Changing Teachers' Perspective of Students from Lower Socioeconomic Families

by

David Michael Keibler

B.A. Clarion University, 2002

M.A. Duquesne University, 2006

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This thesis/dissertation was presented

by

David Michael Keibler

It was defended on

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and approved by

Heather Bachman, Ph. D., Psychology in Education

Shannon Wagner, Ed. D., Superintendent of Schools, Burrell School District

Dissertation Director: Name R. Gerard Longo, PhD, Clinical Associate Professor, Administrative

and Policy Studies

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David Michael Keibler, EdD

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With the poverty cycle continuing and many communities facing an increased number of lower socioeconomic status (SES) families, it is essential to understand the perception teachers have regarding students living in poverty and how teachers' life experiences may differ from those of students who come from lower SES families. Many constructs, including socioeconomic status, can influence a child's ability to ready. The focus of this study is to identify what K-2 teachers know about students who live in lower SES households and how knowledge of their circumstances can be used to help children learn. Does professional development aimed at increasing teachers' knowledge of students living in poverty change how they teach or increase their empathy towards these students?

Qualitative methodology was used for this study, which sought to evaluate the knowledge of K-2 reading teachers regarding students living in poverty and to assess the influence of one professional development session on the instructional approach of teachers at David Leech Elementary School. Two methods anchored the study: a survey and interviews. A survey of the K-2 reading teachers was used to enhance the investigator's understanding of how the professional development training, "Chocolate in Poverty," may have influenced teacher perspectives on students in poverty. Interviews were then conducted with the grade level leaders in kindergarten, first, and second grades. The teacher responses to the survey and interview questions identified the need for additional trainings specific to the impact poverty has on student learning. Future

trainings should provide teachers with resources such as research-based interventions that are proven to support students from lower SES families, strategies to increase parent engagement, and information identifying the available resources in the Leechburg community and how to access the resources. Moving forward, conversations with teachers, parents, and other community stakeholders will further explore ways teachers can support lower SES students overcome the challenges faced at school and in their home lives.

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Preface

1.0 The Problem of Practice

State and federal agencies have acknowledged that students enter school with varying levels of preparation and readiness levels that differ significantly depending on their home lives, including the role socioeconomic status plays in student learning (Adelson et al., 2016; Barnett et al., 2015; Compton et al., 2006; Dilworth-Bart, 2012; Herbers et al., 2012; Hoff, 2013; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Waldfogel, 2012). Many students require additional support to narrow (or eliminate) the achievement gap as students' progress through school.

The focus of this study is to identify what teachers know about students who live in lower SES households and how knowledge of their circumstances can be used to help children learn. What do teachers know about the lives of the children entering their classrooms each morning? How do the life experiences of students differ from what the teachers experienced growing up? Is there a lack of understanding based on teachers' life experiences? Moreover, what are some strategies that can be employed to address a disconnect between teacher perceptions of a child's life experiences and the life challenges the children face? Can professional development increase the understanding teachers have of students living in poverty so as to influence their teaching?

1.1 Site for Study

This study focuses on the teachers perspective of students from lower SES households and will take place at an elementary school in Western Pennsylvania, where I serve as the elementary principal. Around 77 percent of the K-5 students at this building come from lower socioeconomic

households, which places them at risk for difficulties in learning. Through surveys and interviews of classroom teachers and the reading specialist in grades kindergarten through third grade, I explored how teacher knowledge of students of lower SES influences the achievement gap between underprivileged students and their more affluent peers. The goal of this study is to learn more about the teacher's perception and knowledge of students living in poverty and to create a plan of action focused on helping underprivileged students overcome the deficits and challenges they face.

2.0 Review of Literature

Numerous studies identify a reading achievement gap in U.S. students (Adelson et al., 2016; Barnett et al., 2015; Compton et al., 2006; Denton, 2012; Herbers et al., 2012). One such indicator, lower socioeconomic status (SES), has been identified as an area placing children at a disadvantage compared to their more affluent peers. (Dilworth-Bart, 2012). One's ability to proficiently read can be an indicator of an individual's chances of graduation, post-secondary degree, and income level, (Kids Count Data Snapshot, 2010). The effects are not only present when students enter school but remain evident throughout their educational careers (Herbers et al., 2012). If a person cannot read a street sign or a job opening in the newspaper, they fail to improve their standing in society (Agee, 2015).

With so many students living in poverty, what is being done by schools to prepare teachers to support low SES students? Many teacher preparation programs do not adequately prepare teachers to understand the challenges faced by impoverished families and their children (Bennett, 2008). Furthermore, the life experiences of many of our teachers reflect that of white middle-class family life. These teachers do not typically encounter the challenges faced by children raised in lower SES families until they are hired to teach in school systems that serve low SES families (Bennett, 2008; Cho et al., 2015; Hughes, 2010). This literature review will provide context regarding change theory in education, followed by a discussion on the impact SES has on student learning. The focus will then consider teachers perspective of students living in poverty. The literature review will conclude by reviewing the role professional development has on preparing teachers, as well as, the role of increased parent engagement for lower SES families.

2.1 Inquiry Questions

1. What do teachers know about students of lower socioeconomic status (SES) and the attributes that place children from low SES at risk when learning to read?

2. Following professional development for teachers that is focused on improving their understanding of students and families living in poverty, what steps should be taken to better support students living in lower SES households?

3. How can the results of this study be used to engender teacher empathy and engagement with families from lower SES backgrounds?

2.2 Definition of Terms

The researcher referred to the following terms throughout this study. The following terms were defined to assist the reader and clarify the focus of the study; Socioeconomic Status (SES), Poverty, Government Formula, Free and Reduced Lunch.

1. Socioeconomic Status (SES) is defined according to a number of measures, three of which include the government formula, free and reduced lunch numbers, and personal decisions that result in lack of money or capital (Milner, 2015).

2. Poverty refers to a family's income as compared to the guidelines established by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The threshold incorporates many factors and increases with the number of individuals in a family. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).

3. Government formula refers to the scales of income created by the federal government for a family to qualify for free or reduced milk and/or lunch (U.S. Department of Agriculture).

4. National School Lunch Program (often referred to as Free and Reduced Lunch) is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day. The program was established under the National School Lunch Act, signed by President Harry Truman in 1946 (U.S. Department of Agriculture)

2.3 Theory of Change

Change theory is influential when developing reform strategies in education. Constructing a general theory may not be enough to establish the sought after outcomes of the reform. Burger, (2007: 1) discusses the challenges educators often face when trying to turn theory into practice when leadership teams are incapable of producing joint models focused on reform. Educators sometimes demonstrate a lack of openness towards change when the consultant is from a field outside of education or provides ideas that force teachers outside their comfort zone (Thornberg, 2014). This theory of change is not the only factor that needs attention, however. School leaders often assume that spending money to align key mechanisms and pressuring change will result in positive outcomes (Fullan, 2007). Thornberg (2014) points out, "teacher unwillingness to investigate how their own values, assumptions, and behaviors might be a part of the problem and

their one-sided attribution of the causes to deficiencies with the child or his/her family have been reported in many studies" (p. 203).

Does the theory of change work in all districts? What other factors need to be addressed to increase the odds of successful implementation? Often, reform efforts neglect the small details about a school or how the district's culture affects change. Theories that exclude the more difficult inquiry about which circumstances create continuous improvement and, more importantly, how the culture is altered by changes will fail. Reform by itself does take into account the changing environment in which teachers work. That consideration is critical for improvement (Fullan, 2007). Having an understanding of how a theory of change impacts educational reform is critical to my study.

2.4 The Impact of Socioeconomic Status (SES)

The number of students who live in poverty is estimated at roughly 22 percent of the American population—over 70 million people. Before discussing the effects of poverty, it is important to explore how poverty is defined in schooling contexts. SES status is defined according to a number of measures, three of which include the government formula, free and reduced lunch numbers, and personal decisions that result in lack of money or capital (Milner, 2015).

The achievement trajectories for students who come from lower SES households are much lower when compared to those whose families identify as middle class. The parents in lower SES families often have attained lower levels of education, suffer from more financial hardships, and work in less prestigious occupations (Bennett, 2008; Hoff, 2013; Milner, 2015). Due to these hardships, many students from lower SES homes enter school without the necessary foundational

skills needed to learn to read. If not remediated early, these struggles continue throughout a child's academic career, widening this learning gap and impacting career readiness.   Poverty is becoming a reality for more families in recent years, especially those in female-headed households. Data over the past few decades has shown an increase in births of children to unmarried parents and teenage mothers, which heightens the chance of living in poverty (Bennett, 2008; Waldfogel, 2012). Every school system has some level of diversity, and students living in poverty are at the greatest risk for failure at school (Waldfogel, 2012). Milner (2015) asserts, "Poverty does not and should not define a person or group of people, there is no 'culture of poverty' – but it can define a stratified system in which a person or group may live" (p. 13). Understanding the system in which students live can allow educators to make informed decisions when it comes to programs and curricula to motivate these learners and provide the proper safety nets to ensure success (Ladd, 2012).

It is important to consider how social class impacts teachers' expectations of students. Do teachers have the same expectations for all students?   Anyon (1980) describes the schooling received by working-class students: "The procedure is usually mechanical, involving rote behavior and very little decision making or choice" (p. 372). Expectations were different in more affluent schools where students were expected to think much more critically. Teachers asked students to apply their understanding and expand upon concepts (Anyon, 1980). Anyon's observations still hold 35 years later.   The students who struggle to meet proficiency are often given fewer opportunities than their affluent peers, ultimately leading to poorer preparation to enter society (Callan, Marchant, Finch, & Flegge, 2017; Howard, 2007; Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Teachers often rely on their perception of students using their classroom behaviors or motivation to complete a task as a determining factor of their abilities (Timmermans, de Boer,& van der Werf, 2016).

Schools alone cannot overcome this challenge without the support of community resources (Ladd, 2012). A student's home life can significantly influence reading readiness. Do parents regularly read to their children? Are there opportunities to engage children in conversations throughout the day? Current research emphasizes parenting as a crucial component in the readiness of learners to read (Waldfogel, 2012). Childcare, preschool availability, use of technology in the home, and daily routines are all factors that can be impacted by socioeconomic status. These home experiences influence a child's early oral language skills. When a parent is poorly educated, conversations in the home occur less, are shorter in length, and are usually less supportive of language advancement. Vocabulary is limited, and sentence structure is more straightforward when compared to language practices in higher SES households (Hoff, 2012).

2.4.1 Teachers may struggle to relate to less economically privileged families.

There are roughly 15.5 million (21 percent) children under the age of 18 come from families who are classified as living in poverty in America (DeNavas-Walt, & Proctor, 2014). A majority of teacher candidates, most of whom are white females, come from middle-class backgrounds (Bennett, 2008; Cho et al., 2015; Hughes, 2010).

