Teacher Preparation for Working with Students of Low Socio-Economic Status

By

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Proposal submitted to Dr. Nick Scarfo

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In Canada, at least one in ten children currently live in poverty (Canadian Teacher’s Federation, 2010). Therefore, thousands of children in our school system are of low socio-economic status, and likely struggle to afford life’s basic necessities such as food or clothing. Alternatively teachers, due to their profession, earn a salary that allows for most to live well above the poverty line, and therefore a lifestyle more privileged than many of the students that they teach. In order to understand how teachers can best prepare themselves to teach students of low socio-economic status, this research study aims to learn, through semi-structured interviews with current teachers, what specific factors new teachers need to be aware of when working with students of low socio-economic status; what teachers do within their classroom to be sensitive to these factors; and what they have learned about teaching students of low socio-economic status through their experiences.
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the Research Study

In Canada, 11.3% of children live in poverty (Canadian Teacher’s Federation, 2010). However, as there is no one definition for the term ‘poverty,’ it is likely that many more children live in circumstances that would definitely be considered as living in poor or low socio-economic status (SES), even if they do not fit the definition of poverty as it is defined in certain studies. From this information alone, it is evident that teachers working in Canadian public schools will teach students of low-SES at some point in their career, if not at all times.

In 2006, a single person living in Canada was considered to be in low-income if they earned below $15,179, while a family of four was considered low income if they earned below $30,358 (Zhang, 2010). As starting salaries for teachers start at just over $30,000 across Canada, it is evident that given their profession, teachers in Canada are privileged to earn a salary that should allow for most to live a middle class lifestyle.

From the above information, one can conclude that most teachers in Canadian schools do not live in poverty or low-SES, and therefore do not experience first hand what it is like to live in such circumstances. Given the challenges that come with living in these circumstances, it would appear that most teachers would need some education or background looking into the types of challenges that students of low-SES face. Given this fact, I feel it is important to investigate the factors that teachers should be aware of when teaching students of low-SES, so that I, and others, can be aware of the challenges these
TEACHING STUDENTS OF LOW-SES students face, and so that we can understand how to best meet the needs of the students we teach.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify the specific factors teachers need to be aware of when working with students of low-SES, and to understand what current educators are doing to be sensitive to these factors so that new educators can better understand how they can prepare themselves for teaching this group of students. As students of low-SES face many challenges in their daily lives, it is important for their classroom teachers to know what these challenges are and how to account for them in their teaching in order to best meet the needs of this group of students.

As a teacher candidate, I am aware that I will be entering the teaching profession with very different life experiences than those of my students. Hopefully, by understanding how well teachers feel they are prepared to work with this group of students; what they do within their classroom to be sensitive to these issues; and what they have learned from working with low-SES students; this research will help new teachers and educators in the field become better prepared to teach students of low-SES.

1.3 Research Questions

The main questions my research will aim to answer is as follows:

1. What specific factors do teachers need to be aware of when working with students of low socio-economic status?

2. What do teachers do within their classroom to be sensitive to these factors in order to best meet the needs of this group of students?

I am also curious to learn what ethical implications/considerations should be taken into account when teaching that account for the specific challenges that this this group of
students face. For example, is it ethically wrong to discuss one’s trip to Europe, or to use pasta to make necklaces, when students cannot afford to eat?

1.4 Background of the Researcher

As a future teacher who is female, Caucasian, and of upper-middle class background, I am aware that I will be entering the teaching profession with certain biases that will hinder my ability to relate to and understand many of the students I teach. While I am aware that I will need to take extra considerations to accommodate the needs of students who are of low-SES, I wonder how educators can be expected to do this if they themselves have never understood the challenges that students of low-SES face on a daily basis. Despite being aware of the biases that I bring into teaching due to my economic status, I find it difficult to constantly be aware of the assumptions I have, which are so ingrained in my subconscious. For example, while I understand that some of my students may arrive to class hungry, if I am not always hungry myself, will I always remember to be considerate of this fact all the time? I have come to wonder: How can teachers who are not of low-SES be conscious and considerate of the needs of students of low-SES if they themselves have never experienced such a standard of living? How well prepared are teachers to teach students of low-SES, what factors do they need to be aware of when entering the teaching profession, and what can we do to best meet the needs of this group of students? I think that the questions this research aims to answer will not only be of importance to me (the researcher), but to many educators who will be and are teachers of students of low-SES.

1.5 Overview

Chapter 1 of my research paper includes the introduction to my research study, the purpose of the study, the research questions, and how I came to be involved in this
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topic of study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature, which will look and the
incidence of poverty and students of low-SES in Canada, as well as specific factors that
affect this group of students. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedure that will
be used in this study including information about the sample participants and data
collection instruments, as well as the ethical review procedures and limitations. Chapter 4
presents the findings from the study, discussing the common themes that came up from
the interviews with my participants. This paper concludes with Chapter 5, connecting the
findings with the literature, implications, recommendations, limitations, and provides
suggestions on where to focus future research on the subject. References and a list of
appendixes follow at the end.
In order to understand the specific factors that teachers need to be aware of when working with students of low socio-economic status, and what teachers do within their classroom to be sensitive to these factors, it is important to first define the term low-SES, and understand the prevalence of it within Canadian schools. Only by first understanding the issues we are discussing, can we then understand how low-SES affects student performance in school, and why it is important for teachers to be aware of and sensitive to these challenges.

2.1 Low Socio-Economic Status

2.1.1 Definition

In Canada, there is no ‘official’ poverty line (Zhang, 2010). This makes defining and discussing poverty, low-income, and low socio-economic status difficult, as each one means slightly different things to different people. For example, in 2006 a single person living in Canada was considered to be in low-income if they earned below $15,179, while a family of four was considered low-income if they earned below $30,358 (Zhang, 2010). Does this mean that a family of four would NOT be considered low income if they made $40,000, lived paycheck to paycheck, had to use food banks to survive, and could not afford life’s basic necessities such as clothing or medical care? How does this term differ from what is considered to be poverty or low-SES? Each of these definitions is calculated in a precise way, according to specific factors. The difficulty with providing a specific definition to these terms is that the thousands of families who fall just above this ‘criteria for judgment’ are not considered in the statistics, despite living in dire conditions.
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What all these terms do have in common, however, is that people who fall under them would likely be considered poor by most standards. People of low-SES, those living in poverty, and those of low-income struggle to afford food, clothing, or shelter, never mind being able to afford things many of us take for granted such as birthday gifts or opportunities for vacations. For the purpose of this paper, my definition of low-SES will include people who live in poverty, low-income, or any family who struggle to afford life’s necessities.

2.1.2 Prevalence in Canadian Schools

Assuming for this paper that low-SES will include the terms poverty and low-income, it becomes difficult to pinpoint an exact percentage of students living in low-SES in Canada, because, as stated before, these terms refer to varying degrees of the same issue. In 2010, “Canada’s after-tax child poverty rate…stalled at 11.3%” (Canadian Teachers Federation 2010). More recently, according to Campaign 2000, poverty statistics in Canada reveal that 14.6 per cent of children in Ontario live in poverty (Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Ontario, 2012, as cited in Ontario Common Front, 2012). Regardless of the exact percentage, from these statistics alone we can conclude that at least one in ten children are living in low-SES in Canada, while the reality is that this number is likely much greater when we consider those falling just above the poverty line, and the working-poor. From the literature on child poverty and low-SES in Canada, teachers in Canada can be certain that they will teach students of low-SES in their classrooms.

