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Poverty in Schools: The Impact of Poverty on School Readiness for Kindergarteners

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Winona State University
College of Education
Counselor Education Department

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Poverty in Schools: The Impact of Poverty on School Readiness for Kindergarteners

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

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Poverty in Schools: The Impact of Poverty on School Readiness for Kindergarteners

Emily M. Inglett

A Capstone Project Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Master of Science Degree in

Counselor Education at

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Abstract

Experiencing poverty in childhood has lasting impacts on a child. Poverty can have a negative impact on a child's development academically, cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. The present literature review aims to explore research that has looked into what it means to live in poverty, what lasting impacts living in poverty have on children, and what that means for a child's school readiness when entering kindergarten. It will also discuss some interventions that a school counselor could implement in schools to support a child who lives in poverty and their family.

POVERTY IN SCHOOL

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Poverty in Schools: The Impact of Poverty on School Readiness for Kindergarteners

According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average poverty threshold as of 2018 was an individual making \$12,784 or less annually, a family of four making \$25,701 or less annually, or a family of nine or more making \$51,393 or less annually (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). As of 2018, according to the United States Census Bureau, 3.6 million families were living below the poverty level, even if at least one family member was working for at least half of the year. The poverty rate of families with children is at 9%, which is higher than families that consist of a married couple with no children, which is around 2%. The poverty rate is higher yet for single parents. The poverty rate for single mothers with children is at 22%, while that of single fathers with children is around 11%.

The National Center for Children in Poverty reported that nearly a quarter of children lived in poverty in the United States in 2014 (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2014). Poverty in early childhood can have negatively impact a child's language development (Sharkins et al., 2017). Early childhood poverty is associated with a delay in social skills and cognitive functioning, which subsequently contribute to a delay in language development. One reason of a delay in language development may be due to the absence of modeling opportunity among children in poverty.

According to social learning theory, when a behavior like language and social skills are modeled for a child and the child receives encouragement for modeling, they are more likely to practice and imitate the behavior that was modeled (Bandura, 1963). In simpler terms, when a child sees a peer model good social skills and language get praise and attention for this behavior, the child is likely to copy the praised behavior. Therefore, if a child lives in poverty and has not had contact with positive peer models in a learning environment, there will be a delay in social

skills, which in turn can also delay their language development. In turn, the delay in a child's language development can influence a child's cognitive and social-emotional wellbeing.

Furthermore, children can develop social-emotional skills through modeling as well. For example, if a child sees a peer receive praise and encouragement for using appropriate emotion regulation strategies or appropriate social skills, the child is more likely to imitate those praised behaviors as well (Sharkins et al., 2017).

Research has suggested that living in poverty creates long periods of psychological distress (Nikulina et al., 2011) because children living in poverty are often deprived of basic needs (Maslow, 1943) including unstable housing, food insecurity, their parent's stress, and inconsistent daily routines. Exposure to poverty, lack of basic needs, and prolonged psychological distress can lead to negative outcomes later in life. These negative outcomes include increased rates of Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), higher arrest rates in adulthood, and lower academic achievement (Nikulina et al., 2011).

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, when a person's basic physiological and safety needs, such as stable access to food, shelter, security, and safety, are not being met, they are not able to work on needs that are higher in the hierarchy (Maslow, 1943). The higher needs include psychological and self-fulfillment needs. Psychological needs include belongingness and love, which includes fostering relationships and friendships, as well as esteem needs, which are feeling accomplished and successful. Fulfillment needs include becoming self-actualized, which is when a person is able to achieve their full potential.

The Hierarchy of Needs can be played out in families living in poverty in the following ways. When living in poverty, a person's primary focus is on meeting their basic physiological

needs: getting their next meal and feeling safe. When a parent is worried about how they are going to feed their child or keep a roof over their head, it is difficult to foster academic readiness and social skills, as a result the child may have difficulty focusing on learning for school when they have an empty stomach, and they are experiencing psychological stress from instability and insecurity. This is why adversity in early childhood can also cause achievement gaps as early as kindergarten and preschool.

