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Are Schools Educating About Poverty? University Students' Perceptions of K-12 Poverty Education

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ARE SCHOOLS EDUCATING ABOUT POVERTY? UNIVERSITY STUDENTS'
PERCEPTIONS OF K-12 POVERTY EDUCATION

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Child Development and Family Relations)

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ABSTRACT

Research shows that there are disparities in academic outcomes between students living in poverty and those who are not. Poverty will affect all areas of a child's life. There is potential that with increased poverty education in schools, students will come to better understand their role in the causes and consequences of poverty, and in working to eradicate poverty.

Eighty- six undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Maine participated in this study. Participants completed a survey designed to gain insights into their recollection of poverty education during their primary and secondary school years. Results showed that enrolled students did not recall receiving education about poverty. Implications for practices and future research are also discussed.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

According to the 2010 United States Census, 1 in 5, approximately 16 million children under the age of 18 live in poverty in the United States (cited in Howard & Ullucci, 2015). Furthermore, there are approximately 32 million children who live in low-income households (Addy & Wight, 2012). Through the years, research has shown that poverty affects educational outcomes for school-aged children across the United States (Connell, 1994; Hair, Hanson & Wolfe, 2015; Howard & Ullucci, 2015; Kozol, 1991; Ladd, 2012; Lareau, 2003). Hair et al. found that there was an association between socioeconomic status (SES) and brain development, where areas of the brain that help children function academically were structurally different in students from lower SES backgrounds than students from higher SES backgrounds (2015). Oftentimes students may not be able to access the resources needed, such as basic school supplies and technology, to meet the academic expectations to which they are held. Additionally, poverty affects social and emotional development as children living in poverty have limited opportunities to take part in organized activities, due to a lack of financial capital: money to pay for extracurricular fees and human capital: rides to and from activities (Lareau, 2003).

While it is not new that children experience adverse economic situations in the nation's schools, it has become a more apparent issue because of the increase in number of students (Addy & Wight, 2012). In fact, low-income students have become the new

majority, where 51% of students across United States public schools are from low-income families (Suitts, Barba, & Dunn, 2015). Given this, schools have to consider new ways to ensure students have equal opportunities for success. Connell (1994) stated that “How schools address poverty is an important test of an education system. Children from poor families are, generally speaking, the least successful by conventional measures and hardest to teach by traditional methods” (p. 125).

Since Lyndon B. Johnson’s declaration of the “War on Poverty” in the 1960’s, the United States has been trying to overcome the effects of poverty on not only an individual level, but also a political and economic level. Several initiatives have been proposed such as the *War on Poverty, Economic Opportunity Act*, and the onset of *Community Action Programs* that use economic and political approaches to eliminate poverty (Bailey & Duquette, 2014). These attempts showed promise. However, what is lacking is how education about poverty is critical in order to overcome biases and assumptions that poverty is caused by individual attributes, such as laziness and lack of effort, rather than systemic causes, such as wage inequality and lack of high quality education (Cozzarelli & Tagler, 2013; Howard & Ullucci, 2015).

Many schools have implemented programs, such as free and reduced lunch (FRL), to support students living in low-income or poor households (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). However, there is question as to whether or not teachers and school administrators implement poverty education into their curriculums and whether or not students remember such learning experiences. There is a lot of pressure on teachers to teach to the standards and ensure that students are meeting all of the objectives put forth by federal and state mandates. Because of this focus, it might appear that there is not

much time for teaching social and citizenship learning, which connect to poverty education by engaging students in discussion focused on considering how and why it is important to make choices that positively impact those in poverty. However, it is possible to incorporate social learning about poverty into academic learning. For example, a teacher could lead students in activities that help them realize their role as citizens in a larger context or to help them empathize with people experiencing poverty. One could take a math word problem with a topic of “sharing goods” and turn it into a discussion of what it means to share and what that might look like in life outside of school and home. Though it seems like a very basic conversation to engage students in, it is an important one because it helps students recognize that their actions and choices could have an impact on other people: whether they are choosing to share their toys on the playground, or, later in life, electing policymakers who focus on improving outcomes for people living in poverty. Conversations like these could also include a discussion of how sometimes things work against an individual’s control, such as having to go to school without breakfast because there was not enough money for groceries that particular week. It is critical, of course, for such discussions to occur in a safe environment that is sensitive to each student’s background.

While implementing these civic engagement conversations into academic learning may require an addition to school adapted curriculums, the previous research has shown that students will be more engaged in the academic work they do as well as increase their engagement as active members of a community (Rogovin, 2001). In order to change the approach to poverty education in school, pre-service teachers must learn about poverty, how it affects learning, and how to see their future students as capable learners, instead of

considering them under the precepts of the Deficit Model. The Deficit Model describes the tendency to focus on weaknesses as reasons for failure. In the case of children living in poverty, it would be used to blame their lack of academic success on their living situation (Howard & Ullucci, 2015). The Deficit Model is associated with the *Individual Faults Myth* (Howard & Ullucci, 2015), which argues that individuals experiencing poverty are to be blamed for their situation because of a lack of hard work and an inherently lazy personality. While these varied situations do play a role in students' educations and contribute to unequal childhoods between middle class, working class, and poor children (Lareau, 2003), they should not be used as an excuse for teachers to discount their own role in their students' outcomes. Howard and Ullucci (2015), in discussing the use of the label as reason for student failure, noted "In this way, teachers can convince themselves that their teaching plays little to no role in students' academic outcomes" (p. 174). In reality, however, it is imperative that teachers "believe in the promise of children in poverty" (Howard & Ullucci, 2015, p. 173), in order to ensure their students are given equal opportunities to succeed. While schools cannot eliminate poverty on their own, as it is a much larger systemic issue, Howard & Ullucci (2015) argued "schools and teachers can help work against reinforcing a cycle of poverty by not writing off their students (p. 187).

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how schools are educating students about poverty. The information gained could potentially be used to consider practices that will inform how our teacher education programs and school districts prepare pre-service and practicing educators to feel equipped to teach about poverty in an engaging and sensitive way. Such practices would showcase that students are capable of

learning about such topics in a way that they can utilize their innate goodness to become difference makers.

The motivation for this topic came to fruition due to a conference I attended put on by Donna Beegle, Ph.D., a nationally known speaker on poverty. Her organization “Communication Across Barriers” strives to equip people, particularly those in helping professions, with the language and knowledge needed to work with people who are experiencing or have experienced poverty. Prior to this conference, I became interested in poverty, its relation to education, and how we teach students who come from impoverished backgrounds during the fall of my junior year as an undergraduate. While I have always invested time in serving the community and tried to be aware of social injustices, it was my experiences in Professor Mary Ellin Logue’s *Methods of Teaching Young Children Social Studies* class that sparked my interest in researching this topic. I know, as a teacher, I will encounter students from diverse backgrounds, whether from a cultural, race, or socioeconomic lens. I accept Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in my belief that anyone has the capacity to be self-actualizing (Maslow, 1943). Sometimes barriers are in the way, such as feeling hungry, tired or unsafe. These factors can play a significant role in how students learn and consider school as a priority in their lives. I am motivated to give all students an equal chance, and I believe that they can learn when in the right environment. It is my hope that I can take what I have learned from this study, my experiences in professional development, and my experiences in teaching to guide how I nurture my future students and work to promote classroom involvement in the community. In addition, I am motivated to ensure that my students from all backgrounds feel loved, welcomed, respected and safe in my classroom.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will review the literature that informed my research question. The purpose of the literature review was to look at previous research about how poverty affects children's educational outcomes; how schools have addressed these effects; what schools have done to teach students from poverty or other diverse backgrounds effectively; whether or not pre-service teachers are receiving education about how to teach students from diverse backgrounds, as well as introduce potential next steps for policymakers and educators in addressing poverty and preparing pre-service teachers.

How does poverty impact children and their educational outcomes?

According to 2010 United States Census data, 1 in 5, approximately 16 million children under the age of 18 live in poverty in the United States (cited in Howard & Ullucci, 2015). Over one million students are homeless and that number is projected to increase (National Center of Homeless Education, 2012). Furthermore, it is likely that the number of children officially living in poverty would increase if the federal poverty level (FPL) took into account the increasing costs of housing, transportation, and healthcare (Beegle, 2007). According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, the 2017 FPL was set at \$24,600 for a family of four (U.S. DHHS, 2017). This amount estimated the "average minimum income families need to make ends meet" (Addy & Wight, 2012). The FPL remains at a low income to avoid an increase in number

of people living in poverty. If such an increase occurred, it could be an unpleasant political statement on behalf of the United States.

Essentially, 20% of America's children are experiencing daily challenges requiring resilience and tenacity that the other 80% of children do not have to worry about, to the same extent. These challenges include hunger, homelessness, lack of hygienic resources, lack of transportation, and lack of healthcare-- basically, a lack of the resources needed to be nourished physically, mentally, and socially.