2.1.3 Impact on Learning

Since teachers can be sure that they will teach students of low-SES in their classrooms, they need to understand the impact that these circumstances will likely have
on children and their education, in order to be sensitive to challenges they face and account for them in their teaching. Literature on child poverty is full of research on the negative effects that low-SES has on children’s schooling and academic achievement (Taylor, 2005) (Pellino, 2006) (Canadian Teachers Federation, 2010). According to the Canadian Teachers Federation (2010),

Low-income children experience reduced motivation to learn, delayed cognitive development, lower achievement, less participation in extra-curricular activities, lower career aspirations, interrupted school attendance, lower university attendance, an increased risk of illiteracy, and higher drop-out rates (p. 3)

In addition, teachers may find that students of low-SES are less likely to concentrate, focus, complete assignments, study for tests, or come to school as prepared to learn because circumstances at home (Pellino, 2006) (Taylor, 2005). They may also be “unwilling or unable to interact with peers and/or adults in school in an effective manner” (Pellino, 2006, p. 2), possibly related to the fact that children of low-SES are exposed to greater levels of violence, more aggressive peers, and families under financial stress (Evans, 2004). These factors not only affect children of low-SES, but can create an impact on the entire classroom as teacher’s struggle to meet the needs of this specific group of students.

Unfortunately, these are not the only challenges that children of low-SES face. Poor health and poor nutrition are common in children of poverty, and many students of low-SES receive inadequate healthcare and suffer from malnourishment (Prince & Howard, 2002). In addition, “many children who are poor experience hunger on a daily basis” (Prince & Howard, 2002, p. 28). These factors are important for teachers to be aware of for multiple reasons.

Of course, ensuring the wellbeing of the children we teach is of primary concern for educators. Not only is it morally right to ensure that the students we teach are
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receiving the proper care they need, but it is also our legal obligation in Canada to
Certainly guaranteeing that students are being properly cared for will come before all
academic goals, however it is important to understand the impact that malnourishment
and hunger can have on students of low-SES in the classroom setting.

According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1998), all humans have five
basic needs: physiological, safety, belonging and love, self-esteem, and self-actualization
(in that order). Maslow (1998) states that only once lower level needs are fulfilled can
one even begin to perceive the needs that follow. Self-actualization, the highest level, can
be described as “the need to develop one’s common potential and unique talent at the
highest possible level of growth and achievement” (Harper et al., 2003, p. 12), arguably
what educators strive to help all of their students achieve in all areas of school. However,
this can only be attained once the other four needs have been met.

This is important for teachers to be aware of, as according to Maslow (1998),
students cannot be expected to reach their highest academic potential unless all other
needs are being met. Yet unfortunately when teaching students of low-SES, it can be a
challenge to ensure that they have even their most basic needs such as food, clothing, and
shelter fulfilled, as “children who are poor, particularly those experiencing long-term
poverty, often come to school with many of what Maslow refers to as basic needs
unfulfilled” (Lewis, 1994, as cited by Prince & Howard, 2002, p. 28). As teachers, this is
important to realize, as we cannot expect students to perform academically to the best of
their ability if they are hungry, cold, or worried about where they are going to sleep that
night. Therefore, educators must ensure that these needs are being met so that the
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students they teach have the supports in place to be able to reach the highest level of academic success.

Yet even when these basic needs are met, children of low-SES face the additional challenge of fulfilling their other needs such as the need for safety, and the need for belonging and love (Prince & Howard, 2002). This can result from the fact that families living in low-income households often live in environments that are less safe, and have poor living conditions. Therefore, in

Their quest to fulfill their need for safety, many children who are poor and live in dangerous environments develop behaviors that are counterproductive in educational settings. The child’s refusal or inability to disregard his survival instincts places him at serious risk for academic failure (Prince & Howard, 2002, p. 30).

Additionally, “as the hardships intensify, parents [of low-SES] tend to become less nurturing and more inconsistent with discipline and punishment” (Prince & Howard, 2002, p. 30) which can result in children of low-SES feeling as if they do not belong or are unloved. For teachers, this is significant as it outlines the importance for them to create a classroom environment where students feel as if they are loved and belong. Only by feeling this way can students then move on to develop their self-esteem and self-actualization, eventually leading to school success.

2.2 Related Factors

2.2.1 Negative Public Attitude/ Stereotypes

Unfortunately, an additional factor that contributes to the challenges that students of low-SES face is that the public (and teachers) often hold negative attitudes and stereotypes towards those living in poverty (Cholewa, Mixon, & Amatea, 2012) (Hughes, 2010) (Garza & Garza, 2010) (Conner, 2010). Through this type of deficit lens, teachers “identify family and student dysfunction as the primary reason for students’ educational
TEACHING STUDENTS OF LOW-SES and social problems” (Hyland & Heuschkel, 2010; Lea, 2004, as cited by Cholewa, Mixon, & Amatea, 2012, p. 802) (Hughes, 2010). Sato and Lensmire (2009) discuss how even teacher education on students of low-SES can perpetuate these stereotypes, citing the work of Ruby Payne, a high-profile teacher educator who provides workshops in Canada and the United States on educating teachers about the needs and characteristics of children living in poverty.

Payne, in her book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005) reinforces a number of stereotypes about children living in poverty, stating that they make angry vulgar comments, physically fight due to inappropriate language skills, cannot follow directions, are disorganized, and cheat or steal due to weak support systems at home (Payne, 2005, as cited by Sato & Lensmire, 2009). These ideas frame poverty from a deficit perspective, instead of looking for ways that teachers can use students cultural and lived experiences as a way to form connections with them and deepen understanding (Gay, 2000, as cited by Sato & Lensmire, 2009). Another example of viewing poverty from a deficit perspective is illustrated by Pollock et al. (2013), who discuss a case study where teachers view parents of those who live in poverty as unavailable or disinterested in their children’s schooling. However, this assumes that parents do not want to be involved, instead of looking deeper into the reality that with poverty come additional challenges (such as struggling to provide food or shelter) which may take priority over communication with teachers.

Parents of students of low-SES are aware of such stereotypes, and can be self-conscious about not being able to afford school trips or supplies, and “often report feeling intimidated when entering into school structures and are often disinclined to respond positively to invitations from teachers to engage in communication…” (Lawson, 2003;
To address this issue, it is important for teachers to realize these facts, and understand that students and parents of low-SES require more “warmth and support” (Brophy, 1988, p. 257) from them, in order to address this issue.

While many teachers do not hold such views, it is important for teachers to understand the impact that negative public opinion and stereotypes about students might have on their willingness to participate and engage in school. Conner (2010) discusses the need for teacher education programs to challenge stereotypes that pre-service teachers hold towards low-income youth, in order to help future teachers identify the stereotypes they hold and to prevent them from reinforcing stereotypes or making assumptions about those they teach.

