

Supporting Students Facing Poverty in the Elementary School Classroom:

A Look at Trauma-Informed Teaching Practices

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Abstract

This paper examined the effects of poverty on students' learning and the benefits of adapting trauma-informed teaching practices into the general education classroom for these students. These practices allow teachers to be well informed on the impacts of both poverty and trauma on student learning. Teachers will then be better able to create curriculums and practices within their classrooms to support individual student needs. This study showed that students who are able to form stronger relationships and feel supported in their school community through trauma-informed practices, have greater educational outcomes.

***Keywords:* poverty, trauma-informed, outcomes**

Introduction

Many students in the United States are faced with poverty. This study provided future educators with key understandings of how to implement trauma-informed practices into their curriculum to support these students. With 21.1% of students in the United States today facing poverty, teachers have a higher urgency than ever to provide support to these students (McCarty, 2016, p. 1). One significant way to provide this support is through trauma-informed practices. These practices provide students with supportive adult relationships that help them to have an overall feeling of happiness, support, and safety (Kurian, 2022, p. 9).

Students in poverty may have more stress than other students and may need extra support to feel motivated and accomplished within the classroom (Cramer, 2018). This extra stress can also lead to altered brain chemistry within these students that can affect problem solving and judgment skills (Jensen, 2010, p. 25). This is incredibly important to take into account when teaching these students as different methods of instruction may be necessary. This study examined why this issue is urgent, what poverty is and how it affects students, what trauma-informed teaching practices are, and how these practices support students. This study also provided an interview with a teacher who has many insights. And provided findings found through the research of the problem of practice.

Statement of Problem

Trauma-informed teaching practices are necessary for supporting the 15.5 million children who are facing poverty (McCarty, 2016, p. 1). The problem stems from a system where children are born into poverty and get stuck without a way out while dealing with the many implications that poverty brings (p. 1). Students are attending school without the necessary

support system at home to thrive and have positive educational outcomes (Jensen, 2010, p. 25). This makes it harder for students to focus in school, build relationships with fellow classmates, and have the judgment necessary for problem solving during class (p. 25). Teachers need ways to support and connect with these students in order for the students to be successful members of the classroom and society. My research question is, how can teachers support students facing poverty through trauma-informed teaching practices?

Justification of the Study

The work is important because I believe that every single teacher is going to come into contact with students who are facing or have faced poverty in their lives. These students are going to come to them with trauma and stress (Jensen, 2010, p. 25). Without knowledge of how to support them through these difficulties, teachers are doing themselves and their students an injustice. Teachers can't teach what they need to if their students aren't able to learn and focus on the tasks at hand. When students are facing poverty, they may be more concerned and preoccupied thinking about whether or not they will get to sleep in a bed that night than if they are going to get a good grade on a math test (p 25). What's the point of teaching if your students aren't physically capable of focusing on learning the curriculum you are presenting them with?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This section gives an analysis and overview of the research that supports my study of how teachers can support students in poverty with trauma-informed teaching practices. It will give an in-depth analysis of what poverty is and how it affects students, not only in the classroom, but their overall well-being. What trauma-informed teaching practices are and how to

incorporate them into the classroom. As well as how trauma-informed teaching practices can specifically help students in poverty. At the end of this study, there is an overview of the experience of a peer review.

What is poverty and how does it affect students?

Poverty can be defined as not having adequate resources for everyday basic needs like housing, food, and transportation (Gale, 2016). McCarty (2016) states that 15.5 million children in 2014 in the United States or 21.1% lived with families whose incomes are below the federal poverty line (p. 1). DeNavas-Walt notes, “The poverty rate for children was higher than the rates for people aged 18 to 64 and those aged 65 and older” (p. 22) This makes children the largest group of poor individuals in the United States (2014). To make matters worse, children in the United States have a harder time getting out of poverty throughout their lives than those in any other similarly developed nation (McCarty, 2016, p. 1). This means that in the United States, individuals are more likely to get stuck without many means of ever escaping poverty.