Contrary to the *Individual Faults Myth* (Howard & Ullucci, 2015), there are many systemic issues at work in exacerbating poverty (Howard & Ullucci, 2015). Children have no control over the circumstances they are in, yet they experience some of the most detrimental effects. In the field of education, SES plays a significant role in an individual's educational outcomes (Connell, 1994; Hair, Hanson & Wolfe, 2015; Howard & Ullucci, 2015; Kozol, 1991; Ladd, 2012; Lareau, 2003). Children in working class and poor families have "worse health; fewer rich language experiences at home; lower birth-weights; fewer opportunities for high-quality preschool experiences; decreased participation in organized extracurricular and summer activities, and decreased consistency in one school" (Ladd, 2012, p. 206). In addition, the educational opportunities they do have are likely in schools with fewer high-quality and credited teachers (Kozol, 1991; Lareau, 2003). These factors are in no way a result of the students' failures, but are a result of a lack of policy that has considered these disadvantages.

According to Ladd (2012), "Policies are not addressing the educational challenges experienced by disadvantaged students" (p. 204). Currently, the policies in place do not

acknowledge the research and evidence that students at an economic disadvantage do not perform as well in school as their more advantaged peers (Ladd, 2012). Initiatives in place such as “No Child Left Behind”; evaluating teachers from a test-based approach; increased parental choice; charter schools, and competition are the approaches that Ladd (2012) argued are not effective in addressing the needs of all students. An analysis of test scores indicated that there is a negative relationship between percentage of children living in poverty and their state’s test scores due to the fact that, as Ladd (2012) argued, “Educational outcomes are a result of public school quality, and the context in which a child lives” (p. 211). It is true that children living in poorer and urban neighborhoods are often subjected to attend public schools of lower quality than their peers who live just a few minutes away in wealthier areas. Oftentimes, there is a disparity among race as well, where a poor-quality school with a majority of minority students is close to a higher quality school that houses a majority of white children and has more resources (Lareau, 2003).

At a local level, in the state of Maine during the 2016/17 school year, Yarmouth High School was the state leader for the mathematics-standardized tests with 74.3 % of students at or above grade level that academic year. Falmouth High School was second place and Greely High School in Cumberland was third. While these accomplishments are noteworthy, there are also other statistics that are noteworthy about these schools and their locations. Only 10.1% of students at Yarmouth High School qualified for free or reduced priced meals because their family income fell below \$21,950 per year. Falmouth had 6.3% of students qualifying for meals and Greely had 9.7% of students. These statistics almost reverse when one considers schools in lower income areas such as

Portland and Lewiston. At Portland High School, 31.9% of students were considered proficient in math while 55.3% qualified for free or reduced meals. In Lewiston, 17.4% of students met at or above grade level in math and 58.5% of students were receiving assistance.

Though correlation does not equal causation, there is research that supports the inference that there is a relationship between family income and test scores (Ladd, 2012; Petrilli & Wright, 2016). The hypothesis is that it is not that these students in Portland and Lewiston are not capable of doing well on standardized tests. Rather, it is that they have other stressors in their lives due to their socioeconomic situation, whereas students in more affluent communities do not have to worry about such circumstances. The Morning Sentinel (2017) wrote: “Hard work, tenacity, curiosity, and creativity all contribute to success in school. But so do housing, health care, and nutrition” (p. A6). It is unrealistic to only demand that teachers and schools do a better job at preparing students for standardized tests without considering how we can change these students’ and families’ situations at home. This type of effective change requires work at a broader arena in the government, ensuring that a sick child can stay home to recover before the condition becomes chronic, or a student can have an adequate breakfast so that they are more focused in the classroom. If we want improved test scores, there must be an improvement in resource allocation and availability for lower income students and families.

Some of the differences in educational outcomes for students living in poverty result from differences in childhood. “Concerted Cultivation” (Lareau, 2003) is a term to describe the process where, typically, middle class parents ensure that their children have

access to a variety of scheduled experiences: organized sports, music lessons, or community involvement, such as Boys and Girls Scouts. On the other hand, “Accomplishment of natural growth” is the phrase used to describe the type of childhood typical among children living in poor and working class families. This type of experience is characterized by schedules free of activities organized by adults. A child with this type of childhood might be found after school playing with other peers or family members at or near their homes, rather than on a field with a team (Lareau, 2003). This difference in type of activities children from varying SES backgrounds engage in is just one example of how children experience “unequal childhoods” for reasons out of their control; they are living in different worlds due to the difference in income levels of their parents.

In her study of 88 families, both African American and Caucasian, Lareau (2003) concluded that social class affects childrearing. In her extensive analysis of twelve families, she wrote in detail of the tools and strategies parents from different social classes used when talking to, disciplining, and caring for their kids. She and her field workers learned that children in middle class families participated in organized extracurricular activities, were taught to use their words and intellect to advocate for themselves around other adults, and generally attended schools with more resources than their peers living in working class or poor neighborhoods. Their peers, considered to be poor or working class, spent more time playing freely with family members, heard more directive language from their parents, and had fewer opportunities to engage in two-way discussion with professionals.

While this study portrayed middle class parents as having more time and financial resources invested in their children’s lives, particularly their education, there is also

evidence that “all parents across classes want to see children succeed at school” (Lareau, 2003, p. 198). However, there are other factors that impact how involved parents might be in their child’s schooling. For example, working class and poor parents are working multiple jobs to try to make ends meet, contributing to low attendance at conferences and school activities. In addition, working class or poor parents do not use the same conversational language or have the same comfort level when it comes to intervening in their children’s education that middle class parents, particularly mothers, use (Beegle, 2007; Lareau, 2003).

Time and time again, parents from lower-income brackets have been taught to simply listen to professionals. In the field of education, there is a significant amount of jargon used that is difficult to understand which can make it uncomfortable for parents to speak up, especially if their opinions have not been welcomed in the past. Also, schools serve as a representative of the state, which means they are mandated to report anything that raises red flags regarding situations at home (Lareau, 2003). For many working class or poor parents who have different discipline philosophies, there is a fear of “getting turned in because their discipline procedures do not match middle class, and school, values” (p. 228). This concern strengthens the existing divide between parents and schools. It also strengthens the conclusion that “one’s social position has profound implications for life experiences and life outcomes” (p. 257). If we are to work to make childhoods “equal”, we have to start building connections with families in a way that bridges the socioeconomic gap. The focus must be on forming relationships with students and families, working to understand the values that individuals hold, instead of

considering them as belonging to a single social class, and fostering communication that is comprehensible for all.

What are schools doing to engage students living in poverty or other diverse backgrounds?

“Grit” is the latest buzzword used among educators to describe the idea that with perseverance, focus, and hard work, all students can be successful (Duckworth, 2016). When a student is not as successful as their peers in understanding a concept right away, they need only to be told to have a “growth mindset” and to “keep trying” before they will soon be right on track. While these statements appear to be encouraging, and in fact are better than telling a student they will never be able to achieve a goal; they often do not account for the fact that grit might be a term better catered to students who have basic needs met, such as nutrition, hygiene, and housing. It would be unrealistic to tell a student who is hungry, tired, and cold to “just keep going” as it does not take into account the fact that they are already full of grit, just maybe not in the definition that Educational Psychologists coined (Sultan, 2015). Students living in poverty exhibit grit day in and day out when they care for their siblings after school, make their own meals, and work to help their families (Beegle, 2007).

It is critical that schools consider the extent to which trauma affects individuals’ educational outcomes. Perhaps the focus should shift from promoting grit to providing support services to all students, particularly those experiencing poverty. Sultan (2015) cited Howard’s (2015) argument that growth mindset and grit must be considered in the social and cultural context in which children are living. Howard noted, “We are asking students to change a belief system without changing the situation around them”. Instead of dismissing students who have experienced trauma, which affects cognitive

development, it would be more effective for teachers to recognize and harvest the resiliency these kids are already showing into improving the practices they use to teach these students.

There are many positive cases regarding schools that have a high percentage of students living in poverty and also have a high percentage of high performing students. In a study of twelve Kentucky schools in the Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) district, researchers looked at Project SHIELD (Supporting Healthy Individuals and Environments for Life Development) and its aim to “provide students and schools with enhanced infrastructure and comprehensive prevention and early intervention, through education, mental health, and social services that promote healthy childhood development and prevent violence, alcohol and other drug abuse” (Munoz, 2002, p. 3). Second Step was a subproject of SHIELD for elementary and middle school students that aimed to prevent violence. It was evidence-based and worked to prevent violent behavior by promoting pro-social behavior (Munoz, 2002). The goal was to increase students’ abilities to take others’ perspectives, problem solve, and practice anger management skills.

