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An Ethnographic Study of Intermediate Students from Poverty: Intersections of School and Home

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An Ethnographic Study of Intermediate Students from Poverty:
Intersections of School and Home

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education
in
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Abstract

The achievement gap in American schools between middle class students and students from poverty is well documented. This paper outlines the findings of a study designed to explore the experience and conscientization of struggling students from poverty. The argument will be made that poverty can be viewed as a culture and that this view may shed significant light on the dynamics of the achievement gap. Further, using the construct of poverty as a culture provides real life applications that have the potential to impact the achievement gap. The study explored the lived experiences in a public school setting of intermediate students from poverty, hoping to capture their voice and insights. The research utilized a Critical Pedagogical Approach to attempt to understand why American schools struggle with these populations and what could be done to address the achievement gap.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The Issue

Background

Having reached the twenty-first century, it is disappointing that poverty continues to be a pervasive problem in the United States. Approximately 15 million children under the age of eighteen in the United States live in poverty (a family of four making less than \$24,0036 in 2015), representing 21% of all children (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2017). This rate has fluctuated between 15% and 23% over the last 40 years (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010). If we consider those not only in poverty but also those falling into the low income category (a family of four making less than \$48,072 in 2015), 43% of all children come from economically disadvantaged homes (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2017). Low income is defined as those who make less than double the federal poverty guideline, the average income a family needs to meet their basic needs. (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2017.) For the purposes of this paper, “poverty” will be used to refer to generational poverty, rather than a temporary financial situation some families might find themselves in after the loss of a job, for instance. Thomas-Presswood and Presswood (2008) state, “Poverty has a harmful effect on families and children, especially children’s physical, social-emotional, and educational development” (p.3). Poverty can be found in every race and ethnic background, but is distinctly more prevalent in culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse families.

Poverty and education have a confounding effect on one another. Those with low education levels are more likely to be living in poverty and those children who come from poverty are less likely to find educational success (Thomas-Presswood & Presswood, 2008). This achievement gap is one of the most pressing educational concerns of our day and is well documented for students from poverty as well as a number of minority populations (Madhab, 2006; Carpenter, Ramirez & Severn, 2006). While some seem to think these gaps occur because of some deficiency in the family, many believe that the public school system perpetuates this cycle by not adequately addressing the needs of children who are not from the majority culture (Beegle, 2003).

Significance of the Issue

Although schools have long known that children from poverty struggle to be successful, with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), an update of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), schools were held more accountable than ever before for the performance of these students (Menken, 2006; Viadero, 2007). Now, not only were the students deemed to be failing, but so were the schools themselves. This act required schools to report on designated subpopulations of a school, including economically disadvantaged, limited English proficiency, students with disabilities and various race/ethnicity groups. If the subgroups did not meet adequately yearly progress, schools could be penalized, which could include the loss of federal funds. Although there are many critiques of the No Child Left Behind Act, the focus on subpopulations brought the low success rate of these groups into society's awareness

(Viadero, 2007). Schools have not necessarily found better solutions for how to help these special populations, but interest intensified as federal funds and consequences were tied to student performance (Menken, 2006). The federal government then offered both incentives and punishments based on schools' or districts' achievement of meeting these standards (Brown & Clift, 2010). Among those incentives were the attachment of adequate yearly progress status to federal funds and the public reporting of the status of individual schools and districts. If a school failed to meet adequate yearly progress over a period of years, students were then allowed to choose other schools to attend (Brown & Clift, 2010).

The 2015 version of the ESEA, called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), acknowledges some of the unrealistic elements of NCLB, but “maintains an expectation that there will be accountability and action to effect positive change in our lowest-performing schools, where groups of students are not making progress, and where graduation rates are low over extended periods of time” (Department of Education, 2016).

While there are other subpopulations that are also likely to struggle to meet adequate yearly progress, the focus of this paper is on those from poverty or those that fall into the reporting category of economically disadvantaged.

With all the focus on accountability and student achievement in recent years, it seems that schools are working hard to find ways to improve student performance. Menken (2006) claims the benefits that could be drawn by greater attention and effort on behalf of the special populations may, unfortunately, be undone by the

edicts of specific types of instruction, whether they have been shown to be effective with these populations or not. Much of what happens in education is politicized, and reforms end up reflecting the political biases of the recent political administrations (Au & Apple, 2010). While NCLB gave more focus to the achievement gap issues and forced schools to be aware of their performance with subpopulations, it also had a number of deleterious effects. Au and Apple (2010) contend that “NCLB imposed a rigid system of high-stakes test-based accountability on public school that has created massive amounts of failure” (p. 421). Au and Apple point out that there is no evidence that all of this testing has led to any improvement in educational achievement for children, but there is ample evidence that the pressure of these tests is changing education in other ways including increasing teaching to the test, ignoring non-tested content areas, focusing on students with certain scores to improve statistics, and even cheating.

School personnel often react to the statistics and test results without a full understanding of the complexity of the issue. As with many aspects of the NCLB act, it outlined the standards that needed to be met for language learners and other subgroups, but it did not outline or mandate how children should be taught. School personnel were free to rely on best practices and make their best professional judgments. Often teachers and superintendents react to low performance as a need for remediation, which then usually translates into direct instruction models (Menken, 2006). Concerns about the direct instruction approach and underlying learning theory will be discussed in the section called Typical Approaches to Addressing the Achievement Gap.

ESSA is designed to give states more flexibility in setting student performance standards and school ratings. In addition, states have more control over student identification for interventions and the type of interventions that are implemented (Department of Education, 2016). It is hard to say what the effects of the revised legislation will be on schools and students. It is hoped that now that the performance of subpopulations has been brought to the forefront, the field of education will continue to closely examine the effects of any reforms on not only students overall, but also specifically on the populations that have struggled to find success within our school systems.

While there has been much written on poverty in general and how students from poverty perform in schools, there has not been much written about the students' experiences in school. Some reflective pieces have been done of adults looking back and analyzing their school experience (Beegle, 2003), but there is little that includes the voices of students as they are in the school system. Similarly, transformative experiences of college age students, student teachers, or other adult populations have been examined (Martin, 2008), but the experiences of younger students, when the disenchantment with schools is likely to begin, is missing from the literature.

Personal Significance

While these issues are critical for schools, they also have great meaning for me in my professional life. For many years as a kindergarten teacher, I have observed students from poverty come to school and struggle to find success. Later in my career I became

an ESL (English as a second language) teacher and I began to believe from my experiences that coming from poverty made a greater impact than being from a language diverse home, although, being both from a language diverse home and from poverty seemed to compound the negative effects. My desire to understand these students' personal situations and how to help them navigate the school system to be able to use education to their advantage has become a lifelong pursuit for me. It is my hope to find answers that contribute to teachers' understanding of poverty and what role we can play in helping students to find success.

Finally, and the deeper underlying reason for being in a doctoral program in the first place, these issues are very personal for me. I myself was a student from poverty. I am number six of seven children and the first to graduate high school. I am the only one to go on to college (although I now have one sister with an associate's degree and another in a community college program at the age of 50). Now I have my master's and am working on my doctorate. This is an unheard of level of education in my family. It affects the role I play in the extended family and, to some degree, how I am perceived by my siblings and their children. I have looked for the patterns and events that allowed me to be successful in school while most of my siblings were not able to do this.

More importantly, my mother has nineteen grandchildren from these seven children. Only two have college degrees and one of these wasn't until he was almost thirty. We easily have more felony convictions than diplomas in our family. Most of these nineteen grandchildren have children of their own, the oldest is twenty-six and the youngest is a few months old, thirty-one in all. Some of these seem to be headed down a

more middle class path, but many of them have the potential to be the next generation in our family for whom school is a struggle or even to be the next ones arrested. Both the grandchildren and great-grandchildren are beautiful, precious beings born into our family who I will watch grow up and make their way through life. I NEED to understand how generational poverty has affected our family and in so doing, I have hopes that I will also understand enough to be able to help the students who come through the doors of my school to be successful not only in completing at least high school, but also to find success in their adult life. It is obvious to me that the way schools have always done things is not sufficient to change the course of life for most students from poverty. I want to find other ways.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

- What can be learned when students from poverty who are not finding success in school engage in reflection about the school experience?
- What happens in the intersection of school, home and student when the home culture does not match the school culture?

Do upper elementary students (grades three through five) have the ability and awareness to analyze how being from poverty impacts their early education experience? Are these students able to see any differences in how they are experiencing school compared to their more affluent peers? Do students from poverty feel that the staff has a realistic view of their lived experience? In addition to the students' perspectives, teachers' perceptions of students from poverty will also be explored. How do teachers make accommodations for these different experiences or situations? Or, do they make

accommodations at all? Do teachers feel they should? What role do the students' families play in the home to school connection? What messages are they giving their children about the value of education? How do families understand their role in relation to their child's education? Finally, could a transformative experience be developed that would allow the school system to become transparent and malleable for students from poverty? Is it possible through experiences and discussion for students to make conscious choices about how they will proceed in their educational career? If students were to make these conscious choices would that be reflected in their school performance, helping them to become successful students?

Before attempting to answer the research questions, a careful review of the history of poverty and public education was made. Literature that relates to the achievement gap and approaches that have been used to address this gap, including a look at the terminology "the culture of poverty" to determine how it may, or may not apply to this discussion, has been examined. Finally, conscientization and critical pedagogy have also been reviewed.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The History of Poverty in American Schools

Public schools are designed to provide education to a wide range of students. According to Tozer, Violas, and Senese (2002) the mission of public schooling has stretched to include a wide array of students over time. Historically, U.S. schools were designed to give the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic to young children. Others saw the mission of public schooling in a more political light. Public schools, according to Katz (1995) were first formed to address a number of societal issues in the mid nineteenth century. During this time there was a major shift in the types of work people did. Before this time, the U.S. was largely agricultural with families educating children primarily at home, with only the wealthy sending their children to formal schooling. Historically, youth became apprentices around the age of 14, which in effect moved the authority over them from their parents to their new household or mentor until they were old enough to marry and start their own families. There was always a plan in place for where youth were supposed to be or what they were supposed to be doing (Katz, 1995).

With the industrial revolution, this dynamic changed. Adults left the farms and moved into cities to work in factories. By this time there were a number of public schools for younger children, but children tended to leave once they were of working age to help support the family. In some cities there became a great concern over the idle

youth. Too old to attend schools as they were then designed, and too young to enter the job market, they spent their days in idleness and congregated on street corners. Schooling was seen as a way to productively fill the time of these young people as their parents joined the workforce (Katz, 1995).

Particularly for the children of poor families and immigrants, schools were seen as a vehicle to teach middle class, U.S. values and practices. Quoting the 1858 Boston School Committee on its mission, Katz (1995) writes, “taking children at random from a great city undisciplined, uninstructed, often with inveterate forwardness and obstinacy, and with the inherited stupidity of centuries of ignorant ancestors; transforming them from animals into intellectual beings; giving to many their first appreciation of what is wise, what is true, what is lovely, and what is pure.” (p. 104). There was a fear that “Lower class urban families, who failed to implant earnestness and restraint in the character of their children, were breeding grounds for paupers and criminals.” (p. 104).

One could argue that the underlying lack of respect for the value of what families might have to offer their children and the arrogance of the school system, while likely to be stated in more politically correct terms, remains as an underlying attitude today. One way that researchers are currently studying the disconnect between schools and children from poverty is through Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital. Dumais (2005) summarizes Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital explaining that cultural capital is a resource that people use to receive and maintain power and privilege. Cultural capital is apparent when students interact with their teachers and use the language appreciated by teachers, and families act and think in ways that are rewarded by the educational system. This might

be by volunteering at school, following through on homework routines, or attending conferences. A lack of recognized cultural capital may lead to families and students feeling uncomfortable in the school setting, students having low educational expectations for themselves or difficult communication between teachers and those of lower classes. In this view, schools become an institution that serves to reproduce social inequalities. Researchers (Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003) have been able to document the differences in the way that children from middle class or upper class experience school compared to those from the working class or poverty.

Weininger and Lareau (2003) wrote about the social class differences apparent in the interactions during parent teacher conferences. They were able to detail marked differences in both the quality of information and the sense of authority that was given to parents from a middle class background as compared to those from working class or poverty. In essence, the teachers interacted with the middle class parents in more deferential ways. It was also apparent that parents from middle class were more able to direct conversations and obtain services for their children, as well as feeling more comfortable critiquing the services of the teacher and school.

Further, Horvat, Weininger and Lareau (2003) documented the ways parents from different social classes deal with problems at school. Here again, there were distinct differences in the types of communication both on the part of the parents and the part of the school. Parents from the middle or upper classes tended to rely on a network of other parents to bring pressure to bear on the school if a problem arose, expecting a noticeable

response from the school. Working class parents and parents from poverty went to the school and expressed concerns but tended to do so as a lone parent and did not necessarily hear back from the school. These groups tended to rely on relatives or neighbors for information and advice, while those from the middle class tended to have professionals in their network that they could ask questions when problem situations arose. Interestingly, these authors found that race, while playing a role in school issues, was less of a determining factor of how things were likely to be handled than was social class. Once again we see the subtle differences in the ways that the children from different social classes experience school and how schools interact differently depending on the social class of the family.

Katz (1995) further claims that in the mid nineteenth century, public schools became a way for society to deal with what were seen as the troubling issues of immigration. The goal was to take the uneducated, un-American immigrants and turn them into acceptable citizens through years of public education. In the 1920's there were Americanization laws in place and classes to teach adults the "American way of life", including how to cook and raise children (Ullman, 2010). Again, while more current in our politically correct language, some of these same fears of immigrants and cultural diversity remain in our systems today. A few years ago, there was a bill to be voted on in Oregon that would limit the amount of time a student could stay in a native language classroom (Bonczijk, 2008). While this bill did not pass, over 44% of voters in the state of Oregon supported the bill and some counties had the majority to pass the bill. Voters all over the state were asked to make this decision without necessarily having any

background knowledge that would help them understand the complexities of this issue, relying instead on the current national trend to be wary of foreigners and to unquestioningly promote the “American Way”. Since 9-11, a nationalist movement has built momentum including a growing negative attitude about immigrants (Esses, Dovidio, & Hodson, 2002). The 2016 presidential election has further highlighted the polarization of this issue. While this may not seem to be directly related to poverty status, there is considerable overlap of poverty, minority status, immigration status and being a speaker of a language other than English that makes a challenging situation even more complex.

While much has been written on the achievement gap between the races or the performance of ESL students, here is the crux of the situation for comparing English language learners and children from poverty. When English language learners do not come from poverty, they are more likely to have home experiences that support the school’s vision of a competent student. They are more likely to have been to the library or a museum or on vacation. They are more likely to have had conversations around the dinner table or preschool experiences, similar to those of other middle class families. They are more likely to have books and writing supplies in their homes (Krashen & Brown, 2005). This then leaves them only with the English language to master, which they tend to do relatively quickly. It is when English language learners are also from poverty that students not only have to master the English language, but also have to backfill many life experiences that allow them to understand the teaching of the schools. Unfortunately, because of our current system of categorizing students for services, all too often we may not be aware that the students who are truly at risk are not

the English language learners, but the English language learners who are from poverty (Krashen & Brown, 2005). Those English language learners who are not from poverty take a few years, often much less time, to learn a new language and then continue on their academic way. However, when English language students are also children from poverty, then the lack of life experiences valued by school systems may continue to impede their progress even if their English speaking skills are in place. A similar examination of children of color and children from poverty would need to be made to see what percentage of low school achievement can be explained by the overlap of minority status and poverty status.

Katz (1995) notes, “Notice a missing goal among the original purposes of public education: the cultivation and transmission of cognitive skills and intellectual abilities as ends in themselves. Public schools systems existed to shape behavior and attitudes, alleviate social and family problems, and to improve poor people and reinforce a social structure under stress” (p.110). These school reformers in the nineteenth century set schools up to be the solution to all of our social ills and a key component of promoting an American society. Schools have regularly been criticized for falling short ever since.

It is somewhat surprising and a little disheartening to see how long researchers have been working on the subject of students from poverty and the lack of significant gains. A book written in 1967 by Gottlieb and Ramsey, *Understanding Children of Poverty*, was written as one in a series of books to apply current research to the study of the U.S. education system. Other than a noticeable difference in the language used to describe certain populations, the underlying concepts and theories were strikingly similar

to resources written much more recently. Some of the concepts explored in the book are the lack of support for education in the home of those from poverty, a lack of knowledge and experiences that can be accessed for use in the schools, and a disconnect between the schools and students from poverty. For example, Thomas-Presswood and Presswood, writing in 2008, acknowledge this same disconnect. By 2008 the acknowledgement that there is a disconnect between school and home has evolved to the expectation that teachers should bear the onus to meet families on their ground, examining their own cultural identities and assumptions, but Thomas-Presswood and Presswood (2008) offer this as a recommendation for what schools can do to support students from poverty rather than suggesting that these ways of interacting are already in place.