To address the challenges faced by students of lower SES backgrounds, what are teacher preparation programs doing to address gaps in knowledge or understanding? Social issues such as poverty are excluded from the curriculum in many teacher preparation programs (Hughes, 2010). The lives of middle-class teachers and students from lower SES families rarely cross until they meet in a classroom. Teacher preparation programs do address multicultural education, but there is little focus on the issue of poverty (Bennett, 2008). Bennett (2008) further illustrates the discrepancies in preservice teacher education. Her study in the state of Georgia found that 20.2

percent of students under the age of 18 lived in poverty, and 50 percent of the students in her study qualified for free or reduced lunch; 12 percent of the state's student population received special education services. She noted, "According to state law, all teacher certification programs are required to include a basic course in special education for preservice teachers" (p. 251). There is no such state law to address poverty in teacher education.

This lack of teacher preparation regarding students living in poverty often leads to stereotyping by those teachers called upon to eliminate the achievement gap between lower SES students and their middle and upper-class peers. Teachers' unfounded generalizations about students from lower SES households can have long-lasting effects on students. Teachers may believe a student's poor grades are a result of laziness or the child's lack of value for education. They may also assume that people living in poverty are substance abusers (Cho et al., 2015). Hughes (2008) explains the effects of such stereotypes: "Children living in poverty are also more likely to be assigned to low-track or remedial classes, to be retained in a grade, and to be denied a high school diploma than are other students" (p. 55). When looking at the data of income quartiles, those at the bottom are twice as likely not to graduate from high school as those at the top (Gao et al., 2016). Education has been perceived as the way to escape poverty, but school systems' failures to connect with students in poverty have limited their success (Hughes, 2008).

2.4.2 Summer Regression

Regression over summer is more impactful for students who come from lower SES households (Herbers et al., 2012; Hoff, 2012; Waldfogel, 2012). Gao, Gilbert, & Woods (2016) discovered that students in first through ninth grade returned to school in the fall approximately one month behind where they left in the spring. Poverty has a direct effect on a families' ability

to enrich learning opportunities for their children over the summer (Johnston, Riley, Ryan, & Kelly-Vance, 2015). Children from higher SES households often benefit from summer experiences and travel opportunities that enhance their learning. Low-income students, for whom enrichment experiences are rare, show a loss of reading skills over the summer, whereas students from higher SES improve their abilities (Waldfogel, 2012). The direct correlation between the home environment and academic readiness gives support to these findings of summer learning loss (Dilworth-Bart, 2012). For lower socioeconomic students, these repeated episodes of summer loss cause them to fall further behind their more affluent peers (Gao et al., 2016).

2.4.3 Parent Engagement

The importance of parent engagement was brought to the forefront of educational reform when the federal government passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. A requirement of this Act required schools receiving federal dollars to develop plans to include parents in the decision-making processes of the school system (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007). There is abundant research highlighting the importance of parental engagement and its impact on student achievement (Benner, Boyle, & Sadler, 2016; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Im, Hughes, & West, 2016; Zhang, Hsu, Kwok, Benz, & Bowman-Perrott, 2011). Studies focusing on parent engagement suggest that it is a stronger correlate of student grades than standardized test scores. Regular parental involvement in academics has been shown to influence academic achievement (DePlanty et al., 2007).

Socioeconomic disparities exist in schools all across America. Evidence shows a link between families living in poverty and parental involvement and the outcomes of students who have this support (Benner et al., 2016). When parents communicate with teachers, help their

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children with homework, and value education, students are more likely to succeed (Zhang et al., 2011). However, a parent merely being in a school is not engagement and has shown little evidence of influencing a child's academic success (Harris & Goodall, 2008).

Administrators and teachers both have a great deal of influence on whether or not parents become engaged in their children's education (Benner et al., 2016; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Im et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2011). Teachers can indirectly influence the amount of engagement a parent has through their communication with parents. For example, parents may gain motivation through specific communications such as a note or simple reminder of what was taught that day, which assists parents in helping their children work at home (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009). Sometimes there are great discrepancies between teachers' and parents' perspectives. Many teachers report they communicate with parents regularly, but these same parents were often not offered a conference and had little conversation throughout the school year regarding their children's progress (DePlanty et al., 2007). When students struggle in school, there is rarely an invitation for parents to contact the teacher. Often, the parents of these struggling students are dealing with issues of single parenting, working multiple jobs, and putting food on the table, all challenges faced by individuals or families living in poverty (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009).

2.4.4 Physical Health and Wellbeing

Health and wellness is another factor that influences the ability of a child to learn, and socioeconomic status has a direct influence on health. Jenson (2013) explains that "poor people are less likely to exercise, get proper diagnoses, receive appropriate medical attention, or be prescribed prompt medical attention, or be prescribed appropriate medications or interventions" (p. 24). If the parent's circumstances, which are often out of their control, leads to an unhealthy

lifestyle, this practice may be passed on to their offspring. Parents who do not exercise or see the doctor regularly, for example, are more likely to have children who do the same. Hoff (2012) also points out the importance of the mother's care during pregnancy, the child's overall physical health, parent involvement in children's education, and the ability of learners to get a good night's sleep due to the influence they have on language development. While programs like the National School Lunch Program help to address student health and well-being (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017), health issues still negatively impact student learning and disproportionately affect lower-income students. As these struggles continue, they can adversely affect a child's ability to listen, concentrate, and learn (Jenson, 2013).

If teachers are asked to support all students, is it not important to ensure they understand what students are living in poverty deal with daily? Do preservice and in-service teachers gain enough knowledge or experiences with students living in poverty to truly overcome this social injustice? School systems must be clear and focused in their provision of professional development to ensure teachers are lifelong learners in areas of greatest need.

2.4.5 Professional Development

Bredeson (2002) defines professional development as "learning opportunities that engage educators' creative and reflective capacities in ways that strengthen their practice" (p. 663). Professional development empowers teachers to build capacity within their educational environments. Teachers who engage in sharing skills, strategies, and resources with their peers build a sense of community and a culture of support (Linton & Geddes, 2013). Professional development has been the prescription recommended by policymakers, practitioners, and education reformers to relieve schools of every ailment they encounter (Linton & Geddes, 2013).

Educational agencies, both local and state, along with a plethora of non-profits, boast that their program or training will reform a school or mend the fractures of any system (Brown & Militello, 2016).

According to Bredeson (2002), professional development must provide teachers with a continuous learning opportunity that allows them to refine and enhance their knowledge to better serve the children they teach. Time restraints, finances, and appropriate structures are barriers impacting educational effectiveness in many districts. Educators must understand professional development focuses on learning, takes dedicated work, does not happen overnight, and is about people, not programs (Bredeson, 2002; Brown & Militello, 2016; Linton & Geddes, 2013).

Demands on teachers have increased due to high stakes pressure from federal policies, state legislation, and the publication of achievement score results in local and national media outlets (Barton, 2009). Expectations of stakeholders have grown exponentially, and judgments about student performance measures are the new normal for teachers. In the past, principals provided a "smorgasbord approach" by offering many professional development sessions to bolster teachers' skills and attitudes about their role in the classroom. This "shotgun" approach to professional development created an adverse effect on teachers as their growth became stagnant (Brown & Militello, 2016).

There are many types of professional development: Bredeson (2002) examines the different experiences teachers are exposed to over their careers. Professional development workshops are common for those who need to fulfill hourly requirements to renew their teaching certificates. Other workshops or conferences bring in a well-known presenter to share stories to draw in educators, but that is usually the end of the training. Professional development often evolves into trade-shows for vendors and consultants, who create eye-appealing displays to sell

their products as ready-to-use knowledge. They are held at area colleges, intermediate units, or on-site and are highlighted by minimal work requirements to earn hours for attending.

An effective professional development plan includes a structure in which new skills are revisited after the training to assess understanding and effectiveness. Professional development must turn information into knowledge, then turn knowledge into practice—a goal that simply cannot be met during a one-day conference. If the opportunity to follow up on this learning is neglected, many times the initiative is either abandoned or, when implemented, the teacher may not realize whether it is being implemented correctly. Brown and Militello (2016) introduce the idea that principals act as the gatekeepers of knowledge when creating professional development plans due to their knowledge of the specific group of teachers. They also can time the training appropriately to support other initiatives occurring in their buildings and across the district. By empowering teachers with new knowledge and providing ongoing support for the project, school leaders can change past practices and challenge teachers to meet the needs of their students (Linton & Geddes, 2013). School administrators are tasked yearly with creating a professional development plan that effectively addresses the needs of the school system. Moving forward, new modes of professional development delivery are being created that may or may not be appropriate to accomplish the goal of the training.

Technological innovation has forced those in charge of professional development to take another look at online opportunities for learning. Teachers believe in the pedagogical values of online learning once they see the positive effect it has on their pupils' learning. Social networking has emerged as a way for teachers to connect with others in their field who are dealing with similar struggles (Holmes, 2013). Online learning is often cheaper and more efficient when a district has

a wide array of needs. It allows teachers to learn at their convenience and connects them with experts across the country (Bates, Phalen, & Moran, 2016).

Also, new technology has emerged in professional development in the form of simulations. By participating in a simulated environment, teachers can learn and improve their practice through a cycle of rehearsal and reflection. These simulated environments are fun, engaging, and motivating. Developers can create new scenarios for teachers and broaden their capabilities through these virtual experiences (Dieker, Hynes, Hughes, Hardin, & Becht, 2015). Can these platforms be used to provide teachers an opportunity to learn from others more engage in lower SES communities?

2.5 Summary

The achievement gap in reading has long been an issue in American education (Adelson et al., 2016; Barnett et al., 2015; Compton et al., 2006; Dilworth-Bart, 2012; Herbers et al., 2012; Hoff, 2013;The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Waldfogel, 2012). Many constructs can influence a child's ability to read, but socioeconomic status and parent engagement are two that were highlighted in the literature related to this inquiry (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Bennett, 2008; Herbers et al., 2012; Hoff, 2013). Colleges and universities have struggled to prepare teachers who are placed in school systems that have high numbers of students living in poverty (Bennett, 2008; Cho et al., 2015; Hughes, 2010). When students living in poverty do not attain the same quality of education as their more affluent peers, they often remain at a disadvantage throughout their entire lives (Kids Count Data Snapshot, 2010). The needs of the community are critical to developing opportunities for parents to be engaged in their children's learning (Barnyak &

McNelly, 2009; Bennett, 2008; Hoff, 2013; Milner, 2015). School administrators must work alongside teachers and community members to create meaningful opportunities for learning. How does a teacher's perspective of lower socioeconomic students influence their instruction in the classroom? What interventions might be created to advance the opportunities for students who come from lower SES households? How does what a teacher's empathy and what she knows or does not know about students living in poverty influence instruction and the professional development plan for a school? Finally, how can we engage parents, assisting them to better support their child?

3.0 Methodology

This study is focused on learning what teachers know about the challenges faced by students from lower socioeconomic families and how additional training focused on increasing this knowledge may or may not increase their ability to meet the learning needs of this student subgroup, as well as, increase engagement between their families and the school.

The three research questions for this study are:

1. What do teachers know about students of lower socioeconomic status (SES) and the attributes that place children from low SES at risk when learning to read?

2. Following professional development for teachers that is focused on improving their understanding of students and families living in poverty, what steps should be taken to better support students living in lower SES households?

