good about themselves. Positive and respectful relationships are particularly essential for at-risk children.

Given that student achievement was stronger when students perceived that teachers believed in their ability to perform, Milner, Flowers, and Moore (2003) concluded that establishing relationships with disadvantaged students and being able to connect with them was vital. The teaching of core content and standards was essential but

was not enough to ensure high student achievement. In high-poverty, high-performing schools, a culture of high expectations was embedded in a caring, nurturing environment where adults and children treated each other with respect. These strong and supportive student-teacher relationships were the catalyst for academic success in high-performing schools.

**The role of principals.** Schools with strong leadership have been proven to significantly increase student performance and close the achievement gap for low-income students. Research continually refers to the principal as a key player in sustaining a sense of culture in the success of all students (Cawelti, 2000). Carter (2000) asserted that the most notable factor in creating a high-performing school was the presence of an active principal who held everyone to the highest standards. The principal communicated and operated from strong ideas and beliefs about schooling.

According to Barr and Parrett (2007), principals of high-performing, high-poverty schools focused on students as the highest priority. They modeled, supported, and encouraged a school vision and mission supporting the belief that all children will achieve at high levels. Effective principals held high expectations for student learning that, consequently, helped motivate teachers to maintain those expectations for their students. A primary job responsibility of a principal is to monitor the effectiveness of school practices. This is accomplished by supervising instruction and knowing what is going on in classrooms while developing the ability to collaborate and share the challenging work of successfully leading and attaining instructional priorities. Principals

successful in increasing student achievement for economically disadvantaged students were knowledgeable about curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices (Blase & Blase, 2001). They valued dialogue that encouraged teachers to reflect critically on their learning and professional practices. They utilized strategies that were purposeful, appropriate, and non-threatening. They listened, shared experiences, modeled, asked for advice and opinions, gave teachers a choice, encouraged risk-taking, and recognized teachers' strengths. Encouraging, supporting, and collaborating with teachers to make the best use of their talents, experience, and creativity toward the purpose of improving students' achievement were essential characteristics of effective principals (Center for Public Education, 2007).

**School culture and student academic achievement.** Culture refers to a set of shared values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms found within a group or organization of individuals (Banks & Banks, 2009). Every employee in the school environment is affected positively or negatively by the culture in which they work (Adamy & Heinecke, 2005). As with any work environment, this applies to students as well.

Watson (2001) stated that if the culture of the classroom were not conducive to learning, then student achievement could decline. Schools function according to how the culture of the school is established and whether it is positive or negative. In 2004, three-fourths of the teachers surveyed believed classroom disruptions were the main reason educators had difficulty teaching students and students had trouble learning (Guardino & Fullerton, 2010). Traditions are a part of the culture and have a great deal to do with daily

routine. Whether it is written in policy and procedure or acknowledged in conventional expectations, tradition guides everyone at a school. Some districts, schools, and teachers struggled to find programs, strategies, and interventions that could change the course of a student's behavior while increasing academic achievement (Bohanon et al., 2007; Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005). Quality schools commonly strive for a culture that supports good work and high student achievement (Brown, 2004; Goldring, 2002).

In a paper written for the Denver Commission on Secondary School Reform, Brown (2004, p. 11) noted the following ingredients for a productive school culture:

- An inspiring vision and challenging mission
- A curriculum and modes of learning linked to the vision and mission
- A focus on student and teacher learning and quality work
- Relationships
- Leadership that encourages and protects the trust
- Data-driven decision-making
- Solid parental support

### **Historical Foundations of the Study**

**Curriculum.** Although both Kliebard (2004) and Caswell (1966) have suggested that the study of curricula as a professional field dates from the early 1920s, the publication of Bobbitt's *The Curriculum* in 1918 is nevertheless considered the critical first landmark publication. Mary Louise Seguel's book, *The Curriculum Field: Its*

*Formative Years*, was published in 1966 and provided a history that covered the decades from the 1890s to approximately the 1940s and outlined the contributions of Frank and Charles McMurray, John Dewey, and Franklin Bobbitt to this new, emerging field. In her study, Seguel (1996) stated that these men shared four common viewpoints regarding the curriculum: the nature of knowledge, the quality of the knowing process, the professional status of the new field, and procedures for introducing new curriculum insights into broad practice. Seguel's work offered a review of earlier curricula and the contributions of this particular group of scholars. Her work did not provide an interpretive history but rather a detailed account of the various curricular outlines and associations, as well as of the individuals who mostly developed them (Franklin, 1976).

Petra Munro (1996) has stated that although the history of curriculum theory and the history of teaching and education are interrelated, the history of teaching and learning has traditionally been concerned with the history of the profession itself and its role in shaping what is considered the institution of schooling. The history of curriculum theory is more particularly concerned with the examination of how education, which is broader than schooling, forms, and is formed by, ideology and culture, livelihood, and knowledge of millions of Americans in the suburbs (Hunt & Battig, 1966).

**Urban education.** Over the last four decades, many, mostly failed, efforts to change urban schools in the U.S. have been made, and the debate on educational policy continues. The problems include inadequate funding, lack of resources, unequal education, high dropout rates, low academic achievement, racial segregation, and an

imbalance of race and class around and in urban schools. These factors are part of the ongoing story of many cities. Race and poverty have been the central focus of these dilemmas, which started with urban deprivation and white middle-class flight in the 1950s. By the 1970s and 1980s, racial isolation and urban neglect were joined together by deindustrialization in important cities (Lipman, 2004).

The 1980s saw a decline in federal funding for social programs for the poor (Lipman, 2004). Corporate-driven school reforms have been popularized during the past 15 years, consisting mainly of privatization, chartering, vouchers, contracting, turnarounds, and urban portfolio districts. Unfortunately, these reforms have not proved to be any better than public schools at improving test scores, improving academic achievement, or decreasing costs. These reforms have been the central focus of an educational policy that restricts curriculum to little more than teaching to the test.

The restoration and gentrification of various urban areas and the neglect of others, in addition to creating an immensely stratified economy, have increased the gap between the rich and the poor. The connection between racial oppression and social class and the disproportionate spending between urban and suburban schools, have underscored the importance of social class in education in the U.S. Inequalities continue to be entrenched in urban schools (Lipman, 2004), driven by the global connection of markets, production sites, capital investments, and related processes of labor migration. Over the past three decades, a startling contrast between wealth and poverty has emerged in developed nations on a global scale (Lipman, 2004).

**Dimensions of policy.** According to Lipman (2004), “No decent analysis of urban education can ignore the ways in which urban education systems are shaped by the local and national political economy and the role of the state” (p. 13), including the role of race and class in the development of U.S. cities and educational policy.

How a state works regarding economic and political power and influence is reflected in education, and social movements can impact learning and challenge the causes of exploitation. Analyzing educational policy involves understanding governmental bodies, agencies, bureaus, commissions, and organizations at all levels of the state (Lipman, 2004).

Those in authority in the United States have persuaded the vast majority of people to accept massive social inequality and different jurisdiction through cultural hegemony—the structure of “common sense.” According to Lipman (2004), cultural hegemony is the understanding—often taken for granted and assumed—about social reality that legitimizes the existing social order (p. 14). Hegemony works to establish a distinct level of understanding of social problems and imposes limitations on choices in thinking.

According to Apple (2003), “The theory of cultural hegemony ties cultural struggles, contests over meaning, conflicting ideologies, political perspectives, and discourses to struggles over social inequality” (p. 14). In the field of education, those in authority further their social and political agendas by representing those agendas as in the general interest of everyone. The theory of cultural hegemony offers a way of looking directly at how economic and political forces control policy discussions, determine public views on education, and influence community views on education and broader social agendas.

### **Federal Legislation**

In 1983 Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education released “Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform,” which touched off a range of educational reforms, including efforts at privatization of the nation’s public schools. This report supported by business organizations and generated dialogue about the relationship between education and U.S. economic growth (Biddle & Berliner, 1997).

In the 1990s, high-stakes testing began with the Texas Achievement Assessment System (Ovando, 2001), which was eventually joined by accountability policies in Chicago in 1995 (Lipman, 2004). These efforts led to the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2001, which mandated national testing.

**No Child Left Behind.** In 2001, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which dramatically changed K-12 education in the United States and established standards-based accountability for all schools receiving Title I funding.



NCLB mandated public testing of all students. When the action began making school districts responsible for test scores, many schools based on their 2001-2002 test scores were found to be in need of improvement (Ericson & Ellet, 2002; Lee, 2004, 2008; McQuillan & Salomon-Fernandez, 2008).

The purpose of NCLB was ostensibly to make sure that children in lower socioeconomic communities or with special needs had a fair and equal opportunity to acquire a high-quality education and achieve proficiency on state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments (Lee, 2004; Linn, 2005). However, two alternatives under NCLB, “uniform averaging” and “safe harbor,” allowed schools to report data in such a way that would show schools in compliance with the act, potentially widening rather than narrowing the academic achievement gap.

*Uniform averaging.* The strategy used for uniform averaging was devised to challenge reliability issues of measuring groups of students from one year to the next. Although education policy had not specified uniform averaging, it was understood as permitting many methods of collecting data over multiple years and being able to use the techniques for either or both status and improvement evaluations (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005). In smaller schools with smaller numbers of students in specific demographics, “NCLB permits aggregating data from multiple years to increase sample size for more reliable estimation of the target group’s performance” (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005, p. 2). For example, schools can average test scores from a given year with test scores from previous years. This measurement is intended to account for the fact that student

performance can fluctuate widely from year to year due to influences beyond a school's control, such as attendance.

*Safe harbors.* Also, the safe harbor stipulation was established to focus on a fairness issue. The policy requires that schools disaggregate their test outcomes into subgroups (e.g., primary racial/ethnic groups, economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and so forth) and have all subgroups meet the same Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005). This can be problematic due to NCLB's assumption that all students can show improvement at the same rate. Therefore, safe harbor allows schools to have numerous chances to reach AYP rates regarding student subgroups (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005).

**Race to the top.** In 2009, President Barack Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced Race to the Top (RTTT), an initiative comparable to NCLB that also relied on standardized test scores (Nieto, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). RTTT created discretionary/competitive grants that were available to qualified states to help them in their efforts to proceed with reforms in four specific areas (Klein et al., 2010). These discretionary funds have become significant sources of financing for K-12 education in the United States, particularly in California. For states to qualify for Race to the Top funds, the rules must verify improvement in school in four specific areas (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.):

- Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy;

- Building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction;
- Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and
- Turning around the lowest-achieving schools. (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)

Standardized tests mandated by NCLB and RTTT have dramatically changed teaching and learning in the United States. Instead of offering a thoughtful and meaningful teacher education program or professional development that included such things as smaller class sizes, competitive pay for teachers, and more resources for disadvantaged schools, the schools most affected were those with very few resources and teachers (Nieto, 2013).

**Common Core.** The latest government education initiative, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), is a joint project of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Many states have adopted the Common Core, which is supposed to provide rigor, quality texts and a simple way to contribute to designing a curriculum. Proponents claim that it is tough, encourages collaborative efforts among students, gives writing a central focus, and keeps teachers from teaching to the test. These goals have long advocated by many policymakers, administrators, and teachers (Nieto, 2013).

Common Core comes with several problems. Although it is meant to provide high standards for learning and increase quality in curriculum, one problem is that it states it will raise student achievement. However, Joshua Goodman, of the Harvard John F. Kennedy School of Government (2012), maintained that adjustments to state standards over the past 20 years have not resulted in positive impacts on student achievement. Another problem is that new tests will accompany the Common Core and will require more grades tested and more tests administered per grade level. This may cause more harm than the tests provided before, due to states using student scores to evaluate the effectiveness of both schools and teachers. The Common Core also involves additional expenses for schools, including the costs of developing new tests, preparing teachers for new standards, purchasing new textbooks and other materials aligned with Common Core standards, and increased use of technology (Nieto, 2013).

Another problem is related to the financial incentives of Common Core's founders, raising doubts about the motivations behind its creation. In 2014 National Public Radio came out with a story profiling one of Common Core's five co-authors, former Bennington College Professor Jason Zimba. He left his position to dedicate his time to contribute to the Common Core curriculum using an organization he started with two other authors, including fellow Rhodes Scholar David Coleman. Coleman and Zimba have known each other for a long while. Zimba worked at the college Coleman's mother operates. Coleman and Zimba established the nonprofit organization, Student Achievement Partners (SAP). Their report promoting a national curriculum mandate got

them recognized and appointed by nationalized education systems to write the Common Core standards (Garland, 2014).

A lot of money is to be made from national curriculum mandates and tests, whether they are useful or not. The financial statements of curriculum companies show millions in government contracts. For example, Pearson Education, one of the most extensive curricula and testing companies in the world, has received millions from the federal government and its representatives to contribute to and supply parts of Common Core tests. As a result, Pearson earned at least \$138 million in 2015, the first year of Common Core testing.

Pearson is also making millions from retailing the Common Core curriculum, according to Common Core co-author Phil Daro, who is assisting these efforts (Pullmann, 2015). Some states have pulled out of the Common Core, and in many places, students are opting out of the tests—except in poor urban districts. Common Core, in the form of test prep and actual testing, is sucking money and resources away from areas that really could use the money more.

**Importance of test scores.** Since U.S. society places great emphasis on test scores, people tend to flock towards school districts that have high ratings. Schools with high test scores tend to receive more money per student, depending on the taxes paid in each city, which allows districts to provide resources that help students do well. Less money is given per student in poor urban areas because of test scores (Kozol, 1991).

The conclusions of the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966), describing the substantial impact of student socioeconomic status (SES) on student achievement, have been widely accepted. On average, students from low-income families scored substantially lower than students from higher-income families on standardized tests and other academic measures. Attempts to confront this problem stymied. Those emphasizing the effect of SES accused of “writing off” low-income students. Those accused of pushing for higher standards charged with contributing to the high dropout rate among low-income and minority students (Thompson, 2004).

**Segregation and funding.** Considerable inequality remains in financing for public school districts in the United States today. This is particularly troubling because the costs of teaching underprivileged children are usually proportionally higher. Such children have higher incidences of malnutrition, poor health, less caregiver involvement, less nurturing, less stimulating home environments, frequent changes of residence, and more exposure to violence (Pohlmann, 2008). A psychological assessment of a random sample of students in New Jersey living in extreme poverty (Anyon, 1997) found that problems plagued them: chaotic lives, neglect, abuse, poor health and chronic health concerns, emotional stress, anxiety, and hunger.

When parents who belong to a minority group ask for something better for their children, political leaders assume that the parents can be simply discounted (Kozol, 2005). According to Kozol (2005), by contrast, parents in the suburbs stand up for what they want, complain, pose questions to the right people, and get things done.

Fixation on student background can lead to absolving a school of responsibility for student performance. At worst, it encourages the familiar urban school fatalism of teachers and principals expecting little from their low-income students (Thompson, 2004). According to Darling-Hammond (2010), five factors contribute to the unfortunate educational situation in the United States:

- The high level of poverty and the small amount of support for low-income children's health and welfare. Also, the child's lack of early learning opportunities.

- The unfair allocation of school funds and resources has increased re-segregation of schools.
- Inadequate provision of high-quality teachers and teaching to all children in all communities.
- Uneven distribution of high-quality curriculum through tracking and interschool disparities.
- Factory-model school designs that have created dysfunctional learning environments for students and unsupportive settings for strong teaching.

In a school that is considered good, ignoring the effects of poverty implies that the family role in children's education has to do with neglect. When conditions of poverty go unaddressed, this can intensify the predicament of getting and retaining teachers and administrators who are qualified to serve the neediest students (Thompson, 2004).

The significant challenge of education involves not merely access to schooling but access to a form of knowledge that is empowering, one that allows students to learn to think critically and powerfully, to take charge of the path of their learning, and to determine their outcome rather than following those who dictate what is required. This struggle regarding decisions about whom to educate and with what resources has continued through each historical era for racial/ethnic minority groups, new immigrants, and the poor (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

From the time of slavery to the 20th century, African Americans have faced *de facto* and *de jure* segregation in public schools all across the nation, similar to that faced



by Native Americans and, frequently, Mexican Americans (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The Supreme Court in 1954 declared “separate but equal” education to be a violation of the 14th Amendment. In *Slums and Suburbs*, (1961) James Bryant Conant documented continuing disproportions in educational opportunity, including spending levels in suburban districts that were double those of segregated, inner-city schools. Although these disparities decreased somewhat in the 1960s and 1970s, they are again increasing and now characterize U.S. education for numerous students today (cited in Darling-Hammond, 2010). The U.S. public education system is driven in part by these inequities.

Local property taxes primarily support the cost of education, but even the addition of state grants is not adequate to close the gaps caused by differences in local property values. Also even if poorer districts tax themselves at proportionally higher rates, affluent communities can still spend more on their schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010). According to Pohlmann’s *Opportunity Lost: Race and Poverty in Memphis City Schools* (2008), one-half of all school funding comes from local property taxes, resulting in substantial discrepancies in money available for local public schools. For example, in Texas, before judicial intervention, one district spent \$2,337 per pupil, whereas another was able to pay more than \$5,791 per student and still enjoy a much lower tax rate. Wealthy schools were more likely to have the latest textbooks, full libraries, science laboratories, and state-of-the-art computer equipment, as well as the ability to attract better teachers. At the other end of the same town, children often made do with outdated textbooks and other

hand-me-down resources. Understandingly, many teachers are not willing to teach in this kind of environment.

Although the U.S. Supreme Court has refused to apply the constitution's equal protection clause to discrepancies in school spending, many state courts have ruled that such differences run afoul of the equality guaranteed under their state constitutions. The California Supreme Court, for instance, found school spending discrepancies in violation of equal protection. As the California Supreme Court put it, "We have determined that relying on local property taxes covertly discriminates against the poor because it makes the quality of a child's education a function of the wealth of his parents and neighbors" (Pohlmann, 2008, p. 3).

Many people assume that inequality has been eliminated from society because the nation does have many excellent schools that offer extensive opportunities to learn in engaging ways that are open to a broader range of children. But most policymakers, reporters, and editorial writers are not aware of the segregation the "other half" experiences in school (Darling-Hammond, 2010). As a result, policymakers often implicitly or explicitly blame children and their families for a supposed lack of effort, poor childrearing, a "culture of poverty," or faulty genes. Therefore, educational inequality continues among everyday people (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

**Cultural factors.** According to Nieto (2010), the term culture can have various meanings to people in diverse contexts:

Culture is the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed into a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a shared history, geographic location, language, social class, and religion. (p. 78)

Culture is what we do on a regular basis. The decisions we make regarding our traditions, attitudes, behaviors, and values affect the way culture changes. Culture is a learned behavior through interactions with family and people in their surrounding areas (Nieto, 2010).