Students can be affected by poverty in several ways. Ferguson (2007) explains that “It is well documented that poverty decreases a child’s readiness for school through aspects of health, home life, schooling and neighborhoods” (p. 1). They go on to explain that “A child’s home has a particularly strong impact on school readiness. Children from low-income families often do not receive the stimulation and do not learn the social skills required to prepare them for school” (p. 2). Poverty can also greatly impact a students' academic performance. Jensen (2010) poses that poverty and lower cognitive achievement are correlated (p. 38). Not only are student’s cognitive abilities lowered, but Jensen (2010) brings forth in the research that studies show that brain development is altered in children who face poverty. They have found that the brain doesn't grow

as much and that the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex which are responsible for learning and cognition are inundated with cortisol. This stress hormone, when released constantly, can shrink neurons in the brain's frontal lobes in developing children. The frontal lobes are responsible for helping us plan and make judgements (p. 25). When we are aware of what children in poverty are going through, we can better support them.

What is trauma-informed teaching?

Trauma-informed teaching is a way to provide support to students who have or who are facing trauma within their lives. Menschner (2016) explains that we need to understand someone's life experiences in order to care for them best. Trauma-informed practices help us to look at an individual's experience and create a plan to support them (p. 1). Trauma-informed practices are used frequently in classrooms with students who are categorized as having Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs (Kurian, 2022, p. 5). These students come from homes that have "abuse, neglect, or other potentially traumatic experiences" (p. 5). "Studies estimate that 45 percent of all children have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience..." (Harper, 2019, p. 1). This means that trauma-informed practices are beneficial for every teacher to know as a lot of students they encounter will fit this background.

Trauma-informed teaching practices take the trauma of students into account when figuring out how to best support them. Kurian (2022) discusses how it is necessary to think about each child's personal experiences in order to support them in the classroom in a way that will benefit them. She says, "By building supportive adult-child relationships in school and remaining mindful of the socio-emotional, physical, and cognitive effects of adversity, trauma-informed care addresses multiple dimensions of well-being" (p. 9). She explains in her research that

trauma-informed teaching practices follow the four R's which are Realize, Recognize, Respond, and Resist retraumatization. She explains them as, "Realize both the presence and impact of trauma and the ways forward for healing and recovery. Recognize the signs of a person within the system exposed to a traumatic experience. Integrate awareness of the potential presence and consequences of trauma into the whole system norms, behaviors, and structures. Resist behaviors, systems, and policies that risk retraumatization children, families, and staff and promote environments conducive to healing and Well-being (p. 8). Kurian (2022) also explains that these practices don't stop trauma itself, but instead provides support for those who have faced trauma (p. 9). Trauma-informed practices are all about building relationships with your students and, "By building supportive adult-child relationships in school and remaining mindful of the socio-emotional, physical, and cognitive effects of adversity, trauma-informed care addresses multiple dimensions of well-being" (p. 9). Trauma is never a student's choice and supporting them on the road to educational success is key.

Trauma-informed teaching for students in poverty

Trauma-informed teaching encourages relationship building and supportive practices for students living with trauma. Students living in poverty can greatly benefit from this approach as well. Cramer (2018) discusses that educator programs and those for pre-service teachers have to address the needs of students in poverty with trauma-informed pedagogy. He says that this can prepare future teachers for the changing role of professional educators and will help teachers to engage those students that are, "impacted by the effects of chronic stress from poverty" (p.1). He also discusses how students who face poverty can often be faced with the post-traumatic stress of things like, eviction, homelessness, foreclosure, domestic violence, unstable living environments,

or incarceration of a family member (p. 1). These all qualify as traumatic events and trauma-informed practices can help these students to feel more supported and cared for in times of stress.