3. How can the results of this study be used to engender teacher empathy and engagement with families from lower SES backgrounds?

3.1 Approach

A phenomenological approach attempts to understand and describe the experience of the research participants of the study (Davidseon, 2013). This approach allows the researcher to contextualize human experiences which are articulated by the investigator and participants (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). This approach is beneficial to the study because the researcher wants to understand what teachers know about students from lower SES and how this knowledge was

influenced by a professional development training that increased their knowledge regarding the daily challenges faced by students living in poverty. With the poverty cycle continuing and many communities facing an increased number of lower SES families, it is essential to understand the perception teachers have regarding students living in poverty and how their life experiences may differ from those of students who come from lower SES families. This study will focus on how professional development training influences the thoughts and practices of teachers in the classroom. When assessing a teacher's perspective on a phenomena occurring in the school, it is helpful to understand their interpretation of the events. If teachers achieve a better understanding of the challenges students living in poverty face at school and home, can intervention programs improve their learning?

One goal of this study is to learn more about the teacher's perspective when they interact with students from low SES households. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) provide clarity to the importance of the teacher's perspective, " teaching is a highly complex, content-specific, interactive activity in which differences across classrooms, schools, and communities are critically important" (p.3). It is necessary for teachers to take responsibility for student achievement, which often means learning about and introducing new instructional strategies and interventions. Professional development provides teachers with the knowledge needed to improve the learning opportunities of students (Pella, 2012).

The teachers examined in this study were enrolled in a professional development program, "Chocolate in Poverty," created at the Milton Hershey School located in Hershey, Pennsylvania. The Milton Hershey School is a private, coeducational school that is free of cost to qualified families. Milton and Catherine Hershey established the school in 1909 to provide a positive, structured home life to help children gain the skills to be successful in all aspects of life. Today,

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more than 2,000 students from across the United States attend the school. The school boasts an award-winning curriculum, teachers who are experienced and highly qualified, and adult mentors who live with them in on-campus living quarters. The goal of the "Chocolate in Poverty" training was to increase participants' understanding of the challenges students who live in poverty face in all aspects of their lives. An evaluation of this professional development program provided the investigator with insight into the context of the phenomena associated with teacher knowledge, specifically their understanding of teaching students from families of lower socioeconomic status. This evaluation is framed by teacher-driven inquiry and using a qualitative methodology.

3.2 Site and Participants

The evaluation was conducted at a K-5 elementary school located in Western Pennsylvania. The district is a small public school district serving two communities in one county and another located across the county lines. This district services approximately 744 students from a population of approximately 6,000 residents. The district is comprised of three schools: one high school for grades 9-12, one middle school for grades 6-8 and one elementary school for grades Pre-K through 5th grade. The elementary school runs a Schoolwide Title 1 program, with approximately 77 percent of the students labeled as economically disadvantaged.

The table below describes the average experience by grade level and lists the certifications of the participants of this study.

Table 1. Experience of Study Participants

Grade Level	Average Teaching Experience	Certification Area
Kindergarten	15.3 years	Elementary Ed (K-6)
First-Grade	10 years' experience	
Second-Grade	25 years' experience	Elementary Ed (PreK-4)
		Library Science
		Reading Specialist
		Special Ed (N-12)
		Hearing Impaired PK-12

3.3 "Chocolate in Poverty": The Milton Hershey

Before starting this study, my work as the building principal at this elementary school raised red flags about how teachers were relating to students from subgroups of the population. District administration was looking for professional development opportunities geared toward increasing teacher understanding poverty. Several training sessions were available on-site and in-person, but it was ultimately determined the "Chocolate in Poverty" training conducted by the Milton Hershey School was the best option for our district. A six-question survey was sent to the K-12 teachers of the district to provide background information about the staff to help the Milton Hershey Schools presenters prepare for the day.

The survey was completed by 34 of the 57 teachers it was sent to in grades K-12 and the results are displayed in (Appendix B: Pre-Survey Results). Of the 34 teachers, 16 (47%) were

elementary, 8 (23.5%) junior high, and 10 (29%) high school. The table below displays the years

of experience of the participants who answered the survey.

Table 2. Experience of Teaching Staff

Years of teaching experience	Number of Teachers
0-3 Years	1 teacher
4-12 years	8 teachers
13-20 years	18 teachers
21 years or more	7 teachers

Six of the teachers who responded live in the district and 28 live outside the Leechburg

Area School District boundaries. Teachers were asked to describe higher-socioeconomic status as

an open text box. Many of the teachers used income levels as an indicator and others focused on

necessities vs. privileges. The answers display differences in what individuals use to identify

social classes. The final question asked about their socioeconomic status growing up. Six teachers

identified themselves as living in a lower socioeconomic family, twenty-two from a middle-level

household, and four from a higher socioeconomic family. These answers provided the

administrator's with insight into the staff's background, as well as, providing insight to the trainers

presenting for the training.

The Milton Hershey School in Hershey, Pennsylvania offers schools a free training entitled

"Chocolate in Poverty." The school provides this free training if the contracting school agrees to

allow the Milton Hershey School to present information about their purpose and how they impact

the lives of students living in poverty through their school's mission. The presentation focused on

the eight essential resources needed for a child to be successful in school and life (Payne, 2015).

In the discussion, they used videos highlighting the real-life struggles of families, allowing

teachers to gain a deeper understanding of these struggles. According to Payne, (2005), the eight resources needed for an individual to be successful in life:

1. Financial; having the money to purchase goods and services

2. Emotional; being able to choose and control emotional responses, particularly in negative situations

3. Mental; having the mental abilities and acquired skills to deal with daily life

4. Physical; having physical health and mobility

5. Spiritual; believing in Devine purpose and guidance

6. Support systems; having friends, family, and backup resources available to access in time of need

7. Relationships / Role Models; having frequent access to adults(s) who are appropriate, who are nurturing to the child and who do not engage in self-destructive behaviors

8. Knowledge of the Hidden Rules; knowing the unspoken cues and habits of a group

During the "Chocolate in Poverty" training, it was noted that at least six of these eight resources are needed by an individual to increase their chances for a successful life. Some of these resources can be provided by a school system directly, but a school can not offer others. For school systems to be successful, leaders must engage all stakeholders to prioritize the resources that directly improve instruction, curriculum development, parent engagement, and community resources, allowing students the opportunity to overcome the challenges present in society.

3.4 Methods and Research Design

Qualitative research methods focus on the participants and allow the researcher to gain knowledge regarding their experiences and perspective of the phenomena being studied (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, (2016). The investigator assessed whether professional development focused on students living in poverty changes the instructional approach of teachers at David Leech Elementary School. An evaluation approach and the methods used, a survey and an interview, frame this study. A survey was used to gain an understanding of how the professional development training entitled, "Chocolate in Poverty" may have influenced teacher perspectives. The research must be purposeful in the design of the survey. Errors can occur when designing a survey. Some aspects such as life experiences, professional experiences, or individuals involved in the study can disrupt the fidelity of the results (Davis et al., 2010).

A distributed leadership approach will ensure that the stakeholders form a team and have input on the decisions being made. A team approach was utilized in planning curriculum and instruction, school culture, and parent engagement (Harris, 2013). Twelve teachers were requested to voluntary take the survey. The survey allowed the researcher to sample the population and generalize the findings to others in the study population. The survey was designed to gather information to support a subsequent semi-structured interview with the individuals chosen as grade-level leaders within the building.

The data from the survey was used to gain information about the overall population of K-2 teachers in the building. This information will allow the researcher to think about the teacher's perspectives regarding students from lower SES families. Semi-structured interviews subsequently occurred with the teacher leaders in kindergarten, first, and second grade to learn if or how teacher perspectives have been influenced by the professional development training. The

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researcher was interested in learning how the teachers' instructional practices or interventions directed at students from lower SES families may have changed as a result of receiving this new knowledge.

3.4.1 Surveys

Surveys and interviews are tools that help administrators fulfill the responsibility as a leader. These tools provide data that informs the investigator and helps create a plan of action for the identified problem of practice. A survey is a method which allows an investigator to gather information and develop descriptors of a population of which the participants are members (Janson, 2010). The results of this survey helped the investigator better understand the teachers' perspectives toward students who live in poverty. The investigator gained a deeper understanding of the survey data through the use of the semi-structured interviews with teachers who were identified as change agents in instruction and curriculum at their grade level. The survey questions focused on how the teacher's perspectives of students living in poverty may have changed and if new strategies or instructional methods are being used as a result of participating in the Chocolate in Poverty training presented by the Milton Hershey School.

Following the professional development training provided by the Milton Hershey School, 12 teachers were asked to take a survey to understand the effect of the training on the K-2 staff (Appendix C: Teacher Survey). These twelve teachers were chosen as participants of the study due to their positions as teachers in grades K-2. The focus is on K-2 teachers due to the development of reading during this timeframe, as noted in inquiry question # 1. The teachers in this study all are employed by the dsitrict and are K-2 classroom teachers, serve as a reading specialist working with students in grades K-2, or are a learning support teacher. The investigator

kept individual data anonymous, but with the total population of twelve teachers, individual teachers in the study group will be known. The survey was created using the Qualtrics survey tool. Participation was voluntary, and teachers could opt out of the study at any time. All data collected through this study are confidential, and materials related to the study were kept in a secure location. Participants are employees in the researcher's building. They received no payment or any other benefit from their participation in this study.

3.4.2 Transcripts

To protect the identities of the participants, the investigator used pseudonyms in all transcripts of the survey and interview questions. Participants were asked not to share the questions or their answers with colleagues. The interviews were recorded using a recording device and the Natural Readers text to speech software. The two data sets will be used to compare the transcripts for accuracy. All interview results will be kept confidential and destroyed following the completion of the study.

3.4.3 Interviews

In-person interviews are an appropriate method for the investigator to learn from participants who have or are experiencing the phenomena of disconnect between the teacher's perspectives of students living in poverty and their view after receiving training focused on lower SES families (Majid, Othman, Mohamad, Lim, & Yusof, 2017). Interviews were used to gain a deeper understanding of a small group of participants, perspectives on their learning and how they can influence a plan of action for the building as a result of the training provided by the Milton

Hershey School. This semi-structured process allowed the investigator to interview in a somewhat conversational manner. This structure was used to allow the researcher to probe deeper into the topic and thoroughly understand the responses (Harrell and Bradley, 2009). Specific questions (Appendix D: Interview Questions) were developed to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' dealings with students and parents, specifically those from lower SES families.

The interview questions focused on whether or not the professional development session influenced the empathy of teachers, new teaching strategies, and parent engagement for students living in poverty. This study helped determine whether the teacher perspectives regarding the challenges faced by students living in poverty changed through, improved instructional practices, curriculum development focused on this subgroup or an increase in parental engagement for students from lower socioeconomic families. The investigator was also interested in whether or not the empathy for students from lower SES families is affected by this training.

