TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS IN POVERTY

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

This study examines teacher’s perceptions of the impact of poverty on student achievement. The goal of the study is to determine if teacher perceptions of students in poverty impacts instructional decisions in the classroom. Alpha middle school teachers currently do not receive training in strategies to identify and reach students in poverty. Alpha Middle School is a 6-8 building serving approximately 615 students with a relatively small free and reduced lunch percentage of 21.7 percent. Four years ago it was 15 percent. As the number of students in economic distress increases Alpha Middle School faculty and staff will have to examine their classroom practices and their personal understanding of students in poverty.

Alpha Middle School seeks to gain information to aid them in serving students who grow up in poverty. The data was obtained at Alpha Middle School, via a survey given to the teaching faculty.

The report contains the following elements: 1) Background, issue and concerns, 2) Practice Under Investigation, 3) Conceptual Underpinnings, 4) Statement of the Problem, 5) Purpose of the Study, 6) Research Questions, 7) Null Hypothesis, 8) Benefits of the Study, 9) Review of Literature, 10) Research Methods, 11) Findings, 12) Conclusion,

Background, issues and concerns.

America is currently facing increasing numbers of families in economic distress. Students in poverty often face a unique set of challenges in regards to academic achievement.
Generational poverty often magnifies the issues facing students who live below the poverty line. School districts face increasing pressure to increase academic achievement for all of their students regardless of what issues may hinder their academic development. Despite good intentions and a great deal of effort by school districts across the nation the achievement gap persists. While many people associate the achievement gap with race it is also an issue in regards to socioeconomic factors. Students who attend low income schools are more likely to perform poorly academically. Additionally, low income students tend to perform at a lower academic level than students who come from households in the middle and upper income bracket. School districts across the nation are running out of time to meet the proficiency standards established by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. In order to meet the needs of underprivileged students and reverse the lagging trend of academic achievement educators must gain a more clear understanding of the issues facing children in poverty. Educational leaders must gain a better perspective on the perceptions and bias’s the teachers in their districts and buildings may have towards students who live in poverty. The teachers themselves will benefit by reflecting on their own perceptions of underprivileged students. Once these issues have been examined educators at all levels will benefit from an examination of societies view of poverty and a review of current best practices in educating and understanding children from poverty. They will also benefit from a review of current best practices in educating children of poverty. Currently Alpha middle school has a relatively small but growing population of students in poverty.

*Practice Under Investigation*

Alpha Middle School would like to improve academic performance for students in poverty.
Conceptual Underpinnings

Children who come from poverty consistently achieve at a lower academic level than their counterparts from upper and middle class families. Federal pressure in the form of the No Child Left Behind Act has challenged schools to improve achievement for all students. More pointedly it tasks educators with insuring that all students are at grade level in the core subjects of math and reading. This has caused schools to reexamine how they deliver instruction to all of their students. (Payne, 2009) points out that poverty does not restrict a child’s ability to learn. As educators we need to examine every avenue and practice that has proven to be successful in educating children from poverty. This includes, but is not limited to examining our own perceptions of these students, their families and the lives they lead. Understanding the mores and folkways of our student’s community could open our minds to a better way to educate them.

Statement of the Problem

There is a lack of evidence that links teacher perceptions about students in poverty to their academic achievement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to measure teacher perceptions about students in poverty and how they learn. Information gleaned from this study will be used to improve instruction for students from poverty at Alpha Middle School.
Research Questions

The following research questions were constructed to investigate the problem. For each research question multiple survey items were created. Teachers at Alpha Middle School were presented with agree or disagree statements regarding the attitudes of children in poverty and their families regarding school. The teachers could choose from strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. The research questions and the supporting items are below.

RQ1: What are teacher’s perceptions of students in poverty world view?

Students from generational poverty define the world in local terms.

Students from generational poverty have a more limited vocabulary than their peers

RQ2: What are teacher’s perceptions of students in poverty attitudes towards school?

Students from generational poverty fail to connect school success with success in life.

Students from generational poverty see entertainment as more important than academic achievement.

RQ3: What are teacher’s perceptions of the families of students in poverty and their attitude toward education?

Students from generational poverty come from families with a negative view of education.
Null Hypothesis  alpha level

Teachers do not have negative perceptions of students who come from generational poverty.

Anticipated Benefits of the Study

The results of this research will be used to formulate a professional development program to assist teachers at Alpha Middle School to educate children from poverty.