Other suggestions for improvements were also found in other places, sometimes under other names. For instance, Gottlieb and Ramsey (1967) recommend providing instruction that had relevancy for students from poverty. This also shows up in Thomas-Presswood and Presswood (2008), although they contend that it is critical to provide additional experiences to broaden their experiences of the world. Another suggestion by Gottlieb and Ramsey (1967) was to allow students to be able to monitor their progress and have help in goal setting. Thomas-Presswood and Presswood (2008) address this by recommending that students need to be taught how success in schools happens, and that learning involves effort and preparation. Gottlieb and Ramsey (1967) present the idea of using an advisory model that closely aligned a knowledgeable staff member with a student to help them set goals, monitor their progress and listen to their concerns. Today we call this approach “mentoring”. Although this book from 1967 spoke more openly

about the race issues involved in teaching children of color (more specifically black children), it acknowledged that most teachers come from the middle class and don't tend to have a clear understanding of how to help students from poverty. Even the issues about IQ tests being middle class oriented and therefore biased were addressed. One might have expected to see an underdeveloped theory or old ideas that had since been debunked. Instead, many of the ideas in the literature today were being written about in 1967. Which raises the question, why haven't we made more progress in reaching the students from poverty in our public schools in over 40 years?

Typical Approaches to Addressing the Achievement Gap

This participant researcher suggests that the learning theory most commonly used in the public school system is one based on some version of Behaviorism. Whether that takes the approach of John Locke's Atomistic Model (Phillips & Soltis, 2004) and his idea of a blank tablet, Freire's concept of the banking model (Freire, 1970), or direct instruction models that rely on stimulus and response (Kim & Axelrod, 2005), these theories assume that what children bring to the learning situation beyond their mental capacity is largely insignificant. In this view, teachers and a carefully planned, sequential curriculum are the focus and students are responders that are directed by behaviorist techniques. From this theory, there is little need to evaluate children's prior knowledge, interests or learning style, relying on the scripted curriculum to address any discrepancies in background knowledge (Kim & Axelrod, 2005). The goal is to pour into their brains the carefully planned information determined by the district and/or the curriculum development company. With this thinking, it seems that the any experience that does not

mesh well with school expectations could be seen as debris to be ignored or deleted if possible. Even heritage languages may be seen as taking up too much space or as a messy obstruction that needs to be navigated in order to put the preferred English in place in a neat and orderly fashion (Lee & Oxelson, 2006). When children from poverty are approached from this theoretical view, they seem to have little to bring to the educational setting. Their natural intellectual ability will serve them well, but the majority of their home experiences will be seen as unfortunate or even competing against the school agenda. One common view of children from poverty is simply that there has not been enough experience to benefit them in school. The home experiences of children in poverty might be seen as unfortunate and better to be rid of so they can be overwritten with experiences and learning of more value (DeVol, 2005).

How people believe that learning happens affects a myriad of decisions made within the school, whether consciously or unconsciously (Carnine, 2000). With all the attention the No Child Left Behind Act brought to children from poverty and the accompanying threat to schools not meeting adequate yearly progress, schools have been struggling to solve this puzzle of how to help these children perform well on standardized tests (Menken, 2006). Under this pressure, it seemed that more and more educators and schools abandoned alternative theories of learning and relied on a direct instruction model to teach children specific skills or bodies of knowledge (Menken, 2006). According to Kierstead (1985), this approach tends to use large group instruction and the teacher controls the content, pace and sequence of instruction. What the learner brings to the situation is viewed as less consequential. From this narrow base of testing

for discrete skills or specific knowledge, decisions are made about groupings, remediation, special supports, and whether to refer for special education. When deficiencies are identified, the structure is one of the first elements to be examined and modified (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Often this leads to looking for a different curriculum or additional specialization rather than alternative approaches such as examining the culture or climate of education.

In addition, the recent trend in education has been to rely on purchased curricula that often have scripted lessons designed to teach children content and skills. However, there are concerns that these materials developed by curriculum companies often target the middle range of students and do a poor job of addressing the needs of minority students (Hammond, 2016). Further, these curricula may have token components aimed at language learners or ethnically diverse learners, but rarely bring students from poverty into consideration.

Further, even with all of these concerns, and with data to show education has not been “reformed” by these mandates, conservatives continue to push for more stringent reforms such as merit pay for teachers tied to student performance, school vouchers and more charter schools (Peterson, Finn, & Kanstoroom, 2011). In this type of a political climate, it is critical to have research that explores the experiences of the disenfranchised populations and how today’s education is impacting them. While politicians, business representatives and even the general public debate how public education should be conducted to address the achievement gap between the middle class and those from

poverty, this participant researcher would argue that it is important that we hear the words of those in poverty first hand.

Alternative Approaches

Katz (1995) points out that at different points in the political pendulum poverty has been addressed in more direct ways. He suggests that President Johnson's War on Poverty was much more successful than it might at first appear from our historical vantage point. While of course poverty in the United States was not eradicated, Katz (1995) argues that significant gains were made with programs like Head Start, Community Action Programs and expanded welfare programs. He also argues that these changes happening at the same time as the Civil Rights Movement made significant changes for people of color. Katz (1995) points out that progress was made for families living in poverty, but the political wind changed and subsequent federal government administrations moved away from investing so deeply in the needs of those in poverty. Others also agree that one viable approach to supporting students in poverty is to deal directly with the issue of poverty in society.

Berube (1984) analyzes effective schooling in the United States and Cuba during the era of the Effective Schools Movement. After summarizing the history of education and the urban poor, he goes on to focus on the 1980's and efforts at that time to determine what allows some schools or programs to be successful with poor students in the face of statistically overwhelming failure rates. Berube then examines the schooling system in Cuba and the Literacy Campaign that was undertaken in that country shortly after the revolution that put Fidel Castro in power. He concludes his book with

recommendations that are based on lessons he learned from his Cuban experience. He suggests that the U.S. could learn from Cuba how to more effectively involve both student and parent organizations in the running of schools. Berube feels that student leaders and parental organizations have the potential to be partners with administrators to work to improve promotion and discipline. He also believes that the U.S. school system would best be served by significantly more control at the national level. He states that the current system under the control of individual states and communities serves to maintain the inequality of resources and a lack of consistent expectations for what schools should achieve. Berube thinks the national educational system of Cuba is more efficient and organized than ours. His final suggestion is that educators need to see that education and politics are inexorably linked. He sees it as inevitable that educational reform and social reform happen simultaneously and that as a society we should be working to eradicate poverty altogether.

Beyond the calls for educators to work with others to attack poverty on a societal level, some focus more on what can be done specifically in schools, including efforts by individual teachers to make a difference for their students. One of these approaches is to look at poverty as a culture and to consciously change the way we interact with students to create a more culturally responsive classroom environment. Robles de Melendez and Beck (2007) use the definition of culture as “the ways and manners people use to see, perceive, represent, interpret, and assign value and meaning to the reality they live or experience” (p.46). An individual’s cultural identity is the interplay of a number of different variables including ethnicity, language, socioeconomic level, gender and

educational background. Robles de Melendez and Beck (2007) also state, “Culture diversity denotes contrasts, variations, or divergences from the ways of the mainstream or majority culture” (p.7). Tatum (1997) also discusses the elements that make up one’s cultural identity. She points out that every individual has multiple identities some of which are dominant, or, systematically advantaged by society, while others are targeted, or systematically disadvantaged. These authors (Robles de Melendez & Beck, 2007; Tatum, 1997) assert that cultural identity is often narrowly defined and that those identities that are often “othered” are those that are different from the dominant norm. “In American, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure” (Lorde as cited in Tatum, 1997, p. 22). With this definition of culture, we find that coming from poverty can be seen as a culture, in the same way that one’s ethnicity, religion, or gender might be seen as a culture. Ruby Payne (1996) suggests that students from poverty are a distinct culture and professionals should find ways to encourage them to take an additive approach, learning the middle class culture while maintaining the home culture and relationships. Payne suggests that teachers could work with students in poverty the way other authors suggest working with ethnically and language diverse families. Because it is an underlying basis for this research and because there is such strong criticism of the concept of a “culture of poverty” in the literature, this idea will be discussed in greater detail.

Poverty as a Culture

According to Gorski (2008), the term “culture of poverty” came from a book written in 1961 by Oscar Lewis called *The Children of Sanchez*. Gorski (2008) claims that Lewis suggested that there was a universal culture of poverty that included approximately fifty attributes. He also briefly mentions the research that was sparked by this book. Gorski states, “These studies raise a variety of questions and come to a variety of conclusions about poverty. But on this they all agree: There is no such thing as a culture of poverty. (p.32)”

Other authors (Rogalsky, 2009; Pinto & Cresnik, 2014) also critique the claim that poverty might be a distinct culture. Rogalsky (2009) interprets Lewis’s theory as positing “that the poor remain so low because their lives and behaviors are determined by and adapted to poverty (p. 198).” She further states, “This theory claims that the poor share a common culture with low expectations and negative attitudes and behaviors.” Pinto and Cresnik (2014) say of Lewis’s theory, “Based on the study of small communities, this research was erroneously used to suggest a single, negative ‘culture of poverty’ (p.44).”

Osei-Kofi (2005) specifically critiques Payne’s work, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (1996), and claims that, “By dehumanizing families living in poverty through a simplistic lens of selective morality, family structure and circumstances in Payne’s work are equated with pathology and indirectly posited as the cause of poverty.” Osei-Kofi, like Pinto and Cresnik (2014) and Rogalsky (2009) makes strong arguments for understanding the structural causes of poverty and working to

change the current systems to work toward eliminating poverty. Like Berube's conclusions from his work in Cuba, these authors seem to focus on the structural level calling for educators to work to reform systems. All of these authors make strong points that there is not one, universal "culture of poverty."

In their work, Homan, Valentino, and Weed (2017) explored the reasons held about why people are poor. They start with the three categories that are commonly found in the research. "These three types of attributions are individualist, in which people locate the cause of poverty in the personal traits and behaviors of the poor; structuralist, in which people locate the cause outside the individual in the features of society; and fatalist, in which people locate the cause of poverty in non-human factors such as fate, bad luck, or God's will. Fatalist attributions are generally found to be uncommon reasons for poverty in the United States" (p. 1025). At the end of their study they conclude that in addition to individual and structural explanations, people in America use a third category that they call interactionist. "Interactionism captures the interpersonal, interactive, and contextual features of poverty. It includes family, peers, role models, gangs, and children" (p. 1036). They mention "culture of poverty" and say that they purposely avoid using the term, feeling it does not quite match what they are trying to capture in the term "interactionist". However, they acknowledge "this type of attribute may have entered public consciousness after the highly publicized 'culture of poverty' debates of the 1960s and 1970s" (1036). While this participant researcher acknowledges the concerns in the literature about thinking of poverty as a culture, it seems clear that there are important elements of being from poverty that are not captured by looking only

at the individual or the structure of society. This researcher would argue that using the familiar term “culture” provides a number of important advantages in the educational setting.

The work in multiculturalism or diversity has become well established as part of preparing teachers to work in today’s classroom. In current multicultural work, it is understood that no culture should be seen as universal. Melendez and Beck (2010) write about the importance of understanding culture for teachers of young children. They point out that many factors influence one’s cultural identity. They also make it clear that while people might share an element of culture, such as country of origin or religion, they will likely have differing values to various degrees. Culture is a complex concept that includes a variety of factors including ethnicity, language, gender, age, socioeconomic level and others. As each person builds their cultural identity over the course of their lifetime, each of these elements becomes more focused into a person’s understanding of who they are and who others are. “Diversity is found in every single individual because each person is a composite of cultures” (p.57).

Often cultural diversity is narrowly defined by looking only at ethnicity, skin color, or language (Melendez & Beck, 2010). Sometimes there is even a strong disconnect between how others perceive an individual and how that individual perceives himself. For instance, a person with dark skin born in Honduras and living in the United States may identify as Latino, although others may define them as black. However, current diversity work encourages us to guard against stereotypes and making judgments of others’ cultures (Melendez & Beck, 2010). Instead it encourages us to listen, observe

and ask to understand how to be respectful and understanding of another's cultural identity. Narrowing the definition of culture to external, observable traits may encourage us to oversimplify another's culture and cloud our ability to be sensitive and thoughtful to the needs of all of our students, including those from poverty.

Further, while there is significant criticism of both Lewis's and Payne's work, many of those criticisms also fall into the current understanding of diversity work. According to Melendez and Beck (2010), "A stereotype is an oversimplified, generalized image describing all individuals in a group as having the same characteristics in appearance, behaviors, and beliefs" (p, 70). They go on to say that while stereotypes may have some truth in them, those truths are often exaggerated, offensive and dehumanizing. Melendez and Beck (2010) encourage teachers to first examine their own cultures so that they may be able to identify their own beliefs, values and practices. They also encourage teachers to honestly examine their stereotypes of different cultures. If we look at the works of Rogalsky (2009), Osei-Kofi (2005), Pinto and Cresnik (2014), and Gorski (2015) many of their critiques could be categorized as concerns about Payne not being careful with the examples she uses in her books. As she creates sample families to discuss, possibly without basing each example on a real life family from her experience, she may inadvertently be exposing some of her own biases and stereotypes. Any of us who might try to generalize our understandings through examples would have to be equally cautious. Gorski's list of myths about people from poverty could just as easily be labeled stereotypes. By employing the vocabulary of multiculturalism, we again see the ties to cultural diversity work in our conversations about poverty.

Bolman and Deal (2003, p.240) state that, “we live in cultures the same way that fish live in water.” Cultures create a sense of belonging and anytime it is possible for someone to belong it is possible for others to not belong, creating insiders and outsiders. Belonging tends to happen on such an unconscious level, that it can be difficult for teachers and students alike to figure out where disconnects might be (Brown, 2007). Perceived meaning can play a more important role than actual events. Events can also have multiple meanings because they are prone to multiple interpretations (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Depending on your culture, any element can take on its own meaning that may not have been anticipated by others. This idea of belonging and culture is so pervasive that it underlies much of what we do (Melendez & Beck, 2010). As an example, a study of Spanish speaking kindergartners shows that when teachers have certain characteristics like the willingness to use even some of the students’ native language, high expectations for students, and an understanding that English is not a prerequisite to learning kindergarten concepts, student performance increases (Jensen, 2006). These are not issues of better instruction or quality curricula, but they are cultural issues that allow students to have greater success when addressed.

If we take the analogy of fish in water a step further by asking what happens when saltwater fish try to live in a fresh water tank, we begin to see how school culture can be challenging for those students who do not come from the majority culture. The structural configuration of an elementary school according to Mintzberg (1979) is the professional bureaucracy. This structure is characterized by a large operating core with a small strategic apex. This structural configuration relies on professional training and

indoctrination for control of the operating core, which are in this instance, the teachers. This allows for a great amount of independence for teachers in the organization. It also means that external changes are slow and may be unlikely to have lasting impact. While change within this structural configuration tends to be slow, the demographics and needs of the students can change relatively quickly.

While district level decision makers, or the strategic apex, tend to be from middle class and can bring their own lack of cultural responsiveness, it is important to note that making changes at this level may not be enough to affect a systemic change. This structural configuration can mean that the classroom experience can be significantly impacted by teachers' personal belief systems (Carnine, 2000). This can be advantageous or detrimental when considering the needs of non-majority students. Even if district level policies and decisions were to support cultural responsiveness, once a teacher closes the door, the teacher creates the environment and decides how to implement curriculum. For children who come from backgrounds or cultures that are different than their teachers, this can lead to problems (Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 2002; Weininger & Lareau, 2003). In the best of situations, a teacher might have had training on the needs of language learners or children of minority cultures. They may have developed skills to be able to make instruction comprehensible or to help students feel fully included. Other teachers may feel overwhelmed by the needs of these students or believe that all children are the same and there is no need to modify the teaching strategies they have used for years. In the worst-case scenario, teachers, like all people, may have prejudices. Even if they are appropriate on the surface, their personal political beliefs or beliefs about people of other

cultures can impact their decisions and the way they interact with their students and their families (Weininger & Lareau, 2003). Bolman and Deal (2003) claim that when there is a poor fit between the organization and the individuals in an organization, one or both suffer. In the instance of children from poverty or ESL students, both the individuals and the organization suffer. Statistical data consistently shows that these populations struggle to find success in schools (Krashen & Brown, 2005; Carpenter, Ramirez & Severn, 2006).

Since most teachers tend to come from the middle class culture (Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 2002; Bowman, 1992), it may be difficult for them to have an understanding of the issues children from other cultures or from poverty, face in their daily lives. However, training and an awareness of cultural diversity issues can allow individual teachers to be more prepared to meet the needs of students from a range of cultures (Melendez & Beck, 2010). A possible advantage to the structural configuration of a school system is that affecting changes in an individual teacher or even one member of the operating core can change the experience for the students in that classroom. Brown (2007) suggests that an understanding of students' cultures and experiences is a critical element in their success.