*Cultural influences on learning styles.* A child's home is the primary place where learning takes place. Childrearing is a process of learning and teaching. The importance of socialization takes place within the child's family and the community at an early age. Within a given culture, children learn how to walk and talk. Engaging with family and caregivers on a daily basis has much to do with how children progress in school. If their cultural values and behaviors are accepted in school, learning can be positive (Nieto, 2010). Different culturally determined child-rearing practices influence how children learn in school.

Ramirez and Castaneda (1974) suggested that instead of asking families to make dramatic changes, the schools need to make some adjustments by responding to the learning needs children bring to school. According to Ramirez and Castaneda, the ways caregivers of different cultures raise their children result in various learning styles and different techniques of processing information. The researchers concluded that schools

should establish environments that are considered “culturally democratic” (p. 93) and compatible with the learning styles of all students (Nieto, 2010). Schools that have made significant adjustments for various approaches to learning from children of diverse backgrounds represent significant progress in both the theory and practice of education.

However, some scholars have criticized the existing research on learning styles and have even questioned the idea that different learning styles exist (Nieto, 2010). Given that learning is a complicated issue, research has emphasized that learning styles are a result of a child’s culture (Nieto, 2010). Some instructional strategies and assessments based on learning style research have been overly scripted (Nieto, 2010). For educators to develop a better understanding of how culture and learning are linked, they need to see culture as encompassing many characteristics that people have in common within a particular group. The social and political context of culture should be given particular attention since culture is strongly affected by shifts in authority and power. In a society, primary social groups usually decide what is essential in a culture. For example, significant cultural groups can designate themselves as “the norm” and others as “culturally deprived” (Nieto, 2010).

*Ideological barriers.* The most damaging cultural belief is that social and cultural identities and experiences define a person’s intellect and skills and that this cannot change. These beliefs make their way into school practices through the opinions of educators, administrators, and legislators (Nieto, 2013).

Societal barriers include biases and stereotypes about race, ethnicity, and social class and tend to affect everyone, particularly those who are oblivious to societal obstacles. If teachers and administrators have these biases, they may unintentionally act on them. According to Nieto and Bode (2012, p. 13), this is what is known as “the expectations gap,” the belief that students will behave according to someone else’s view of them, rather than on their actual ability. Gifted and talented African American and Latino students who live in conditions of poverty are praised and encouraged by their teachers far less often than their white and Asian peers of the same ability as a consequence of the expectations gap. Students of color are also more likely to be placed in special education courses in high school than are their white and Asian peers (Nieto, 2013).

Other ideologies include assumptions about families and whether or not they are concerned about their children’s education. For instance, parents who do not attend their child’s parent-teacher conferences often are looked at critically, when the reasons for their absence may include such legitimate concerns as lack of child care, lost pay if work missed, lack of transportation, or apprehension about visiting schools due to their own negative experiences as students (Nieto, 2013).

Harmful ideologies impede student learning, and if these ideologies are not dealt with at both the individual and the institutional level, they likely would not change. Social and school conditions, coupled with negative perceptions and beliefs about students, impede the accomplishment of society’s ideal of equal education (Nieto, 2013).

### **Government Initiatives and Policies Significant to this Study**

**Federal legislation.** In 1964, Congress created the Job Corps to provide education and training for a targeted population. These programs included the Community Action Program (CAP), which established ways in which poor people could work against poverty, and Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), a domestic Peace Corps. In the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) Act of 1964 (Zigler & Muenchow, 1992), Congress gave the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) the ability to respond to dire emergencies.

Sargent Shriver, the OEO director and President Johnson's chief general in the War on Poverty, had difficulty locating many cities that fit CAP criteria. Congress allotted \$300 million for CAP's primary year. During the fall of 1964, while the OEO was funding CAP's first grant, New York City representatives in Congress were involved in a dispute with Mobilization for Youth, one of the CAP initiatives. The New York location had been accused of mishandling of funds, causing public unrest and a lack of respect for the competence of the local government. This kind of negative publicity became associated with CAP. Shriver had the means to improve school performance, had the funds from Congress, and had a personal commitment to implement Head Start because of the spread of poverty in the United States. Almost half of the population's poor people were children, and many were under the age of 12. He aspired to increase the intellectual ability and the educational attainment of poor children based in part on his

experience as president of the Chicago School Board before joining the federal government.

Shriver had three central agendas: (1) to keep teachers employed full time, (2) to use tax-supported facilities to help develop comprehensive community action programs, and (3) to provide preschool children with educational experiences during the summer before their first year of school. He was hoping to prepare poor children for first grade by helping them alleviate any worries, concerns or fears they might have regarding school. Since most of these children had never been to school, it was imperative that Head Start help them conquer their doubts about the school environment and school activities. This effort would also be helpful to parents who may not have had a positive experience with school themselves (Zigler & Muenchow, 1992).

**Other outside causes of low school attainment.** Schools themselves have traditionally been seen as the primary cause of poor educational success for needy children, including low teacher expectations, poor quality of teaching, and lack of subject matter knowledge. Research, however, has confirmed connections between poverty itself and educational attainment regardless of school quality. Schools with less than 50% of their students in poverty had average test scores above the U.S. average, while schools that had higher than 50% of students in poverty had average test scores that fell below the U.S. average (Berliner, 2005).

According to Berliner (2005), “We put too much of our time, attention, and resources into trying to solidify what goes into low-performing schools when the cause of

low performance may reside outside the school” (p. 521). Berliner suggested we would be better off devoting time, attention, and resources to assisting families in the community whose children attend those schools. This would be an appropriate strategy for addressing the problem of the low academic performance of children in the community since poverty and its ramifications keep most poor children from doing well in school. Outside the school setting, various aspects of poverty influence student achievement, including family income, the surrounding neighborhood, violence rates, medical and dental care availability and use, hunger, the number of household moves during a child’s education, whether one or two parents are raising the child, the availability of high-quality early education that offers structure and preparation for the next grade level, and the language spoken at home (Berliner, 2012). Since children spend a relatively small percentage of their time in school compared to the time spent outside of school, those outside elements have a stronger influence on student achievement than what goes on in school. If a child’s family and neighborhood environment are challenging, the child is more likely to have a difficult time in school.

According to Weiner (1985), many children develop complex emotional problems as a consequence of living around negative influences. For teachers to respond to these problems requires frequent communication with parents or guardians. As a consequence of this communication all parties will have a greater understanding of these problems and hopefully, develop responses that would fit the unique needs of each student.



### **Framework for Social Justice**

According to Lipman (2004), “Educational policy’s role in the formation of inequity in race and class, and the connection with authority, consists of four orders of social justice”: Equity—“all children should have an intellectually challenging education”; Agency—“education should support students’ ability to act on and change personal conditions and social injustice”; Cultural relevance—“educators should use students’ cultures to support academic success, help students create meaning, develop sociopolitical consciousness, and challenge unjust social conditions”; and Critical Literacy—“students need tools to examine knowledge and their own experience critically and analyze relationships between ideas and social, historical contexts” (pp. 16-17). These four orders provide a standard against which education policies should measure.

**Neoliberalism.** According to Pauline Lipman (2011), neoliberalism consists of “economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in cost and labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere” (p. 6). Neoliberalism has generated a consensus about how we think about our place in society.

Underneath the surface of economic growth and political strength, poverty, racism, oppression of women, imperialism, and social alienation were brought to light by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Lipman, 2011). The cultural politics of race are significant in justifying the privatization of schools. Haymes (1995) stated that the “concepts of ‘public’ and ‘private’ are racialized metaphors. ‘Private’ equated with

being ‘good’ and ‘white’ and that which is public with being ‘bad’ and ‘black’” (p. 20). Portraying people of color as inferior (i.e., lazy and welfare dependent) provided policymakers with the justification to eliminate government social welfare programs (Gibbons & Katz, 1989).

The neoliberals labeled the post-Civil Rights era as “colorblind,” absolving the general public and the state from being accountable for improving racial inequality and oppression. This “post-racial society” denied the existence of racial disparity in income, wealth, employment, access to higher education, health, lifespan, and academic achievement, stressing that it is an individual effort and personal accountability that is the road to success (Lipman, 2011). This educational policy is essential to urban restructuring practices, justifies social accounts of poverty and promotes market outcomes and the withdrawal of funds from the community (Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2008).

The development of U.S. cities has historically been associated with business interests. City governments supplied physical infrastructure. Corporations supplemented zoning and other tax policies. Many of these policies were challenged, however, resulting in free admissions to local universities and union benefits for public employees (Lipman, 2011).

From the 1940s through the 1970s, working-class communities were relocated by urban development projects, and many people of color ended up moving to public housing. Overall, the reshaping of cities and urban policies has created new types of economic and social inequality (Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2008).

“Neoliberalism reframes how we think about an urban city, who has the right to live there, . . . what constitutes a ‘good’ neighborhood, and what kinds of economic development are possible and necessary” (Lipman, 2011, p. 33). The leading idea of urban change is neoliberal power, which affects financial plans and ideas. Cities are organized by neoliberal strategies that result in the isolation of racial/ethnic and social classes (Hackworth, 2007). City governments dictate large-scale projects such as museums, housing complexes, and downtown developments, resulting in the gentrification of working-class neighborhoods (Lipman, 2011). Urban schools are then slated to close, and children living in conditions of poverty ultimately are forced out of these areas.

### **Philosophical Foundations of the Study**

**Citizen schools.** Three strategic models of counter-hegemonic education have developed. The Workers Party Municipal Government in Porto Alegre, Brazil created the first model, Citizen Schools. Apple, Au, and Gandin (2009) specified how these schools counter neoliberal and neoconservative influences on education in Brazil. The Citizen School Project was started to not only focus on making schools better for impoverished students who had been left out of education in Brazil but also to begin a pedagogical project concentrating on radical democracy. These researchers (2009) pointed out how schools addressed alienation and failure by revamping the school structure by assigning students to classes with children of the same age while offering a more challenging environment to meet developmental needs (Lipman, 2011). The schools also developed a

curriculum focusing on issues of poverty and failure by confronting neoliberal educational agendas by articulating a “liberatory” educational plan. The Citizen Schools offer us innovative ways to think and grow in the field of education.

**Rethinking schools.** The second model, the Rethinking Schools project, aims to influence reform in the U.S. public school system. Its journal, *Rethinking Schools*, started as a teacher journal established in Milwaukee in 1986. The editors, many of whom were teachers, has provided a platform for teachers to read about curricula that address social justice issues. The articles help teachers to create a pedagogy that addresses issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, social inequality, devastated environments, globalization, war, militarism, and community disinvestment. This journal includes the perspectives of teachers who are working in these conditions, providing real examples of critical, anti-racist education. The journal creates an educational discourse that is counter-hegemonic and is available for teachers to access and implement.

**Culturally relevant pedagogy.** The third model incorporates culturally relevant pedagogy into instruction for teachers of African American students. A significant body of literature by African American scholars (including Delpit, 1992, 2012; Foster & Sen, 1997; Irvine, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001) has developed practices for teachers to emphasize the culture of African American students as a way of encouraging academic capability and sociopolitical awareness. A cross between a history of Black education in the United States and studies of the methods and practices of teachers, this work has created a wealth of instructional practices that support culturally relevant, culturally

responsive education for African American students. Pulling from African American students' cultural background, teachers who contribute to these studies associate literacy with students' social identities. By developing tools to defy racism and oppression, and by analyzing issues in the community, such as homelessness, this pedagogy opens the way for students to see themselves as African American intellectual leaders (Lipman, 2011).

According to Pedro Noguera (2008), American schools carry out three primary educational functions. First, schools divide students into groups based on academic ability and place them on possible occupational paths. Second, schools play a significant role in the socialization of children by teaching morals and values that are considered essential to society in general. Schools do this by teaching children to obey authority by introducing them to definitions of what it means to be "normal." Third, schools tend to function as institutions of social control. They provide social order by establishing rules, saying they aspire to focus on the good of children. All three functions are imperative in running schools. However, the third function also serves to maintain order and control, which is needed for the other two purposes to occur. In an environment where rules are followed, and those in authority respected, the process of grouping and socializing students becomes easier.

This leads to Weiner's (1985, 1986) Attribution Theory and its focus on student achievement, since the goal of education is to help students achieve academically. He

states that the most significant factors influencing attributions are ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. Three causal scopes remain with attributions:

1. Locus of control (two poles: internal vs. external)

A person's locus of control may be either internal or external. Reading skills provide an excellent example of this. If a lack of reading skills is associated with failure, then the possible outcome may be looked upon as a student's ability not being able to read. This specifies, according to Rotter (1966), that the result associated with having control from within is called internal locus of control. However, if a skill has a genetic disposition, it will not be recognized as an issue of internal locus of control by a student who fails.

2. Stability (do causes change over time or not?)

Some aspects of security are ability, difficulty with tasks, and bias, which are viewed as moderately unchanging. Other elements are effort, luck, and mood, which tend to change. Ability is a stable cause that is internal, while energy and attitude are unstable and internal. Task difficulty and bias are viewed as external and constant, while luck is an external unbalanced cause of success or failure. The stability of a reason has questioned because its locus of control may change in anticipation (Frieze, 1976; Weiner, 1985, 1986). This means that, if situations are projected to stay the same—such as one's level of ability, the difficulty of the task, or the bias of the teacher—then past results would be presumed to reoccur. Recent success anticipates future success, while continued past

failures reinforce the belief that there will be more failures to come. However, if crucial conditions, like the extent of effort expended, are expected to change, future results can be expected to be different than past results.

3. Controllability (causes one can control, such as skills, as opposed to factors one cannot control, such as luck or others' actions).

Lack of effort and being ill are both internal and unstable causes of failure, but there is an apparent difference between the two. The lack of effort is considered controllable, but the illness is not. A person might decide to try harder to overcome failure, but a person cannot merely choose to overcome illness. Effort is more controllable than illness (Weiner, 1985, 1986).

### **Instruction**

**Teachers: Between a rock and a hard place.** In the U.S. public schools, there are approximately 3.5 million teachers. White women make up the majority of teachers at 84%. According to a MetLife survey conducted in 2010 (Nieto, 2013), many teachers stated that they were content with a career in teaching, and three-quarters intended to keep working in education after they retired. However, 50% of teachers surveyed were not satisfied, primarily due to the stress of teaching in urban areas. Veteran teachers were less satisfied than new teachers (Nieto, 2013). Many teachers (69%) felt as though their voices were not heard in current reform movements. Teaching for a Living, a nationwide survey conducted by Public Agenda and Learning Point Associates that included 890 teachers (Johnson, Yarrow, Rochkind, & Ott, 2012), discovered that among K-12

teachers, 40% were discouraged with their jobs because they taught in low-income schools.

Another MetLife survey (Nieto, 2013) conducted in 2012 yielded even more discouraging data. More teachers were dissatisfied with their careers than indicated in the study done only two years previously. A growing percentage of teachers stated that they would leave their jobs if they could, pointing to a lack of motivation among teachers—or growing disenchantment. Teachers regretted the decrease in the number of jobs as well as cuts in such extracurricular activities as art programs, music, foreign language, and physical education. Increasing class sizes, inadequate pay, and lack of job security are some of the other causes for lack of motivation, and 34% of teachers surveyed felt insecure about their job, compared to only 8% in 2006. On the other hand, the teachers who are satisfied reported that they are treated as professionals, feel their jobs are stable, have the opportunity to attend professional development, have the time to collaborate with other teachers, have more preparation time and supports to involve parents successfully. These teachers saw a greater involvement of parent participation and their schools working together as a team to benefit the wellbeing of the students (Nieto, 2013).

A common theme in both surveys is that many white teachers in urban schools teach students who are predominately Hispanic or African American. The 2010 MetLife study (Nieto, 2013) showed that teachers who were highly satisfied and who worked in middle class and relatively affluent schools had high expectations for their students and a firm belief in their potential. They exhibited confidence in their ability to help their



students achieve student success. However, this was not the case for many of the teachers who worked in low-income schools that included many students from diverse backgrounds (Nieto, 2013).

Douglas Ready and David Wright (cited in Nieto, 2013) stated that teachers tended to over or underestimate their students' abilities, depending on the students' backgrounds and ethnicities. According to Nieto (2013), the researchers investigated associations between teacher perceptions and children's sociodemographic backgrounds, using nationally representative data, [and] found that teachers in high-poverty schools with lower achieving students often underestimated their students' abilities. However, teachers overestimated the skills of white students compared with Hispanic students, even when English was their primary language. Their involvement with their students was affected by their expectations and drove significant decisions related to placement in academic progress. (Nieto, 2013, p. 15)

Rubie-Davies, Hattie, and Hamilton (2006) have demonstrated that some teachers have overall expectations for the entire class; their expectations, whether high or low, are for all students. Marsh (1990) found that while the self-perceptions in math and reading of students with teachers who have high expectations improved across the year of the study, those of students with teachers who had low expectations declined considerably. Furthermore, students seemed to be aware of their teachers' expectations. When asked to

rate the statements: “My teacher thinks I am good at reading” and “My teacher thinks I am good at math,” the same pattern was evident (Rubie-Davies et al., 2006).

In a further study, teachers with high and low expectations were interviewed, and similar patterns were shown in their instructional beliefs and teaching practices (Rubie-Davies et al., 2006). Classroom observations confirmed the interview findings of teachers’ practices (Rubie-Davies et al., 2006). Teachers with high expectations had students working in mixed-ability groups, encouraged student independence in learning activities, explained new concepts, provided students with feedback, positively managed behavior, and asked many open-ended questions. Teachers with low expectations grouped students by ability and provided learning experiences that were teacher-directed; they repeatedly gave directions, reacted negatively to student behavior, and asked closed questions (Rubie-Davies et al., 2006).

It appears as if there are teachers who make a significant difference to student learning depending on their expectations, while other teachers have less effect on student learning. Brophy (1985) stated many years ago that the expectations for the whole class were likely to be more significant than the expectations for individual students, but thus far, class-level expectations have not been investigated in studies.

Many teachers are aware of the idea that “their expectations about a student can eventually cause that student to perform and achieve in ways according to those expectations” (Tauber, 1998, p. 1). Sociologist Robert K. Merton first named this phenomenon in 1948, and Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) introduced it widely to

teachers in *Pygmalion in the Classroom*. Research on teacher expectations since that time has demonstrated that teachers, like most people, will use outward impressions to predict another's behavior (Good & Brophy, 2000).

As a result of respondent interviews conducted for this study, their attitudes towards their students fall in line with Bernard Weiner's achievement motivation and influence their students to work hard and to do their best. Regardless of how stressful their students' situations were at home, the students tend to be resilient and maintain a level of motivation.