Children who grew up in poverty in their first two years of life showed lower executive functioning, language development, and social skills than their peers by the time they are two to three years old (Burchinal et al., 2018). These gaps were also seen when a child experienced their family transition into poverty when they are in preschool, which is between ages three and five (Burchinal et al., 2018). By the time children are five years old, this gap in their executive functioning, language development, and social skills has solidified and could become more apparent when the children entered kindergarten. Furthermore, Children who live in poverty showed significantly more problem behaviors than their peers who had not experienced poverty (Burchinal et al., 2018).

The purpose of the present literature review is to discuss the impact that living in poverty has on the children who are a part of the 3.6 million families living in poverty, specifically how it impacts their academic readiness for school. Research has indicated that poverty exacerbates an achievement gap between children who have not experienced poverty and children who have experienced poverty in early childhood (Burchinal et al., 2018). Also, experiencing poverty in early childhood can cause developmental delays in language, cognition, and social-emotional skills, which are all crucial in order to be school ready when it is time to enter kindergarten (Burchinal et al., 2018).

Review of Literature

School Readiness

In Minnesota, when a child attends a preschool or kindergarten readiness program, they are assessed for several benchmarks before entering kindergarten. These benchmarks cover three learning domains: social emotional, math, and language, literacy, and communication. In each domain, there are several objectives for which the student is assessed. For example, under the social emotional domain, a student is assessed for thirteen different objectives. These objectives include emotions, building relationships with adults, conflict resolution, self-comforting, self-control of feelings and behaviors, social and emotional understanding, relationships and social interactions with familiar adults, managing feelings, following limits and expectations, taking care of their own needs in an appropriate manner, and responding to emotional cues.

Each state has its own standards and benchmarks that each student must meet at each grade level. In Minnesota, there are standards that kindergarteners must meet by the end of the school year. These standards are in five categories: the arts, English language arts, math, science, and social studies. Each category is then broken down into three or four headings. Each heading contains a varying number of standards, that are broken down even further into several different benchmarks (MN Department of Education, 2021). For example, for kindergarteners in Minnesota, there are four subcategories: the nature of science and engineering, physical science, Earth science, and life science. Under the subcategory “The nature of science and engineering,” there are two standards: the practice of science and the practice of engineering. The benchmark of the practice of engineering standard is that the child can sort objects into whether something is found in nature or human-made (MN Department of Education, 2021).

School readiness includes many different factors that play a critical role in how prepared a child is to enter kindergarten and succeed in school (Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems, 2018). These factors include a child's early math skills, language, pre-literacy skills, cognitive abilities, problem-solving, social/emotional/behavioral development, and health and physical development. How ready a child is for kindergarten is not only predictive of how they will do in kindergarten. Furthermore, a child's level of school readiness has also shown to predict future academic success in the long and short term. Achievement gaps that may present during kindergarten only become more pronounced as students progress throughout their school years. Because of this, early intervention is greatly encouraged to help narrow the achievement gap (Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems, 2018).

Poverty in Schools

One indicator of a student's socioeconomic family background is their qualification for Free and Reduced Lunch (FARL). A study conducted in 2013 indicated that 48% of fourth-grade students, who qualify for FARL, are below their expected basic grade level reading level that they should be at that point in their schooling (Apel et al., 2013). There are a couple of implications from these findings. The first is that there is already a significant achievement gap by the time students are in fourth grade. The second implication is that if that is how early the achievement gap widens by the time students are in fourth grade, early intervention is necessary in order to ensure equity for all students that are served.

Experiencing poverty can negatively impact a student's academic achievement (Bhattacharya, 2010). One of the achievement gap areas is reading; students from low socioeconomic status families score an average of sixty percent below their peers from families with a higher socioeconomic status (Bhattacharya, 2010). One explanation for this gap is that

children from families who have a high socioeconomic status have access to more age-appropriate, cognitively stimulating environments. Parents who have a higher socioeconomic status are able to provide more resources for their children to better their reading abilities and they are able to invest more time with their children to positively influence their child's learning.