### 2.2.2 Relationship between Minority and Low-SES

While living in low-SES has many negative influences on school achievement and success, it is often not the only factor teachers need to take into consideration. Taylor (2005), Pellino (2006), Hughes (2010), and the Canadian Teachers Federation (2010) all discuss the relationship between poverty and minority students. One in two children from families of new immigrants live in low-SES, as do one in two Aboriginal children (Canadian Teachers Federation, 2010). In addition, children of colour have a greater chance of living in poverty (Ontario Common Front, 2012).

This can make it difficult to isolate the challenges that children living in poverty face, as their struggles cannot be separated from their possible relationship to the challenges surrounding issues relating to living as a minority. In fact, none of the literature discussed the different challenges that those living in poverty, and minorities face, and instead just discussed them together.
This is one of the factors I hope to isolate in my research. Despite that fact that in the literature low-SES and minorities are often discussed together when it comes to education, this is not my goal. While these factors may be related when it comes to school success and involvement and achievement in schools, this paper seeks to isolate students living in low-SES circumstances. This is not to undermine the challenges of minority students, but by being aware that the challenges associated with low-SES does often occur in conjunction with additional struggles, educators can be aware of some of the many factors that affect student learning and school success.

2.2.3 Teacher Education

As teachers, given their salary, are likely not of low-SES, it is important for them to understand the challenges that students of low-SES face in order to account for these challenges in their teaching. Much of the literature discusses the importance for teacher education programs to specifically teach about the challenges students of low-SES face (Conner, 2010) (Cholewa, Mixon, & Amatea, 2012) (Hughes, 2010). By challenging the beliefs of pre-service teachers, teacher education programs can contribute to abolishing teacher-stereotypes about families of low-SES (Cholewa, Mixon, & Amatea, 2012). Conner (2010) also discusses the importance for providing pre-service teachers with opportunities to work with students and understand their challenges, so that they can attempt to overcome their personal biases for the benefits of their students.

Unfortunately, aside from these factors, none of the literature discussed specific challenges that students of low-SES encounter that teachers and pre-service teachers should be aware of when working with these students. This is the information that I believe would be most helpful for teachers to be aware of, and one of the things I hope to uncover in my research. By understanding not just the biases that I hold within myself,
but also the specific challenges that students of low-SES within my classroom face, I hope to enter the teaching profession with knowledge of the specific factors teachers need to be aware of when working with students of low socio-economic status, such as not having money for field trips, or running shoes to participate in gym class, and what I can do within my classroom to be sensitive to these factors. This is where I have identified a current gap in the literature on students of low-SES, and where I hope to target my research.

2.3 Impact on teacher stress/ burnout

Lastly, it is interesting to note the relationship between teaching students of low-SES and the high incidence of teacher stress and burnout (Vanderslice, 2010) (Sato & Lensmire, 2009) (O’Donnell, Lambert, & McCarthy, 2008). Teaching, in and of itself, is often considered a stressful job, with half of teachers leaving the field within their first five years teaching (Pas, Bradshaw, & Hershfeldt, 2010). This can be attributed to a number of factors, including teachers feeling unprepared or inexperienced, teachers feeling as if they have excessive job demands, or if they feel that they do not have the support of other staff and administration (Pas, et. al., 2010).

While these factors can affect teachers in all schools, is interesting to note that “teacher turnover is 50% higher in high-poverty schools than in low poverty schools” (Ingersoll, 2001, as cited in Vanderslice, 2010, p. 300). This may be a result of teachers feeling unprepared or inexperienced teaching students of low-SES, or have to do with the relationship between students of low-SES and poor performance in school, thus creating more job demands on the part of the teacher. Alternatively, teachers in high-poverty schools may feel that they need more support from staff and administration in order to meet the various challenges that students of low-SES face.
Another possible explanation for greater teacher burnout in schools with higher proportions of students living in poverty could be related to the fact that teachers feel more confident and a decreased level of demand when student achievement scores are higher (O’Donnell et. al., 2008). As previously explained, students of low-SES do not perform as well academically as peers of higher-SES. Therefore, teachers in schools with high levels of poverty are more likely to have poor school achievement scores, and therefore feel greater levels of stress.

To address the issue of teacher burnout and reduce the stress teachers experience when teaching students of low-SES, the literature recommends a number of strategies. Firstly, by receiving support from administration or mentors within their school, teachers report feeling more prepared and better supported to meet the needs of students of low-SES (Vanderslice, 2010). In addition, by hiring teachers who are knowledgeable about the factors that contribute to low-SES, and providing ongoing teacher training on the subject, administrators can ensure that those that they are bringing into the school are prepared to meet the challenges faced by these students. By understanding the challenges associated with teaching students of low-SES and some of the factors that contribute to teacher stress, educators and administrators can recognize and address these issues to prevent burnout. In doing this, teachers and administrators can better prepare themselves to effectively teach students of low-SES.
3.1 Procedure

This Masters of Teaching Research Project was conducted to meet the course requirements required by the University of Toronto to graduate from the program. Prior to conducting my interviews with participants, a literature review of children living in poverty in Canada was conducted to understand the scope of child poverty in Canada, and to the importance of conducting research about students of low-SES. This information helped to define poverty and low-SES, for the purpose of discussing it throughout my study. In addition, it will help readers understand the prevalence of poverty in Canada, and why this study is important. It also outlined current challenges students of low-SES face, and what teachers understand about children living in these circumstances. The sources of this literature review consist of scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles.

After conducting a literature review, I compiled a series of 10-15 questions (See Appendix A) to be used for the purpose of conducting face-to-face interviews with eligible participants, with the goal of eliciting information regarding their beliefs and practices about working with students of low-SES. I hoped to learn about their feelings of preparedness for working with students of low-SES, what they have learned from their experience teaching, and what they do to accommodate the needs of this group of students.

After completing my questions, I conducted qualitative research by engaging in 2 face-to-face interviews with consenting educators working in public schools in Toronto. Participants were selected based on their teaching experience, the likelihood that they will have worked with students of low SES, and their availability to participate in the research study. Each interview was audio recorded.
Upon completion of the interviews, each interview was transcribed and analyzed based on how they relate to themes regarding students of low SES including: teaching strategies to accommodate the needs of these students, beliefs about these students, challenges they face, and ethical considerations that should be taken into account. This information will be discussed in Chapter 4- Findings.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection:

The instruments of data collection used in this research study consisted of informal, face-to-face interviews with 2 consenting participants. These interviews centered on participants experiences teaching students of low SES, and challenges they have experienced when teaching this unique group of students. Interview questions included information on participants experiences teaching, their background, and challenges they were aware of and have identified by working with students of low SES (See Appendix A). Samples of the questions include:

- How would you describe your current level of economic well-being?
- Do you believe your socioeconomic-status influences/ impacts your teaching? If so, in what way?
- Can you describe a specific teaching experience where extra considerations were required in order to accommodate students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds?