Cramer (2018) also explains that students who need extra steps taken to stay focused and engaged due to chronic stress need to be able keep them feeling confident in their learning. When these students feel confident and have relevant material, they are more likely to complete the work and feel excited to learn. Creativity and encouragement are also big factors in these students' success (p. 3). There are also several other ways teachers can create learning environments for their students to succeed. Cettina (2015) talks about how a teacher named Garcia, understood that children who are in poverty, and therefore unstable circumstances, could benefit greatly from trusted adults and building relationships with them. Garcia started allowing students to have small group lunches with her. This encouraged her students in poverty to build good peer relations and build trust with her, the teacher as well (p. 3). Students need support from stable adults when they are in unstable living conditions. "As an educator, you don't have a choice about being in the trauma business. You do have a choice in what you do about it" (Souers, 2018, p. 11).

This section gave a review of the literature that supports the stance of trauma-informed teaching practices helping students in poverty. It showed the reader what poverty is and how it affects students in and out of the classroom. It also showed how to incorporate trauma-informed teaching practices into a general education classroom while also explaining this pedagogy in detail. This review also gave an overview of how students facing poverty are benefited by trauma-informed teaching practices and how it's an overall important set of practices to

understand for all types of trauma in the classroom. At the end there was also a description of the use of peer feedback.

METHODOLOGY

This section included my positionality or why I decided to choose my topic, my theoretical framework of self study, and will provide an in-depth overview of my community partner interview. I chose the topic of supporting students facing poverty through trauma-informed practices for several reasons including my own personal experience with students in poverty and my desire to know how to support them in the future. I chose the self study framework because of its self-reflective nature. My community partner interview was with a teacher who I feel has a great understanding of how to support students in poverty and I thought she would be a great resource for furthering my knowledge.

Positionality

In high school, I volunteered in an elementary school classroom and then worked as an aid in a first grade classroom. During my first few months as a volunteer, I witnessed how much more difficult school was for students living in poverty. There were students in these classes who didn't have the means to afford notebooks or backpacks which are very important for success in general education classrooms. Some other students' parents would bring in extra backpacks, binders, and notebooks for students in need and the teachers always made sure the students were taken care of as well. These students would show up to school hungry and sometimes couldn't receive free and reduced breakfast because they were frequently late due to a lack of transportation. I saw teachers giving their own personal food to students just so they could be

successful in the classroom that day. I knew that I wanted to do research on some aspect of students facing poverty and supporting these students. Through this research I came across trauma-informed practices as a way to support these students and I wanted to know more.

As a future educator, I am constantly reminded that students need support and care from their teachers and that educators play a big role in student's lives in every aspect. They are who students spend most of their day with and who they often look up to, especially when they don't have the best role models at home. Learning about how to support these students in poverty will be important for me to know when I have a class of my own. Trauma-informed learning is important to know for students who are facing any type of trauma. There are a lot. It is important to know how to create individualized support systems and I want to help my future students have the most positive learning environment possible.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework I chose to best match my study on how teachers can support students facing poverty through trauma-informed practices is self-study. Self study involves the use of self reflection and Schulte says that it is, "how who one is, shapes how one teaches". She also talks about how the research shows that many teachers don't have the life experience or the cultural competencies to adequately meet the needs of students living in poverty. Lassonde (2009) notes that self-study is focused on the teacher being the researcher of their own teaching practices (p. 4). Not ever having been in poverty myself has made it challenging to think about what students in poverty may need. You really have to self reflect on who you are, put that aside, and then step into the shoes of the child to see how their needs can best be met.

Schulte also talks about deficit perspective which is where teachers look at what students are lacking instead of what they bring to the classroom. With trauma-informed teaching practices, it is incredibly important to recognize what students bring to the classroom in order to build a relationship with them in which they feel loved and confident in their abilities. I think using self-study in my future classroom with everything I do will be important. It gives us a different perspective on student learning outcomes and provides us with better insights. Lassonde (2009) states that even pre-service teachers can use self-study to reflect on their practices to improve their teaching and their students' overall learning (p. 207). Meaning that self-study is an important practice to start from the beginning of being in a classroom. I want to teach my students in a way where they are all going to feel supported and I think that there is no better way to do that than self-reflection. Self-study gives teachers a way to evaluate their own teaching, which is incredibly important.

