

Teacher experiences in low SES schools and high SES schools

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SUMMARY *This paper examines the differences in perceptions of students and students' environments held by tenured teachers in a low socioeconomic status (SES) school and tenured teachers in a high socioeconomic status (SES) school. By comparing teachers' perceptions of their students' characteristics and performance in a low SES school with the same characteristics in a high SES school research will be conducted on the impact of this. Research will now be one step closer to reassessing the impact of both teachers' perceptions of students on their actions and treatment of students on students' outcomes and the impact of students' environments on students' outcomes. The main question explored was, "How have the experiences of teachers in a low SES school differed from the experiences of teachers in a high SES school?" Based on the information retrieved, there was a portrait created of teachers' perceptions that can be used to help prepare preservice teachers to the attitudes of other teachers in the field. It can help orient teaching students to the environment. That combined with data on the area can help new teachers enter the profession with a more objective attitude about the educational culture and the impact that dynamic can have on student learning.*

Introduction

In the past, school districts within the United States have been performing at different levels based on the socioeconomic status of the surrounding area. Researchers have found that many factors such as parental involvement, children's health, and the physical environment that children inhabit affect their development (Guo and Harris, 2000, p. 434, Mackner, Black and Starr, 2004, p. 744). Often, the circumstances these low socioeconomic status (SES) children experience correlate with their poor development.

Parent and School Involvement

In general, in order for children to succeed, they need a social and emotional connection to a role model and in turn the role model needs to give the children an indication that they are loved (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2004, p. v). The lower the socioeconomic status, the fewer resources people have at their disposal, which can in turn have negative effects on development (Gordon, 2003, p. 191). A study conducted by Skowron (2005), suggested that low SES environments have more stressful events and these events create early risk of learning delays as well as behavioral and emotional problems. As concluded by many researchers, these challenges may include abuse, both physical and mental abuse, and neglect (Evans, 2004, p. 80; McLoyd, 1998, p. 196; Middlemiss, 2003, p. 294 & 299 & Skowron, 2005, p. 2). Research indicates parents of low SES families do not always participate in educationally positive activities. The limited involvement by the low SES parents can correlate with diminished reading development (Evans, 2004, p. 81).

Lerner and Anderson (2003) illustrated how positive aspects of youth development are shaped through positive reinforcement from parents, teachers, friends and other influences (p. 175). These authors suggest five different ways to influence youth positively. These are through “competence, confidence, character, social connection and compassion” (p. 175). Extracurricular activities that distinguish between children and help a child develop a certain talent (Evans, 2004, p. 81 and Lerner & Anderson, 2003, p. 174). Evans (2004) discusses that low SES parents are involved in a total percentage of 36, while higher income families were involved in 59% of the time (p. 81). However, there’s no information on just how much extracurricular activity is maximal.

Research suggests that the high SES parents monitor their children more often. The high SES parents are able to describe their children’s best and worst subjects as well as their teachers and coaches (Evans, 2004, p. 81).

There have been some trends that have been seen in parenting. Within the current population survey [CPS] (2002), it was found that “in 1980, 77 percent of all children under age 18 lived with two parents, falling to 73 percent in 1990 and only 68 percent by 1998” (p. 3). Since that time, there has been an increase in the number of children living with only their mother. This rose from 18% to 23%, while the number of children living with only their father grew from less than 2 percent to about 4 percent. In 1998, about 3 percent of children lived with other relatives and about 1 percent lived with people who were not relatives (CPS, 2002, p. 3). This suggests that our society may need to provide more support services for families than have been provided in the past.

Children's Physical Environment

Many families have unsafe and unsanitary living conditions. Evans suggests that the standard for affordable housing is less than 30% of income, but more than 75% of Americans are below poverty and half of them pay 70% of their income for housing (p. 84). Evans (2004) determined that low SES families are less likely to have smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, gated stairs and clean tap water (p. 84). In fact, research indicates that children's socioeconomic status during their first five years of life has a higher impact on whether or not they successfully complete school than their socioeconomic experiences during any other time (McLoyd, 1998, p. 193).