Definition of Terms

Situational Poverty: Having little or no money or means of support.

Generational Poverty: Having been in poverty for more than one generation.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

Students who attend high poverty schools receive less engaging types of instruction. (Solomon, 1996) It’s hard to believe that is true. Another way of saying it would be that students who need engaging lessons the most are receiving them the least. Perhaps it would be better to say that students who are in the greatest need of good instruction receive it less than their counterparts. It is generally accepted that the most important factor in student achievement is the teacher in the classroom.

As of 2007 only 60 percent of children from low income families can expect to graduate from high school. (Education Resources Institute, P. 2007). Those students who do not graduate are four times as likely to be unemployed according to the same research. Additionally, only one in three will attend college. Poor students rank in the 19th percentile on classroom assessments as opposed to their upper middle class counterparts who score in the 66th percentile. (Lacour and Tissington, 2011) This statistic is magnified by the fact that students who are not proficient in reading by third grade have a greater chance of not finishing high school by the time they turn nineteen years old. (Casey Foundation, 2007) There is an endless supply of statistics that connect poverty to low academic achievement so I will not list them all. In an era where education, or more accurately knowledge, is at a premium those statistics should set off alarm bells across the nation.

Further complicating this situation is the schools that children from poverty frequently attend. Students in high poverty schools are 77% more likely to be assigned an out of field
teacher than a student from a wealthier school. (Armstrong 2010) These schools are also more likely to employ beginning teachers. Armstrong contends that our most gifted teachers need to be assigned to our most needy students.

The majority of the teaching force in America is mainly white and draws from middle class households. (Bennett, 2008) Bennett also points out that in addition to being from the middle class most teaching candidates are female. This creates a cultural barrier between the majority of teachers and students from poverty. While Bennett concedes that the population of teacher education programs is increasingly diverse, they are not reflective of the student population and will not be anytime soon. Being white should not be an inhibitor to employment as a teacher, but it would be a benefit to high needs school districts to identify and develop talent from diverse backgrounds. Bennett contends that understanding the mores and folkways of your student population is an asset when trying to engage students in their own learning.

Students who come from poverty are more likely to face obstacles that will make learning more difficult. Children from poverty have a greater chance of being malnourished, suffer from lead poisoning and have asthma. (Armstrong 2010) Furthermore these ailments are more likely to go undiagnosed and all of them can limit brain function. Often poor children come from families who operate in a state of chaos. (Armstrong 2010) Many come from single parent homes and are subject to inconsistent discipline techniques. They frequently have a high rate of mobility due to their families not being able to pay the bills. This obviously disrupts their studies and can lead to emotional and psychological issues. These issues will be magnified if a student finds themselves in a homeless situation. Armstrong contends that all of these factors can be
barriers to the success of these students. These factors are also beyond the control of the student. Educators must provide these students with structure and a high level of engagement to keep them interested in and connected to school.

Faced with these alarming statistics it is no wonder teachers feel overwhelmed when fulfilling their duties. In fact, Lisa Delpit, (2005) identifies teacher attitudes as one of the biggest obstacles to overcome in educating children from poverty. According to Delpit, teachers frequently place blame for low student achievement on external factors over which they have no control. A frequent target of this blame was lack of parental support, or poor parenting. Oddly enough, central office bureaucracy was another.

Unfortunately teachers in high poverty schools tend to harbor negative perceptions of their students at a very high rate. According to Solomon (1996) teachers viewed parents of students in high poverty schools as being less involved in school and less supportive of their child’s education. These teachers were also more likely to be unhappy about their working conditions and have an unsatisfactory feeling about their jobs. It is not hard to imagine that people with negative feelings about their job and work environment will be less effective in their tasks. It should be no surprise that Solomon also found that teachers with negative attitudes about their work situation tended to grant less autonomy to their students and display less student work. These same teachers tended to focus on student compliance rather than their learning potential. It’s not hard to see that becomes a cycle that leads to a self fulfilling prophecy. In other words teachers are sending a message to students that they expect very little out of them.
School leaders must create support structures for teachers in these situations and provide them with the resources they need to be effective in this environment.

Teachers who educate students for generational poverty could benefit from an understanding of the multiple intelligences. (Goebel 2009) Goebel points out those students from poverty are often labeled as disruptive or out of control. The use of the multiple intelligences could be used to bridge the educational gap that exists for these students. This will require teachers to connect with the students to understand their learning styles and innate abilities. It will also require teachers to release responsibility to the students in the form of choices that allow the student autonomy to create an outcome.