One goal of the school system is to educate students in academic areas (Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 2002). This is the overt curriculum. A case could be made that there exists a hidden curriculum in the school system to educate all students to the standards and values of the white, middle class culture (Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 2002; Brown, 2007). That means that those students who already come from this culture have an

advantage (Krashen & Brown, 2005). While they are able to concentrate on learning to read, write and do mathematics, students from other cultures, including language learners and children from poverty, have to learn not only those content areas, but also the rules and customs of another culture (Brown, 2007). More importantly, since these are not part of the overt curriculum, students may struggle to decipher their new environment. Brown (2007), drawing on the work of others, suggests culturally responsive teachers should explicitly teach the hidden curriculum.

At least two of the authors reviewed (Delpit, 1995; Payne, 1996) call for an additive approach to teaching children of non-majority cultures. Delpit advocates teaching Standard English and other majority culture approaches to black children, not by taking from them who they are, but by adding more options to their repertoire. Payne (1996) makes a very similar argument for children of poverty. Each sees the need to honor children's home cultures as well as give them the tools to be able to compete and participate in the majority culture as they so choose. Payne (1996) calls this method an additive approach. In practice, the additive approach allows children to become bi-cultural in the same way that children having two languages would be bilingual. The opposite of this approach is called subtractive and relates to those situations where children are forced to abandon either their language or culture to be successful in the dominant culture.

One could argue that some of the approaches that have been found to be successful with children from poverty, programs such as Head Start or the Abecedarian Project (Campbell & Pungello, 2000), may have found success in some part by not only

ameliorating the effects of poverty, but by also exposing children to people and programs that closely reflect the school culture at an early age. The children who have gone through these programs come to school not only more academically ready, but also more culturally ready. Similarly, some of the aspects of the research on resiliency which emphasizes caring relationships (Bernard, 2004) could also be seen as examples of children at risk being mentored by others from the majority culture. Beegle (2007) specifically addresses how important this is for students from poverty, detailing how people who know the systems may help others navigate it successfully. In cultural diversity work this is referred to as having a cultural broker (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983).

While there are some pitfalls to seeing poverty as a culture, as pointed out by a number of works reviewed (Gorski, 2008; Pinto & Cresnik, 2014; Osei-Kofi, 2005; Rogalsky, 2009), there are also some distinct advantages. First, by putting poverty in the category of a culture, teachers could apply all the diversity work they are exposed to as also applying to students who may look like the majority culture but who may not, in reality, be from the majority culture. It would encourage them to be cautious of making judgments, assumptions and stereotypes. It may help them to examine all their instruction through the eyes of another, someone who may not be experiencing the world as the norm assumed by the curriculum. If teachers go further and share with their students that “school cultures” and “home cultures” are not always the same and that both can be learned and honored without having to subjugate one to the other, then students may have a better chance of becoming powerful advocates for themselves.

Finally, it is important to note that the work of people like Ruby Payne speaks to the heart of those who work with children. While those who critique her work are concerned about her popularity, it says something that in her teacher workshops “one audience member after another told her their own stories about class and education and, usually, how her books had helped them understand their students and themselves. A few of the teachers hugged Payne. One woman kissed her hand. Another burst into tears” (Tough, 2007, p. 54). Away from academia and intellectual discourses, teachers in the trenches every day faced with images of students they care about deeply must have practical strategies for how to reach the students from poverty who are not finding success in our schools. While calls to change school systems at the structural level are important, they are no more valuable than helping the individual student who sits before a teacher today to find success in the existing, less than perfect public school system. In the same vein, using concepts and language that is already familiar to educators such as “culture” may allow them easier access to a deeper understanding of the issues of students from poverty than cloaking those issues as a completely different area of study.

Conscientization

When we contemplate how long students from poverty have struggled in schools and the myriad of curricular approaches that have been tried, it seems unlikely that a new curriculum or teaching strategy will be the key to changing the achievement gap for students from poverty. Instead we can look to all that we know about cultural disconnects

and how this affects both student performance and teacher expectations. US schools tend to reflect the white, middle class value system (Tozer, Violas, and Senese, 2002). Schools in our society also have a tendency to see a discrepancy of educational performance as being a problem with the child or their family rather than reflecting on how the educational system might be perpetuating inequities (Smith, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988). Freire's (1970) work offers educators the opportunity to walk beside those who have historically been disenfranchised and participate in a dialogue that may move them toward an awareness of their position in society. It may then be possible for someone to make conscious decisions about their own life, rather than being the unwitting victim of circumstance, and choose whether or not to follow the statistical path of their individual situation. Freire refers to this process as "conscientization" which means, according to Boston, "an awakening of the conscience, a shift in mentality involving an accurate, realistic assessment of one's locus in nature and society, a capacity to analyze the causes and consequences of that, the ability to compare it with other possibilities, and finally a disposition to act in order to change the received situation" (as cited in Burns, nd). Freire himself says of conscientization, "It is the way of reading how society works. It is the way to understand better the problems of interest, the question of power. How to get power, what it means not to have power" (as cited in Torres, 2009, p.132). For the purposes of this paper and research, conscientization is defined as a type of self-awareness that specifically focuses on the individual's social and cultural position in their world.

Numerous authors have done extensive writing on the impact of culture on people in a society. Paulo Freire (1970) speaks of the oppressor and the oppressed. While this dichotomy could be referring to differences of race, SES or other factors, the point is that he addresses the situation of those in power and those without power. He believes that those in power cannot bring about true transformation without the informed participation of the oppressed. He also speaks to the tendency for those who are oppressed to try to emulate those in power rather than find value and strength within themselves.

Lisa Delpit (1988) in her article *The Silenced Dialogue: The Pedagogy of Educating Other People's Children*, speaks of the cultural disconnect that exists for people of color in the public school system. She talks about the frustration of black educators trying to be heard on the issue of educating black children. While Delpit speaks about black children, the same argument could be made for children of other racial backgrounds and children from poverty. Here again there is a tendency for the majority culture to decide what is best for those of the minority culture without taking their concerns into account (“Getting to Why”, 2005).

Looking more specifically at the language learner population, Cummins (1986) summarizes research done on minority language learners throughout the world. He demonstrates a disturbing trend for the academic performance of minority students to mirror the standing their race holds in the majority culture. For instance, Finnish students experience academic failure in Sweden and success in Australia. The difference appears to be the status the group holds within the country. When a group is held in high regard they find academic success. When the group is of low status they find less success in

school. The theory put forth by Cummins is either a lack of cultural identity or a promotion of a negative cultural identity by the dominant group. Although these observations were made about language learners, the dynamic of being held in low regard in a society and having this low regard have an impact on school performance may be equally applicable to children from poverty (Weininger & Lareau, 2003). It is apparent that issues of cultural identity must be considered to help students not of the majority culture to achieve academic success.

Considering these perspectives, it is important to reflect then on what may have the potential to impact the educational experience of struggling students from poverty. This participant researcher would argue that it is critical to look at relationships and conscientization, and the work of Paulo Freire. It isn't that quality instructional practices or well-designed curricula have no impact. However, even with quality teachers and quality instructional materials, public schools are still not meeting the needs of our students from poverty year after year. If we were to look historically at all the educational movements and the range of approaches used to try and impact the students from poverty, we would see a myriad of curricula, theories, and strategies have been tried. And yet, the U.S. success rate continues to be dismal if measured by dropout and incarceration rates (House, 2010). This participant researcher believes a better approach is one that emphasizes a combination of relationship, conscientization and explicit training about how to be successful in school. (Incidentally, a very similar approach that is suggested in the Gottlieb and Ramsey volume from 1967.)

Other researchers have examined the process of conscientization on other populations. Martin (2008) explored the process with college level students from working class families. He found that while he could not necessarily keep the students from being educationally alienated, he could still have an impact raising the conscientization of his students by using critical pedagogy strategies.

Sernak (2006) discusses the need for school reform to bring about conscientization for students if it is to have a true impact for children from poverty or minority children. She details how all too often school reforms become focused on the academic quality, economic goals and traditional values, rather than bringing about a transformation that has the potential for students to realize their place in society and make conscious decisions about who they choose to be and how they choose to engage in the world. Sernak (2006) details how schools and school reform tend to “continue to maintain and reproduce social and class hierarchies.”

With these examples in mind, it seems reasonable that teachers at even the elementary level need to be mindful of the underlying messages we are sending children about school, success, society, class and their place in the world. There is significant indoctrination that happens in the early years of school, teaching children how to function in a classroom and school environment. At what age should children be encouraged to examine this process and think critically about what it means for their lives and future? It seems apparent that for many, high school is too late. By that time, students have already developed a firm sense of who they are in the school structure, whether they are the “jock”, the “brain”, the “popular kid”, the “stoner” or “loser.” These roles and the

accompanying school performance is such a part of our culture, movies and novels are based on these themes. It seems likely that to interfere with the statistical trajectory intervention needs to come before high school. This participant researcher suggests that children at the third through fifth grade may be capable of examining these issues and participating in critical dialogues.

Critical Pedagogy

While Freire's work has been instrumental in this research, some who have used his work and built upon it go too far for the purposes of this study. For example, Cole (2005) proposes that what is needed is a complete change in the ways schools are structured and the underpinning philosophy. He sees a need for a Marxian philosophy to be substituted for a capitalist approach. In this way, he believes, it will be possible to change schools from a place to train labor for the status quo capitalist society where only those who are the economic elite can truly prosper into a society where the current inequalities can be addressed. While it may well be that a philosophical overhaul of the public school system is needed, this is a long, slow, tedious process that will likely be undermined by the professional bureaucracy organizational system outlined by Mintzberg (1979). In a system such as this, the organizational autonomy of each individual teacher makes it very difficult to make lasting changes to how classrooms are run. Further, the focus of this study will be in understanding the experiences of current students rather than the long-term outcome for future generations. So while heading in a social justice direction, this study aims to have a better understanding of the school experience of

students from poverty and the practices of the individual teacher that show promise to impact individual students and their school.

Chapter Three

Methods

As we move into the methods section, it may be helpful to revisit the research questions that drove this research.

- What can be learned when students from poverty who are not finding success in school engage in reflection about the school experience?
- What happens in the intersection of school, home and student when the home culture does not match the school culture?

Research Design

This study used a critical ethnography design. According to Creswell (2005), the critical ethnographer studies social issues of power, empowerment, inequality, inequity, dominance, repression, hegemony, and victimization. Researchers conduct critical ethnographies so that their studies do not further marginalize the individuals being studied. Thus, the inquirers collaborate, actively participate, use care in entering and leaving a site, and reciprocate by giving back to study participants. The critical ethnographer is self-conscious about his or her interpretation, recognizing that interpretations reflect our own history and culture. Interpretations can only be tentative and questioning and subject to how readers and participants will view them. Critical researchers position themselves in the text to be reflexive and self-aware of their role, and to be upfront in the written research report. This means identifying biases and values, acknowledging views, and distinguishing among textual representations by the author,

the participants, and the reader. No longer is the ethnographer an “objective” observer as in the realist approach. This non-neutral position for the critical researcher also means that he or she will be an advocate for change to help transform our society so that people are less oppressed and marginalized. In the end, the critical ethnographic report will be a “messy, multilevel, multimethod” approach to inquiry, full of contradictions, imponderable and tensions (Denzin, 1997, as cited in Creswell, 2005, p. 441).

Freire’s (1970) concept of conscientization was the focal point of this research design. It was the attempt to raise the consciousness of students and encourage them to take control of their own education that was the underlying framework for this research study. Torres (2009) describes an educational process where the teacher and the student are sharing information and learning together. He calls this a “cultural circle” where the “emphasis is placed on *sharing* and *reflecting critically* upon the learner’s experience and knowledge” (p. 147). It seems comparable to other studies that have been done with other populations (Burns, nd; Martin, 2008), but focused on a different demographic group. The Freirean approach used with adults involves problem posing and opening dialogue as summarized by Frankenstein (1992). “...Freirean problem posing is intended to involve the students in dialogue and co-investigation with the teachers” (p. 246). “They listen to students to discover themes which teachers then organize and present as problems challenging students’ previous perceptions” (p. 246). It was this researcher’s hope that this approach could be adapted to be used with children for the purposes of this study.

Within a selected study group, participants explored how well they do in school and possible differences between their lives and the lives of the middle class students. Students were encouraged to examine their home lives and their lives at school. There was discussion about how they felt about school, who their friends were and what life was like at home as it relates to school support. Students examined times they felt on the outside, what caused it to happen and what would have made them feel on the inside again. The group was encouraged to dissect the school culture and their place in it. The goal was to make them conscious actors when it came to their school experience.

This work took place in a weekly study group that met ten times. The participant researcher planned weekly activities designed to elicit conversation around being from poverty and how it may affect students in school. Included in the weekly lesson plans were guest speakers both in person and in video format, video clips from movies, discussion topics and a visit to a local college. The study group weekly topics are included in Appendix I and are discussed in Chapter Four.

Site and participants.

The elementary school where the study took place, and where the participant researcher works, is set in a suburb of a major city in the Pacific Northwest and serves students K-5. There are approximately 550 students of which approximately 80% are Anglo, 16% are Latino and the remaining 4% are a mix of other ethnicities. The school has just under the 25 percent of students receiving free and reduced lunch that is required to be a Title One school.

Study participants were selected on four criteria: attending grades three through five, being from poverty, not identified as special education, and struggling in school. To establish poverty status children needed to be on free or reduced lunch. Struggling in school was established by either state testing results or teacher report when state tests were not available. Although there may have been merit in including students who are both from poverty and academically successful, because this study focuses on the disconnect that happens between home and school, academically successful students were not included. For whatever reason, those students from poverty who are also successful in school have found a path that allows them to adapt to the school culture and this is not the current focus.

Following district policy and with approval from the human subjects review board, a letter telling about the study was sent to parents of all third through fifth graders in the school to begin the participant selection process. It was detailed in the letter that the study was focusing on students from poverty who qualified for free and reduced lunch status. A list of the lesson plan activities for the study group was included so parents could see the type of activities their student would engage in. Parents were asked to sign and return the bottom of the letter if they would like to have their child considered for the study. A copy of this letter is found in Appendix H. From the 278 letters sent out, the participant researcher received twelve responses.

These twelve responses were compared to the study criteria of struggling academically and not identified as special education. Of those twelve, only four students met the first three study criteria and were sent on to the district office to be compared to

the free and reduced lunch information. One of the other eight was a student who had a current IEP (Individual Education Plan, indicating they qualified for special education.) Four others were disqualified for the study because state testing showed them to be passing state tests. For the third graders there was no state test data available due to their age so teachers were approached to see if the students were a concern academically. When teachers did not express any concern about the student's academic performance, three more participants were excluded. With only four potential study participants and the free and reduced lunch criteria still to be checked, the researcher went back to the protocol outlined in the human subjects review paperwork to generate additional potential participants.

The next step was to go to all of the classroom teachers grade three through five. Each was shown their current class list and asked to highlight any students they felt would meet the study criteria of struggling student, not identified as special education, and likely low income. This activity generated a list of fifty-one additional potential candidates for the study bringing the total of possible participants to sixty-three. Since a mass letter had already been sent and the response had been minimal, the participant researcher knew families would have to be contacted directly. She resolved to contact the family of each student on the list until they had either agreed to be considered for the study or had in some way taken their student off the list of potential candidates. The selection process was much more involved than originally anticipated and became a finding of the study. This process will be described in greater detail in chapter four.

At the end of the selection process, a group of thirteen students was formed. There were three fifth graders, six fourth graders and four third graders. The group had nine girls and four boys. It was hoped that the participants would reflect the ethnic makeup of the school which is about sixteen percent Latino. However, possibly due the participant researcher's role as an ELL (English Language Learner) teacher, about one third, or four of thirteen, of the participants were Latino. Four students were English language learners, which again was somewhat higher than the percentage of language learners reflected in the school. All of the language learner students were at high levels of English language proficiency. Selected students demonstrated some challenges in the school setting, but did not have a documented disability. Parent permission was obtained as well as a willingness to participate in the study from the participants. Classroom teachers of selected students also signed permission to participate in the study.

My role as participant researcher.

I am a long-term teacher in this elementary school. I taught kindergarten in the building for fifteen years. Although no former kindergarten students of mine became study participants, it was possible that those students who were in fourth and fifth grade could have known me as a kindergarten teacher. Four of the thirteen were current or former ESL students. Even for students who were not in my class in the past, my longevity and reputation in the building may have made relationship-building easier. The fact that I changed from being a kindergarten teacher to the ESL teacher in the building may account for the high percentage of ESL students in the study. It may also be that

while the ESL population is around 16% in our building, the percentage could be significantly higher within the subpopulation of free and reduced lunch, so therefore may not be an overrepresentation within the subpopulation of those from poverty. I saw no indication that my role as the ESL teacher caused confusion or misgivings for those students who were not ESL, but I did wonder if it gave me extra credibility for the families who were predominantly Spanish speakers. Even with letters of explanation and repeated contact, it was hard to know if some families truly understood the purpose of the study and my role as participant researcher. Instead, what seemed to come across was my deep interest in their student and their family, causing a long-term bond to develop with the parents of a number of the study participants.

