Experiences in High-Poverty Secondary Schools:
Self-Identifying Middle-Class Teacher Perspectives in Toronto

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A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements
For the degree of Master of Teaching
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Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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Abstract

The city of Toronto has the highest poverty rates in Canada. Living in poverty has several negative implications for one’s education. The goal of this study was to gain insight into self-identifying middle-class teachers’ experiences in high-poverty secondary schools in Toronto. This study relied on qualitative, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews as the method of data collection, and offers insights into the importance of reflexivity regarding one’s positionality in society. This study explored teacher perceptions on best practices, and challenges regarding working in high-poverty schools. As well, it drew several comparisons between teacher experiences in affluent and high-poverty schools. Based on the experiences of the teacher participants, this study may be used to inform the educational community to better prepare pre-service teachers, as well provide educators with suggested insights and strategies for working in high-poverty communities.

Key Words: teacher experiences, socioeconomic status, high-poverty secondary schools
Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to first thank my peers, as without their empathy and support over the last two years, I am not sure that I would end up with a final product I am happy with. I would like to thank Maria, my sister, for always being there with all her wisdom, as she is no stranger to processes like this. As well, this would not be a proper acknowledgement if I left out two key ingredients in any written work: music and coffee. Without these two key elements, I would have lost my sanity a long time ago.

Most importantly, I would like to thank the individuals who inspired me to care about this issue in the first place: the group of students with whom I was entrusted to mentor during my time as an undergraduate at McMaster University. I was given the task of mentoring ‘youth at-risk’ as a required placement for a fourth-year seminar. While I was supposed to be a guide for these teenagers, it was me who truly learned from them. Although at the time I already wanted to pursue a career in teaching, these kids made teaching so much more than a job for me. They showed me the importance of empathy, of care, and of activism, and for that I am forever grateful to them.
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Research Context and Problem

When it comes to the issue of poverty and its effects on education, Canadians should be concerned. One in three children is less than fifteen years of age, and thirty one percent of youth (aged 15-24) live in poverty in Toronto (Social Planning Toronto, 2013). In all of Canada, Toronto holds first place in poverty rates, with its relatively close neighbour Hamilton holding fifth place with twenty two percent of its children and youth growing up in poverty (Monsenbraaten, 2015). Forty percent of Toronto’s neighbourhoods have child poverty rates of at least thirty percent. The Regent Park neighbourhood alone, as of 2015, had a concentration of about sixty three percent of children living in poverty (Monsenbraaten, 2015). In 2005, 90 000 individuals were living in poverty in Hamilton, and according to a 2015 report by the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton, 38% of the North Hamilton community alone lives in poverty.

According to the 2012 report by People for Education, the goal of any publically funded educational institution is “providing every child (rich or poor) with an adequate chance for success” (p. 8). Unfortunately, coming from a low-income background and living in a high-poverty urban environment brings with it numerous academic obstacles (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). Generally, there is a positive correlation between parental income and a student’s educational success (Belley, Frenette & Lochner, 2013) and low socioeconomic status students are particularly placed at a disadvantage by ability streaming. Research shows that students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including of low socioeconomic status, are overrepresented in the non-Academic streams in Ontario schools, negatively effecting their likelihood of participating in post-secondary education (Anisef, Brown & Sweet, 2011). People for Education’s (2015)
recent report found that 33% of students from low income neighbourhoods took most of their courses in the applied level, compared to six percent of those from more affluent neighbourhoods. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in 2013, also stated that being separated into tracks meant lower outcomes for those of low-income backgrounds.

In addition to this, there are also non-academic issues that are often associated with high-poverty urban schools. According to Murray and Malmgren (2005), many of the challenges facing students in these schools include high rates of violence, overall poorer quality schools, increased levels of stress, high rates of drug and alcohol addiction and limited employment and health care opportunities. As well, classroom management is highlighted as being distinguishably relevant in urban schools. Weiner (2003) outlines the importance of understanding factors outside the school walls, particularly with low-income students, and general social context when evaluating and responding to students’ behaviours.

It is the educator who has a prominent role in closing the achievement gap in education that exists among students of different socioeconomic status backgrounds (Faitar, 2011). High poverty communities like those that exist in Toronto, are like to result in the presence of urban schools largely populated with high poverty students, many of which are facing challenges to academic success. While the Canadian statistics on poverty in these two cities exist, there appears to be a lack of research on actual teacher experiences in these high-poverty urban schools in a Canadian context, specifically for teachers of middle-class backgrounds.

The story of the heroic teacher in a classroom of ‘socially troubled and low achieving youth’, who comes in and single-handedly defeats the culture of poverty which prevented their
academic success, has been told in films and novels numerous times. Bulman (2002) outlines the characteristics portrayed of both the ‘hero teacher’ and the troubled youth. Generally, the teacher is middle-class (and likely white) but somehow is able to change the attitudes of the poor students who are portrayed stereotypically as having the ‘wrong’ attitudes towards school as the purported reason behind their limited success (Bulman, 2002). Our society’s media adds to the picture of urban classrooms as being places of high violence, crime, and substance abuse, perpetuating moral panic. While there are likely many things wrong with the picture that filmmakers and even society more generally like to paint, there is much to be said about this particular learning situation.

Studies do, in fact, suggest that the teacher population is generally made up of individuals who self-report as being middle-class (Massey & Szente, 2007), which includes those who work in high poverty schools. The teachers may play a particularly critical role for the students in these schools particularly if students have less support at home (Jacob, 2007). At the same time, however, there is also research suggesting that there is a high turnover rate for teachers in high-poverty schools (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). As well, Jacob (2007) argues that high-poverty schools have difficulty attracting high quality teachers, thus leaving those schools with those less qualified or lacking experience.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of middle class teachers in high poverty secondary schools. I will explore the topic by interviewing a sample of teachers about their instructional approaches, classroom management strategies, experiences with ability streaming and personal experiences with non-academic tasks in general when it comes to educating students of different social classes than their own. The study aims to report and share
current experiences and practices of middle-class Ontario secondary school teachers in high-poverty high schools in Toronto.

1.2 Research Question

The central research question guiding this study is: What are the experiences of self-reporting, middle-class teachers working in high poverty secondary schools in Toronto?

Examples of sub-questions used further guide this inquiry are as follows:

- In which city were you born in? Grew up in?
- Would you say that your experience with low-income youth has caused you to think about your own identity with regards to class background in different ways? If so, could you explain?
- Through what general lens would you classify your approach to teaching?
- Are there any specific changes you feel should be made to the school system more generally to better serve low-income youth?

1.3 Background of the Researcher

I grew up in a suburban neighborhood primarily populated with middle and upper-middle class families, and my high school was fairly reflective of that. At the same time, a significant portion of our school was populated with students from a nearby subsidized housing complex. Within our school specifically, there was a clear distinction between groups of people primarily based on social class. As a student, I often witnessed very negative attention being given to these ‘ghetto’ or ‘hood’ students (commonly used phrases, but not by me), even from teachers who treated many of the low-income students as if they were less than worthy of receiving an education, and wanted nothing more than to get them out of the school. The teachers, and the school more generally, had a tendency to reinforce the dangerous misunderstanding that these
students were not achieving academically because they had the ‘wrong attitude’ towards school and therefore somehow lacked the capacity to do well.

I self-identify as middle-class. I am not of any racial minority, I am not an immigrant, and English is my first language. That being said, while my family has never had to be extremely worried about money, there had been times growing up where I really had to learn the value of a dollar. My only real experiences of oppression and inequality have been on the basis that I am a female in a society where all gender identities are not treated equally. Thus, it may appear odd my interest and, in fact, passion when it comes to this issue. That being said, growing up with a good mix of social class background peers, I always found myself identifying better with those on the lower end of the middle-class spectrum rather than the higher.

More than that, perhaps the following will help to explain my interest in this research topic. I spent the last year of my time as an undergraduate volunteering as a tutor and mentor for ‘at risk’ (again, not my words) youth in a North Hamilton community with Pathways to Education, a program started in Regent Park. In this experience I developed an extremely deep concern for the students I had the privilege of working with. Essentially, their only requirement to join the program was to have a postal code linking them to a specific high poverty neighborhood in North Hamilton. Each of the students came from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, had intense personal and familial issues (a few had parents in jail) but each student was unique and had the capacity to be successful, and the program allowed them to be. This community program provided students with not only academic help but, at times, simply gave them somewhere to hang out where they were surrounded with positive influences regarding school and life more generally. Thus, it would be interesting to see how schools themselves work to foster this same resilience in their students, particularly in high-poverty schools.
Essentially, the target sample of my research could really be me as a future educator, and I hope it is. These middle-class teachers in high poverty schools are basically in a role in which I one day aspire to be. Therefore, I feel that being who I am and being able to relate to the participants’ identities helped me complete this study.

1.4 Overview of the MTRP

To respond to the research questions, I conducted a qualitative research study using purposeful and convenience sampling to interview two to three middle-class teachers working in high-poverty secondary schools about their experiences teaching a population of students of different socioeconomic status backgrounds than themselves.

In Chapter Two I review literature on low-income youth, their academic needs and achievement, and middle-class teachers’ role in the process. Next, in Chapter Three I elaborate on my research design. In Chapter Four, I report my research findings and discuss their significance in light of the existing research literature. Lastly, in Chapter Five, I identify the implications of the research findings for my own teacher identity and practice, and for the educational research community more generally. As well, I articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings, and point to areas of future research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Throughout this chapter, I review the literature in areas pertaining to high-poverty secondary schools. More specifically, I outline some of the general cognitive and social effects of being from a low-income community, and how to correlates to success in academics. Next, I analyse the achievement gap, and some of the common themes that arise when discussing low-income youth and academic achievement. Following this, I discuss teacher preparation and suggested teaching strategies from the perspective of teachers in these schools. Finally, I outline additional challenges faced in high-poverty, urban schools.