Negative perceptions of people in poverty are not limited to educators. I have little doubt that the negative perceptions of educators reflect the attitude of society as a whole. A recent study identified negative perceptions of social service workers in the Ozarks region of Missouri. (Langille-Hoppe et al. 2009) This study exposed a number of bias’s that exist among the very people who dedicate their lives to serving the poor. Many service providers identified a poverty of spirit that exists among their clients. In interviews providers verbalized a belief that poverty may be a symptom of not being in a relationship with god, or Jesus. It was as if a judgment had been passed from above that kept people in a cycle of poverty. Ironically, this perception is not supported by empirical data in any way. (Langille-Hoppe, et al.) This belief is a reflection of the cultural rhythm of the region but it is still somewhat surprising given the perception that many social workers have a liberal world view.
Mental illness was also identified as a contributing factor to poverty. (Langille-Hoppe, et al.) Providers frequently identified psychiatric diagnoses as a contributing factor to their client’s situation. Oppositional defiant disorder, bipolar and obsessive compulsive disorders were among those mentioned. Whether the perceived cause is psychological or religious they both point to a belief that if the individual could be “fixed” they may escape poverty and proceed with a successful life.

Providers also identified poverty as a mind-set as being a contributing factor to poverty. (Langille-Hoppe, et al.) Many of their clients came from multigenerational poverty. In many cases they could not see themselves as being able to achieve more in life. Providers made judgments and lumped people from multigenerational poverty as being part of the “undeserving poor”. This helped the providers manage their jobs and set priorities in their work. One provider indicated that people in these situations cannot be helped. This bias is juxtaposed against a backdrop of the “deserving poor” who may have fell on hard times and have a desire to improve their situation. Human nature being what it is I can only imagine that the biases of educators and social service providers are likely to be internalized by the constituencies they serve. Given the results of this study it comes as no surprise that educators would have a negative view of children and families in poverty.

Despite evidence of negative perceptions of poor children in the educational system and society all students have a right to a first class education. The good news is that perceptions can change. There is an increasing amount of guidance available to educators to help them more effectively educate children from poverty. Ruby Payne is perhaps the most well known expert
on the subject of educating children from poverty. Her writing on the subject draws both praise and criticism but is nonetheless a great reference point for discussion.

Educators need a framework for understanding children in poverty. (Payne 2003) According to Payne individuals have eight resources that influence achievement and money is only one of those resources. The other seven resources are paraphrased as follows:

1. Emotional- the ability to choose and control emotional responses...
2. Mental-intellectual ability and acquired skills, i.e. reading etc.
3. Spiritual- divine purpose
4. Physical-health and mobility
5. Support Systems-external resources that can be called upon in times of need
6. Role Models-access to adults who are appropriate and nurturing
7. Knowledge of Hidden Rules-knowing the unspoken rules of a group i.e. middle class

Students who lack these resources will more than likely struggle in school. Educators need to be cognizant of this and develop a plan to support these students. Students who don’t understand the hidden rules of the middle class will need guidance in that area. Educators will need to be intentional in teaching those rules to their students. This will not happen by accident and will require educational leaders to develop a systematic plan to address these issues in their high needs students.

Most students from generational poverty have a very limited vocabulary. (Payne 2003) This is known as casual register and often includes only 400 to 500 words. A vocabulary that is so limited undoubtedly be a detriment to achievement in school and limits their options in life.
According to Payne students from generational poverty also lack mediation skills. Mediation skills are cognitive skills that develop when children are taught cause and effect of actions and are given strategies to impact outcomes. Since these skills have not been developed at home educators must take on the responsibility of developing these skills in school.

Students who lack these skills are unlikely to develop them without intentional adult intervention. Educators will benefit from forming positive and appropriate relationships with their students. In order to form meaningful relationships with students it will be imperative to gain an understanding of the culture in which they live. Evidence has shown that having teachers do tours of the community they serve can help them see their students in a different light and that will be reflected in how they relate to and educate their students. (Bennet, 2008)

Students from generational poverty will benefit from a discipline program centered on structure and choice. (Payne 2003) The focus of this philosophy will not be punish and forgive. Instead it would focus on helping students to develop skills to avoid being in trouble in the future while still holding them accountable for behavior. Payne suggests giving the students examples of choices that would be more appropriate in the future. By asking students questions about their behavior choices and focusing on problem solving the student will begin to see their other choices that can be made in the future. The teacher may even have the student decide how they will react to a particular situation in the future.

