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Academic and Social Effects of Poverty on Elementary School Students

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Academic and Social Effects of Poverty on Elementary School Students

Abstract

Poverty is incredibly stressful for low-income households and their students. This senior capstone examines how poverty affects Elementary School students academically and socially. Through the use of literature reviews and interviews with two teachers, the results indicated that poverty is the leading cause that has affected students' academic performance and social performance.

Introduction and Background

It can be incredibly stressful for everyone in the low-income/poverty household, including young children and students. Whether the young student cannot maintain concentration in the classroom or does not have enough resources as the rest of the students do, etc. These factors may lead to additional mental and physical stress on the young students. My interest in this topic stems from when I was a para-professional at an elementary school. I was working in a classroom with kindergarteners and first graders. Like most classes, I saw a few students below average struggling within the classroom and outside the classroom with their peers. I began to pay more close attention to those students. I wanted to see if there was any correlation between their academic and social performance and their guardian's household income. I believe educators have a preliminary obligation to treat each student with respect and dignity; however, educators have a moral obligation to help each student reach their highest goals.

Jiang, Ekono, and Skinner (2016) present research proving facts about the struggles of children living in poverty under the age of 6 years. Children under 18 years represent 23 percent of the population, but they comprise 32 percent of all people in poverty (Jiang et al, 2016). Young children under the age of six show an astonishing 47 percent living in low-income or poor households. The statistics show a constant uprising in percentages of low-income and poor households. Higher levels of parental education seem to decrease the likelihood that a child or children will live in a low-income or low-income family. As for health insurance for low-income families living in poverty shows that 6 percent are uninsured. Educators have a preliminary obligation to treat each student with respect and dignity; however, educators have a moral obligation to help each student succeed in reaching their highest goals. As a future educator, I want to research the effects of poverty on children living in the lower socio-economic class and

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determine how it affects their academic and social levels. I want to facilitate the knowledge of my research to teachers. Hence, they can support students of low socioeconomic status to succeed academically and socially inside and outside the classroom.

As a current developing educator, I wanted to know what current teachers felt about this topic. The primary question for the capstone project is: *What does the research say about the effects of poverty on children living in the lower socio-economic class?* Related and secondary questions that will be asked are: *What is poverty, and how does it happen to families? To what extent does poverty affect the students' academic and social levels? Are there federal and state guidelines to determine the parents' level of income to be considered low-economic status? If there are, how do teachers know? To what extent does their parents' economic status affects their students academically and socially? What could teachers do to support students of low socioeconomic status to succeed academically and socially inside and outside the classroom?*

Literature Review

Furthermore, I wanted to do extensive research on this topic. My literature review includes the findings I found up to this point. These sources come from scholarly journals, *TED Talks*, and authentic internet sources. While going through my literature review and finding the information that I have used to conduct my research, many topics have been covered and reviewed thoroughly. This research will further help current educators, future teachers, and parents support children struggling with poverty.

Statistics have shown that 47 percent of children under six years old live in low-income or poor households. Koball and Jiang (2016) present the basic facts and numbers about low-income children in the U.S. This is a credible, peer-reviewed journal in the Columbia University Library. This fact sheet is a part of the National Center for Children in Poverty's

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demographic fact sheet. Some points that stood out in this journal were the percentages due to race/ethnicity. As shown on a chart, black, American Indian, and Hispanic children are disproportionately low income and poor compared to other races. Another chart shows that children of immigrants are more likely to be low-income than children of native-born parents. Family structure plays a significant role in poverty. Children who live with two parents are much less likely to be poor or low-income than children who live with one parent or neither parent (Figure 10).

Poverty

To understand the effects of poverty, one must first know what poverty is. The U.S. Census Bureau (2021) presented research examining the different measures of poverty. This is a credible article. The Census Bureau is the government's largest statistical agency that provides accurate facts and statistics to show America's people, places, and economy. The Census Bureau states that if a family's total income is less than the family's threshold, then that family and every individual are considered in poverty (Census Bureau, 2021). Recently, COVID-19 has played a significant role in our nation's poverty. Author Bill Fay states that the Census Bureau numbers were compiled before the COVID pandemic sent the economy into a tailspin. Columbia University's Center on Poverty & Social Policy estimated how the supplemental poverty rate changed on a monthly basis. Assessing the pre-COVID rate at 15% (compared to the Census Bureau's 10.5%), the center said the poverty rate peaked at 17.3% in August 2020, falling to 16% two months later, but concluded it would have been much worse without extraordinary government intervention (Fay, 2021).