2.1 Poverty and Education: Context

This section gives context and discusses several of the general effects of poverty on educational attainment. Exploring the topic of school communities densely populated with low-income youth requires an analysis and understanding of the relationship between poverty and education. This will be analysed under the categories of the general affects on education, and the achievement gap.

2.1.1 How poverty impacts youth

From the earliest years of a student’s educational career, low self-esteem and low scholastic readiness are primary outcomes associated with poverty (Thompson, Corsello, McReynolds, & Conklin Powers, 2013). It has been argued that poverty has direct influences on cognitive function and psychological development (Mani, Mullainathan, Shafir, & Zhao, 2013). Adolescents who live in poverty may have delays in cognitive, language, and social emotional growth (Dearing, 2008). Poverty and low socioeconomic status have also been found to give youth a higher chance of poor physical health, learning disabilities and emotional or behavioural
problems (Hughes, Stenhjem & Newkirk, 2007). Furthermore, studies also point towards positive correlations between poverty and tardiness, the inability to keep appointments, and limited productivity, a great deal of which may be explained by the environmental factors that come with living in poverty (Mani et al, 2013). An example of said ‘environmental factors’ includes the concentration of poverty into specific neighbourhoods (e.g., Regent Park, Toronto). In regards to this, Oreopolous (2008) discusses the ‘neighbourhood effect’ - the social interaction that occurs within a group- as one of the causes affecting social and economic well-being (p. 243). Poverty can also affect mental process; for example, monetary concerns may easily take precedent over other elements of an individual’s life, such as academic achievement (Mani et al, 2013). Understanding some of the effects that come with living in poverty is important for the topic of this research study by giving context to the situations of the students these teachers are working with.

2.1.2 The achievement gap

There is an insistence amongst the literature that students living in poverty are already at a disadvantage upon entering the school system, as Stull (2013) argues when stating that the achievement gap between social classes exists prior to students beginning school, and only grows larger as they move forward.

Challenges to accessing quality learning opportunities outside of the classroom have been found to put students at a disadvantage for potential to succeed at school (Hughes et al, 2007). These said ‘quality learning opportunities’ take form in what is referred to as ‘cultural capital’. Cultural capital is a term used to describe social assets which manifest in experiences of music, drama, literature, history, forms of speech, and other areas which stimulate opportunities to learn. Lam (2014) found that students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, in lacking this and
other familial resources, may subsequently lack important prerequisites to do well academically. In this case, familial resources refer to things like having parents with the leisure time to read to their children, and taking them places which will facilitate learning and cognitive development. Thus, it is argued that the achievement gap is created by factors that exist prior to the beginning of school. The achievement gap becomes an important feature of this study when discussing teacher strategies which are intended to close this gap.

2.2 Common Beliefs & Negative Stereotypes

The literature on the topic of youth from low socioeconomic status backgrounds site a number of beliefs and stereotypes society has of this demographic. Walker (2014) outlines that practices of education “mimic social structures that [create] the stereotypes and attitudes education is theoretically designed to challenge” (p. 24). In other words, the institution of the school can mirror society in ways which reinforce negative stereotypes, instead of working to dissolve society of them. In analysing literature on the topic of low income youth and academic achievement, several issues relating to these negative stereotypes arise frequently. Most notable are ability streaming and the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’. I discuss each of these in turn.

2.2.1 Tracking and ability streaming

Tracking, sometimes called ‘streaming’ or ‘ability streaming’ is the practice of separating students by the curriculum, and is often argued to be an important factor in the ‘subpar’ education that low-income students often receive (Hughes et al., 2007). It has been found that these different tracks, or ‘streams’ (known in Ontario as ‘Academic’, ‘Applied’, ‘Workplace’, ‘College’, ‘University’) are not viewed equally by students or teachers (Tanner, 2010) and Walker (2014) discusses that teachers can underestimate student’s abilities and thus place them
in their prejudicially perceived ‘proper’ stream on the basis of students’ socioeconomic backgrounds.

A result of tracking is that students of low socioeconomic status backgrounds are much more likely to be placed in less challenging streams than their middle/upper class peers because of preconceived notions of their academic ability (Hughes et al, 2007). According to the 2006 Canadian Census data, schools with a higher percentage of students in lower track courses (specifically mathematics) also had greater proportions of students of low socioeconomic status backgrounds (People for Education, 2015). The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), in 2013, also stated that being separated into lower streams meant lower educational outcomes for those of lower income backgrounds.

A notable issue that stems from the segregation of students by tracks or ability streams is that this segregation extends beyond the classroom environment. Often students of particular tracks lack interaction with those in different tracks in other areas of the school community, resulting in the creation of subcultures within the student population (Tanner, 2010).

2.2.2 The self-fulfilling prophecy & teacher expectations

The idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy was introduced by sociologist Robert K. Merton (1948) as a “false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true” (p. 195). In other words, it is a situation in which “fears are translated into reality” (p. 210). In applying this concept to the classroom, the self-fulfilling prophecy is understood as a situation wherein teacher perceptions and beliefs with regards to a student heavily influence and predict their performance in the classroom (Riley, 2009).
Students of low socioeconomic status backgrounds can fall victim to the self-fulfilling prophecy in ways which impedes their academic achievement and success (Tanner, 2010). If higher ability streams (e.g. university preparation courses) carry with them higher prestige in the school community, a students’ sense of self may thus be dictated or at least influenced by the stream that they are in (Tanner, 2010). Often, university bound courses are associated with success, while others represent a sort of societal failure. It is common for low-income students to internalize the negative label of being ‘lower track’ and thus create for themselves a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure (Laffey, Espinosa, Moore, & Lodree, 2003).

Being ‘stuck’ in a lower track may have students feeling like there are limited opportunities for their success and thus subsequently fill with doubt about their chance for success in the future (Hughes et al, 2007). Tanner (2010) argues that, because streaming has a strong bearing on a student’s identity, it can result in a manifestation of either a conformist or delinquent character on the part of the student.

Teacher expectations of a student is a key factor in where they will be streamed, and as research suggests that teacher expectations play a key role in student success. Rubbie-Davies, Hattie and Hamilton (2006) found that high teacher expectations at the beginning of the school year had a positive relationship to the reading levels of their students by the end, giving evidence to the validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

2.3 Preparing Pre-Service Teachers For High-Poverty Schools

More specific to the central research question is the literature which highlight teacher characteristics, experiences and perspectives when it comes to teaching in high-poverty schools. The following is a discussion of the literature outlining some of the issues in relation to preparing pre-service teachers to work with low-income students.
2.3.1 Characteristics of the teacher in high-poverty schools

According to Bennet (2008), the majority of teacher candidates self-report as middle class. Worthy (2005) argues that middle-class, European American teachers generally have limited experiences working with students from different socioeconomic status backgrounds than their own, entering teacher preparation and the workforce with negative understandings of low-income youth. As well, Nieto (2000) highlights the fact that historically teacher-preparation programs have worked in accordance to ideologies of assimilation, somewhat driven by these stated characteristics of the population being served by these programs. Thus implying that teachers are perpetuating deficit ways of thinking about high-poverty communities in their classrooms.

Given this, Dell’Angelo (2014) found that, considering the demographics of the majority of teachers, there is a need for more professional development on being self-reflective in order to understand one’s positionality in society, in relation to the students in their classrooms. In doing so, teachers are able to develop themselves as understanding, thoughtful, and reflective practitioners, able to address the needs of all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status backgrounds.

2.3.2 Teacher turnover

An issue that stems from this is the tendency for high teacher turnover rates in high-poverty schools. Simon and Johnson (2015) found that the divide between the socioeconomic status backgrounds of teachers and their students have been argued to be a driving force behind teacher turnover rates. But what they also analyse are the patterns suggesting that it is not necessarily all about the student demographics, but rather, the poor working conditions, perceptions of principals, and collegial relationships. This issue may negatively impact students
as they experience inconsistent staffing, and are often being taught by teachers that are new to the school and/or the teaching profession (Simon & Johnson, 2015).

2.3.3 A positive change

Educators have been advocating for years that more programs be developed and enforced to help train teacher-candidates to work with students ‘at-risk’ (Henderson-Sparks et al, 2002). Therefore including those coming from high-poverty communities. Freedman and Appleman (2009) argue that if teacher education programs focus on a number of suggestions, they can work to enhance teacher retention, thus avoiding teacher turnover, in high-poverty urban schools. Their suggestions included teacher education programs reinforcing and developing a sense of mission among their teacher candidates, and reinforcing important skills such as persistence. As well, the study suggests that if members of the teacher cohort and other professional networks developed during teacher education provided ongoing support during a teacher’s first years on the job, teacher turnover rates would drop (Freedman & Appleman, 2009).

2.4 Teacher Strategies

Existing literature outlines several strategies which teachers have expressed to be useful when working in high-poverty schools. These strategies are argued to be effective in promoting resiliency in students regardless of the barriers that come with being from a low socioeconomic status background.

2.4.1 Teacher expectations

Previous research on the topic of teacher expectations have shown that the expectations a teacher has of their students has a significant role in student success (Rubie-Davies, Hattie, and
Hamilton, 2006). In Johnson’s (1998) analysis of twenty principles for instructing ‘at-risk’ youth, maintaining high expectations was listed as necessary for working with low-income youth. Dell’Angelo (2014) found, in her survey with data from 31 urban schools, that the teacher expectations and perceptions of their students have the ability to mediate the negative effects of poverty on education previously outlined in this chapter. According to Rubie-Davies (2007), teachers who practice maintaining high expectations for their students, in turn, spend more time facilitating learning through strategies such as providing more feedback and managing behaviour positively. Therefore, teachers with high expectations of their students also perform better as teachers overall.