Community Partner Interview

My community partner was an eighth grade teacher named Kari Stevens. She has taught every grade from kindergarten through eighth and has been teaching for fourteen years. I selected Kari for this interview because she has a lot of experience with different students and always goes above and beyond in her teaching. I thought she would have a lot of great insight into ways to support students in poverty as well as creating a great learning environment for all students as a whole in the classroom. She also implements a lot of community building so that the students feel supported by one another and accepted for their differences. This helps all students because instead of feeling rejected by peers for differences, they feel like they are being celebrated for

their differences. I really wanted to hear about all of her ways she supports students individually and in her everyday classroom curriculum.

My problem of practice is a lack of cohesive support from educators and staff for students facing poverty within the education system and my research question is, how are teachers supporting students facing these traumas? My community partner better helps me understand this problem of practice because she has had several students within her classes over the years who have faced poverty. She also has a huge dedication to changing the lives of her students and making sure that they find a love for learning. She wants her students to go into the world with all of the tools in their belts to accomplish anything they set their minds to while recognizing they will always hit a few bumps in the road. She believes in learning through mistakes and never giving up. She wants to support her students in every way possible and I knew she would have some great resources for supporting them if they are facing poverty as well.

When I asked what the socioeconomic status of the students is like at the school, Kari told me she believes close to 70% of students are receiving free and reduced lunch. This means that even if students aren't facing poverty, their parents fall under a certain income bracket. This could cause extra stress for these students and they would also benefit from extra support from their teacher. Learning this gave me extra insight into how many students could be dealing with the financial stress of their parents even if they aren't in poverty.

When I asked Kari how she and the school support students in poverty, she told me that they follow the Nurtured Heart Approach. This method focuses on the whole child and encourages a lot of hands-on activities. She told me that through this approach, students are able to feel supported more and like their individualized needs can be met. She also told me that within her own classroom, students get time to turn assignments in if they need it. She also

provides lunch and after school help with assignments and makes sure that if students can't afford things like computers, that they can rent one from the school. She has a huge emphasis on focusing on building relationships with the students so they feel comfortable enough to tell her anything that might be going on that they are struggling with.

Kari makes sure to communicate with parents about student needs and situations that might be going on at home if the parents are comfortable opening up. Throughout the year, Kari also asks other parents if they can bring in extra clothes or materials for students who may be in need if they are able. Most of the time, she has parents who are willing to bring in an overabundance of things and it helps students in poverty out tremendously. She also always makes sure that there are ways to help students afford field trips if their family cannot. The school Kari teaches at also uses counseling referrals for students so that they can talk about problems at home in a safe environment.

I think that all of Kari's practices within her own classroom support my research by providing great resources and places to start when looking to support students facing poverty. I found a lot of similarities between what Kari is doing within her classroom and what my own research has led me to find on supporting students within the classroom. There has especially been a trend within my research on a whole child approach and making sure that each student feels heard and loved. This was something that is definitely seen and practiced within Kari's classroom on a daily basis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section gives an analysis of the findings I found in my research and how they have brought clarification to me in my understanding as a future educator. Throughout my research I found three main connections between the literature review and the community partner interview and both better helped me to understand poverty and ways to support students through it. These connections also confirmed that researchers and teachers are coming to very similar conclusions on how to support students facing poverty. I found that students in poverty face more learning barriers, building relationships is incredibly important for these students.

Discussion of Findings

Finding One - Students in Poverty Face More Learning Barriers

My community partner interview and research brought to light that students in poverty face more learning barriers than other students might in a general education classroom. Mrs. Stevens said that she gives students who she knows are facing poverty more time to turn assignments in because sometimes they have less access to WIFI or computers while at home. She also discussed how she makes sure these students are able to receive school resources like computers and extra notebooks when possible so that they can learn with the rest of the class. From my research, Ferguson (2007) explains that students who come from homes facing poverty have a decrease in readiness for school learning due to aspects of health and home life. While Mrs. Stevens focused on a more resource focused learning barrier and Ferguson (2007) focused on more of a cognitive readiness barrier, both discuss the implications of a lack of resources for learning due to home life. However, both also discuss that with proper support and encouragement, these students can overcome the educational barriers they face. This helped me

to realize that a big part of supporting students is making sure they are provided for and feel taken care of and heard.