A significant challenge that I faced in my role as participant researcher was that of the gap between being an adult and being a child. The role of an adult is likely to always have an influence on a group of children. Furthering this gap was the fact that I was a recognized teacher in their school building. Although I tried to maintain the delicate balance of enough authority to ensure the safety and behavior standard of the students while encouraging a deeper and more honest level of personal interaction than is often found between student and teacher, I don't know that I fully achieved this goal. I was unable, no matter how much rapport I established, to be seen as a true member of the group since they are eight to eleven year old children. Thoughts, language, and interactions that might arise between these children on a playground, for instance, were tempered in my presence. In addition and of more significance, while most students seemed quite comfortable discussing issues related to the school and friendships, they

were much more reticent to discuss elements of their home lives. My role as a teacher in their building may have made it difficult for them to be as forthcoming as they might have been with an outside researcher. However, it is difficult to know whether any adult researcher would have been able to get more information with the same questions and parameters.

Those same characteristics that may have distanced me from the student study participants likely served me well in my participant researcher role with the teachers and parents. My long-term relationship with the teachers in the building allowed me access to an insider view and, I believe, honest and open conversations about their impressions of students and their families. Similarly, with parents I was not only given the respect and consideration of being a teacher at their child's school, I seemed to be given an even higher level of trust because I was taking a personal interest in their child and family.

Setting.

During this study, the study group met as an after school group and participated in a variety of activities designed to explore the relationship between school and being from poverty. This included watching movies about people raised in poverty, discussing school rules and routines, examining home environments, taking a fieldtrip to the local college, having guest speakers, and an overall atmosphere of dialogue and critical analysis. Meetings were held for 50 minutes one day a week for ten weeks in my ESL classroom. We had access to computers, supplies and a document camera. Because the group met within their own school, there were both benefits and some potential drawbacks. Benefits included a quick and easy transition from the end of their school day

to the study meetings. Many after school classes and activities are held in the building so this after school procedure is well established for both students and parents. A potential drawback, although I saw no evidence for concern, is that the confidential nature of study participation may have been somewhat compromised by the initial letter that went to all third through fifth graders about my study when students later could have been witnessed coming to my room for the study group meetings.

The goal was to encourage conscientization, possibly leading to a roadmap, similar to the one spoken of by Smith (2009), not focused primarily on college entrance, but first focused on navigating the K-12 school system, leaving the possibility open of college attendance in the future. Just as Smith points out that there are paths that lead to high school completion and college entrance, there are paths that lead to putting a student in the best position for high school completion, scholarships, grants, and college attendance. Smith's work focused on getting into college, but for many students the roadmaps that lead to high school completion, especially as an honors student, are just as obscure. Based on this goal, these meetings were a combination of giving students information about the issue of poverty and eliciting conversation around those issues.

Data collection.

Ethnographies are a type of qualitative research that focuses on the culture of a group (Creswell, 2005). In this type of research the focus is on understanding the behaviors and beliefs of the group being studied. Unlike other research designs, ethnographies draw more on the everyday experiences of both the study group and the

participant researcher. Specifically, in a critical ethnography, study participants are encouraged to be an active part of collecting the data.

Triangulation, a critical element to any research project (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010), was provided by multiple interviews, surveys, student records, recordings of study group meetings and participant researcher field notes. By examining the targeted students from both an internal and an external view, the participant researcher hoped to gain a balanced picture of their school experience and the major elements that influence it.

Using an example adapted from LeCompte and Schensul (2010) Table 1 provides a table of the data collection matrix planning outline (p. 188) that gives specific details about the type of data that might have been collected, how it related to the research questions and how it might have been analyzed. For the purposes of this study the questions outlined in Table 1 became the framework for the data analysis. Those questions are: What do I want to know?, Why do I need to know this?, What kind of data should I use to answer my research question?, Where or from whom would I obtain these data?, and How would I analyze this data?

Over the course of the study and into the data analysis phase, this original planning matrix changed into a summary sheet of twenty-four elements (Appendix J). The collected data was reviewed looking for evidence that related to these elements. At times one element might show up from a variety of data sources while other elements may not have had any evidence from any of the data sources. Following the planning

matrix chart below (Table 1), the specific data collection methods the participant researcher used will be described.

Table 1
Planning Matrix Chart

Research Question:	Conceptual Rationale	Data Type	Data Source	Possible Analysis
What do I want to know?	Why do I need to know this?	What kind of data did I use to answer my research question?	Where or from whom, did I obtain these data?	How did I analyze this data?
Do students from poverty perceive themselves as different from other students?	I wanted to know if they already had awareness of a disconnect.	Personal statements made in conversation during study group sessions or during interviews	Videotapes of study group meetings Researcher field notes Personal interviews	Limited transcription and looking for evidence of self-concept
How do students from poverty feel about school?	I wanted to see if there are attitudes/beliefs that may impact school performance. And, if so, where these beliefs seemed to come from.	Personal statements made in conversation or interviews.	Videotapes of study group meetings Researcher field notes Survey/ interview results	Transcription and looking for evidence of attitude toward school.

<p>How do students from poverty feel about their teachers?</p>	<p>I wanted to see what role the teacher/student relationship seemed to be playing in the school performance</p>	<p>Personal statements made in conversation or interviews.</p>	<p>Videotapes of study group meetings Researcher field notes Survey/ interview results</p>	<p>Transcription and looking for evidence of the student's perception of their teachers</p>
<p>Do students from poverty feel they can affect a change in their school performance?</p>	<p>I wanted to see if they perceived having power over their school performance and whether they were taking on all the responsibility of that poor performance. (Did they think it was "all their fault"?)</p>	<p>Personal statements made either in conversation or in interviews. May be able to get to it in a survey.</p>	<p>Videotapes of study group meetings Researcher field notes Survey results</p>	<p>Transcription and looking for evidence of a sense of control over their performance in school.</p>
<p>Do students from poverty know what other students do/have that make them successful in school?</p>	<p>I wanted to know if students could identify what it takes to be successful in school and where barriers may lie for them.</p>	<p>Student comments</p>	<p>Personal interviews Videotapes of study group meetings Researcher field notes</p>	<p>Transcription and looking for evidence of an awareness of the differences in social class and how it might affect school performance</p>

<p>How do teachers perceive students from the study group?</p>	<p>I wanted to examine how teachers were situated in their beliefs about the targeted students.</p>	<p>Teacher comments</p>	<p>Personal interviews Report card comments and grades Comments made in school meetings and interactions in the school building (researcher field notes) Survey results</p>	<p>Transcription and looking for evidence of a the teachers' perception of the study participants Quantification of grades</p>
<p>How do teachers perceive the families of the students from the study group?</p>	<p>I wanted to know how attitudes about the families may be impacting student performance or teacher support.</p>	<p>Teacher comments Conference attendance Teacher to parent contact</p>	<p>Survey results Report card comments Conversations with teachers Personal interviews</p>	<p>Transcription and looking for evidence of a the teachers' perception of the families of the study participants Evidence of conference attendance Number of contacts made and nature of contacts</p>

Do state/standardized tests shed any light on school performance?	I wanted to know if there were years where test results drop or raise. I wanted to know if tests show weaknesses or strengths that are not perceived by teachers or students.	Test results	Student files/ Oaks online	Looking for patterns and discrepancies or anomalies
What are the families' beliefs about their child's school experience?	I wanted to know what role the parents' attitudes toward school may play in the student's performance.	Parent comments	Personal interviews Survey results	Transcription and looking for evidence of a the parents' attitude toward the overall school experience
How do parents feel about their child's teacher/s?	I wanted to understand the teacher/parent relationship from the parents' side.	Parent comments	Personal interviews Survey results	Transcription and looking for evidence of the parents' attitude toward the student's teachers
What were the parents' school experiences like?	I wanted to know if the parents past school experience was playing a role either by affecting attitudes or affecting confidence to support their child academically	Parent comments	Personal interviews	Transcription and looking for evidence of the parents' attitude toward their own schooling

What kind of school support is available at home?	I wanted to know how the logistics of home life are impacting, for positive or negative, school performance.	Parent comments Student comments	Personal interviews Survey results (both parent and student)	Summary of possible support: time, supplies, organization, adult interaction/support
How do students and parents feel about the study group experience?	I wanted to know if there are signs of conscientization for students.	Student comments Parent comments	End of study survey End of study survey	Transcription and looking for evidence of the students' and parents' attitude toward the study experience

Researcher field notes.

In this study, the researcher field notes were a primary source of information. This participant researcher kept a field journal that recorded her impressions, thoughts and experiences throughout the course of the study. As stated by LeCompte and Schensul (2010), “The basic tools of ethnography use the researcher’s eyes and ears as the primary mode for data collection” (p. 2). Ethnographers are not limited to data collection during specific times as is true in an experimental study, but any experience, casual conversation or observation may be drawn upon to make meaning of the situation being studied while the ethnographer is in the field.

Field notes were recorded after formal meetings of the study group. Impressions of the study participants, interpretations of comments by study participants, further questions that arise for exploration or study, and the participant researcher’s own intellectual and emotional responses to the session were documented. In addition, field notes were made as the field researcher happened upon other conversations or insights. This participant researcher was an ongoing member of the environment in which the study took place, giving her access to casual conversation with students, teachers and parents. In addition, as part of the participant researcher’s job tasks, she sat in on meetings and conferences where study participants or similar students, could be the focus. Other impressions or understandings were included from these daily activities during the course of the study and became a part of the researcher’s field notes.

Video recordings.

At each meeting of the study group, video recordings were made. While many researchers might have used this data collection method by transcribing the recordings verbatim, for the purposes of this study, they were used more as backup data to enhance the participant researcher's field notes. LeCompte and Schensul (2010) suggest, "another reason for using multiple sources of data is to make sure that if one dataset or source proves to be unreliable or incomplete, others will provide the information needed to answer each research question posed" (p.180). Having recordings allowed the participant researcher to go back and examine particular comments that helped to clarify what a participant said or their intended meaning. In this way, the recordings were used to verify and enhance the field notes of the participant researcher, but they were used more for accuracy than a primary source of data.

Archival or cultural artifacts.

Study participants' report cards and other school records were examined. Although not a primary source of data, these archival documents shed light on the history of the students' struggles in school and in many cases led to greater understanding. Report cards in particular were examined in more detail. In addition to grades, report cards had teacher comments that were mined for shedding light on research questions. The participant researcher analyzed report card comments, looking for insight into how the study participant was viewed within the school culture.

State or other testing was examined as secondary sources of information. Specific scores were not the focus, but the participant researcher looked more for the history of

school challenges, when they began, what interventions were put in place, and the overall school response. While these data may be seen as archival, this researcher also perceived these documents as an example of cultural artifacts from the school culture which, along with the home culture, was one of the two major components of the study.

Written responses from study participants.

Originally, it was planned that students would complete written responses at the end of each study group session. However, once groups started it became apparent that the study group could not cover everything in the lesson plans. In addition, students did not seem agreeable to completing written responses. This may have been because they are not confident writers or because they just didn't want to do a task that seemed too much like academic work. Therefore, written responses were not part of the collected data. In addition, the homework routine paper that students were asked to take home was completed by only one student.

Surveys.

The participant researcher conducted two sets of surveys during the course of this study. The first set of surveys were an attempt to document the concerns, issues and attitudes of the student's struggle in school from the viewpoint of the student (Appendix A), the parents (Appendix B) and the teacher (Appendix C). The second set of surveys was given to students (Appendix D), parents (Appendix E) and teachers (Appendix F) at the end of the study to allow them to reflect on their experience in the study and to share any final thoughts. All of the student surveys and eleven of the parent end of the study

surveys were completed interview style. One parent completed the survey in written form and one parent did not complete the end of the study survey because she had moved and was unable to be contacted. This decision was made to allow for a richer response than was received in the initial surveys. When filling out the surveys as a written document, answers tended to lack detail. By allowing study participants to answer verbally, they gave more detailed responses. Teachers completed the end of the study survey in written form. Surveys were analyzed for evidence that correlated to the elements outlined in Appendix J.

Interviews.

In addition to the surveys at the beginning and the end of the study, the participant researcher met with each participant (student, teacher and parent) during the course of the study face to face. These interviews focused on the issues of poverty and how they may be affecting the schooling experience of the study participants. In addition, these interviews served to both support and challenge the initial theories of the participant researcher. The literature that had been examined as the basis of this study as well as her own personal and professional experience had led this participant researcher to believe that poverty is a distinct culture that can impact a student's school experience. Could this be exposed in interviews with the study participants? Do these study participants see an impact of poverty on their lives? What level of awareness do they have? Some guiding questions are included in Appendix G, but additional questions or topics may have arisen during the course of the interviews. With participant permission, interviews were recorded but only as a way to accurately check what was shared and to back up notes of

the interview. Interviews were not transcribed word for word although some specific quotes were transcribed and used.

Data analysis.

Data analysis in ethnography includes a description, data analysis for themes and the participant researcher's interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2005). In a critical ethnography additional focus is given to the advocacy for the group being studied. The focus is on giving voice to a group that may be disenfranchised. For the purposes of this study, the emphasis has been on representing as accurately as possible the experience of the students from poverty with some consideration given to input from both their families and their teachers.

In an ethnographic study, data analysis begins immediately with the study and continues throughout the study timeframe and beyond. This may involve both the generation of themes and the interpretation of the data collected. Both themes and interpretations are likely to be in a tentative form at the beginning of the study. The process is recursive and themes, data collection procedures and interpretations are likely to evolve over time (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). Although, as stated, impressions and interpretations were made throughout the study, the bulk of the interpretation came once a majority of the data had been collected and an overall view of the situation began to emerge (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). The participant researcher used a summary sheet with guiding questions to create a profile for each student, compiling data from all data sources (See Appendix J). Using the same form found in Appendix J, the set of

thirteen summary sheets became an overall summary sheet to further refine results. From those profiles and the participant research journal, common themes and insights were formed. The following elements guided the data analysis phase.

Themes.

The initial themes anticipated by this participant researcher were relationships, home support, school support, academic performance, effort, attitudes, beliefs about schooling, perceptions of others, indications of realistic views of the other system, examples of alienation or “othering”, and emerging signs of conscientization. The focus of this study was the intersection between home and school as it applies to the student’s school performance and the possibility of conscientization, with an initial theory that a disconnect exists between the school culture and the home culture.

Table 2 details the anticipated themes listed above and the possible underlying factors that may have shed light on each.

Table 2
Potential Themes with Related Factors

Relationships	Home Support	School Support	Academic Performance	Effort
Parent to child +/- Parent to school +/- Child to school +/- Teacher to child +/- Teacher to parent +/-	Attends conferences Volunteers in school Homework routines Expectations of school success Problem solving of school related issues School attendance	Teacher interventions Counseling involvement Academic interventions Big brother/sister Mentor Brought to student services team Attendance intervention	School history Grades Teacher perception Child perception Parent perception Test Scores	Of child as perceived by child, parent and teacher Of parent as perceived by child, parent and Teacher Of teacher as perceived by child, parent and teacher

Attitudes	Beliefs about Schooling	Perception of Others	Realistic Views	Othering	Conscientization
Toward schooling	Important	Parent of child	Realistic	Assumptions of middle class Values	Change in attitudes
Toward teacher	Unimportant	Parent of school	Unrealistic	Negative comments	Change in self Concept
Toward family	Level needed for success	Parent of teacher	(May use perception column to look for similarities and differences in perceptions)	Lack of understanding of school setting	Increased awareness of other setting
Toward student	Effort needed for success	Parent of self			Increased sense of power/control
Toward Accommodations	Homework requirements	Child of school			Improved plan for Future
Toward poverty		Child of teacher			Improved understanding of systems
Toward specific subjects		Child of self			
		Teacher of child			
		Teacher of parent			

		Teacher to school Teacher of self			
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Collected data was analyzed in relation to these beginning themes. Over time some themes were abandoned as they proved to be less fruitful in the participant researcher's understanding while additional themes emerged. A sheet of twenty-four elements was established. This sheet was used for each student in the study with all data sources reviewed and summarized onto these sheets. This will be reported in Chapter Four. Following are the details of the data analysis process as it relates to types of data collected.

Qualitative data.

Student files.

Data analysis began with the school cumulative files of the student participants. By third grade a student had four years' worth of report cards and four different teachers who had given their input. In addition, there were enrollment forms, state and district testing results, attendance letters and health records. Comments and phrases used in the report card comments were examined, and were used to form and refine the initial themes as described by Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte (1999). In later examinations of this data, relevant information was recorded on the element summary sheets for each student.

Field notes.

A field journal was kept by the participant researcher that included detailed observations of participants, group sessions and participant researcher reflections and insights. This field journal started with a rich description of the process of participant

selection and continued on through the weekly study meetings and other observations that pertained to the study topics. Ongoing impressions of the students and the study experience were included. The field journal served as a receptacle for all thoughts, insights and documentation of casual conversations that the participant researcher had that related to the study. During the data analysis phase this journal was examined for evidence relating to the twenty-four and the emergence of new themes. Beyond the twenty-four student specific elements, an additional theme about the study selection process and communication with families from poverty emerged from review of the field journal.

Video recordings, interviews and surveys.