**Teaching challenges.** According to Noguera (2008), the Diversity Project he was associated with organized a staff development day where two panels of teachers held discussions regarding the daily challenges they faced with their students. One of the difficulties was teaching classes of students with mixed abilities. Some other issues included classroom management and cooperative learning. Some social factors that were out of the teacher's control included family support, prior schooling, and socioeconomic class background. Low-income minority students, especially African Americans, offered the most challenge. Some teachers agreed to work with the Diversity Project on the customized professional development plan to improve teaching at their school.

Another challenge that teachers encounter is that although a student may not have acted out on purpose, the teacher may nevertheless perceive the student as defiant. When the student's cultural values are different from the teacher's, a lack of understanding of those differences often results in miscommunication. Teachers may then unintentionally

use their authority to get the student to confirm, thinking it is best for the student. Sensible use of power would be one that addresses both teachers' and students' knowledge of each other's cultural values (Grant, 2009).

According to Grant (2009), another challenge teachers encounter is the belief that if they acknowledge the race of their students and discuss ethnicity concerns in their classroom, they may be labeled as insensitive. Teachers who ignore their students' ethnic identities and their distinctive cultural beliefs, values, and perceptions are not providing culturally responsive pedagogy. "Teachers who consider themselves colorblind claim to treat all students 'the same,' which usually means that all students treated as if they are, or should be, both white and middle class" (Grant, 2009, p. 37).

The respondents in my study expressed their attitudes about taking time to communicate with their students about other topics other than school. This leads to the student opening about their frustrations and sharing why they are behaving in a certain manner. It clarifies what is going on at home that is affecting their students during instruction.

Schools must acknowledge diversity and support distribution of power to reduce the achievement gap; teachers should recognize the difference, accept that it is not going away, and commit themselves to get involved in the transition that change requires. Teachers may do a disservice to their students if they center their teaching expectations around the idea that students will live in a community that will experience little change and have similar social demographics to where they were raised. Despite the fact that

many urban neighborhoods marginalized, teachers will do their students a disservice if they fail to prepare them for a world that is changing quickly (Grant, 2009). Knowing how to plan appropriately and implement classroom management strategies permits teachers to emphasize developing inquiry-based skills. Teachers tend to “dumb down” the curriculum to control student work better when classroom management is lacking (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

**Culturally relevant pedagogy.** Ladson-Billings (2009) discussed Giroux and Simon’s thoughts on critical pedagogy:

Pedagogy refers to a positive way to shape how knowledge and student identities emerge throughout particular sets of social relations. It can presume as a practice through which people can gain a “moral character.” It attempts to make an impact on the qualities of experiences that continue. Pedagogy is an idea which makes the processes recognizable through which knowledge is produced. (p. 15)

For Sonia Nieto (2010), critical pedagogy is an approach used when students and teachers collaborate in learning. Critical pedagogy also implies praxis, that is, “developing the necessary social action predispositions and attitudes that set the foundation of a democratic society and learning to use them to help alter patterns of domination and oppression” (p. 130). Specifically, culturally relevant teaching is teaching that involves students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural resources to convey necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

“Cultural relevance,” according to Ladson-Billings (2009), transcends language to include many aspects of school and student culture. Not integrating culture into instruction results in not being able to see a person’s history, culture, or background in a curriculum or textbook.

Culturally responsive pedagogy involves not only African American students but also Hispanic, Native American, and students of other racial and ethnic backgrounds (Nieto, 2013). Culturally responsive pedagogy is an approach that respects students’ way of life, culture, and experiences and includes cultural issues in the curriculum to make teaching more meaningful and authentic. Culturally responsive pedagogy respects and admires students’ community, broadens their world, establishes their identity, and holds high expectations and includes learning about the students’ background, history, and family traditions to incorporate those values and practices into the curriculum. Culturally responsive pedagogy demonstrates that these cultural values and practices are relevant and believes the students are as outstanding as anyone else. They are deserving of education with substance (Nieto, 2013).

Some teachers that Sonia Nieto interviewed stated that, “I need to relate to them. I need to know what their goals are in life,” which means understanding who students are as cultural beings. Another teacher has students create “a playlist of their lives” that will not only reveal who they are but also allow them to explore who they might want to be. Another teacher’s approach is to “bring the human side into it, make it more personal and try to incorporate their real life and their world to make them think” (p. 53). As Nieto

(2013) said, “Creating cultural responsiveness through the curriculum embraces the notion of diversity” (p. 53). One teacher stated that the goal was to

maintain a balance between language that is socially accepted in general society and helping children understand that their language is also a legitimate form of communication. I know I have to teach them language that is recognized in school, but also give them confirmation that their home language is a real language. There is nothing wrong with it. In some ways, I feel I offer them validation of who they are and understand them just because of who I am. They get to see themselves and experience the familiar while learning outside of their box. (Nieto, 2013, p. 55)

According to Nieto (2010), students learn better when they are interacting and collaborating with each other. Collaborative learning consists of creating equal roles for each student, regardless of different levels of achievement. Working on similar problems helps with having a greater understanding of what is learned. The result of collaborative learning among children of diverse backgrounds, led by competent teachers, is the development of a collaborative learning community rather than creating a situation where teachers and students are left to work by themselves (Nieto, 2010).

Strong teachers tend to use a significant number of useful strategies, allowing high-quality learning to take place, which makes a connection to students’ experiences, needs and learning styles (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Teachers need to be aware of the skills that students bring to school to make connections between learning inside and

outside the school. Teachers need to make their instruction accessible to diverse students with diverse learning styles. They need to know how to make decisions about what is best for the situation according to the diversity of cultures. Teachers also need to be able to help students recognize stereotypes to help decrease prejudice (Banks, 2001; Beyer, 1999; Zeichner, 1992).

Teachers who teach from a multicultural foundation have a range of knowledge of cultural groups, address personal beliefs, create safe environments, and incorporate multicultural strategies (Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Gibson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lipman, 1996; Nieto, 2000). Studies of teachers who work well with diverse learners found that these teachers identified strengths in students, held high expectations of their students, and held themselves accountable for student learning (Aaronsohn, Carter, & Howell, 1995; Banks, 2001; Gibson, 2004).

When educators make connections using culturally responsive principles and methods, they recognize the strengths that disadvantaged learners bring to the classroom. They understand that those students are culturally different from their middle-class peers and that they have unidentified abilities and underdeveloped potential (Williams & Newcombe, 1994). Teachers can develop skills in cultural proficiency in addition to skills in designing curriculum, instruction, and assessment that meet the needs of all students, including students who are at a disadvantage (Gay, 2000).

Research shows that motivation and support from teachers is an integral element of student achievement (Deemer, 2004; Turner et al., 1998; Urdan & Turner, 2005).



Effective instructional and classroom-management practices are associated with academic motivation and achievement of students (Foorman et al., 2006; Pressley et al., 2001; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). Students of teachers who are highly engaged in academic assignments usually spend additional time on instruction, which may include teachers reading aloud to the entire class, implementing small group instruction, and integrating curriculum. Encouraging self-control in students has shown to lead to high academic achievement (Foorman et al., 2006). Bernard Weiner (1985) shows how emotions influence the cognitive process of academic motivation, especially when it comes to children who live in conditions of poverty.

In a classroom where creativity is fostered, teachers engender and sustain an environment that allows respect for the students and encourages their new ideas (Cropley, 2006). Providing choices for students and allowing students to take risks with their new ideas and interests promotes creative thinking (de Souza Fleith, 2000; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2007). Teachers can employ the positive aspects of cultural diversity that are beneficial to all students and make efforts to encourage creative problem solving and age-appropriate ideas among students (Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008). When teachers incorporate real-life events that students can make a connection to, creative learning is likely to occur (Fishkin, Cramond, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 1999).

Teachers need to encourage expression and respect for many perspectives. Scholars refer to this type of teaching as “culturally responsive teaching.” Irvine and Armento (2001) defined culturally responsive teaching as “best practices that promote

maximum learning and personal growth for all children” (p. 19). Gay (2000) stated, “Teaching encompasses environmental and situational processes. As such it works best when factors such as prior knowledge, community environments, cultural, and ethnic identities of teachers and students are incorporated when used” (p. 21). Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (2000) stated that “developmentally appropriate practices involve providing learning environments, instructional content, and pedagogical practices” (p. 167). Three areas that are essential to address are an instructional approach, classroom environment, and curriculum.

Taking the time to know students’ interests also provides educators information on the learning needs of students. Banks (2001), a leader in the field of multicultural education, writes that, “the curriculum should demonstrate the cultural learning styles and individuality of the students within the school community” (p. 319).

**Instructional strategies.** Garcia (1991) stated that instructional strategy exemplify cultural influences “to overall approaches or methods for applying or utilizing certain principles in the classroom” (p. 129). According to Freiberg and Driscoll (2000), instructional strategies emphasize “how to teach content learners” (p. 6). Instructional strategies are observable, meaning that it is possible to hear a lecture or experience role-playing (Freiberg & Driscoll, 2000).

Weinstein and Mayer (1986) described many types of instructional strategies, including rehearsal strategies, organizational strategies, comprehension monitoring strategies, and practical strategies. Rehearsal strategies consist of the repetition of

information. For example, simple repetition occurs when students repeat the words of a song to memorize it, whereas sophisticated rehearsal strategies require more complicated tasks. When students use this particular strategy, they may be asked to summarize or paraphrase information.

Organizational strategy is the next type of approach. Weinstein and Mayer (1986) described both basic and complex organizational strategies. Basic organizational strategies consist of ordering or grouping objects into hierarchies, sequences, or categories. When students put new words into categories, they are using basic organizational strategies. Complex organizational strategies refer to more sophisticated orderings or groupings. Summarizing chapters of a book or creating a lesson plan from information require these procedures (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986).

Comprehension monitoring strategies are used when students determine whether or not they understand information, decide how they learn content, and recognize what they want to learn before studying (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). For example, these strategies used when students ask themselves what their interests are in learning about a particular topic before watching a video on that topic (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986).

Another type of instructional strategy is affective strategies. According to Weinstein and Mayer (1986), these strategies focus on attention to a feeling toward a subject, an action, or an issue. They also explained that people's beliefs and attitudes influence their enthusiasm and self-confidence. Affective strategies are used when

students take affirmative steps to pay attention to the lecture, even though they may not enjoy the content (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986).

Freiberg and Driscoll (2000) described a series of instructional strategies that are commonly used by teachers. The instructional strategies range from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered instruction, and consist of lectures, demonstrations, discussions, guided practice, independent practice, grouping, role-playing, and reflection. The lecture strategy falls at the teacher-centered instruction end of the continuum, while thinking falls at the student-centered end. When teachers use instructional procedures, they are recommended to move along the continuum (Freiberg & Driscoll, 2000).

**Assessments and accountability.** For the past 20 years, evaluations that are accountability-oriented have used as an instrument for improving education (Eckstein & Noah, 1993). As noted above, in the United States, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) implemented a policy for improving schools, which involved raising academic standards, in addition to enforcing high-stakes testing and accountability requirements.

Tax revenues commonly support high-stakes, test-driven reforms. Student performance tests designed for accountability purposes have been linked with public rewards (and punishment) for schools, leaders, or teachers (Popham, 2008; Stecher, Barron, Chun, & Ross, 2000). Unfortunately, this type of testing has been shown to have harmful effects on teaching and learning routines. The most commonly documented adverse impacts are two undesirable classroom practices: namely, teaching-to-the-test and narrowing of classroom curricula (Shepherd, 1989; Stecher et al., 2000). General

detection of such problems has promoted calls for classroom assessment that supports learning and learner growth (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2003; Black & William, 1998; Popham, 2008; Shepard, 2000, 2005; Stiggins, 2002). The decisions and actions of the teacher—including planning for instruction, selection and placement of students, referrals, and speaking with parents in the community—play a vital role in student achievement and many significant classrooms and school decisions (Gittman & Koster, 1999; Hoge, 1984; Sharpley & Edgar, 1986; Stiggins & Conklin, 1992). The choices the teacher makes can also influence students' motivation, self-perception, effort, and feelings (Black & William, 1998; Brookhart, 1997). Overall, formative testing of student achievement, which is different from high stakes testing, can inform and help improve instruction and student achievement, particularly for students performing significantly below grade level (Shepard, 2005; Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005).

Teachers are perceived as the best source of information regarding student performance and progress (Baker, Mednick, & Hocevar, 1991; Hoge & Coladarci, 1989; Perry & Meisels, 1996). Teachers are not only able to determine student achievement with a high level of accuracy, but also, because of their daily involvement with students, have a deeper understanding of student achievement than what might be shown by a standardized test, since these tests do not show what a child is truly capable of doing (Hopkins, George, & Williams, 1985; Kenny & Chekaluk, 1993; Meisels, Bickel, Nicholson, Xue, & Atkins-Burnett, 2001). The majority of teachers agree with this

position; some studies have shown that teachers are usually sure about their ability to accurately assess and judge the performance of their students (e.g., McBride, 1992).

According to McNamee and Chen (2005), to assess students' strengths and weaknesses, teachers need to find ways to determine a student's level of achievement and correlate that level with standards. Thus, there should be an ongoing process of gathering information on student achievement to understand what is going on in the classroom, which helps teachers make informed decisions about what to teach and how to teach it.

The respondents in my study communicated how they perceived administering various assessments during one school year. They expressed their concern of the instructional time take away. However, it is necessary in itemizing the data and looking for common knowledge that can be applied to their lesson planning and instruction.

Teachers have the option to choose their methods using informal classroom assessment techniques. Authentic and performance-based assessment, such as observation, portfolios, and anecdotal notes should be used to guide instruction on a daily basis. Classroom assessment also includes talking with students, making informal assessments, taking content area inventories, giving tests, helping students with projects, and assigning classroom work (Conley, 2005). According to Frey and Schmitt (2007), "to engage in best practices requires a shared understanding of what different assessment practices are, what they look like, and what the critical components are to expect outcomes suggested by theory or empirical research" (p. 414).

## **Attribution Theory**

Weiner (1974, 1980, 1985, 1986) established a theoretical framework that has become significant in social psychology. The attribution theory posits that people decide why people do what they do by understanding those elements that effect student achievement. Three stages in the process brings about an attribution:

1. attitude needs to be observed/perceived
2. approach needs to be determined to be intentional
3. position associated with internal or external causes (p. 362).

In the classroom, learning may be a struggle for some children. The chronic conditions of poverty may contribute to school failure. These conditions include fewer resources, less time involved in adult interactions, more health issues, and lack of connection between environments rich with print, and the children's personal and cultural identities. Many school environments that may contribute to failure have to do with low expectations of teachers, few school resources, and challenging work conditions for teachers (McIntyre, Hulan and Layne, 2011).

When students make errors or don't do well, they will go through a process called internal attribution, the belief that they have caused the failure; then students slowly become aware of another feeling in which they try to find an outside cause of the error, called external attribution. This occurs because they are concerned about how they appear to others. External attribution will most likely hold them back, not inspire them to move

forward and to work on themselves to improve. The outcome leads to the child not concentrating on the actual—internal—cause of his or her error. Roesch and Amirkham (1997) found that when athletes paid close attention to themselves and recognized that a mistake was their fault, they were able to eliminate those errors. When working with students in the classroom who complain about not succeeding because the content area or skill is too complicated for them, a teacher needs to show them that the problem is lack of good study habits. This will allow the students to change their behavior from being harmful to most likely confident and improve their attitudes (Roesch & Amirkham, 1997).

Teachers' expectations influence their students and most likely affect their academic achievement. Many teachers, in spite of good intentions, believe that children who live in conditions of poverty cannot accomplish as much as children who do not. This thinking results in the belief that these students will acquire only necessary skills (Delpit, 1986, 1988; Ferguson, 1998; Weinstein, 2004).

### **Studies Relevant to Student Academic Success**

According to Nieto (2010), when students are engaged and collaborating with each other, they learn better. Collaborative learning is based on creating more equitable roles among students who may be at various levels of achievement. This can result in higher academic success when students work on similar problems to improve understanding.



A connection exists between schools, teachers, and learning. For example, a secure relationship with a teacher is critical to keeping students in school; students who do not have strong relationships with their teachers drop out at higher rates. A survey of African American males who remained in school showed that their teachers gave them hope, while those who dropped out of school indicated that they did not have a close relationship with their teachers (Nieto, 2010).

When educators and schools are genuinely concerned with student learning, students identify the school as a place they can relate to and develop their academic individuality. The conclusions reached by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) in their study regarding African American children in a Washington, DC, high school found that academic success to the student meant “acting white.” This demonstrated that a positive association between school learning and their environment outside school had been not made (Nieto, 2010). “Teachers and schools need to make academic success what Meier called a ‘wantable’ identity, while at the same time not disparaging or dismissing the characters with which students come to school” (Nieto, 2010, p. 124).

Teachers need to establish healthy, meaningful relationships with their students in spite of the challenges they face in building these relationships. For example, the number of diverse students is growing in the United States, while the number of diverse teachers is not. Teachers of European American backgrounds may have little to no experience with bicultural students. This may lead to the teacher having stereotypical thoughts about them. Most teacher education programs are not known for preparing teachers for

diversity (Nieto, 2010). To develop meaningful relationships with their students, teachers need first to change their attitudes and beliefs and learn to value minority students (Nieto, 2010).

When instructional goals identified by students' interest instead of ability as gauged by standardized tests, students are more likely to stay interested in an idea and develop a more significant knowledge base. If students are enjoying learning, students will exceed the expectations of teachers. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to examine what is understood by "learning abilities" (Grant, 2009).

Teachers continuously make judgments about what they feel influences their students' achievement (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). Teachers have theories about why their students are achieving the way they are and whether they are doing well or not. Many teachers believe that a large part of what motivates students is the amount of support they receive at home. Student motivation, ability, and home support guide the teachers' efforts to implement instructional goals in the classroom. Teachers also make assumptions regarding what motivates or helps achievement based on how students perform in the school—their performance, their behavior, how they respond to the teacher and classroom tasks (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

Teachers have indicated that one of the challenges they face is keeping their students from falling behind due to excessive absences. However, they are usually empathetic towards their students' situations and take the necessary steps to compensate for deficiencies.

Teachers view students who are White and Asian as more teachable than students who are Black and Latino, and students from middle- or upper-class backgrounds as more teachable than those from lower-class environments, even if they all display the same behavior in the classroom (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). Teachers have associated Asian immigrant students' difficulty in their academics with their inability to speak English, but the academic problems of African American students are attributed to family background and, most importantly, according to the teacher's sense of the degree to which their parents value education (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

According to Grant and Sleeter (2007), teachers who are competent at teaching low-income students of color will take the initiative to introduce children to complex material. By engaging students with thought-provoking content that is above their reading level, students learn to "decode" when being read to by their teachers. Specifically, during fourth grade, there is a transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" (Grant & Sleeter, 2007, p. 36). Engaging students in discussions that include information and advanced vocabulary is critical. Enabling students to create metaphors to make connections with their prior knowledge to new insights requires them to get involved in activities that use vocabulary in analytical and creative ways. Engaging students in material that requires repetitive oral use helps to develop vocabulary. For example, students who can distinguish between fiction, nonfiction, and other genres of literature as they discuss each other's writing and editing use this knowledge (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). Having the ability to solve problems is useful beyond the classroom because it connects

students to their intellectual skills. Instruction that is successful needs to be continuous, rigorous, and integrated across content areas that make a connection to each student's experience and culture (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

When working with low-income children of color, it is essential to look at what the children know versus what they do not know—specifically, how they decipher and evaluate life situations and make accurate judgments.