These questions allowed for participants to share their experiences and beliefs about teaching students of low-SES, due to the nature of interviews. Interviews are a successful form of data collection, as they allow researchers to gather authentic, qualitative data from people working in the field.
3.3 Participants

As previously mentioned, participants for this study were selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, two participants were selected, as it is important to interview more than one person in order to identify common themes and gain a variety of different perspectives on the topic. Unfortunately, no more than two participants were selected, as, due to the nature of this study, interviews, data collection, and analyzing of interviews is time consuming and thus limited the number of participants I could interview.

Participants were selected based on their experience teaching, and the likelihood that they would have worked with students of low SES. This is important, as new teachers would likely not have as much experience teaching students of low SES as a teacher with more experience would have had, and teachers working in upper class neighbourhoods or private schools would not have had as great a likelihood of working with students of low SES. This is important for my study, as I hope to learn from my participants what teachers of low SES students feel is important for them to be aware of when teaching students of low SES, and what challenges they have encountered when doing so.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

After conducting the interviews with 2 public school teachers, I transcribed their interviews verbatim. These interviews were then read and reviewed in an attempt to find common themes within the interviews. For example, educator beliefs about teaching students of low SES, practices within the classroom to accommodate students of low SES, challenges teaching students of low SES, and advice for new teachers were investigated. These themes will be identified, and then passages that share common
themes will be highlighted and colour coordinated for ease of data analysis and discussion.

After identifying the main themes discussed in the interviews, I will then re-examine the current literature to identify areas of overlap or disagreement. These factors will then be discussed in Chapter 4: Findings.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

In this research project, I followed the ethical review procedures outlined by the Masters of Teaching program at the University of Toronto. This involved sending my participants a consent letter (See Appendix B) prior to conducting my interviews, and allowing them time to review and ask questions about the form prior to the interview. This outlined the measures I took to protect their confidentiality, such as using pseudonyms in place of their real names in my research study. In addition, I gave each participant a hard copy of the consent letter. Prior to signing the consent letter, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and that they had the right to retract any statement they made at any time during the research study. Participants were also informed that their information is confidential, and that their personal information was only used for the purpose of this research study.

Each interview was audio recorded, which was only used for the purpose of transcribing the interviews afterwards. These recordings were then be deleted. Transcripts of the interviews were kept on a password-protected computer to ensure confidentiality. Transcripts were then sent to the participants to look over, and anything they wish to have removed from the interview was deleted and not considered in my research. Participants are acknowledged in my paper, as without their willingness to participate, this study would not be possible.
3.6 Limitations

Due to the qualitative nature of this research, there were a number of potential limitations to this study. As this research was be conducted in accordance with the Masters of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, I was limited to the procedure in which my research was carried out as required by the university. I was also limited to the time constraints outlined by the program, and had to carry out my interviews in accordance with the ethical review board as outlined by the university.

As I only interviewed two educators, I worked with a very small sample size. Therefore, my information only reflects the views of those I interviewed and myself, which is very limited and does not reflect the views of all teachers in Toronto, much less Canada. This small sample size prevents my research from being generalized. In addition, due to the nature of the interviews, much of what my interviewees said was open to interpretation and there is a risk that I did not interpret their words as they were intended to be understood.

Lastly, much of the information I used was drawn from my literature review. However the existing literature on students of low-SES in Canada is significant and there is the risk that my research is not reflective of the entire body of research available on the subject.
4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings based on the information gathered from two face-to-face interviews with educators currently teaching in the Toronto District School Board. These interviews were conducted with the intent of investigating what teachers need to be aware of when working with students of low-SES, and what current teachers are doing within their classrooms to be sensitive to these factors. The interview participants were selected based on their diverse experience working within the public school system; one with teaching experience in a primary school in an inner-city neighbourhood, and the other in a secondary school in an affluent neighbourhood. By selecting participants with diverse teaching experiences, findings related to teaching students of low-SES will be relevant to students from primary and secondary school settings, from both affluent and low-income neighbourhoods.

My first participant, Hannah is a visual arts teacher. She currently teaches in an arts-based high school, located in an affluent neighbourhood in Toronto. She has taught for 24 years in the same school, and has taught students from grades 9-12, in the subject areas of math, visual arts, psychology, sociology, English, and media studies. She has also taught night school and summer school to adults. My second participant, Linda, is currently teaching grade 4, 5, and 6 students in the Home School Program, which provides support in reading and mathematics to students with learning disabilities. She has been teaching for 19 years in a primary school located in an inner city neighborhood in Toronto. Linda also has had experience teaching kindergarten and grade 4.

The findings discussed in this chapter reflect the common attributes and beliefs these two participants have had as teachers in the public school setting relating to
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Teaching students of low-SES. Several common themes emerged from these interviews as interpreted by the researcher, including the impact low-SES has on student’s education, and teacher biases and initial understanding of teaching this student demographic. In addition, they discuss the strategies used when attempting to meet the needs of these students within their classrooms, and the current need for more systematic and institutional supports in order to address the main issues affecting students of low-SES.

4.2 Attributes of students of low SES

Both Hannah and Linda stated that at the start of their teaching careers, neither of them knew much, if anything, about teaching students of low-SES. Through their experiences working with this demographic of students, they each identified common attributes that students living under these circumstances tend to display, including certain attitudes some of these students share and common identifiers that help them understand which student they teach are of low-SES.

4.2.1 Many students of low-SES share common characteristics

Hannah stated that when it comes to understanding which students she teaches are of low-SES, “It’s a touchy subject, because a lot of students are very embarrassed about that” (December, 2013). She also noted that often they are quieter students, which can make identifying them difficult, as quiet students would be more likely to fall under teacher radar.

In addition to being considerate of the fact that students of low-SES may be quiet or embarrassed, Linda discussed how a common characteristic of students of low-SES is their strong resiliency. “If they are done wrong they will just get up and keep going. They are a tough, tough group of people, and they, they have overcome stuff that would make
This quotation illustrates the need for educators to not only understand the hardships that many students of low-SES have to endure, but also the strength that this group of students demonstrate when forced to cope with the hardships of poverty on a daily basis. Linda went on to describe the impact that this realization had on her teaching: “I came with all these biases, thinking, “Aww, aww” turns out I was the one that was the fool you know?” (December, 2013). Instead of viewing her students from a deficit perspective and focusing on the negative aspects that come with living in low-SES, Linda outlined the importance for educators to see the strength and resiliency within these students that can be easily overlooked.

The concept of teacher bias as it relates to students of low-SES came up multiple times throughout Linda’s interview, and will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter.

4.2.2 Common identifiers of students of low-SES

As Hannah discussed, knowing which students within her classroom are of low-SES can be challenging, as they may not always be open to discussing it due to embarrassment or possible fear of social stigma. This can be challenging for educators devoted to providing additional support and sensitivity to meet the needs of these students, as without knowing which students are of low-SES they cannot know to provide such accommodations. However, Hannah and Linda both discussed certain instances that helped them identify these students. Hannah mention that visual identifiers such as “the way they dress” (December, 2013) can be obvious indicators, while Linda noted that sometimes “we kind of think, oh, you’re poor because your hair’s not combed, and its much deeper than that…when you start seeing the healthcare issues and stuff like that, that’s really, poverty” (December, 2013). Linda also discussed a time that she was talking with students what they wanted for Christmas, and one student “did not skip a beat, and
said “I want my own bed,” illustrating for Linda the fact that this student was living in a crowded environment home due to low income. These observations can serve to provide new teachers with insight into some of the indicators that students are of low-SES. Being aware that visual indicators such as how students dress and how their health is being addressed, in addition to verbal comments about how students are living in their home environment provide vital information to teachers about how students may be living.