Analysis of video recordings, interviews, and surveys were approached similarly. Each data set was processed and analyzed data to add to the summary sheet. Videos of study group sessions were not transcribed but were analyzed to check for accuracy of the participant researcher's impressions. When the recordings were analyzed, the focus was on the verbal interactions with some interpretation of the visual information used for clarification. Each study group session had a topic or event. The study involved nine weeks of lessons and activities that encouraged conscientization about being a student from poverty and a final week when study participants as well as their parents and teachers celebrated the end of the study. An outline of lessons is included as Appendix I. In addition, personal interviews were conducted with students, teachers, and parents. Two sets of surveys were completed, sometimes in written format and sometimes in

interview format. These data, as all of the qualitative data listed above, was examined for evidence relating to the summary elements.

Quantitative data.

Although limited, some quantitative data was included, but no quantitative analysis was performed. Test results were examined for strengths, weaknesses and possible anomalies. This information served at the beginning of the study as a means of limiting possible study participants. Once the study began, this data was used as one element to build a general student profile of the study participants.

Chapter Four

Results

Moving into the examination of the results from the study, it might be helpful to restate the questions that guided the study from its design.

- What can be learned when students from poverty who are not finding success in school engage in reflection about the school experience?
- What happens in the intersection of school, home and student when the home culture does not match the school culture?

This chapter begins with a description of the ten study group sessions. Then results relating to the selection process will be discussed. Representative profiles of students who participated in the study will be shared. As part of the data analysis process, summary sheets were created for each student in the study (See Appendix J). All data collected from all sources including study group meetings, surveys, and interviews were used to fill in the summary sheets. This same summary sheet was then used as a cumulative summary sheet for each element. The results of the elements from the selection process and the summary sheets are arranged into five overarching themes: connecting with the sub population, the role of teachers and schools, interactions of students, discussions about poverty with intermediate students, and conscientization.

Study Group Sessions

The study group was held for ten weeks. In those ten weeks students and the participant researcher explored the idea of being a student from poverty in a variety of

ways. The first week the participant researcher shared her own childhood story. Much of this was accomplished by sharing pictures from a childhood photo album. The participant researcher pointed out things that were signs of her family's poverty from her vantage point such as broken windows that had been boarded over with plywood and abandoned cars in the yard. The family history of dropping out of school and being arrested was shared. In addition, positive elements of being in a close, loving family were detailed.

Week two, students drew pictures of who was in their family as an opening activity. Then students watched excerpts from the Ben Carson story, *Gifted Hands*. The scenes were taken from his mid elementary school years to his eighth grade graduation. These scenes point out the poverty of the family through the apartment they lived in and the work the mother was able to find. In addition, the transformation from being a student at the bottom of the class to a top student was shown. The movie implies this was mostly accomplished through the efforts of Carson's mother by limiting what they watched on television, setting high academic expectations and regular visits to the library. Student study participants seemed quite interested in this story and asked over the next weeks to be able to finish the movie (which was unable to happen due to time constraints.) One student went home and found the movie online to watch it.

The following week the study group started with a comparison of students' lives to either Ben Carson's story or the participant researcher's. Each student shared how their life was either the same or different. Some students spoke about needing to get glasses. Others spoke about kids making fun of them. A few spoke about getting bad

grades. Then a guest speaker arrived. He told his story of growing up in poverty, coming from a divorced home and dealing with the disruptions of his mother's relationships. He spoke of ways that poverty marked him such as using coupon food stamps, not having brand named clothes, and having a different colored lunch ticket because he was on free lunch. He also spoke of being in sports in his high school years and having to prove himself every year because the coaches always assumed that the students who had attended the expensive summer sports trainings would be the better players. Students gave little input during the guest speaker's presentation, but some made a point of catching the participant researcher's eye as elements of his story seemed like their stories.

During week four students responded to the prompt, "What if someone made a movie about your life, what would be in it?" They were told they could either share something that had already happened in their life, or what their life might be like in the future. Students shared different events from their lives. Many stories shared were dramatic moments that involved the police or domestic situations in the home. The participant researcher had told them the stories could be any event including happy or boring moments, but it may be that the prompt of your life being a movie brought out these more dramatic stories, or perhaps once the first story was shared, others followed in a similar vein. An example was, "You know the warrant searches? I was in one. I was in number five. The police came and kicked down the door." Students were also allowed to pass without sharing, which a few did. Captured in the background of the video recording was an interesting interaction between two students. The first asked, "Did you

feel comfortable when you told your story?” To which the second student replied, “Not the last one.”

The second activity was computer research about types of jobs, the average salary and the education level required. Students were very engaged in this activity and asked many questions about what the participant researcher earned as a teacher, how benefits worked and the concept of taxes being withheld. This conversation also allowed the participant researcher to introduce the idea that not only does education tend to allow for better pay, but it also tends to allow people to find jobs where they can use their intellect instead of their bodies, increasing the number of years a person can work over a lifetime.

The study group participants went on a fieldtrip to a local college for week five. They were introduced to the campus by a student representative and then they took a tour of the different buildings. Students were told by the representative some of the things a college looks for in prospective students like good grades, extracurricular activities and a quality essay. The president of the college happened by when the tour was about to start and told students he was impressed by how early they were taking an interest in thinking about college.

Week six showed some differences in the interactions of the students. One of the younger students, who had shown a number of issues interacting with the others, began to show signs of appropriate friendships with another member of the group and an overall positive change in his interactions in the group as a whole. When asked, he didn't have an explanation, but this improvement continued from that point forward. In addition, study participants began talking about going to each other's birthday parties and homes.

The conversation topic for this week was “What do we have at home that helps us in school?” and “What is it that we don’t have at home that would help us?” Participants made a list of things that make it easy to learn and what makes it hard. The next conversation prompt was, “What does the house/bedroom look like of a student who is a really good reader?” This opened a conversation that focused on homes of people who come from higher economic statuses. Most students seemed to have an image in their heads of what these bedrooms would look like including being large in size, having computers, intercoms, shelves of books, and not having televisions or video games. After some discussion, one student stated, “Just because you have a nice room doesn’t mean you’ll get smarter.” Another student replied, “I don’t have a good house. One morning we woke up--we watched movies and fell asleep on the couch---and there was a leak in the roof and the hot water doesn’t work. That’s why we have to move. We have a really bad house and the landlords are really rude. They let people have dogs but they wouldn’t let us have cats so we had to get rid of our cats. Our landlord won’t fix anything.” After the open discussion, students returned to the career search from the previous week.

During week seven one student continued to recall the visit to the college. She was making connections to the topics in the study group and attending college. She also talked about how being in this study group might help kids get out of poverty in the future. The participant researcher had prepared a group activity formatted like a game show to present statistics around being from poverty and resiliency factors. Study group attendance was low because fifth graders were at outdoor school. Also, some of the girls in the group had begun to pull away from some of the discussions. The participant

researcher could not discern whether this was due to discomfort or the obvious growing bonds between them as friends.

Because of the low attendance, week eight repeated the game on poverty statistics. Some of the presentation led to a conversation about what happens to kids whose parents are in poverty. A misconception about child protective services came to light and discussion dispelled the idea that the authorities can take kids away from their parents because they are in poverty. Overall engagement was low and this week was the most challenging to keep students on task. The ultimate conclusion of the participant researcher was that presenting statistics, even in a game format was challenging for students of this age.

Engagement returned in week nine as study participants watched the recorded interview of another adult who grew up in poverty. This speaker brought forth ideas of things happening at home that teachers had no understanding of and the negative assumptions her teachers made about her. She talked about being the oldest of five children and having to find ways to feed her siblings. She also talked about having to work even in her middle school years to pay bills for her family, without her teachers having a clear idea of what was going on at home. She spoke of many negative experiences with teachers and a few positive interactions. “I think it was evident in the way that I looked that I came from a place that wasn’t healthy. My clothes were not clean. My hair was not brushed. There were always holes in my shoes...I know that my teachers were aware, but they chose to ignore it. They didn’t ever reach out to me in a way that was helpful. And, in fact, a lot of times I felt like I was ignored and I was

treated differently and I was excluded, not only by my teachers but my classmates. I felt like they had banded together at some points in my life, during certain times or certain grades, and they had just joined forces against me. Looking back I don't know that that was the case, but that's the way it felt." Another teacher she spoke of gave her a leather journal as a gift and told her she could write anything in there that she wanted. She felt it was an attempt to let her know that the teacher was a safe person she could talk to if she wanted. However, she never confided in her. As with the other life stories presented during the study group, students were attentive and making connections to their lives.

The second activity this week was a group discussion with the prompt, "What should your teacher know about you?" or "What would you like to tell your future self?" One student spoke about what his teachers should know, "My mom has gone through a rough time, a really rough time and I haven't seen my dad in six years because he got deported when I was five so I don't really get to stay connected to my dad any more. I've lived with my (guardians) for almost two years now." Another student wanted to tell herself, "I would want to tell myself that I can do the right things and get the right job and enough money just to be a good mother or something." Most students expressed concerns about telling their thoughts in an open discussion and advocated for speaking privately to the camera. As always, students were allowed to choose not to share.

The final meeting was a celebration of the study group. We had pizza and soda and socialized. No recording was made. Parents and classroom teachers were invited to attend. At least five parents attended, but only one teacher made a short appearance.

Overall, the study group sessions allowed for relationship building between student participants and the participant researcher. It also allowed for an exploration of discussions about poverty and the impact it can make on intermediate aged students. Some discoveries were made about which approaches had successful engagement of student participants and which were less successful.

Connecting with this Sub Population

Results relating to the selection process.

The first results of this study revolved around the selection process for study participants. The selection process spanned more than four months. After those months of parent contacts, the participant researcher set the date for the first study group meeting. Although there were not as many participants as the original goal stated, the study needed to move forward for those who had agreed to participate and were waiting. The first study meeting was to be held on a Wednesday. As of the Saturday before the meeting there were only five students who had signed permission forms to start the study. The participant researcher was concerned that this was too few students to be able to do the study as designed, but resolved to move forward. Even after parents had agreed and all criteria had been checked and met, there were students who were pulled out of the study days before starting. Two study participants brought in their permission forms the Monday before the first group started. One student brought in the signed permission the morning of the first meeting. Another student forgot his form at home, left school the afternoon of the study and brought it back and joined the first study

group five minutes into the first meeting. Most surprising of all was the student who had gone through all the criteria checks, but parents had decided they were not interested. The afternoon of the first study meeting, this student and her mother were outside the classroom door checking through the lost and found. The student approached the participant researcher and asked why all the kids were going into the room. The participant researcher reminded her about the study group that she had been told about and said that this was the first day. The student went to her mother and convinced her to allow her to join the study. Mom signed the permission form at the door and this student joined the study group!

Data showed that getting decisions from families was not a simple process. Of the final thirteen student participants, only three agreed after initial contact. Six students were contacted twice before parents decided to include them, while three student families had three contacts. One family was contacted four times before coming to a final decision to include their student. While this details the process for the study participants, a closer look at the process for all students considered for the study reveals even more information.

At the beginning of the study selection process, twelve initial responses were generated by the mass distribution of the interest letter. Once it was determined that this did not generate enough potential study participants, teachers were asked to give the names of students they thought were possible candidates according to the study criteria. This two-step process generated a list of an additional fifty-one students, bringing the total potential study participants to sixty-three. Of these sixty-three students to be

contacted, eighteen families made their decision with one contact. Ten were contacted twice, while nine other families were contacted three times. Ten more families needed four contacts to make their decision and three families had to be contacted five times before declining to put their students in the study. One family was never able to come to a resolution even after more than five contacts, although they never asked not to be contacted again and continued to say they were indecisive. At the end of this selection process, thirteen students became study participants. All remaining data is based on the results from those thirteen students, their families and their classroom teachers.

Student Participant Profiles

As part of creating a rich description and a narrative of the study participants, four student participant profiles are given here. Specific identifying elements have been changed to maintain participant confidentiality. In addition, attempts have been made to mask student identities while attempting to stay true to the student's stories. The following profiles are composites of more than one student.

Student one.

The first student profile is of a third grade girl. This student was one of the most outspoken students who consistently showed her ability to use her language skills to process her life experiences and share her opinions with others. During the study group sessions, she was attentive to the stories of others from poverty and whenever a speaker shared something from their past that resonated with her, she would either state out loud

the connections to her own life she was making or make eye contact with the participant researcher showing her interest in the elements that were common to her own story.

When there was not enough time to complete the first video about Ben Carson's life, this student also took the initiative to find the movie online and watch it. It appeared that the stories of others from poverty were of high interest to her.

During her third grade year, her mother had lost housing and was living with the mother of her boyfriend in another community over twenty miles away. This qualified the family as homeless and the mother was able to advocate for her children to get them bussed from their temporary situation. There was quite a bit of negotiating on the part of the school counselor and principal over this situation, but the classroom and ESL teacher advocated strongly that she be allowed to finish the year with her classmates. During this time the student was at times left in the care of the mother of the boyfriend for days although the woman was basically a stranger to her.

At the time of the study, the student was having little contact with her father. Based on interviews with the mother this was more because he chose not to be in the student's life, rather than any animosity from the mother. The participant researcher's impressions were that the mother really wanted the father to be a bigger part of the student's life, but the father was emotionally distant from the mother and by association, the student. The participant researcher never met the father of the student and the student did not speak about him. According to the mother, the student had had a close relationship with her grandfather, the mother's father, but he had passed away some months before.

During the first weeks of the study group sessions, this student's issues with peer interactions were evident. Other student participants complained that she was sticking her tongue out at them or making unkind comments to them. The participant researcher did not see these interactions, which led her to believe that she was careful not to have a teacher see these behaviors. The participant researcher did mention to the mother that she was having some problems in the group and worried that maybe the topics of the study group were causing her some stress. However, neither she nor her mother wanted her to discontinue so she continued in the group. After the first two or three weeks one of the other student participants, a boy from her class, began to be purposeful in his interactions with her. At first it seemed as if he had decided to monitor her behavior and give her additional correction and feedback about her behavior. Within the next couple weeks there were incidents of him sitting beside her, having conversations with her, and even sticking up for her with other student participants. By week six of the study group sessions, there had been a noticeable change in her behavior. She seemed to have built a true friendship with the boy and was no longer targeting or targeted by other students in the group. It seemed that she had become a full member in good standing within the study group.

This student's mother had been a graduate of this same school district. She reported that she had loved school, but finished her high school career at the alternative ed program. She mentioned that because of her shyness she had social challenges in school and found the alternative program a better option. The mother was thoughtfully engaged in the issues explored by the study. At the time of the study she was enrolled in

college and on the verge of becoming a licensed therapist. She shared that the student's father had had trouble learning in school.

The teacher of this student felt like she had good potential to be a strong student and that she had academic potential. However, she was concerned about her routines to support school work completion. She had been assigned to a daily study hall for lack of homework completion for a number of weeks and at the time of the study was just getting to the point where she was turning in her work. The teacher was also concerned about her ability to focus and thought there was a possibility that she had attention deficit disorder. These concerns were expressed repeatedly on her report cards from younger grades. During interviews, the mother seemed to know this was a concern and was grateful for the patience of her teachers, but she did not seem to be interested in looking into this any further.

Student two.

The second student profile is of a fifth grade boy. He was an ESL student from a Spanish speaking family. At the time of the study, he was living with relatives who were his guardians. His mother was in an extended program that did not allow her to come for visits very often or have regular visitations from her children. The relatives had stepped in and agreed to care for this child and his older sister while the mother was taking care of her own issues.

At the beginning of the study, all permissions and initial interviews were done with the guardians. During the course of the study group, the student's mother returned

from her program and also moved into the household. This arrangement seemed to have been agreed upon by the different family members and there seemed to be no official agency involved in decisions. That also meant that while the mother had voluntarily signed over temporary guardianship, this could be rescinded at any point.

In the fall of his fourth grade year he began the year in another district attendance area. According to him, this was a negative experience. He reported that his teacher did not like him and would often assume it was him talking or disrupting and send him to the office, even when it was another child. After the first couple months he returned to our school and started in a fourth grade classroom. The fourth grade teacher in our school had grave concerns about the ability and behavior of the student. She had read in the files from the other school that they had had serious concerns and were considering a referral for special education. Because the participant researcher had been this student's ESL teacher during his third grade year, she felt this information was very inaccurate and advocated for the teacher to look beyond the information in the files. She even did a reading running record that showed the student to be above grade level in his reading. The classroom teacher struggled to reconcile the differing views of the student and insisted on having him attend an after school program to support his reading skills. The participant researcher began encouraging the student to perform his best consistently so accurate decisions could be made about his educational program. The student finished his fourth grade year in our school and began his fifth grade year there as well.

During his fifth grade year he was under the guardianship of relatives. Now the student had a different home environment and two additional aspects of the student came

forward. He had been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder and, throughout the year, finding ways to help him consistently take his medication were explored. With these additional supports in place, the student began to show his true ability and the fifth grade teacher began to understand that he was a very capable reader who had skills two or more grade levels above his current grade. From the guardian's perspective, it looked like he had gone from being a second grade reader to a seven grade reader in a single year! The study group sessions happened in the spring of his fifth grade year and he talked about how excited he was to complete a whole year in the same school. He stated that this would be the first time he had been able to attend the same school for a whole year. Despite the obvious successes in his guardian's home, this student remained strongly emotionally tied to his mother and continued to be staunchly loyal to her.