By knowing the context of their students' lives, skillful teachers can connect broader world learning to their experiences through instruction that is meaningful and engaging (Grant & Sleeter, 2007, p. 55).

Successful teachers share individual attitudes and practices. They will take the initiative to find ways to introduce the culture of middle-class homes, which students who are living in poverty are less likely to experience. They refrain from making adverse assessments and judgments about students' lack of knowledge of particular vocabulary. They teach what is necessary with enthusiasm (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). Successful teachers are aware that it is skill, not intelligence, that students lack, and that they need practical instruction to master these skills. They emphasize to students that they are all smart but have varying levels of skills and that skills can develop over time. Sometimes extra effort and reinforcing of what's taught is necessary to increase their skills (Grant & Sleeter, 2007, p. 57).

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Teaching skills in a program that is consistent will help develop the necessary vocabulary to use in the context of real-life experience. Providing instruction that connects instruction in class to the experiences children bring with them to school reinforces the sense that children can make a connection (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

Strategies and conventions should be taught within a context that provides meaning, so students can make a connection to the community (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). Most successful teachers observe what their students are doing and will expose them to many tools to use and to build skills, giving them the opportunity to grasp a concept (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

The stereotype is that teachers of low-income children provide instruction with no connection to real-life experiences. An effective teacher will give students opportunities to participate in literacy activities regardless of whether or not their homes reflect school culture, helping them learn the skills to communicate accordingly. Teaching skills should be deliberate by engaging students in activities that involve interaction, writing, reading, and communication with each other (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). Students given the opportunity to speak and explain what they have learned to others can solidify new knowledge (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

Successful instruction that is integrated across the curriculum and connected to students' real-life experiences is engaging, rigorous, continuous, and nurtures problem solving skills that students can build on beyond the classroom (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). Successful teachers of low-income children help their students achieve at high levels by focusing on instructional strategies that keep the students' cultures and academic backgrounds in mind. Such teachers build on children's interests and expose them to new environments. Teachers must not only analyze what their students do not know but also recognize what they already do (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

## **Factors Associated with Successful Learning**

McCombs (2003) has delineated the various modalities, cognitive, and metacognitive factors associated with academic success.

### **The learning process.**

1. Nature of the learning process: Learning complex subject matter is most useful when it is intended to construct meaning from information and experience.
2. Goals of the learning process: A learner who is successful, over time and with support and instructional guidance, can create meaningful, logical demonstrations of knowledge.
3. Construction of knowledge: The successful learner can make a connection to new information with existing knowledge in meaningful ways.
4. Strategic thinking: The successful learner can produce and use a repertoire of thinking and reasoning strategies to attain complex learning goals.
5. Thinking about thinking: Inquiry-based strategies choose and monitor mental processes that facilitate creative and critical thinking.
6. The context of learning: Learning influenced by environmental factors, including culture, technology, and instructional practices.

### **Motivational and affective factors.**

7. Motivational and emotional influences on learning: The learner's motivation influences what and how much is learned. Motivation to learn is affected by the individual's emotional states, beliefs, interests and goals, and routine of thinking.

8. Intrinsic motivation to learn: The learner's creativity, higher order thinking, and natural curiosity all contribute to motivation to learn. Inherent motivation stimulates tasks of optimal novelty and difficulty, relevant to personal interests, and provides for individual choice and control.

9. Effects on motivation on effort: gaining sophisticated knowledge and skills requires extensive effort and guided practice by the student. Without the students' motivation to learn, the willingness to put forth this effort is unlikely without coercion.

**Developmental and social factors.**

10. Developmental influence on learning: As individuals evolve, they come across various opportunities and experience many constraints for learning. Learning is most effective when individual development within and across physical, intellectual, emotional, and social domains is taken into account.

11. Social influences on learning: Learning impacted by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication with others.

**Individual differences factors.**

12. Individual differences in learning: Learners have many strategies, approaches, and abilities for learning that are a result of prior experience and heredity.

13. Learning and diversity: Learning is most effective when differences in learners' linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds are taken into account.



14. Standards and assessment: Setting significantly high and challenging standards and assessing the learner and learning process, including analytical, process, and outcome assessments, are integral parts of the learning process.

These values are meant to provide an understanding of students while they are making connections to real-world learning. They are assumed to be an organized set of principles; no policy should be examined by itself. The 14 values are separated into categories regarding cognitive and metacognitive, motivational and effective, developmental and social, and individual difference factors that will make an impact on students and learning. The principles are also meant to be relevant to all learners from children to teachers, to administrators, to parents, and to the people in the community involved in our educational system (McCombs, 2003).

No student is ordinary. Good teachers put in the effort to get to know each student as an individual. According to Grant and Sleeter (2007), “many teachers hold on to the goal of beginning with the particularities of the children in their classrooms” (p. 42). The most important thing a teacher can do to start teaching is to establish friendly relationships with each student. Higher student achievement results from having strong student-teacher relationships and student engagement in the classroom. Components of healthy relationships are patience, determination, facilitation, and support of and empowerment for students.

Positive student-student relationships are as meaningful as student-teacher relationships. Students learn better when they are emotionally secure in the classroom,

and the teacher creates an environment conducive to peer learning. When teachers encourage students to communicate with and respect other students from diverse backgrounds, students will be better prepared when they come face to face with differences in the future and be capable of a deeper understanding of life in a diverse society (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

Finding familiar ground and shared interests help to build similar relationships in the classroom. Cultivating a class community takes time. Students can learn to appreciate each other's perspectives but do not necessarily have to agree with them. Therefore, they should try to sense how other students feel about different things (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

Incorporating cooperative learning also leads to improved student achievement. Collaborative learning supports diverse learning styles and abilities. Cooperative learning groups that are heterogeneous in ability, race/ethnicity, gender, and social class tend to disrupt patterns of segregation that may occur among students and present an opportunity for children to get to know each other. Groups function best when work is planned so that every student has a role, roles switch as activities change, and all students are accountable for their work. So, for example, one student might be a great writer, while another is good at drawing or organizing, and another is skilled with technology; the skills of all are needed to complete the tasks, and the jobs require interdependence. Students are taught cooperation, group process, and conflict resolution skills (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

Teachers who take the time to find out about their students' interests, knowledge, and day-to-day involvements and activities are able to marshal meaningful teaching and

learning resources (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). The more different a child is from a teacher, and the further the child's area of competence is from school general knowledge, the less likely the teacher is to distinguish and understand the child's cultural knowledge. Yet doing so can create rich rewards for both teacher and student. Teachers who take the initiative to find out about students' cultural backgrounds can help build strong relationships between school and home. Schools need to work harder to bridge cultural gaps between the child and the school. Students tend to do better academically with teachers who adjust their teaching to the students' learning styles. Many students feel torn between their home culture and school culture, and if they do not conform to school culture, they may be deemed unsuccessful academically (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

## **Summary**

Although our views on poverty have become much more comprehensive, research on poverty remains focused on the economic paradigm, leaving plenty of room for us to discover the diverse kinds of thoughts and actions that make up the cycle of poverty. In response to this research gap, this study focuses on elementary teachers' perceptions of their challenges working with children in poverty. Reviewing the literature on poverty reveals the importance of understanding the causes of poverty and understanding the life experiences of poor children affected by it. The conceptual framework employed for this study is built on the perceptions of teachers' challenges working with children in poverty. It is hoped that this framework would balance the previous narrow emphasis on the economic domain of life and deprivations of children living in poverty.

In this chapter, I have addressed a review of the literature that examines the context of education, education policy, and poverty as these factors influence how elementary teachers perceive the challenges they experience working with students living in conditions of poverty. Next, I will address the methodology.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Research Design

This study investigated one central research question and three closely related sub-questions. The fundamental problem of this study was: In what ways do elementary school teachers perceive the challenges of working with students who live in conditions of poverty? The three closely related sub-questions were:

1. In what ways do teachers perceive how poverty affects their students' academic achievement?
2. What assessment strategies do teachers use to determine the effectiveness of their teaching practices with students living in poverty?
3. What pedagogical strategies do teachers use to address the academic development of students living in poverty?

This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological research design. Phenomenology focuses on how things appear; that is, they're left just as they are presented, separate from daily routines, and biases from what we are informed are accurate and the natural world of the everyday living (Van Manen, 2014). Pure phenomenological research seeks essentially to describe rather than to explain and to "start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions" (Husserl, 1970).

For this study, the research focused on recording the experiences of a selected sample of elementary school teachers and the researcher's attempt to understand those

experiences to learn how the participants perceive their students as children living in poverty.

Any phenomenon represents a suitable starting point for an investigation. What is given in our perception of a thing is its appearance, yet this is not an empty illusion. It serves as the essential beginning of science that seeks a strong determination that is open to anyone to verify (Husserl, 1931, p. 29).

This study employed the technique of *epoche*, which explores an understanding of phenomena while judgments are set aside and events are examined with an open mind. Phenomenological reduction focuses on what is real with a “natural attitude” and lives in its world from which it has emerged. The researcher examines the phenomenon and the data without the data being altered. Imaginative variation is a method used to expose possible meanings through diversifying the frames of reference, approaching the phenomenon from conflicting perspectives, different positions, and roles. The objective is to determine the underlying factors accounting for the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994) and, through a synthesis of texture and structure, researchers can “listen to the data and come to understand the essence of the lived experiences” (Moustakas, 1994, p.85).

Weiner’s (1985) attribution theory of achievement motivation and emotion was used to illustrate how emotions influence the cognitive process of academic motivation, specifically as related to children living in poverty. Bernard Weiner’s theory highlights the role of emotion in the cognitive process and the effect of emotion in the primary

cognitive progression of motivation. Weiner's method is particularly useful when investigating the problem of academic achievement in children who live in poverty.

The teachers' perceptions varied about the extent to which poverty affects academic achievement. Although a few teachers felt that the lack of quality resources for poor students—as opposed to resources afforded to children in suburban areas—is the major consequence of poverty, other teachers perceive poverty affecting student academic achievement because of students' outlook on life. Other teachers felt that the difficulty of the situation poor students face in school may cause them to be unable to focus effectively during instructional time. Also, teachers understand that poverty is out of the child's control, although the child and academic achievement may suffer as a consequence.

### **Respondent Selection Strategy**

Phenomenology makes an effort to identify and describe the subjective experience of respondents. The central objective of psychological phenomenology, as stated by Moustakas (1994), is

. . . to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and to be able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual stories, general or universal meanings derived, in other words, the essences of structures of the experience. (p. 245)

A purposeful respondent selection strategy, as described by Patton (2002), was used, along with a set of criteria to identify appropriate respondents for this study. In keeping

with Patton's (2002) findings on the participant selection process, there were several requirements that each participant must have met to be included in the study. These are:

- Participants must currently teach in a Title I school in the U.S.
- Participants must currently teach in the elementary (K-6) level school.
- Participants must currently teach in a public school with at least 50% of the student population qualifying for the free and reduced lunch program.
- Participants must have at least five years teaching experience.
- Participants may be male or female.
- Participants can be of any race or ethnicity.
- Participants have grown up in various demographic communities.

There were seven participants in this study. Their names have been changed to pseudonyms for this study. Each respondent presents his or her professional perspective on elementary education: Ashley Anderson teaches first grade; Brenda Bennett and Frances Fisher teach third grade; Erica Ericson teaches fourth grade; Christina Campbell and George Green teach fifth grade; Denise Danielson teaches sixth grade. The respondents represent elementary education from lower to upper level, offering a broad perspective on the questions examined.

I requested an interview with various teachers who met the respondent selection criteria. I asked for recommendations from their administrators to find an available respondent that would satisfy the respondent selection criteria. By emailing



administrators, I utilized their knowledge of teachers to identify the respondents needed for this study who met the respondent selection criteria.

To verify that potential respondents teach in schools where an appropriate percentage of students qualify for the free and reduced lunch program, I consulted the Office of the Superintendent of Public Education website to identify schools that met these criteria. Once potential participants were identified, the researcher emailed invitations to their administrators requesting their participation. If no response was received from administrators within two weeks, the researcher followed up with additional emails as needed (See Appendix A) or identified new potential participants.

Potential participants were provided with information regarding the research study and what their participation would involve. Once they indicated interest in the study, the researcher met with them individually to review the study in depth, discussed details regarding the interview and observation dates and times, and gave them a copy of the Human Subjects Consent to Participate form (see Appendix B) to read and sign. Respondents remained anonymous in the study; only the researcher knows their names and school sites.

### **Data Collection Procedures and Instrumentation**

The documents analyzed in this study are derived from curricula, field notes collected from personal observations of elementary teachers, and interviews. Interviews and observations are the primary means of data collection. The phenomenological discussion encompasses a casual, collective process and employs open-ended comments

and questions. The phenomenological meeting starts with an informal conversation to establish a level of comfort and credibility. The interviewer focuses on the experience and is accountable for making sure participants are at ease so that they will be able to respond openly and honestly (Van Manen, 2014).

Van Manen's data collection involves using the participants' personal experience to start off the phenomenological inquiry. Knowing a person's experience of a phenomenon provides more clues to become familiar with the event. The phenomenological interview is a way to discover and pull together preliminary information and aims to gain a deeper understanding of the participant.

I focused on the perceptions of teachers who have shared experiences teaching students who live in conditions of poverty. According to Van Manen (2014), "Phenomenology consists of an expression of lived experiences of individuals as living through it. Phenomenology intends to embrace preferred aspects of a phenomenon or event such as identity/essence/otherness" (p. 27).

Phenomenological studies need the researcher to set aside possibilities of common knowledge as a basis for truth and reality before observing and interviewing respondents. The researcher needs to be free of any preconceived ideas regarding participants' potential responses (the *epoche* process mentioned earlier involves "setting aside preconceived notions regarding the participants' potential responses" [Moustakas, 1994]). By using the *epoche* process, the researcher is in a "pure state of being required for fresh perceiving and experiencing" (Moustakas, p. 486).

**Interviews.** As detailed above, I interviewed seven teachers who teach in the elementary grades. The interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of how primary teachers perceive the challenges they experience working with children living in conditions of poverty. Open-ended questions tend to create themes and help participants keep their attention on specific experiences, and guided questions focused on the facts and development of an event were used to produce more accurate information about it (Moustakas, 1994). Before using an interview protocol, it's imperative to be prepared mentally and to cautiously reflect on what perspective the interview is to offer (Van Manen, 2014). The interview protocol included primarily open-ended questions to allow participants to respond openly and naturally from their perspective and understanding (Creswell, 2012).

Interviews were built around a core set of questions (see Appendix A) that provided consistency across interviews and facilitated the analysis of data (Creswell, 2012). Also, the core questions were supplemented during the interviews with clarifying questions. These additional questions asked to expand on issues raised by a participant; they helped develop a clearer understanding of the participants' experiences while bringing forth additional details and examples. Overall, the semi-structured interviews ideally put the participants at ease and encourage them to freely and candidly express themselves.

The researcher:

- designed and used an interview protocol and form with a variety of open-ended questions;
- did a trial run to ensure the validity of the interview questions;
- determined where the interviews would be conducted;
- reviewed the purpose of the study, the amount of time involved in the interview process, and how the results of the interview were analyzed;
- offered an abstract or a copy of the report to the interviewees.

**Observations.** The researcher observed three teachers to collect field notes. For this study, the field notes collected were correlated with the respondents' interviews to identify common themes.

According to Van Manen (2014), observations are an effective way to collect data from participants. "Close observation" encompasses participating in a person's life. It generates a broader variety of data that was acquired through a written or interview approach. It involves a method that allows the observer to remain engrossed in the observation while being attentive to various situations that arise (p. 318).

**Field notes.** While remaining inconspicuous during the classroom observations, the researcher gathered reflective notes from each participant on possible emerging thoughts, feelings, and ideas following each session (Creswell, 2012). Descriptive field notes were utilized in the study to record what occurred between the participant and students during the observation periods. Field notes were written during teacher observations to gather data on current classroom strategies, as well as observing the

routines and procedures in which instruction was taking place. This study was completed by analyzing the observations and interviews. Directly following each interview or classroom observation, the researcher recorded the meaning of interaction with the students, the strategies used, and how the respondents dialogued with their students.

**Documents.** Patton (2002) suggests records, documents, artifacts, and archives constitute a rich source of information. Documents may reveal things that have taken place before the research begins. Documents prove valuable not only because of what can be learned directly from them but they also provide a stimulus for paths of inquiry that can only be pursued through direct observation and interviewing.

### **Triangulation and Data Validity**

This study was conducted in accordance with Patton's (2002) strategies on triangulation. Triangulation is a method that utilizes more than one sampling strategy in which different types of data provide cross-data validity checks. The purpose is to increase validity and reveal profound meaning in the data. All data collection—field notes from observations, documents, and interviews—is utilized to analyze the attitudes and beliefs the elementary teachers displayed.

Patton (2002) suggests that records, documents, artifacts, and archives constitute a rich source of information. Documents may reveal things that have taken place before the research begins. Documents prove valuable not only because of what can be learned directly from them but also provide a stimulus for paths of inquiry that can only be pursued through direct observation and interviewing.

To look for common themes from these three sources, I was able to identify common words and phrases that intersect all three sources and identify common results. The results from all three methods came to the same conclusion. I assessed various types of curricula and identified the resources needed in the lesson to carry out the instruction. The respondents mentioned during the interviews a lack of resources in their classrooms, and I observed that there were not enough resources for many classes.

Patton (2002) states that triangulation strengthens a study by combining various methods of data collection, as well as gathering multiple types of data. According to Patton (2002), “studies that use multiple methods in which different types of data provide cross-data validity checks strengthen the study” (p. 248). The researcher used data source triangulation in this study. I examined each teacher’s perspectives. During the interview, I focused on listening to their attitudes about how they perceive their job as a teacher and how they view and enjoy working with their students. During each observation of the respondents, I looked for the same attitude I identified during the interview while observing them. I saw a lot of body language and gestures used with the students for communication purposes to keep from disturbing the rest of the class during instruction. Signaling was used with the students' thumbs to indicate if an answer was correct or incorrect. In the curriculum document, I looked for procedures of lessons and materials used by the respondents during their observation and saw that they followed through with the lesson procedure during the observation.