2.4.2 Relevant material

Several studies argue for the importance of making the curriculum content relevant, particularly when discussing working in high-poverty communities. Johnson (1998) argues that making connections is imperative for these students because they are likely to feel disconnected to the content if they are unable to relate. Additional research has also found that one of the most helpful strategies for inner-city youth is making education meaningful and relevant, which furthermore means knowing the students and teaching to not only their interests, but their strengths as well (White, 2010). Bridging classroom content to the students’ real lives can help prepare them for the real world, which is one of the main goals of school (He, Cooper, & Tangredi, 2015).

The literature provides several specific suggestions as to how to do this. One that stands out is utilizing community partnerships and providing meaningful field trips. Utilizing community-based programs give students the opportunity to enhance their self-esteem and confidence (Johnson, 1997). White (2010) found that field trips provide enriching opportunities
for students, providing them with learning opportunities outside of the classroom which they may not have the chance to receive otherwise. These opportunities help to provide students with the ‘cultural capital’ they were unable to receive because of their family’s socioeconomic status.

2.4.3 Additional strategies

Technology has also been brought up as a useful tool to aid in the academic success of youth in high-poverty schools. Interactive computer technologies have been found to be useful in meeting certain Ministry expectations, such as having to teach students higher-order thinking skills, a deep understanding of complex subject matter, and reasoning and thinking skills (Laffey et al, 2003). Problem solving, with the aid of these technologies, has also been found to be significantly enhanced (Page, 2002). As well, the use of these technologies have the ability to increase students’ self-confidence and self-discipline (Page, 2002). When students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in urban schools were given specific Interactive Computer Technology programs, Laffey et al (2003) found that they increased their time spent on tasks and were less inclined to disruptive behaviour, in comparison to their peers who were not given the technology.

Additional strategies that have been found to be effective when working in high-poverty schools include understanding the causes of poverty, being aware of resources available to the students and challenging and empowering students to become accountable for their own learning (White, 2010).

2.5 School Environment as Factors in Success

The school environment is an important factor in student success. This includes not only the teachers, but the principals, and the attitudes and relationships that exist among them.
2.5.1 Effective administration

While teachers are important driving forces behind student success, effective teaching is not solely dependent on the teacher as an individual. Administration and collegial connectedness affect student achievement in school. Principals who are considered effective can increase the achievement of their schools (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). In high-poverty schools, it has been found that principals spend more time working with their students, and spend less time aware from the school (Mulford et al, 2007). Principals also reported that in these schools they feel greater importance to keep their staff informed of the goings-on of the school (Mulford et al, 2007). Klar and Brewer (2013) report that in schools doing better than expected (based on poverty levels) have principals working to improve and build strong relationships within and outside of the school, by emphasizing collaboration among the staff. Simon and Johnson (2015) found that strong collegial relationships create ‘social capital’ in schools, and when they lack this, the community as a learning environment will suffer. Teachers have also expressed that with the uncertainty that often comes with working in urban, high-poverty schools, organizational supports among the school’s staff and administration increased opportunities for the students to succeed (Kraft et al, 2015). This collaboration element is important to note as the challenges that come with working in high-poverty schools often lead to a need for school-wide reform, which cannot be done by a principal or individual teacher alone (Johnson, 1997). Examples of such school-wide initiatives that have been suggested include ‘homework clubs’ or instating a ‘No Homework Policy’ (White, 2010).

2.5.2 Challenges

Aside from the aforementioned challenges facing students of low socioeconomic status backgrounds, teachers have highlighted several additional challenges that they themselves face in
high-poverty schools. One challenge that teachers have highlighted is overcoming the negative attitudes that exist towards those living in poverty. They argue that the stigmatization of having a low socioeconomic status background can negatively impact students for life (White, 2010). Thus making it imperative for teachers to break through these stereotypes. Part of this is getting to know their students by building meaningful relationships with them. This becomes a challenge in the sense that it can leave teachers with the emotional burden of caring for their students (DiBara, 2007). Teachers also report having to deal with general uncertainties in high-poverty schools. These include truancy, tardiness, and the effects of poverty and neighbourhood violence on their ability to concentrate in school (Kraft et al, 2015). Finally, the issue of funding has come up as a significant challenge to teachers in high-poverty schools. While it was previously argued that a strategy to better student experience in these schools was by taking them on field trips, there is a lack of financial means to make this happen. As well, while subsidy programs exist, many students do not take advantage of them, and it is therefore suggested that these policies be reviewed to see if there is a reason behind this (White, 2010). Lupton (2005) found that in order for a school to increase its quality, it has to be provided with resources in order to change its organizational design. To do so he found that more teachers, smaller classrooms, and more investments in learning supports are required. To be able to do this, though, more funds are necessary. Thus, it is suggested that these reforms are considered as part of the basic funding of a school, and not seen as being additional needs.

2.6 Conclusion

In this literature review, I examined research related to the relationship between a student’s socioeconomic status background and their academic achievement, common themes regarding low-income youth, teacher preparation, suggested teaching strategies, and additional
challenges faced in high-poverty, urban schools. Setting up the context of the effects of poverty on student’s well-being, specifically with regards to their educational attainment, addresses the barriers they face before and during their time in the school system. Due to the nature of my study, the focus shifted then to teachers and their experiences in high-poverty schools. Looking at teacher demographics is important as the literature suggests that most pre-service teachers entering the faculty from middle-class backgrounds and little experience with high-poverty communities in any regard. Despite this, the literature discussed goes on to analyse the teachers that do work in high-poverty schools. Maintaining high expectations and utilizing relevant pedagogy are highlighted as key strategies for teachers in high-poverty schools. Effective administration, encouraging school-wide collaboration is also regarded as important in these schools. Teacher perceptions of the challenges they face in high-poverty schools, such as relationship-building with students, insufficient funding and the all-around uncertainty that comes with working in high-poverty communities concludes the literature review.

In the following section, I outline the methodologies used in my own study. My research will be directed specifically towards middle-class teachers and their perceptions of their experiences in high-poverty secondary schools in Toronto, Canada. By considering the reality of teacher experiences, it is my hope to provide better understanding of the realities of working in high-poverty, urban secondary schools, and from there to inform further teacher training and policy development.
Chapter Three: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I explain the research methodology, outlining the various methodological decisions I have made, and my rationale for these choices, as they relate to my research purpose and question. I begin with identifying and discussing the research approach and procedures, followed by a description of the main instrument of data collection. Next, I identify the participants of the study. I then describe how I have analyzed the data, following with an analysis of the relevant ethical issues that have been considered and addressed. Lastly, I outline the particular methodological limitations of the study as well as its strengths.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

The study will be conducted using a qualitative approach, including the execution of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with two to three teachers. In the past, qualitative methods have been scrutinized for an apparent lack of 'scientific rigour' in comparison to quantitative methods (Mays & Pope, 1995). They have been labelled as 'anecdotal' and subject to researcher bias, much of which is attributed to the misconception that qualitative methods lack not only 'rigour' but also reproducibility and generalizability (Mays & Pope, 1995). With Attride-Stirling (2001) also argues that qualitative methods in research have been gaining recognition in fields which are typically dominated by more positivistic methods.

Qualitative inquiry involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world beginning with certain assumptions and studying particular problems by inquiring into meaning that individuals give to social problems (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research can include multiple sources of data (e.g., interviews and document analysis) in which researchers find meanings about the issue/problem from the perspective of their participants (Creswell, 2007).
Watt (2007) argues for the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research. In taking on a qualitative inquiry, researchers are required to be aware of their personal and subjective reasons for carrying forward a particular study. Not only does this aid in the trustworthiness of a study, but it helps a researcher to make sure they find appropriate participants who also find the particular issue important (Berg, 2004).

Throughout the data collection process, qualitative researchers study things in natural settings in order to attempt to make sense of the particular issue in looking at the meaning participants give to it (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) also outlines some of the key features necessary for the researcher of qualitative inquiry. Some of which includes having committed extensive time in the field of study, engaging in intense data analysis, long written passages, and engaging in social and human science researcher without specific guidelines or procedures.

Using the qualitative research method is appropriate for my research topic because its entire purpose is to gain personal perspectives from my participants.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

A qualitative research study relies on multiple sources of data, most commonly being document analysis, interviews and observations (Creswell, 2007). According to Rabionet (2011), qualitative interviews are powerful tools to capture the voices, perspectives and experiences of participants. Interviews also have the potential to avoid the poor response rates of other methods such as questionnaires, and give the researcher the ability to more genuinely explore the participants' attitudes and beliefs (Barriball & While, 1994). Considering the topic of my study is so personal, with teachers' experiences in very specific situations, face-to-face interviews provided me with the most relevant data.
Of the three general categories of interview – structured, unstructured, and semi-structured – a semi-structured interview was be employed for this study. Structured interviews operate in such a way that an interviewer asks a participant a series of pre-determined questions where there is little room for variation in responses (Fontana & Frey, 1994). On the other hand, unstructured interviews are traditionally defined as in-depth, open-ended, ethnographic interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Semi-structured interviews belong somewhere in between these two interview formats. While participants are asked the same, pre-determined questions, they are written in an open-ended format, which allows participants to give as much information as they would like to disclose to the researcher (Turner, 2010).

The semi-structured interviews that have been employed in this study were also face-to-face, individual interviews. This allowed for a better exploration of the participants' attitudes, perspectives and beliefs. As well, this form of interviewing helps to overcome the aforementioned issue of poor response rates of other methods. Sturges and Hanran (2004) argue that topics which are sensitive (e.g., because they are emotionally painful) may be better explored in face-to-face interviews. The rationale behind this being that the ability to see a participant allows the interviewer to pick up on any confusion, discomfort, and so on brought on by the conversation and/or questions asked (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2012). As well, things like non-verbal cues which shape and guide the interview are available in face-to-face interviews, which they are not in other forms, such as telephone interviews (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2012). Due to the nature of my study, being on personal experiences, face-to-face interviews provided the most useful information.