In the care of his guardians, he experienced a very different family culture. The relatives lived on a farm and there were expectations that everyone pitched in on chores. In addition, expectations for homework completion, respectful interactions and keeping one's own space clean and tidy were a part of this home. In interviews and other interactions throughout the year, this change in structure was a frequent topic of conversation. His guardian reported that at the beginning the two children were resistant to some of the rules in the home, but over time had come to understand that every member of the household had responsibilities that allowed the household to function. At some point during the study, the student's mother returned and also moved in with these relatives. During the final interview with the family, both guardians and the mother spoke openly about the arrangement they had made as a family. The mother was becoming a

part of the established household. The guardian, student and mother all spoke about the adjustment for the mother and how she too at first had been resistant and the son had been the one to remind her that everybody had to pitch in. The mother, at the time of the final study interview, expressed how much she was learning about being a parent and how to offer support for her children. She expressed that she had not felt like she had been doing these things for her children in the past. She expressed gratitude for her relatives not only taking over the care of her children while she was away, but also allowing her to stay until she was ready to be on her own again. She also spoke about some of the challenges in having multiple adults and authority figures in the home. The mother shared that while the student in the study seemed to be accepting of her journey, her teenage daughter was angry and struggling with her return. In fact both the guardian and the mother has expressed that they wished there had been some way to include the older sister in the study. Unfortunately, she was a middle schooler at the time and did not fit the age parameters of the study.

During the study group sessions, this student was easily distracted, but he seemed to be taking in the discussions. During interviews he spoke about the importance of education and was already making connections between education and his future. This student was one participant that the participant researcher was able to visit in his home. During the study group sessions, he told others that I had been to his home and seemed very pleased that this had happened. In addition, he was in a math intervention with the participant researcher during his school day. In that intervention, he rarely participated or

responded unless called upon. After hearing the participant researcher's life story, he became obviously more engaged and participatory during the intervention.

During the study interviews the mother spoke about the challenges of raising her children on her own. The mother expressed the difficulty she had in being able to support her son in school both because of her work hours and because of language barriers. She also said that math was particularly difficult for her. She shared that she went to school until the sixth grade in Mexico. During final interviews it became obvious that while the mother was grateful the participant researcher had taken an interest in her son, she had a limited understanding of the study. She knew the participant researcher was a teacher, spoke Spanish and was offering school support.

Student three.

The third student was a fourth grade girl. Her mother was a frequent visitor to the school. She dropped off and picked up her daughter regularly. She also attended conferences and other school events. She had been very forthcoming with teachers about her history and the history of her daughter. She asked questions of teachers and strove to support her daughter at home in school work. Teachers also reported that they believed she provided routines, expectations for homework completion and other types of school support.

The student did not begin the school year in this school, but came at some point in the fall. At that time, she was living with her mother and older sister. There may have been a boyfriend of her mother's in the home, but her father had already been deported

and she had had little contact with him. When she entered the school, she had recently shaved off all of her hair in support of her grandmother who was undergoing chemotherapy. Entering the school as a third grade girl with no hair set her course with relationships with other students. She shared during the interviews that those students who showed support for her during this time had become her friends while those who made fun of her were people she did not consider to be friends.

This student seemed to be a verbal processor. She made a number of comments during the study group sessions that showed that she was making connections to the topics being discussed and her own life. When she saw the video of one of the guest speakers who spoke about negative experiences with teachers and going back to school after she had been married and had a child, she commented that she thought her mom might have had some of the same teachers and was also going back to school. After attending the field trip to the college, she referred to that experience multiple times and talked about what colleges look for in their applicants. She also asked questions about confidentiality of the study and made comments that being in a group like the study group could help students be successful in school.

The classroom teacher's impression of this student tended to be a mixture of concerns for her future and disapproval. She stated she was worried that this girl often had to "be the mom". She spoke several times about the student making comments about sex and worried she would "look for love in all the wrong places." The teacher claimed that she told outlandish stories to get attention from others and that her basic needs were not being met. She based some of those judgments on the way the student dressed and her

hair. According to the teacher, when she brought some of these concerns to the mother, the mother was dramatic and made it all about herself. The teacher said that she worried that she was failing the student and unable to meet her needs. However, she also said the student was improving academically and getting good grades.

This student was performing near grade level in most academic areas. The teacher acknowledged that the support at home was allowing her to stay near her peers in ability. The teacher felt she was an amazing thinker with a great sense of humor. She shared that she could be very observant and interested in learning. There had been some concerns about her writing organization and a lack of perseverance when the work was difficult. In the fall of her third grade year there had been a daily behavior tracking sheet, to address problems with her social interactions. These issues with peers came out both in her interviews and also in the first weeks of the study group sessions. When interviewed, the student showed in a number of ways that she may struggle to have a positive self-image. For instance, she was unable to think of anything that she felt proud of herself for in school. She also stated that she did not believe she could become a top student.

Student four.

Student four was a fourth grade boy. He came from a blended family and he had a step-sibling in the same grade who was also a student participant in the study. One of the things that sticks out about this student was the confusion his home situation seemed to create for teachers. The mother of this student was married to the father of the step-sibling. The father of this student had other older children so in that branch of the family

there were adult siblings that lived in other homes that he rarely saw. In addition his mother and step-father had had a number of younger children since their marriage. So there were six children living with these two parents. This student was the oldest of the six in the home. In addition, the entire family lived with the paternal grandparents, for a total of ten people, qualifying them as homeless. Each of the children had been through the Head Start program and the mother seemed involved and admiring of that program. Upon enrollment he was tested and qualified as an ESL (English as a second language) student based upon information on his enrollment form that said he was Native American and his performance on the language screener.

Two older siblings were already out of the home, and neither had completed high school. His older brother, in his early 20's, had been into some trouble with the police and had a new baby. His sister who was still of high school age had recently gone to stay with the older brother because she was in conflict with her mother. Her mother was worried because she believed her daughter had recently started smoking marijuana.

The mother was grateful to her extended family, especially her brother, who had recently helped remodel part of the home for them. This uncle of the student also pulled the student in to homework support at his home and generally included him in the family activities in their home with the cousins who were of a similar age.

Mom shared with the participant researcher and teachers that she had had issues with drug addiction in her past. She believed the addiction had started because she had been in a serious car accident that necessitated the use of pain medication. She reports this accident and other health concerns continued to affect her health, often leaving her

too exhausted to do much. This willingness to share her story and make the home situation transparent had seemed to garner empathy and respect from the current classroom teacher. Mom also reported that she herself had been good in school and really enjoyed it. She had gone to some college and had hoped to go further but her health and life events had made it challenging.

The mother also shared about her own history that she had been through drug rehab and at times had been homeless and lived in shelters. There had been a suicide and near death event approximately one year before the study period. When sharing about this, she mentioned that she had found her own mother dead of a methadone overdose that was ruled accidental. Speaking of the family's finances, mom stated, "We can wipe our butts, but we can't do anything extra." All of these elements served as a backdrop for the life of this student and his family.

While these profiles have been provided to give details to the lives of the study participants, the elements here reflect only some of the complexities of the lives of children from poverty. It is hoped that these profiles will encourage others to strive to know well the students that sit before them.

The Role of Teachers and Schools

Homework completion.

Homework completion was explored through reviewing report card comments and teacher interviews. Parent and student interviews might also have mentioned issues with homework. Of the thirteen students, two had no mention of concerns in this

area. Three others indicated there was some concern or mixed comments about homework participation. One of these three was a student who had recently made significant progress after missing months of recess to work in a study hall as a consequence for missed homework. The final eight students had comments from one or more sources that showed that homework completion was an ongoing concern. One student put it this way, “It’s really hard for me to learn at my house because my dad is always yelling at us...Most of the time we are gone because my sister has softball practices and games...so I can never get my homework done and Ms. A, I try to tell her the day before we leave school it will be really hard for me to get my homework done because I have to sit on a field where everybody’s yelling...It’s not really easy to do that where I live...It’s always loud.”

Availability of supplies.

Although homework was a concern for many, questions showed little concern about whether there were adequate supplies in the home to support homework completion. Only one student expressed that there was a problem at times having supplies in the home needed to be able to complete school work. Three students said their home provided needed supplies, and nine students had no data, likely showing there was no concern in this area.

General adult support.

Relying mostly on teacher, student, and parent interviews, five students seemed to have general adult support. Two of these five were given regular support by extended family members, rather than parents. Three others reported support from one source interviewed, but other interviewed sources gave doubt as to whether the support was sufficient. For example, a parent might have reported in their interview that they helped the student at home, but teachers had evidence that showed the support was either sporadic or inadequate in some way. For example, when asked about whether one of the children had adequate support in the home, a teacher replied, "I think it's difficult. I mean he's very smart. It's not like he's incapable. But if something's unclear to him, I think it's easier for him just not to do it, because mom and dad can't read English, I'm guessing. They can't speak it so... And he's the oldest? So he's the interpreter in their family. I think academic support at home is minimal. I know mom had to take him to the public library because they don't have internet for him to do his research." Five students were consistently without recognized adult support in the home. Two families expressed difficulty due to having a home language that is not English.

Support for schoolwork.

When the participant researcher probed for whether students had support specifically for school work, only four students seemed to have adequate support in the home. Two of those reported had adequate support from extended family members, not a parent. Nine of the thirteen students had results that indicated they did not have an adult

in their life that was able to help with school work on a regular basis. Three barriers mentioned were time to work with students, language barriers, and adequate academic skill levels of adults. One teacher commented that while the parents do help with the weekly writing assignment, the parents' academic level may not be strong enough to support their child past the fifth grade. Another parent shared, "My aunt does a lot of the helping. I can do quite a bit of it, but my brain can't process it all at one time. I'm still working on things so my aunt helps me a lot...And I can't do math worth nothing, it's all her. I'm looking at it last night going, "Where did the 'n' come from?"

Knows how to get help from school.

When asked questions about whether students and families knew how to get help from the school if needed, only four families gave answers that indicated they were likely to be able to get help if needed. One of these families involved a student in a guardianship where the guardians appeared to operate from more of a middle class culture. Even in this situation, the adults expressed concerns over understanding school expectations. "I think that's the challenging part. Not trying to get *her* specifically to do things. It's trying to understand what the teacher's asking of them and reading through it, trying to get direction and then you're trying to tell them what you think it's about and they're like, 'Well, no because they said this or whatever else...' It's hard so I'll email them...and depending on the teacher, they might not answer you for a day or two or they may say, 'Go read the syllabus.'" Two other families did not give answers that allowed

for interpretation. Information gathered on the other seven families indicated that getting help from school might be an issue for them.

Student Perspectives.

Feels able to do the work.

Although a number of students showed concerns in the area of adult support, only three students reported that they did not feel they were able to do the work expected of them. Five others reported feeling successful overall, but expressed some concerns about a single subject area; four of those were in the area of math and one in the area of spelling. Five others expressed that they felt they were able to do the work expected at their grade.

Attitude toward school.

Eight students consistently expressed positive attitudes toward school. Three others mentioned that school was boring at times. Two students said that school was not always a positive experience due to friendship issues.

Attitude toward classroom teacher.

When asked about classroom teachers all but one student had positive things to say. Many mentioned ways that teachers specifically helped them or supported them in school work. For example one student reported, "She's really nice. She helps me when I'm having a hard time on a problem or when I'm having a hard time with a friend." In

one instance a student knew that his teacher was making accommodations for him, “My teacher does know that my grandma has cancer so she’s kind of giving me less homework because she knows it will be hard to do it.” Only one student had negative things to say about the classroom teacher. “If Mrs. B is in a good mood, it’s fine, but if she’s in a crabby mood it’s—it’s bad. Mrs. B is mean to me sometimes because I’m not really good in math. So this one time I was finishing up a test. She went to go grade it and she said, ‘Who helped you on this?’ I’m like, ‘Nobody.’ She’s like, ‘If you don’t understand this, then you won’t be able to understand this.’ She’s like, ‘Who helped you on this?’ I’m like, ‘Nobody.’ She kept asking that and finally I said, ‘Nobody! I guessed.’” When asked, “How did it feel when she kept asking you?” She replied, “Really bad.”

Parent perspectives.

Child’s school experience.

Parents tended to be positive about the school experience of their child. Nine families made positive comments about their child’s school experience. Two families had generally positive comments about their school experience but also spoke of having concerns over one or more teachers. The last two families gave no data on this question. No families expressed overall negative impressions of their child’s school experience. Regardless of whether they had positive or negative comments, five families expressed worry for their child in school.

Perception of teacher.

Speaking specifically about their child's classroom teacher, ten families had positive things to say. One family gave mixed reviews and two families made negative comments. One parent reported about an interaction with her child's teacher that altered the tone of the relationship. "We came in for a party and I felt very unwelcomed. I never wanted to go back and have another conference or anything with her. I did go back and have another conference because I was concerned about (my child) falling behind, but then I made sure I scheduled it when my husband could go with me. I don't think she meant to make me feel unwelcome... I had two of my kids with me and I think that bothered her... That stressed her out. We only lasted about five or ten minutes before I'm like, 'Ok, I'm not welcome. I'm leaving.' So that was a really bad experience. So I haven't been able to really forget about that. I never addressed it with her, but I took note of how I didn't want to---I'm sure she's a nice person----I just took note that I will never, EVER make somebody feel like that."

Parent school experience.

Parents reported on their own school experience. Three parents interviewed reported positive school experiences when they had been students. Five said they struggled in school and three reported negative school experiences. Two families either had no data or expressed a neutral school experience.

Teacher perspectives.

Perception of student.

When data was collected from the teacher's point of view, results were less positive. Looking for an overall attitude toward the student, five students had consistently positive comments from teachers. One example was, "I think she's one of the most creative, quirky little girls I've ever met. She's brilliant. She is really an out of the box, creative, quirky little thinker. I envision her going far in life, very far, despite her poverty." Five other students had comments that were sometimes positive and sometimes expressed concerns regarding the student. For example, "He needs to recognize that the choices he makes take him down a path and the path he wants to be on, that he expresses, and he's not afraid to say it, is that of a decent student who's making it in life. But, he's very easily pulled into negative behaviors, including some borderline bully type behaviors that just takes him down that negative path." For some students these mixed results were noticeably different from one teacher or year to another. Three students from the study got comments that consistently showed that teachers saw them as challenged and/or challenging.

Perception of family.

When it came to the teacher's perception of the families, the results were even less positive. Only one family had consistently positive comments from the data. Six other families had comments that were at times positive and at other times expressed concerns for their role in their child's academic life. Six families received comments that

overall expressed concerns or were outright negative about the family. One example of this was, “I think (this student) is busy being the mom. So much inappropriateness. When I called the mom she made it all about her and being too busy.”

State test results.

When state test results were examined, four of the students met state standards or in the case of the third grade students, teachers perceived them to be meeting state standards. Eight students were in the nearly met category either by state tests or teacher perception. Only one of the students did not meet state standards according to state test results.

Interaction of Students

During student interviews, the participant researcher included a couple of questions about who the study participants considered friends and who they identified as being “good at school”. The questions had been included to help students feel comfortable talking and to get to their informal school experience as well as the academic experience. To this participant researcher’s surprise, many of the names given by students on this interview question were either names of other study participants or students who had been contacted to be in the study. Sometimes students would use these same names to answer the question of who was “good at school” even if teachers had perceived these students to be struggling.

Discussions about Poverty with Intermediate Students

Perception of study participation.

Students.

When asked about the study group experience all thirteen students said it was a positive experience, although two of them also expressed concerns that the confidentiality of the videos be maintained. Over the course of the following year, multiple students who had participated in the study approached the participant researcher and asked if the study groups could continue.

Parents.

Similarly, eleven of the parents expressed positive comments about the study experience for them and their child. One parent stated, “I was excited at the opportunity because I look for anything that can help them get a better understanding of where they are coming from and how they can use that to succeed. You always want better for your child.” Another set of parents said, “I thought it was awesome. She enjoyed it too.” When asked about a highlight of the study experience they said, “You stick out in our mind because she talks about you all the time... You know us. You know our student... There should be more of you in the school.” There was no data available for two families. Although parents were enthusiastic about the study experience, three families made comments during the final interview that showed a lack of understanding of what the study group was about. This was surprising to the participant researcher

because they had been given all the required permissions and access to the information about the study.

Teachers.

Teachers were less positive about the study experience. Eight final surveys showed that teachers saw no effect for them or their student because of the study. Five of the final interviews expressed positive comments about their participation or the participation of their students in the study. Two of these teachers showed a high level of understanding of the issues that students from poverty face. (Although there were only seven teachers involved in the study, the final teacher interviews were given one for each student in the study, so if a teacher had more than one student in the study, their general feedback about the study experience would have been tabulated more than once.)

Conscientization

Self perception.