For example, the first grade teacher, the third grade teachers, the fifth grade teachers, the fourth grade teacher, and the sixth grade teacher were examined as one part of a triangulation. The curriculum documents were examined as another part of the process, and the field notes from the respondents' observations were examined.

By completing this study, I was able to answer the central question of this study: In what ways do elementary school teachers perceive the challenges of working with students who live in conditions of poverty? I was also able to answer the three closely related sub-questions:

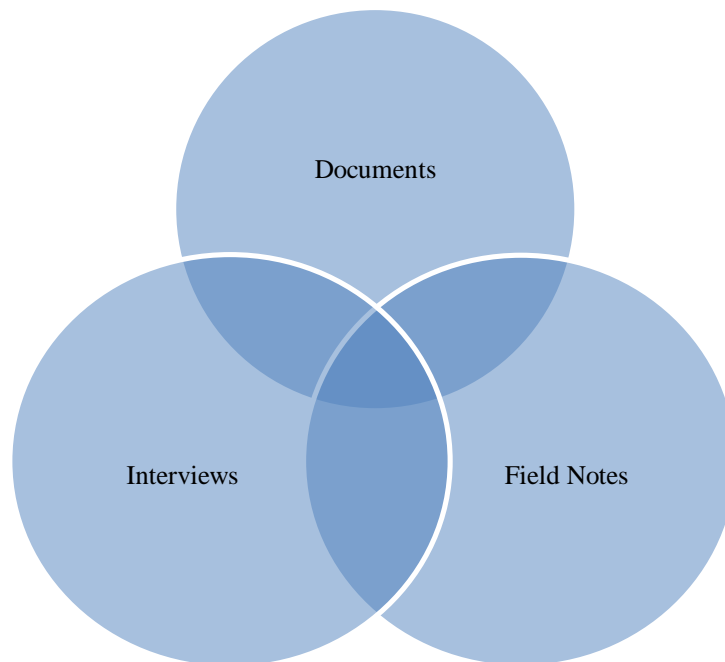
1. In what ways do teachers perceive how poverty affects their students' academic achievement?
2. What assessment strategies do teachers use to determine the effectiveness of their teaching practices with students living in poverty?
3. What pedagogical strategies do teachers use to address the academic development of students living in poverty?

Although the researcher focused on immediate classroom challenges, the researcher set aside a host of other challenges: the pressure of administering standardized tests, the lack of parent involvement, a less than adequate salary, the threat of the federal government tying teacher pay to test scores, and damaged or outdated resources. These challenges, among many others, are outside the control of an individual teacher and outside the scope of this study.

Triangulation of qualitative data sources means comparing and cross checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by various means. It involves analyzing interviews with the perspectives of people from different viewpoints and checking interviews against documents and other written evidence that can support what interview respondents report (Patton, 2002). The Venn diagram in Figure 1 illustrates the triangulation the researcher used to identify and analyze the core samples for this study.

Figure 1

*Venn diagram of triangulation used to identify and analyze data*



### **Data Analysis Procedures**

As described in each teacher's curriculum documents, I examined the content of the curriculum, the procedures for the lesson, the student learning goals, and the materials



needed for instruction and assessment. Field notes made from classroom observations and interview data were used to begin cross-case analysis to search for patterns and themes (Patton, 2002). First, I selected my participants, planned a meeting with them, located a place of mutual convenience to conduct the interviews, used an interview protocol, and interviewed the teachers. Next, I transcribed the interviews, used color-coded, sticky post-it notes to identify common patterns and themes that emerged from the transcriptions. Then I looked for common words and phrases and color-coded those words and phrases to look for broader themes.

This study examined elementary teachers' perceptions working with children who live in conditions of poverty to answer the stated research questions. Also, the researcher investigated the teachers' instructional strategies and explored their understanding of the effectiveness of these strategies and whether and how they supplement and support learning.

From the analysis of curriculum documents, respondent interviews, and observations, I developed a detailed description of the strategies teachers use during instruction and in the education field. Common themes in this research study were determined during data analysis; therefore, a review of themes to understand the complexity of patterns that emerged was used during the data analysis stage.

According to Van Manen (2014), while exploring themes and patterns, we can treat various types of meaning as a story, whether it is a paragraph, sentence, phrase, expression, or word. There are a few approaches to this, such as in the detailed reading

approach, where every sentence is examined to reveal the experience portrayed. The researcher should try to identify the various themes found in expressions, phrases, or paragraphs that let the meaning emerge.

Next, I developed a coding scheme to analyze data from each theme (Patton, 2002). The act of identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling primary patterns in the data was utilized to analyze the data in this study (Patton, 2002). For example, I made comments on post-it notes to create categories to separate the data into logical groups that would make reporting the findings manageable. Because I looked for emergent themes in the data, the classification of themes was essential to this study (Patton, 2002).

The researcher analyzed field notes from observations of the participants, curricular sources, and interview data to begin cross-case analysis to search for patterns and themes (Patton, 2002). The researcher looked for common themes regarding the ways elementary school teachers perceived their challenges in working with students living in conditions of poverty, investigated their instructional strategies, and explored their understanding of the effectiveness of these strategies.

The triangulation approach was employed to investigate the consistency of findings from analyzing curriculum documents, field notes from observations of the teachers, and data collected from respondent interviews. Triangulation is a general technique that facilitates validation of data through cross verification. Triangulation

employs multiple measures and perspectives to analyze data (Patton 2002). For this study, the triangulation approach is appropriate to test for validity.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role included describing, interpreting, and analyzing the teachers' perceptions of their challenges working with children who live in conditions of poverty. My position as the researcher required me to make continuous decisions about how much emphasis to give each role at any given time.

By creating a description of the teachers' perceptions of their challenges working with children who live in conditions of poverty, I identified both the details and the broader context for understanding these challenges. The analysis of the teachers' perceptions derived from the analysis of interviews of respondents. The analysis of the curriculum documents and field notes from observations and interviews required me to search for emergent themes and patterns carefully. Evaluating the data was essential to discover consistency in the findings (Patton, 2002).

Therefore, I conducted observations of the teachers in the classroom and wrote detailed field notes, interviewed the seven respondents, and collected curriculum documents to investigate this study's research questions to create a detailed description of the teachers' perspectives (Creswell, 2007). By investigating these perspectives, I was able to identify key themes and developed an interview protocol discovered from the investigation of the teachers' perspectives (Creswell, 2007).

I conducted interviews with respondents that represented their professional experiences in the field of elementary education (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). The data collected from the interviews further assisted me in examining the guiding questions of this study.

Through literature review, I learned as much as possible about the research related to teacher perceptions and their challenges working with children living in conditions of poverty. My role as researcher paralleled the problems teachers face working with children living in conditions of poverty. My role as an educator was to stay abreast of what is current in education as a whole and to share my knowledge of the current research literature with others. My role as a researcher was to conduct this study with integrity and validity. The information obtained from my participants was in-depth and honest. As the researcher, I took the position of empathic neutrality in the interviews. That is, I was “caring about, and interested in, the people studied, but neutral about the content of what they reveal” (Patton, 2002, p. 569).

By investigating these perspectives, I was able to identify key themes and developed an interview protocol discovered from the investigation of the teachers’ perspectives (Creswell, 2007).

According to Moustakas (1994), a researcher usually has a personal motivation or a reason for wanting to explore a lived experience. I have served 20 years as a practitioner in both urban and suburban settings. My role as an elementary school teacher and doctoral candidate has provided me with a solid background and experiences

regarding the topic of my study. My understanding of the data and how I made decisions impacted the entire process of data collection, coding, and analysis. I paid attention to detail in what I saw and heard during the data collection and analysis process (Patton, 2002). I made sense of meaning during observations based on my professional experience. I took field notes as impartially as I could without including my biased interpretation based on my perspective as a teacher (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002).

I wrote field notes that are detailed but not interpretive of what I observed (Patton, 2002). I relied on the literature review to focus on data relevant to the study and excluded any insignificant or irrelevant data that was not of help in answering the research questions (Patton, 2002).

I utilized triangulation to validate the accuracy or inaccuracy of the findings in this study. I reported the data that I analyzed, even if the results did not correlate (Patton, 2002). I was flexible enough to communicate outcomes that may not be consistent with the overall themes of my research. I acknowledged my perspectives in the study for the study to be fair.

I intend to contribute to the body of knowledge of the ways teachers perceive the challenges they experience when working with students living in conditions of poverty and use the findings of this study to support future teachers who need help meeting the needs of children living in poverty.

### **Philosophical Approach**

The philosophical basis for this study was constructivism. Constructivism is a theory about knowledge and learning; it describes both what “knowing” is and how “one comes to know.” Constructivism takes on a different approach to what is implemented in the schools. A constructivist view on learning gives students the opportunity for concrete, contextually meaningful experiences where they can self-organize, invent, explore patterns, be inquisitive, generate their questions and hypotheses, model, interpret, and support their ideas. The classroom is seen as a community of learners involved in various activities, discourse, and reflection. The teacher’s position is one of a facilitator, and students take ownership of their learning (Fosnot, 1996).

Constructivism is related to my methods and decisions as a teacher. I have to ensure the learner is thinking about learning in general. This understanding may involve

me in providing the student with activities, with hands-on learning, with opportunities to experiment and manipulate the objects connected to real life, but the intention is always to clarify to the student the organization of the world independent of the student. I am there to support the students in their efforts to understand the world, but I don't ask them to construct their world. Constructivism guides me in finding the right level at which to engage students, helping me to describe a level of understanding that is only possible when a student engages in an assignment—with my help.

Constructivism demonstrates how a person goes about making sense of the world and how a person does that should be valid and respected. Social constructivism is also essential to my methods of teaching because it is found in cultural communities that shape the way an individual understands and expresses a unique view of the world. Constructivist philosophy progressively influences my decisions in the organization of my classrooms and curricula, as well as fostering learning outside the classroom. We need to reflect on our routine to apply these ideas to our work (Hein, 1991).

Students living in conditions of poverty need many of the components as mentioned earlier as part of their learning, so they can continue to build on and strengthen their knowledge to become lifelong learners.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Qualitative research is contingent on the role that the researcher plays in the process because that individual is entrusted with the entire methodology procedure. As a researcher proceeds through the examination process, the researcher must acknowledge

she is the primary research agent. Therefore, it is necessary for the researcher to recognize her biases, limitations, and perspectives for the duration of data collection, analysis, and while describing the steps of the process. Patton (2002) stated:

A concern about evaluator effects has to do with the extent to which the predispositions or biases of the evaluator may affect data analysis and interpretations. This issue involves a certain amount of paradox because, on the one hand, rigorous data collection and analytical procedures, like triangulation, are aimed at substantiating the validity of the data. On another hand, the interpretive and social construction underpinnings of the phenomenological paradigm mean that data from and about humans inevitably represent some degree of perspective rather than absolute truth. (p. 16)

Debates about the research value of qualitative methods means that researchers must make their peace with how they are going to describe what they do. The meaning and connotations of words like “objectivity,” “subjectivity” “neutrality,” and “impartiality” will have to be worked out while making a lasting impression on the audience (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). That is to say, in this study, I acknowledge the possibility of unintentional influences on my interpretation of my research subjects’ perceptions of working with children who live in conditions of poverty. The following discussion outlines my personal experiences connected to this study.

I focused attention on what I saw and heard during the data collection and analysis process (Patton, 2002). I had a predisposition to make meaning in observations



based on my profession. However, for this study, I forced myself to take field notes as factually as possible without adding an annotation that was based on my perspective of the challenges faced by these teachers (Patton, 2002).

I wrote field notes that were descriptive and not interpretive of what I observed (Patton, 2002). When interviewing and making observations, I only recorded notes that were said or seen, not what was anticipated. This step required me to be focused on writing field notes that were descriptive of the data collected. I relied on the literature review to define what data was necessary for the study and what data would not contribute to answering the research questions (Patton, 2002). This required me to be focused on writing field notes that were descriptive of the data presented to me.

I used triangulation to validate the reliability and inconsistency of my findings. I reported the data that I analyzed regardless of whether or not the findings connected (Patton, 2002). Although consistency is preferred in my profession, I was flexible in reporting outcomes that were not consistent with the overall themes.

I acknowledged my perceptions in this study for the study to be authentic and unbiased. Executing a completely objective study was unrealistic, but I aimed to be as objective as I could. As an educator, I separated my own beliefs of the issues surrounding elementary teachers' perceptions of working with children who live in conditions of poverty. Although I have personally experienced these challenges, I did not let those experiences affect my analysis of the data. Debates about the research value of qualitative methods means that researchers must make their peace with how they are going to

describe what they do. The meaning and connotations of words like “objectivity,” “subjectivity” “neutrality,” and “impartiality” will have to work out while making a lasting impression on the audience (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). That is to say, in this study, I acknowledge the possibility of unintentional influences on my interpretation of my research subjects’ perceptions of working with children who live in conditions of poverty. The following discussion outlines my personal experiences connected to this study.

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I have currently spent 20 years as an elementary teacher; two years in Pontiac City Schools, Michigan; six years in Detroit Public Schools, Michigan; six years in the Elk Grove Unified School District, Elk Grove, California; and six years in Montgomery County Public Schools, Rockville, Maryland. I've taught 12 years as a first-grade teacher and eight years as a kindergarten teacher in both urban and suburban schools. This experience has given me the background knowledge, skills, and expertise as an educator regarding the challenges working with children in poverty. Having a first-hand understanding of the challenges teachers encounter strengthens my understanding of the routines and procedures that occur in the classroom.

In addition to the influence of my professional experience, my background may bias my methodological approach. My experiences were living in an integrated neighborhood and attending integrated schools that were diverse in language and economics. I have spent my entire childhood on the West Coast. I was raised in a highly educated and career-oriented family that always stressed the importance of education and life-long learning. Although my professional work involves me as being a teacher, my experience teaching in various school districts around the United States might constitute a bias.

### **Assumptions**

Children begin their educational journeys in pre-K or kindergarten. However, all children do not enter the formal education system on an equal footing. This fact is frequently ignored in the current climate of increased standardized assessments of both teacher and student performance. Factors influencing the teachers' instruction, such as selecting meaningful learning activities, giving thorough explanations, asking useful questions, and assessing students' learning, are all contingent on the teacher's knowledge of what students are to learn.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand how elementary teachers perceive their challenges working with children who live in conditions of poverty. More

specifically, the researcher described, analyzed, and interpreted the experiences of elementary teachers with an emphasis on how they respond to these challenges.

This study followed Patton's (2002) overall strategic framework for qualitative inquiry. Patton's framework presents 12 significant themes or principles divided into three basic categories: design strategies, data collection and fieldwork strategies, and analysis strategies. The researcher used a small sample of seven participants, which produced information-rich data that provided insights and understanding about elementary teachers' perceptions working with children who live in conditions of poverty.

This chapter provided a discussion of the method of inquiry to be used in this study as well as research procedures, respondent selection strategy, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, and the role of the researcher.

## Chapter 4

### FINDINGS

#### The Teachers

This section introduces five African American, and two Caucasian participants; provides a brief description of their schools, including student demographics, teacher background, teaching experience, and the reason for becoming a teacher; and offers the participants' perspectives of their work places. This section also contains the participants' responses to the research questions.

**Ashley: First grade teacher.** I met Ashley in a quiet area not far from her classroom. We had a wonderful chat about teaching. Her attitude towards her job showed kindness and understanding. She stated that she loved all aspects of teaching and says that children are the same no matter the geographic location—same children, different addresses.

Although Ashley was reserved, she seemed very comfortable and confident throughout our conversation, even though our conversation was recorded. She sat with her hands in her lap and engaged in our interview with ease.

Before relocating to another state as an adult, Ashley grew up in a close-knit community in an urban area, where everyone knew everyone else; it was like being around family all the time. She relocated to another state to attend college and, shortly after graduation, gained employment as a teacher in a local elementary school.

Ashley has been teaching first grade in an urban school for the past five years. She got into teaching because her mother was an outstanding teacher and inspired her at a young age. Although her mother wanted to attend school and study education, she couldn't continue her education due to unforeseen circumstances. However, her mother instilled in her the teaching qualities that she learned while getting her associate's degree. Ashley's mother did not continue to get her bachelor's degree or to get certified in education. Nevertheless, Ashley's mother continued to be a significant influence on her.

Ashley mentioned that her experience as a teacher was very challenging because sometimes she isn't equipped to handle what students go through emotionally. Ashley is familiar with the curriculum and content areas but isn't ready to meet all the students' emotional needs. Having to deal with students' emotions on a regular basis is challenging.

Ashley always tries to be adaptable as a teacher, to be flexible with the students, parents, and the school because situations change. The most important thing she learned this year was to talk to her students and build relationships with them. Ashley took the time to find out their interests, likes and dislikes. Ashley had another teacher at her school become her mentor/coach, which helped her to deal with issues she was having with her students. Her mentor/coach helped her learn how to communicate more effectively with students who were having problems transitioning, mainly if they were new to the class. She would take some time just to talk to them about anything not related to school. Doing that, she found that some of her students had a difficult home life

and were not getting enough sleep. Had Ashley not spoken with them, she wouldn't have known that, and wouldn't have understood why some of her students would exhibit inappropriate behavior. Building relationships with her students allowed her students to trust her, and she to understand them, and from that point on she and her students had a better year.

**Brenda: Third-grade teacher.** I met Brenda in a quiet area of her elementary school. She expressed the love she has for teaching because she genuinely loves what she does. She perceived her students to be hard workers. She asserted that she continuously encourages her students to take 15 minutes of their time to do their homework when they first get home.

Brenda has patience with kids, which is one of the reasons why she enjoys working with them. Brenda was more of an outspoken individual. She engaged in our conversation about teaching without hesitation. She was kind, very polite, and pleasant.

Brenda grew up in a rural area. There was only one elementary school, junior high, and high school in her community, which was very small compared to where she was now teaching. Brenda relocated to another state after attending a job fair at her university. Being ready for a change, she accepted her first teaching position.

In college, Brenda initially was not an elementary education major. She realized after taking a few courses that this major wasn't her passion. She knew she appreciated working with kids and helping people—so she decided to change her major to elementary



education. She began to relish and enjoy her classes. Brenda knew everything felt right, and she fit right in when participating in observations and fieldwork.

Brenda has been teaching third grade at an urban school for five years. The most significant challenge she has in teaching in her Title I school is parental involvement. Brenda mentioned that half of her parents were involved, while the other half were not. She truly believes that communication is crucial and makes a considerable effort to communicate with her parents. Brenda wanted her parents to know her name, know who she was, and know that she was available. Brenda stated that, although parental involvement was a struggle at the beginning of the year, by the end of the year involvement did get better; she understands that everyone doesn't have the same attitude about school. Brenda is aware that it's not that the parents don't want to be involved; it may be that they don't know how or that they had terrible school experiences. Although grappling with difficult issues like talking to parents and trying to get them to help with homework, Brenda eventually figured out there are nevertheless things in the classroom that she can do to support students better.