The schools that were part of this study were all considered to be high-poverty schools. There were 179 students who took the pre- and post-tests. An evaluation interview was used to determine the prior knowledge and/or skills students held in the aforementioned areas. Following the implementation of the program, there was a post-test. The results were significant in that all of the schools that participated showed progress in the areas assessed. This improvement demonstrated the potential for schools and teachers to teach students and to nurture the whole child, regardless of SES.

A study done at Emerald Elementary School in Ann Arbor, Michigan, indicated how this school's reading program "beat the odds" in helping students learn to read, a fundamental skill that is a gateway to other knowledge, using evidence-based interventions. For this high-poverty school, as percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch increased, the average early reading performance for the school decreased (Adler & Fisher, 1999). However, there were a variety of different qualities Emerald Elementary held that contributed to its success in helping its students.

First and foremost, the staff's main priority was to focus on student learning outcomes. They were willing to try various instructional approaches until students understood the material. It was the teacher's role to establish an environment where students felt safe and cared for. In such an environment, it was easier to proceed to the learning objectives. The second practice was that of using more than one instructional approach in any given classroom. Students rotated through whole group, small group and one-on-one instruction. This variety allowed for students to work with more than one teacher so that various professionals could gather insights on a particular student through assessments. A third factor was the shared responsibility teachers had in promoting student success, despite their different roles in the students' education. Furthermore, the leadership at both the school and classroom levels at Emerald Elementary was strong at the time of this report. In interviews with teachers, it was clear that the principal took just as much responsibility in student success as the teachers. She was considered "flexible, a risk-taker, someone who encourages creativity and freedom while demanding excellence, and someone who allows mistakes and shares the responsibility for both failures and successes" (Adler & Fisher, 1999, p. 22). Finally, the experienced staff at Emerald

Elementary was key in supporting student success. The staff did not attribute student struggles to individual faults, but to the instructional strategies used. They used student data to inform their plans for future instruction and believed in the potential of every student. Though this report studied success in reading programs, the qualities mentioned are not limited to literacy. These qualities such as leadership, shared responsibility, and collaboration cross content, school, and socioeconomic lines and have potential in helping all students succeed.

In another study of high-poverty schools in Kentucky, Clements & Kannapel (2005) looked at common characteristics among the schools that helped them become high-performing schools. The researchers selected schools based on percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch; state test progress over time; type and diversity in school, and performance on state accountability and academic indexes (Clements & Kannapel, 2005). Though many schools applied, there were 26 that were eligible and eight elementary schools that were selected. Based on the results from the audits, the researchers concluded that there were eight common characteristics that these schools shared which led to their status as “high performing”.

These schools held all members of the school community to high expectations. The principals held the faculty and staff to high expectations that trickled into the classrooms where faculty and staff expected themselves, as well as their students, to take responsibility for the learning that would take place. They were committed to doing whatever it took to see their students reach success. Part of these expectations contributed to the culture of care and trust in the relationships built within the classroom and school community. Trustworthy relationships were a key component to creating an environment

that focused on academics and instruction, but in a way where children felt safe to try, make mistakes, and try again. Clements & Kannapel (2005) noted “The high-performing, high-poverty schools focus a considerable amount of attention on curriculum, and they work to use assessments and instructional strategies that are designed to ensure that students learn the curriculum” (p. 14). Continuing with the theme of curriculum, the schools had a plethora of assessment strategies in place where students were assessed throughout the unit rather than only at the end of the unit. These checks for understanding allowed for teachers to adapt the curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of the students at any given point in time

From a school wide perspective, each school had strong leaders who collaborated with the entire staff to make decisions. Furthermore, the morale among the faculty and staff was high, and they worked exceptionally hard to ensure that all students’ needs were met. They analyzed data to plan for instruction and interventions and worked to build relationships with families and community members. Despite all of their hard work, researchers found a low rate of teacher burnout or teacher complaints. They wrote, “these schools were happy places—focused, but happy” (Clements & Kannapel, 2005, p. 19).

As made clear by the results of these studies, these are the practices and characteristics of the schools that were effective in changing the outcomes for their students. Though there is no information on financial resource allocation among the schools, it appears that regardless of resources, many of these practices could be possible for all schools to engage in. Building relationships with students and families, having high expectations, and focusing on academic instruction and assessment are practices that

could be implemented in any setting, as long as there are people who feel valued and committed to doing so.

McAllister-Flack & McAllister (2016) shared stories of what one teacher, Ms. Ellen, did in her classroom to engage her students in social and citizenship learning. She taught in a school with a majority of Native American students in a town where Native American culture is very much prevalent. Ms. Ellen capitalized on her students' culture in order to create a culturally responsive classroom. The first step she took to create such an environment was to analyze and reflect on her own beliefs regarding biases and assumptions toward students and their backgrounds. This reflection allowed her to move forward into her practice of countering a deficit-based perspective with a strengths-based one.

Ms. Ellen held on to the guiding principle that each child was a unique individual with something to offer the class. She suggested that teachers “mine the gems” (McAllister-Flack & McAllister, 2016, p.142), which means to capitalize on what qualities students brought to the classroom. Because of this approach, Ms. Ellen was better equipped to integrate her students' backgrounds and culture into her teaching and use them as a basis for how she approached the curriculum. Her dedication to brain-based learning and safe environments (Hyland, 2010) allowed her to “disrupt the power structure, where some students and voices are privileged over others” (McAllister-Flack & McAllister, 2016, p. 143). She believed that “creating a society and classroom that is more socially just starts with children who feel empowered” (McAllister-Flack & McAllister, 2016, p. 144). Ms. Ellen's story is one example of the potential success

teachers and schools can have when focusing on building culturally responsive classrooms, and in viewing all students as having “gems”.

What are the suggestions for schools to effectively teach about poverty?

It can be challenging to figure out ways to implement social justice and citizenship learning into a rigid curriculum. Additionally, the pressure to meet the standards can be a turn-off to adapting curriculums. However, it can be done. Wilmore & Papa (2016), in their research, provided suggestions and strategies on how teachers can promote social justice in their classrooms. They defined social justice as the “view that everyone deserves equal economic, political, and social rights and responsibilities” (p. 200), and advocated for its place in the classroom beginning in the early grades. Before one can implement the suggested strategies, he/she must decide what he/she believes the purpose of education is. Is it to focus on curriculum content or to create good citizens? It is possible to have a balance of both and foster the creation of “good citizens” through the curriculum content. To do so, Wilmore & Papa (2016) outlined the *Six Elements of Socially Just Curriculum Design*. The elements were providing opportunities for students to learn about who they are and where they come from; building a community of respect for others regardless of differences; engaging in critical thinking and conversations about issues and the history of social injustices by finding connections between historically relevant events; studying various examples of social movements; raising awareness of social injustices with one another, and creating opportunities for students to advocate against injustices in their own communities.

While these strategies may seem only applicable to older students, it is still possible to integrate instruction on injustices in an elementary school setting. Elementary

school classrooms are filled with various forms of print: books, media, and journals. Wilmore & Papa (2016) advised teachers to take advantage of these types of print and connect them to real-life experiences when considering how to incorporate social justice and poverty education into their classrooms. Additionally, it is possible to engage students in activities regarding this topic while remaining sensitive to the circumstances that students have experienced. Activities such as “skin-tone identification” in which students go beyond the colors of “white, black, and brown” to explain their skin color, or using technology as a platform to explore and explain injustices could be an effective start in building a classroom community built on respect and care for diverse cultures. From this, teachers could engage students in other activities directly related to poverty, such as unequal access to resources.

Teachers who served as models for their students were effective in their pursuit to promote universal acceptance among classmates (Schoenaerts & Papa, 2016). Teachers could model what it looks, sounds, and feels like to be self-reflective, take risks, and interact with others. They could demonstrate acknowledgement of self-worth as well as provide opportunities for continued conversation and interactions that promote acceptance. These practices that teachers engaged in led to “magical moments”, moments that occurred when there was well-planned instruction and a well-prepared audience who engaged in well-constructed events (Schoenaerts & Papa, 2016).

In order to create magical moments centered on universal acceptance of others, there must first be an understanding of the value of each child. Schoenaerts & Papa, (2016) wrote, “Before a child will reveal their understanding and acceptance of others, they must first know they are accepted and honored for who they are” (p. 152). In order

for teachers to honor their students, they must have an understanding of the backgrounds and contexts that each student brings to the classroom. There should be conversations and opportunities to link the extra and ordinary found in human behaviors such that students develop an awareness of the similarities and differences humans have that can be utilized to promote the common good (Schoenaerts & Papa, 2016).