3.5 Limitations

The participants of this study are a small group of K-2 teachers from a small, rural school district in southern Armstrong County, Pennsylvania. The researcher acknowledges the findings or this study may or may not be consistent with similarly small rural school districts across the state of Pennsylvania or similar schools in the United States. An additional limitation of this study could occur due to the fact that I serve as the principal and direct supervisor of these teachers. There is a concern they may not give 100% honest answers due to my role as their supervisor.

3.6 Analysis

This study examined in what ways a participant's perspectives regarding students from lower SES households might change as a result of professional development training provided by the Milton Hershey School. As principal, the researcher partnered with teachers, and parents to create a plan of action focusing on improved instruction and parent engagement designed for students living in poverty. The instruments used in this study include a semi-structured interview and a survey. This approach provides a triangulation of methods to collect data which will provide a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon and validation of the findings (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014).

Throughout the professional development process, the investigator observed the actions and discussions of staff members looking for signs of empathy as a result of the training. The researcher was interested in learning whether or not a participant showing empathy demonstrates a heightened ability to change instructional practices, create safety nets, and increase parent engagement of students who come from lower SES families. The evaluation of this study will be useful when creating a professional development plan for the 2019-2020 school year, with a heightened awareness of addressing the needs of families living in poverty.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Survey

Do you think the number of students living in poverty and attend David Leech Elementary has increased?

        To determine how teachers were impacted by the Chocolate in Poverty training, a survey was sent out to twelve teachers who are assigned to teach students in grades K-2. The general response to the survey was encouraging with 91.6% participation. Of the twelve teachers who were sent a survey, eleven completed the survey. All eleven participants felt there had been an increase in the number of students living in poverty at David Leech Elementary School. The results of this question are consistent with the data provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education's National School Lunch Report (2018). This report indicates that in 2010, 40.48 % of the student population in David Leech Elementary School qualified for free and reduced lunches. The report for the 2018 school year indicates that 77.74% of students or 255 of the 328 qualified for a free and reduced lunch.

Have you seen any of the following at your school that you think can be attributed to poverty?

■ Children coming to school Hungry
■ Kids eating breakfast at school
■ Kids demanding / stealing food from others
■ Families not accessing free school meals
■ Families needing food for the weekend (PATHS)
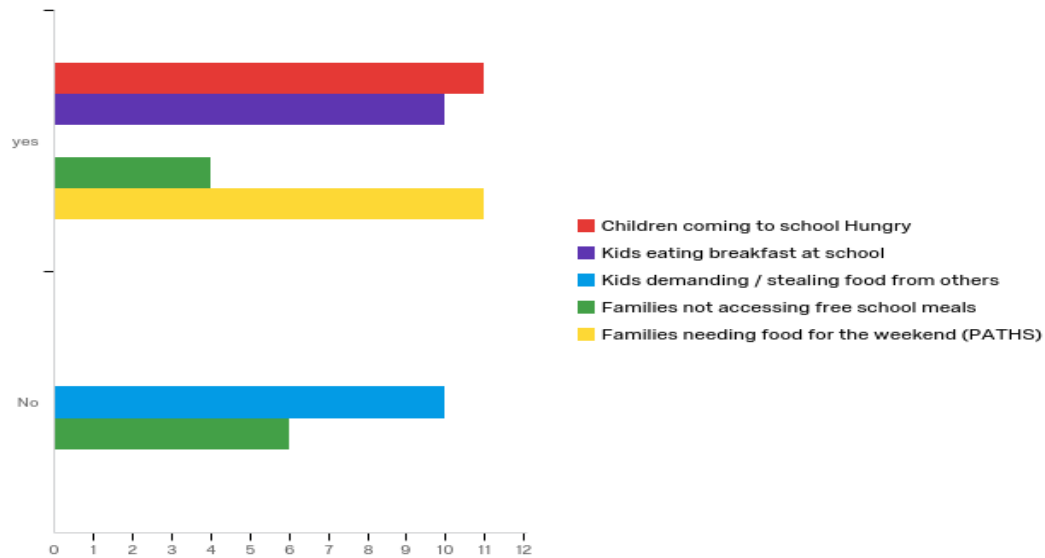
Figure 1. Question 2 Survey Results

When focusing on food and the nutrition of students at David Leech Elementary School, 100% of the participants (eleven) responded that they feel children coming to school hungry can be attributed to poverty in the community. All eleven participants responded that families needing food for the weekend through the PATHS program could be attributed to poverty. Ten participants responded that kids eating breakfast at school can be attributed to poverty. These figures may highlight the impact poverty can have on student nutrition. Jensen (2013) noted the adverse impact poverty has on children when parents are unable to provide food to their children at home and students arrive at school hungry. The survey produced mixed responses regarding families accessing free school meals. Four participants responded that families not accessing free meals can be attributed to poverty while six felt it was not attributed to poverty. It should be noted that ten responses indicated that students are not demanding or stealing food from other students as a result of poverty.

Have you seen an increase in any of the following that you think is attributed to poverty?
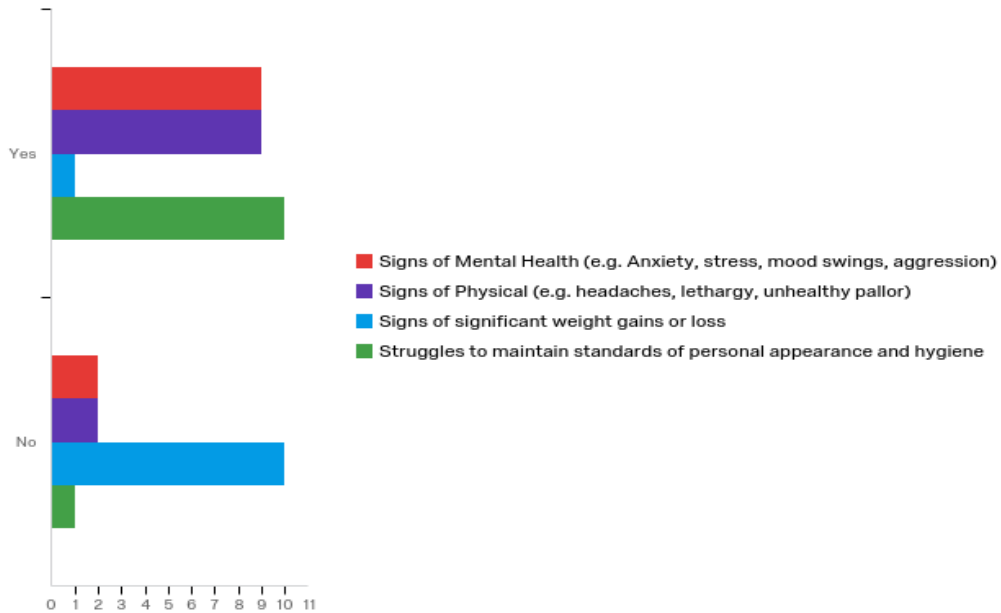
Figure 2. Question 3 Survey Results

About mental health, hygiene, and physical appearance, the results indicate that poverty may be negatively impacting students. Although ten of the responses indicate that weight gain or loss is not attributed to poverty, the other areas of this question paint a different picture. Of the eleven participants, nine or 82% felt signs of mental health such as anxiety, stress, mood swings, and aggression can be accredited to poverty. Regarding signs of physical distress such as headaches, lethargy, or unhealthy pallor, the number of responses attributing these indicators to poverty was also nine individuals or 82% of the survey population. 91% of those surveyed felt the struggles of students to maintain standards of personal appearance and hygiene could be attributed to poverty.

Have you seen an increase in any of the following in your school that you think is attributable to poverty?
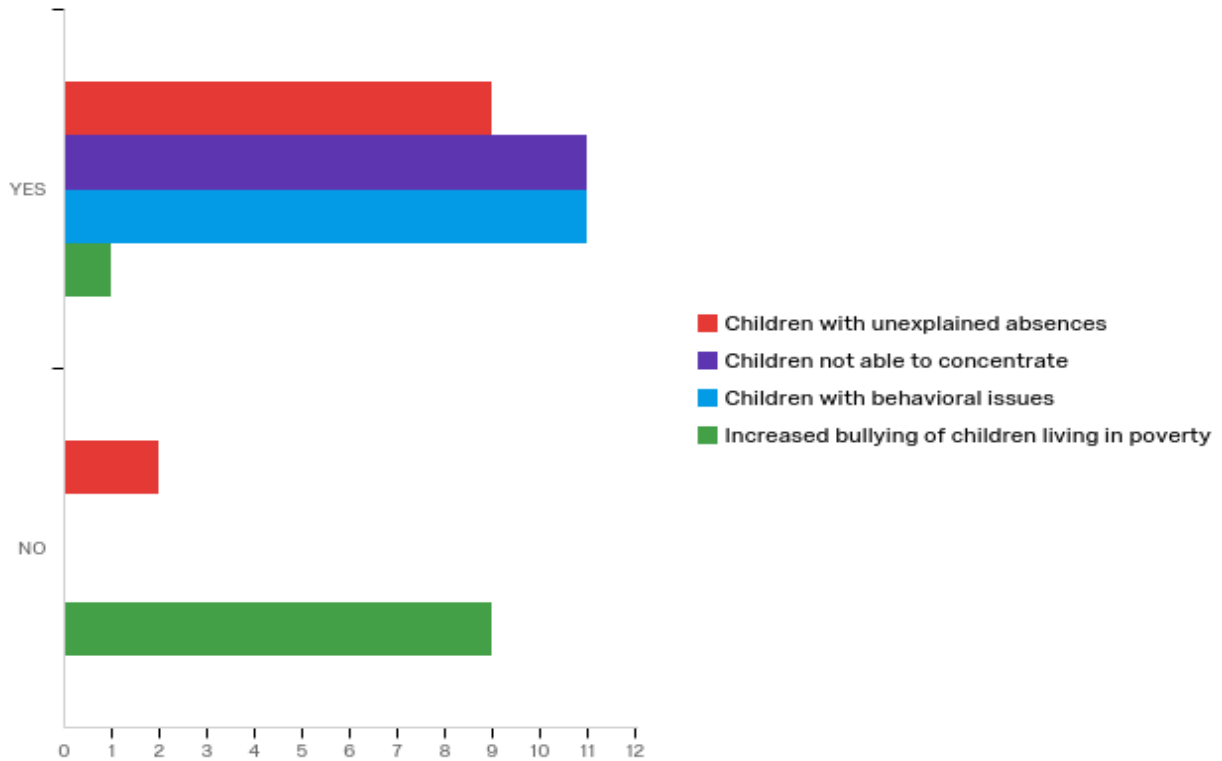
Figure 3. Question 4 Survey Results

Attendance is an area highly studied regarding the impacts of not attending school regularly. Nine participants or 82% of those responding indicated that attendance issues can be attributed to poverty. All eleven participants felt that children who struggle to concentrate, as well as, students with behavioral issues could be attributed to poverty. In regards to bullying, 82% responded that increased bullying is not attributed to poverty.

Have you seen an increase in any of the following in your school that you think is attributable to poverty?

