

DO TEACHERS' BACKGROUNDS MATTER? EXAMINING TEACHERS
WITH LOW-SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS' PERCEPTIONS OF
TEACHING ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

by

DEMETRUS LIGGINS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

DECEMBER 2014

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to

The loving memory of my mother Leatrice Faye Liggins-Johnson

&

To my Great Grandfather, Fred “Hosea” Jones, a descendant of slaves, who

married his wife (my Great Grandmother) in part, because she was

literate and would be able to teach his children to read.

Who would have thought just three short generations

later that he would have an offspring to

receive a PhD in Education?

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thank you to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ from whom all blessings flow. “O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done marvelous things, things planned long ago.” (Isaiah 25:1).

I would like to thank Elijah. Your love, patience, and support mean the world to me. I would like to thank Keturah and Vaughn for being my escape and refuge in times of distress. My cohort members are much appreciated for their support and encouragement. Additionally, I would also like to thank the members of my dissertation committee, particularly Dr. Barbara Tobolowsky, for her guidance.

Finally, I especially want to thank my grandmother. Mary Alice Jones Liggins deserves the credit for seeing my potential long before I realized it myself.

November 17, 2014

Abstract

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Demetrus Liggins, PhD

The University of Texas at Arlington, 2014

Supervising Professor: Barbara Tobolowsky

This qualitative study explored how teachers from low-income backgrounds perceived their roles as teachers of economically disadvantaged students. The specific setting was Pinewood Park Elementary School in North Texas (a pseudonym), which was a Title I, low-income, elementary school campus with 96.2% economically, disadvantaged students that earned an “Exemplary” rating for the 2010-2011 academic year and a rating of “Recognized” for 2011-2012. Seven third – fifth grade teachers of varied ethnic groups and varying years of teaching experience, who all identified as having low-income backgrounds during grade school participated in one-on-one interviews. They were selected, because the students in their grades were responsible for the school’s successful ratings. Bandura’s (1989) theory of self-efficacy and Bourdieu’s (1973) theory of cultural capital were used to understand

the perceptions of the teachers. The teachers perceived their roles as providing a quality education for their students while also acknowledging their students' economic backgrounds and making deliberate efforts to aid them in overcoming obstacles. They also found that the shared backgrounds with their students influenced their relationships and efforts. Ultimately, this study contributes to the limited research on the effect teachers' economic backgrounds have on elementary school student success.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The percentage of U.S. residents living in poverty is on the rise. In the last decade the nation's poverty rate rose from 11.3% to 15.1% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). With over 46 million Americans living below the official poverty line, we now have the highest number of poor people ever recorded since the U.S. Census Bureau has published such figures (www.usa.gov). Poverty among America's youth continues to be an epidemic as well. According to the U.S. Department of Education Institute for Educational Sciences report (2012), from 2010 to 2011, the national child poverty rate also increased from 17% to 22% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). Studies show that youth living in poverty not only experience emotional, physical, and social adversity, but their achievement in school is also affected (Barton & Coley, 1998; Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, & Koschoreck, 2001).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), the largest K-12 academic achievement gap is between students living in poverty and those who are not. In fact, Reardon (2012) stated, "We have moved from a society in the 1950s and 1960s, in which race was more consequential than family income, to one today in which family income appears more determinative of educational success than race" (p. 14).

A multitude of studies have repeatedly found that socioeconomic status affects student outcomes (Baharudin & Luster, 1998; Clark, 1983; Eamon, 2005; Hochschild, 2003; Jeynes, 2002; Kuykendall, 2004; Majoribanks, 1996). National academic data trends indicate that children living below the poverty threshold are less likely to demonstrate proficiency in both reading and mathematics than children living at or above the poverty threshold (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2011). A similar gap exists regarding students' knowledge in the sciences. Data from the National Assessments of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2011) found that the achievement gap widens from 29 to as high as 52 percentage points on science assessments from third grade through high school. Further, students from low-income families are more at-risk of dropping out of school than students from middle- or high-income brackets (Eamon, 2005; Hochschild, 2003). And, only one of three low-income students who receive a high school diploma continues on to a trade school, community college, or university (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

The relationship between socioeconomic status and student success has been debated and has influenced national education policy for years (Coleman et al., 1966). In 1964, President Johnson launched his War on Poverty with the signing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The aim of this law was to help economically disadvantaged students attain higher academic achievement. Specifically, Title I, Part A was intended to help economically

disadvantaged students with the learning deficiencies associated with poverty. Yet despite the act's goal to level the playing field, data trends continue to show a discrepancy in student achievement between the haves and have-nots in our public school classrooms (Payne, 2009; Puma, Karweit, & Price, 2008; Rees, 1999; Slavin, 2009).

Although legislative efforts have proven ineffective in closing the academic achievement gap (Puma et al., 2008), most educators agree that the most important factor in a student's success is the teacher standing before them each day (Kuykendall, 2004). Stronge (2002) suggested that teachers directly impact every aspect of student learning from the particular subject matter students are to learn to the amount of knowledge students obtain in a given year within that subject.

All high-quality teaching uses students' previous knowledge and learning as the basis for building new skills and acquiring new knowledge (Kuykendall, 2004). Ethnic minority student groups have been shown to improve academically when their teachers are familiar with their culture and implement instructional strategies into their lessons based on that cultural understanding. Ladson-Billings (2005) found these teachers to be more successful with their students because they "understand the need for the students to operate in the dual worlds of their home community and the white community" (p. 116), a phenomenon she has coined as *culturally relevant pedagogy*. As a result, many researchers have studied the idea

of culturally relevant pedagogy with various student groups. Mohatt and Erickson (1981), Gay (2000), and Wortham and Contreras (2002) found when studying ethnic minority students from varied cultures and backgrounds, if teachers used culturally relevant teaching approaches in their instruction (e.g., cooperative learning, diverse instructional resources, cultural references), their students performed at or above the level of their peers who did not have teachers who used such approaches.

Payne (2009) declared that poverty, like race or ethnicity, is its own culture with its own traditions, values, and norms. Individuals living in poverty are often unaware, unless newly impoverished, of the hidden rules of the middle class (Payne, 2009). These rules include such things as knowing when to use a formal language versus slang and informal speech, considering the ramifications of decisions instead of acting impulsively, and understanding the importance of education in achieving financial success. Both Payne (2009) and Delpit (1995) also argued that educational and economic success depends on poor students being able to conform to the rules of the middle and upper classes in their day-to-day interactions with individuals from varied economic backgrounds.

Most children living in poverty attend school where the majority student population is poor and considered economically disadvantaged (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). Many children fail to realize or identify with being poor or economically disadvantaged because they rarely, if ever, encounter

or interact with individuals in the middle- to upper-income brackets (Payne, 2009). However, establishing conditions and circumstances in public schools that support academic success for all students irrespective of their socioeconomic background has never been more important (Kuykendall, 2004). Studies show having high quality teachers throughout school can substantially offset, or even eliminate, the disadvantages of a low-socioeconomic background (Wayne & Youngs, 2009). However, similar to culturally relevant pedagogy that looks at race and ethnicity of teachers and students to make significant student gains, little to no research has explored how teachers' socioeconomic backgrounds may affect their approach and behavior with students of similar backgrounds. Therefore, this study examines how teachers from low socioeconomic backgrounds perceive those experiences affect their teaching and relationships with economically disadvantaged students. This information will help us better understand the role that economic class and status may play in teacher effectiveness.

Orienting Theoretical Framework

For this study, I use both Albert Bandura's concept of self-efficacy and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as the overarching theoretical frameworks. Bandura (1997) employed the expression *self-efficacy* as referring to "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p.3).

A teacher that believes that his or her behavior can positively impact student outcomes tends to have a high sense of efficacy and a teacher's personal belief that his or her actions have no impact on student outcomes tends to have a low sense of efficacy. Therefore, it is an appropriate theory for this study because it explores how teachers perceive they affect their students' success.