The success or failure of this proposition will rely on the adults’ ability to establish a positive relationship with the student. Students from generational poverty lack positive role
models whom they can rely on for guidance and an example for appropriate responses to situations. (Payne 2003) This process will require a large investment of time from the adult. The adult will have to be consistent in tone and tenor as well as how they respond if they want to engender trust on the part of the student. They will also have to be patient and not take student behavior personally as the student will undoubtedly test the relationships boundaries and reliability.

Research has shown that school size is a factor in the effect of poverty on student achievement. The impact of poverty on achievement is much higher in large schools than in smaller ones. (Bickel, Howley 2000) The same research shows that this impact is particularly strong at the middle level. This study is fascinating because it pulls data from four very different states: Ohio, Montana, Texas and Georgia. This lends credibility to the study and its findings. In each state the results were consistent despite varying levels of diversity in the student populations.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Method

The following research methods were used to investigate the research questions stated above.
The methods of 1) research design, 2) study group identification, 3) data collection and instrumentation, and 4) statistical analysis are described below. The three research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What are teacher’s perceptions of students in poverty world view?
RQ2: What are teacher’s perceptions of students in poverty attitudes towards school?
RQ3: What are teacher’s perceptions of the families of students in poverty and their attitude toward education?

Research Design

This is a post, non experimental research design. A survey was used to measure teacher perceptions about the academic achievement and attitudes toward education of students in poverty and their families. Survey monkey was the collection tool that was utilized. Using Ruby Payne’s culture of poverty as a guide the teachers were presented with eight statements describing characteristics associated with students from poverty. These statements generally had a negative connotation so the teachers were agreeing or disagreeing with negative statements. The teachers chose between strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree. The independent variable in this research is the teacher and the dependent variable is the teacher’s perception of the student’s attitudes and abilities.
Study Group Description

There are 44 teachers employed at Alpha Middle School. All 44 will be given the opportunity to voluntarily participate in the study. 40 of the 44 teachers at Alpha Middle School are female. 42 of the 44 teachers at Alpha Middle School are white. One Native American and one African American comprise the rest of the group. The historical socioeconomic background of the group is unknown. These factors could skew the results. Survey data concerning teacher perceptions of the effect of poverty on student achievement will be collected from those who choose to participate.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments to be Used

Survey data concerning teacher perceptions of the effect of poverty on student achievement will be collected via survey monkey. Teacher responses will be collected, grouped into categories and reported as percentage that strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree.

Statistical analysis methods used

Survey results will be described in a descriptive study. The results will be analyzed and used to inform the author and readers of this paper about teacher perceptions of students in poverty at Alpha Middle School. This data could in turn be used to design professional development to help teachers meet the needs of students from poverty.
Chapter 4

Presentation of the Data

Twenty-Nine out of forty-four teachers (66%) at Alpha Middle School responded to a four question survey regarding their perceptions of students in poverty.

RQ1: What are teacher’s perceptions of students from poverty world view?

The survey results indicated that teachers perceived students from poverty has having a very limited world view. When presented with the statement that students from generational poverty define the world in local terms, 96% agreed or strongly agreed.(Figure 1) Furthermore, 86% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that students from generational poverty had a more limited vocabulary that their peers.(Figure 2.) These responses support the idea that teachers see students from generational poverty as having a limited world view.

Figure 1. Students from poverty define the world in local terms.
Figure 2. Students from poverty have a more limited vocabulary.

**RQ2: What are teacher perceptions of students in poverty attitude towards school?**

The survey results also indicated that teacher perceived students from generational poverty as having a negative attitude toward school. 83% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that students from generational poverty fail to connect school success with success in life. (See figure 3). 89% percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that students from generational poverty see entertainment as more important than academic achievement. (See Figure 4)
Figure 3. Students fail to connect school success with success in life.

Figure 4. Entertainment is more important than education.
RQ3: What are teacher perceptions of the families of students in poverty and their attitude toward education?

Finally the results also indicated a negative perception of family attitudes of students from generational poverty towards school. 72% of respondents believed that students from generational poverty came from form families with a negative view of education. These viewpoints have the potential to impact teacher behavior and attitudes toward these students. Please see figure 5 below.