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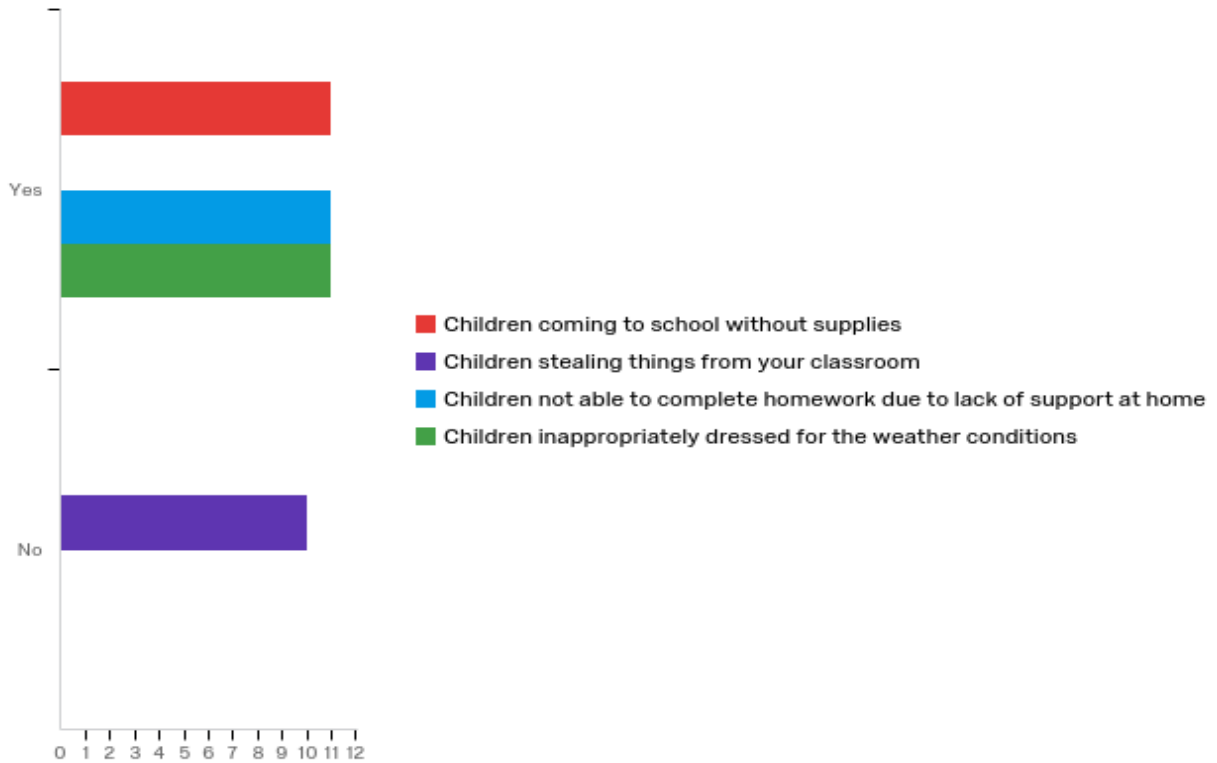
Figure 4. Question 5 Survey Results

All eleven participants felt that students' coming to school without the necessary supplies is attributable to poverty. All participants also responded that a child not being able to complete homework due to a lack of support at home is attributed to poverty. All responses agreed that children inappropriately dressed for the weather are attributable to poverty. Ten participants agreed that children stealing from the classroom are not attributable to poverty.

Have you noticed an increase in any of the following?
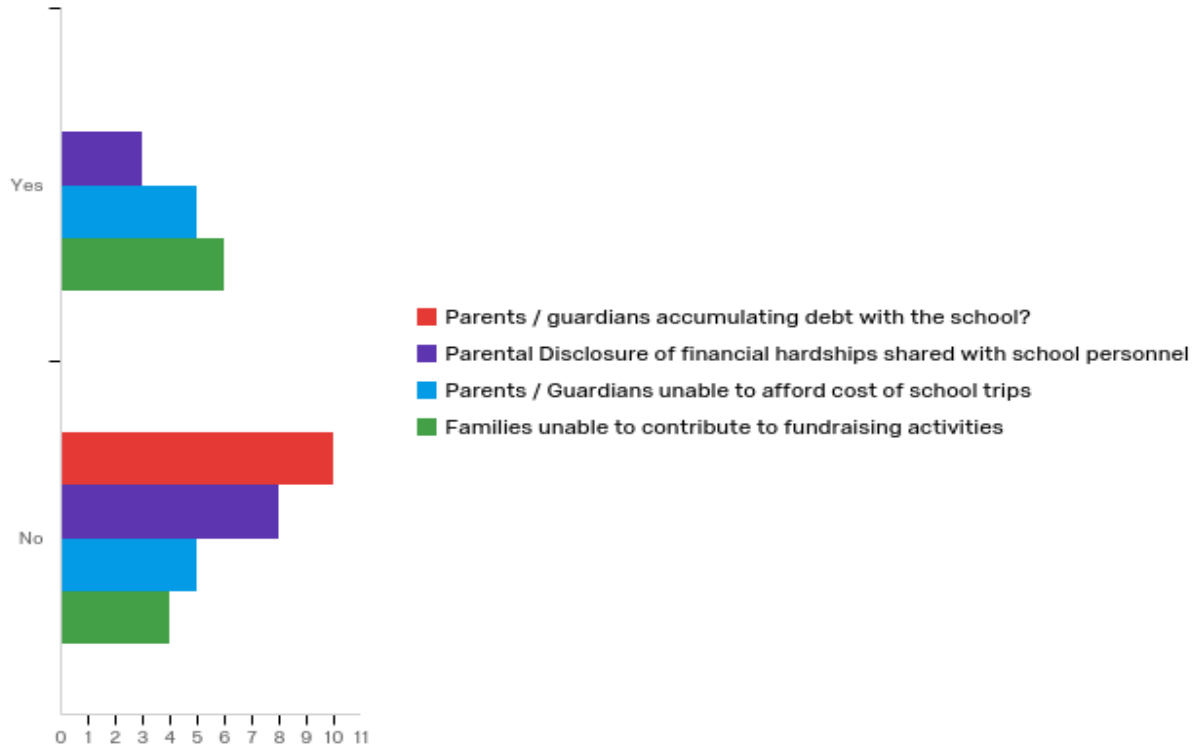
Figure 5. Question 6 Survey Results

All participants agreed that they had not noticed an increase in parents/guardians accumulating debt within the school. Three of the eleven participants responded that parents had disclosed financial hardships as an issue in their family. 50% of the responses indicated that parents/guardians are unable to afford the cost of school trips. Six out of ten participants indicated they had noticed families unable to contribute to fundraising activities. These results show the impact financial hardships have on families within the community.

Has your school recently introduced or adapted practices to support children and families experiencing poverty? If so, please describe.

Eight of the participants responded to this question regarding new practices that support students living in poverty. Only one teacher was able to identify the "Chocolate in Poverty" training as something new that has provided information about available resources for this subgroup. The participant also included the fact that teachers are professionals and need to

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recognize the signs of students or families who are struggling. The other seven participants focused solely on the new programs that address the hunger issues that have increased in the district. Responses included the free breakfast and lunch program, the PATHS program that sends food home for the weekend, our summer lunch program, our giving closet, and the elementary food drive. Although each of these items does support families living in poverty, three resources are indirectly supporting the academics of the students.

Please rank the following from #1-8 with 1 representing the resource you have the most influence over in school and 8 being the resource you struggle to provide at school.

1. Financial
2. Emotional
3. Mental
4. Physical
5. Spiritual
6. Support Systems
7. Relationship/Role Model
8. Knowledge of the Hidden Rules

Table 3. Question 8 Survey Results

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Financial	5.00	8.00	6.80	1.08	1.16	10
2	Emotional	1.00	4.00	3.00	1.10	1.20	10
3	Mental	3.00	6.00	4.70	1.10	1.21	10
4	Physical	3.00	6.00	4.40	0.92	0.84	10
5	Spiritual	5.00	8.00	7.10	0.94	0.89	10
6	Support System	1.00	7.00	3.20	2.09	4.36	10
7	Relationship / Role Model	1.00	3.00	1.40	0.80	0.64	10
8	Knowledge of the Hidden Rules	2.00	8.00	5.40	2.29	5.24	10

The chart above ranks the resources in order from what teachers have the most impact over. We will rank them using the mean. Teachers identified the relationships/role model as the resource they have the most influence over. The second resource the participants feel they can influence is the emotional state of the children. This resource is followed by the support system. The fourth-ranked resource for teacher influence is physically followed by mental health. The next resource identified is their knowledge of the hidden rules. Financial resources were identified as the 7th ranked resource out of the eight for their influence. The participants identified the resource of spiritual beliefs as the one they have the least influence over.

4.2 Interviews

Interviews were conducted with the three-grade level leaders in kindergarten, first and second grade. Each teacher was asked three questions related to the "Chocolate in Poverty training. The questions and responses are listed below.

Has your grade level changed any instructional practices as a result of the Chocolate in Poverty training?

All three participants responded that the students had influenced instructional practices in their classrooms. More support has been added to identify struggling learners earlier than in previous years. They mentioned the Enhanced Core Reading Instruction (ECRI) as a new intervention that has a positive impact on students living in poverty. An intervention initiative, What I Need (WIN) has been implemented to differentiate instruction for students. One teacher shared what occurred when she started her career at Leechburg. Her mentor had the feeling that homework was mandated and if students did not complete their homework, they lost recess. She

says this is no longer an option because many students do not have the support at home to complete all homework. This grade now adds time into their schedule to start homework so they can check for understanding. All three participants noted that the district had created opportunities for free lunch and the PATHS program, which impact a child's ability to learn.

Has empathy towards students living in poverty changed as a result of learning new facts about families dealing with these struggles?

All three participants stated that empathy has increased as a result of this training. The teachers stated their empathy has increased due to the increase in kids dealing with parents in jail, addiction to drugs, as well as transient population due to homelessness. They stated that the small school setting allows them to know more about families, which increases the empathy of the staff. Two of the three participants stated that empathy has increased after teachers realized that many parents are not supporting their children at home. This impacts their ability to complete homework, study for a test, and overall motivation towards school.

Have any new opportunities been created to engage parents of students from lower socioeconomic families in your grade level after participating in the "Chocolate in Poverty" training?

Responses to this question were generally focused on parent communication. All three participants identified newsletters and online communications as ways they increased parent communication. These communication devices allow for real-time communication with parents. They said parents today respond quicker to apps on the phone rather than written notes discussing a child's progress. It was noted by two of the three participants that fewer than 50 % of parents attend an open house or parent conferences. One participant said that the only time parents show up at school is if free food or items are offered for attendance.