The theory of cultural capital was developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1973) in *Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction* and was first used to help explain how social inequalities were reinforced within the educational system. The term *cultural capital* refers to non-financial social assets that promote social mobility beyond economic means. Cultural capital refers to having the knowledge and experiences that result in behaviors and practices aligned to the values of those who are in a position to legitimize them. Therefore, for this study, cultural capital is a useful framework because the teachers' backgrounds suggest that they did not possess the behaviors, norms, and practices of the middle class, which are traditionally valued in school culture, yet they succeeded. This study explored how these teachers perceived their backgrounds affected their teaching of students who may lack this knowledge.

Statement of the Problem

There is a steady increase of students in public schools who are identified as living at or below the poverty threshold, leading to a continued widening of the academic achievement gap between these students and their more affluent

counterparts. Funding sources such as Title I, Part A, were meant to level the playing field for poor students but have failed to close the achievement gap. Educational researchers must find ways to ensure that the most fundamental opportunities are provided to all students (Kuykendall, 2004).

Studies have shown that having well-trained teachers who understand instructional delivery and pedagogy are crucial to student success (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004). Researchers have also shown that the use of culturally relevant pedagogy with students from ethnic minority backgrounds and cultures affect student outcomes positively. Little to no research, however, has been done using the culture of poverty as its focus. Furthermore, published research on teachers who come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and their possible impact on students with similar backgrounds, seems to be nonexistent. Therefore, there is a need to explore this concept further.

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this study was to examine the experience of teachers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and their perceptions of their role as teachers of economically disadvantaged students. The study included teachers of students in an urban Title I elementary school with a majority population of students identified as economically disadvantaged. For the purpose of this study, economically disadvantaged students were defined as those students who qualified for free or reduced school meals based on federal family income

requirements. Although schools with these challenging demographics are often unsuccessful, the school in this study was rated as a successful school. This school was selected because the goal of this study is to understand how teachers perceive their own backgrounds assisted their students to succeed.

Methodology

The overarching goal of this study was to explore the perceptions of teachers from low-income backgrounds and their experiences with teaching economically disadvantaged students. Therefore, qualitative research methods were used for this study. Particularly, qualitative research methods were more useful for this study because they provide textual descriptions of the teachers' experiences. The qualitative approach offers great insight and specific information on the research topics (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In order to answer the main question, this study posed the following related research questions.

Research Questions:

1. What is the classroom experience of elementary school teachers from low-income backgrounds of low-income students?
2. How do teachers from low-income backgrounds perceive their role as teachers of students currently living in poverty?
3. Do they perceive that their backgrounds affect their students' success? If so, in what ways?

4. How does the theory of self-efficacy help explain how teachers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds perceive their role as teachers of economically disadvantaged elementary students?
5. How does the theory of cultural capital help explain how teachers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds perceive their role as teachers of economically disadvantaged elementary students?
6. What else was revealed about the experience of teachers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and teaching economically disadvantaged elementary students during the study?

Research Methodology

This research was also phenomenological because it sought to describe rather than explain a phenomenon (Husserl, 1970), which in this case was about teachers coming from low-income backgrounds teaching low-income students. The primary data source was from individual interviews, because it is the best way to “gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale, 1983, p. 174).

The interviews were done with teachers of students from Pinewood Park Elementary School (pseudonym) located in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. This location was selected for the study because it is a Title I, low-income, elementary school campus with 96.2% economically disadvantaged students. Title I campuses are often low-performing; however this school earned an

“Exemplary” rating for the 2010-2011 academic year and a rating of “Recognized” for 2011-2012. An elementary school was chosen as the research site due to early childhood being the most critical in a student’s educational development. For example, Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber (1993) found that children’s learning-related skills for early academic achievement are developed in the early years of their education, specifically before entering fourth grade. In addition, most of Ladson-Billings’ (2004) research on culturally relevant teaching was conducted at the elementary level and, although this study is not reviewing the same topic, it is researching a related area.

Creswell (1998) suggests qualitative studies with phenomenological approaches should have between five and 25 participants, while Morse (2000) recommends “at least six” (p. 3). Therefore, the participants included seven elementary teachers with varying years of experience and varied ethnic backgrounds.

The method of individual interviews was chosen due to the sensitive nature of the questions asked and information being gathered. DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) stress the importance of establishing rapport and building trusting relationships with research participants when dealing with issues that can be considered sensitive and private. In addition, data were collected through a demographic questionnaire given to the teachers at the time of the individual interviews. The methods are discussed in length in Chapter 3.

Positioning the Researcher

Understanding the perception of teachers from low-income backgrounds who teach economically disadvantaged students has been an interest of mine ever since I was in middle school. I was raised by a single mother and grew up with the assistance of government aid that helped her feed, shelter, and care for my basic needs. It was not until I attended middle school that I realized that I was poor, because that was the first time I was exposed to students from different socioeconomic classes. My elementary school, I now realize, was a Title I school with mostly poor families. It was at this point that I began to realize that teachers seemed to make a difference in my success and the success (or lack thereof) of my peers, particularly those with whom I attended elementary school. The teachers I remember most fondly and those that made a larger imprint on my academic success, grew up poor. Because of this, I decided to take a closer look at the perceptions of teachers from low-income backgrounds who teach economically disadvantaged students. Therefore, the intent of this study was to better understand teachers' own descriptions of their roles in the success of indigent students. The interpretations will provide an understanding of teacher effectiveness with low-income students.

Significance of the Study

The population of children in the U.S. who live in poverty grows each year. These children from low-income backgrounds continue to fail at

significantly higher rates than their economically privileged counterparts. The result of such failure leads to many students falling short of completing and successfully graduating from high school. Of those poor students who do receive a diploma, only one of three pursues higher education at a trade school, community college, or university (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). Even fewer students graduate with a bachelor's degree. The evidence is overwhelming that for most people, education beyond high school is a prerequisite for a secure lifestyle and significantly improves the probabilities of employment and a stable career with a positive earning trajectory (College Board Report, 2014).

One of the greatest challenges that educators and policy makers face today is the low performance of economically disadvantaged students. Developing sustainable programs with widespread success among economically disadvantaged students continue to elude most public schools (Mayer, 2003). Even with monetary assistance of the federal government over the last decades, Title I schools are failing to meet the academic needs of economically disadvantaged students by providing them the same opportunities for high academic achievement (Rees, 1999; Slavin, 2009).

Ultimately, this study is significant because the implications of the research contribute to the limited literature on the effect a teacher's socioeconomic background has on student achievement of economically

disadvantaged urban elementary school students. There are policy implications, as well, because the study explored other potential aspects that contribute to students success beyond Title I funding and support. Furthermore, the research has practical implications for assisting administrators in providing support and staff development for teachers thus enabling faculty to establish and/or strengthen existing practices to improve student success.

Summary

Economically disadvantaged students, a growing population in the U.S., continue to fall behind their peers and are not academically prepared to make the leap to higher education; consequently, the academic gap continues to grow. Previous research contends that having high-quality teachers throughout school can substantially offset, or even eliminate, the disadvantages of low-socioeconomic background (Wayne & Youngs, 2009). Culturally relevant pedagogy contends that if the race and ethnicity of the teacher is similar to that of African American students, those students will achieve significant gains. However, little to no research has explored how teachers' socioeconomic backgrounds may affect their approach and behavior with students of similar backgrounds. The primary implication of this work was to gain insight into teachers' perceptions of teaching poor students in order to identify strategies to increase student success of economically disadvantaged students.