Looking to see if students perceive themselves as different, nine of the students gave no indication that they did. Four others expressed feeling different than their classmates in a variety of ways, including having attention deficit disorder, being quiet and shy, having friendship issues, struggling with anger issues, and following directions. Only one student mentioned feeling different because of his perception of his family. Being from poverty was not mentioned as a specific cause for feeling different by any of the students.

Sense of control.

To ascertain whether students had some sense of being in control of their own education, the participant researcher looked at comments made by teachers and students. Three students showed signs of thinking about their school careers. During an interview when asked what he thought about school, one student said, "It's good because you get to learn new things and you get knowledge. You can use that knowledge later in college and you can get good jobs and get a good family and you get a big house and take care of your kids if you have any." One classroom teacher felt another student was working toward this understanding. "Not yet. He's still figuring it out. In his mind if he's successful on Monday, that should carry him through the week." Four other students gave indication that they were not aware of the importance of their schooling and no data came forth for five others. One student was perceived as actively working against her school career.

When this student was interviewed she was asked by the participant researcher, "Do you think if you wanted to, you could become a top student?" She replied with a strong, "No." When asked further she replied, "Well, first of all, I can't even tell time. I don't know times. I don't know division. I'm bad at school. I just don't know how to do them." When her classroom teacher was interviewed she said of this child, "She's just not in control of her learning. She's more into avoidance. She's not willing to take a risk and she's not willing to put a book down and do the right thing. She's a thinker. That's why it scares me. She's thought this through. She is at complete risk for dropping out...Any opportunity that comes along that I hope will hook her, like taking her on a

fieldtrip, she's not even willing to take that risk... She's the only one without a permission slip." Further, this student had sporadic attendance in the study group sessions and her family was the only one not to complete all of the study interviews.

Academic success.

When asked probing questions about whether students understood what others might have or do that helps them be successful in school, only four students showed signs that they had a good understanding of student behaviors that led to academic success. A representative answer from one of these students was, "They listen when the teachers are trying to teach them lessons and they practice at home and they just do what they're told." Three others had some understanding, while teachers felt two others were working toward that understanding but were not there yet. A number of students gave answers that successful students were smarter than them. For example, "How I'm different is they're a LOT smarter than me and they always turn in their homework." Three students gave answers that showed they had little to no understanding of how students find academic success with one of these looking only to social situations as being important. Finally one student was perceived as actively working against successful student behaviors.

Moving toward conscientization.

When looking for specific signs of conscientization at the end of the study, results were inconclusive. One student made an obvious connection between school, attending

college and success in life. Two parents showed great signs of understanding the importance of studying students from poverty and the issues they face, although their children did not necessarily show a similar level of understanding. Other signs that may point to an increase in conscientization were a lack of comments on certain topics. For example, only one student gave comments with any detail on any question concerning their families. This student had a longer and closer relationship with the participant researcher beyond the study group participation. He reflected on his family situation, “My mom, she’s getting way better. She has a little bit more things to do. My brother’s a little mad at her. He thinks that he’s been through a lot, but he really hasn’t. I’ve been with my mom every step of the way that she’s gone through, with everything she’s done and he thinks *that’s* bad. I’ve seen more stuff than he probably has. A year I didn’t see my brother. He lived ...with my grandma...before she passed away. He’s been able to finish a couple years at (the same) school. I’ve never finished a year (at the same school).” In comparison, while most students spoke freely about their school performance, friendships and their relationships with their teachers, similar probes about families and home life got limited responses. At times students asked if they had to respond to these questions. An example from one student was, “Do I have to answer all of these, or can I skip some?” This lack of willingness to share about family experiences may show some level of awareness about how their families might be perceived in a school setting. Additionally, the response of the students to the participant researcher sharing her own life story growing up in poverty may show some level of conscientization. Not only did students in the study show a new level of connection after

hearing the participant researcher's story, but with her permission, some shared her life story with other students who were not able to participate in the study, and a sense of connection was created with those additional students as well. While there may have been some limited signs of the beginning of conscientization, it seems it would be difficult to make too many observations from a short term study, needing instead to see how these conversations might impact student behavior over time.

Chapter Five

Conclusions

At the end of the study and data analysis, patterns began to emerge that took shape into some conclusions about the experience. First, this research indicates that to truly engage families from poverty, the standard communication procedures commonly found in an elementary school appear to be inadequate. Second, well-meaning teachers, without a deep understanding of those from poverty and a careful examination of their own biases, may be missing the mark in building relationships and helping families to support their children in school. Third, even in a school of mixed socioeconomic levels, students may be clustered and clustering in a way that hinder their exposure to a wider range of classes, limiting the ability to learn about a variety of ways of interacting in the world. Fourth, no harm seems to have been done by introducing conversations about poverty and issues surrounding it with students as young as the third grade. Finally, the beginning stages of conscientization seem to be possible as young as the third grade, but conclusions about full conscientization would need further research or longitudinal studies.

Connecting with this Sub Population

One of the most significant implications of this research seems to be in understanding the challenges of making connections and communicating effectively with families living in poverty. During the participant selection phase of the study there was a surprisingly long period of repeated phone calls and attempts to make contact with

families. The first phone calls were made on November twenty-fifth and the study began on April second. In those four months the participant researcher made contact with families via phone calls, in-person contact at the school, and talking directly to students who were potential candidates.

Even though the participant researcher was herself a student from poverty and had some working knowledge of the challenges of communicating with families from poverty, she sometimes found herself uncomfortable in how many contacts she was making to get resolution of whether students would participate in the study or not. It felt awkward to call families repeatedly or to approach them in person to get resolutions when she ran into them. However, rather than offending families, some families demonstrated the need to have numerous contacts to come to a decision about whether to include their student in the study or not. The participant researcher reflected on whether the awkwardness on her part was a reflection of her own transition from having grown up in poverty to becoming a member of the school culture. While many factors might have affected the challenges of this selection process such as the topic of the study, the participant researcher's role and reputation within the school, and family schedules, it generated significant questions about communication with this population.

Other observations during the selection process were that even once parents and students had verbally agreed to the study, to get signed forms back and forth was a further challenge. This observation may have additional implications for how schools communicate with families from poverty and the need to develop systems that go beyond papers shuttled between the school and home if the school truly wants to include students

from poverty in the full school experience. Further, a lack of response after an initial contact may not show a lack of interest as might be assumed, but a need for further contact or information to fully connect to families from poverty.

The Role of the Teacher and Schools

Seven classroom teachers, representing all student participants, agreed to become participants of the study when their students were selected as study participants. The analysis of the data retrieved specifically from teachers through interviews and surveys led to some tentative conclusions about the role teachers may play in the intersection between home and school. Overall, all the teachers could give specific detailed information about student's academic performance as well as their perceptions of the student's behavior and social interactions. However, when it came to questions about the family and the role they play in the student's life, there was a noticeable range of responses from teachers. Some had little information about parents, and were not even sure if they had attended conferences or not. Others knew great details about students' families. There was also a range of attitudes about families. While in most instances, teachers were positive and expressed hopefulness about their students, there was a higher incidence of critical comments about families. Teachers seemed to create impressions of families based on the performance of the students and their interactions (or lack of interaction) with parents. Then, when interpreting those interactions, teachers often used a middle class value schema. For example, one teacher wrote, "He is going to have to continue raising himself." Another teacher said of another student, "She is

struggling. Homework never done. Can't find things. Clothes are too small. Dressing inappropriately for the weather. I called the mom, she made it all about her and being too busy.”

It is interesting to note, that with one exception, students expressed nothing but positive attitudes toward their teachers and school in general. In addition, with only one or two exceptions, parents expressed positive attitudes toward school and teachers. It appears that the disillusionment with school that seems to impact many families from poverty either are not overly present at this age of student or may just not have been strongly represented in this small sample size.

Two instances that may show signs of a disconnect arose during the course of the study. The most significant involved one of the students in the study. This student was already showing signs of detaching from the school culture. She had already had an older sibling who had had such significant trouble in the local school system that he had been sent to live with an aunt in another state in the hopes this would help him get back on track. Of all the study participants, this student's parent was the most difficult to reach and the only one who did not complete all the interviews and surveys. After attending some of the study sessions, this student became interested in other social activities and quit attending the study group. By the end of the year the family had left the district and there was no information about where they had gone. During the study, this student was the most negative about her teacher and school experience. In addition, the teacher expressed great concern about her engagement in school, asking the participant researcher to intervene when the student had decided not to attend a fieldtrip to a local art

museum. The teacher saw this as a valuable opportunity for the student to be exposed to things she might not normally get to see. The student expressed no interest in going and the parent allowed her not to go. From the perspective of the participant researcher, these were signs of a damaged or broken relationship from both sides.

The other case of possible disconnect did not seem to be affecting the student at that point. While the student only expressed positive attitudes toward school and her teacher, when the participant researcher interviewed both the teacher and the parent, there were slightly negative comments made about the other. The teacher stated, “I do not see any evidence of a parent playing a role of support for academic achievement.” The parent said, “Haven’t had a good experience with the teacher this year.” It is interesting to note that another teacher was also interviewed regarding this family and her perspective was much more positive. Similarly, the family was not universally negative toward school or their child’s teachers, but pointed to specific events that had made them uncomfortable in one classroom and made them feel judged and unwelcome.

Whether a coincidence or not, both of these instances involved the same classroom teacher. Interestingly, this teacher was one who expressed the most interest in the study and shared that working with students from poverty was of great interest to her. She also showed in her interview to be a teacher willing to take extra effort on behalf of her students. She reported visiting a student’s home when there were frequent absences and making phone calls and additional parent conferences when she had concerns over a student. So while some may suggest it is a lack of interest on the part of teachers to support students from poverty, this participant researcher believes it may be

more accurate to look at the assumptions made of students and families based on the underlying beliefs of teachers, or, put another way, the cultural awareness and sensitivity of teachers when working with students from poverty.

Another example that demonstrates this need of cultural awareness arose during the study period but did not involve one of the student participants. One of the participating teachers shared her experience with a student who likely would have qualified as a study participant. She noticed that he did not have a backpack and was transporting papers to and from school in a plastic shopping bag. She found a quality backpack at a garage sale and sent it home with him. The child did not use the backpack but continued to use a plastic bag. After a couple of weeks the teacher asked for the bag back. She also approached the family and invited the student and family to attend church events. She was even contemplating offering free tutoring over the summer to the child. All of these offers were declined and the relationship between teacher and parent became even more distant. It does not seem to be a lack of caring or effort on behalf of the teacher that has alienated this family. However, something in her approach did not meet the needs of the family and in fact, may have offended. Again, this participant researcher would point to a need to have a greater understanding of the culture of those from poverty and how to bridge the distance between the school culture and the home culture.

Further, data collected showed a need for additional supports for parents and students who are from poverty. If the school expects parents to play an important role in their child's education such as supporting homework completion, editing writing, filling

out forms, attending events, having a working knowledge of school expectations, etc., then it seems more support is needed for families experiencing poverty. Whether it is the parent's skill level, time constraints, language barriers, or some unidentified factor, many families were not feeling like they were able to adequately support their children from the home. While it might make sense to expect families to solve these issues themselves, it seems to this participant researcher that the onus for bridging these gaps lay with the professionals who are being paid to educate the students rather than the families that are already struggling. It is not that this participant researcher believes families have no responsibilities for the academic achievement of their students, but more the acknowledgement that all families are not equally prepared or able to give needed levels of support. When this becomes evident, it seems logical that the school has some responsibility for putting equalizers in place to allow all students a greater chance of academic success.

Interactions of Students

The school where this study took place is in a suburb of a major city in the Pacific Northwest. The school has just under the twenty-five percent of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch needed to be a Title One school. The school not only has a number of low income apartments in its attendance area, but also pulls students from affluent homes off the surrounding hills. This mix of socio-economic levels is evident at school events, the parent group and the support the school receives. However, it came to light during the study that students from poverty in the school may not be interacting in

meaningful ways with students from a range of classes. The participant researcher had not even thought to include questions to probe for this dynamic, assuming that students mingled in classrooms and on the playground with a variety of students. It had long been a topic of conversation that our Latino population, which is around sixteen percent, tended to cluster together in informal settings within the school such as on the playground and in the cafeteria. There often arises the question of whether this is healthy for them or whether teachers should follow their inclinations to try to encourage a range of playmates. With support from the ESL staff, the staff has come to understand there may be some very important, healthy reasons why students self-group in this way and that it does not need teacher intervention any more than we might try to insist that the white children make sure they have at least one friend of color. However, because free and reduced lunch status is a confidential demographic, it may not be as apparent how often children are grouping by socio-economic level.

While more research would be needed to confirm this trend, this participant researcher believes it is possible that even in a school of mixed socio-economic levels; students may be clustered with other academically struggling students from poverty in academic situations and self-clustering in informal settings within the school. In the opinion of this participant researcher, this may reflect a similar pattern spoken of by Tatum (1997) in “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria.” This could be further evidence that being from poverty functions for students like being from minority ethnic cultures.

Discussions about Poverty with Intermediate Students

Although this participant researcher has been a teacher for over twenty-five years and has demonstrated an ability to discuss a wide range of topics both educational and personal with students, including issues of race, discussing being from poverty with study participants was a challenge. First, the term poverty was not familiar to all students. Students were cooperative in learning about the topic and hearing people's life stories, but it was difficult to know if they were also applying the term to their own lives. While numerous comments over the course of the study showed that students had an understanding of people who were financially better off than their families were, or even a sense of injustice about some things that were not available to them due to financial constraints, there was a general lack of identifying as being students from poverty. Time and again, the researcher journal reflected the need to bring real life examples into discussions because students seemed unable to discuss the topic of poverty in the abstract. In addition, students seemed to be less open to discussing their home lives and families than their school lives. Near the end of the study the participant researcher reflected in her field journal,

“ I may have raised students' awareness of their educational risk because they are students from poverty, but will this prove to be a positive force in their life or a negative one? I can see how the information could either be a discouragement or allow for informed choices. I reflected quite a bit on other situations that might be comparable: racism, medical conditions, health practices. In many instances in our society, we attempt

to inform people about their risks in the hopes that they can make healthy decisions. As we know, that does not always work, but we see the attempts at prevention as worthwhile. To me, this seems similar. I believe the statistics clearly show students from this population to be at greater risk for school failure. My hope is that by exposing that risk to them they can avoid it and take control over it rather than be the unwitting victims of it. I worry that there is a chance for it to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Only time will tell for these thirteen students.” (Rector, 2014, field journal notes.)

This excerpt shows some of the thinking of the participant researcher during the study. However, final interviews with students and families showed that many of these worries were likely unfounded. Students and families expressed positive feelings toward both the study experience and the participant researcher. While it is difficult to tell if these conversations about being from poverty will have any outcome on students’ academic lives, the overall experience of being in the study appeared to be a positive experience. In fact, students and parents from the study continued to feel connected to the participant researcher after the end of the study and give updates when chance meetings occur. Again, like other cultural diversity work discusses, although there may be discomfort, there are valid reasons for teachers and students to examine these sensitive issues.

Conscientization

Of all the areas explored in the study, this area is the most challenging in terms of coming to conclusions. Conscientization is both an awareness of one's position in society and then the ability to affect change based on this awareness. Most students showed little awareness or understanding about being from poverty. Even the term "poverty" was problematic. Specific examples of issues due to a lack of funds were more readily understood. In addition, the life stories of others who have come from poverty, both in person and in video form, seemed to have the most impact on students and allowed them to make connection to their own lives. Activities that involved statistics about poverty or discussions about poverty on a macro level were more challenging for students to stay engaged in. Further, while the start of conscientization may be possible as early as third grade, a study of this duration was not able to show definitive conclusions about conscientization. The general impression of the participant researcher was that the older the student, the more understanding they had of these issues. This understanding came more from silences and a lack of off topic comments and questions than from actual comments made. The participant researcher currently believes that it will likely take until the end of the study participants' K-12 education to know if true conscientization occurred. With the limited observations she is able to make as students stop by and check in, some seem on a solid path to high school graduation at the time of writing. At least one student that she is currently aware of is struggling significantly with homework completion in middle school and is struggling to pass many of her classes. Although this student is not currently meeting school expectations, it is still possible that

this is more of a conscious choice or that she has a clearer understanding of the possible implications for her future than she might have had without participation in the study. It is also possible that study participation had little to no impact on her established educational course.

Limitations of the Study

The nature of an ethnographic study is that the results cannot claim to be replicable. Another participant researcher even with a similar set of students may come to different conclusions because the ethnography is unique to each setting and set of participants. In addition, this study was done in a suburb of a major city in the Pacific Northwest so a similar study in a different region of the country or in an inner city school might have different results. Although all students in the study qualified for free and reduced lunch, the specific level of poverty of the student study participants could also impact results of the study.

The power of this study is in increasing the understanding of students and families from poverty and their school experience. This study also may offer some possible approaches for improving the school experience of students and families from poverty. The participant researcher cannot claim to have uncovered all of the possible issues involved for student and families from poverty or all the possible approaches to better support them. Its usefulness is limited to the conclusions of the participant researcher and the future value of trying suggested approaches to improve the school's ability to communicate with and respond to students and families.