**Christina: Fifth-grade teacher.** Christina's interview was conducted over the phone, but that did not diminish Christina's strong personality and willingness to answer my interview questions. She demonstrated a considerable amount of enthusiasm, motivation, and passion when answering my questions and was thoroughly realistic about the unforgiving nature of teaching. Through her words, she expressed an attitude of

enjoyment of the children, the community, and her school. Her attitude exhibited emotions that would help her students with their internal attribution.

Christina is a seasoned teacher. She has the desire to teach children who are at a disadvantage. She also wants to provide everything she can to meet the students' needs personally, academically, and emotionally.

Christina grew up in an urban area. She teaches 5th grade in an urban school and has taught for 18 years. Christina got into teaching after completing her first degree in another field. She learned that she disliked working where she was at the time. She began substituting and ended up liking teaching. After substituting for a while, Christina went back to school and got her master's in Education.

Christina loves teaching in a Title I school and was highly enthusiastic talking about education. Christina said she wouldn't teach anywhere else. She teaches for the benefit of her culture. She always felt that she wanted to be in an urban setting, teaching urban kids and giving back to the community. One of her significant concerns is absenteeism. She says students do not come to the school as they should. If the students are not in the classroom, she can't teach them.

Christina said she believes that a teacher has to have an open mind and an open heart. Teachers must have a love for someone who isn't privileged. Teachers need to be able to deal with someone who may not smell the way you want them to smell or speak the way you want them to talk or listen to the same music you enjoy. At a Title I school, a teacher needs to be able to understand the cultures—or at least be willing to learn about

them. Teachers can't just come into the community, teach, and then go home and tell their friends all the horror stories. Teachers have to have some behavior management training. If the kids are off track and not listening to the teacher or feeding off each other, they won't pay attention to what is going on. As a teacher, you have to have the best of both worlds. You must be like a mother, you have to be strict, but you have to show them love too.

**Denise: Sixth-grade teacher.** Denise came across as a carefree individual. Although she was cool, calm, and collected, she was thoroughly involved in my interview. She was engaged in answering my questions because she is completely vested in her career as a teacher. Her attitude conveyed her confidence talking about parents and working with families to benefit the wellbeing of the students in her class.

We met in a park adjacent to the elementary school where she works. It was a beautiful day, and we could hear nothing but nature around us, which was a perfect setting for the interview to take place without interruptions.

She taught in many different locations. Denise taught on different coasts, having relocated to live closer to her family. She said that children are the same regardless of what coast they are on.

Denise grew up in an urban/suburban area in a working-class neighborhood where most families had both parents. She currently teaches sixth grade in an urban school. She has been teaching for 20 years but in different schools and different school districts.

Denise got into teaching by being influenced by family, and many were teachers. In college, Denise took a different path. She started out in a different major and then, during one summer while she was off from school she decided to try out teaching, and from there she started teaching kids at a local elementary school. As a result, she ended up developing a passion for teaching. Her friend ended up helping Denise to get into teaching full-time.

Denise's experience teaching in a Title I school was challenging due to the extreme behavior of some of the kids. A handful of kids in the school were always cursing, tearing up the bathrooms, bringing marijuana to school, and so forth. The school was trying to address the problem but was having a hard time getting a handle on the situation. She shared that some children lack discipline in the home.

**Erica: Fourth-grade teacher.** Erica chose to answer my interview questions via email and on her own time since she was up against a hectic work schedule. Although this was less than ideal, I couldn't do anything but respect her time and decision. However, she comes across as being disciplined and familiar with the external attribution her students intend to have, and because she is from the surrounding area, she knows her students and her students trust her.

She loves teaching students that she can relate to culturally, enjoys exposing them to new concepts and ideas and helping them to make connections needed to become successful

Erica grew up in an urban city where she attended a public neighborhood school. She had a regular upbringing where most homes had both parents and a stay at home mom. Erica teaches at a school in an urban area and has been teaching for 20 years. She has always known that she wanted to make a positive impact on our youth. She has a master's degree, and most of her teaching was done in one school. Schools in the city began to close as many families started to move to safer suburban neighborhoods. She has taught various grades. She has worked in six schools total.

Erica teaches in a Title I school, currently at the 4th-grade level. Her school suffers a high teacher turnover rate because of management issues and discipline problems. Issues such as high poverty, excessive absenteeism, little to no parent support or involvement are also factors contributing to high teacher turnover. She says the majority of students at her school had had three teachers from September to January when she started working there. The classrooms are overcrowded. This school administered a total of nine standardized tests in a year. Erica states that everything revolves around data, which leaves very little time for teacher preparation and regular teaching. The school experiences many teacher absences due to emotional turmoil, and the school has no intervention for disruptive students other than suspension.

**Frances: Fifth-grade teacher.** My interview with Frances took place over the phone, but in spite of that, her passion for teaching came through loud and clear. She revealed how much she enjoyed teaching. She perceived her students as being her kids. Her attitude was motherly.

I enjoyed speaking with Frances because she was a professional educator. She was kind but lively at the same time, sharing her experiences as an elementary school teacher.

Frances grew up in a suburban area. She teaches fifth grade in an urban school and has been teaching for 25 years. Frances started her college career in a different major. She said that, while her relatives were both teachers, there was no way she was going to become a teacher. But Frances ended up taking a required education class. She then realized that this was the right fit for her. She realized she didn't belong in that other field. Education is where she belonged.

Frances' primary teaching experience entails teaching in Title I schools. Although she teaches in a community that is predominately Latino, she says the poverty needs are pretty much the same as in any urban area school. Some challenges that she encounters include not having the basic materials and supplies a teacher needs. Although in the past she would buy the materials she needed, she can no longer afford that cost. That's a huge issue and has impacted her teaching more than anything else.

Aside from the language barrier she faces with many of her students, even those who speak English as their primary language have only limited vocabularies. Unlike her previous teaching experiences, she is now teaching students who are 98% Latino. Instead of building relationships with students who speak predominately English, she now has to build relationships at a deeper level. She has had to focus on building basic vocabulary.

**George: Fourth-grade teacher.** I had the pleasure of interviewing George face to face, meeting with him in his classroom after school hours. He is genuine, sympathetic, and down to earth. He was very calm about answering questions while being recorded and was sincere about the passion he has for his students. He communicated to me with a relaxed and easy-going but enthusiastic attitude towards his students, their siblings and the families he has come to know so well.

George grew up in a suburban community. He teaches fourth grade in an urban school. He has been teaching for less than ten years. He has taught in two different elementary schools.

George was not an education major in college. Once he finished his major, opportunities led him to work for colleges. He lived in a different state and ended up moving back to the area where he grew up. He worked for another university. This gave him insight into the criminal justice system. George realized the many injustices in our current legal system and decided that he needed to go back to school to get his master's to become a teacher. It was either that or pursue a law degree and become a public defender.

George has taught only in Title I schools, and this is his ninth year. He feels the challenge of encouraging teachers to have conversations with their students about fairness and equality. Unfortunately, the teachers that are always open to those conversations are not the people that need to be having them.

He believes that teachers must address race and poverty in America. He also believes in being mindful if a student isn't learning something. George is aware that his students face many issues outside the classroom that affect their behavior and learning. He is continuously working on ways of helping his students develop coping and relaxation strategies to help them deal with stress and to facilitate learning.

**Summary.** The seven participants in this study come from various backgrounds and have experienced different pathways to becoming a teacher. They continue to teach because teaching genuinely rewards them. They all continue to contribute their background knowledge, skills, and expertise within their schools and local communities. The next section describes the themes that emerged from the data I collected, as well as my analysis and explanation of the data that was discovered from the interviews and observations.

### **Themes**

The data analyzed in this study revealed four major themes, illustrated by verbatim examples from the interviews, which expound on the participants' perceptions regarding their understanding of their experiences working with children who live in conditions of poverty:

- Lack of resources
- Culturally responsive pedagogy
- Effectiveness of assessments
- Poverty affecting student academic achievement



The teachers talked about how fascinated they were by the strong relationships they built with their students and families. They attributed this to the students and families trusting the teacher and sharing personal stories. The teachers asserted that communication between teacher and parent could help everyone have a greater understanding of the reason and degree of the behavior and develop techniques and consequences that would best fit the situation.

**Theme One: Lack of resources.** Although many of the respondents felt that children living in poverty tend to be resilient when it comes to overcoming obstacles, a few agreed that coming to school is a positive, safe haven for children in poverty to escape from their daily situations at home.

When the respondents were asked about their dislikes about teaching in an urban setting, one common theme emerged from the data: lack of resources and external supports, including resources beyond their classrooms.

Ashley dislikes not having sufficient resources to accommodate the children as far as dealing with their emotional stress is concerned. Ashley offered her perspective on the lack of resources:

I dislike that we don't have as many resources as we need to accommodate the child. The emotional distress, whatever their trauma is. So, just [to] have more resources, like more counselors, having activities, even having materials for the teachers to use . . . to squeeze a ball to work on their anger or videos or a tablet in the back so they can watch something. Something they can go to and

accommodate them when they're going through whatever. Dealing with social and emotional issues was a challenge for me. When they come to me and tell me "Oh I did this" or "I was hit last night" I consider that very challenging for me. So that's one of the dislikes, lack of resources.

Brenda discusses the lack of resources and focuses on the lack of supplies and not having access to the technology and books that other children are afforded:

You know . . . supplies . . . just the supplies. I feel badly that my children don't have access to kinds of technology, kinds of books, that my students don't have access to what the majority of the population has access to. That makes me sad . . . it really does.

Brenda read a story, "The Grasshopper and the Owl," to the class and then the class dispersed into small groups working together to determine what the lesson was in the fable. There were a couple of students sitting at their tables who were off task, not discussing the fable. However, they remained in their seats. Brenda had to be firm and direct with the students in order to get them back on task. The teacher was available for questions and concerns during the student discussions and made sure the students had all the resources needed to complete the assignment. The assignment was to create a chart of the main events in the story. The students had to provide a heading for each section: characters and setting, the interaction between the characters, conflict and resolution. I observed the curriculum and focused my attention on the format of the lesson in which

Brenda followed. Although Brenda expressed that there was a lack of resources in the classroom, it appeared as if the students had what they needed for this lesson.

On the other hand, Frances ties the lack of funding for supplies to parental involvement: “I can’t think of any this year other than maybe funding for supplies and that kind of goes back to parental involvement.”

Ashley, Brenda, Christine, and Erica discuss the external supports and resources beyond their classroom to address the needs of children living in conditions of poverty. Regarding external supports, Ashley said that at her school a few counselors come during the day, and a social/emotional teacher is also used. She stated:

We have counselors, but they come twice a day . . . not twice a day . . . twice a week. So, we don’t have a home-based counselor. Yeah, we have counselors that come twice a week and then we also have a social/emotional teacher, but just one per 600 kids she must accommodate. That can be a lot. I wish we had more of those external resources.

Brenda considered the professional development training she attended as a significant external resource. She stated:

I didn’t use too much resources. This year we have a language arts specialist, and so she came in at times and gave different trainings. In her trainings she discussed a lot of English Language Learners and curriculum and she gave us things we can use there. She also helped us with vocabulary-based teaching. Over the summer I did go to, uh . . . Google drive training that the district gives.

Christine's explained that her students are involved with the Detroit Lions and Detroit Pistons. She stated:

We have a whole lot of community support from the Bangladeshi community. They definitely support the school. They come in and have different programs, and it's usually geared towards the Bangladeshi population. However, the African Americans can [also] participate. We have all kinds of people coming in. We have Detroit Lions come in, Detroit Pistons, and other people have partnered with our school and they come in and work with the students.

Erica's perspective on external support involves access to the Gleaners Food Bank and Good Fellow for students in need of those items. She stated:

The school partners with Gleaners Food Bank and Good Fellow to provide needed items for students and families. When I have time from my mandated assignments and tasks, I write for classroom grants from Adopt a Classroom to get supplies that may be needed for special projects, such as technology, books, and writing tools to enhance student learning.

Frances's external supports include Southwest Solutions, plus the University of Michigan provides interns.

**Theme Two: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.** In analyzing Ashley's interview data regarding her experiences implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching, she said that she uses this strategy to make a connection between home and school:

So, one approach that I use is called Culturally Responsive Teaching, where they're using the stuff that they use in their life when they go outside of the classroom. For example, I did like a basketball game too. . . I do a thing called snowballs, that's how I catch their attention. I ask them a question like, "when do your parents use coins," and everything and they will write it down "well, they use them in a store to make a purchase."

Ashley described how Culturally Responsive Pedagogy helps enhance learning outcomes:

That's how I hook them in, and they ball it up and throw it at me and then afterward I do a lot of movement so . . . Because they love to move around in the classroom . . . I do like a heads up, heads together, bottoms up so . . . it gets them out of the more structured time frame we have at school and makes them feel comfortable. I focus on what they like to do at home and bring it in the classroom. So that's the culturally responsive strategy I use.

Ashley talks about what kinds of resources are available to her:

Curriculum wise? Yeah, we have a laptop and a projector, um . . . we have, um . . . we have a lot of materials. I can say they have enough resources as to make it through the day. So, we have enough resources for that.

Brenda describes the kind of resources available to her. She stated:

I use a lot of resources online. Our principal tells us to make sure it's Common Core aligned. And so that's where I pull a lot of my supplies. I partnered with a

teacher who has been teaching for nine years. She had a lot of her resources, as well, so we shared, and we partnered. We use Engaged New York. It's curriculum for that state. It's Common Core aligned, and we found it went more in-depth in thinking and processing, and another one I use is a website called Common Core. Iready is an online curriculum that we have so the students can get online and log on, and it gives them lessons kind of set up like games. Teachers can go online and see how their students are progressing on their lessons. It sorts your class into groups and then gives you resources you can use for a small group and so that was a very nice component of the curriculum and makes it a little bit easier for the teacher to follow. Iready offers a lot of useful resources for parents providing helpful ways to prepare their child for classwork.

Regarding Christine's perspective on her experiences implementing the Danielson Model, she said that she wants to incorporate more discourse among students:

Well, you know in Detroit, there's what's called the Danielson Model, where the teacher is the facilitator, and they want the kids to interact with each other.

Administrators wish to have more groups. The Danielson Model promotes clear and meaningful conversations among students. Even when they come in and observe, they don't want the teacher standing in front of the class. And you know, that's how I've always taught, so it was a significant change for me because that's all I know because I went to Catholic school. All I remember are nuns standing in front of us lecturing. It was all good. I thought it was the best thing, but now they

want us to put the kids in groups and have them teach each other. So, we use different strategies like turn and talk and, um . . . we like do four corners where you put a number in each corner or a number on each wall and you'll give out four answers whether you agree, strongly agree, disagree, or strongly disagree, students have an opportunity to engage in a discussion.

Christine shared how these strategies help enhance learning outcomes: "They want the kids up and moving and learning from each other." Christine tells about what kind of resources are available to her. She stated:

We have smart boards. We have computers. We have a computer lab. We basically can turn in a wish list, and they'll get us anything that we want. I like each kid having a whiteboard. So, we use whiteboards and signals. I like um . . . we have agree/disagree. When another person is talking you can use your hand signals up, have partially agree. There's like ten of them we use in the classroom, and the kids like those signals.

Erica described what teaching strategies she uses. She explained that she implements a few strategies such as think, pair, share and gradual release, which promote dialogue among students.

Erica tells about what kind of resources are available to her. She stated:

Smart board, which I use to bring resources to students via the Internet to provide exposure and build background knowledge for students. Any support I use helps to give a little more relevance to the students about a given subject or skill.

Frances described what teaching strategies she uses. She uses a Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, which is imperative to use with English Language Learners. She stated:

You know Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol? Um . . . I follow a lot of those, so these strategies talk a lot, move a lot; you know multiple representations of whatever it is that we're doing . . . um . . . I do a whole lot of visuals . . . you know pretty much everything has a visual, every story has an accompanying power point, tier 1, tier 2, tier 3 vocabulary um . . . biggest strategy. I learned how to read the stories backward so because when I read the regular way I can find tier 3, but when I read backwards I find more tier 2 words that way. It's laid out for us. I don't have to think as hard.

Frances talked about the kind of resources available to her:

I have five desktop computers; they're ancient but they're working, and the students go online. I have access to a tablet cart, but they're tablets, and half of them aren't working half the time. Um . . . there's a computer lab and then there are computers in the centers as well. A lot of teachers don't use it . . . the tablets and stuff so I am lucky to have them to myself, so I say, "I'll keep them in my room" and can access them whenever I want. I try and give my students as much exposure and access to them as I can.



Regarding George's perspective of what teaching strategies he uses, he explained that he teaches in small groups, considering that his students are reading at various reading levels. He stated:

Well, small groups are everything. Fortunately, we articulate our classes based on reading level. So, I don't get a class of twenty kids and twenty different reading levels, and some of them can be put in the same reading group. So, I would say strategy-wise, teaching in small groups, um . . . more generally speaking just trying to be animated and talk about myself and talk about the kids and try to make connections to who they are as individuals. I have a student who's obsessed with making comics. So, one of our reading centers you know incorporates comics. We talked about how comics can show you dialogue, action, and we worked it into our reading centers just to use as an example because I know he's really into that and has motivated other kids to become interested in that. So, making those connections is fantastic.

George described the kind of resources available to him. He stated:

We have fabulous ESOL specialists. ESOL teachers are an enormous resource. Even the ones who don't work with my kids directly. It's their wealth of knowledge. Um . . . staff development . . . the conversations we've had at meetings about oral discourse . . . just about different strategies, vocabulary, and sentence structures. Our reading specialist is fantastic. Just the other professionals in the building are an incredible resource.

**Theme Three: Effectiveness of testing.** When my respondents inquired about what they thought were some challenges students living in poverty will face when taking mandated standardized assessment test, one common theme emerged from the interview data: The burden of excessive testing and the effectiveness of experimentation.

All of my teachers shared their experiences dealing with the challenges of administering standardized tests. When the respondents were asked about the challenges administering standardized tests during instruction, one common theme emerged from the interview data: unnecessary testing.

In analyzing Ashley's interview data, she spoke of being concerned with helping the students understand the test questions to be able to answer them correctly. She stated:

Um . . . challenges being able to read the material, comprehending the material.

Sometimes I have to read over and over again and read it in different ways for them to get an "Oh, okay!" So, reading and comprehending what they read and being able to write it down and being able to bubble in the correct answer.

In analyzing Brenda's interview data, she spoke of how she is concerned with not only her students' stress but also with helping them understand and be able to take the tests successfully.