This chapter provides a rationale of and brief introduction to the study. Chapter 2 is the review of the literature. Chapter 3 includes the design of the study. Chapter 4 explains the findings and analysis of the study. Chapter 5 includes the conclusions and implications of the study.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Improving the success of economically disadvantaged students in public schools is crucial to the continued improvement of our educational system and society as a whole. Understanding this need, the relevant research discussed in this literature review is: student-teacher relationships, student motivations, characteristics of effective teaching, and culturally relevant pedagogy. It concludes with an introduction to the two theoretical guides for the current study: self-efficacy and cultural capital.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Much research has explored the importance of student-teacher relations. In her qualitative study, Jones (2006) explored the relationship between the passion teachers exhibited for their profession and student outcomes at a rural school district in central Texas. This grounded theory, single-study case involved 23 classroom teachers and addressed whether or not the passion and calling of the teacher affected the success of their students. The teachers shared their point of views of how they perceived teaching – as a calling, job, or profession. Jones concluded that, “teaching involves touching not only the minds of children, but their hearts” as well (Jones, 2006, p. 381).

Sementi (2007) conducted a mixed methods study of 270 teachers in southwest Pennsylvania to discover the frequency with which teachers

implemented effective teaching strategies and to determine what obstacles inhibited them from doing so. He found that effective teachers make connections with the students they encounter, respond to their academic needs, allow them to be themselves, and establish a rapport with them. Palincsar and Herrenkohl (2002), similarly, utilized a mixed methods approach to explore the relationship between effective elementary teachers and their success with students who historically performed below grade level. Through survey data with 107 participants and interviews with 24 of the 107, they found that personal connections with students were reciprocal and benefited both the teacher and the student. The teachers benefited from this relationship because students were less disruptive in class and the students benefited because they increased their academic achievement (Marzano & Marzano, 2009).

Parsley and Corcoran (2003), in their qualitative research of two rural Arkansas middle schools, concluded that four actions contribute to positive student-teacher relationships. First, trust must be established between the teacher and the students. Second, students must know that teachers care about them as individuals. Third, teachers must create a learning environment where students feel comfortable taking risks without ridicule or judgment from the teacher and their classroom peers. Finally, teachers need to create an environment that supports and enables each student to feel that he or she belongs in the classroom.

Previous studies have found links between teacher-student relationships and the academic achievement of students (Birch & Ladd, 2008; Pianta, 2009). Long and Hoy (2006), conducted a mixed methods study with 63 elementary-age students in urban Chicago schools. Using data from student scores on standardized state exams and interviews focused on the students' relationships with their teachers, the researchers concluded that students need to be cared for, respected, and valued by their teachers and that the connection between teachers and students is critical to student achievement.

Similarly, Jackson (2008) conducted focus groups with 21 elementary classroom teachers and explored the importance of developing a good relationship with their students. He defined a "good relationship" as "strong, frequent, and genuine interactions with students that last over a considerable period of time" (Jackson, 2008, p. 9). Based on this definition, Jackson found that teachers who had good connections with their students had greater success at getting their students to pay attention while in class and, when necessary, respond to corrective action because they accepted the rules and procedures of the classroom.

According to Payne (2009), in her study of the culture of people in poverty, relationships were the most significant factor that contributed to the achievement among students of poverty, especially at early ages. People of poverty generally placed great emphasis on relationships with others and learning did not occur without significant relationships between teachers and students. She

found in her study that when students improved their financial situation and got out of poverty, often they stated that it was the relationship and positive bond with a teacher, coach, or counselor, who took an interest in them as individuals that made a difference in their lives to help them achieve success.

These relationships are particularly important in elementary school and become a powerful influence on the academic outcome of students (Kuykendall, 2004). Research showed that early grade teachers significantly impact school adjustment (Parsley & Corcoran, 2003). One qualitative study exploring the classroom teacher's role in preventing school failure concluded that the foundations for school failure or school success often stemmed from experiences at the beginning of elementary school (Parsley & Corcoran, 2003). Parsley and Corcoran (2003) conducted focus groups with 27 low-income and minority middle school students as well as with 19 elementary and middle school teachers. They concluded that students developed foundational skills and a belief in their own academic abilities (or lack thereof) as a result of their experiences in early grades. Such experiences included having teachers who took an interest in their lives outside of school, such as their weekend activities with their family and friends.

Although there is no single factor that dooms a child's educational experience, nor one solution for academic failure (Parsley & Corcoran, 2003), it is clear that classroom teachers play a vital role in the academic success of low-

income students. The development of a positive relationship that includes respect, courtesy, and shared responsibility is essential in convincing students that everyone is important in the classroom and that everyone can and is expected to learn. One way to accomplish this is through the daily use of positive reinforcement. When positive relationships are developed and maintained in the classroom, minority students find the support they need to sustain and improve academic achievement (Parsley & Corcoran, 2003).

Several researchers explored the importance of student-teacher relationships in student success. For example, Peart and Campbell (1999) addressed the student-teacher relationship by assessing students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness. After interviewing 90 middle schoolers, they found that the students believed the most effective teachers were the ones with whom they had the best relationships.

More recently, Ozgungor and Guthrie (2004) studied the extent to which student-teacher relationships affect student behaviors, specifically focusing on the students' "educational investment and academic achievement" (p. 440). In this study of 20 middle school-aged students, educational investments referred to students' positive behaviors such as completing homework in preparation of the daily classroom lesson. Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988, LePore and Warren conducted regression analysis and found that the student-teacher relationships did have a significant positive

influence on the students' abilities to make wise educational investments. This ability directly impacted the academic success of students including their performance on standardized tests.

Other research noted that teachers' attitude and personality traits, affect minority student outcomes. For example, Calabrese, Goodvin, and Niles (2005) conducted a mixed methods study with 16 teachers at an urban middle school with a high percentage of at-risk students and a high dropout rate. Using standardized math test scores, a survey, and individual interviews and focus groups with a racially and ethnically diverse group of teachers, administrators, and counselors, they perceived a weak relationship between student-teacher relationships and achievement on math tests for most students; however, there was a correlation between student-teacher relations and achievement for students at risk of dropping out of high school. This finding suggested that the student-teacher relationships for at-risk students improved their academic achievement. Specifically, effective teachers encouraged students, established meaningful relationships with them, and showed concern while non-supportive teachers' attitudes reflected frustration, racism, blame of others, and lack of flexibility (Calabrese et al., 2005).

Other studies supported these findings. For instance, Marzano (2009) reported that if the relationship between the teachers and the students is good, then everything else that occurs in the classroom seemed to be enhanced. Further,

Sheets and Gay (1996) in their qualitative study of 108 ethnically diverse students in central Florida found that most behavioral problems resulted from a break down in the relationship between the student and the teacher. They concluded that, “The causes of many classroom behaviors labeled and punished as rule infractions are, in fact, problems of students and teachers relating to each other interpersonally” (Sheets & Gay, 1996, p. 86 – 87).

Student Motivation

Other researchers investigated the role of the classroom instructional environment on the development of self-motivation skills in students. Customarily, instruction in classrooms with poor and minority students is teacher controlled, with low-level tasks and watered-down curriculum. DiCintio and Gee (1999) addressed the relationship between instruction and student motivation for the students in at-risk situations. The participants in the study were six at-risk students in alternative education programs. The students completed 54 motivational surveys after engagement in a variety of learning activities. The researchers conducted a multiple regression analysis to assess motivational variables (e. g., boredom, confusion, competence, and desire to be doing something else) with regard to the students’ perception of challenge and student control. The researchers found that students who felt they had control over decisions and choice in assignments reported more competence and motivation.

Wlodkowski and Ginsburg (1995) argue that when students can make sense of what it is that they are learning and also can understand its importance in connection to their values and perspectives, they become motivated. They contend that instruction without motivation is useless and motivation cannot exist without engagement. Therefore, they conclude that it is the responsibility of teachers to ensure that students are engaged in their learning and the lessons that are being presented.