Social, Behavioral, and Academic Development

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Children living in poverty have a more difficult time achieving social competence, emotional control, academic success, and self-regulation as compared to their peers (Holm-Blackburn, 2008). When children begin to notice they are falling behind their peers or behaving differently than them, they may start to develop low self-esteem. Having low self-esteem can harm one's mental health. It may lead to depression, anxiety, and bad habits to cope. That all plays a part in the social, behavioral, and academic development of a student.

Living in poverty creates a tremendous amount of stress on the child. Stress causes our body to release a chemical called cortisol. The buildup of cortisol in our body sends weaker neuron signals to the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus. Both the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus are crucial for learning, cognition, and working memory (Mckenzie, 2019). When students in poverty continue to be stressed, it causes the shrinking of neurons in the frontal lobe of the child's brain.

What are particular experiences associated with growing up in poverty that might be able to be targeted to promote brain development and learning outcomes for kids? Nutrition, access to health care, exposure to second-hand smoke or lead, and the experience of stress or discrimination, to name a few (Ted Talk, 2019).

Mental Health and Programs

Hodgkinson, Godoy, Beers, & Lewin (2017) present how to improve mental health access for low-income children and families. Unfortunately, poverty is a common thing for many families. This makes it challenging to get the health care they need. Low-income houses are the least likely to be connected with high-quality mental health care. Poverty has been linked with poor health and increased risk of psychological disorders in children and adults that can persist across the life span (Hodgkinson et al, 2017). Being raised with poverty around you is an

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extreme stressor that can increase the parental risk for mental health problems and substance abuse, which will affect the child's whole worldview. Only a small percentage receive services and even fewer complete treatments. However, a patient-centered medical home (PCMH) is a promising strategy to increase access to mental health care. PCMH has a system-based approach and reflects core elements that lead to improved mental health outcomes.

Domínguez, Vitiello, Fuccillo, Greenfield, and Bulotsky-Shearer (2011) present a discussion about the effects on children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. It may seem obvious to some that children raised in middle or high-income households have more opportunities, better grades, socialize better, etc. This journal points out that to be accurate due to extensive research done. These researchers say we should put socioeconomically disadvantaged children into comprehensive early childhood programs that aim to foster children's readiness in multiple domains, including language and literacy, mathematics, science, and approaches to learning (Domínguez, Vitiello, Fuccillo, Greenfield, and Bulotsky-Shearer (2011).

Teaching skills that connect children to their experiences will heighten their early school success. A program for this is called Head Start. A system model by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) helps one better understand all the influences in a child's life. They describe how children's development is not just shaped by their individual characteristics but also by the proximal environments (classrooms). Campbell (1990) shows the percentage difference in behavior problems such as aggression, hostility, and emotional lability, are dramatically higher in children from low-income households. Campbell (1990) suggests preschool can be a huge factor in helping lower those numbers.

Parenting consequences

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Ward and Lee (2020) present research showing that parenting stress is associated with lower levels of parental sensitivity towards their children, which leads to negatively influencing a child's outcome. This article aims to make people aware that parenting stress plays an enormous role in influencing the child's results in life mentally and physically. It is essential to understand the consequences of parental stress and the factors that explain or mediate the relationship between parenting stress and outcomes (U.S. DHHS, 2014). Parenting stress leads to parents being less responsive to their children, making the child more needy and anxious. Maternal parenting stress is associated with lower child health ratings (Larkin & Otis, 2019), and mothers' supportiveness mediates the relationship between parenting stress and child behavior problems (Cherry, Gerstein, & Ciciolla, 2019).

Camilo, Garrido, and Calheiros (2020) present the social information processing model in child abuse and neglect. Multiple aspects go into parenting. It's background, social situational factors, biological processes, personality, etc. When several, or even one of those is compromised, such as poverty, the likelihood of maladaptive parenting in the form of child maltreatment increases (Cicchetti & Valentino, 2015). Abuse and neglect play a detrimental impact on children's long-term development. Characteristics of children's families are associated with children's educational experiences and their academic achievement (NCES, 2021)

Insufficiencies in Low-income Households

Casey (2001) presented research examining the characteristics of US children living in food-insufficient households. This team compares it to other households that are food-sufficient and have more physical activity. A total of 9,459 children between the ages of 0 and 17 years were studied. The results were that children in low-income households summed fewer calories and watched more television than in higher-income houses.