A lot of them. I had one young girl who every time she took a test would say, "my stomach is hurting, my stomach is hurting." She would miss 30 minutes when we start. She finally says, "mom says I'm nervous." So that just goes back to them and their attitudes about school. Also, um . . . a lot of them needed other

assistance with assessments, so I wasn't even handing individual assessments it was almost . . . even though they didn't have an IEP, I had to give them things as well. Towards the end of the year, my class showed a lot of progress. I could pull back, and my aide could pull back.

In analyzing Christine's interview data, she seemed to be focused on the number of tests and what they are purportedly measuring. She stated:

Are we talking standardized? The standardized tests are ridiculous. There are too many and too often, and not aligned with the curriculum. So, kids are tested on things they haven't even been taught. We give a test called the MAP. We provide a fall, winter, spring test on the computers. I forgot what it's called if you get one wrong it goes up. If you get one right, it goes on, or it goes down. It's called progressions. So, what happens is the kids are so used to having the same test. They cheat off each other but they can't because everyone has a different question depending on how they answered the question. As far as the additional standardized testing, we give a test called the M-STEP. All of the tests are computerized, but the kids haven't had any keyboarding or computer skills. So back when it was paper and pencil, it was a little easier to manage them running around with thirty kids and thirty different tests trying to make sure they're on task. Not pushing buttons and doing what they're supposed to do. Along with that, the curriculum is also a first semester and second-semester pre- and post-test.

With the standardized tests and with what the district has, they're bombarded with tests.

Denise seemed to indicate that the assessments don't show what she feels she knows about her students and that she can better assess her students' strengths without lengthy testing. She stated:

Focus is probably the biggest um . . . having a very difficult time focusing. I know there is a high diagnosis of ADHD but I feel like it's not always being . . . the students don't have enough time in the environments where they have to focus. It's maybe a super busy household. We give a lot of assessments. Yes, a lot. Some of them are online. I try not to make mine too long because I don't feel like I need a whole lot of problems to assess whether they understand or not, but just their ability to focus and just be still and also the directions . . . just understanding what's being asked of them and addressing all parts of the problem.

During my observation I saw some of the student behavior she was referring to in her interview. In Denise's class, my observation was during the students' math block solving real-world problems through the application of algebraic and geometric concepts. Denise was more authoritative, as talking among the students persisted. She wasn't mean in any way, just firm. However, it was necessary when some students got off task during their assignment so that they wouldn't disturb the others. She also used body language which consisted of gesturing a student to get back to work. The students were being more social talking about unrelated topics than talking about what the assignment was about.

In the curriculum I focused on the lesson plan format which included the objective of the lesson, vocabulary and the strategy used. I was able to see how Denise incorporated all three aspects of the curriculum into her instruction with the students. She had pictures associated with the vocabulary words.

In analyzing Erica's interview data, Erica appears to be concerned that the exams are not reflecting where the students are as opposed where the tests/curriculum says they should be. She stated:

Most children are 1 or 2 grade levels behind the pacing chart so when assessments are given they're not reflective of where the child is and students being absent excessively is a downward pull to the average evaluative score of the class.

In analyzing Frances's interview data, she spoke of the challenges and the amount of time administering standardized tests allocated for instruction takes. She's also concerned with the number of standardized tests administered causing a significant amount of stress and anxiety among the students. She stated:

You mean like all the testing I do all the time. How does poverty impact that? It takes away from instruction. It takes away from the things the children need. Having the children taking assessments to make the MWEA three times a year and then the MSTEP once a year and then Renaissance having them read every quarter. I like that, and it works better using that. It's too much. My kids went through the MWEA and then they went right into MSTEP, and you burn them . . . you burn them up. I shut down testing for my kids a lot. I see how things are

going and we stop. We have to stop and it's not fair for the kids. You look at especially if you have a child that's new and still in the one year you have your grace period not enough to build up enough vocabulary and then when you sit in front of a computer, and they raise their hand . . . I'm sorry I can't . . . it hurts them because the kids want to do well.

In analyzing George's interview data, George seemed to focus on the disconnect between test content and the students' reality. He stated:

One of the biggest issues is that you know we use technology. The kids don't have the same fluency at home. They're not . . . there's that . . . it all has a sort of white middle class to it. The names, the situation . . . How many of our students want to read about horse racing. It's nonsense. You plan your teaching to engage students but when you assess them with MAP-R and PARCC. Nothing is engaging about it. There's no reason for a child to want to do well on that . . . You want to develop intrinsic motivation when you're teaching students how to read and put text in front of you about knitting, and you want to play video games and play soccer. Like no amount of intrinsic motivation will have you go, "Oh! Let me read this ten-paragraph essay about knitting and then write a couple of paragraphs."

In analyzing Ashley's interview data, she spoke of the assessments and how they are useless and need to accommodate students better. She stated:

I can say in math yes . . . everything else . . . no. Reading and literature, no, we cannot draw from data because it's like a one size fits all. It's not accommodating my visual learners or my auditory learners. It's not helping them, so I do a mixture of tests. I have this group that does this activity that accommodates their needs and learning styles.

In analyzing Christine's interview data, she spoke of putting more emphasis on less formal assessments and using the assessments to inform instruction as much as possible. She stated:

The standardized tests? Um . . . well, you have to be effective . . . is all. Correlated with our evaluations. If 70% of your class increased on those tests you got all 25 points as far as growth. If 50% of your class grew you got like what every . . . The next one is being effective. And so, the standardized tests are bound with teacher evaluations. I've done my assessments as I've always done them. We introduce stuff on Monday and assess on Fridays. They have us doing a lot of formative evaluations with the kids. If it's not paper and pencil test, they want you to evaluate orally, and they want you to assess in other ways other than a test so that's what they're looking for when they come in our rooms and that's how we do. We do formative assessments with the whiteboards, hold up the whiteboard. We have these things called clickers. Have you heard of that where each kid has a clicker? It evaluates when the whiteboard . . . it tells you how many kids got it right with the clickers. Each one has the little thing in their hand. So, it will come

up many 36 kids. If you have 30 kids, 25 will have the right answer, so you know whether to continue with that skill without giving a formal test.

In analyzing Denise's interview data, she spoke of the effectiveness of assessments. She seems to use them as a means of informing instruction. She stated: "I guess as a grade level we look at our data and best teaching practices to help . . . based on the results of our assessments."

In analyzing Erica's interview data, she spoke of the effectiveness of assessments. She questioned the validity of testing and often sees how bored students get throughout the test. She stated:

Assessments aren't always able to show what skills the students may have, and they also do give a reason for the scores on a given day. Since the test cannot account for the things the students may be dealing with that are out of their control. Test fatigue is a factor as well as, so many students often just click buttons and move on.

In analyzing Frances' interview data, she spoke of the effectiveness of assessments. Frances depends on the assessments she uses to inform her instruction. She stated:

That's the MAP. The MWEA and um . . . I like it because I get the information back right away, and so I would be foolish if I didn't look at it and see what the deficits are and see what I need to do to address those deficits to facilitate higher learning, but I prefer Renaissance style Reading Renaissance Place accelerated



reading and Accelerated Math. I prefer that because I can take a kid who is not having any growth and I can have them take one of those tests and see . . . “Oh! Look I went up.” It’s more hands-on and kid-friendly so they can see where they are and see where they’re going. So, I prefer that. I can randomly test them whenever I want, whenever I feel the need.

In analyzing George’s interview data, he spoke of the effectiveness of assessments. He itemizes the data by looking for prevailing trends across grade level to make adjustments to his instruction. He stated:

So, is this my assessment that we do as a grade like when we’re doing our formatives? We have conversations in planning about what sort of answers we expect. What we see as everyday successes across the classroom or the grade. It depends on the assessment and depends on what the skill is. A lot of skills . . . it really takes a year to develop. You’re doing summaries all year to check for understanding. You’re doing cause and effect, not always, but on and off.

**Theme Four: Poverty affecting student academic achievement.** The next interview question focused on how poverty affects academic performance. The themes that emerged from the interview data were varied.

Ashley perceived poverty reflected in the lack of quality resources. She felt as though the students would not be able to experience having the same quality of supplies that are afforded by other children in this country. She stated:

Poverty affects student achievements um . . . by the quality and lack of resources. Secondly, not being exposed to qualities of exposure. So, when they see something new, it's just "Oh this is new; should I break it or like being destructive". I think um . . . it affects them . . . their academic success because they're not used to good quality. When you're used to resources that are not of good quality and they are exposed to something that is of good quality, they don't know how to react to it.

As a result, Ashley uses a behavior management system to assist in developing positive student behaviors.

Ashley used a football-themed behavior clip chart with her first-grade class, with "MVP" being the best behavior and "Benched" being the poorest behavior. Clothesline clips with students' names would be clipped on their level of behavior. MVP award certificates were given out each week for those students who achieved stellar behavior. I also viewed curriculum that Ashley used for her lesson. I focused on the entire procedure of the lesson to see if Ashley followed the format. She incorporated the same lesson plan format in the reading curriculum into her instruction that day. I focused on the objective of the lesson, the procedure and the assignment. The assignment was to retell a story and include key details by illustrating a picture and writing a few sentences to go with the picture.

Brenda recognized that students should have opportunities outside of school to help them academically or to balance out their academics. However, because of poverty, they're often not able to afford to get involved in such activities. She stated:

So, a lot of them, uh . . . I wish they would've gotten opportunities to have outside tutoring or outside extracurricular activities. However, unfortunately neither can [they] afford tutors nor can [they] afford to play on different teams and things like that and so I did see it in the classroom, um . . . homework was a struggle because their parents were just not there, working different shifts, things like that. So, they weren't getting outside help, and so that was a struggle because of where they are on the poverty line.

Christine believed that poverty affects academic achievement because it involves a person's outlook on life and could include generational poverty. She stated:

Poverty has a lot to do with the mindset. You know . . . it's a vicious cycle. Their parents were probably in poverty and didn't value education so education . . . their parents are out here trying to survive. So, to do everything that you need to do to make sure your child is educated is at the top of the list. So, while you're out here trying to figure out what you're going to eat, where you're going to live, and heaven forbids you to have a parent who is an alcoholic or uses drugs. Now that puts a whole other spin on it. So, I feel that um . . . we do an excellent job with the poverty level.

Denise had an interesting opinion of how poverty affects academic achievement. She was sensitive to the devastation that the students experience and how their needs are overlooked. She stated:

I think it changes student academic achievement in various ways. One depending on the severity of the situation. I mean kids have a difficult time focusing and that's . . . you know . . . just physical . . . Physiology . . . the diet that they have, the sleep patterns they have, the basic needs being met at their ability to come to school ready. Also, just the behavior conflict/management when um . . . I've seen some families . . . everyone yells and screams. People don't understand how to have a conversation. Those skills have to be taught at the beginning of the year, like how to have a collaborative conversation, how to talk with someone which involves looking at them and paraphrasing what you heard them say. These types of things. You have to teach explicitly.

For Denise to combat challenging behavior, she implements a behavior management system, which I observed in action during my observation in her classroom.

In Denise's sixth-grade class, she used "a Caught in Expectations" tallies chart, keeping track of students who followed through with class expectations. There were refocus sheets for students to fill out if they didn't meet class expectations and where they had to explain why and how they didn't meet expectations.

Erica had a thought-provoking way to express how she felt about poverty and academic achievement. She stated that poverty is out of the child's control and so the child and academic achievement both suffer. She stated:

In every way possible, poverty is a disease that slowly eats away at the spirit of the child, and the child has no power to change any of it. They are powerless to prevent the casualties of poverty such as drug and alcohol abuse; parents or parent incarcerated; multiple fathers of stepchildren; living in homes that are not safe or healthy. The child becomes the victim of these circumstances, and the mind and such a young age has been put into survival mode, and academic achievement suffers greatly and/or progresses slowly.

George believed that the brain is actually changed by poverty and that poverty results in a traumatic environment where the mind can be damaged. He stated:

Oh, my God . . . you know . . . I mean coming back to the brain science. You know a stressed out brain is . . . the same part of your mind that regulates impulse control, short-term memory . . . the same part of the brain that is damaged by a stressful environment. So, if someone is stressed out because of whatever is going on at home or because of poverty or not to make that separate from what's going on at home you know . . . violence at home whatever that might be, the same part of the brain is aware of the situation, and impacted by that situation and is going to have a much harder time coming to school and relaxing. So, your short-term memory works, so impulse control . . . where if someone really ticks you off in

the lunch room . . . if your brain is impacted by your home situation, you're way more likely to get up and slug somebody without even premeditating it. So, that is everything we deal with here. That is everything! So, it's not my perspective as much as just what I have learned. It helped me understand what I see every day.

The respondents described their love and passion for teaching, as demonstrated by interacting and working with their students regardless of the problems they encountered. They were determined to use their internal motivation to move their students forward socially, emotionally and academically, long before their students could become aware of their external attribution.

### **Summary**

The themes of Lack of Resources, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Poverty Affecting Student Academic Achievement, and Effectiveness of Assessments emerged from the data that was collected in this study. The participants described their experiences and their perspective in the many ways in which they have challenges with lack of resources, poverty affecting student academic achievement, and effectiveness of assessments, but share their experience using Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. They discussed the types of challenges that they experience and explained how working with children who live in conditions of poverty is helped by having some support or professional development that offered classes to rectify ways to deal with challenging situations. They also expressed the different ways in which they feel it's rewarding to work with children as a whole.

The respondents described their challenges in teaching and what they experienced. They all shared a sense of passion, determination, and motivation, as they would not give up on the children regardless of the overwhelming challenges they encounter daily. All of the respondents revealed that they feel they are successful at what they do and don't mind going above and beyond the call of duty to meet the needs of the students.

The findings of the data presented core themes for each teacher. The individual descriptions encompassed their explanations of their thoughts and perceptions, which made each experience distinctive. Van Manen's (2014) method of analysis of phenomenological data, which consists of treating various types of meaning as a story combined with each teacher's individual lived experience as a teacher, crafted a consolidated description of the signification and essences for the group of teachers altogether.

The description of data was presented for seven elementary school teachers' perceptions working with children who live in conditions of poverty and teach in Title I schools in northern California, Michigan, and Maryland with teaching experience ranging from 5-20 years. Four core themes emerged from the participants' data. A crafted combined description of the significance and essences of the group of teachers concluded this section.

Chapter five will discuss what the researcher learned from this study, relate what she learned to the literature on teacher perceptions of their challenges, and compare

findings to new understandings. Recommendations for further research will complete  
Chapter Five.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

#### Conclusions

The data analyzed in this study concerned elementary teachers' perceptions of working with children who live in conditions of poverty in Title I schools. This study investigated the feelings, attitudes, and beliefs of seven elementary teachers with teaching experience ranging between 5 and 20 years working with children who live in conditions of poverty. This conclusion addresses the overarching question: In what ways do elementary teachers perceive their challenges working with children who live in conditions of poverty?

#### What I Learned

**This is what I learned about poverty.** Poverty means that children go hungry, frequently have to go to school in dirty clothes and sometimes are not taken to the doctor when they are ill. Children in poverty often have to look after themselves at home alone. They may have been abandoned, deserted or forced to live in dangerous conditions around drugs, alcohol and violence.

Students are unable to learn if they don't know what they will find at home at the end of the day. A family member could be in the process of being arrested or the students' home could be in the process of being raided. Children come to school with limited vocabularies and background knowledge while trying to meet the standards of the curriculum—a difficult challenge if they are distracted by not having their developmental

or even basic needs met. Despite all of these challenges outside of school, the children in poverty are able to demonstrate learning in the classroom. Their teachers work hard to get their students where they need to be academically in spite of the difficulties they face in understanding why too often students are not focused and fail to stay on task. Usually the reason goes back to their basic needs not being met at home.

The teachers express that offering tutoring before and after school or providing extracurricular activities is also a challenge. Since many after school programs are not free, students from a background of poverty are often unable to take advantage of these opportunities. Teachers also understand that completing homework is often difficult because no one is at home to help reinforce what is being taught in school.

Poverty has a powerful effect on the mindset of those in poverty, particularly if parents do not value education. Because many parents are merely trying to survive, they often have difficulty helping to make sure their child is educated and does well in school. School often takes second place to survival, particularly for parents who do not know what their next meal is going to be or where they are going to live next week. If these parents are heavily involved with alcohol or drugs, the situation is even worse.

I learned that poverty is like a disease that gradually wears down a child, and the child is helpless to change anything. Their lives are out of their control. They are incapable of preventing the calamity of poverty—drug and alcohol abuse, a parent incarcerated, multiple fathers of step-children, homes that are not safe or healthy. Eventually children become the victim of these conditions and, at an early age, find

themselves operating in survival mode. Ultimately, academic achievement suffers and academic progress is slow. Poverty can even cause stress on the brain, damaging the part of the brain that controls impulse and short-term memory.

**This is what I learned about the historical foundations of poverty.** Although state governments are accountable for funding public schools, the distribution is too often unequal, and some schools end up with not enough funds to meet the schools' basic needs. Private sources of funding vary from community to community, and not many schools have education support organizations such as a parent-teacher association to offer help.

A shortage of counselors means that they are only able to attend to the children twice a week in some schools. There are no home-based counselors. There are also shortages of social/emotional counselors, which are much needed in communities of poverty. However, counselors do make an effort to accommodate as many children as possible. The need to have external resources for the children is essential—and too often nonexistent.

Support systems differ from school to school and not all schools have access to specialists on site. Specialists are needed for reading, math, and language—or simply as a means of providing food and clothing for the children. Some communities, however, have a culture that provides extensive support and offers a variety of programs geared towards the population of that community. Some stakeholders provide support and

organizations like the NFL and the NBA partner with the schools, coming in and working with students and families.

When teachers have time from their busy schedules and tasks, they often take the time to write classroom grants to get needed supplies, including technology, books, and other resources to enhance student learning. Parental involvement is a source of external support that is much needed and most helpful. Teachers need to stay involved with the children's parents and communicate with them at all times—not just when something goes wrong. If there are parents who have negative attitudes towards the education system, it is imperative to gain their trust so that they feel comfortable addressing their child's needs.

**This is what I learned about social justice.** All children should have the same challenging education, and students must have equal opportunities and rights, which include access to the necessary material resources needed to carry out daily instruction.

Teachers often do not have the resources they need in order to accommodate the children. Materials that may possibly help with a stressful situation—something as simple as a stress ball—is also needed to reduce the level of emotional distress. Because some children are not using quality items and are not taught how to handle or take care of them, they do not learn a sense of belonging and may even at times destroy materials. Although some teachers do have access to technology—Promethean Boards, chrome books, student desktop computers, computer labs and tablets—many others lack supplies and do not have access to the technology and books that more affluent schools are able to provide.