Data suggests that approximately one in five children, between the ages of birth to five, live in food-insecure homes, and would therefore qualify for FARM (Johnson & Markowitz, 2018). These children also have low social-emotional skills, as well as low scores in reading and math (Johnson & Markowitz, 2018). This study also found that if the level of food insecurity a child experiences increases as they age, their scores are lower than those who do not experience increases in their level of food insecurity during their earliest years of life. Research suggests that this might be the case because parents in these households are unable to have adequate time to provide quality parenting due to their own stress in trying to provide for the needs of their family. In particular, mothers in food insecure homes may become withdrawn, distracted, and depressed, making it difficult to foster parent-child interactions that are crucial for child development of the skills they need to start school successfully (Johnson & Markowitz, 2018).

Children who experience poverty at an early age have been shown to have lower executive functioning which is extremely beneficial in academic achievements (Burchinal et al., 2018). Executive functioning refers to organization skills, planning and goal setting, time management, self-regulation, and accountability. Organization skills refer to a person's ability to know that everything has a place, and they are able to put things in their respective places. Planning and goal setting refer to how a person determines what needs to be accomplished and when it needs to be accomplished. Time management is being able to schedule when a person is going to finish a particular task. Self-regulation refers to a person's ability to monitor their own

emotions and behaviors. Lastly, accountability refers to a person's ability to take ownership of the outcomes that they experience and to learn from negative outcomes and experiences (Burchinal et al., 2018).

Another factor that can impact school readiness among children experiencing poverty is a child's ability to internalize and externalize problems (Burchinal et al., 2018). When a child internalizes problems, they tend to become withdrawn and fearful. Conversely, when a child externalizes problems, they tend to become restless and angry (Burchinal et al., 2018). Children who have experienced poverty are more likely to externalize their struggles. Such behaviors are often disruptive, seen as problem behaviors in classroom, and result in negative interactions with other students and staff. While children who externalize their struggles and provoke negative attention, children who internalize their problems are less likely to receive much needed attention to their struggles.

Applications in School Counseling

School districts are attempting to improve achievement gaps for children who are entering kindergarten by making preschool more accessible to all families, no matter their socioeconomic status background. Accessible preschool experiences can introduce children to the school environment before entering kindergarten and can help students gain the social and academic skills needed to be successful in kindergarten (Coley, Spielvogel, & Kull, 2019). In Minnesota, there are two state-recognized assistant programs that help families living below the poverty line have access to preschool experiences. One of these is the Head Start program, while the other is the Voluntary Prekindergarten program (*Early Learning Programs*, 2021).

Head Start is a program accessible to pregnant women and children birth to five years old. It is a program that helps families who have an income that is equal to or below the federal

poverty line, families who are homeless, and children who are in foster care. Head Start provides qualified families and children connections to early education, health services, community services, and support in learning and development for the child and the family. Head Start workers are able to help families find local early learning centers and childcare centers (*Early Learning Programs, 2021*).

Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) is a program that Head Start services would direct families to. VPK is a publicly funded Preschool program. VPK classrooms are able to provide students with quality, free education for four-year-old children. The aim of the program is to provide learning for the children, support for families through strong parent involvement, work with family-centered programs, and facilitate a smooth transition into a school setting for the child and the family (*Early Learning Programs, 2021*).

Research has also found that the socioeconomic status of the children in the preschool classroom has an impact on outcomes for the students (Coley, Spielvogel, & Kull, 2019). Students who came from a low socioeconomic background and were in a classroom with peers who also came from a low socioeconomic background had more positive outcomes than children who did not have any experience in a preschool classroom (Coley, Spielvogel, & Kull, 2019). However, the students from a low socioeconomic background who had the most positive outcomes were students who attended preschool in a classroom that had students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Coley, Spielvogel, & Kull, 2019). When classrooms consisted of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds there were opportunities for social emotional skills to be modeled and students were able to be introduced to higher level academic materials. These learning opportunities are able to help close the achievement gap between peers of different socioeconomic status backgrounds (Coley, Spielvogel, & Kull, 2019). Students were

able to learn from their peers how to behave appropriately, they were able to develop their language and social skills more based on how their peers spoke and acted (Coley, Spielvogel, & Kull, 2019). This indicates that earlier interactions with peers from different backgrounds can help to improve outcomes for a child.

The same study also found that the scenario with the most positive outcomes were classrooms that had a quality teacher, a smaller class size, promoted peer interactions, and consisted of students from a variety of socioeconomic family backgrounds (Coley, Spielvogel, & Kull, 2019). From these findings, school district administrators should advocate for accessible preschool experiences that have smaller class sizes, quality teachers, that promote positive peer interactions, and consist of children from diverse family backgrounds.