I organized my protocol (located in Appendix B) into 4 sections, beginning with: participants' background information, followed by questions about the participants’ training and
prior experiences with high-poverty communities, then on personal teacher identity as it relates to their role in a high-poverty school, followed with questions about their experiences and beliefs regarding teacher practices and pedagogy related to working with low-income students, and concluding with questions regarding supports, challenges, and next steps. Examples of questions include:

- How does your identity as 'middle-class' help or hinder your ability to connect with your students?
- What are some of the unique non-academic tasks required of you in this teaching environment? (e.g. dealing with violence)
- What does social class mean to you, in terms of shaping your identity?

3.3 Participants

Choosing participants for a qualitative study is an important step in that they have to feel that the issue is important to them as well (Berg, 2004). Participants should be chosen on the basis that they can best inform the researcher on the research problem being explored. They are also required to be accessible and willing to disclose information (Creswell, 2007). Below, I address all methodological decisions related to the research participants.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The following criteria was applied to my teacher participants:

1. Teachers will self-identifying as being of a middle-class background
2. Teachers will have experience working in high-poverty secondary schools in Toronto
3. Teachers will have been teaching for at least three years
In order to address the main research question, the participants I interviewed had experience working in high-poverty schools as self-identifying middle-class individuals. Additionally, the teachers who participated have been teaching for a minimum of three years. In order to maintain a geographical focus, teachers were all employed in high-poverty communities in Toronto.

3.3.2 Sampling procedure/ recruitment

Sample selection and the strategies employed to do so in a qualitative research study have a significant effect on the overall quality of the research (Coyne, 1997). The procedures used in sampling for qualitative research do not follow rigid or strict guidelines in the same way that they do in quantitative studies (Coyne, 1997).

Qualitative research has three broad approaches to sampling: convenience, purposeful and theoretical. Convenience sampling involves the researcher selecting their most accessible participants, which is the simplest and most cost effective method, but brings with it certain limitations, such as lacking intellectual credibility (Marshall, 1996). Purposeful sampling is directed towards a purpose (Coyne, 1997), and is the most commonly employed sampling method in qualitative research (Marshall, 1996). Purposeful sampling is practical and based on the researcher’s prior knowledge on the topic and previous literature available (Marshall, 1996). Finally, theoretical sampling pertains to, or is in accordance with a given theory and are generally driven by said theory (Coyne, 1997). They intend to build on the theories created by existing data by examining a new sample (Marshall, 1996). Marshall (1996) explains that there is quite a deal of overlap among the three types of sampling and that often researchers employ elements of more than one. Based on the methodological parameters of my research study, I have pursued a combination of both convenience and purposeful sampling.
The sampling procedure in this research study was purposeful in that participants were chosen on the basis of set criteria that they needed to adhere to. The criteria were created in such a way that they had the intention of gathering the most rich and informative data in response to the research question. The sampling procedure also had an element of convenience sampling because participants will be relatively close geographically (Toronto) and were sought out through my pre-existing resources and connections. In casually discussing the intentions of my research with two individuals I met through the University of Toronto, they were able to connect me with a number of other individuals who they felt fit my criteria. I got in touch with a number of them, and those that were the first to get back to me and willing to participate ended up being my sample.

3.3.3 Participant bios

Emma is a secondary school teacher who was born, grew up and currently lives and works in Toronto, Ontario. As well, she received her teacher education in Toronto. She has been a secondary school teacher for over ten years teaching mostly Social Science, History, Geography and Spanish courses for Grades 9-12. She has had experience in both high-poverty and more affluent secondary schools in Toronto. Her most recent high-poverty school was considered a ‘high needs school’ in which there exists a high proportion of minority students. Emma identifies herself as middle-class, but considered herself to be at the lower end of that spectrum during her childhood.

Jane is a secondary school teacher who was born in Toronto, grew up in Thunder Bay, and then spent the later years of her childhood in a suburb of Toronto. She, too, received her teacher education in Toronto. She has been teaching as a secondary school teacher for almost ten years teaching mostly History, Geography, Law, Social Sciences and Special Education courses
for Grades 9-12. She has had experience in both high-poverty and more affluent secondary
schools in Toronto. She has moved around through several schools in the board, but she
described the school she felt had the highest needs as serving many students who relied on food
banks. Bailey identifies herself as middle-class, but maintains that she can still relate in many
ways to the students in her high-poverty schools.

Greg is a secondary school teacher who currently lives and teaches in Toronto. Greg has
been a secondary school teacher for almost twenty years. Prior to teaching, he was an investment
banker. Greg taught abroad before deciding to enter teacher education, and received his teacher
education in the Buffalo, NY. Greg currently teaches History and Economics, and has had
experience teaching a wide variety of Social Science and Humanities courses. Greg currently
teaches at an affluent secondary school in Toronto. His most recent high-poverty school was in a
neighbourhood where the major streets were characterized by having one of the highest
concentration of social housing projects. Greg identifies himself as middle-class.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research relies primarily on inductive reasoning processes,
which involve transforming data into meaningful findings (Thorne, 2000). The data analysis
process uses analytical categories to describe a particular social phenomenon, which arise as they
emerge from the data (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). Data which fits under each category is
organized accordingly and compared to the rest of the data in order to more fully distinguish the
categories from each other (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). Essentially, the data is reduced,
separated, and analysed in categories on the basis of different themes, and is represented in
various forms, such as figures, tables, or a discussion (Creswell, 2007).
Throughout my analysis, I employed this method by transcribing my interviews and coding my data. I then classified repetitive themes or issues in the data and discussing their significance. As I scanned through the transcripts of my participant interviews, I identified a number of repetitive words and phrases. I then grouped them together into categories on the basis of their similarities. From there, these categories became themes based on what information they provided me.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

The idea of ethics in qualitative research has to do with doing good and avoiding harm, with particular reference to the protection of human participants in the research study (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2000). According to Di-Cicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), there are four main ethical issues qualitative researchers must acknowledge: reducing the risk of unanticipated harm, protecting the participants' information, thoroughly informing participants of the nature of the study, and reducing the risk of participant exploitation.

Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2000) outline three main ethical principles pertaining to qualitative research: autonomy, beneficence and justice. Autonomy refers to respecting participants' rights such as, for example, the right to be informed or the right to freely withdraw from the study. Beneficence refers generally to doing good and avoiding harm by being aware of the potential outcomes of publishing participants' names. For this purpose, it is recommended that researchers use pseudonyms and that participants are aware of how the results will be published. Finally, justice refers to ensuring that participants are not exploited. Thus, researchers must recognize both the vulnerability and the contributions of their participants (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2000).
Given that the topic of middle-class teachers in high-poverty schools involves a certain degree of personal information and self reflection, certain questions elicited emotional responses. Thus, I provided my participants with the interview questions prior to the interview and reminded them that they had the right to pass on answering certain questions, and may have withdrawn at any time. As well, because of the importance of anonymity, I provided each of my participants with pseudonyms to ensure that their identities were protected. The collected data was kept on a password protected cell phone transferred only to a password protected laptop computer.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Qualitative research receives a fair bit of criticism for a number of reasons - most commonly because of its perceived lack of 'scientific rigour', particularly because the data is subject to researcher bias and lacks reproducibility (because the research is so personal), and lastly because it cannot be generalized (Mays & Pope, 1995). It has also been criticized for depending too heavily on interviews and focus groups (Anderson, 2010). Anderson also outlines other limitations of qualitative data. Of particular note, the vast amount of data makes its analysis and interpretation extremely time consuming, a researcher is present during data collection and may affect participants' responses, and the findings can be difficult to present visually. Overall, the main limitation appears to be the issue that the findings cannot necessarily be applied to larger populations the way that quantitative data can, and that data cannot be tested for statistical significance (Atieno, 2009). This issue, to a certain degree, affects this particular study. Due to the fact that the study is focusing on the specific experiences of a small sample, the findings cannot necessarily be applied to larger populations in the way quantitative data can.
That being said, there are a number of strengths in qualitative research that are directly applicable to my research project. Anderson (2010) outlines a number of strengths of qualitative research. For one, issue(s) at hand are examined in great detail, may be guided and/or redirected in real time and the framework/direction of the study can be revised. Finally, simplifying and managing data without destroying the context is also a characteristic of qualitative research (Atieno, 2009). Due to the specificity of my research problem and question, the most genuine and worthwhile data would come from employing the methods of qualitative research.

3.7 Conclusion: Brief Overview and Preview of What is Next

In this chapter I outlined and explained the methodology for the research study. I began with a discussion of the research approach and procedure, discussing the definition and features of qualitative research. I then outlined the instrument of data collection, classifying face-to-face, semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data for the study. Here I outlined some of the different types of interviews that qualitative researchers use—namely structured, unstructured, and semi-structured. Next, I described the participants of the study, and identified the sample criteria that applied to all of them. I also discussed the recruitment procedure for my participants, which was a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling. I then outlined the way by which I analysed my data, which consisted of identifying common themes among the findings from the different interviews. Ethical issues in qualitative research were then described as pertaining to my study. Finally, I outlined both the limitations and strengths of qualitative research. For my study in particular, limitations included biases of the researcher, and strengths being the first-hand look into the human experience. In the next chapter, I report on the findings of the research.
Chapter Four: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

The central research question guiding this study is: What are the experiences of self-reporting, middle-class teachers working in high-poverty secondary schools in Toronto? The sampling criteria utilized in this study is as followed: Each participant had to be self-identifying as middle-class and has had experience in high-poverty secondary schools in Toronto. As well, I asked that they have at least three years of teaching experience. The previous chapters in this study have outlined several subjects. In Chapter One, I introduce the research context and problem, by discussing some of the statistics regarding poverty in Toronto and its surrounding areas, followed by an outline of the purpose of my study and the research question, concluding with a conversation about my personal background and relationship to the topic. In Chapter Two I provided a review on literature pertaining to the topic of high-poverty secondary schools and teacher experiences. Finally, in Chapter Three, I outlined the methodologies utilized in this study. I spoke of qualitative inquiry, and discussed the choice of using semi-structured interviews for my qualitative data collection.