Children's Health

As suggested by McLoyd (1998) children living in low SES environments that have experienced many illnesses are experiencing these illnesses because of the poor environments in which they inhabit (p. 198). These low SES families lack the capital needed to purchase food and this may lead to undernourishment (Guo and Harris, 2000, p. 433). There is a possibility that the undernourished children are more likely to suffer illnesses that force them to be absent from school

(p. 433). There is a possibility that the undernourishment also may cause cognitive and psychological impairment that can be irreversible (Patterson, 2002, p. 3). McLoyd suggests that these poor environments and lack of nutrition are resulting in lower scores on IQ tests (p. 191).

This possibility may also occur in a high SES. Although there are no statistics, there is a possibility that if children experience an extreme illness and it goes untreated than that child may also experience low IQ. Undernourished children perform lower on standardized tests and experience higher dropout rates later in school (Patterson, 2002, p. 3).

The school lunch program, funded by the United States Department of Agriculture, provides free or reduced lunch to all children who qualify for this program (p. 1). School lunch programs only provide children with one meal a day. Some schools are instituting a free breakfast program as well, but many have not participated in this. There are 29.6 million children being served lunch. As of 2005, 14.2% of them are provided free lunch and 2.9 are provided reduced price lunch across the United States (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2005, p. 9).

There is minimal ability to contrast the circumstances presented above with high SES children's circumstances, since high SES parental related challenges have not been researched sufficiently. Although high SES families may give their children limited attention, indications are that middle and upper SES families spend at least some greater amount of time participating in education-nurturing activities with their children (Evans, 2004, p. 81). If the parents are involved in their child's life better development will be seen. Chronically poor families provided lower quality childrearing environments (NIICHP, 2005, p. 795). Children, regardless of their socioeconomic status, may live in environments where violence may occur. In some cases examined by Kaufman (2000) and Vigil (2003), violence is seen more in areas of low SES than in high SES areas.

The Study

Introduction

The research was exploratory in nature. It consisted of interviews with eight tenured teachers in a high school setting from grades 9- 12 and observations made during those interview periods. Three interviewees were from a low SES school district and five were from a high SES school district. These schools were chosen based on the economic status of the district. In both of the schools there is a 12 to 1 ratio of students to teachers. The student population in the low SES high school is approximately 6,000 students. The median family income as of 1999 was approximately \$55,500.00, and number of families that were living below poverty was 11.4%. The student population in the high SES high school is approximately 2,000. The median family income as of 1999 was approximately \$112,500. Approximately 1.3% of families lived below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, p. 1).

The Interviews

Interviews were conducted with five tenured teachers from a high SES school and three tenured teachers from a low SES school in an urban environment who volunteered to be interviewed. Interview questions were designed to elicit teachers' observations about their students' performance and environmental factors that might impact that performance. Teacher 1, 2, and 3 were interviewed on October 11, 2005 and teacher 4, 5, 6, and 7 were interviewed on December 17, 2005. Questions asked were:

1. At what level do you think your students are developmentally as far as cognition, ethics and preparation toward the future?

2. What outside factors such as gang activity or working do you feel affect student performance at school?
3. Do you feel students have been exposed to the educational material needed for their level? If not why haven't they gotten that exposure? If so they are where did they get that exposure?
4. Is there anything that you would like to share about students at your school or your school's environment that you have observed that would help prospective teachers?
5. What is the overall impact of students' income in your school? What percentage of your students are low income?

Results

Low SES School

Through the interviews many contrasts were revealed in regard to what teachers feel students are experiencing in low SES school and high SES schools. The teachers within the low SES school district suggested that student performance is affected by work and allegiance to gangs. Interviews with teachers indicate that they perceived low SES students most often spend time working in order to contribute to their families' income. One response noted often was that in the low SES school feel that there may be a gang influence in their school. Some teachers describe that there may be about 8 to 10 different types of gangs in their school. Some feel that the gang members have trouble with school because they are suspended from school or too busy with gang business to get school work done. On the contrary, one low SES teacher feels that the students that are in school are not the students involved in the gang activity.

Another factor that the low SES teachers perceive as a problem in their school was the lack of parental involvement. One of the teachers feels that part of the problem is that the parents in the

community speak many different foreign languages and this makes it difficult for teachers to communicate with parents and vice versa. One out of the three low SES teachers notices that on open school night there was a very small percentage of parents in attendance.