Part of achieving such a goal is creating a safe environment that celebrates the “our”, or the contributions of individuals to further the success of the entire class. One example of an activity that demonstrates such collaboration is the challenge of a class puzzle. When the students are involved in completing a puzzle, the success is sweet. Each student plays a role in the overall success of the class. Teachers should also engage students in activities that promote fairness in resource distribution. There are examples of students who, when they notice their peers do not have equal access to a good, they do what they can to ensure that every student has a share. Following such an activity, teachers are encouraged to engage students in dialogues that “elicit the response for the students’ need of equality and justice” (Schoenaerts & Papa, 2016, p. 159). Their responses are evidence that students desire to ensure equality for others. They just need to be given opportunities to demonstrate that ability as well as connect it to a macro level perspective.

Are teachers being taught about how to teach students from diverse backgrounds effectively?

There were varying opinions regarding whether or not teachers were provided adequate education when it came to effectively teaching students from diverse backgrounds. There was evidence, however, that it was possible to properly prepare pre-service educators (Hayes, 2016). Hayes (2016) claimed there is a lack of attention

given to preparing teachers to effectively teach students experiencing poverty. She wrote, “this lack of attention to preparing teachers to work in those contexts is part of a larger settlement about inequality in society that deems it acceptable for some people’s children to attend schools where there are usually less experienced teachers, more first-time leaders, and fewer resources than in the schools attended by the children of more affluent families” (pp. 213-214). This statement regarding the inequalities children face due to factors out of their control was a message to policymakers that reforms need to be made in order to better the educational opportunities and outcomes for all students.

Though Hayes’ research consisted of fieldwork in Australia, her findings related to what is going on in the United States. She strived to help teacher candidates build “repertoires of practice” (p. 221), or toolboxes with strategies, to help have a positive impact on students and families living in poverty. She pointed to the case of “Suzy”, a teacher she observed in the northern suburbs of Australia, whose class had a sense of true community. Suzy’s success, Hayes noticed, was not in any special instructional strategy, but in her commitment and ability to build rapport with parents and caregivers. Because of that rapport, she was able to have a strengths-based perspective and capitalize on the plethora of prior knowledge that students brought to her classroom.

Because of Suzy’s example, Hayes (2016) composed a list of strategies for a teacher candidate’s repertoire that included being reflective; monitoring the changes that take place in student learning due to contextual factors; recognizing what the function of school actually is, and working in collaboration with colleagues to limit

the impact of social inequality on students. These suggestions might be beneficial to teacher educators who are interested in helping their candidates form practices and behaviors that will positively impact their students, build classroom community, and help them “make sense of inequality by drawing upon existing meaning making processes” (Hayes, 2016, p. 221).

Ball (2016) cited her own research and model, Ball’s *Model of Generative Change* (2009) in her explanation of her transnational research that looked at teacher education programs for urban schools in both the United States and South Africa. The model was a framework for understanding the changing perspectives of teacher candidates who completed education programs that served to teach them about the social inequalities and injustices students from diverse, urban, and poor backgrounds face, and disproportionately the injustices students of color face (Ball, 2016). In this model, teachers, in theory, went through four stages in which they interacted with and challenged perspectives, engaged in social action research, and worked with diverse populations. The stages were awakening, agency, advocacy, and efficacy.

Findings from longitudinal studies of teacher candidates who participated in Urban Education Programs through their respective universities’ collaboration with Ball (2016) indicated, “there were differences in the ‘development of commitment’ in those participating in activities versus those not” (p. 122). Indicators of commitment included specific action plans and strategies the teacher candidates discussed as well as explanations of their intended purpose in their future classrooms. Writing was used as a tool to gain insight into the higher ordered thinking these candidates engaged in, as well as their changing perspectives. This evidence, along with testimonies from pre-service

educators, indicated that teacher candidates were being taught about how diverse backgrounds play a role in students' educations.

However, these types of programs were not consistently integrated in all teacher preparation courses even though the demographics of schools are changing worldwide (Ball, 2016). Most teacher education programs primarily focused on classroom management, aligning instruction to standards, and teaching content-area skills. While these areas of focus are important to the overall academic development of the child, it is also important to prepare teachers with knowledge of “cultural and linguistic issues and how control and authority reflect and are designed to maintain the current structures in society” (Ball, 2016, p. 118). It might be beneficial to put more weight on these areas and revise the way teacher education programs prepared students as demographics change. Ball (2016) cited a Gallup poll that predicted United States schools would need to hire approximately two million teachers within the next 10 years due to “teacher attrition” (p. 132). This trend was reflected globally as well. She went on to suggest that this inadvertent turnover is the perfect opportunity to emphasize different approaches to teacher education with a more specific focus on teaching pre-service educators about diverse backgrounds.

The field of research on teacher preparation for diverse, usually referring to high-poverty, schools is a field that has become increasingly popular. Cochran-Smith, & Villega (2016) looked at a variety of studies done around how universities and other teacher education programs prepare mostly white, middle-class teacher candidates to teach in diverse schools. They examined over 125 studies that dealt with this preparation, revealing how popular a topic it is. Statistically speaking, Cochran-Smith, & Villega,

(2016) cited the 2009 National Center for Education Statistics noting, “students of color accounted for over 44% of total enrollment in U.S. Public Schools, whereas teachers of color comprised only 17% of the teaching force” (p. 17). Overall, most of the studies pertained to the growing cultural gap between teachers and their students and how teacher education programs could provide instruction and experiences to help narrow such a gap.

Many teacher candidates entered their respective programs without prior knowledge or experiences that deal with the interests, cultures, backgrounds, and living situations of students who were different from them. The course instructors, who primarily conducted the studies, aimed to change the belief that the difficulties some students faced were a result of “lack of academic or motivational skills” (Cochran-Smith & Villega, 2016, p. 17), instead of external influences. The authors hypothesized that the key first step in changing this mindset was for teacher candidates to first examine the assumptions and biases they held.

To accomplish this goal, the researchers worked to combine direct classroom instruction with opportunities to gain experience in the community. Some instructors placed students in field experiences where they would serve as tutors and mentors, help immigration center workers, and/or make ethnographic observations in and around a community. A key focus across studies was how critical it was to provide opportunities for candidates to have an active role in teaching. While knowledge from readings and discussions in a course are helpful, it does not compare to using field experiences to assess one’s abilities, knowledge, and perceptions.

These studies relied on qualitative data that primarily obtained positive results (Cochran-Smith, & Villega, 2016). Through journal entries, reflections, cultural memoirs, and pre- and post-experience surveys, researchers gained insights into the positively changing views candidates had toward diversity and increased understanding of themselves as cultural beings (Cochran-Smith, & Villega, 2016, p. 20). However, one limitation of these studies was that it was hard to determine whether or not these effects were long-term, as the participants were not followed after they entered the workforce. It was safe to say that teacher candidates were taught about diversity, which in the areas studied often implied poverty, and were given opportunities to engage with differing perspectives regarding society's role in exacerbating racism and classism. However, it might be worth considering following these teachers post-graduation as they enter the workforce to see if they are using their new knowledge and understanding of their students' day-to-day realities to inform their teaching practices.

While the focus of most of this literature review has been on students in K-12 classrooms, it is important to remember those younger than that who spend many hours in Early Childhood Care and Education centers. These kids in early childhood, considered to range from birth to age eight, are affected by factors out of their control, such as poverty, homelessness, and lack of healthcare. Because of the changing demographics in the United States, Muñoz & Powell (2016) noted the "importance of bringing a social justice imperative to child care and teacher preparation programs" (p. 130). This element could be helpful in addressing an individual's need to be in an environment where they are safe and their needs are being met in order to thrive.

Unfortunately, the United States ranked toward the bottom of industrialized countries in how well children are cared for (Muñoz & Powell, 2016). Despite this poor ranking in early childhood care and education, early childhood professionals still enter the field with fewer qualifications than those required of professionals entering a K-12 system. Therefore, it is important that these professionals are given the proper training and instruction regarding caring for and nurturing young children in their development. The suggestions the authors provided were not unlike those other researchers have offered. Relationship building and partnering with families were the key components, along with considering varying perspectives, refraining from judgments, and using inclusive language (Muñoz & Powell, 2016).

In terms of what is offered to the children, play is a critical aspect of their care and education. It is how they make sense of their world (Ailwood, 2003). Because of this knowledge, it is imperative that professionals strive to create learning opportunities through play in a natural environment. It might be beneficial for caretakers to join a professional organization where they can obtain resources that advocate for the needs and healthy development of all children. The period from birth to eight is a critical time for children's development. It is time for the United States to take the importance of early childhood experiences as well as the macro-level factors that influence a child's experiences and potential outcomes seriously.

What are the next steps for policy makers and educators in addressing poverty and preparing teachers?