This chapter works to present and discuss findings that emerged throughout the data analysis of the research interviews with middle class teachers in high-poverty secondary schools. In analysing the data I collected, my research question remained at the forefront of the direction I intended to take. In the discussion of this chapter, connections are drawn between participants’ experiences and perceptions and the Chapter Two literature review. Findings are organized into four main themes:

I. How middle-class positionality impacts teachers in high-poverty schools
II. High poverty vs. affluent schools
III. Strategies for teaching to your students
IV. Challenges to teaching and learning

Each theme will be described, followed by a report of the data, brought together with a discussion of the significance each theme exhibits within the context of existing literature.

Conclusively, I summarize my findings and transition to the final chapter.

4.1 How Middle-Class Positionality Impacts Teachers in High-Poverty Schools

The participants outlined how their social positions as ‘middle-class’ as well as being self-reflective on their privilege has positively impacted their role as teachers when working in high-poverty secondary schools. Each of the participants had their own ways of expressing what socioeconomic status and social class meant to them in their own lives, and related this to their teacher identity, and how it affected the dynamic they had with their students.

In practice, the participants each encountered situations where they unknowingly perpetuated inequity when forgetting their privilege, but used this as a learning experience to avoid continuing to do so in the future. The participants described experiences where they were subconsciously ignoring the socioeconomic status of their students, resulting in inequitable practices. Nieto (2000) argues that because many teachers (who are white and middle-class) have limited experiences with diverse communities, they seldom reflect on their privilege. Based on the participants’ responses on the topic, though, it is arguable that this is not always true. The participants made it apparent that to best understand the students, one must understand themselves, their self identity, and be self-aware of their privilege. Participants were thus asked to share moments where this self-awareness was highlighted.

Emma spoke of an experience where she, in hindsight, realized that she had done something wrong. In planning a class trip, she overlooked the fact that the cost of the trip, while
to her seemed reasonable, was quite a financial burden for the families of her students that were already struggling with money. She realized here that it is extremely important to “be careful not to perpetuate inequitable practices”.

Citing similar experiences, Greg recalled planning trips and realizing that students would often get their parents to not sign permission forms because they did not want to face admitting that they could not afford it. As his sensitivity to this issue heightened, he planned more cost effective trips, and found ways to ensure costs to students and their families would be minimal. In both cases, the participants were positively impacted as teachers because they realized the importance of not putting their students in a position where they would feel embarrassed, or ashamed for not being able to afford the trip.

Greg also discussed his acknowledgment of the privilege he holds as a white male, as he believes that his physical appearance reinforces to people the class to which he belongs and the privilege that comes with that. Rather than allowing this to create a divide between him and his low socioeconomic status students, he utilizes this in a positive way:

I generally dress, I guess, more presentable than your average teacher. Uh, I do suits and ties and it wasn’t, uhm, as much to distinguish me from the class, it was, number one, to establish myself as a professional, and secondly to be something that the students could aspire to, and that their school was a place with smart, bonified, caring teachers and they were getting the education that could help them succeed later on in life.

Greg is suggesting that as teachers, we have the power to influence not only external behaviour, but internal beliefs. If students do not have models of behaviour and attitude, they
will not have any goals to aspire to. Greg described that in doing this he is utilizing his own physically defined privilege to benefit his students.

Jane took on a slightly different approach, and did not bring up any specific incident(s) where she felt she perpetuated inequity, but did reflect on recognizing the difference in socioeconomic status between her and her students. Jane suggested that she feels she can empathize with her students to a certain degree, but still identified being aware of situations her students are facing that she never had to.

Like I’ve had students where there’s ten kids in a family and they’re all in a two bedroom. […] So that wasn’t me. I had my own room, you know, like that kind of thing is subtle but I guess I can still kind of understand better looking that way because, uh, even things like trying to figure out how are they going to pay school, to go to school. That was something that was very difficult for me to figure out and go through. So I mean that I can help them find more of these avenues.

Similarly to Emma and Greg, Jane found that her privilege does not have to create a divide between her and her students. Rather, she believes that she is often “using my own privilege to get them privilege”. As she stated in the quotation above, having the privilege that she does because of the social class that she is in means that she can use her access to information and share it with her students.

According to Dell’Angelo (2014), it has been found that teachers require self-reflection as part of their professional development, particularly when working in high-poverty schools. This self-reflection is important because it allows teachers to understand themselves in relation to their students, and subsequently help them to understand how to bridge the gap between their
positions in society. In the discussion of this topic with my participants, their own reflexivity has caused them to help stop perpetuating inequities in their schools.

4.2 High-poverty vs. Affluent Schools

Participants each drew several comparisons between their perceptions of their experiences in more affluent secondary schools to those in high-poverty secondary schools. Each had experiences working in both types of school communities, and highlighted several noticeable differences.

Emma described her experience of the school atmosphere in more affluent schools as being “so, so different”, particularly with regards to the administration and the attitudes towards and treatment of teachers. She explained, “so there was this sort of attitude about how, uhm, the teacher is like the servant, or the teacher is the person they’re meant to serve, like it’s not a job somebody’s respected as it would be in other, like, in Latin America, like you respect your teacher”. Emma is suggesting that the socioeconomic status of a school and its community can influence the way that teachers are treated.

She continued to discuss this issue by saying that, “there’s that attitude, uhm, with respect to education and communities. The more affluent you are, the more we’re supposed to bend over backwards even though it might not be so ethical”. Emma is suggesting here is that there is a tendency, in these more affluent schools, for teachers to also be expected to do things which may not seem fair, to appease both the students in these schools and their parents. She elaborated on this by giving a specific example,

If I caught a student for plagiarizing, and then I was hulled down to the office, uhm, basically questioning about it and I was asked to provide proof, and then the VP met me,
with a comment ‘well, his mother’s a lawyer’ and I’m like ‘well then she should know better about plagiarizing’

Jane spoke also about several points of comparison based off her experiences in both high-poverty and affluent secondary schools. When asked about experiences with colleagues, she highlighted her belief that the goals of her colleagues were different in the different school communities.

Speaking specifically on experiences with colleagues in high-poverty secondary schools, she reflected on these experiences as hindering her, “some of my colleagues are great and they’re doing good things. But I would say that it is few and far in between”. Unfortunately, she went on to say that, “my teachers make things difficult, easily, because they don’t get it. A lot of them do not have the patience or ability to understand that socioeconomic status plays a huge part”. She went on to expand on this by explaining:

I would say a lot of my colleagues don’t get it. They also don’t have the patience for, you know, a bad day, a tired day, like, I said, you know some of my kids have been in a shelter, and yeah they’re pissed off and frustrated and colleagues make it very difficult, uhm, for my kids to want to be in the building. So I do, I, I butt heads with a number of my colleagues on a lot of like the real, tough, hard to deal with kids, because they don’t, they don’t take a minute to understand or ask the question, why?

Because of this, Jane expressed colleague collaboration being prohibited in these schools because of the perceived lack of understanding she feels her colleagues experience. Reeves (2003) found that it is colleague collaboration that is a large determinant of success in high-poverty schools. While this is likely true in many circumstances, the achievement of Jane’s
students, although she lacks excessive colleague collaboration, proves that this is not always the case.

Shifting to her experiences in more affluent schools, Jane highlighted a sense of feeling a difference attitude, mainly with regards to the goals of the teachers, and these goals being the same. These said goals are focused more on academics: “you all want your kids up there getting the 80s, 90s, like how are we going to get these kids to university? And then that’s the biggest push, as a staff you’re always trying to figure out how do we get these kids here?” Clearly not dealing so much with the barriers that come with being part of marginalized communities, Jane highlights that she believes teachers in more affluent schools are more in sync in what they are pursuing, and that is academics and academic success, demonstrated by the percentage of students going to university.

Jane also spoke of an attitude that she believes exists among administration in low-income communities. When attempting to get a particular form of programming going, her administration “didn’t want me teaching through hip-hop, they thought hip-hop was just going to promote violence, drugs, gangs, uhm so I mean its just, their ignorance is very, very hard to push past”. What this also highlights is the issue of understanding the students and school community beyond the classroom, that was discussed above. Unfortunately, as the participants noted, not everyone is equipped with that understanding which they believe is necessary in these high-poverty schools.

When asked about some of the differences she has experienced in more affluent secondary schools, Jane pointed out that she believed administration teams were generally “more
of a figure head” and because they do not have to “put out as many fires” they have time to “be more supportive”.

Greg drew a few comparisons between high-poverty and affluent secondary schools as well, but focused on a couple points which stood out as the main differences. Speaking about working in the inner city, in high-poverty schools, he said “it’s like you’re constantly fighting fires”. He also mentioned that the schools are working with a budget that is designed to make things better, instead they end up using it on replacing things that were lost, stolen, or broken.

He also spoke of the teachers themselves, and found that in more affluent schools, we can focus on instruction a lot more. Rather than, lets say, dealing with extreme behaviours, uh because generally we found with poverty, uh, lack of social or low social skills. Uhm, or anti-social behaviour, uhm, often or sometimes was exhibited by the students and so therefore you took on the role of essentially being the parent and teaching manners, and things that you would expect would be present at home but they have to be taught or they’re not going to learn.