Ferlazzo, (2011) in his work *Helping Students Motivate Themselves*, suggest five immediate actions that activate motivation in students. First, he says that it is important to praise students for specific actions. He argues that generic praise from teachers such as “You’re smart” will simply encourage students to avoid taking risks in their learning in an effort not to disappoint or prove the teacher wrong. Instead, teachers should give specific praise to students such as “Your topic sentence communicates the main idea very well” (Ferlazzo, 2011, p. 5), in order to have long lasting motivational effects. Secondly, teachers should build relationships with their students by learning about their lives, dreams, and challenges as well as showing their students that they care about them. Ferlazzo goes on to identify the use of cooperative learning in classrooms as another action to motivate students. He insists that teachers should create lessons that are engaging and that allow students to work together or learn from each other.

Lecturing should be kept to a minimum and instructional practices such as problem-based learning and project-based learning should be prevalent.

Additionally, Ferlazza (2011) maintains that teachers should show students the economic and health advantages of doing well in school. For example, adults with advanced degrees have the potential to earn up to four times the salary in their lifetimes than those with less than a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Similarly, people with more education have been shown to live healthier lives and even live longer (National Center for Health Statistics, 2014). Studies showed that simply informing students of such statistics motivate them to learn (Jacobs, 2010). The final action teachers should take to provoke immediate motivation in students is to create opportunities for students to help make decisions (Ferlazza, 2011). Specifically, inviting students to have a voice in classroom decisions such as allowing students to choose their seat location in the class, having students decide in what order a particular unit will be taught, or determining what is the best day to take a quiz or a test. Allowing students to make these sorts of decisions are ways that teachers can increase student motivation. Rigoglioso (2008) found that people were more motivated and confident when they believe they have more control over their environment and that people who feel they have less power over situations do less than they otherwise would.

Characteristics of Effective Teaching

In addition to building strong relationships with students and creating motivating classroom environments, effective teachers possess many characteristics that are linked to improving student achievement. Stronge (2002) suggests that teachers directly impact every aspect of learning from the subject matter to the amount of knowledge students obtain within that subject in a given year. It is up to teachers to provide students with a quality educational experience (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2009; Sanders & Rivers, 2008). Goldhaber and Anthony (2009) surveyed 293 successful teachers in various charter schools in the Detroit area in an attempt to identify commonly used instructional strategies that resulted in student achievement for low socioeconomic students. They identified classroom environment and teacher enthusiasm, and classroom management among the characteristics of effective teaching.

It is believed that the effective teacher shapes the environment of the classroom, which allows students to feel comfortable, safe, and willing to share their opinions with other students in the classroom (Sanders & Rivers, 2008). Sanders and Rivers found in this study of six inner-city, low-performing, high-poverty high schools in Detroit that the successful students had teachers who set clear expectations in the beginning of class. In addition, students were encouraged to take risks and help each other answer questions and respond to instruction

without facing judgment or ridicule when answering questions incorrectly. One student explained:

I felt as if I was on a team because if I tried and failed, my classmates encouraged me to keep trying and offered assistance. And if I tried and was successful, they cheered me on and made me want to keep it up. It was just that type of classroom where we were like a sports team and we all needed to be successful to win. (Sanders & Rivers, 2008, p. 81)

Similarly, in a qualitative study of 16 teachers at seven urban middle schools in the Houston area, Evens (2009) found that the overall atmosphere and classroom environment impacted student success. Effective teachers had the ability to recognize if students were experiencing trouble in their class and act upon that knowledge. They also supported the notion that successful teachers created classroom environments where students felt comfortable taking risks, such as answering questions aloud without expecting ridicule from their peers if they answered incorrectly and taking opportunities to explain concepts to their classmates in a different manner than the teacher did to allow students to hear the same material in another mode of delivery.

Along with building connections with students, the effective teacher is more stimulating and enthusiastic than the ineffective teacher (Gelinas, 2007; Sementi, 2007) and their enthusiasm positively affects student learning (MacKinnon-Ashby, 2007; Selsor, 2009). Students in MacKinnon-Ashby's

(2007) study of rural high schools stated that if teachers had a positive attitude towards teaching, it affected their own attitude towards learning.

Lambert (2009) came to similar conclusions in his study of middle school students. He measured the amount of times teachers smiled at students while in class, the movement of the teachers throughout the classroom setting versus remaining in the lecture position or seated at their desks, and the actual statements of the teachers indicating their enthusiasm, excitement, or love for the students and their profession as educators. He found that enthusiastic teachers tended to move around the class and smile more at their students than non-enthusiastic teachers. That enthusiasm got their students to feel excited about their learning, therefore, increasing students' interest and engagement.

Researchers (Thomas, 2007; Wong & Wong, 2009) have identified other specific methods effective teachers used to connect with students such as sharing personal information about their own favorite writers, creating bulletin boards that display personal pictures of their own families, sharing stories about their own lives, and displaying student accomplishments from local newspapers. Conversely, these effective teachers also encourage students to talk about their families, their home lives, and their culture. The teachers then integrated those things into the classroom discussions, student work, and instruction (Thomas, 2007).

Additionally, effective teachers possess other characteristics that are linked to improving student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2008). In this section, several of those strategies are discussed including formative assessments, cooperative learning, questioning, homework assignments, student engagement, classroom management, and effective lesson development.

Researchers have found the use of formative assessments as an instructional tool to be very helpful in increasing student outcomes. Black and William (1998) synthesized more than 250 studies and found “conclusively that formative assessment does improve learning. The gains in achievement appear to be quite considerable...” (p. 61). They found that teachers use formative assessments to inform their instructional decisions and guide their lessons to better address the learning gaps of their students.

Effective teachers assess their students in using various methods including oral questioning to initiate class discussion, quizzes – both open-ended and multiple-choice, projects, and daily assignments (Kuykendall, 2004). Using multiple assessment models allow students to demonstrate their learning through their various individual learning styles (Marzano, 2007). Further, Marzano suggests that formative assessment is a form of feedback for students that provide them with meaningful information on their progress towards an established learning goal.

In addition to formative assessments, quality instruction also includes careful attention to the manner in which students develop new learning and process new information. In a meta-analysis on effective practices, Rosenshine (2002) observed:

When the most effective teachers in these studies taught new material, they taught it in “small steps.” That is, they only presented small parts of new material at a single time...the importance of teaching in small steps fits well with the finding from cognitive psychology on the limitations of our working memory. Our working memory, the place where we process information, is small. It can only handle new bits of information at once – too much information swamps out working memory. (Rosenshine, 2002, p. 7)

Good and Brophy (1995) and Mayer (2003), although using different terms, agreed that on the importance of effectiveness of introducing new learning in small chunks.

Another critical aspect of effective instruction included cooperative learning. A multitude of researchers (Bowen, 2000; Haas, 2005; Hall, 1989; Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson, & Skon, 1981; Lipsey & Wilson, 1993; Walberg, 1999) found that student achievement increased with the use of cooperative learning techniques rather than working independently. Effective teachers used this instructional technique because it allowed students to

experience content from multiple perspectives, not solely relying on how the instructor presented the material. Cooperative learning was most effective when teachers assigned specific roles to students and organized the groups with students from varied academic performance levels. In other words, students who had shown academic promise in certain learning objectives would often be paired with students who showed less promise in the particular instructional goal.

Questions are another important aspect of effective teaching. Redfield and Rousseau (1981) contrasted the effects of higher-level questions, which required students to think more deeply and utilize processing skills in order to answer, versus lower-level questions, which usually required memorization and rote learning. They concluded that the students of teachers who asked higher level questions earned higher scores on standardized state exams than students of teachers who asked only lower-level questions. Replications of this study resulted in similar conclusions regarding the quality of questioning (Ozgungor & Guthrie, 2004; Willoughby & Wood, 1994).