Discussion

Poverty in schools is an extremely prevalent issue that needs to be addressed from the local school district to the federal level. Nearly a quarter of all children are currently or have experienced poverty (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2014). Poverty is an adversity in childhood that has been linked to prolonged psychological stress, which can lead to PTSD and MDD which will only add to the hardship that these children experience in their lives (Nikulina, Widom, & Czaja, 2011). In addition to the negative psychological outcomes that are associated with experiencing poverty in childhood, these children experience achievement gaps from the time that they enter kindergarten and have decreased levels of academic achievement throughout their academic career when compared to their peers from higher socioeconomic status families (Bhattacharya, 2010).

These findings are supported by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (Maslow, 1943). Children in poverty are not able to have their basic physiological needs met; therefore, their

focus is not able to be on their academic or social needs. Academic skills aren't able to be fostered by parents who are working numerous jobs in order to feed their children and try to keep a roof over their heads. Social skills cannot be modeled by peers when early educational experiences, such as preschool or childcare, cannot happen when they are not monetarily accessible to families living in poverty.

There are some programs available that are able to help meet some of these needs, for instance, the ability for children to have at least one meal a day at school through qualifying for Free and Reduced Lunch. However, there is a need for more programs that allow families in poverty to have access to quality early childhood education. Expanding on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, these education programs do much more than prepare students for their academic life, although that is a great benefit of this experience (Maslow, 1943). Quality early childhood education can also provide students with at least two consistent meals a day during the week and a stable and safe environment to help meet their basic needs, as well as social interactions and models to help them meet their social needs (Maslow, 1943). Once these basic needs are able to be met, children are able to learn and grow academically with the support of quality educators.

Head Start and VPK are able to simultaneously benefit the child and their family. Both of these programs work with the family to find quality classrooms and programs that work for the family and help the family become prepared to enter the school system. Assisting the family find resources provides long term benefits for the children within the families.

Ethical Considerations

When looking at poverty and children who live in poverty, it is difficult to talk about it without also talking about the racial bias that goes with it. The United States Census Bureau reported that the majority of those living below the poverty line in 2019 were Black or Hispanic

(The United States Census Bureau, 2020). These statistics indicate that the matter of poverty in schools impacts students of color at a higher rate than their peers who are white. The academic system needs to work at a systemic level to provide an equitable education experience to all students, no matter their race or socioeconomic background.

Another topic to consider when discussing childhood poverty are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (Steele et al., 2016). ACEs are considered to be physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, family member with a mental illness in the household, incarcerated relative, domestic violence, substance abuse in the home, and divorce. Children who live in poverty experience ACEs at a higher rate than their peers who have not lived in poverty (Steele et al., 2016). A study conducted in 2018 researched the connection between ACEs and academic risk for elementary school students (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018). This study had a sample of 2,101 children, ranging from Kindergarten to 6th grade, and found that 44% of their sample have experienced at least one ACE, and 13% of the students experienced three or more ACEs. Researchers found that the more ACEs a child has experienced, the greater risk there is of: repeating a grade, missing school, problem behaviors, and lower school engagement.

There are also several negative outcomes for children who are experiencing the ACE as well as adults who have already gone through the experience. Some of these negative outcomes during adulthood are physical health concerns, such as a greater risk for diabetes and cancer, while others are mental health concerns, such as increased risk for depression, anxiety, and addiction. For children, there are both academic and behavioral negative outcomes. ACEs have been linked to greater risk for poor functioning in academic settings, low school engagement, and a higher rate of dropping out of school (Moses & Villodas, 2017). The increased rate of

ACEs that children in poverty experience only adds to the necessity for early intervention that can be provided through accessible quality preschool programs.

Conclusion

Children are vulnerable and need to have support and equitable access to services and academic experiences no matter their family's background. Once the child's basic needs are met, and the needs of their family, they are better placed to decrease the achievement gap between children who live in poverty and their peers. When a child is able to have quality early education, the better placed they become to overcome the negative outcomes that have been found to occur for children living in poverty.

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