4.3 Teacher beliefs about students of low SES

As many educators do not know what it is like to live in poverty, it would be understandable if some of the beliefs they have about those living in such circumstances are inaccurate. From the interviews conducted, some of these beliefs are identified, and both Hannah and Linda discuss some of the understandings they have gained about students of low-SES from the teaching experiences. In addition, they discuss some of the biases and assumptions they and other educators have had and continue to hold, including the realization that students living in low-SES are not as easy to identify as they initially thought when entering the field of teaching.

4.3.1 How teachers understand the life of students in low-SES

This research set out to understand how well teachers can best meet the needs of students of low-SES, when they themselves may not have experienced such a lifestyle. Hannah noticed that when it came to relating to students of low-SES, “having a background where it wasn’t easy helps a lot, so I can see it, I can understand it, I can identify” (December, 2013). She went on to explain unlike her, some of the teachers within her school did not come from a challenging economic background.

If I had never experienced that, I think it would be harder, I may not understand, or identify, or even be aware right? Especially in this school, some people are not
This quotation confirms the assumption made at the onset of this research project- that some current educators are not aware that they are teaching students of low-SES. Hannah went on to state that she believes it “would be better if teachers moved [schools] a little more, because then they’d get a better idea of different environments where kids are coming from” (December, 2013). This would be one way to ensure that teachers are more aware of the diversity of economic backgrounds within the students they teach.

As an educator who did not experience economic hardship, Linda describes a realization she came to when attempting to understand life of low-SES:

The more and more I saw, that the more and more I sort of felt that I am perpetuating this stereotype that people of low income status need handouts and need pity, and need…somehow I am the answer, you know? And really all that was, was it made me feel like I am doing a good thing without really being willing to understand and go into what the community really needs and what these families and these kids really need (December, 2013).

This quotation illustrates Linda’s initial reactions to students of low-SES, as she explains how as a middle-class teacher, she entered teaching feeling the need to provide resources to students in an attempt to be the solution to their problems. She goes on to describe how this view changed with experience, as she no longer views herself and as the answer to these issues, but as someone who is now responsible for attempting to understanding the solutions to the greater solutions to the problems families of low-SES face.

4.3.2 Many educators hold biases/assumptions about students of low-SES

As discussed previously, teachers entering the profession will undoubtedly arrive in their classrooms with preconceived notions about what it means to be of low-SES and what their role will be in teaching such students. As Linda explained, as educators “we really need to examine our biases…what am I saying subtly, indirectly, and directly to
my kids and their parents when I am in the classroom with them?” (December, 2013).

Unfortunately, as is the case with many biases and assumptions, many of us do not even realize the assumptions we make, or the impact that these assumptions have on our students. Hannah described one such experience:

You have to be careful, you cannot, you cannot assume. So one teacher, said to his class, when they hand in their assignment, he said ‘Do not even tell me you do not have a computer, because I will not believe you, so you need to all hand it in over e-mail.’ Right, so I had this student, and she was very, very upset…she came to me shaking, just shaking, way too embarrassed to tell her math teacher. No way would she go and say ‘I actually do not have a computer’ (December, 2013).

In this instance, the teacher involved did not even consider the fact that his students may not have access to a computer, resulting in not only embarrassing that student, but also upsetting her. Linda described an additional example of this:

I will not say house anymore. A lot of the time if we’re reading or something and the word attic comes up, that would be making assumptions that every kid knows what an attic is. A lot of our kids live in apartments, not houses, in fact when they found out I live in a house they told me I was rich. And it was not until they said that that I believed them, I was like, you’re right, I am, I never thought that, owning a house (December, 2013).

This illustrates how Linda’s ongoing understanding of student’s living in low-SES have resulted in her changing the language she uses within her classroom in order to be sensitive to their needs, and to prevent her from making assumptions about their living arrangements. In addition, it outlines a shift in her own understanding of what it meant to be ‘rich’, as it was only by hearing her student’s perspectives on the topic that she even considered herself that way.
4.3.3  Students of low-SES are not always obvious or easy to identify

One of the biases that Linda mentioned many people have is that poor people are dirty or wear second hand clothing that looks ragged and worn. However as she describes, this is not always the case in families of low-SES. “We have a lot of people in our community who are very, very, proud and they will not have their kids wearing any second hand clothes. They scrub their kids. They are very, very clean, and those are things that we do not realize” (December, 2013). While this would be another example of bias and assumptions people have about students living in low-SES, it also highlights the fact that students of low-SES are not always as visibly identifiable as educators may assume.

Hannah also commented on the fact that students of low-SES were not as apparent as she initially assumed they would be, saying, “I guess the biggest thing that I’ve learned is that they are not going to tell you, you know you cannot assume that they are going to tell you at all” (December, 2013). This quotation illustrates two points. First, it supports Linda’s observation that students of low-SES are not obviously identifiable. Secondly, it describes how Hannah made the assumption that students of low-SES would let her know if they needed any support or additional, demonstrating the importance for educators to not make assumptions about students living in poverty.

4.4 Impact on Schooling

One of the findings both Hannah and Linda discussed was the detrimental impact that low-SES has on students and their performance in school. Academically, Hannah observed that in students of low-SES “you see the grades fall” (December, 2013). Linda
TEACHING STUDENTS OF LOW-SES echoed this in her statement that at her school they “…have so many kids in crisis, so many kids behind, in their reading scores, their language scores, [and] their math scores” (December, 2013). This is important for educators to keep in mind, as knowing about the relationship between poor marks and low-SES could not only help them identify those within their class of low-SES, but also help them be aware these students may be facing challenges at home related to their socio-economic status.

In addition to academic challenges, both educators interviewed mentioned non-academic challenges students of low-SES face, which relate to their ability to participate and do well in school. Hannah noted that when it comes to low-SES in students, “it does affect them socially. They do not have near as many friends, they are embarrassed, they are reserved, and this can be related to the grades falling suddenly” (December, 2013). Linda stated that “it is a devastating impact…families [of low-SES] do not have the financial resources to expose their kids to stuff that we take for granted: going to the museum, going to the science centre, going to, all of those things you know, is huge” (December, 2013). Linda then described that because of her awareness that children of low-SES do not get as many opportunities to be exposed to different cultural experiences within the community, she planned excursions and invited professionals into her classroom as one way to allow them the opportunity to have exposure to diverse experiences.

4.5 Strategies to meet the needs of students of low-SES

Only by knowing the factors that affect the school performance of students of low-SES can educators understand how to adapt their programming in order to address these needs. Both interviewees discussed the strategies they implement within their classrooms as a means to meet the challenges student of low-SES face. However, they also
mentioned topics that they avoid bringing into the classroom as one strategy to be sensitive to the challenges that come with living in low-SES.