Self-Efficacy. During the past 40 years, researchers have also discovered that the academic achievement of students can be influenced by the teacher's belief in his or her own ability to impact student learning or self-efficacy. In his 2009 study, Donald defined teacher self-efficacy as "teacher's belief in his or her own ability to affect student learning" (p. 40). Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk-Hoy (2009) offer their definition of teacher efficacy as "a teacher's judgment and

learning, even with those students who may be difficult or unmotivated” (p. 783). According to Craig (2006), if the efficacy of a teacher is high, it influences his or her belief about the potential of students. On the contrary, if efficacy is low, it has an adverse affect.

Much research has been conducted on teacher self-efficacy over the years. For example, Berman, McLaughlin, Bass, Pauly, and Zellman (1977) surveyed educators at 100 schools to evaluate their practices following the discontinuation of funding for Title I programs. Berman et al. (1977) discovered that teacher efficacy was in fact an accurate predictor of various behaviors, particularly in the improvement of student performance. Their study relied on the two-item scale created by Armor et al. (1976) which asked teachers: “When it comes right down to it, a teacher really can’t do much because most of the student’s motivation and performance depends on his or her home environment” and “If I try really hard, I can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated students” (p. 73). The resulting positive relationship between efficacy and the academic achievement of students stimulated further research on the subject resulting in similar results (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990). Each of these studies found that efficacy was created by teachers' individual beliefs in their ability to influence student performance despite the students' backgrounds, behaviors, or motivational levels.

Ashton and Webb's (1986) study identified characteristics of effective and ineffective teachers. Efficacious teachers are characterized as viewing their work with students as meaningful and important and as not being discouraged when teaching students of varied backgrounds. These teachers also set goals and created detailed plans for student learning. These teachers are very positive about the work they did, have a great outlook about themselves and students, and have a sense of confidence that allowed them to influence student learning. On the other hand, ineffective teachers are characterized as often discouraged, frustrated, and pessimistic when witnessing students struggling. They also fail to take ownership for student failure or set goals for students to develop their skills, and find themselves in a constant battle with students for control and power of the classroom. Therefore, these students recognize that teacher efficacy was critical for student success.

Homework. In addition to teacher efficacy, researchers have also looked at the impact of homework on student achievement. Homework is typically defined as an assignment or task given to students by the teacher to perform outside of school hours (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006). The research results have been mixed but by and large the benefits of homework on student learning have been generally positive.

Many meta-analyses of studies have been conducted on homework. One such study (Cooper et al., 2006) reviewed 50 empirical research reports from 1987 to 2003 and found:

With only rare exceptions, the relationships between the amount of homework students do and their achievement outcomes were found to be positive and statistically significant. Therefore, we think it would not be imprudent, based on the evidence in hand, to conclude that doing homework causes improved academic achievement. (Cooper et al., 2006, p. 48)

Although homework is assigned to students as early as prekindergarten and continues throughout their educational careers, well through high school, there is still no clear consensus on the benefits of homework in early elementary grades. In his meta-analysis of effect sizes between classes with homework and those without, Cooper (1989), reported that effect size grows as the grade level increases. He reported gains of 6 percent in grades 4 – 6 to as high as 24 percent gains in grades 10 – 12. This suggests that homework has much lesser effects on younger students. However, with such results, Cooper (1989), still recommends that teachers provide opportunities for elementary students to complete homework. He states that even though homework may not lead to better grades “...homework for young children should help them develop good study habits,

foster positive attitudes toward school, and communicate to students the idea that learning takes work at home as well as at school” (Cooper, 1989, p. 90).

Later studies (e.g., Cooper et al., 2006) left the issue of the effect of homework in the lower grades unresolved. In their meta-analysis, they found in grades two, three, and four that students in the homework group outperformed students that did not receive homework. However, when examining the amount of time students spent on homework and subsequent achievement, there was a negative relationship with students in lower grade levels. So the more time they spent on homework the lower their achievement. Conversely, there was a positive correlation between time spent on homework and achievement for secondary school students. These correlations suggest that both assigning homework as well as the amount of time spent on homework affect student outcomes. None of the studies however focused on the quality of the homework provided to the students.

Other arguments surrounding homework is the inherent issue of parent involvement, especially at the lower grade levels. Ugale (2012), for example, conducted a qualitative study at a Houston area Title I unsuccessful elementary school. Her participants included 14 parents who participated in individual interviews and a focus group to help her determine the perceptions of teachers of first-generation, Asian-American students. She reported that parents helped their children even if they feel unprepared and the subsequent interaction with their children frequently caused stress for both parent and child.

Granger (2008), in his qualitative study at a highly successful Title I middle school in the St. Louis area, concluded that homework was beneficial to students when parents were involved in the homework process and when they understood and knew their role in assisting their children complete their at-home school assignments. After interviewing 17 teachers and 21 parents, he determined that there were certain conditions under which parent involvement enhanced homework. Although parents were not expected to be content experts, they needed to be provided with clear guidelines by the teacher as to their role in the homework process, which included asking clarifying questions of their children to help their students summarize what they learned while showing genuine interest.

One conclusion that can be supported by previous research is that homework can, if implemented in certain ways, contribute to improved student achievement. Therefore, the amount of homework, the grade level and age group of the students, and the structure of parent involvement in the process of completing homework assignments are important aspects to consider when assigning homework, which can be an effective teaching strategy.

Student Engagement. Keeping students engaged in their learning is one of the most important considerations for the effective classroom teacher (Marzano, 2007). Teachers are not trained entertainers, nor should they be expected to be. However, with the advent of technology including fast-paced

media and video games, it is increasingly more important for teachers to find ways to capture and keep the attention of their students.

The connection between student engagement and academic achievement has been a topic of interest for many researchers (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Marzano, 2007; Schlechty, 2008). Engagement refers to students attending to the instructional activities occurring in class (Fredricks et al., 2004). Most research findings concluded that authentic student engagement resulted in higher achieving students. Marzano (2007) argues that there are five techniques that effective teachers use to engage students: high energy, missing information, the self-system, mild pressure, and mild controversy and competition.

The technique of *high energy* refers to activities that require students to keep a high level of energy during the teaching and learning process. Such activities may include instruction that is paced so that students have quick transitions for one learning activity to the other which prevents them from becoming bored or getting off-task. During this stage, the learning process and learning opportunities often require physical activity and kinesthetic movements. Another way to engage students is related to the second technique, which is *missing information*. This refers to requiring students to complete partially completed work (e.g., fill-in-the-blank statements) as a stimulus for engagement.

The third technique is the *self-system*. This refers to instructing students utilizing resources and topics that reflect their personal interests. Such interests

may be due to their cultural backgrounds, home lives, or community exposures. When teachers incorporated their students' personal interests into their lessons, they yielded more attention from their students leading to higher student achievement (Marzano, 2007).

The fourth technique of creating *mild pressure* in an instructional environment also resulted in increased engagement. However, it is important to understand that too much pressure may cause anxiety, which leads to stress and disengagement (Jenson, 2005). Finally, Marzano (2007) argues that creating *mild controversy or competition* in the learning environment is a strategy effective teachers use to encourage classroom engagement. Debates on controversial issues and learning games are examples of such strategies.

Classroom management. Arguably, although not a direct instructional technique, classroom management has the largest effect on student achievement because without it, creating a learning environment that is conducive to learning cannot take place (Blackburn, 2008; Ferlazzo, 2011; Schlechty, 2002; Whitaker, 2000; Wong & Wong, 2001). Classroom management refers to classroom rules and procedures that influence student behavior.

Emmer, Evertson, and Worsham (2003), known experts on classroom management, explains the importance of rules and procedures in developing successful students:

It is just not possible for a teacher to conduct instruction or for students to work productively if they have no guidelines...inefficient procedures and the absence of routines for common aspects of classroom life...can waste large amounts of time and cause students' attention and interest to wane.