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Students living in poverty often have fewer resources at home to complete homework, study, or engage in activities that help equip them for success during the school day. Many impoverished families lack access to computers, high-speed internet, and other materials that can aid students outside of school. Parents of these families often work longer hours or multiple jobs, meaning they may not be available to assist their children with their schoolwork. Nearly one-fifth of students nationwide live in poverty, attend a high-poverty school, or both. Poverty negatively impacts students in various ways within K–12 education and beyond (NASSP, 2021).

Methods and Procedures

For my capstone project, I wanted to do more than just research. I wanted to go out into the field and ask teachers about their personal experiences in their classrooms about this topic. I did extensive research through articles, books, and online sources for my methods and procedures. I also interviewed two elementary school teachers from a local school. I shared a Google Docs form with each of them where they were able to fill out the page with their personal answers. I asked them eight questions that relate to my primary research question. I wanted to see if they noticed a difference between the students that are in poverty versus those who are in the middle class or upper class.

I chose these two elementary school teachers because they have been teaching for over ten years and have experienced many different classroom situations. The teacher questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2. Aside from my research and interviews, I witnessed the effects of poverty while being a paraprofessional in a kindergarten and first-grade classroom.

Results, Findings, and Discussions

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The aggregated information received from two interviewed educators produced well-rounded responses to the proposed eight questions. Outlined below will be questions from both of the educators I interviewed and summarized responses from each of them.

Teacher Interview Questionnaire

What do you think poverty is? (Appendix 1 and 2)

(Educator respondent 1, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) Poverty is when you do not have the basic need necessary to live.

(Educator respondent 2, Personal Communication, 2 April 2022) Poverty is someone living not only paycheck to paycheck but below what they are able to afford.

Are there telling signs of students struggling in poverty? (Appendix 1 and 2)

(Educator respondent 1, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) Some telling signs of students struggling with poverty might be their clothes, cleanliness, always being hungry, and low performance in their academics.

(Educator respondent 2, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) states that students who live with neglect, lack of food, proper care, depression, living with many siblings in one room, or sleeping on a couch as their bed can be telling signs. Lots of signs come out if you talk with your students you have concerns about.

How often do you see students in poverty within your school and/or classroom? (Appendix 1 and 2)

(Educator respondent 1, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) Students in her school have a low poverty rate, so she cannot speak about it because she does not see it often enough.

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(Educator respondent 2, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) I had one girl a few years ago that was potentially homeless. She was on the edge of calling Child Protective Services (CPS) several times, but she decided to keep trying to work with her guardians on helping her with her well-being.

Do you see social and/or academic problems more so from students in poverty? (Appendix 1 and 2)

(Educator respondent 1, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) I absolutely does see social and academic problems more with students who are in poverty because they lack the resources they need.

(Educator respondent 2, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) Yes, if they are tired, depressed, malnourished, etc., they cannot have a successful day at school.

Do you think there is a way that teachers can support students in poverty? (Appendix 1 and 2)

(Educator respondent 1, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) Teachers can support students who are in poverty by teaching to their specific academic and social needs.

(Educator respondent 2, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) Teachers do the best that they can. Teachers cannot save them all but we can investigate each situation. Teachers help by showing care and giving them a safe space in our classrooms.

What elements of curricular reform do you see deem fit to meet the needs of students living in poverty? (Appendix 1 and 2)

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(Educator respondent 1, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) You must first assess the situation and then implement interventions to target the needs of the specific students.

Monitoring the student's progress often is a must as well.

(Educator respondent 2, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) Phone calls to parents or guardians will help get a better understanding of the environment that the student is living in. Safety is always the most important thing to check up on with a child.

Do you believe your school provides enough resources for all students to succeed? (Appendix 1 and 2)

(Educator respondent 1, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) My school does not provide enough resources for all of its students to be successful. The reasonings are tied to funding.

(Educator respondent 2, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) I do believe her school provides enough resources. They have programs and places they can direct the students in poverty to if they need extra help as well.