Similarly to Jane’s perception of administration having more time to be supportive, Greg suggested that in more affluent schools, teachers have more time to focus on instruction, rather than dealing with what he refers to as ‘extreme behaviours’.

White (2010) found that teachers believe overcoming negative attitudes about those living in poverty is one of the greatest challenges faced in high-poverty schools. This relates to what Jane discussed regarding her colleagues not ‘getting it’. Although she has found ways to manoeuver not always having positive collegial relationships, it remains a challenge that she has had to face when working in high-poverty schools. As Klar and Brewer (2013) found, schools
with high poverty levels do better than expected when principals emphasize and facilitate collaboration amongst the staff.

Taking on the role of being more than just a teacher, as Greg outlined as being more prevalent in high-poverty schools, has also been found in existing literature. Referred to as both the greatest challenge and greatest reward, teachers have expressed experiencing having to go above and beyond to build meaningful relationships with their students (DiBara, 2007).

On the topic of administration, what Jane emphasized focused on the experiences she has had with ineffective principals in high-poverty schools. It has been found that principals spend more time working with their students and less time away from the school when working in high-poverty schools (Mulford et al, 2007). Based off the information given in Jane’s interview, her experiences have not aligned with this sentiment.

4.3 Strategies for Teaching to Your Students

The participants recognized the significant impact understanding their audience had on both their personal philosophies of teaching, and the subsequent strategical and pedagogical decisions they made. Throughout the interview process, all three participants emphasized the impact that understanding their audience has on creating relevant pedagogy, utilizing the community, and maintaining high expectations for their students.

4.3.1 Knowing your audience

Each of the participants maintained that understanding the students that they are educating is imperative, and is particularly important within the context of teaching students from low-income backgrounds. To reach the students, and make their school experience positive and relevant, they feel they need to ‘get’ them. This includes understanding their personal lives, and how their familial financial situation impacts their school lives.
All three participants noted specifically the importance of getting to know their students and building relationships to being more effective educators. As Jane outlined, “they seemed to kind of take me in because I would have these real conversations with them and I would sit with them and its just all on the table […] so I think its about how you relate.” Similarly, Emma stated that, “relationship building with the students, knowing how they self-identify, does affect how I teach”. And finally, Greg stated that, “I find understanding their circumstances makes me much more effective in the classroom.”

For the participants, taking the time to understand their students has made a huge impact on how effective they are as educators. Jane particularly, on a couple of occasions, referred to colleagues and administrators that experienced frustration and in certain ways ‘gave up’ on the students, which she believes is a result of them not taking the time to understand the students and their lives beyond the school walls.

4.3.2 Relevancy of content to student lives

Closely tied to understanding students is to then bring in their experiences in curricular content. In making subject matter relevant, the teachers found that they were being more effective in their teaching practice as students tend to be more engaged in the content. This involves not only resources in the classroom, but enlisting the aid of community sources to go the extra step in making their teaching both engaging and effective. Johnson (1998) outlines that creating connections between course material and life experiences of students is imperative for engagement. Specific to schools in high poverty neighbourhoods, reaching out to the community was a powerful way to connect to students and bring their voices into conversations.

Emma spoke about the necessity of ‘critical pedagogy that actually brings in student voices’ and as someone who also works to develop curriculum, explained that for her, ‘youth
participatory action’ is crucial. To avoid youth from marginalized communities to only ever seem themselves as the subjects of research and never agents of change, she works to use student voices in all that she does. This also means bringing in outside sources, as Emma admits, “I’m a strong believer in, like, in the value that community has […] who the heck am I to go in and do P.D. on Roma students or Portuguese students? I need, I need the community not just to give me information but for them to actually have an active part”. So for Emma, having guest speakers who can best relate to her students have become a strong source of effective teaching for her.

Jane agreed with the necessity of relevant pedagogy, “whatever my audience is, [I need] to have their perspectives included, cause otherwise its not relevant”. Jane spoke about using appropriate language, validating experience, and finding ways to engage students by making things relevant. Something specific she mentions is that unfortunately outside of the classroom kids are dealing with extreme hardships like homelessness, but are still somehow managing to get to school. So for her, something that is really important is making her lessons and classroom experiences relevant and engaging so that they can escape what is going on in their lives at least for the time that they are in class.

Jane also spoke positively about community involvement, saying not only does she reach out to the community to get things like food for her students, she, “in turn will bring my kids back to the community.” This included things like cultivating their community garden, which produced food for food banks, or working with younger students at the neighbouring elementary schools. Jane also mentioned attempting to get guest speakers, but unfortunately faced financial barriers in being able to do so.
Similarly, Greg emphasized also the need for different approaches such as relevant literature and articles to read in order to “bring back their own awareness of themselves”, because, “disengagement, which I believe is the worst attitude for inner-city youth to adopt.” Finally, he stated that being consistent and showing you care will elicit respect from the students.

Guest speakers also came up in Greg’s interview, but he spoke too about his specific involvement in outside community groups where he has “worked to address some of the systemic issues that face basically youth, especially in impoverished neighborhoods and especially with treatment of the police, and practices of the communities which seem to, despite what they say, uh, unfairly target these neighborhoods and especially students of colour.” While this did not involve students per say, he was working with the community on policies to better their educational experiences.

4.3.3 Maintaining high expectations

Greg acknowledged that while in inner city settings, students may be “very academically challenged”, he avoids “dumbing things down”, which he feels happens a lot. Rather, he made a point to highlight the importance of “maintaining high expectations” and “modelling the best behaviours”, particularly in regards to professionalism, so that these students have something to look up to and aspire to be.

Similarly, to Greg, Emma discussed fostering these high expectations in the students themselves as well by encouraging that ‘growth mindset’ that gets students to believe that they are capable to rise above their situations, regardless of how they have done in school in the past. Emma added to this by acknowledging what she believes is a common attitude facing students in high poverty schools, “I really don’t believe in ‘well students come from this community, they’re
bound the stay in that community’ cause I’m going to tell you, like a lot of people actually think that’s it”.

Bailey expressed the importance of expectations on her students because of how she has seen them fail to rise above what many people expect of them, which is generally low academic success. “When you don’t have expectations of a kid then, they’re not going to rise above it. So, yea, they’ll look at themselves and they’ll think ‘okay, whatever, fine, who cares?’ They’re not expected to do anything, so they won’t.”

What the participants discussed in this section was very much in line with existing literature. While students from low socioeconomic backgrounds endure a number of issues impeding their academic success, Dell’Angelo (2014) found that the expectations and perceptions a teacher has of their students has the ability to counter this in a positive way. It has also been found that when teachers have high expectations of their students in the beginning of the school year, there is a positive relationship to high student academic achievement when tested at the end of the school year (Rubie-Davies, Hattie, and Hamilton, 2006).

On the topic of relevant, engaging pedagogy, on the other hand, rather than community, the literature emphasized using field trips much more. White (2010) found that field trips provide students with important learning opportunities which they can engage in and relate to their own lives in ways that may never be facilitated inside the classroom. While the participants did previously mention planning trips, they did not come up as one of the main strategies for engaging student learning or creating relevant pedagogy.

As well, the literature highlighted several additional strategies that were not specifically mentioned in the research interviews. Most notably was utilizing technology. Interactive
Computer Technology has been found to aid youth in high-poverty schools with several Ministry expectations, such as having students develop higher-order thinking and reasoning skills (Laffey et al, 2003). That said, this discrepancy may have to do with issues of funding which will be discussed further later in this chapter.

4.4 Challenges to Teaching and Learning

When the question was asked about factors that hinder student success in high-poverty schools, each of the participants provided answers relating to issues such as common narratives, and financial inadequacies.

4.4.1 Common narrative, and who’s telling it

Literature on the topic of high poverty or inner city schools will often cite concepts like the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’, and the negative affects of streaming. Thus, it seemed appropriate to ask teachers their opinions on the validity of these ideas.

Simply upon mentioning the literature and these ideologies, Emma had the following reaction: “Oh my god, it makes, it makes me so mad because it like, it perpetuates that deficit frame of thinking”. Clearly disagreeing with the way literature tends to frame the topic, Emma said that we “need to ask ourselves ‘who is writing this literature?’ its not the racialized people”. Having most literature about marginalized communities as not being written by members of the community, and therefore having an (often) biased, and ‘deficit’ perspective.

For Emma, she believes there remains very “damage centered perspectives”, where there is this idea that schools must “save” the poor kids. We spoke about this sort of ‘hero complex’ that some teachers and/or schools may have when it comes to low-income youth. This idea that a white, middle-class teacher is going to enter the poor school and save all of the students from
their pre-written future of continuously lacking in academic success and even more so continuing the cycle of poverty. At the same time, on the other end of the spectrum, there exists this sentiment of, “why are you helping this kid, they’re not doing to graduate anyway?”.

When asked about streaming, Emma stated the following, “I think streaming in itself, right, the statistics tell us that ‘certain groups are streamlined into applied and essential’. This tends to fit well with the self-fulfilling prophecy, as the stream that a student is in will likely influence their level of success.

On the topic of the self-fulfilling prophecy, ability streaming came up in Jane’s interview, and she had the following to say:

For sure, and you know we’ll talk to the kids in a way based on that. And we’ll be like ‘well that’s applied’ you know. Even the way that its said, and the way that- and the kids know it. Uhm, at least like the words change, when I was in school, uhm, it was ‘Advanced’, ‘General’, and ‘Basic’. And, when I was in school you needed math in nine and ten, uhm, not eleven like now, and I was in Basic math. I took shop math, and business math, but I mean it was bad then, cause its like well you were in ‘Basic’ class. Like you were literally, you were ‘Basic’.