While kids living in poverty have much going against them, they also have much to offer. Therefore, teachers should harvest their strength and resiliency in the way that they decide how they will go about educating them. It is imperative, according to Howard

& Ullucci (2015), that educators and pre-service educators pay close attention to “the knowledge, values, and perspectives” (p. 172) they learn about when they consider how to design and implement effective lessons for children who are from low-income backgrounds. Poverty affects children in a myriad of ways that deserve recognition. While it is critical to focus on what students can do, it is also important to acknowledge the context of their childhoods, which will undoubtedly seep into the classroom (Sultan, 2015). By acknowledging these factors, it allows teachers to try to focus on how they can turn the students’ strengths into qualities that are valued in an education system that mostly coincides with middle class values (Lareau, 2003).

For example, children experiencing poverty are responsible. Oftentimes, they are caretakers for themselves and siblings. They provide for themselves or find resources that provide food, shelter, and clothing (Beegle, 2007). However, who the education system often considers “responsible” are those who complete their homework on time, get their permission slips signed by parents, and manage their time efficiently between extracurricular activities and academics (Lareau, 2003). While these are important qualities, the students living in poverty are often reprimanded for their lack of completed homework, signed forms, and time management. What Howard & Ullucci (2015) advised was for educators to recognize the context behind those students’ lack of “responsibility” and change approaches from applying a label to a child such as: “He is poor, which explains why he failed” to: “He is experiencing less than ideal circumstances, which might explain why he is always tired during my lessons. I am going to look at what he can do and the many positive qualities he exhibits to guide my relationship with him”.

Additionally, Howard & Ullucci (2015) advised for “a thorough preparation of novice teachers centered on identifying, discussing, and examining some of the root causes of poverty” (p. 181). Poverty is not to be attributed strictly to individual choices and deficits, but to the systemic issues that perpetuate it, such as “faulty schools, fewer work opportunities, poor healthcare, lack of a living wage, geographic isolation, and poor childcare” (p. 176). A commonality among all of these systemic issues is that none of them are under the control of a child. No child decides to attend a school that lacks resources or chooses to grow up in a situation where he or she will not have access to healthcare, proper nutrition, and housing. Instead, it is the situation they are dealt in a country that makes it rather difficult to rise out of.

Once pre-service and current educators consider these systemic factors, they can change their approach to educating students living in poverty the same way they would educate students from middle or upper class backgrounds. All students deserve to be held to high expectations. Moll & Gonzales (2004) suggested for educators to recognize the “funds of knowledge” idea that “all communities develop ways to cope with the challenges they face and to survive and capitalize on the resources they have (p. 184). Instead of focusing on the issues that accompany students from impoverished backgrounds, this approach transforms those “problems” into assets (Howard & Ullucci, 2015; Moll & Gonzales, 2004).

While educators and administrators cannot eliminate poverty, due to it being a wider national and global issue, they can engage in the “fight against reinforcing the cycle of poverty” (Moll & Gonzales, 2004, p. 187). In order to do this, they must believe in the promise of their students and their many abilities. This means that educators should

avoid the temptation of engaging in “othering”, or setting their students living in poverty aside, under the assumption that they are living an experience that makes them fundamentally different than the rest of the students in the classroom. All children have the same desires: to be loved, cared for, safe, and believed in. These values do not discriminate between social classes. Therefore, it is up to educators to understand the role SES plays in a child’s life, but to not let it define students, for children are much more than their distance above or below the FPL, the neighborhood they live in, or even the extracurricular activities they can or cannot participate in. Students are human beings capable of doing incredible things if supported in a positive environment (Maslow, 1943).

The achievement gap among students of varying SES is a very real issue in this country at the present time. Ladd (2012) noted, “reducing the achievement gap recognizes the importance of education to the life chances of individuals” (p. 212). How do we, as a country, make sure this recognition becomes a reality? Ladd (2012) argued for a broad approach focused on macro level policies that better the lives of those in poverty. For example, she suggested that attention is paid to decreasing unemployment, providing assistance programs for poor families, providing tax credits for low-wage workers, or perhaps introducing another *War on Poverty* that Lyndon B. Johnson declared approximately 50 years ago. However, this approach is difficult as there is disagreement regarding the national budget and what issues take priority. Therefore, another step would be for policymakers to focus closely on improving the quality of schools, where quality is defined “in terms of how well schools are operated with the goal of meeting the educational goals of all students” (Ladd, 2012, p. 224). There are many directions this approach could take. However, research has shown that teachers are the

most critical “school-related” factor that plays a direct role on student achievement (Ladd, 2012). There is a huge range in school quality in and across districts. The current approach to evaluating teachers by their test scores is not working. There is increased pressure on the part of the teachers which trickles down into pressure on their students. Rather than continuing with this test-based approach, it is suggested that support on the part of the administration and peer review would likely be more effective in improving teacher quality. In addition, policies that ensure mental health and social workers are in schools to provide support to students and teachers could have a positive effect on student outcomes (Ladd, 2012).

Children deserve high quality teachers who will work to nurture their holistic growth. In order to attract high quality teachers to lower SES schools, Ladd (2012) advised policymakers to create school assignment policies that balance out socioeconomic and/or racial mix of students across schools. There also needs to be policies in place that promote strong and supportive leadership for teachers and students as well as “financial incentives to attract and retain teachers” (p. 223). In addition, schools need to be held accountable to striving to meet the needs of all students through instructional experiences that give students an opportunity to learn and grow instead of giving them tests that, if completed poorly, punish both the teachers and the students.

While it would be difficult to implement these policies overnight, it is critical to consider such changes. It is known that the United States’ education system is not performing as well as other countries, yet research has shown that there are issues at a macro level that are halting the process of improving educational outcomes (Ladd, 2012). Therefore, it is imperative to pressure policymakers to consider these impacts when

creating policies. While that is happening, it is also critical that educators work to better themselves as they face their biases and assumptions in order to ensure that all of their students know they are in an environment that is safe, welcoming, and conducive to learning and growth in many different areas of their lives.

Summary

The aforementioned programs have shown promise in improving student outcomes. While there is evidence that teachers are learning about how to create culturally responsive classrooms that engage in social justice and poverty education (Hayes, 2016; McAllister-Flack & McAllister, 2016; Schoenaerts & Papa, 2016; Wilmore & Papa, 2016), it is unclear as to whether or not students remember what they have learned. The purpose of my research is to survey if a sample of undergraduate students were taught about poverty and what can be done to eradicate it. If they were taught, then the question becomes whether or not they remember it. If this type of education is not implemented in a way that will be memorable and inspiring, then it could be considered ineffective. It is critical that educators look for other strategies that can be used to promote socially just, equitable classrooms with high expectations for teachers and learners, a strong commitment to partnerships with families and communities and dedication to exploring the causes and effects of poverty.

My research questions are as follows:

RQ1. Are schools educating students about poverty?

RQ2. What are the general beliefs regarding the causes and solutions to poverty among undergraduate students?

RQ3. In what content areas have students learned about poverty?

RQ4. Have schools implemented programs to benefit the community and those in poverty?

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Participants

Eighty-six undergraduate students participated in this study. Participants had to be 18 years of age or older to participate. The average age of participants was 19 years old, and the average GPA was 2.47. Participant breakdown is as follows: 81.9% of the participants were female and 18.1% were male. In terms of ethnicity, participants overwhelmingly identified as White (91.6%). Very few identified as Native American/American Indian (2.4%), Hispanic/Latino (2.4%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (1.2%). Additionally, 3.6% identified as a race other than the ones listed.

Among the participants, 38.8% were part of the College of Education and Human Development; 31.3% in Natural Sciences, Forestry, and Agriculture; 16.9% were undeclared majors; 12% in Liberal Arts and Sciences, and 1.2% indicated they were double majoring across colleges. Over half (55.4%) of the participants were first year students; about a third (31.3%) were second year; 9.6% were third year, and 2.4% were in their fourth year. Forty-seven percent of participants indicated they were fulltime students; 38.6% were employed for wages, and 9.6% were looking for work. In terms of socioeconomic status, 44% of participants self identified as middle class; 29% as lower middle class; 15% as upper middle class; 7% as lower class, and 3% as upper class. Prior to attending the University of Maine, 79.5% of participants reported they attended public schools; 7.2% attended private schools, and 12% of participants attended one or the other at one time. Finally, 56.6% of participants grew up in Maine and 43.4% grew up out of

state. There was some selection bias that occurred as only the students who attended class that day were invited to participate.