4.3 Summary

The participant's responses to the survey and interview questions display an understanding that there has been a change in demographics in the Leechburg Area School District. A majority of the responses identified student hunger as a significant need of the community. It was also noted in the responses that the free breakfast and lunch program at David Leech Elementary is necessary due to an increase in lower socioeconomic students in the district. The responses to the survey identified poverty as a contributor to the physical and mental health struggles of many students. Students displaying higher levels of stress, anxiety, aggression, lethargy, or personal appearance were attributed to poverty in the district. Attendance and behavioral issues were also identified as areas that can be attributed to poverty and have increased over the past decade. Although the participants attributed these challenges to poverty, they were consistent that bullying and family hardships being shared with school staff have not increased in recent years. The responses were consistent with information provided at the "Chocolate in Poverty" training in regards to what resources teachers can influence student achievement. Relationships or role model, support systems, and emotional resources were identified as resources teachers can address at school. Financial and spiritual resources were identified as an area teachers have the least influence over.

The responses to the interview questions asked to the grade level leaders failed to acknowledge many of the key challenges identified in the review of literature for this study. These teachers stated empathy has increased, but responses only hit the obvious problems such as jail, drugs, and housing. Waldfogel (2012) identified the impact parenting has on school readiness. If parents cannot provide preschool or cannot afford childcare, these students enter school behind those who had those opportunities to learn or interact with others. The participants of the interview

did not identify the availability parents may have to attend school functions due to work obligations or other contributing factors. There were no responses that identified specific strategies being used to engage parents living in poverty. It was previously stated that administrators and teachers are influential in whether or not parents become engaged with the school (Benner et al., 2016; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Im et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2011).

5.0 Conclusion

This study focused on teacher knowledge of students living in poverty, along with the empathy that influences teachers' ability to meet the needs of this subgroup of learners. An essential component of this study is the perceived disconnect between teachers and students as a result of teachers' life experiences and how these experiences influence their ability to address the needs of learners who live in poverty. Research outside the K-12 environment has identified how a child's low socioeconomic status can place him or her at an academic disadvantage. According to Herbers, et al. (2012), when educators fail to address the effects of low SES, the following questions arise: Do our teachers' life experiences enable them to understand and empathize with children who live in poverty? Are schools with high enrollments of low SES students focusing on sufficient resources and training for teachers of underprivileged children? This study explored how professional development in poverty can contribute to a learning environment better suited to the needs of students living in lower socioeconomic households. Linton and Geddes (2013) explain that many professional development opportunities are prescribed through state or federal mandates. School leaders must understand the life experiences of many teachers do not prepare them to understand the struggles faced by families living in poverty. Professional development training must provide relevant training and increase the knowledge on the poverty of teachers. Are schools with high enrollments of low SES students afforded sufficient resources and training for teachers to meet the needs of underprivileged children?

Qualitative methodology was used for this study, which sought to evaluate the knowledge of K-2 reading teachers regarding students living in poverty and to assess the influence of one professional development session on the instructional approach of teachers at this elementary

school. Two methods anchored the study: a survey and interviews.   A survey of the K-2 reading teachers was used to enhance the investigator's understanding of how the professional development training entitled "Chocolate in Poverty" may have influenced teacher perspectives on students in poverty.   Interviews were then conducted with the grade level leaders in kindergarten, first, and second grades. The teacher leaders were selected in order to gain insight into whether or not changes had occurred on a grade level or that relevant conversations took place as a result of the training.

Inquiry Question #1: *What do teachers know about students of lower socioeconomic status (SES) and the attributes that place children from lower SES at risk when learning to read?*

The literature addresses many factors that place students from lower SES households at risk for learning to read. Socioeconomic status and parent engagement are two factors that appeared consistently in the literature related to this inquiry (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Bennett, 2008; Herbers et al., 2012; Hoff, 2013).   The investigator discovered teachers have many misconceptions about students living in poverty, how to support these students with interventions, and the resources needed to help them succeed. Survey data indicated that teachers' knowledge regarding poverty was minimal, and the participants were unsure about which strategies are directly responsible for impacting student learning in a classroom as compared to those which impact students outside the classroom. For example, survey participants all mentioned food or other physical materials provided to students.   Although these resources do have an indirect influence on learning, they do not directly impact the child's ability to succeed in the classroom. The responses also excluded any factors related to a child's home life as risk factors for learning. The literature indicates that many parents of lower SES families are not as educated as their more affluent peers, which places them in financial hardships due to the type of employment they have

(or lack of employment) (Bennett, 2008; Hoff, 2013; Milner, 2015). The teachers who responded to the survey also neglected to identify the issues of high birth rates in single-parent families, usually female-headed households, which increase the probability of living in poverty (Bennett, 2008; Waldfogel, 2012). This general lack of knowledge regarding poverty is alarming, but not a surprising finding of this study.

During the interviews, participants pointed to intervention programs such as Enhanced Core Reading Instruction (ECRI) and Assessment to Instruction (A2i), which are used for all struggling learners, but the interview participants neglected to discuss whether they changed their instructional techniques to address the effects of poverty on children. Once again, responses focused on food and hunger issues, which support student learning outside of school. Hoff's(2012) research pointed out the importance of prenatal care as one factor that impacts language development. It was also noted that a child having a good night's sleep and parent involvement in school is critical. After the "Chocolate in Poverty" training, participants were still largely unaware of challenges faced by students living in poverty. These results indicate a need to provide teachers with more opportunities to increase their knowledge and identify strategies which support students living in poverty.

Inquiry Question #2: *Following professional development for teachers that is focused on improving their understanding of students and families living in poverty, what steps should be taken to better support students living in lower SES households?*

The data collected from the survey and interviews provide evidence that there is a need for additional training focused on poverty at the district which this study was conducted. Teacher responses failed to show a deep understanding of what is happening in low-income students' homes and ways to improve their ability to learn. Responses consistently identified the problems

with the health and well-being of students and shared knowledge of the district's effort to provide food but left out many other factors that are important for learning. Were these specific challenges omitted due to a lack of knowledge, or is there a disconnect between what teachers perceive to be an issue and what is happening in the homes? The data from this study indicate the need for additional training that is more specific to the challenges that directly impact learning, such as parent help, completed homework, or absenteeism. The "Chocolate in Poverty" training pointed out eight resources that individuals need for success. The responses seemed to indicate teachers understand ways to help students outside the classroom but were limited in identifying ways to support these students in their classroom. Examples of ways teachers can support students in the classroom could be but are not limited to differentiated instruction aligned to the need of individual students, time to work on homework at school, interventions during small group instruction, or simply providing emotional support when necessary. Future training will require open dialog aligned with the literature on children living in poverty in order to strengthen teachers' understanding and awareness of poverty and to create a plan of action to help lower SES students overcome these challenges.

It is evident from the literature that professional development is an essential component to support teachers in the school district. According to the National School Lunch Program Report published by the Department of Education (2018), this schools free and reduced lunch numbers increased from 36 percent in 2008 to 77 percent in 2018. However, no professional development focused on students living in poverty was provided for the teachers before May 2018.

Training cannot be directed simply toward the teachers, but must also include training for parents. Harris and Goodall (2008) present evidence that parents merely showing up at school does not lead to their children's academic success. Training must be provided to assist parents

living in poverty and establish an environment in which parents are comfortable asking questions without concerns of being judged as parents. The teacher's role in this process must be nurturing in nature and allow them to work with parents while taking ownership of the success or failure of the academics of lower socioeconomic students. Relationships must be established with parents, beginning with preschool and teachers must work to ensure that parents feel comfortable remaining active in the school through graduation. Schools must also take advantage of community resources and help parents understand where to find the necessary help. Schools can establish resource pamphlets informing parents of resources which are available in most communities free of charge. Examples of these community resources support for parents in the areas of employment, healthcare, tax credits, public assistance, child care, and preschool, (Sherman, Tristi, & Parrott (2013).

Inquiry Question 3: How can the results of this study be used to engender teacher empathy and engagement with families from lower SES backgrounds?

The data from the survey reveals a need for additional training on poverty. All eleven participants understood that there had been an increase in the number of students living in poverty at this elementary school. The respondents noted many indicators of poverty, such as the need for the district to provide free breakfast and lunch, an increase in mental health issues such as stress and anxiety, poor physical health and appearance, lack of concentration, behavior issues, absenteeism, and lack of support for education from home. Although the increase in students displaying these traits can be attributed to the poverty levels in this district, it is critical for teachers to understand what strategies can be used to help overcome these challenges. The participants who completed the interview portion of this study all expressed empathy for students living in poverty. Their responses to the questions do not provide the investigator with enough data to assess

whether their empathy indeed did increase. A question for them may be would they be satisfied if their own child's situation was handled this way. Simply providing free food or naming an intervention acknowledges that teachers have some empathy for the struggles facing these kids but is it enough to help overcome the challenges faced academically? Are teachers willing to spend the time required to help overcome the challenges faced by this subgroup of children? Bennett (2008) noted that many teachers lack the preparation needed to support students living in poverty, a finding also supported by this study. This lack of background knowledge regarding poverty often leads to stereotyping, which can cause students to be assigned to remedial pathways and to be more likely not to graduate from high school (Gao et al., 2016; Hughes, 2008).

The data from this study does show teachers actively participating in parent communication, mostly through social media and technology-based programs. Programs such as Remind and DoJo were mentioned as platforms teachers use to share information regarding the academics and behaviors of each student. These programs also allow teachers to share basic information about classroom events such as homework, parties, and other upcoming events. I question whether or not this type of communication is enough to support students living in poverty. We must continue to investigate ways to increase low SES parent involvement in the school. Schools must be more creative in designing training which informs and assist parents who are living in poverty and build an environment where parents are comfortable asking questions when trying to support their children. Relationships must be fostered with parents, beginning in preschool or before, and teachers must make an effort to ensure that parents feel comfortable and active in the school until graduation. Schools and their teachers must help parents understand and locate community resources, as well as, provide additional support to ensure they are using those resources.

5.1 Summary

The recommendations in this study should be reviewed on a bi-annual basis and adjusted in order to maximize the achievement of students living in poverty. Each intervention provides another layer of support for this subgroup of students who are often marginalized in their school and community. The district must create opportunities for teachers to learn more about the challenges faced by families living in poverty. Once the teachers have a better understanding, they can better align resources to the needs of the students and their families. Professional development sessions must be geared towards specific challenges and interventions that relate directly to student learning. The school system must create open dialog regarding poverty and have teachers take leadership roles on this topic. The school system must create a sense of urgency around education to make sure graduates are prepared for the jobs of the future. The following plan will be implemented at this district as the result of this study.

Appendix A Professional Development Plan for 2019-2020

The district in which this study was conducted has five professional development days built into the teachers' contract. There are also four 105-minute after-school meetings for professional development included in the contract. The elementary teachers have 30 minutes each day from 8:00- 8:30 am for meetings, professional development, and planning. Following is a plan for creating professional development opportunities that will help teachers to enhance opportunities for families who are living in poverty and whose children attend this school.

1. District Professional Development Days (five in the contract):

The district will offer a three-hour training before the school year starts for all teachers K-2. This training will occur on either August 26th or 27th, 2019. The investigator will arrange with Westmoreland County Community Action or similar organization from Armstrong County to inform teachers about the challenges faced by students living in poverty. A discussion will begin that deepens teachers' understanding about the resources needed for students to overcome the problems they face at home and in school when learning to read. A short survey will be administered after the training to help the investigator determine the agenda for the second training. The survey will focus on teacher knowledge regarding the teaching strategies directed at supporting lower SES students and their families from the August professional development. This second training will be discussed with the PD provider and will be scheduled for February 2020. Two of the districts five professional development days will be focused on poverty and interventions to support students identified in this subgroup.