Jane also spoke to the lack of course opportunities which would enable success for certain student demographics, “we need to be presenting more opportunities… we’re closing schools, uh and the schools that we’re closing are schools with tech options”. Thus, these teachers perceive that because schools are not offering appropriate options to meet the needs of the population it serves, students are less inclined to be successful at school.
Jane outlined a few similar attitudes. A specific example came from her administration team at a particular school. When attempting to put into place a program of teaching through hip-hop, she was met with the response of, “all this stuff you’re doing to help out these ‘black boys’ is not going to stop them from their fast track to being dead or in jail.” Reflecting back on what was said about the real influence that expectations have on students, attitudes such as this perpetuate negative self-fulfilling prophecies.

In Greg’s experience, he believes that the self-fulfilling prophecy can definitely be true, as he believes that the teacher is the “number one force in the class to make a difference in that student’s life” and that “where that teacher is not passionate, is not patient, is not tolerant, to, perhaps some of the, maybe lack of social skills, it simply does, indeed, set the student on the road to failure, disengagement, which I believe is the worst attitude for inner-city youth to adopt.”

For the most part, the data collected from the research interviews is in line with existing literature. Tanner (2010) looks at the self-fulfilling prophecy and postulates that a student’s sense of self is heavily influenced by the stream that they are placed in. Based off of the conversations, the participants tended to agree with this. Walker (2014) also found that teachers can underestimate student abilities based off of their socioeconomic status backgrounds, leading them to place them in their perceived to be ‘proper’ stream, as Emma attested to. What the literature did not discuss was the specific negative attitudes teachers themselves express regarding the different streams, as Jane pointed out, and how their expressed attitudes of this negatively impact students even more. As well, existing literature that was discussed in Chapter Two highlighted only what it meant to be an ‘effective administrator’. From the perspectives
discussed here, particularly from Jane and Emma, there is much to be said for the challenges that come with ineffective administrators, and how to overcome this.

4.4.2 Where is the money?

Something problematic that came up numerous times throughout the research interviews was the issue of funding. When asked about some of the greatest challenges being faced in high-poverty schools, Greg spoke about his board’s funding formula, and argued that while the boards “promote diversity”, there is “no diversity in the funding formula”, in other words insisting that they are following an archaic way of doing things.

Jane spoke about needing money to be better allocated into programming that appeals to the community of a school. For example, she believes that with high-poverty schools, money should be going into tech options for students, as they are likely to be more oriented towards those fields.

As Emma put it, there may be issues with budget, but for her it boils down to hiring more teachers, and more specifically, “teachers who want to be there”.

On the topic of funding for high-poverty schools, the literature also sees this as a necessity. For White (2010), it was found that more money is needed specifically for school trips, and that subsidy programs that exist may need to be re-evaluated if they are not being utilized by students. Lupton (2005) argued that there is a need to change the way that funds are allocated in schools, and to what is considered ‘core’ verses ‘extra’, similar to what Greg argued when he suggested the need for a more diverse funding formula for schools. Lupton (2005) also echoed Emma’s sentiments hiring more teachers, but did not touch on the point she made about “teachers who want to be there”.

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4.5 Conclusion

Throughout the analysis process, four main themes developed. In doing a study about middle-class teachers in high-poverty schools, the importance of reflexivity on one’s social class identity was imperative. This study showed that while literature tends to postulate that while teachers should participate in self-reflection as part of their professional development, but do not, the conversations had during the research interviews proved otherwise, at least for this sample. The participants were self-aware not only of their own identity, but also how this compares to the identity of their students and the way that their privilege is manifested.

Secondly, I found that the comparisons drawn between high-poverty and more affluent schools, while not entirely uniform, do reflect several patterns. Relationships these participants have with colleagues and administration tend to be more strained in high-poverty schools, whereas the relationships with the community seem stronger and more beneficial in authentic ways for the students. Literature on these specific comparisons appear minimal, but do attest to the importance of colleague collaboration and building meaningful relationships with students.

Next, I found that the participants have specific strategies to best serve students in high-poverty secondary schools. These strategies were discussed under the general categories of maintaining high expectations, and making content relevant. The responses tended to be in line with the literature, although varied on the specific ways in which to do this.

Finally, I ended my discussion of the research interviews with an analysis of the challenges to teaching and learning that these teachers have experienced. This included breaking down common narratives, and addressing the issue of funding.
These findings speak to the central research question of my study, as they shed light on experiences of middle-class teachers in high-poverty schools. Although just a snapshot of the entire picture, the findings provide a number of revelations regarding these teachers’ experiences in a local context. Next, in Chapter 5, I discuss broad and narrow implications for these findings, provide recommendations and note potential areas for further research.
5.0 Introduction

This research study has provided insight into teacher perceptions of their experiences in high poverty secondary schools in Toronto, Ontario. Participants involved in this study self-identified as middle-class. This study has outlined best practices, points of comparisons, challenges and areas of improvement all pertaining to my participants and their experiences working in these communities. Based on the information gathered from the participant interviews, this section will focus on the implications and recommendations regarding academic success of secondary students from low-income communities. I will also raise a number of questions pointing to further research required on the topic of teaching in high-poverty secondary schools. The chapter will then conclude with a summary explaining the significance of this research to teachers working to ensure equitable practices and the academic success of students in high poverty secondary schools.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings

Initially, when undertaking this research study, I was intending to focus simply on what teachers in high-poverty secondary schools were doing to ensure the success of their students. I am reminded of the literature that suggests that there is a positive relationship between an individual’s parental income and their educational success (Belley, Frenette & Lochner, 2013) therefore justifying attention being given to these populations. As I narrowed my focus, however, I found myself shifting towards the importance of also addressing and considering the socioeconomic status of the teachers in these schools, and how this comes into play when working with their students. Each of the participants in the study self-identified as middle class,
and part of the study required them to be reflective on what their positionality in society means to them and how it has helped and/or hindered them in their profession. Specific themes that further explored were: comparing high-poverty and more affluent schools, strategies for teaching to your students, and challenges to teaching and learning.

Each of the participants revealed the way in which recognizing the difference in socioeconomic status between themselves and their students, and acknowledging their privilege positively impacted their experiences in high-poverty schools. Being reflective helped them to understand the students in front of them, as well as encouraged them to use their own privilege to better the experiences of their students. This included avoiding any practices which may subconsciously perpetuate inequity, such as planning cost-effective field trips.

Participants also revealed several points of comparison regarding their experiences in more affluent secondary school to those in high-poverty secondary schools. One participant noted that the attitudes and treatment of teachers was generally more negative in affluent schools. Another participant explained that she found colleague collaboration to be much more difficult in high-poverty schools because of a lack of understanding of the lives of the students. In more affluent schools she found that colleagues tended towards the same goals; that being getting their students into university. Similar comparisons were made regarding the administration in these differing school communities.

In furthering the theme of self-reflection, and understanding one’s audience, the participants revealed a few strategical and pedagogical strategies they use and believe to be effective. Each of the participants attested to the importance of making course content relevant to the students, noting particularly the use of community resources and guest speakers. As well, the
participants discussed their belief in the importance of maintaining high expectations of their students, and avoiding ‘dumbing things down’. The participants also discussed their beliefs on the self-fulfilling prophecy and streaming as barriers to student success.

Finally, the participants also discussed the issue of financial inadequacies in the schools as a challenge in high-poverty schools. They each belief that funds need to be better allocated to meet the needs of students. This includes hiring more teachers, and implementing course options that are a better fit to the community of the school.

With this information, my study ultimately provides a glimpse into the issues that middle-class teachers are facing in high-poverty secondary schools.

5.2 Implications

The following section provides the implications that come from my research study. Said implications are divided into ‘Broad’ and ‘Narrow’.

5.2.1 Broad: The educational community

My findings suggest that students are often burdened with their home lives, affecting their academic success, and equitable practices in schools are not always being put into place. While these challenges are not always easy to overcome, the participants in this research study have provided their perspectives on how this may be done. Specific suggestions that have come from the research are several teacher strategies, and community partnerships available that teachers need to advocate to utilize. As well, the overall consideration of experiences from teachers themselves, at a local context at that, may be used to better the educational community more broadly.
The findings reveal that there is a need for reform at the level of faculties of education. While the participants I interviewed have been going the extra mile to help their students, some of what they revealed about their perceptions of collegial and administration attitudes imply the need for an attitude shift, at the least. Perhaps faculties of education could make it a point to explore specifically working in inner-city, high-poverty schools to break down the deficit ways of thinking that still exist. As well, to provide teachers with specific strategies proven effective when working in these schools.

The participants also call for improvement in terms of funding. Restructuring the ways that funds are allocated to better ensure success in these high-needs schools would subsequently better ensure the success of students.

**5.2.2 Narrow: Your professional identity and practice**

As someone who self-identifies as middle class, and has spent time working with youth from low-income communities, I knew that this was a population I wanted to advocate for. At times, I have struggled, for I know that students may look at me and may think that I cannot relate to their lives, and therefore are not someone that they can look up to. I know that I cannot erase my privilege, but that does not mean I cannot use it to help others, and my participants showed me that. As well, I hoped that in getting the perspectives of experienced teachers, I would be able to broaden my understanding of what it means to work in high poverty secondary schools, particularly here in Toronto.

The classic story gets told to us (often) by Hollywood; the financially privileged (and usually white) teacher comes into the poor, urban school and single-handedly saves the youth from their lives of drugs, violence and gang affiliation. Something that I wanted to do with this
research was to figure out how to break free from this saviour complex and to understand genuine ways that teachers are bringing these youths to academic success.

In conducting my interviews, I learned a great deal. For one, the power of self reflection truly makes a difference when working with low-income youth. Recognizing one’s own privilege goes a long way in creating trusting relationships with students, developing and carrying out equitable practices, and even helping them to ‘get privilege’.