The last factor that teachers of the low SES school perceive to be a problem is the income of the citizens that are participating in the school. One teacher feels that the students' families' income and the community's income are affecting the school district. They believed the school district is not being financially supported by its community. All of the teachers believe that 65-80% of their school is low income and approximately 25% are in poverty. Two out of three low SES teachers believe that many of the children are not being properly fed at home and feel that the students' work in school is being affected because of the lack of nutrition that they are receiving at home.

High SES School

Within the high SES school a much different picture was portrayed. All of the five teachers reveal that cognition was fairly high and the students have a tremendous knowledge base. The students are prepared towards the future and, in most cases students reveal that they are more prepared than their counterparts. All of the teachers agree that they do not feel that there is gang activity in their school. All of the teachers also perceive that the students in this high SES school are dedicated to doing well in school and that is their main job. Four out of the five teachers believe that many of the students are heavily involved in sports and many of them are overstretched.

All of the teachers in the high SES school feel that the students have been exposed to the educational material needed. One of the teachers perceive that the attitude of the school is if it will

help the curriculum, it will be purchased for the students. Another teacher also feels that the students are exposed to the computer and the internet resources that they need to excel.

All five teachers believe that there is less than one percent of the student population that is living in a low income environment. Two out of the five high SES teachers discuss the difference of the high SES school and the low SES school that they worked at in an urban environment. One high SES teacher witnesses that in the urban school where he used to work in, a student did not hand in her homework and when the teacher asked why they did not do it, the student responded that her dad was shot last night. Two out of the five teachers believe that socioeconomic status has an impact on preparedness and their educational future.

Analysis

Based on previous research, parental involvement in school promotes increased achievement, less aggression, increased attendance, and increased graduation rates (Ferrara and Ferrara, 2005, p. 77). Parent involvement was limited in the low SES school, and parents were involved in the high SES school. Teachers in the low SES school indicated that parental involvement was obsolete. A low SES teacher said, "I think the lack of parental involvement in the district is a problem. I think it comes from the community in general because we have so many outside foreign languages being spoken that it is difficult as the teacher to communicate or the parent to communicate with the teacher". Contrary to this, teachers in the high SES school felt that parents were heavily involved in the school.

Many of the teachers that were spoken to in both schools were experiencing frustration with parental involvement. In the low SES school frustration was felt by teachers when they spoke about the lack of parental involvement in the community. Because of their limited participation and

involvement by parents, teachers felt frustrated with the amount of work that they were doing for their students and the little acknowledgement that they were receiving from the parents. Frustration was also felt in the high SES school. Teachers in this school were frustrated because they felt like they were always being watched by the parents. In some cases, teachers revealed that anything done in the classroom was scrutinized by the parents. One teacher jokingly explained that an inappropriate skirt was worn by a faculty member and 10 parents were at the principal's door within minutes. Many of the parents are influential in the community and very demanding.

In both schools, the feeling of frustration may lead to aggression towards either the students or the parents. Teachers' frustration may become evident in their interactions with their students. Some teachers may be short with their students because of the fear they have, or the lack of enthusiasm that they are feeling. Some teachers, especially in the low SES school, may feel that a student is not worth the effort of their time. This lack of dedication by the teacher may also cause the student to feel that effort should not be given on their side. The teachers may feel that if the parents do not care why should the teacher put any effort into caring for the student. The frustration, as seen through the interviews conducted, revealed that there may be different treatment applied to certain students where frustration is not evident.

As stated above, many of the students in the low SES school were facing inadequate nutrition. As suggested by the teachers in the low SES school, many of the students were not receiving a nutritionally balanced meal. As research suggests without a nutritionally sound environment, many negative cognitive factors can be experienced. Children may not develop properly due to the lack of food. Teachers in the high SES did not feel that there was an issue with nutrition in their school. Since most of the student population was from an affluent environment, the teachers felt that nutritionally sound meals were available at the students' finger tips. However,

solid research is lacking. One question to consider is whether students in even the high SES environment eat nutritionally sound meals? Children may find that it is easier to find a pop tart for breakfast, which is not a nutritionally sound breakfast.