(p. 17)

Students who understand the classroom routines and expectations for behavior and are reminded of them throughout the school year are more likely to be successful academically than students who are instructed in classrooms without such procedures (Schlechty, 2002).

Marzano (2007) posits that there are three simple components of effective classroom management. First, organizing the classroom in a fashion that is favorable to quality teaching and learning is critical. In other words, teachers should take the learning of their students into consideration when determining the placement of furniture, including student desks, the teacher desks, bulletin boards, posters, and displays. Additionally, the set of rules and procedures should not be extensive but rather concise and usable in various classroom situations. For example, the established rules and procedures for a student to walk about the room for whatever purpose (e.g., sharpening a pencil, getting a tissue, throwing away trash) should be the same and not require a different practice for each action. Finally, the classroom teachers should interact with students about the classroom rules, procedures, and expectations regularly. Interactions with students

about classroom management also included soliciting students' feedback and suggestions on the rules and procedures as well as allowing students to practice the classroom expectations with they are still learning them.

Further, research (Stronge, 2007; Wong & Wong, 2009) contended that exercising strong management skills in the first three weeks of school were critical in determining student achievement for the school year. Marzano (2009) concluded that effective teachers understood that they should establish the classroom rules, procedures, and expectations within this timeframe, because teaching and learning can only flourish in such a classroom environment.

More specifically, Chism-Conway (2007) found that effective teachers established appropriate classroom behaviors, such as daily procedures and routines early in the term. Because the expectations were stated and reiterated regularly, transitions between activities and lessons were smooth (Gay, 2000). Moreover, these teachers understood and practiced consistent discipline and rewarded appropriate behavior in their classrooms. As a result, researchers (Jackson, 2008; Pinkey, 2009) found that effective teachers experienced fewer discipline problems throughout the year.

Effective teachers also understand the importance of establishing consequences for students when the procedures, rules, and expectations are not followed (Wong & Wong, 2001). Such consequences may include phone calls or emails home, time-outs, or personal conferences with the teacher. Conversely,

successful teachers also rewarded students for following the classroom rules in such ways as tangible recognition, phone calls or emails home, and providing additional privileges.

Effective lesson development. In this era of “No Child Left Behind” and “Race to the Top,” many states and school districts have established certain standards that students are to learn at each grade level and in each subject area. However, teachers still have the flexibility to organize the required content into units of study and timelines according to their preferences. There is no one way to design a unit, but the most effective teachers give a great deal of attention to their planning to ensure that it results in the best learning outcomes for their students (Marzano, 2007).

Teachers spend many hours outside of classroom instructional time to plan lessons and prepare for quality instruction. Although lessons all differ in their approaches, activities, and materials, Hunter (1984) suggested that all quality lessons need to set clear lesson objectives. She identified five basic steps for good lessons: (1) gaining the attention of the students with a review of previously taught material or engaging facts or components of the new learning to take place in the current lesson; (2) including a direct-teaching component where students hear from the teacher and gain new knowledge; (3) providing opportunities for students to practice new learning with the assistance of the instructor; (4) allowing students time to apply their new learning on their own, independent of teacher

support; and (5) evaluating students to determine their level of mastery and to inform future planning.

Researchers argue that without quality planning, lessons are often fragmented without clear direction or objective, lack rigor and student engagement, and ultimately lead to off-task behavior and limited learning experiences (Marzano, 2007). Effective teachers understand that lesson planning allows the teacher to track progress or what has been taught, refer back to it to readdress certain concepts as necessary, and to amend lessons moving forward to better meet the learning needs of the students (Marzano & Kendall, 2007).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

In her research of teachers who successfully led African-American students to achievement, Ladson-Billings (1995b) studied the common practices and beliefs among effective educators. This resulted in “culturally relevant pedagogy [which] respects and uses reality, history, and perspective of students as an integral part of educational practice” (Bartolome, 2004, p. 119).

The pedagogy focuses on common behaviors of the teachers, their teaching ideologies, and certain characteristics of students and school culture.

It [culturally relevant teaching] empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impact knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural references are not just a

way of substantiating or explaining the dominant culture; they are actually aspects of the curriculum. (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 18)

Cultural relevant teaching, as employed by Ladson-Billings (1994), examines how classroom instruction strengthens and promotes students to access prior knowledge through the lens of their identified culture to better understand the world and work towards improving it. Ladson-Billings (1994) asserts that students belonging to a minority ethnic culture experience negative effects when they fail to see their own history, culture, experiences, and backgrounds represented in the textbooks or the curriculum or by seeing their culture misrepresented. Thus, this pedagogy uses the culture of minority students to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture. Within this framework, teachers model and instruct in a fashion that promotes equal social and human relations and encourages students to learn collaboratively.

In her study of over 24 successful teachers, Ladson-Billings (2000) found that culturally relevant pedagogy rested on three particular criteria. First and foremost, students must obtain the skills necessary to experience academic success through the use and mastery of literature, mathematics, technology, social studies, and politics. This was done through high expectations for student work as well as instruction and learning activities that students found both engaging and rigorous. Secondly, culturally relevant teachers possessed cultural integrity by developing and supporting cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

“Cultural competence refers to the ability to function effectively in one’s culture of origin” (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 117). Lastly, both academic success and cultural competence “must be supported by sociopolitical critique that helps students understand the ways the social structures and practices help reproduce inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 162).

In culturally relevant classrooms, teachers create communication styles and participation structures that bear a close resemblance to their students’ own cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Culturally relevant teachers infuse the culture of their students into their regular teaching through “community access and involvement, trust between teachers and parents, and concern and caring for the students (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 207). Instead of concentrating on student deficits, this approach focuses on student strengths. As a consequence culturally responsive teachers realize not only the importance of academic achievement, but also the maintaining of cultural identity and heritage (Gay, 2000).

Accordingly, educators who engage in culturally relevant teaching practices are known by the way they perceive themselves and others, by the way they construct their social interactions, and by their own personal knowledge of culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1994) describes teachers as culturally relevant or assimilationists. Culturally relevant teachers take ownership of the learning in their classrooms while assimilationists place blame and find excuses for the learning, or lack thereof, in their classrooms.

The teachers with culturally relevant pedagogical practices are part of the students' culture and lives beyond the classroom. Teaching is about giving something back to the community and believing all students can succeed. Conversely, teachers identified as assimilationist are described as seeing themselves as individuals who may or may not identify with students outside of the classroom environment and who believe failure is inevitable for some students. Culturally relevant pedagogical practices have been shown to be more effective with students than the assimilation approach.

Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as the belief “in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p.3). He hypothesized that the ability to cope in specific situations is determined by a sense of self-efficacy. Goddard (2009) summed up Bandura’s (2008) definition of teacher efficacy as “a type of self-efficacy; the outcome of a cognitive process in which people construct beliefs about their capacity to perform at a given level of competence” (Goddard, 2009, p. 474). Bandura contended that people’s behavior is affected by their belief that their actions will impact the outcome. A teacher that believes that his or her behavior can positively impact student outcomes tends to have a high sense of efficacy and a teacher’s personal belief that his or her actions have no impact on student outcomes tends to have a low sense of efficacy.

Thus, if teachers do not perceive themselves as efficacious, then they exhibit lower levels of effort when faced with obstacles, show a low level of persistence, and may inadvertently hinder their students' success rather than contribute to it (Bandura, 2009b). Conversely, efficacious teachers tend to associate student failure with lack of effort by the student rather than ability. They also establish clear goals and have lower levels of stress (Bandura, 2009a). Bandura linked this research to the idea of motivation. People who believe they can positively affect the outcome are motivated to proceed while those who believe otherwise tend to shy away from action (Craig, 2006). Thus, this theory is useful for this study explores how teachers with a low-SES background understand their role in their students' success.