Instrumentation

The survey consisted of four sections: general participant information; questions about participants' childhoods- i.e. where they grew up and whether or not their town had resources for those living in poverty; beliefs and attitudes about poverty, and educational experiences, both general and those specific to poverty. After looking at examples of research surveys, I determined what kind of demographic questions I would want to include that addressed factors, such as sex; year in school; major; GPA; race; religion; language; social class, and description of hometown. These factors would help me to analyze and interpret the data as they might not only impact one's personal beliefs about poverty, but also the education or lack of education he or she may have received regarding the topic. The survey consisted of thirty multiple choice and likert type questions with opportunities to elaborate. Sample questions included: "Do you believe people who live in poverty are capable of improving their situation on their own?" "On a scale of 1-4, 1 being very easy to 4 being very difficult, how challenging was it to tell who was getting free and reduced lunch?", and "In what subject did you most often learn about poverty?". The survey was designed to examine both implicit and explicit educational practices that addressed poverty. Students could have been learning about poverty, opinions on the topic, and what the schools and communities were doing to rectify it implicitly through observations regarding free and reduced lunch recipients and/or events held to benefit community members in need, such as food drives and free family activity days. Explicit education would be a result of learning about poverty in

particular content areas and/or through their own circumstances living in poverty or knowing others who were living in it.

Procedures

Undergraduate students enrolled in CHF 201 *Introduction to Child Development* at the University of Maine were invited to complete an anonymous survey titled: “Are Schools Educating Students About Poverty?”. The survey was used to obtain information about participants’ primary and secondary educational experiences regarding poverty, as well as survey their general beliefs and attitudes towards poverty. In addition, demographic information was collected to formulate comparisons. After introducing the study, participants were given an explanation of the risks, benefits, and compensation regarding participation in this research. In addition, it was made clear that this was a voluntary survey and that participants could skip questions or stop at any time. The participants were made aware of the Informed Consent page on the front of the survey and that they could keep it for their records. There was time for participants to ask questions and no questions were raised. The surveys were passed out to those students willing to participate. It took approximately ten minutes to complete and 86 surveys were collected. The compensation for participation was one point extra credit. However, students only had to hand in the tear-away sheet to their Teacher’s Assistant to earn the extra credit, regardless of whether or not they participated. Individuals were thanked for their participation as they handed in the survey and gratitude was expressed to the class as a whole. Of the 86 surveys, three were eliminated because of a significant amount of missing responses.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

In this chapter, I present the results of my study. The results are organized by research question. The questions are as follows:

RQ1. Are schools educating students about poverty?

RQ2. What are the general beliefs regarding the causes and solutions to poverty among undergraduate students?

RQ3. In what content areas have students learned about poverty?

RQ4. Have schools implemented programs to benefit the community and those in poverty?

RQ1. Are schools educating students about poverty?

Two items on the survey addressed this question (Q. 20 and Q. 22, Appendix E), and were rated on a five-point scale (1= poor to 5=excellent). Descriptive statistics indicated that for both questions, the means fell below the mid-point of the scale (M = 2.22, SD = 1.01 and M = 2.38, SD = 0.99) respectively. The Pearson Correlation test indicated a 2-tailed significance ($p < 0.001$) rejecting the null hypothesis that these results were due to random chance. Furthermore, the strength of the positive correlation ($r = 0.652$) indicated significance at the $p < 0.01$ level (2-tailed). The positive correlation indicated that participants rated their primary and secondary schools' success at educating about poverty in similar ways. Overall, based on the low means, it appears that

schools were not successful at educating students about poverty, or that what they were implementing was not memorable.

When compared to childhood SES, ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.92$), there was a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.271$, $p < 0.05$, $p = 0.013$) to level of primary school education regarding poverty as well as a positive correlation ($r = 0.259$, $p < 0.05$, $p = 0.020$) for secondary school education. From these results, it could be shown that the amount of education regarding poverty increased as participants indicated a higher childhood SES.

There was a non-significant small negative correlation between participants' year in university and their rating of primary and secondary school poverty education received. Though these results were not significant ($p > 0.05$, $p = 0.531$, $p = 0.789$), it is possible that we would see a stronger correlation and significance had the sample size been larger.

I used an ANOVA test to look for a difference between participants' hometowns and their rating of their primary and secondary schools' success at educating them about poverty. The ANOVA did not result in any significant difference. However, an analysis of the means indicated that participants who grew up in Cumberland County fell towards the higher end of the means ($M = 2.0$, $SD = 0.57$; and $M = 1.92$, $SD = 0.90$) whereas other counties, such as Penobscot, were clustered toward the lower end of the means ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.89$, $M = 1.92$, $SD = 0.90$). Aroostook and Somerset counties were at the lowest end of the means ($M = 1.00$, $SD = 0.00$) for both primary and secondary school. Though these differences are not significant, these means all fall below the midpoint of the scale, further suggesting that schools are not adequately educating students about poverty in a memorable way.

RQ2. What are the general beliefs regarding the causes and solutions to poverty among undergraduate students?

This question was tested with a Pearson Correlation test, which indicated there was no significant relationship ($r = 0.136$, $p > 0.05$, $p = 0.227$) between participants' major and their beliefs about the causes of poverty. These results reject the hypothesis that participants who indicated they were majoring in a helping profession, such as nursing or education, believed poverty dealt with systemic causes as opposed to individual faults.

In a test comparing childhood SES and beliefs in the causes of poverty, results indicated a weak negative correlation ($r = -0.180$), though insignificant ($p > 0.05$, $p = 0.109$). Based on these results, one could hypothesize that with a larger sample size, the correlation would be stronger and significant in accepting the hypothesis that as SES increased, beliefs in the causes of poverty would decrease farther from the mean. When asked about the causes of poverty on a five-point scale (1=completely individual, to 5=completely systemic), the results ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.78$) favored a more systemic view, though hovering right around the midpoint of the scale.

In a multiple comparisons test comparing hometown to beliefs in the causes of poverty and the solutions to getting out of poverty, I reduced the data to three categories: participants who grew up in Penobscot County, participants who grew up throughout the rest of Maine, and participants who grew up outside of Maine. Results suggested those who responded from Penobscot County believed the causes of poverty were more systemic ($M=3.46$) than those from the rest of Maine ($M = 3.30$) and out of state ($M = 3.32$). These means all fall above the midpoint line of the scale, (1= completely individual to 5= completely systemic), suggesting slight differences in opinions, yet

primarily a belief that poverty is either due to an equal combination of individual and systemic factors or more towards a systemic view. Furthermore, when I looked at the means for hometown and beliefs in the solutions to poverty, the results suggested differences ($M = 2.85$ to $M = 3.29$). Those in Penobscot county ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.899$) were more agreeable to the idea that people could rise out of poverty on their own, whereas people who grew up out of state ($M=3.29$, $SD=0.62$) believed that individuals could not do it alone. However, the means all fell around or above the mid-point line to varying degrees, which suggests that participants acknowledged a need for help to get out of poverty as opposed to individuals being able to do it on their own.

RQ3. In what content areas have students learned about poverty?

Participants were given six options of content areas where education about poverty might potentially occur: Math; Social Studies, Science, Reading/English, Other, or did not learn about poverty at all). The frequency test indicated a mean ($M = 3.17$) and standard deviation ($SD = 1.73$). However, what was most helpful in analyzing this question were the frequencies of each selected answer. The majority of participants (62.7%) responded that they primarily learned about poverty in Social Studies. There was an even number of responses (9.6%) for Reading/English, Other, and Did not learn about poverty at all. Six percent of participants chose two answers indicating that they learned it equally in two different content areas. Finally, an equal number of participants (1.2%) responded that they learned about it most in Math or Science classes.

RQ4. Have schools implemented programs to benefit the community and those in poverty?

While the data indicated a negative correlation ($r = -0.200$) between childhood SES and participation in extracurricular activities due to how it was coded, there is actually a positive correlation. Though not significant ($p = 0.069$, $p > 0.05$), the results were close in suggesting that participants who grew up with fewer financial resources were not participating in extracurricular activities to the extent that participants who grew up in higher SES households were. The data may have been significant had the sample size been larger. What we can conclude from this is that there is a trend towards a lack of participation in extracurricular activities for students who lacked resources, suggesting that there may not have been programs available, such as transportation and financial assistance, for such students to attend extracurricular activities.

Using a Pearson Correlations test, I found a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.537$, $p < 0.001$) between presence of events to benefit the community and a free and reduced lunch (FRL) program in primary schools. Additionally, a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.253$, $p = 0.021$, $p < 0.05$) was present between events to benefit the community and the presence of a FRL program in secondary schools. These results suggest that if there was a FRL program in the school, there was also more likely to be other events to benefit the community and those in poverty. Despite this positive correlation, the means ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.110$) and ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.005$), respectively for primary and secondary schools, suggested that the programs primarily occurred yearly or bimonthly, as opposed to more frequent weekly or monthly events.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I discuss the results, implications for practice, suggestions for future research, and limitations.