4.5.1 Things educators do within the classroom to be sensitive to low-SES

Hannah mentioned that when it comes to providing classroom materials, she does her best to supply most of the resources students may need. However, she noted that “there will be some times when a student cannot afford whatever extra there is, so in that case I’ll go to the head of the department and then we’ll pay for that” (December, 2013). She also discussed how there have been instances where she had students that she “could tell weren’t eating, and they weren’t from a high social economic class. So, and then you know, teachers, I slip them money, they’re still very embarrassed but I say you’ve got to eat, and you have to take it” (December, 2013).

Linda also discussed the idea of bringing in supplies, stating:

When I was a new teacher of course I did all that stuff. You know I brought food from home, I always asked if they had eaten, I’d bring in, I’d ask all my friends to donate their clothes and their mittens and hats through the winter to keep my kids warm and stuff, and because I’d find sometimes they wouldn’t come to school dressed and I thought that that was what a good person should be doing (December, 2013).

While most teachers likely understand the need to provide resources required for students to participate in class, it is important to note the finding that it may also be necessary for them to bring in supplies for students to meet their basic needs, and not just their educational ones.

In addition to providing physical resources to students within the classroom, both Hannah and Linda mentioned the importance of providing emotional support to students of low-SES. Linda outlined how she did this with a student of low-SES within her classroom who did not come to school very often:
I think gentle things like letting him know when he comes I am really, we are really happy to see him, because my class is like a family. Those are really important, to encourage him. Again, it is about giving him the tools to think later on “I am an awesome kid, like I can do something, and go somewhere” (December, 2013).

By letting students of low-SES know that that you are there to support them not only academically but also emotionally, teachers can help this demographic of students know that they are valued, and that you are there to help them overcome any additional challenges they have to endure due to their economic situation.

4.5.2 Things educators will not do within the classroom to be sensitive to low-SES

While these findings outline a number of factors that educators are currently doing within their classrooms to be sensitive to the needs of students of low-SES, both participants discussed the importance of avoiding discussing certain topics such as money with students of low-SES. Hannah mentioned how, when she informs students of the supplies they need to use in visual arts, she ensures that she does not specify the quality of the materials required, as not all students may be able to afford them. Linda also mentioned how she takes extra precautions when discussing the monetary value of expensive things, because as she stated, “the terrain between us would grow so much, because that would be incomprehensible [to students of low-SES] you know?” (December, 2013). Therefore, in order to maintain a common ground between teachers and students of low-SES it is important that educators refrain from engaging in conversations about money, and that they ensure sensitivity when such topics do arise within the classroom.

4.6 Need for systematic and institutional support

The last finding to come up from this study was the idea that, while there are things that educators can do to be sensitive to the factors affecting learning of students of
low-SES, there is a vital need for greater systematic and institutional support. Hannah discussed how for students of low-SES at the high school level, she wished there were “…more grants at our school for kids that need it” (December, 2013). She also mentioned numerous times how, in addition to providing food or clothing for students who were in obvious need, she also looked to her administration, going to “the office to see if they can help” (December, 2013). Linda discussed the need for this type of administrational support also, noting that

Giving my kids, you know free breakfast, or bringing in groceries is not really the answer, what they need, what we needed was a breakfast program, you know? So we need to get on board with getting a breakfast program, we need to find, a, an organization, and we did (December, 2013).

She went on to explain how, after realizing that many students in her school were arriving to class hungry, she began to look for a way to not just address the issue with the specific children in her class, but at a school wide level. By approaching her school board and administration, she was successful in advocating for the creation of a school breakfast program.

While looking to identify the specific factors teachers need to be aware of when teaching students of low-SES is necessary to understand what teachers can do within their classrooms to be sensitive to these factors, being aware of and sensitive to them is not enough. Both interviewees discussed that when it comes to providing the resources and tools necessary for students of low-SES to thrive in the classroom, they, as individuals, cannot do this alone. By understanding this fact, new teachers can accept that while they will not be able to eliminate the challenges students of low-SES face, by advocating for the needs of students of low-SES, they can create small changes within their classroom while recognizing the need to advocate for greater ones.
I chose to investigate what teachers need to be aware of when working with students of low-SES, and what they do within their classrooms to be sensitive to these factors as I felt unsure about what I could do as a new teacher to meet the needs of these students, having never experienced poverty myself. From the research, I had hoped to learn some strategies from current educators that I could use within my future classrooms to meet the needs of students of low-SES. What I had not considered prior to conducting this research however, was the fact that, while such strategies can meet the immediate needs of these students, they do nothing to help address the issue of so many children within Canada currently living in poverty. While being sensitive to the fact that these children may be embarrassed about their economic circumstances is important for teachers to consider on a daily basis, simply being considerate of that does nothing to address the issue. Similarly, while bringing in food to help meet the immediate needs of those who arrive to class hungry is a short term solution to eliminate the immediate problem, doing so does nothing to help other students who are not in one’s class. These are temporary solutions to a much greater issue. This has left me with much more to consider in terms of what teachers can do to not only meet the immediate needs of the students within their classes, but what type of advocacy they need to do in order to help reduce the problem so that these types of strategies are no longer needed.

5.1 Evaluation

As the research regarding poverty statistics and current teacher salary suggested, both participants interviewed revealed that they do not live in low-SES, and therefore do not currently experience the same economic challenges that families of low-SES do. This finding supported the assumption made at the onset of this study; that due to the salary
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that comes with teaching, most educators likely do not live in low-SES making it challenging for them to understand their students that do. In addition, the research also highlighted the fact that some educators we not even aware that they were teaching students of low-SES. This is a significant finding also, given the fact that within the Toronto District School Board, half of the students from kindergarten to grade 6 are from lower income families (O’Reilly & Yau, 2009). The implications of this within the classrooms are huge, as by being unaware that the students they are teaching are of low-SES, teachers cannot possibly be continually meeting their needs and addressing the challenges they face.

Existing research on students of low-SES also discussed the biases and negative attitude that the public often has towards people of low income (Cholewa, Mixon, & Amatea, 2012) (Hughes, 2010) (Garza & Garza, 2010) (Conner, 2010). While neither of the participants interviewed admitted to having a negative attitude towards students of low-SES, they both stressed the importance of identifying biases within themselves in order to prevent themselves from making any assumptions regarding students in their classes.

However, the fact that both participants understood that they do hold biases is important, as it is only by understanding the biases and stereotypes that teachers have towards students of low-SES that we can understand and address them. For example, the negativity that some educators have regarding students of low-SES could be related to the fact that they do perform poorly in school, and thus require additional support and resources from the teacher. This would in effect create a self-fulfilling prophecy: if low-SES leads to poor school performance, it then becomes the teacher’s job to address these issues. This could then cause teachers extra work meeting these students needs, in effect
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create more challenges for teachers to deal with. This could then lead to teachers developing negative attitudes towards students of low-SES, when it was low-SES that caused them difficulties in the first place. Yet, by being aware that it is not the child’s fault but a challenge they face due to circumstances outside of their control, teachers can understand the root of the issue, and be sensitive and compassionate to these needs.