Do you think poverty plays a role in a student's academic and social achievement? (Appendix 1 and 2)

(Educator respondent 1, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) Poverty absolutely plays a huge role in a student's academic and social achievement.

(Educator respondent 2, Personal Communication, 2 April, 2022) Absolutely I think so. Having an income at home, a comfortable environment to live in, safety, support, encouragement, etc. will help a student thrive in school rather than them struggling to get assignments done or

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achieve higher goals. Support and encouragement from educators, no matter what the grade level, will help students survive who are in these situations.

Problems and Limitations

A problem I came across while doing my research was not being able to meet with the two elementary school teachers in person. Due to COVID, I had to communicate with them through emails and have them answer my questions through a Google Docs page.

The teachers I interviewed mentioned that they have come across limitations on how much they can physically help their students in poverty such as, they cannot give them money, they cannot help them outside of school, Child Protective Services (CPS) cannot do much unless there is physical proof, and that they can only do so much within the school hours.

Recommendations

One of the most unfortunate results of their economic struggles is that students who live in poverty often drop out of school, choosing a low-paying job to pay for the luxuries they have been denied instead of an education (Nour, 2020). However, teachers have the opportunity to support them if they are aware. There are several ways teachers can be observant and spot if a student is in poverty. Children in poverty will most likely have health and nutrition deficiencies. Overall, people in poverty are less likely to exercise, get proper diagnoses, receive appropriate and prompt medical attention, or be prescribed appropriate medications or interventions. Moreover, poor nutrition at breakfast affects gray matter mass in children's brains (Jenson, 2013). The grey matter in our brains is responsible for our muscle control and sensory perception, such as seeing and hearing, memory, emotions, speech, decision making, and self-control. Teachers must remember that the two primary foods for our brains are oxygen and

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glucose (free!). Teachers can set up a time for stretching, yoga, or simply practicing taking deep breaths. These are great ways to improve metabolic health and self-management.

Students in poverty vocabulary will not be as developed as their middle-class peers as well. Children from low-income families hear, on average, 13 million words by age 4. In middle-class families, children hear about 26 million words during that same time period. In upper-income families, they hear a staggering 46 million words by age 4—three times as many as their lower-income counterparts (Jenson, 2013). Teachers can incorporate new vocabulary in daily rituals such as storytime, vocabulary flashcards, reading books, etc.

It is crucial for teachers to implement hope and a growth mindset into these young students. It may be much harder for these students to see any hopeful futures because lower socioeconomic status is linked to hopelessness/helplessness. However, hope is one of the most powerful things a teacher can pass along to their students. Teachers can do this by focusing on reinforcing and affirming efforts. This will guide the students into making better decisions and cultivating a positive attitude. Other methods for teachers to better support their students struggling in poverty are to expose students to new experiences, give plenty of praise, show them kindness and love, and keep expectations high. By maintaining high expectations, you reinforce to the students that you believe in their abilities (MMcClain, 2015).

Conclusion

This extensive research has concluded that children living within households in poverty do not have all the resources needed to succeed in the classroom and outside of the classroom. My primary and related questions were all answered by my research done to date. The two elementary school teachers answered related questions as well.

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Many of these articles provide a next step in what we can do to help children in unfortunate situations like these. As a future educator, I plan to implement my newly learned knowledge into my classroom so that I can support each one of my students. I believe that teaching is all about making your student feel safe and comfortable when they come to school, especially for those students who do not feel safe in their own homes. I can only gather information up until May 12, 2022.

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Appendix 1

Teacher Interview Questionnaire

Educator #1

Crossroads Elementary School, Riverbank California

- 1) What do you think poverty is?

Poverty is when you don't have the basic needs necessary to live.

- 2) Are there telling signs of students struggling in poverty?

Some telling signs of students struggling in poverty are the students' clothes, the cleanliness of their bodies, always being hungry, and low performance in their academics.

- 3) How often do you see students in poverty within your school and/or classroom?

The students within our school have a low poverty rate. The amount of our free and reduced lunch qualified applicants is less than 35% of our population. Therefore, we are not designated by the state as a Title 1 school and our funding is limited due to that percentage.

- 4) Do you see social and/or academic problems more so from students in poverty?

Absolutely, I see social and academic problems more with students who are in poverty. They lack the resources needed to assist them with their social behaviors and academics at home.

- 5) Do you think there is a way that teachers can support students in poverty?