Results

I predicted that many of the participants, because they are recent high school graduates, would have a better memory of their primary and secondary school experiences. These students, with an average GPA of 2.47, indicated that they did not receive or do not remember receiving a significant amount of education regarding poverty during their primary and secondary school years. This finding is important, as these are students who were academically successful in high school, yet they do not remember receiving much education about poverty. The ratings of poverty education in primary and secondary schools decreased among students who indicated they had a lower SES. One participant noted in an open-ended survey question: “Many people were in poverty, including myself. It was never discussed.”. Another expressed: “We didn’t have any education about poverty.”. These statements suggest that perhaps poverty was not discussed in lower SES districts because it was simply a fact of life. Nonetheless, these statements are powerful indicators that there is still work to be done in the realm of implementing poverty education in school systems.

Implications for Practice

The most common content area in which poverty was addressed was Social Studies. While there are many opportunities to have conversations in Social Studies that address poverty- i.e. some of the political decisions to counter its effects, such as President Johnson's War on Poverty- there are also ways to integrate education into other content areas. A secondary Math or Accounting teacher could have students complete the "What Money?" budget assignment, in which they are given an allotted amount of money to cover monthly expenses, such as rent, electricity, unexpected vehicle repair, groceries, and a classroom field trip (Beegle, 2017). The allotted money is not enough to cover all of the expenses, forcing the students to make decisions on how they will allocate their resources. This activity could initiate discussion around the fact that many people in this country are making these decisions on a weekly or monthly basis. Such an activity builds up stress in the participants as they are forced to make difficult choices and split up their resources in ways they may not have had to do before. Teachers might find that these activities build empathy in their students and initiate honest discussions about the difficulties of living in poverty, while at the same time meeting content standards.

At the primary level, teachers could do a similar activity but instead of the students dividing the specified goods, such as tokens, the teacher begins by giving some students more than others. Young students notice when some people have more than others, and they would likely be the first to recognize the lack of "fairness". The teacher could explain that the students have a problem to solve: they need to figure out a way to ensure that all students have enough tokens to buy a necessary item, such as a pencil. This type of activity would build collaboration among students as well as spark discussion on fairness and sharing resources.

In a Language Arts course, one activity to spark the discussion on poverty and privilege is to take the students through a series of prompts, during which they reflect on their experiences and move according to whether or not a prompt applies to them. For example, “move three steps forward if you have ever been on a family vacation” or “move four steps back if you have ever been without heat due to unpaid bills”. Following the prompts, the students are able to visualize where they are in relation to their peers. This Class Continuum (Beegle, 2017) is meant to give students a chance to tangibly recognize the privileges they may have taken for granted in the past. It would be of the utmost importance to ensure this activity is done in a way that is sensitive to feelings of embarrassment for both the lack of and, in some cases, wealth of privileges that individuals have. Therefore, this activity would likely be most appropriately implemented in a high school or college setting. However, when done in a safe, non-judgmental environment, there is potential for self-reflection and fruitful conversation about disparities between people due to factors out of their control, such as parents’ level of education, race, income to pay for amenities and/or extra treats.

Perhaps the most important activity is that of debriefing, a time allowed for students to discuss their opinions and feelings. After the activity, high school students could then complete a writing assignment, reflecting on their own privilege, assumptions, or biases and how they have impacted their experiences. In addition, students could be asked to research or come up with solutions to these disparities, giving them an opportunity to generate ideas that could make a difference in the lives of those experiencing poverty.

Before these suggestions can be implemented, it is important that teachers assess their own beliefs and assumptions about poverty. As research has shown, teachers who have had opportunities to engage in such discussion and have had exposure to experiences regarding working with people in poverty have changed their attitudes and perspectives as they reflected on how they would approach such topics in the classroom (Ball, 2016; Cochran-Smith & Villega, 2016; & Hayes, 2016). While it would be beneficial to begin this process in the years prior to earning one's education degree, school administrators might want to consider offering professional development opportunities that can spark reflection among present teachers. Teachers are important individuals with a lot of power in regards to how they make their students feel. Maya Angelou said: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel". It is critical that teachers and school administrators work to ensure that the environment in which children learn is a safe and respectful one- one that is conducive to conversations about challenging topics, such as poverty, and one that encourages students to think hard about things that matter in order to show them that they are the future and that they can be difference makers.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should consider a larger sample size in order to ensure more reliable results. Additionally, it might be beneficial to use an already established survey that is confirmed to be valid and reliable. Including interviews with educators on their assumptions and biases on poverty as well as their experiences implementing poverty education, or lack thereof, would provide different perspectives for the researchers regarding what schools are doing to address poverty and poverty education. Finally,

research on focus groups of practicing and pre-service educators who have been given lesson prompts and suggestions to improve their classrooms on this topic would be beneficial in providing additional information about what has and has not worked in implementing poverty education in the classroom.

Limitations

The limitations of the study fall into three areas: sample, survey, and design. The sample was limited to university students, specifically to those in class the day of the study. Additionally, there was not an equal breakdown of participants by gender, socioeconomic status, and year in school. Because of this, the sample may not be representative of all students who previously attended high school.

The survey was limited in that there were no reliability or validity coefficients. Also, some of the questions were not as specific as they could have been and participants answered in multiple ways, despite the options given, making it difficult to code data. For example, one question was open-ended and asked about participants' extracurricular activities. Multiple responses stated "sports", though they did not specify what type of sports they played, which could make a difference, as some sports are more costly than others.

Furthermore, the design was limited as there was only a one-time opportunity to collect data. This limited the amount of potential participants and data to be analyzed. Additionally, participants were self-reporting which could have led to biased responses. However, its strengths lie in it being a descriptive survey that raises awareness of what is or is not being taught regarding poverty in primary and secondary schools. It provided me

with some basic information to use in determining whether or not there was enough evidence to support or refute my hypotheses.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

I sought to evaluate university students' perceptions of K-12 poverty education. While we know that it will take changes at a systemic level to eradicate poverty (Ladd, 2012), the students in our schools are the next policymakers, activists, teachers, social workers, car mechanics, and doctors. Therefore, we have to begin somewhere when thinking about how to change the course of the future for those in poverty. Why not start with our children? While this study was a small sample of participants' educational memories, the responses indicated that more could be done to begin, or improve, poverty education in schools. More extensive research would need to be done to ensure that this study was reliable and valid. In the meantime, I know that I would like to take what I have learned and use it to inform my own teaching practices, ensuring that my students are given opportunities to engage in conversations about fairness and the importance of working to help those in poverty. As an educator, I have the opportunity to positively impact each student who walks through my classroom door. Therefore, it is important to me that I harvest that responsibility into serving the whole child and providing opportunities for him or her to be a difference maker in the classroom, school, community, and beyond.

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APPENDICES

for a course project?

other (specify)

2. Does this application modify a previously approved project? N (Y/N). If yes, please give assigned number (if known) of previously approved project:

3. Is an expedited review requested? Y (Y/N).

Submitting the application indicates the principal investigator's agreement to abide by the responsibilities outlined

in Section I.E. of the Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects.

Faculty Sponsors are responsible for oversight of research conducted by their students. The Faculty Sponsor ensures that he/she has read the application and that the conduct of such research will be in accordance with the University of Maine's Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research.

REMINDER: if the principal investigator is an undergraduate student, the Faculty Sponsor **MUST** submit the application to the IRB.

Email this cover page and complete application to UMRIC@maine.edu

***** FOR IRB USE ONLY Application # 2017-09-15

Review (F/E): E

ACTION TAKEN:

X Judged Exempt; category 2 Modifications required? Y Accepted (date) 10/18/2017

Approved as submitted. Date of next review: by Degree of Risk:

Approved pending modifications. Date of next review: by Modifications accepted (date):

Not approved (see attached statement) Judged not research with human subjects

Degree of Risk:

FINAL APPROVAL TO BEGIN Date: 10/18/2017

01/2017

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

You, as an undergraduate student at the University of Maine, are invited to participate in a research project conducted by Rachel Sirois, an undergraduate student in the Department of Child Development and Family Relations at the University of Maine. Sid Mitchell, Ph.D. is the faculty sponsor involved with this project. The purpose of this research is to gain insights into what, if anything, students are learning about regarding poverty during their primary and secondary school experiences. This study is being done in order to complete The Honors College Thesis requirement. You must be at least 18 years old to participate and your participation is voluntary.

What will you be asked to do?

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a paper survey administered by Rachel Sirois. You will be asked to answer questions about your age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, and educational experiences. Sample questions include: “Did you ever participate in any extracurricular activities at school? If yes, which ones? If no, why not?” and “On a scale of 1-5, one being poor and 5 being exceptional, how would you describe your secondary school’s success at educating students about poverty?”. It is estimated that it will take about ten minutes to complete the survey.