Recommendations for Future Research

Adding a longitudinal element to this study design might give the field more information about the impact of these conversations about being from poverty. In addition, repeated groups of a similar nature might give students more exposure to these ideas about how to navigate the education system even if a student's family is experiencing poverty. One of the possible benefits to having similar groups of this nature is to make explicit what schools often take for granted, giving students from poverty the ability to problem solve about how to achieve similar results by looking for alternative paths or supports.

Implications for Teacher Education and Teacher Practice

Teacher education.

Explicit teaching about families from poverty and how they might be experiencing school should be included in both teacher development programs and ongoing professional development for practicing teachers. Conversations with teachers during the course of the study showed that many teachers seem to approach families from a middle class perspective and this may cause them to make judgments or have expectations that do not promote positive relationships. This participant researcher would suggest that these trainings be included in the diversity work currently being done, but that it should be a distinct topic covered and examined for both similarities and differences to other types of cultures and background experiences. Like any other diversity work, courses

would need to pay special attention to stereotypes and overgeneralizations that could lead to an oversimplified understanding of issues of poverty.

Teacher practices.

Specifically, this participant researcher suggests that teachers be encouraged to engage in culturally responsive teaching and that the experience of poverty be considered. Teachers should examine their own culture and position in society. Then they should examine their own beliefs and assumptions about students and families from poverty. They should work to continually broaden their understanding of different cultures and backgrounds, including those who come from poverty. By examining these issues, it is hoped that teachers will be able to have a better understanding of families from poverty and be able to minimize judgments of families and find alternative ways of interacting with them. Of even more importance, they should carefully learn about the current cultures and situations of the children in their room each year. If a teacher comes from poverty, finding appropriate ways to share their story and journey may allow students from poverty to broaden their view of the future. If a teacher is not from poverty, finding other ways to bring these stories into the classroom through film, text or visitors could also be done. During the study groups it seemed that the narratives of others who came from poverty had the greatest impact on students emotionally and seemed to promote thoughtful engagements. It's important that teachers make sure that their students and their experiences are represented in respectful ways in the curriculum and the classroom. This participant researcher suggests that special effort be made to

build relationships with the families of students who are struggling to find success. From the experience of contacting families for participation in the study, it seemed that families needed multiple contacts to be able to respond. If the school system relies on families to contact them with concerns or to sign up independently for conferences, families from poverty may consistently be the families that go unheard and unsupported. Families of stronger students tend to seek teachers with confidence.

Generally, the recommendations for teacher practice are applicable to all struggling students, not only those who have experienced or are experiencing poverty. In the classroom, teachers should focus on building relationships with their most struggling students. They should look for ways to make the learning relevant and help students make connections to the value of education and its potential for future success. Interviews with students showed that only a few had beginning ideas of the potential usefulness of education for their future. Knowledge of the experiences of students in poverty can add to the teacher's ability to meet the needs of all of their students. Activities that promote critical thinking should be a regular part of the curriculum, possibly including the impact of societal systems on social class. Teachers should help students to set meaningful goals, evaluate their progress and adjust goals as needed. Goals should reflect the student's priorities toward what they wish to accomplish rather than reflect the teacher's desires for them. If families have little to no experience with the pathways of academic success, it may be hard for them to support their students in making realistic, attainable goals. Teachers should give frequent, honest, non-judgmental feedback to students about their progress.

During instruction, students from poverty may benefit from the increased use of visuals and specific teaching of vocabulary. Because of the possible lack of cultural capital, students may need frequent checks for understanding. It may be helpful to bring additional information about content topics rather than assuming all students have had common experiences. As one parent pointed out, many common experiences may not be accessible to families with limited funds. Teachers should look for student strengths and provide avenues for them to use those skills. Teachers should plan for and allow time for the teaching of “soft” skills such as explicit teaching of work routines, homework completion, or organizational skills. Further they may need to have specific instruction in school appropriate behavior, verbal interactions with authority figures and routines at home that support schooling. In interviews, it became clear that supporting students with homework completion was a struggle for many of the study families. It is important that teachers work to present these skills in non-judgmental ways, instead helping students to see why they might want to develop these skills, especially if these are not skills promoted in their home.

In interactions with the families, teachers should be the one to accept the responsibility for building relationship. It is important that teachers monitor their assumptions or judgments of families. These beliefs can come through in subtle ways in both what a person says and how they say it. Listen respectfully to what families are sharing, even if what they are sharing is out of your comfort zone. This sharing is a sign of trust and building relationship. Teachers should strive to give honest, non-judgmental information about the progress and ability of their student. As teachers give parents

student information, they should have helpful ideas ready for support at home. Again, with families not finding much success with homework, teachers may need to encourage activities that are readily understood or find effective ways to support parents in their understanding so they can, in turn, support their students. Teachers should be careful to not assume that families can follow through with suggestions in time, academic levels of adults, or energy. Families may find greater success if teachers provide supplies or materials, specific tasks, suggestions of when and how the tasks can be done and modeling of the task. If families are successful with supported tasks, teachers can expand the type of tasks requested. However, if evidence shows that families are not successful in providing support (lack of stickers on charts, lack of homework completion, lack of skill attainment), teachers should work to find alternative ways to support students within the school setting. This might include finding mentors, attending after school programs, or providing additional support from the teacher during class. The goal should be to allow equal access to academic success and to determine what equalizers may need to be put in place for students. It is worth noting that the participant researcher has most often heard these patterns of students and families explained by fellow teachers as students or families being “lazy” or a “lack of value for education.” There was no evidence of these types of attitudes in the interviews with parents or students. Instead, parents seemed to want for their students to do well but tended to either feel like they did not have the skills to support or had other pressing issues that acted as barriers. Teachers should keep in the forefront of their understanding that not all circumstances are equal. Teachers would do better to follow the data and keep trying different strategies until the results show that

students are making progress in academic achievement. It is also important to state that while these suggestions are likely helpful to all students, not just those from poverty, families who have more resources tend to have systems in place to be able to help their children find academic success. In a similar vein, students from poverty with adequate support systems will not necessarily become struggling students.

Finally, while the teacher's job is instruction, there is no reason that teachers cannot have community information available for families that might express a need. While teachers may rightfully think, "It's not my job," this sentiment serves little purpose in the life of students. It takes little time to find the name and number of an appropriate person to help the family find needed resources. It may be that a classroom teacher is the only person outside a student's family who sees a student frequently enough for the student and his needs to be known. However, teachers may find it helpful to examine their own life and set boundaries that keep them safe and at peace with themselves. This participant researcher encourages teachers to do what they can do, but to also realize that they will never be able to do it all.

Administrative support.

While an individual teacher can make a significant impact on their own practice, thereby affecting all students who come through their door, the impact for students from poverty increases if building or district administrators make understanding students from poverty a priority. Building or district administrators can schedule staff trainings around these topics. There may be some presenters or established staff development programs that are worth looking into, but much of this work could be done by finding articles or

guest speakers to bring issues of poverty into discussions held by the staff. Activities that encourage teachers to examine their beliefs and biases, especially with a view to those who come from poverty, would be powerful. Hearing the stories of those who came from poverty and how the school system impacted them could be enlightening. (This technique seemed especially powerful for the students in the study groups, so may also prove powerful with teachers.) Administrators could put in place policies of one hundred percent attendance at parent teacher conferences or at least for those students in the bottom quartile. Specific training or consensus building on what should be presented to parents during conferences might help teachers to explore better ways to support families who come from poverty, especially in light of the findings of Weininger and others (Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003). All aspects of a district's operation should be examined for accessibility for those who come from poverty and unintentional barriers that might be in place that make it more difficult for families from poverty to fully participate in the offerings of the schools.

Any examination of the research will show that students from poverty are not finding success in schools at the same rate as their middle class counterparts. These students deserve special consideration and a greater understanding from our school systems. It is our responsibility to find ways to interact with students and families in their current situation rather than expecting them to be able to conform to middle class standards that may not even be explicitly communicated. The hope is that by improving

our level of understanding about students and families from poverty, we can find culturally responsive ways to improve their academic outcomes.

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Appendix A

Student Survey

Dear student,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. The critical point of this study is to understand how the teacher, the student and the parents see this issue. I appreciate your time in filling out the survey below and look forward to working with you for the next few weeks.

1. How are you doing in school? Why do you think this is the case?

2. What do you think would help you to be more successful?

3. What kind of support do you get at home for your schooling?

4. Are you aware of any challenges or barriers you might have to finding academic success?

5. Who has tried to help you with your learning? What did they do? Did it help?

6. How does your teacher help or not help you?

7. What else would you like to tell me about yourself and your learning?

8. How do you feel about school?

Appendix B

Parent Survey

Dear parent,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. The critical point of this study is to understand how the teacher, the student and the parents see this issue. I appreciate your time in filling out the survey below and look forward to working with your child for the next few weeks.

1. In your opinion, how is your child doing in school?

2. What do you think would help your child to be more successful?

3. How do you support you child in their schooling? What challenges do you have to support your child?

4. Are you aware of any challenges or barriers your child might have to finding academic success?

5. Who has tried to help your child with their learning? What did they do? Did it help?

6. How does your child's teacher help or not help your child?

7. What else would you like to tell me about your child and their learning?

8. How do you feel about your child's school?

Appendix C

Teacher Survey

Dear Teacher,

Thank you for agreeing to contribute to my study. The critical point of this study is to understand the viewpoint of this issue from the perspective of the teacher, the student and the parents. I appreciate your time in filling out the survey below.

1. In your opinion, how is this child doing in school?

2. What do you think would lead to greater success for this student?

3. What role do you believe the parents play in supporting this student in their academic achievement?

4. Are you aware of any challenges or barriers to academic success for this student?

5. Can you share any interventions or services that may have been provided for the student?

6. How do you see your role as teacher in this student's life?

7. What else would you like to tell me about this student or their situation?

8. How do you feel about the student or their family?

Appendix D
End of Study Student Survey

Dear student,

Thank you for so much for your participation in my study. I know it difficult to have someone asking questions about your life and the life of your family and I sincerely appreciate your willingness to help me gain a greater understanding of the experience of students from poverty in our school. Below are a few questions that ask you to reflect on the study experience. Thanks again for taking the time to share your thoughts.

1. What did you think of your participation in this study?

2. What was the best thing that happened during your time with me?

3. What was your greatest concern about this experience?

4. Do you learn something about yourself or your family that you would like to share?

5. Please share any final thoughts about the study or your school experience.

Appendix E
End of Study Parent Survey

Dear Parents,

Thank you for so much for the time and support you have given me during my study. I know it difficult to have someone asking questions about your life and the life of your child and I sincerely appreciate your willingness to help me gain a greater understanding of the experience of students from poverty in my school. Below are a few questions that ask you to reflect on the study experience. Thanks again for taking the time to share your thoughts.

1. What did you think of your child participating in this study?

2. What was the best thing that happened during their time with me?

3. What was your greatest concern about this experience?

4. Do you learn something about your child or yourself that you would like to share?

5. Please share any final thoughts about the study or your child's school experience.

Appendix F
End of Study Teacher Survey

Dear teacher,

Thank you for so much for your willingness to help with my study. I know it is difficult to find time for extra things in the course of your busy day and I sincerely appreciate your willingness to help me gain a greater understanding of the experience of students from poverty in our school. Below are a few questions that ask you to reflect on the study experience. Thanks again for taking the time to share your thoughts.

1. What did you think of your participation in this study?

2. Do you see any change in student performance, behavior or attitude during the course of this study?

3. Did the study have any impact on you or your relationship with the student that you are aware of?

4. Please share any final thoughts about the study or this experience.

Appendix G

Guiding Interview Questions

Teacher Interview

1. What do you most enjoy about _____? (student)
2. What do you worry about the most for this student?
3. What do you know about their home life?
4. Do you think this student knows what it takes to be successful in school? Can you share specific examples?
5. Do you think there is adequate school support at home?
6. Have you ever been to their home or have an idea about where they live?
7. What else would you like to share about this student or their family?

Student Interview

1. What do you think of school?
2. What do you think of your teacher?
3. What do you think of the kids at school?
4. Who are your friends? Why are they your friends?
5. What do you think it takes for students to be successful in school?
6. Do you know any students that you think are successful?
7. How are you alike or different than the successful student you mentioned?
8. Do you think you could become a top student? Why or why not?
9. What do you wish the teachers knew or understood about you or your family?
10. What is your biggest challenge in school?
11. What are you proud of when it comes to school?

Parent Interview

1. What was your school experience like?
2. How often do you come to school? How do you feel when you come to the school?
3. How do you feel about your child's teacher?
4. Do you go to parent teacher conferences and how is that experience?
5. Do you feel you are doing the best you can to support your child in school? Give specific examples.
6. What do you wish the teachers knew or understood about your child or your family?
7. What is the biggest challenge for you to be able to help your child with learning?
8. What are you very proud of about your child or your family?

Appendix H
Parent Introduction Letter

Dear Parents,

Hello, my name is Shiela Rector. I have been a teacher at Mabel Rush Elementary for over 20 years. I am also a doctoral student at Portland State University. My passion is learning about students from poverty and what schools can do to help them be more successful. I myself was a student from poverty and while I did well in school, many of my brothers and sisters did not. I have always known they were as smart as I was, but they did not successfully complete high school. As a teacher, I have seen this same trend of students struggling to find success in school. I want to know why. I want to understand how the schools could better meet their needs. So, as part of my doctoral work, I am doing a research study group.

This group will be made up of students from third through fifth grade. The study group will meet as an after school club for ten weeks. The club will be called "School Voices". On the back of this letter are the planned activities for the group. We will have discussions about what their school experience is like. I want to know what they think and feel about school. I want to know if they have any ideas about how we as a school system could be doing it better. I want to know if they can think about their experience and choose what kind of student they would like to be. I understand that talking about these issues can be a very private thing. These discussions about school and home could be somewhat sensitive. I have found that by the third grade, most students are already well aware of how they compare to other students in their class in a variety of ways. However, if your child is still unaware maybe this group is not a good fit for them. I don't want to make any kids uncomfortable. I believe allowing children to talk openly and honestly about their experience has great potential to help us as a school system to better understand their experience and their needs. I personally have a driving desire to understand as these issues continue to affect my extended family today. If you are interested in you and your child being a part of this work, please send in their name of the attached form. Submitting your child's name will give the district office permission to release certain demographic information to me such as your child's grades, test scores and free and reduced lunch status. Not all students who are interested will fit the criteria of this study. You will be contacted with further information and for specific consent if your child is selected to be in the study. The study will include only 10-15 students. If you would like to ask more questions before submitting their name, please contact me at 503-554-4495 (school) or 503-852-6069 (home). I am excited to begin this work and get to know you and your child better. Thank you for your interest.

(Return this portion to Mrs. Rector)

Yes, I am interested in having my child _____ participate in this study. I understand that Mrs. Rector will have access to my child's file and school information.

Signature

Date

I am interested in learning more about this study before making a decision. Please contact me.

Name

Phone number

Student's name

Appendix I

Lesson Plan Outline for Research Group

Week 1- My story, my family's story and what my research is about. Students are encouraged to share about their families, who lives with them, who is important to them, what they like best about their families and what make their family unique.

Week 2- Our homes, what home routines look like, how many books we have, whether we like books, whether we like school, who we like at school, why? Is school important to us? Why or why not? Guest speaker of someone who came from poverty and now has college degree.

Week 3- What do the homes of "good" students look like? What do their home routines look like? How are our routines the same or different? (I may invite a guest speaker in or ask a parent if we can interview them and maybe use a video of their home so I can show it to open this discussion.) The goal is a conversation starter, not overgeneralization.

Week 4- Computer research of jobs, salaries and education needed. Make a list of these to keep.

Week 5- Visit to George Fox College.

Week 6- Discuss visit to college and what we have learned about ourselves so far. Guest speaker of someone who has come from poverty and now is on another path.

Week 7- Looking at school culture and home cultures. Consider the implications of being bi-cultural.

Week 8- Why aren't we more successful in school? What is within our control to change? What is not? Is it important to us? Why or why not?

Week 9- What are the implications of this study? What do we want our teachers/parents to know about us? Where do we want to go from here?

Appendix J Summary Sheet

Element	Student _____
Reports nightly homework	
Talks about supplies	
Talks about adult support (Broad definition)	
Talks about feeling able to do the work	
Signs of positive attitude	
Signs of knowing how to get help from school if needed	
Signs of primary caregivers able to help with work	
Does the student perceive themselves as being different?	
How do they feel about school?	
How do they feel about their teachers?	
Do they have a sense of being in control of their education?	
Do they have a sense of what other students do/have that allows them to be successful?	
How does the teacher perceive this student?	
How does the teacher perceive this family?	
Do state tests shed any light on school performance?	
What does this family think about the student's school	

experience?	
How do these parents feel about the teacher?	
What were the parent's school experience?	
What kind of school support is available at home?	
How did the student feel about the study group experience?	
What did the parent feel about the study group experience?	
What did the teacher feel about the study group experience?	
Specific signs of conscientization	