Having access to technology allows teachers to go online and monitor how their students are progressing on specific computer lessons. Some programs can sort a class into groups based on learning level and then offer resources needed for small group instruction. Usually these resources are a component of the curriculum, making it easy for the teacher to follow. All of these resources bring various media sources to students via the Internet to provide exposure and build background knowledge for students. This support helps to supplement a significant aspect of student learning in various content areas and skills.

**This is what I learned about instruction.** Various kinds of research-based instructional strategies are available to teachers. However, incorporating Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is particularly important for students from a background of poverty and as a way of engaging students and keeping them interested in learning. By integrating interesting parts of a student's culture into the curriculum, the student becomes motivated, while at the same time increasing the teacher's cultural awareness and sensitivity.

I learned that Culturally Responsive Teaching could be incorporated into any teaching strategy if the teacher is willing to use interesting parts of the students' life to engage them in learning and keep them interested and on task. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy helps enhance learning outcomes because students become motivated and excited to participate in the lesson. It gets them out of the structured time frame too many schools impose and makes them feel comfortable.

I learned more about partner and small group instruction as a way of teaching teamwork and collaboration. The students experience first hand what it's like working with other people and build character skills that will be needed later on in life. Through partner and small group instruction students learn conversational skills and incorporate more discourse in each lesson.

Finally, I also learned more about the Danielson Model, in which the teacher is in the role of facilitator, encouraging students to interact with and learn from each other. The Danielson Model promotes clear and meaningful conversations among students. The model uses such strategies as turn and talk and 4 corners, techniques that give students an opportunity to engage in a discussion.

### **Research Question Analysis**

*In what ways do teachers perceive how poverty affects students' academic achievement?*

The objective of this study was to explore how teachers perceive the ways poverty affects student academic achievement. The teachers identified various ways they see the consequence of poverty on student achievement.

Perhaps the most important way the teachers in this study described the consequences of poverty has to do with the mindset of people living in poverty. Poverty can be a vicious cycle, and the environment of poverty simply consumes people. If the parents grew up in poverty, received a substandard education and learned not to value education, two outcomes are likely. First, because of their poor schooling they might not

have had the educational and intellectual resources to move themselves out of poverty, thus continuing the vicious cycle. Second, because of their negative experience with education, they might not have much of an inclination to support their children's education. But even if their own lives have shown them the value of education, they are often doing all they can to simply survive and just do not have the time to support their children in school, no matter how much they might want to do that. However, if their situation involves alcohol or drugs, incarceration or dangerous neighborhoods, the impact on their child's academic achievement can be catastrophic.

As many of the teachers in this study pointed out, poverty can have a negative effect on student academic achievement if the children aren't receiving an appropriate diet or getting an adequate amount of sleep, either or both of which can cause difficulty in staying focused and damage the ability to come to school ready to learn.

Although the respondents are fully aware of the negative impact poverty has on the lives of their students, they nevertheless work hard to meet the needs of the students who walk through their classroom doors. Some students come to school without the experience base students from more affluent backgrounds possess. Many students, particularly at the lower elementary levels, can't identify the concepts of "print" or "letters" and in some extreme cases may never have held a book or been read to. As a consequence of these situations, respondents in this study frequently described the need to implement a wide variety of strategies to help students catch up on these basic issues before they can even begin helping students meet standards.

Finally, students from a background of poverty may be angry or may have not learned proper social behavior, and consequently act out in school or even demonstrate unsafe classroom behaviors. These behaviors can be a challenge for any teacher.

However, the respondents in this study constantly stressed the importance of understanding a student's background to reduce the likelihood of misunderstanding or over reacting to a student's actions.

*What assessment strategies are teachers using to determine the effectiveness of their teaching practices with students living in poverty?*

The purpose of this question was to identify assessment strategies teachers are using to determine the effectiveness of their teaching practices. A wide variety of assessment strategies are used. Usually, content is taught the week before the assessment is given, while a few teach at the beginning of the week and assess at the end of the week.

However, there are other ways the respondents determined the effectiveness of their teaching. Many used formative assessments. But the most valued formative assessments are those that offer immediate feedback, guiding the teacher's next steps. These "on the spot" assessments are often instructional activities used and finalized on the Internet. These programs collect data that allow the teacher to track student mistakes or successes in learning. Itemizing the data from the assessments, looking for familiar trends and tracking everyday successes or mistakes, the respondents apply this data to lesson planning both for the entire class and for differentiated instruction.



One way respondents assess students performance is to conference with them and talk about what they have learned. Another way is to use feedback from the assessment to drive instruction, particularly if the assessment provides immediate feedback. Students can also edit each other's work, and a more challenging lesson can be issued to the students as a result of the assessment. Assessments monitor student learning each step of the way.

*What pedagogical strategies are teachers using in addressing the academic development of students living in poverty?*

This objective was to address the pedagogical strategies teachers are using in addressing the academic development of students living in poverty.

The most important finding from this study regarding this question was the imperative for teachers to examine their own beliefs and develop an understanding of different racial and cultural perspectives in their classrooms. Teachers need to show cultural competence and sensitivity by thoroughly understanding the students' cultural background, their way of life and traditions. Many research-based strategies have been developed to accomplish this, most notably Culturally Responsive Teaching. Culturally relevant teaching is a framework that benefits the design of school curriculum based on students' cultural backgrounds and life experiences (Gay, 2000). Teachers found that making a connection between home and school was helpful in improving academic achievement in students who live in poverty.

Incorporating interesting parts of the students' daily lives and what they experience outside school can get them motivated and enthusiastic about learning. Teachers who take the initiative to know more about their students' background and who respect their cultural differences are more likely to connect with them and establish deep and meaningful relationships. This is a great way to build trust with students.

Another finding from this study is the extent to which teachers are required to diversify their teaching by providing instruction for students with various academic needs, ranging from students who struggle to learn to those gifted students who need to be challenged academically. Differentiated instruction is used every day by the respondents in this study to meet the diverse needs of an increasingly diverse student body.

It is imperative that teachers become as skilled as possible teaching students who are living in poverty and that they use methods such as culturally responsive pedagogy to engage and motivate students by joining essential parts of their lives outside school into their daily instruction.

### **Additional Findings**

My findings confirm previous insights regarding elementary teachers' perceptions of working with children who live in conditions of poverty. Some scholars have attested to the challenges children encounter outside of school. Among the many problems the research has identified that impact students during school include hunger, inadequate or non-existent health care, and a home environment that may consist of alcohol, drugs, and

violence. Children living in these conditions are often angry and aggressive and may find it difficult to adapt to school and socialize with others. Children are often abandoned and left alone to take care of themselves and their siblings while their parent or guardian works double shifts to make ends meet.

My findings also confirm that using instructional strategies such as Culturally Responsive Teaching engage students, keep them involved, on task and interested in their learning. Students can connect to what is taught in the curriculum to the real world. My findings indicate that although there were various researched-based strategies used by the respondents in my study, incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy increases teachers' cultural competence and helps master cultural awareness and sensitivity. Also, using procedures such as differentiated instruction allows students various opportunities to learn, since a wide range of academic levels can be found in most classrooms. Teachers need to be able to meet the needs of their students where they are academically, and differentiated instruction helps that to happen.

My findings indicate that although teachers are bombarded with an array of assessments they are required to administer throughout the year, of greatest value are those formative assessments that offer immediate feedback that can be used to move instruction forward. Unlike the many required summative assessments, formative assessments allow teachers to make necessary changes to their lesson planning and thus meet the needs of each child exactly where he or she is academically.

My findings are consistent with the extensive research that shows a lack of resources teachers need to carry out daily instruction. Without adequate resources teachers find it difficult to accommodate an entire class so that the needs of all students at different levels of academic ability are met. Not every teacher has access to technology to make connections to the real world and to help expose students to new concepts and ideas. Some teachers do not have access to something essential as a curriculum and may need to use curricula from another state. Although some schools do have external support resources, a desperate need nevertheless exists for additional funding for too many schools and teachers who serve a student population from a background of poverty.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Because of the many challenges teachers face in working with poor children, professional development for both new and experienced teachers in meeting these challenges is crucial. To address this issue, one or more qualitative studies should be conducted to determine the appropriate kinds of professional development that best prepare teachers to teach in poverty areas. One or more of the following questions should be addressed in these studies. (1) What are the ways elementary school teachers are currently undergoing professional development that explicitly addresses teaching children in poverty? (2) What are the ways teachers are examining their own biases in an effort to understand different racial and cultural differences? (3) What are ways of exposing teachers to various strategies they can use to help children in poverty achieve academic success? (4) What are the ways elementary school teachers currently address issues of

race, culture, and social justice to create more culturally responsive classrooms? (5) What are the ways to help elementary school teachers overcome the most important obstacles to teaching children in poverty?

*(1) What are the ways elementary school teachers are currently undergoing professional development that explicitly addresses teaching children in poverty?*

Teachers must have an understanding that teaching children in poverty requires an unusually high degree of empathy for those children and be aware of the possible distressed situations children are encountering daily. Poverty often causes students to be exposed to devastating conditions or even trauma. As a result, dangerous student behavior is sometimes a consequence. The various ways the child interacts and behaves can be a challenge to deal with for any teacher (George, 2018). Because of this, schools must develop support structures for students that offer various ways of deflecting inappropriate student behavior. Furthermore, professional development programs must constantly reinforce various ways teachers can implement effective behavior management plans, while at the same time establishing thoughtful and meaningful relationships with the students.

*(2) What are the ways teachers are examining their own biases in an effort to understand different racial and cultural differences?*

Teachers must reflect on their own cultural backgrounds as a way of gaining an understanding of how those backgrounds might affect—and perhaps even bias—their perspectives on how they view their students. A person's cultural belief system is a

consequence of everything that has happened in a person's life but is most affected by family of origin and the social and economic context in which he or she grew up. But in spite of a teacher's own cultural background, he or she must nevertheless understand the cultural background of students in poverty in order to understand where they are academically. According to (Davis, 2016), to be better educators, we must thoroughly understand students'

cultural background and what that means to their lives. We must also be open and flexible to learn about our nation's history regarding race relations and how our thinking has been affected by those biases and our own experiences. Teachers who take the initiative to know more about their students' background and respect cultural differences are more likely to connect with them in a meaningful and thoughtful way. (Lawson-Davis, 2016, p. 43)

*(3) What are ways of exposing teachers to various strategies they can use to help children in poverty achieve academic success?*

Various research-based teaching strategies have been developed that incorporate differentiated instruction to meet the needs of a wide variety of academic situations. Implementing such strategies is imperative because there is always going to be a wide range of academic abilities in the classroom, particularly in a context of poverty. Differentiation encompasses teachers to plan lessons that provide students a variety of different chances to understand and demonstrate academic content. The foundation of

differentiated instruction is based on addressing students who learn differently, too often overlooked in too many classrooms that “teach to the middle.”

One way to address the wide range of student needs typically found in classes containing poor students is to use an assessment that provides immediate feedback. This way, data regarding the performance of specific students on specific tasks can lead to the development of specific teaching strategies for different students. As Goddard, Goddard, and Mingjung (2015) have pointed out, schools and their teachers face the need to teach in ways that interact and engage students from diverse environments. Teachers are required to diversify their teaching by providing instruction for students with various academic needs, ranging from students who struggle to learn to those gifted students who need to be challenged academically. Differentiated instruction is one of the most important strategies for reaching students from a background of poverty and must constantly be reinforced in professional development programs.

*(4) What are the ways elementary school teachers currently address issues of race, culture, and social justice to create more culturally responsive classrooms?*

Professional development must address the issue of equity in the classroom. Teachers need to engage in conversations about equity and the dangers of low expectations of students. Teachers who take the initiative to learn about their students’ cultural backgrounds, interests and daily lives will as a consequence be able to establish deep and meaningful relationships with their students. Lawson-Davis (2016) pointed out that teachers who focus on the sometimes disruptive behavior of black students will tend

to overlook their academic strengths and needs. Research regarding teacher expectations of black male students shows how individual negative perceptions on the part of teachers can have considerable negative effects on the academic performance of those students. Although some teachers are highly qualified, it is imperative that white middle-class teachers—who make up 80% of the teacher workforce—receive frequent and ongoing professional development regarding these issues.

*(5) What are the ways to help elementary school teachers overcome the most important obstacles to teaching children in poverty?*

Although parent involvement can vary from community to community, staying in communication with parents is essential—regardless of whether or not there is a particular problem. Respondents in this study who stayed in frequent touch with the parents of their students established a level of trust that allowed those parents to feel comfortable in coming to their child’s school to address their needs. Building relationships with students is perhaps the most important way teachers can overcome the challenge of teaching children from a background of poverty.

According to Iruka, Winn, Kingsley and Orthodoxou, Y. J. (2011), parent-teacher relationships are closely associated with the academic success of poor students. Home and school are two significant places that contribute to young children’s growth and academic and social-emotional success. When both teacher and parent become aware of a child’s needs and difficulties, strategies for both school and home can be devised.



Communication between teacher and parent helps everyone, and coordination between home and school is essential to meet a student's academic and social needs.

### **Summary**

The findings of this study were consistent with the scholarship surrounding children who live in conditions of poverty. The fact that poverty can have a negative impact on academic achievement is supported by much of the existing literature. The multiple challenges teachers encounter working with children who live in conditions of poverty are confirmed by the current research. This study, however, presents perspectives unique to elementary teachers. The needed support for elementary teachers is confirmed in the existing literature. Results from this study will contribute to the current literature by providing a more in-depth understanding of the supports needed for elementary teachers working with children who live in conditions of poverty. The researcher offers recommendations for research that will further explore the unique challenges faced by elementary teachers teaching students from a background of poverty. The researcher looks forward to working with other scholars with similar research interests.

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**Appendix A:**  
**Interview Protocol**

1. Tell me about the area where you grew up? Was it rural? Suburban? Urban?
2. Briefly tell me about your career in teaching.
3. Tell me about your recent experience as a teacher in a Title I school.
  - a. What are some of the significant challenges you face while teaching at a Title I school?
4. What do you like about teaching in an urban setting? What are your dislikes?
5. How would you describe your relationship with your students?
  - a. What role does that relationship play in your success as a teacher?
  - b. What praise would you value most from a student?
6. From your perspective, talk to me about working with students living in poverty. What are the challenges you face?
7. From your perspective, how do you think poverty affects students' academic achievement?
8. Can you describe the mobility you experience in your classroom?
  - a. How many students arrived in your class after the start of the school year?
  - b. How many students have already withdrawn from your class?
  - c. What were the reasons these moves occurred (to the best of your knowledge)?
9. What teaching strategies do you frequently use for lesson delivery?

- a. How have these strategies helped with enhancing student learning outcomes?
  - b. Tell me about the resources available to you.
  - c. Tell me about your recent experiences in implementing resources in the classroom.
  - d. What resources do you use?
10. What external support resources beyond your classroom do you use to address the needs of children living in conditions of poverty?
- a. How do you interact with school, district, and/or community supports?
  - b. What types of interactions do you have with parents?
11. From your perspective, what do you think are some challenges students living in poverty will face while implementing assessments in the classroom?
- How do you determine the effectiveness of these assessments?
12. What recommendations would you make to prepare new teachers to serve children living in conditions of poverty?
13. Is there any other information you'd like to share?

## **Appendix B**

### **Letter to Respondents**

8228 Harvest Bend Lane #22  
Laurel, MD. 20707  
(916) 529-8986

Trobinson@u.pacific.edu

To [Name of prospective participant]:

My name is Terri J. Robinson and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, CA. I am also currently employed as an elementary school teacher with Montgomery County Public Schools. I am currently looking for respondents for a study who are interested in the possibility of participation in a qualitative study investigating elementary school teachers' perceptions of the challenges of working with students who live in conditions of poverty.

Your participation would involve an interview, a discussion of curriculum, a site visit by me to your classroom and a possible follow-up interview. These interviews would be scheduled at a time of mutual convenience. Responses would remain anonymous; only I will know your name and school site.

Please feel free to contact me. We can discuss the possibility of your participation in this study and hopefully set up an initial meeting. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Terri J. Robinson





## **Appendix C**

### **Human Subjects Consent to Participate Form**

#### INFORMED CONSENT

#### ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF WORKING WITH CHILDREN WHO LIVE IN CONDITIONS OF POVERTY

You are invited to participate in a research study that will involve Elementary Teachers working with children who live in conditions of poverty.

My name is Terri J. Robinson, and I am a doctoral student at the University of the Pacific, Benerd School of Education. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of self-identification as an elementary school teacher teaching in a Title I school. The purpose of this research is to examine teacher perceptions concerning working with children who live in conditions of poverty.

If you decide to join this study, you will be asked to participate in an observation and semi-structured interview. The interview will take approximately 1-2 hours total and will be audio recorded. I then may request a second interview to follow up on what I learned from the first interview. The estimated number of interviews will be 1-4. The estimated interview time is 4-8 hours total. I am also requesting to have two observations of your teaching. The observations will take place in your classroom for a full day. Your participation in this study will last a year.

There are some possible risks involved for participants. Sociological discomfort may result if participants share their responses to information that is provided to

interview questions. Loss of confidentiality may occur if the subject chooses to disclose his or her answers to other individuals from the interview. Sociological discomfort may result if participants share their responses to information generated by the interview questions. Sociological and loss of confidentiality risks may also occur the researcher accidentally reveals/releases the information that was gathered from the interviews. Psychological risks may result if the teachers may feel anxious from being watched in the classrooms or from talking about their practices.

I plan to minimize the risks of psychological discomfort by providing resources for additional help (counselors). I plan to minimize risks of sociological discomfort by providing safeguards of data such as restricted access (encrypted data storage). I plan to minimize the risks for loss of confidentiality by storing data in a secure environment and in locked files. There are the possibility that their reflection on their suspension practices/decisions may raise issues or discomfort on the part of the participants. Participants may elect not to answer any of the questions that make them feel uneasy.

There are some benefits to this research, particularly that it will help the researcher: 1) document the decision-making practices, 2) make elementary school teacher contributions to policy and 3) add new knowledge to the field of education. The benefits to the subjects will allow them to have the opportunity to gain the experience of participating in a study and to also be useful or helpful to contributing to the field of education.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please call me at 916-529-8986 or my faculty advisor Dr. Thomas Nelson at (209) 946-3253. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project please call the Research & Graduate Studies Office, University of the Pacific (209) 946-7716. In the event of a research related injury, please contact your regular medical provider and bill through your normal insurance carrier and then contact the Office of Research & Graduate Studies. Revised February 2016

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Measures to insure your confidentiality are the use of pseudonym codes for each participant. The data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked location and will be destroyed after a period of three years after the study is completed. I (the principal investigator) and Dr. Thomas Nelson (faculty advisor) will be the only personnel who will have access to the data. Your participation is entirely voluntary and your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form, and

that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. You will be offered a copy of this signed form to keep.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_