![Figure 5](image-url)

*Figure 5. Families negative view of education.*
Chapter 5
Overview, Findings and Recommendations

Discussion of Findings

When presented with negative statements about students from poverty and their attitude toward education, teachers at Alpha Middle School consistently agreed with those statements. All three research questions indicate that teachers at Alpha Middle School agree that students from poverty have negative attitudes towards school. Therefore the null hypothesis that teachers do not have a negative perception of students who come from generational poverty is rejected. These findings indicate that teachers at Alpha Middle School must make a concerted effort not to let personal viewpoints about children in poverty limit opportunities for those same children. All children deserve the same opportunity to an education. One limitation of this study is that 35% of Alpha Middle School Teachers declined to participate in this study. The reason for this is unknown but higher participation would have better reflected the overall perception of teachers in the school towards children of generational poverty.

Conclusions

The findings of this study clearly indicate that teachers have a negative perception of students who come from generational poverty. These attitudes could limit an educator’s effectiveness in educating these children. It is important that teachers do examine their bias’s and reflect on how those bias’s may be impacting their instructional practices in regards to these
students. Teachers must view all students as learners and work to meet their individual needs. With that in mind, the study does not tell us anything about how teachers in the classroom are dealing with students who come from generational poverty. This study does not look at instructional methods or professional development. In a sense it raises another set of questions about educators in general and those at Alpha Middle School in particular. Do their perceptions affect their performance in the classroom as it relates to children from generational poverty? What kind of professional development will be necessary to help educators serve students from generational poverty and their families?

**Recommendations**

Students from generational poverty are diverse in skill set, mindset and innate talent. As educators we must be careful not to paint all students in this category with the same brush. I believe educators can benefit from ongoing professional development to support the education of students from poverty. That professional development should include examining our own biases in regards to students from generational poverty. It should also include guidance on how to connect with and build relationships with students and their families who find themselves in this position. Positive relationships with students are a powerful way to help these kids connect to school. If they connect with an adult at school they are more likely to connect to the school in general. Teachers will also need ongoing support in differentiated instruction and engaging all students in their own learning. Those who teach in high poverty schools could benefit from getting to know their communities and the challenges they face. This will help them become more empathetic toward the students who they serve.
Teachers will need to examine the demographical data of their students to help them identify children who may be in need of extra support. (Pathways 2007) They can then cross reference this data with their own records in regards to student behavior and performance to develop a plan of action to help students be more successful at school. Since Alpha Middle School operates under the middle school model teachers already have collaboration time built into their schedules. This is the perfect opportunity to leverage their talents in meeting the needs of their students from poverty. Teacher communication is a critical part of this process as the different experiences of the teachers with individual students will create a more complete picture of the student’s strengths and weaknesses. This should increase the chances of developing more effective tools of support for students.

Administrators and other school leaders must contribute to this effort. Educational institutions must adopt the mindset that all children can learn and our job is to help them develop their mind. (Payne, 2009) Payne also worries that social determinism will continue to be an impediment to student success. This is no longer an option for schools as our national economic success relies on an educated populace. Each student must be evaluated individually and educators should cater instruction to meet that students needs.

Alpha Middle School should reflect upon their model of discipline to insure it is meeting the needs of its students. Building on Payne’s notion that students from poverty will benefit from structure and choice Alpha Middle School should organize professional development that helps students develop skills they will need to be successful not only in school but also in life. The administration of Alpha Middle School will set the tone for this endeavor by supporting the
teachers in this endeavor and holding those who resist accountable. They can also establish an invitational mindset among the staff. Students can’t be successful in school if they don’t have the basic supplies to succeed. (Mahabir, 2010) Teachers will have to be creative to meet those needs. Reaching out to the community in a school supply drive is one recommendation.

Teachers will also benefit from professional development in the multiple intelligences. Understanding the multiple intelligences can be an effective tool in raising student achievement. By teaching to a child’s natural talents we can increase not only their chance to be successful academically but to begin to change their outlook on school and life. By investing in these children we will help them learn to trust adults and nourish their own unique talents.

Educational leaders everywhere should take a close look at the relationship between school size and the academic achievement of students living in poverty. Research suggests that small schools mitigate the influence of poverty on academic achievement. Further study should be given to this idea. What is different about the small school setting? How do small schools support these students? What are the costs involved? Perhaps the larger school districts could benefit from this kind of study.