As the literature on students of low-SES continually states, low-SES has a negative effect on student performance in school, both academically and socially (Taylor, 2005) (Pellino, 2006) (Canadian Teachers Federation, 2010). As mentioned previously, this can be due to factors within the home environment such as increased stress or violence that students of low-SES are more likely to encounter (Evans, 2004). Not surprisingly, both interview participants confirmed this, as they both commented that when it comes to their performance in school, children of low-SES perform worse both academically and socially compared to those from higher income families. While this finding was therefore not surprising, it confirmed the impact that low-SES has on student learning. This understanding is important, as knowing that students of low-SES may require academic and social support within the classroom will be important for future educators to understand and prepare for.

Both interviewees also discussed some of the factors that help them identify students of low-SES, including looking at what students say, what they wear, and what their health is like. If students are not getting the necessities they need to come to class prepared to learn, such as food or adequate clothing due to economic need, then they cannot be expected to fully participate in school. By providing such resources, teachers can help prepare students of low-SES to be ready to learn, and reduce the likelihood that these factors will hinder their performance in school.
These factors can not only serve to provide teachers with information about what they should then be doing within their classrooms to meet the needs of students of low-SES, but are also important to consider in order to ensure that there are no issues of neglect taking place. In terms of dealing with issues of neglect, it is extremely important for educators to always ensure that all students are being properly cared and provided for. Yet while neglect and poverty may appear similar, there is a difference between not being able to provide adequate care, and choosing not to. While in both instances it is of utmost importance that educators ensure students are being adequately cared for, families in poverty may need help or support accessing the resources they need in order to do this. Therefore it may also be helpful for educators to not just provide resources to children to help meet their basic needs, but to also act as a resource for families who may not know where to go to get the support they need.

As discussed in Chapter 4, one of the findings that emerged from analysis of the interviews was that students of low-SES are not always easy to identify. This is important because if educators believe that students of low-SES will be obvious to identify, or that they will tell them about their circumstances when extra support is required, then teachers may not realize that there are students within their classrooms that are of low-SES who are not obvious to them. When this is the case, teachers cannot know to accommodate and be sensitive to these student’s needs or circumstances, as was the case described by Hannah in 4.3.2. Since we cannot expect students of low-SES to identify themselves, the only way to account for this within the classroom setting is for educators to constantly be teaching under the assumption that there are students within their classrooms who are of low-SES, and to be aware of the biases, assumptions, or language they are using and how they might relate to students of low-SES.
As discussed by both participants, refraining from discussing money and finances in the classroom is one strategy they currently use to be considerate of students of low-SES in their classrooms. This finding is important for new teachers to be aware of, as it is important for students to feel they can relate to their teachers in order to build a positive relationship and rapport conducive to learning. By discussing monetary issues, teachers may unknowingly drive a wedge between themselves and their students. This would only serve to further the divide between these students and their teachers, preventing them from forming positive relationships that aid in building trust necessary for success.

While the literature does stress the importance for teacher education programs to address the specific needs of students of low-SES, neither of the participants interviewed felt that they were at all prepared for teaching this demographic of student (Conner, 2010) (Cholewa, Mixon, & Amatea, 2012) (Hughes, 2010). One possible explanation for this may be may be due to the fact that both educators interviewed attended initial teacher education programs over 20 years ago, before many of the literature consulted was every published. However, as a soon to be graduate of a teacher education program myself, even with the current knowledge on the effects of low-SES on student success, I still do not feel prepared for meeting the needs of these students. As both interviewees mentioned, advocacy is needed to gain more institutional support on the subject, and this could be one area where teachers focus their efforts.

5.2 Implications/ Recommendations

From the findings outlined in Chapter 4, a number of implications for future teaching and recommendations for teachers to consider when teaching students of low-SES emerged. First, both participants supported the initial assumption made in this
research study by confirming that neither of them felt prepared to work with students of low-SES upon entering the field. While this is something that these educators have realized after reflecting back on their careers, new teachers should consider how prepared they feel to teach this student population prior to entering the classroom, and actively look for ways to educate themselves in areas where they feel unprepared. As recommended by the participants, this could be done by not only reflecting on any biases that we may hold when entering the classroom, but also by seeking to gain experience firsthand within inner-city schools. While current teachers can do as Hannah recommended and gain experience in different schools within their school board, in order to create lasting change advocacy is needed to convince initial teacher education programs that there is the need to better prepare new teachers for working with students of low-SES.

Related to recognizing the biases that educators may have about low economic status, new teachers also need to ensure that they critically examine any stereotypes they may have about students of low-SES in order to be understanding of the consequences these biases may have on students. For example, even though elements such as worn clothing and poor hygiene can be indicative of low-SES, it would be wrong to believe that all students of low-SES will present this way. This is not only a stereotype about students of low-SES, but also makes the assumption that identification of low-SES is visible, which as this research confirms, this is not always the case. From this example it is clear that understanding bias and stereotypes is necessary, as these can hinder our ability to not just identify students of low-SES, but also fully comprehend the scope of what it means to live in low-SES. While it may be impossible to know some of the assumptions one holds until they are faced with an experience, it is only by understanding
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that these biases exists and attempting to be mindful of them that we can begin to eliminate the impact these have on our teachings.

From analysis of the interviews, it was discussed that students of low-SES are often embarrassed about their situation, and are often quieter. The implications of this on teaching are important. As discussed in the literature, the effect that poverty and low-SES has on student achievement in school can be devastating. From this information, teachers can understand that extra considerations need to be made when teaching these students. However, if students of low-SES are quiet and embarrassed about their economic circumstances, teachers may not know which of their students are living under these circumstances. In addition, once teachers identify which students they teach are of low-SES, they need to not only be aware of the challenges these students face, but considerate of the fact that these students may be embarrassed about them. Knowing that students may be embarrassed about their economic circumstances will require educators to not only take extra considerations into account in their planning and instruction, but also to be sensitive and respectful of the fact that these students may not want to discuss their economic circumstances.

One potential challenge that arose from the findings was the possibility for conflict when trying to meet the basic needs of students, while still being sensitive to the fact that students may embarrassed about their financial situation. As both participants discussed, one strategy to help meet the needs of students of low-SES is to make certain essentials such as food or clothing available to students if needed. While this would be one way for teachers to help students of low-SES meet their basic needs, it has the potential to create more issues, as such an act may draws attention to the fact that these students require additional resources. As discussed, students of low-SES often are
embarrassed about their situation, therefore even when trying to help, teachers may inadvertently be causing students discomfort. This example highlights the complexity of the issues that teachers will likely face in their attempts to be sensitive to the needs of students of low-SES, as attempting to meet students basic needs can create additional issues regarding how to be sensitive to the fact that students may be embarrassed about their need for such items.

Another interesting point that arose from this study was that teachers need to be considerate of the challenges that students of low-SES face, while also being aware of not viewing these students from a deficit perspective. Based on the literature review of teaching students of low-SES, I anticipated that the interviewees would outline challenges that come with teaching these students and how the participants meet these challenges. This was a bias that I have come to realize I held as researcher, believing that with low-SES come challenges that need fixing. I had not considered that with these circumstances can also come positives, such as the strength or resiliency that these students gain when overcoming hardships associated with low-SES. This realization helped me understand that as a future teacher, I will need to be aware of challenges faced by students of low-SES in order to be sensitive when discussing issues relating to finances or privilege, while ensuring that I do not view the students or their situation from a negative lens.