Cultural Capital

Pierre Bourdieu (1973), who discussed how social inequalities were reinforced within the educational system, developed the theory of cultural capital. These non-financial assets can help or hinder one's social mobility just as much as income or wealth. For example, the accumulation of cultural capital can be perceived in an individual's education, dress, physical appearance, intellect, and speech patterns (Bourdieu, 1986). Because cultural capital is not evenly distributed throughout the class structure, there are ways of dressing, talking, and so forth that reflect different social classes. The differences also account for class differences in educational attainment. Bourdieu said that the education attainment

of social groups is therefore directly related to the amount of cultural capital they possess. People who have upper-class backgrounds have a built in advantage because they have been socialized in the dominant culture. Thus middle-class students have higher success rates than economically disadvantaged students from similar backgrounds because middle class subcultures are closer to the dominant culture.

Therefore, for this study, cultural capital is a useful framework because the background of these participants suggests that they did not possess the behaviors, norms, and practices of the middle-class, which is traditionally valued in school culture. This study explored how these teachers perceive their backgrounds affect their teaching of students who may lack this knowledge.

Summary

This chapter discussed the relevant literature of the topic of economically disadvantaged students and their academic success factors. Chapter 3 explains the methods for this study. You will find in Chapter 4 the analysis and findings and Chapter 5 will present the conclusions and implications of the study.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of teachers from low-income backgrounds and their experiences with teaching economically disadvantaged students. I used Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1989) and Bourdieu's (1973) concept of cultural capital to better understand how the teachers explained their role in their students' success. This chapter includes the research questions, the design of this study, the procedures, and how trustworthiness was ensured.

Research Questions

The central research question and sub-questions are as follows:

RQ1: How do teachers from low-income backgrounds perceive their role in the academic success of economically disadvantaged students?

RQ1a: What is the classroom experience of elementary school teachers from low-income backgrounds who teach low-income students?

RQ1b: How do teachers from low-income backgrounds perceive their role as teachers of students currently living in poverty?

RQ1c: Do they perceive their backgrounds affect their students' success?
If so, in what ways?

RQ1d: How does the theory of self-efficacy help explain how teachers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds perceive their role as teachers of economically disadvantaged elementary students?

RQ1e: How does the theory of cultural capital help explain how teachers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds perceive their role as teachers of economically disadvantaged elementary students?

RQ1f: What else was revealed about the experience of teachers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and teaching economically disadvantaged elementary students during the study that contributed to the students' success?

Study Site

The study was conducted at a public elementary school, which will be referred to as Pinewood Park Elementary. A pseudonym was used to ensure the confidentiality of the school and the participants. The school serves approximately 590 children in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade in a city located in north Texas. This school was chosen because it serves a majority population of students who qualify for free or reduced meals due to family income and receives campus-wide Title I funding. Title I campuses are public schools with a minimum of 40% of their children identifying as economically disadvantaged and who are at-risk of failing (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Pinewood Park Elementary School, despite such challenging student

demographics, is not considered a failing school and has consistently been a successful campus, earning a rating of “Exemplary” from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) for the 2010-2011 school year and a “Recognized” rating for the 2011-2012 school year.

Ratings, based on TAKS scores, determine how well students scored in math and reading in grades three through five, writing in grade four, and science in grade five. To earn a rating of “Exemplary,” 90% of all students in each subpopulation (i.e., African American, American Indian/Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, White, two or more races, and Economically Disadvantaged) were required to meet the minimum standard in all subject areas (i.e., math, reading, writing, and science). In order to earn the rating of “Recognized,” a campus must have 80% of its students in each subpopulation meet the minimum standard in all subject areas, including 15% of students missing no more than three questions on the assessment (TEA, 2011).

Campus ratings and TAKS scores were accessed online to ensure the campus selected met the research criteria. Only teachers from grades three through five were selected to participate in the study because the campus ratings were based on the performance of students in these grade levels. In addition, the data provided information on campus demographics, which were also important in the campus selection. The campus has a diverse, ethnic student population

with a high concentration of students identified as at-risk and economically disadvantaged. See Table 1 for the demographics of the school.

Table 1

Subpopulations of Pinewood Park Elementary School

<u>Subpopulations</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Economically Disadvantaged	96.2
At-risk Students	84.6
Ethnicity	
African American	28.3
Hispanic	34.9
White	21.5
American Indian/Native American	2.3
Asian/Pacific Islander	7.6
Two or More Races	5.4

On this campus, each student may apply for school meals at any time throughout the school year. After completing the application, if it is determined that a family is earning at or below current federal income eligibility guidelines, they will qualify to receive either reduced meal costs or meals at no cost. Also for students in families who participate in the federal Supplemental Nutrition

Assistance Program, commonly known as food stamps, they automatically qualify for free school meals. Free or reduced meal qualifications were the only criterion used to determine economically disadvantaged status in schools for this study. Furthermore, all teachers on this campus teach classrooms with a majority of economically disadvantaged students.

Study Design

A qualitative research design was chosen for this study. Patton (2008) suggests that a researcher who utilizes a qualitative methodology seeks to understand the knowledge, perceptions, and feelings of individuals, typically through intensive, in-depth interviewing. In this research, the goal was to explore how teachers from low-income backgrounds perceive they influence the success of economically disadvantaged students; therefore, the participants needed to be allowed to express their experiences, feelings, and opinions. For this reason, a qualitative design was most appropriate for this study. Individual interviews were conducted to gather those perceptions.

After securing IRB approval from the University of Texas at Arlington on April 17, 2014, I contacted the research department at the school district where the study was to be conducted. Once I received approval from the district and the school principal, the principal introduced me to the faculty during an after-school staff meeting. A questionnaire was given to all teachers to determine demographical information, including their economic backgrounds.

A total of 13 teachers identified themselves as having low-income backgrounds, 5 taught in pre-kindergarten through second grade and 8 were third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers. The 8 teachers in the third – fifth grades were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews because their students take the TAKS and, therefore, are responsible for the school’s academic ratings. Of the eight participants identified, one chose not to participate in the study. The seven participants’ taught in the school from 2 to 23 years. The teachers were of varied ethnic backgrounds. Five of the teachers were female and two were male. See Table 2 for the participant teacher backgrounds. Pseudonyms were given to ensure confidentiality.

Table 2

Background of Teachers

<u>Teacher Participants</u>	<u>Years of Teaching Experience</u>	<u>Grade Levels Taught</u>	<u>Ethnicity</u>
Cynthia	19	4 th	Black
George	4	3 rd	Hispanic
Judy	23	5 th	White
Randy	14	4 th	White
Rhonda	7	3 rd	Black
Shanyta	2	4 th	White
Sondra	3	5 th	Hispanic

To capture the perceptions of the seven teachers, I conducted individual interviews with the participants due to the sensitive nature of the topic (see Appendix A for teacher protocol). At times, the teachers were asked to clarify responses, elaborate on an idea, and/or provide further explanation or details, which was possible through the use of the semi-structured protocol. The protocol for the teachers' interviews provided an in-depth understanding of their perceptions of teaching students who they identified as having economic backgrounds similar to their own. More specifically, I asked questions regarding

the teachers' instructional practices, expectations for their students, and views regarding their students' socioeconomic backgrounds.

The teachers were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any given time, choose to answer only the questions they felt comfortable answering, choose to end the interview at anytime, or have anything they said omitted upon their request. The interviews lasted between 45-75 minutes each.