I learned quite a bit about best practices in terms of teacher strategies. The more that a teacher can include student voices into their content, the higher the likelihood that they will be engaged and successful. Perhaps more specific to low-income youth, terms like the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ and the ‘school-to-prison-pipeline’ found in existing literature get thrown around in discussions of ‘at-risk youth’. To counter this, my participants noted instead the importance of keeping expectations of their students, regardless of socioeconomic status, high.

That said, it remains important to be mindful of the socioeconomic status of one’s classroom when it comes to ensuring equitable practices. Planning trips, for example, needs to be a well though out process. This is not to imply that teachers should not be encouraged to plan field trips with these students, but rather to be more creative, perhaps, in order to ensure the financial costs be minimal. Related to this is the importance of making connections, both internally with teachers, administrators, and board members and externally with the community.

Unsurprisingly, this research highlighted a number of challenges faced when working in these communities. Perhaps the most important takeaway is the need for empathy and understanding. The challenges the participants discussed facing stemmed from deeper seeded issues, such as the stigma of the poor. The negative attitudes they found themselves confronted
with, often by their colleagues, is perhaps a reflection of how our society often tends to view the poor. Even something as seemingly simple as the way that existing literature labels students as ‘at risk youth’ may be extremely damaging and perpetuates assumptions like the negative ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’.

5.3 Recommendations

I am reminded here again of the self-defined identities of my participants. Two of the three participants had no experience working in high-poverty communities prior to being placed there as teachers, and the participant that did, received his teacher education outside of Ontario. Thus, this speaks to the need for teacher education programs to implement some sort of training or experience in working with low socioeconomic status communities.

The idea of equity and the implementation of equitable practices is increasing both in teacher education and in the Ontario curriculum. As well, there are board wide programs currently put into place, such as the Toronto District School Board’s Model Schools for Inner Cities. This initiative recognizes the challenges students face when living in poverty, and works with students, families, the community and the government to help ensure innovative teaching and learning practices be put into place, and that students have access to services they need to meet their well-being (TDSB, 2014). Yet, these teachers are still identifying that there remains a disconnection between policy and reality.

To help remedy this, teachers are encouraged to reach out to the community and build strong community connections. Each of the participants made a point to mention how great of a tool the community can be, particularly with high-poverty secondary schools. As well, teachers and administrators are encouraged to be open to new teaching techniques. For example, Jane had
attempted to implement ‘teaching through hip hop’ as a pedagogical tool, and was faced with backlash and disinterest from an administrator.

Additionally, while it is simple to say that money is a contributing factor, Greg made a poignant point to say that the lack of diversity in the funding formula for schools is playing a key, negative role in the outcome for many of the students attending these schools.

Finally, the information gathered by this research highlights the need for an attitude shift. Essentially there is no reason for a city like Toronto, wherein thirty-one percent of youth (aged 15-24) are living in poverty (Social Planning Toronto, 2013), to have teachers not understanding these circumstances and advocating for change. To achieve this, perhaps changes need to be made starting at the level of pre-service teacher education.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

The participants that I interviewed, while they faced many challenges, they were the teachers that were overcoming them and going above and beyond in an attempt to best serve their students. Emma and Jane have both collaborated on writing curriculum, and Greg has been involved in policy-making. It would be interesting to see how this research would differ if they came from different perspectives. My participants were all from Toronto or the Greater Toronto Area, and perhaps this makes a difference. Perhaps it would be interesting to see how teachers coming from rural areas have experienced working in high poverty secondary schools? Perhaps teachers from different socioeconomic status backgrounds other than ‘middle-class’ would bring in another voice to the conversation?

It would also be interesting to embark on a research project geared specifically to the implementation of initiatives such as Model Schools for Inner Cities by the Toronto District
School Board, or looking at outside programs such as Pathways to Education and how they work to close the achievement gap. In doing so this type of research could also help to answer the question of how thinking can be shifted in order to move away from the damaged-centred stigma of the poor.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The research conducted in this study matters for all stakeholders in the field of education. It matters because it addresses issues of equity, best practices, and changing attitudes in the educational community, all of which effects teachers, students, administrators, parents, board members, policy makers, etc. I believe that this research is also important because existing literature on the topic often uses damaging language, and the vast majority of it is not a local Toronto or even Ontario urban perspective.

In terms of the future, I hope most essentially that there will be a visible attitude shift both in society more generally, but within the classroom specifically in regards to how students from low socioeconomic status communities are viewed, and subsequently experience school. My hope is that more educators engage in professional development and self-reflection in order to break down the stigma that follows these communities. I hope also that more initiatives are implemented and utilized in order to best serve the needs of all students, particularly those from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.

Even as a middle-class background, white, female, pre-service teacher these issues matter. The teacher perspectives that this research highlights are important. I could easily be (and hope to be) in their position throughout my teaching career, and thus will take with me what I have learned from them. While their experiences do not paint an entire picture, the similarities running through each of their perspectives do attest to the issues that remain in high-poverty
secondary schools in Toronto, and thus highlight the necessity of this research, and all subsequent research on the topic.
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Date: ________

Dear ____________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. As a self-identifying, middle-class teacher candidate who has had experience working with low-income youth, I am interested in learning how a sample of middle-class teachers is experiencing working in high-poverty schools. Findings obtained from the study may be informative not only for current and pre-service teachers, but for community programs involved with ensuring the educational success of youth living in poverty, and I feel 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. 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 an approximately 60 minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a time and place convenient to you.

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 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 audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after data has been collected. Given the topic of socioeconomic status, and personal experiences, a minute risk participating in this study would be that certain questions may cause an emotional response, having the participant potentially feeling vulnerable. To address this, you will be provided with the questions ahead of time. I will also share a copy of my notes with you 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.

Sincerely,

Sandra Giammarco

MT Program Contact:
Dr. Angela Macdonald-Vamic,
Assistant Professor – Teaching Stream
angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca
416-821-6495
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 ________________________ (name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________

Name (printed): __________________________

Date: _____________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for participating in my research study. The aim of this study is to learn how a sample of self-identifying, middle-class teachers is experiencing working in high-poverty secondary schools. This interview should take approximately 60 minutes, and is comprised of approximately 25 questions.

The interview protocol has been divided into four sections, beginning with your background information (including prior preparation and experience), teacher identity as it relates to your role in a high-poverty school, your practices, pedagogy and experiences related to ensuring the success of low-income students, and questions regarding supports, challenges, and next steps for teachers. I want to remind you that you can choose not to answer any questions, and can remove yourself from participation at any time.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

To begin, can you state your name for the recording?

Section A - Background Information

1. In which city do you currently reside?
   a. In what specific neighbourhood do you live?
2. In which city were you born in? Grew up in?
   a. (If the same) which neighbourhood?
   b. (If different) which neighbourhoods?
3. How many years have you been working as a teacher in Ontario?
4. Do you have any experience teaching outside of Ontario? If so, where?
5. What grades and subjects do you currently teach? Which have you previously taught?
6. Is your current (or most recent) school the only school you have taught at?
   a. (if no) How many years of teaching experience did you have prior to being placed in a school within a high-poverty community?
7. Could you describe the community to which your (most recent, high--poverty) school belongs (Not just on the basis of socioeconomic status, but also crime, violence, etc).
8. How many years have you been working at this school/had you worked at this school?
9. Did you have any experience working in low socioeconomic status communities prior to being a classroom teacher?
   a. If so, could you describe the experience to me? (e.g. with a community group? Was it a positive or negative experience?)
10. Have you had any experience working in low socioeconomic status communities outside of the classroom since becoming a teacher?
a. If so, could you describe the experience to me? (e.g. with a community group? Positive of negative experience?)

11. Do you feel that your teacher education program prepared you to work in high-poverty schools as a new teacher?
   a. Can you recall any specific preparation that you received during your time at your respective Faculty of Education?

12. Have you previously taught/do you currently teach in a school(s) in more affluent communities?
   a. If yes, what were the most significant differences? (With students, administration, school atmosphere, etc).

Section B- Teacher Identity

13. As you are aware, I am interested in learning about middle-class teachers’ experiences in high-poverty secondary schools. You have self-identified as meeting this criteria. Could you tell me more about what social class mean to you, in terms of shaping your identity?

14. What is it like being of a different social class or SES from many of your students?
   a. Would you say it affects your relationships with them? If so, how?

15. Can you think of a moment or event when the difference in you and your students'/school community’s class background stood out to you?
   a. How did you/continue to handle this?

16. Would you say that your experience with low-income youth has caused you to think about your own identity with regards to class background in different ways? If so, could you explain?

Section C- Teacher Practices, Pedagogy, and Experiences

17. Through what general lens would you classify your approach to teaching?
   a. Does this, in any way, relate to, or stem from your experience with low-income youth?

18. What are some of the ways in which the SES of the student body affects how you teach?
   a. Positive?
   b. Negative?

19. What roles does X play in helping you to work with your students?
   a. Colleagues
   b. Administration
   c. The Community

20. (If applicable) Did you find the roles (mentioned in question 18) to be different in schools in more affluent neighbourhoods?

21. Literature on the topic of low-income youth/high-poverty schools often discuss concepts like the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ and the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’. Based on your experience, how would you say these concepts are and/or are not manifested through the school/community/society?
22. What kinds of support systems are available to you with regards to working with youth from low-income families?
   a. What do you think about the resources available to you?
23. What would you say is the overall greatest challenge about being a middle-class teacher in a high-poverty secondary school? Greatest reward?
24. Are there any specific changes you feel should be made to the school system more generally to better serve low-income youth?
25. As a teacher candidate who also self-identifies as middle-class and would like to work with low socioeconomic status youth, what advice do you have for me entering the profession?
26. Do you have any final thoughts?