In the classroom teachers can support students who are in poverty by teaching to their specific academic and social needs. Tier 3 intensive grouping and Social and Emotional lessons are great ways a teacher can assist a student suffering from poverty that has

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academic and social gaps. The teacher can also get other support providers such as a school counselor, behaviorist, and a school nurse to aid in supporting the student as well.

- 6) What elements of curricular reform do you see deem fit to meet the needs of students living in poverty?

The elements of curricular reform should be the same for all students who have learning or social gaps. You first must assess the situation and then implement interventions to target the needs of the specific student. Monitoring the student's progress often is a must as well. The reform must be purposeful with specific intentions behind it.

- 7) Do you believe your school provides enough resources for all students to succeed?

I would have to say that my school doesn't provide enough resources for all of our students to be successful. The reason this is the case is because it is all tied to funding. Since our school is not a Title 1 school, our state funding is very limited. Therefore, our school leaders and teachers have to get very creative with the little resources we do have, and many times it's just not enough to close the gaps that are needed for our students.

- 8) Do you think poverty plays a role in a student's academic and social achievement?

Poverty absolutely plays a huge role in a student's academic and social achievement. Students in poverty usually only have school as their only resource. Therefore, the school needs to be an effective resource for these students. For those students struggling, a specific plan such as a student study team should be in place to monitor the students' specific needs in all areas. Progress monitoring using data should be a constant to ensure the student is successful in making the necessary growth in all areas of concern.

Appendix

Teacher Interview Questionnaire

Educator #2

Crossroads Elementary School, Riverbank California

1) What do you think poverty is?

I think poverty is someone living not only paycheck to paycheck but below what they are able to afford. This could mean homelessness or living in a hotel, mission, the street, etc.

I think poverty is also living without basic needs. I've seen evidence of poverty in my own town and especially traveling around the world.

2) Are there telling signs of students struggling in poverty?

Sure! If students are living beyond their means with credit card debt, student loans, outstanding personal loans, no money for food, etc. Students need a course in budget management like adults do too. This is for college students. Elementary to high school students who live with neglect, lack of food, proper care, depression, living with many siblings sometimes in one room or sleeping on a couch as their bed, etc. Lots of signs come out if you talk with kids you have concerns about.

3) How often do you see students in poverty within your school and/or classroom?

I had a girl a few years ago that was basically homeless except that her grandparents stepped in and she slept on the couch. She was always clean and sometimes her hair was brushed. Often she didn't have breakfast and I made sure she had a snack. I was on the edge of calling CPS several times, but I kept trying to work with her grandparents and father on helping her with her well-being. Times like that are tough. I often realize we can't save all the "starfish," but it does matter to the one who needs it the most.

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- 4) Do you see social and/or academic problems more so from students in poverty?

Sure. If they are tired, depressed, malnourished, etc, they cannot have a successful day at school. They do not have a place to do homework or often someone who can even help them with homework.

- 5) Do you think there is a way that teachers can support students in poverty?

As I said, we do the best we can. We can't save them all, but I think we investigate each situation. We help by showing care and giving them a safe space in our classrooms and meeting their needs here to the best of our ability daily.

- 6) What elements of curricular reform do you deem fit to meet the needs of students living in poverty?

I can only do so much by documenting each situation. Phone calls to parents or guardians will help get a better understanding of the environment too. Safety is always the most important thing to check up on with a child. In terms of curricular reform, you can teach a child to make better choices, but after they reach adulthood, things are out of our hands. We as teachers can teach about problem-solving and how NOT to get into poverty, but it doesn't mean that the message is always received.

- 7) Do you believe your school provides enough resources for all students to succeed?

Yes, I do. We have plenty of resources and people to talk to if there is a problem. We have programs and places we can direct them to as well. I think we offer a variety of choices and resources for all kids.

- 8) Do you think poverty plays a role in a student's academic and social achievement?

Absolutely, I think so. This is not to say that a child in poverty can't go on to get a college degree. However, having an income at home, a comfortable environment to live

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in, safety, support, encouragement, etc will help a student thrive in school rather than them struggling to get assignments done or achieve higher goals. I believe social students are judged more harshly as they get into intermediate grades such as 4th on. Identity and bullying tend to take place more often at those levels and this can be harder for kids that come from poverty situations. Again, support and encouragement from educators no matter the grade level will help kids survive who are in these situations.