Finding Two - The Importance of Building Relationships

My community partner interview and research also showed a great deal of importance for creating impactful student-teacher relationships. Mrs. Stevens said that she has a huge emphasis on building relationships with students and parents so that they feel comfortable enough to tell her anything that they may be going through. This can include any sort of stress or anxiety they may be feeling about life at any given time that they are struggling with. From my research, Kurian (2022) discusses how building adult-child relationships in school addresses multiple dimensions of well-being (p. 9). Based on these findings, I recognize that building a support system of trust for students who have faced poverty is one of the most important things we can do for them on the road to educational success. Creating this support system is the whole basis of trauma-informed practices.

Finding Three - Different Informed-Trauma Practices can Have Similar Outcomes

Another finding that confirmed my original thinking between my research and community interview was how beneficial it is for students and the classroom community as a whole to implement trauma-informed teaching practices. From my interview, Mrs. Stevens talked about Nurtured Heart Approach which is a trauma-informed practice that focuses on educating the whole child, “head, heart, and hands” and has an emphasis on students being the leaders in their learning and lives with lots of hands-on activities and opportunities to learn from their mistakes. It focuses on promoting good behavior through noticing what children are doing

that is good and true throughout the day. The students have shown a lot of great responses to this strategy. From my research, Kurian (2022) while discussing trauma-informed practices, talks about strengths based perspectives and how beneficial they are to students. This means looking at what students are doing that is strengthening the classroom environment as a whole (p. 14). These two practices are different, but are both more specific trauma informed teaching strategies that both focus on the good that students are doing. They both show that with implementing these strategies, students can have positive learning experiences.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how teachers can support students facing poverty through trauma-informed teaching practices. It gives an in-depth overview of what poverty is and how it affects students, what trauma-informed teaching is and how it can be implemented in the classroom, and how trauma-informed teaching can benefit students in poverty. This study also found important connections between the community partner interview and the literature that are very beneficial in understanding these concepts and practices as a whole. It also explored the personal reasons behind the subject of study and provided readers with a comprehensive understanding of how to support students with poverty in the classroom.

I personally want to find out about more trauma-informed training I can take in the future to better support my students. Not only is this a great resource for students in poverty, but I would argue every student in the classroom benefits from better relationships with their teacher. I want to learn more about how I can incorporate this. I want to dive into more specific trauma-informed practices instead of it as a whole. I know of Nurtured Heart Approach, but would love to learn about other ways to make children feel supported. I want to know how many

teachers and schools are using trauma-informed practices right now and what those outcomes look like as a whole. I wonder what overall student success looks like at these schools from these practices. I am also more interested in self study and I want to know more ways that it can guide teachers through providing students with an impactful education.

The implications that I found for this study were that almost every teacher comes into contact and has students facing poverty in their classrooms. However, sometimes teachers may not want to have to use their own resources to provide for these students or they might just not have the resources to support these students. Whether that be through different pedagogy or through physical means. There is also no one approach that is going to help every single student in poverty and figuring out exactly what can help each student is time consuming and it is often difficult to hear about what different students are going through which can put a mental strain on the teacher.

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Schulte. California State University Chico Professor. Video.

APPENDICES

Community Partner Interview Questions

1. What grade do you teach? What grades have you taught? How many years have you been teaching?
2. What type of community do you teach in? What is the typical socioeconomic background of your students?
3. Have you had any students who have been in poverty? What's your definition of poverty? Does your school have a definition of poverty regarding students' families?
4. What types of support do you provide to different students?
5. How do you support students in poverty?
6. How do you support students who are facing neglect at home?
7. How do you support students with ACEs
8. How does your school support students facing poverty, neglect, and students with ACEs?
9. What kind of training have you had regarding this? Was it helpful? Do you implement anything from them?
10. Have you done any of your own research and if so, what did you find to be most helpful?
11. What does resilience mean to you as a teacher? How do you teach your students to be resilient?