2. *PD Time included in teacher schedule (8:00 am – 8:30 am daily)*

These meetings are held two to three times per week in the building in which this study was conducted. The meetings are scheduled depending on the agenda or needs of the building. During the month of September 2020, the investigator will add poverty to the agenda and discuss the August training, as well as any other topics on poverty brought up by the staff. Starting in October, the investigator will spend eight weeks conducting a book study on Mike Schmoker's book *Focus: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning* (2011). A copy of this book will be provided for each teacher. Teachers will be assigned one chapter a week and will use the remaining three days of meeting time to fit this assignment into their workday. As the investigator discusses the content of this book, a reference will be made back to issues of poverty the group has discovered. This book study will provide a focus on school improvement, particularly for students living in poverty. In December, the investigator will start introducing an article or two per month related to poverty and the impacts it has on students. After working through this plan, teachers will be asked to find articles that are relevant to the challenges they are facing in the classroom. In February and March, the investigator will turn these discussions into teacher-led discussions. Teachers will share the struggles they are facing and work together to find research-based solutions.

3. *After-School Professional Development Time (3:30 – 5:15 four times during the year)*

The investigator will use one hour from two of the four after-school meetings to provide training focused on resources that support students living in poverty. Exact details

for these two pieces of training will be determined by using the data gathered from the teacher survey administered after the August training session

4. ***Parent Engagement Training***

Initial training for parents will occur in August during our Friendship Trail event, which is one of the district's kindergarten transition events. During this time, the district will work with representatives of the Westmoreland and Armstrong Counties Community Actions group to bring representatives to this event to provide details on community resources available for families in the district. Topics will include housing, food, and assistance with utilities, healthcare, employment, and other relevant matters. Following this event, we will use Survey Monkey to learn how the training was received by the participants and learn more details about the needs of the community. The district will host parents for two additional events, one in November and one in March, to provide support for parents of the community. In addition, a parent resource area will be set up in the elementary office for parents to access when they are at the school.

5. ***Policy Discussion with School Administration and Board of Directors***

The investigator will share these findings with the other administrators of the district, as well as the Board of Directors. After the stakeholders are made aware of the findings, the investigator will begin to review district policy and explore what policies can be adapted to support the needs of the community. Below is a list of district policies that can be reviewed and/or updated to support the changes in the community demographics.

a. Policy 100 Comprehensive Planning

   i. The current comprehensive plan for the district runs through June 2021. As the stakeholders begin the next plan, the current district demographics must be at the forefront.

b. Policy 204 Attendance

   i. The current policy on attendance was revised in October 2017 when the state changed the law regarding unlawful absences and truancy. The district must add to this policy support for lower SES families to change attendance patterns and get their students to school.

c. Policy 304.1 Employment of Professional Employees

   i. This policy on hiring must include a document showing that the district will hire the best candidate available for any professional position. The ability of a teacher to identify the needs of a student and provide resources in the classroom is essential for students to overcome the effects of poverty places on students. All stakeholders must be aware of the qualities needed to be successful in a classroom.

d. Policy 602 Budget Planning

   i. The district in which this study occurred has a new administrative team, along with a new business manager. The team must prioritize money not only for students but also for quality professional development for staff. These conversations must be ongoing and updated or revised when necessary.

The results of this study will guide future instruction and professional development opportunities for teachers at the elementary school where this study took place. The teacher responses to the survey and interview questions identified the need for additional training specific to the impact poverty has on student learning. Future training session should provide teachers with resources such as research-based interventions that are proven to support students from lower SES families, ways to increase parent engagement in the school, and information identifying the available resources in the community and how to access the resources. Professional development must be used to improve the instructional capacity of teachers, especially for students living in poverty. Moving forward, conversations with teachers, parents, and other community stakeholders will further explore ways teachers can support lower SES students to overcome the challenges faced at school and in their home lives.

Appendix B IRB Exemption Approval

University of Pittsburgh

1500 Fifth Avenue, Suite 106

Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Institutional Review Board

Tel (412) 383-1480

www.hrpo@pitt.edu

APPROVAL OF SUBMISSION (Exempt)

IRB:	STUDY18120124
PI:	DAVID KEIBLER
Title:	Teachers' Perspective of Students From Lower Socioeconomic Families
Funding:	None
Date:	January 10, 2019

On 1/10/2019, the Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the above-referenced application through the administrative review process. The study may begin as outlined in the University of Pittsburgh approved application and documents.

Approval Documentation

Review type:	Initial Study
Approval Date:	1/10/2019

Exempt Category:	(2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation
Determinations:	
Approved Documents:	• Exempt Application Form • EMAIL REQUEST FOR RESEARCH CANDIDATES • Permission to conduct study at Leechburg Area • Qualtrics Survey Questions • Interview Questions

As the Principal Investigator, you are responsible for the conduct of the research and to ensure accurate documentation, protocol compliance, reporting of possibly study-related adverse events and unanticipated

problems involving risk to participants or others. The HRPO Reportable Events policy, Chapter 17, is available at http://www.hrpo.pitt.edu/.

If this trial meets the definition of a clinical trial, accrual cannot begin until it has been registered at clinicaltrials.gov and a National Clinical Trial number (NCT) provided. Contact ctgov@pitt.edu with questions.
Research being conducted in an UPMC facility cannot begin until fiscal approval is received from the UPMC Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Support (OSPARS). Contact OSPARS@upmc.edu with questions.

If you have any questions, please contact the University of Pittsburgh IRB Coordinator, Amy Fuhrman at fuhrman@pitt.edu.

The following six questions were giving to the staff at Leechburg to gain background information

for the presenters from Milton Hershey School. 34 out of 57 teachers responded.

<u>Question 1:</u> Which level do you teach at Leechburg?
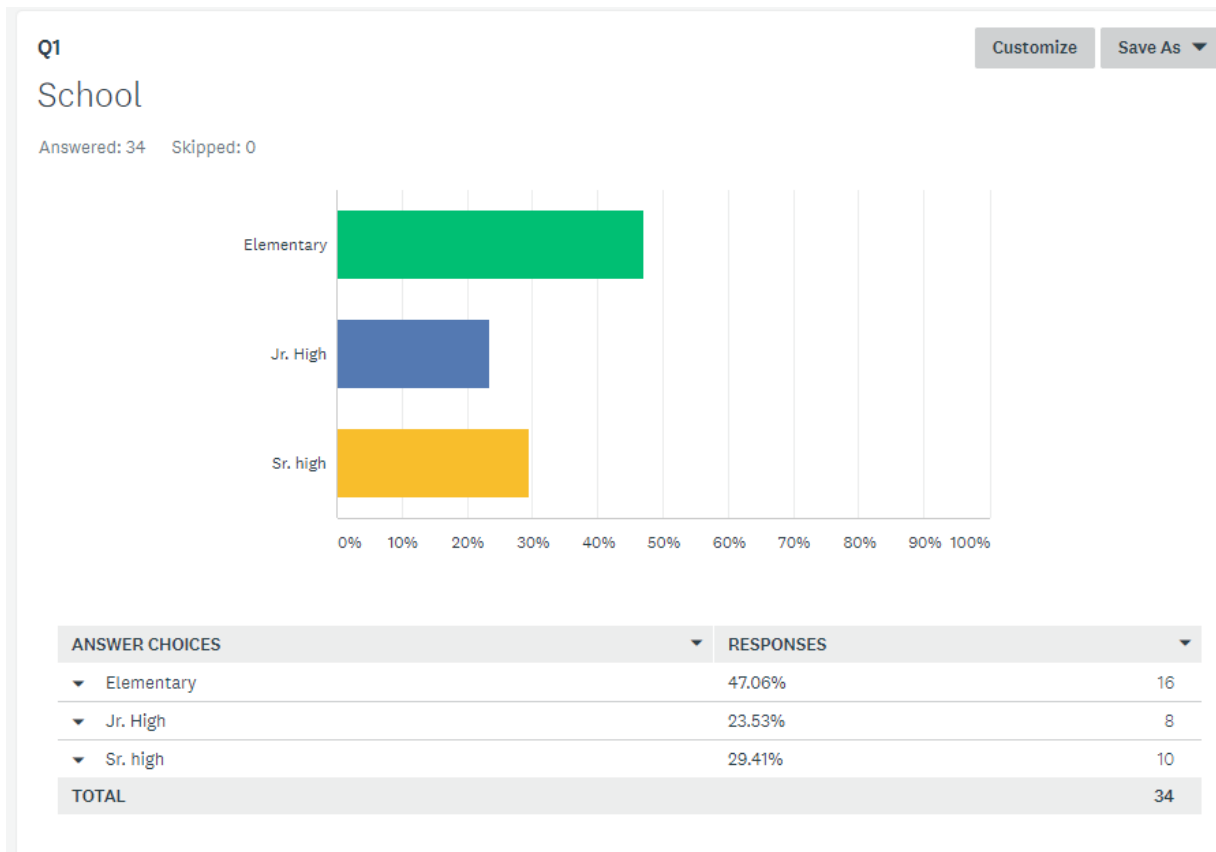
<u>Question 2:</u> How many years have you been teaching?