Risks:

It is possible that you will become uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You may skip questions that make you uncomfortable. Time and inconvenience are the only other foreseeable risks to participating in this study

Benefits:

While this study has no direct benefit to you, this research may help us point to areas where discussions about poverty throughout education could be improved. One goal of the study is to benefit educators and administrators as they work to come up with ways to include poverty education into their classrooms at all levels.

Compensation:

If you choose to hand in the tear-off sheet with your name on it, you will be compensated with one point extra credit, regardless of if you participate.

Confidentiality Statement:

This is an anonymous survey. Your name will not be on any of the data. You will print your name on the tear-off sheet and hand it in to your professor when you turn in your survey. He will not have access to answers that link to individuals. Please do not include any information anywhere on the survey that may identify you or anyone else. The surveys will be kept in a locked file in the faculty sponsor's office. They will be kept until December 2027 in the case that the principal investigator uses it for degrees in higher education. They will then be destroyed in December 2027. Once transferred to a computer, the data will be kept in an encrypted folder and will also be destroyed in December 2027.

The project will be shared with members of the principal investigator's thesis committee as well as other members of the public who wish to learn about the thesis. There is potential for the results of this research to be on display at future research conventions and given to educators in school systems.

Voluntary:

Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to take the survey, but you must turn in the extra-credit cover sheet with your name to receive the one point extra credit. You may skip any question you do not wish to answer. Submitting the survey indicates consent to participate.

Contact Information:

If you have any further questions regarding any part of this research you can contact:

1. Rachel Sirois: 224 Merrill Hall, University of Maine, rachel.sirois@maine.edu
2. Sid Mitchell, Ph.D. 224 Merrill Hall, University of Maine, 207.581.3435, sid.mitchell@maine.edu

If you wish to learn more about your rights as a research participant, you can contact:

Gayle Jones

Assistant to the Protection of Human Subjects Review Board

207.581.1498

gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu

APPENDIX C

Script Inviting Students to Participate

Hello,

My name is Rachel Sirois and I am a 4th year Child Development and Family Relations major. I am also a member of The Honors College. This semester I will be completing my Honors Thesis. I am researching the question: Are schools educating students about poverty?

Professor Mitchell has kindly let me speak to you and give out my anonymous survey to those who would like to participate. He has agreed to grant extra credit for those who participate. It will take about 10 minutes to complete and it asks for information regarding age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc., along with questions about your educational experience learning about poverty. You are welcome to skip over questions and/or withdraw from completing the survey if you feel uncomfortable. In addition, you must be over the age of 18 to participate. I truly appreciate your participation and if you have any questions please feel free to ask Professor Mitchell or me.

APPENDIX D

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Are Schools Educating Students about Poverty? Survey done by Rachel Sirois

I. General Participant Information: Questions 1-12 ask for some information about yourself. Please answer honestly. You may skip questions if you prefer not to answer them.

1. **How do you identify yourself?**
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
2. **What year in school are you?**
 - a. First
 - b. Second
 - c. Third
 - d. Fourth
 - e. Other
3. **What is your major? If undecided, please write undecided.**

4. **What is your age?**

5. **What is your current GPA?**

6. **Ethnicity Origin (Race)**
 - a. White
 - b. Hispanic or Latino
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Native American or American Indian
 - e. Asian/Pacific Islander
 - f. Other: (Please Specify) _____
7. **Employment Status: Are you currently?**
 - a. Employed for wages
 - b. Self-employed
 - c. Looking for work
 - d. Student only
 - e. Military
 - f. Retired
 - g. Unable to work

8. Do you practice a religion? If so, what?

9. What is your preferred language?

- a. English
- b. Spanish
- c. French
- d. Mandarin
- e. Other

10. How would you describe your socioeconomic class before you turned 18?

- a. Lower Class
- b. Lower-Middle Class
- c. Middle Class
- d. Middle-Upper Class
- e. Upper Class

11. What is your socioeconomic status at this time?

- a. Lower Class
- b. Lower-Middle Class
- c. Middle Class
- d. Middle-Upper Class
- e. Upper Class

12. Did you attend public or private school?

II. Childhood: Questions 13- 16 ask you about your childhood. Please answer honestly. You may skip questions if you prefer not to answer.

13. Did you grow up in Maine? If yes, which county? If no, where did you grow up?

14. How would you describe your hometown?

- a. Rural
- b. Suburban
- c. Urban
- d. Other

15. Was there a soup kitchen or food pantry in your hometown?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. I don't know

16. Was there a homeless shelter(s) in your hometown?

- a. Yes

- b. No
- c. I don't know

III. Beliefs/Attitudes about Poverty: Questions 17-18 ask you about your beliefs and attitudes about poverty in the United States. Please answer honestly. You may skip questions if you prefer not to answer.

17. On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being completely individual and 5 being completely systemic, what do you believe are the causes of poverty in the United States?
1. Completely individual 2. Somewhat individual 3. Equal combination 4. Somewhat systemic 5. Completely systemic

18. Do you believe people who live in poverty are capable of improving their situation on their own?
1. Definitely not 2. Probably not 3. Maybe 4. Probably yes 5. Definitely yes

IV. Educational Experiences: Questions 19-30 ask you about your education and educational experiences regarding poverty. Several questions ask about your primary school or secondary school. If you attended multiple primary or secondary schools while growing up, please think about the school that you attended the longest when answering the questions. Please answer honestly. You may skip questions if you prefer not to answer them.

19. How did you get to school?
a. Bus
b. Walk/Bike
c. Somebody drove me (please specify who drove you) _____

20. On a scale of 1-5, 1 being poor and 5 being excellent, how would you rate your primary school's success at educating students about poverty?
1. Poor 2. Fair 3. Good 4. Very Good 5. Excellent

Please give examples, if you wish to explain your answer.

21. How often did your primary school hold events to benefit the community, such as food drives, homeless shelter drives, free activity days?
a. Weekly
b. Monthly
c. Bimonthly
d. Yearly
e. Never

Please give examples, if you wish to explain your answer.

- 22. On a scale of 1-5, 1 being poor and 5 being excellent, how would you rate your secondary school's success at educating students about poverty?**
1. Poor 2. Fair 3. Good 4. Very Good 5. Excellent

Please give examples, if you wish to explain your answer.

- 23. How often did your secondary school hold events to benefit the community (e.g. Food drives, Homeless shelter drives, free family activity days)**
- a. Weekly
 - b. Monthly
 - c. Bimonthly
 - d. Yearly
 - e. Never

- 24. Did your school system have a Free and Reduced Lunch Program?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I don't know

- 25. If yes, on a scale of 1-4, 1 being very easy to 4 being very difficult, how challenging was it to tell who was getting free and reduced lunch?**
1. Very easy 2. Somewhat easy 3. Somewhat difficult 4. Very difficult

- 26. Did your primary school have any sort of food/clothing/toiletry pantry?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I don't know

- 27. Did teachers keep extra snacks in the classroom for students?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I don't know

28. On a scale of 1-5, 1 being never and 5 being daily, how often did you have trouble completing your homework because of lack of resources? (e.g. Internet, electricity, food, pencils, paper)

1. Never 2. Once or twice a year 3. Monthly 4. Weekly 5. Daily

29. In what subject did you most often learn about poverty?

- a. Math
- b. Social Studies
- c. Science
- d. Reading/English
- e. Other _____
- f. Did not learn about poverty at all

30. Did you participate in any extracurricular activities?

- a. Yes
- b. No

If yes, please provide a few examples. If no, please explain why not.

(On Separate Page) Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey. Please remember, this is anonymous and your answers will remain confidential. If you have any questions do not hesitate to contact Rachel Sirois or Sid Mitchell, Ph.D. Their information can be found on the Informed Consent Page.

Please write your name below if you wish to receive one point extra credit.

Name:

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Rachel Sirois was born in Winslow, Maine on September 19, 1996. She graduated from Winslow High School in 2014. She will earn an Undergraduate Degree in Child Development and Family Relations with a concentration in Early Childhood Education from the University of Maine in May 2018. Throughout her college career, Rachel was very involved with Black Bear Catholic, the Catholic Student Association on campus, serving as Vice President her sophomore year and President her junior and senior years.

Rachel is the youngest of five children to Marc and Sarah Sirois, of Winslow. She credits her loving family's guidance and support in nurturing her deep faith, sense of humor, and commitment to academic and personal excellence. When she is not cracking puns, you will find her playing games, adventuring outdoors, working with children, and spending time with family and friends.

Following graduation, Rachel plans to find a job as a teacher in grades K-3 in New England. She is passionate about educating the *whole* child with a focus on fostering social and emotional learning, especially at a young age. Her passion stems from a belief that all children are capable of learning when in an environment that meets their needs with a teacher committed to nurturing relationships with students and families in order to ensure all students have opportunities to meet their potential.