In many cases teachers have different perceptions depending on what environment that are exposed to when they are teaching. The data that was analyzed in this research was anecdotal. If a teacher is teaching in a low SES environment, they may feel badly for their students who are living in poverty. They may also feel that these students are not deserving of any education. The teachers may feel that they do not need to invest time in these students because they are not worthy. As stated by one teacher in the low SES, “I have a number of students that do work and they work late hours. I know that some of them have to work and they contribute to their families, but regardless it definitely affects the classroom because they come in and they are tired, they haven’t prepared, they haven’t done the homework, they haven’t studied and it definitely has an effect on their performance in class, a negative effect”.

In the interviews conducted in the low SES, gang members was one group of students where all of those interviewed agreed that these students were a waste of time. The teachers interviewed felt that these students were not worth being educated. The teachers specified that these students would hardly show up to school and if the students did show up they were sleeping or uninterested. The teachers instructing in a high SES environment expressed anger and frustration towards the families in their area because of their unbelievable wealth. The students in the two socioeconomic areas were treated different from each other. The teachers of the high SES environment admired their students’ dedication to school, sports, and other activities. The teachers in the low SES environment discussed a frustration with their students instead of an admiration. These students

were treated differently because of the environment that they live in. Teachers in the low SES environment feel that they are in the school to teach and that is it. In the low SES environment there is no attachment to the students or the outside environment by the teachers. The teachers and students are detached from one another. Conversely, in the high SES environment teachers were more supportive of students and the outside environment.

The low SES high school and the high SES school that were examined showed that within the same geographic areas, there is a contrast in the environments that these students are exposed to. Teachers within the low SES environment spoke about many outside factors that are influencing the students' learning in this school. Some of the factors discussed were lack of parental involvement, and limited time spent on school work due to other obligations. In contrast, the teachers within the high SES school discussed how the environment that these students were being exposed to increased the students' learning in many ways. Within the low SES high school, the teachers indicated that many of the students work in order to support their family. The teachers indicated that many of the students were not able to dedicate time to their studies. The teachers in the low SES environment felt that this limited the students' dedication to school and did not indicate that what these students were doing was admirable. Teachers discussed that the students had their priorities mixed up. They did not understand that many of the students had to work in order for their family to survive. Many teachers were not compassionate to these students and did not feel that they needed to be. Teachers in the high SES found potential differences in the area of student working. Many of the teachers indicated that student working was used as a resume builder and in all cases not necessary for survival. Teachers in the high SES school indicated that the jobs were usually community service or volunteer and because of the volunteer aspect of these jobs, students were held in high regard. One teacher states, "Very few students work. They don't have a

job; they rarely work in the summer. Some girls might baby sit, but really the culture of this school and the community is that the students' jobs are their work here". Another teacher states, "That our problem in our school is the number of sports they play. Many students involved in sports are more stressed or negatively affected by this".

Both of the schools were located within 10 miles of each other, but they showed a between the learning environments that these students are exposed to. This exploratory study showed that the correlation between socioeconomic status and education is one that must be explored not just from a developmental standpoint, but also from a sociological standpoint if teachers are to create an equal, optimal learning environment for all students. This study indicated that does have an influence of student's success.

All of the interviews conducted eluded to some ideas that preservice teachers should be taught previous to entering the teaching field. As one of the low SES teachers explain, it is important to become involved in the community that a preservice teacher will be teaching in. This teacher states, "I think that teachers need to experience what a kid is going through or hear the stories of kids". One of the high SES teachers state that, "Future teachers should come with work ethics. It would be nice if they can be prepared on what they should wear, how they should conduct themselves". It is important that all preservice teachers realize that the environment that students are involved in may affect their education. Materials may be limited in a low SES environment as compared to a high SES school. It is imperative for a future teacher to realize the barriers and obstacles that the students are involved in before a preservice teacher acquires a job.

The research and the exploratory study that was conducted reveal that there is a discrepancy between a high SES and low SES school. The discrepancy has been seen through past research as well as through the small study conducted here. The teachers in this study explained what their expectations of teaching are and explained what some of their frustrations with teaching is. The research has revealed that in order for a student to be successful in school a student needs to have parental involvement, as well as a nurturing schooling environment.

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