0-3 years 1 teacher

4-12 years 8 teachers

13-20 years 18 teachers

21+ years 7 teachers

Question 3: How many years have you been teaching at Leechburg?
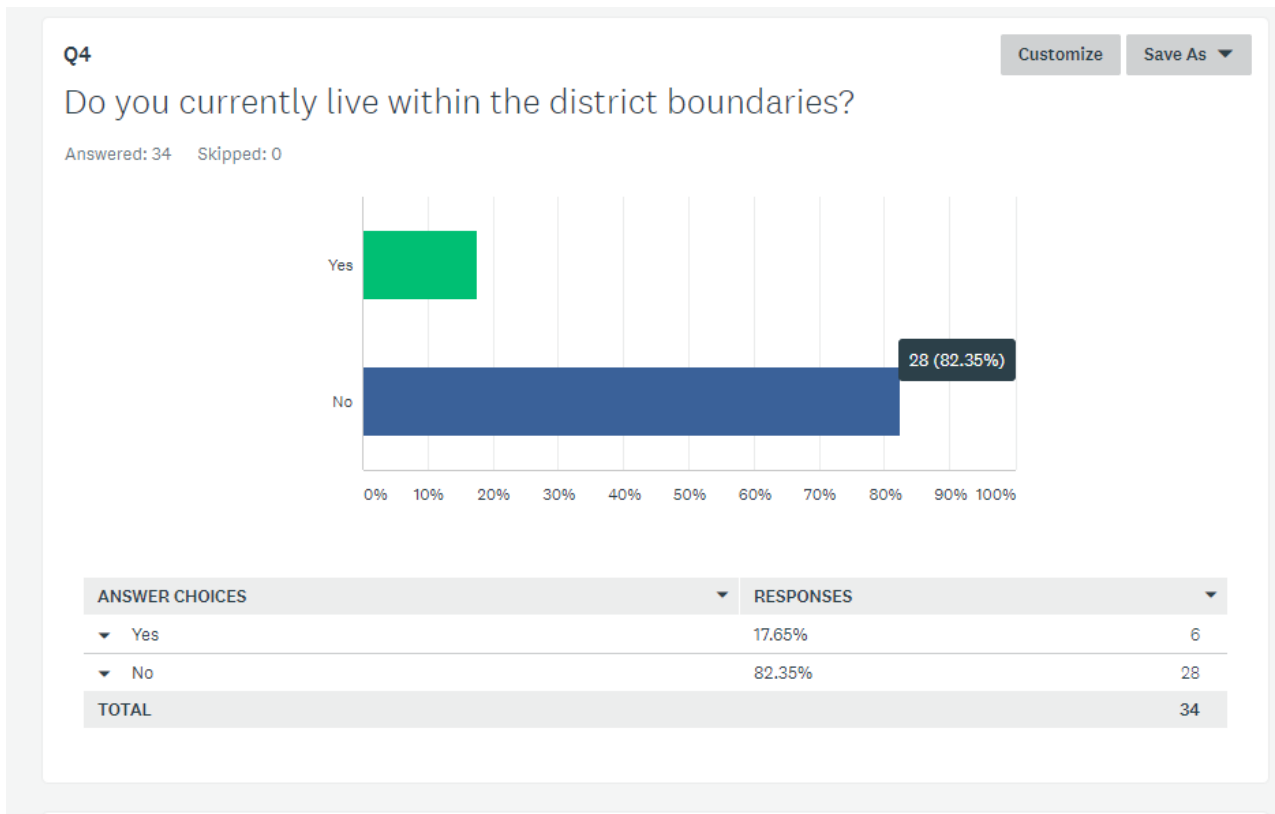
0-3 years4 teachers

4-12 years8 teachers

13-20 years18 teachers

21+ years4 teachers

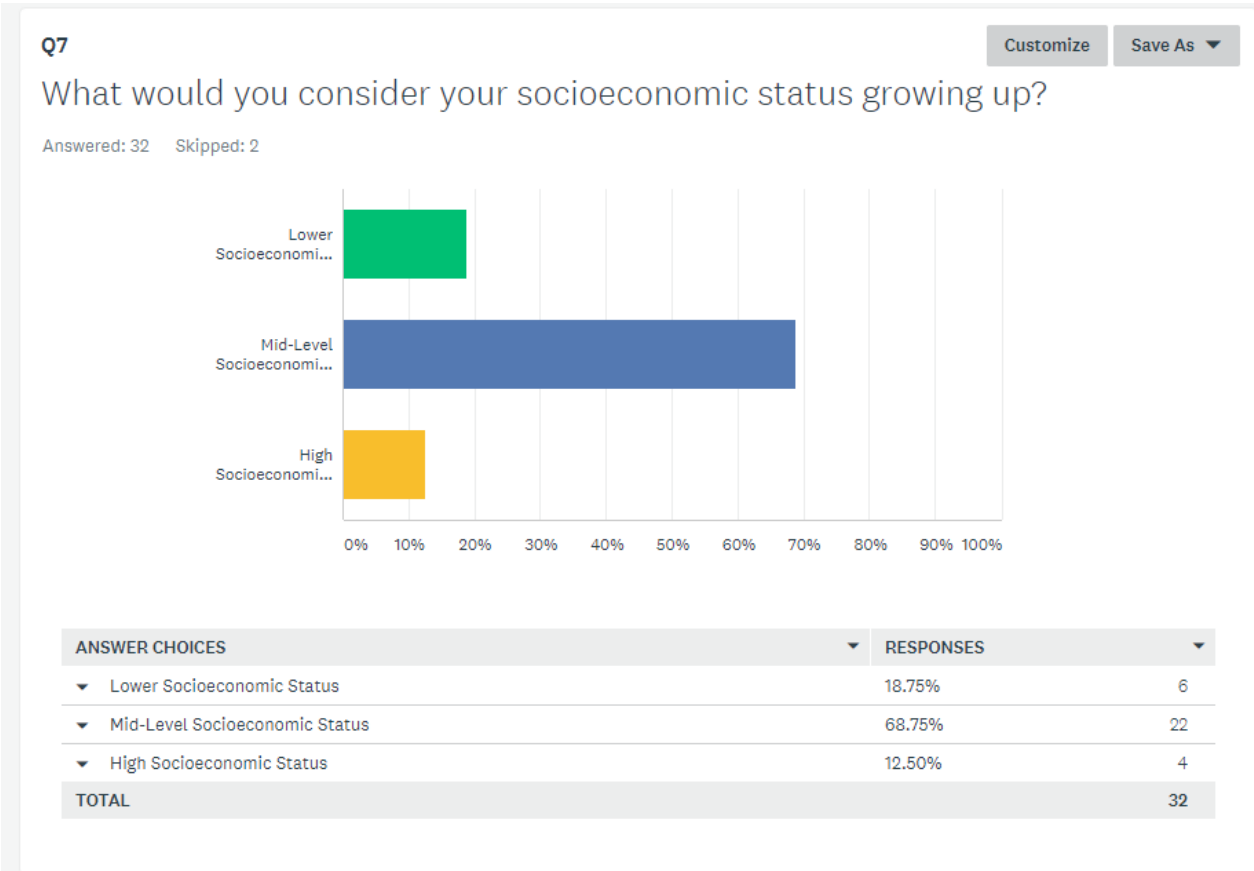Question 4: Do you live in the district?

Question 5: How would you define a family from a higher-socioeconomic status?

- A family from a lower-socioeconomic status has had some sort of hardship to make it difficult for the family to move from a lower-economic status to a higher-economic status.
- earning less than $30k per year
- Trouble paying for basic necessities.
- Someone living pay to pay. Or struggling to pay bills.
- Family whose income is lower than the average income for the district
- A measurement that combines a family's income, education, and employment status in relationship to other families. Families from a lower-socioeconomic status typically have a household income that falls at or below the poverty level (~$25,000 for a family of four). These families have to base their spending on what they NEED rather than what they WANT. Oftentimes, they must prioritize essentials to make ends meet.
- A family that is not aware or uses the resources available for the family. They have limited education and therefore may not have the income of a family where education and resources were used and/or available.
- A family whose total net income isn't enough to provide for essential necessities (e.g. clothing, food, gas, medical coverage, rent, utilities, a vehicle, etc.)
- Lower socioeconomic families are families who are in poverty, who may have help with purchasing housing, food and healthcare, but who struggle to pay for clothing, shoes, utilities and transportation.
- This family would generally not have the money for extras. The children would not have as many chances to participate in extra activities outside of school such as little league, basketball, etc.
- A family who earns minimum wage or less, collects well-fare or disability, may be homeless, possibly struggled in school and has a high school diploma or lower
- A family of four making an annual income below $38,000.00.
- A family from a lower-socioeconomic will often have less access to resources. In addition, they are often at a disadvantage when it comes to privilege, power and control.
- Lower income, need support from outside resources
- Family income at or below poverty level.
- A family who does not make a lot of money. They do not always have the means or education to succeed.
- A family that has trouble paying their bills because their income is too low. A family that doesn't support their child's needs: clean clothes, clean bodies, and academic support.
- Not having a enough money to meet the basic needs
- A family whose entire household income falls below a designated total defined by social and economic specifics
- Family income equals or is below the national poverty level.
- Low level of income, education, and occupation
- below average income
- low income, lower educational achievement, poor healthcare and societal stressors
- Income below poverty level income, not much of an education, and unemployed.
- ?
- If lower-socioeconomic status is already identified to the school district through qualifying for free and/or reduced lunch, as individuals often requiring higher levels of support from both the school and outside agencies. These supports could be for a variety of reasons...medical assistance, mental health involvement, parenting support and daily living skills to list a few. Often, families consist of single parents due to divorce, incarceration, drug involvement where one parent is in a treatment facility, and grandparents or foster parents raising children. Families of lower-socioeconomic status in our school district are also educationally limited in terms of reading and writing skills.

- People who are struggling to make ends meet; might have to worry more about how they are getting food on the table than they are about homework
- under $30,000 family income annually
- A family of 4 living on a household income of $50,000 or less
- A family who lives paycheck to paycheck or below
- Close or below estimated poverty level of <20,000?

Question 6: What would you consider your socioeconomic status growing up?

Q7

Customize   Save As ▼

What would you consider your socioeconomic status growing up?

Answered: 32   Skipped: 2

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Lower Socioeconomic Status	18.75%	6
▼ Mid-Level Socioeconomic Status	68.75%	22
▼ High Socioeconomic Status	12.50%	4
TOTAL		32

Appendix D Teacher Survey

Teachers' Perspective of students from Lower Socioeconomic Families

1. **Do you think the number of students living in poverty and attend David Leech Elementary has increased?**

    Yes / No

2. **Have you seen any of the following at your school that you think can be attributed to poverty?**

	Yes	No
Children coming to school Hungry		
Kids eating breakfast at school		
Kids demanding / stealing food from others		
Families not accessing free school meals		
Families needing food for the weekend (PATHS)		

3. **Have you seen an increase in any of the following that you think is attributed to poverty?**

	Yes	No
Signs of Mental Health (e.g. Anxiety, stress, mood swings, aggression)		
Signs of Physical (e.g. headaches, lethargy, unhealthy pallor)		
Signs of significant weight gains or loss		
Struggles to maintain standards of personal appearance and hygiene		

4. **Have you seen an increase in any of the following in your school that you think is attributable to poverty?**

	Yes	No
Children with unexplained absences		
Children not able to concentrate		
Children with behavioral issues		
Increased bullying of children living in poverty		

5. **Have you seen an increase in any of the following in your school that you think is attributable to poverty?**

	Yes	No
Children coming to school without supplies		
Children stealing things from your classroom		
Children not able to complete homework due to lack of support at home		
Children inappropriately dressed for the weather conditions		

6. **Have you noticed an increase in any of the following?**

	Yes	No
Parents / guardians accumulating debt with the school?		
Parental Disclosure of financial hardships shared with school personnel		
Parents / Guardians unable to afford cost of school trips		
Families unable to contribute to fundraising activities		

7. **Has your school recently introduced or adapted practices to support children and families experiencing poverty? If so, please describe.**

Yes / No [   ]

8. **Please rank the following from #1-8 with 1 representing the resource you have the most influence over in school and 8 being the resource you struggle to provide at school.**

Financial

Emotional

Mental

Physical

Spiritual

Support System

Relationship / Role Model

Knowledge of the Hidden Rules

Appendix E Interview Questions

Interview Questions with Grade-Level Leaders

1. Has your grade level changed any instructional practices as a result of the "Chocolate in Poverty" training? If so, what has changed?

2. Has empathy towards students living in poverty changed as a result of learning new facts about families dealing with these struggles? If yes, can you provide an example?

3. Have any new opportunities been created to engage parents of students from lower socioeconomic families in your grade level after participating in the "Chocolate in Poverty" training?

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