In addition to realizing the importance of recognizing biases such as the one discussed above, this research also helped me understand that simply being aware of the challenges students face and addressing them is not enough to create lasting change for students of low-SES. Most of the strategies discussed, while immediately helpful to students, do nothing to help solve the problem of child poverty within Canada. This
research left me more aware of the need for educators to work together to advocate for more supports for these students at an administrative level. There needs to be more awareness about child poverty so that teachers can be aware that they will be teaching these students, and new teachers need the support and training so that they can better understand the challenges that students of low-SES face and what they can do to support them in their classrooms. This is the most profound learning that I gained from this study.

5.3 Limitations

This research had three major limitations. The first being that due to the time constraints outlined by the University, there was only time to interview two participants. Therefore, the information gathered from this research only reflects the views and experiences of two individuals, and thus cannot be generalized to a larger population. By interviewing a greater number of participants, this research study could have more widely represented and therefore reflected the views of a greater number of teachers. Secondly, the participants selected for this study are both educators within the City of Toronto. Due to this, the information gathered does not include the voices of those in rural neighbourhoods, those in teaching outside of the city of Toronto, or educators teaching in independent schools. Therefore the challenges that educators discussed students facing may be influenced not only by their economic status, but possibly their geographic locations also. Lastly, as this study only interviewed educators who teach within the public school board, this study lacked information from who have experience teaching within private and independent schools, which would have provided a more comprehensive look at the differences that educators need to take into account when teaching students of high versus low-SES.
5.4 Next Steps

From the findings gathered from this research study, a number of questions arose that could be considered for additional research in the future. Mainly, I have been left wondering not only what teachers do within their classrooms to accommodate for students of low-SES, but what types of administrative and board wide support teachers feel would be required to reduce or eliminate the challenges that students of low-SES face on a daily basis. Do teachers feel that there are certain supports that can be implemented at the board level to create lasting change for students of low-SES? Are teachers advocating for these changes? What type of action is currently taking place in an effort to create such changes? Knowing what types of supports will be beneficial, and how teachers can and are advocating for such supports would be one place to focus research on the subject in the future.

In addition, it may be interesting to interview those who are currently of low-SES in order to hear their perspectives on the challenges that they face and the accommodations they feel would be beneficial within a classroom. While hearing about the factors that educators feel help students of low-SES is undoubtedly helpful to my future teaching, this study did not speak directly to those who are living within these circumstances. Hearing their will would provide a new perspective on how these students feel about their situation, and may provide insight on what supports they feel would be helpful to them within the school setting.

5.5 Conclusion

Unfortunately, it is a reality that many students within Canada are currently living in poverty. This research set out to determine what new teachers should be aware of when teaching students of low-SES, and to identify some of the strategies that they can
implement within their classrooms in order to effectively plan and implement a program conductive to the specific social and academic needs of these students. From the analysis of interviews with two public school teachers in the City of Toronto, common themes and findings related to teaching students of low-SES. Findings showed that many students of low-SES have similar attributes, which teachers can use to inform themselves about the attitudes of these students, and to help them identify which of the students within their classes are of low-SES. Teacher beliefs were also discussed, which brought forth the notion of teacher bias, and the importance of being aware of these biases and assumption to prevent them from negatively impacting ones teaching. The interviewees also discussed the impact that they notices low-SES to have on academic and social interactions within the classroom, as well as some of the strategies educators use to address these needs within the classroom. Lastly, the need for more systematic and institutional support was stressed in order to not only address the challenges that students of low-SES face, but to help eliminate the issues through advocacy for solutions to these issues. By being aware of the challenges that students of low-SES face and understanding what we as educators can do to help them, new teachers can begin to b reduce the challenges students of low-SES currently face, and hopefully advocate for changes that will help to eliminate some of them entirely.
REFERENCES


TEACHING STUDENTS OF LOW-SES


Appendix A: Interview Questions

Thank you for participating in this research study. I would like to remind you throughout the course of your interview, you can withdraw a statement, or stop at any time. I have a list of 15 questions to ask you, which are the same as the ones I sent you in advance. I will be video recording our interview so that I can transcribe it later. I would like to remind you that anything you say is confidential, and all information I gather here today will be password protected and used only for the purpose of this study. I would like to remind you that my research goal is to learn which factors teachers of low SES students identify as challenges for students within the classroom, and what teachers can do in their classrooms to be considerate of the needs of these students. For the purpose of this research, I define ‘low SES’ as any student who is living in poverty or in poverty like circumstances. This definition will include any student that struggles to afford life’s basic necessities, or any factors that limits a student’s ability to participate in school due to economic circumstances. Do you have any questions for me before we start the interview?

Section 1: Teaching Background

1. a. What is your educational background?
   
   b. How did you come to be an elementary school teacher?
   
   c. For how many years have you been teaching?
   
   d. Have you ever taught in private schools?
   
   e. If so, for how long? What would you identify as the main difference between teaching in public/ private schools?
   
   f. What grade(s)/subjects(s) are you currently teaching?
   
   g. What grade(s)/subjects(s) have you taught in the past?

Section 2: Personal Background

2. How would you describe your current level of economic well-being?

3. Have you ever experienced a lifestyle that differs from what you just described to me? If so, how was it different?

4. Do you find that your current level of economic status is greater than that of any of your students? If so, what factors lead you to believe that your students are of lower economic status?
5. Do you believe your socioeconomic-status influences/impacts your teaching? If so, in what way?

6. Can you describe a specific teaching experience where extra considerations were required in order to accommodate students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds?

7. Can you tell me about a time that made you suddenly realize that one of your students was of low SES? What specific factor contributed to your awareness that that student was of low SES?

8. Can you describe an experience where one of your student's low SES negatively impacted their ability to participate in school?

Section 4: Beliefs

9. In your opinion, what kind of impact do you believe a student’s low SES has on their school experience?

10. Do you believe it is possible for teachers to meet the needs of students from low SES if they themselves have ne'er experienced living such a lifestyle? If so, how?

11. When you entered teaching, what did you know about teaching students of low SES?

12. What have you learned from your teaching experience about students of low SES that you did not know upon entering the field?

13. What considerations would you recommend new teachers take to help them be more considerate of students of low SES?

14. Are there any subjects you try to avoid discussing in your class to be considerate of students of low SES?

15. What ethical considerations do you feel teachers need to take into account when working with students of low SES? For example, is it ethically wrong to make pasta-necklaces in your class if students cannot afford to eat?
Appendix B: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: November 16th, 2013

Dear ____________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the implications of teaching students of low-SES for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Susan Schwartz. My research supervisor is Dr. Nick Scarfo. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

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Research Supervisor’s Name: Nick Scarfo
Email: nick.scarfo@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Morgan Couch and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name (printed): __________________________________

Date: _________________________________________