Interview Data Analysis

Each of the interviews were audio-recorded so I could have an accurate record of the interview for later transcription. The recording device was carefully positioned in plain sight and each participant was informed that the recording would not begin until they were ready. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Before I began the analysis of the data, I read the interview transcripts multiple times for accuracy to gain a full and thorough comprehension of the statements. I read and coded, as appropriate, the interviews line-by-line (Creswell, 1998) and then compiled the data and condensed the codes into broader categories of families of codes or themes. This systematic approach allowed me to relate the data to other categories, validating those relationships, and to fill in categories that needed further refinement and development. Some codes came directly from the research questions and theoretical guides (e.g., self-efficacy, SES). Other codes came from consistent phrases, expressions, or ideas

that were common among participants (e.g., instruction, relationships, culture) (Kvale, 1983). When I coded the interview, if new codes emerged, I would review all the transcripts again to see if this code was present in the other transcripts. This iterative process allowed me to mine the data for any and all codes that related to the research questions. The final themes are reported in Chapter 4.

Trustworthiness

The rigor of qualitative research is judged by the trustworthiness or consistency of the findings (Creswell, 2007). Thus, the question for qualitative researchers is if the interpretation of the data captures the perceptions of the participants. My personal background is aligned with the economic background of the teachers in this study and I too was a classroom teacher in a high-performing Title I elementary campus with a majority of economically disadvantaged students. I, therefore, had to be careful that I did not make generalizations based on my own biases.

To ensure that I expressed the teachers' perceptions, I used member checking and peer debriefing. Member checking is when analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those groups from which data were originally obtained (Patton, 2008). Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit that this is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility. After each interview was transcribed, the teachers were emailed copies of the transcriptions and advised to review their comments. The teachers were encouraged to make

corrections, deletions, or additions as they saw fit. Each teacher was sent the transcripts within 10 days of their interview and asked to return the transcriptions with their feedback within 2 weeks of receiving the email. The email also informed the participants that if I had not heard back from them by the end of the 2 weeks that I would assume there were no changes. All teachers responded within the given deadline and none made any changes to their transcripts.

Peer-debriefing is a useful practice for establishing credibility (Lincoln, Guba, & Pilotta, 1985). For this study, I used two peer-debriefers that are qualified researchers without any stake in this project. Specifically, they are fellow doctoral students. They assisted me in reviewing my data interpretation. They read the transcripts and the findings and provided feedback. Lincoln et al., (1985) elucidate that this process, peer debriefing "...help[s] keep the inquirer "honest," exposing him or her to searching questions by experienced protagonists who are doing his or her best to play the devil's advocate. The inquirer's biases are probed, meanings explored, the basis for interpretations clarified" (p. 308). Peer-debriefers question the researcher's findings to decrease the likelihood of alternative explanations of the data. In turn, this increases the confidence in the researcher's analysis (Patton, 1990).

Limitations and Delimitations

The benefit of this study is to contribute to both education practitioners and researchers seeking to better understand the relationship between the

teachers' and students' socioeconomic backgrounds and student success. This information can help address the academic achievement gap between America's poor students and its more socioeconomically privileged students. The study, however, is not without its limitations. One such limitation is that this study focused on teachers and, therefore, lacked data from other sources. As a result, the findings were not triangulated. However, methods were taken to ensure the credibility of the findings such as the aforementioned process of member checks and peer-debriefing.

Additionally, the study is based on the experiences of these seven teachers at one North Texas elementary school. The findings represent only their views and may have been different if different teachers at this school or other schools participated in this study. Finally, because the study is qualitative in nature, its findings are not generalizable. Therefore, the findings only represent the experiences of these teachers in this setting.

Summary

Included in this chapter was a detailed explanation of the design of this study, the analysis, and steps taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Chapter 4 will explain the findings of this study.

CHAPTER 4

Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this chapter is to capture the voices of teachers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds concerning their perceptions of teaching economically disadvantaged students. The findings are organized into three sections: (1) teachers' perceptions of their role as the classroom teacher of economically disadvantaged students, (2) their teaching strategies, and (3) teachers' views of their own personal grade-school educational experiences. The findings are analyzed through the lenses of Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital.

Teacher Perception of their Roles as Teachers of Poor Students

The interviews provided information specific to each teacher's personal experiences, yet, they also contributed to the broader understanding of the perceptions of teachers and their role with students in a successful Title I school who have similar economic backgrounds. The teachers in this study perceived their roles in many different ways. Some teachers identified their positions as role models and examples of success while others recognized themselves solely as educators. Sondra, a fifth-grade teacher with three years of experience, for example, believed that she was called to be a teacher of poor children. She commented:

I believe most things in life are fate and my being a teacher, especially of poor kids, is no coincidence. I really do think I was called to do this...I think this is part of the reason the Lord gave me the experiences that I had growing up poor and all. I can relate to my students so much better because I know what they are going through.

Similarly, Cynthia, with 19 years of teaching experience who teaches fourth grade, perceived her role in her students' lives as an example of what they can be despite their socioeconomic circumstances. She shared:

I'm educated...I live in a nice home...I drive a nice car...I'm not a criminal...I'm married and have a husband and a beautiful family...and for the most part I consider myself to be pretty successful. These babies see all of that and realize that if I can do it, then they can [do it] too. We don't have to be statistics or fit into someone's small box of what they think we should be. Me and these babies all came up the same way.

There is no reason they can't mirror my success or go even further.

Not all teachers perceived their role as specific to the economic background of the students that they taught. Many of them simply believed that they were teachers and had a responsibility to their students as educators. Judy commented "I use my background to my advantage with my students, but I don't think I would teach or treat students any differently if they weren't poor." Rhonda agreed:

It bothers me when people think it is easier for me to work here simply because I can identify with these students. I can really identify with any student...that's just what good teaching is. If I were at a school with mostly affluent students, I would be just as successful and impactful to those students as I am to the ones I teach now. I would just have to figure out what makes them tick and want to learn, just like I have with these kiddos and we would be off to great things too.

In addition to perceptions about their personal backgrounds impacting their role, the teachers also discussed their personal investments in their students. Cynthia shared:

Yes I call them "my babies." I have gotten a lot of flack over that throughout my career 'cuz a lot of people think it's unprofessional, but I just can't help myself. Before I started teaching I stayed at home to raise my three girls and two sons. When I finally started to teach, I immediately realized that above all else I was a mother. So many of the things I had to teach my own kids and the way I treated them just seemed natural once I was in the classroom. I called my first class, almost 20 years ago, "[my] babies," and every class I have had since then have been my babies.

Randy, a male teacher of 14 years agreed that he sometimes takes on the role of a parent. He stated:

Many of my kids see me as a father figure. A lot of these kiddos don't have their dads in their homes or a part of their lives and they crave that male figure in their lives. Over the years, I have had mothers request from the principal that their kid be placed in my class when they come to fourth grade just because I am male and they think their kid needs that. It's not just boys either; a lot of the girls see me in that role, too. One year a student even started calling me "dad". After I realized it wasn't a slip of the tongue and she was doing it deliberately, I made her stop...I thought it was inappropriate, although I was flattered and understood that she was simply longing for a real father in her life.

On the contrary, George, a third-grade teacher with four years experience, made efforts to not become a parental figure in the lives of his students, he declared:

I just try to be the best teacher I can be for these kids. I'm not their momma or their daddy, I'm their teacher. When I was in school, I remember I would get so mad when I thought a teacher was trying to act like my momma or my daddy. Don't get me wrong, I wanted them to be a nice teacher and all, but I didn't want another momma or daddy. Now that I'm an adult I now realize that because I was not with my own mom or dad, and I wanted to be, that I couldn't stand for someone else to act like they were them because I needed to feel like they still mattered. So for

that reason, I don't try to be these kids' father...or mother for that matter.

I tell them "I want to be the best teacher you'll ever have, that's all."

Shanyta referred to her students as scholars. She stated her reasoning as "I think people live up to what you call them. I call my students 'scholars' because that is how I expect them to behave."

Though they may have referred to them in different ways, the participants rarely referred to students without including the possessive term of "my." Some common ways they spoke about their students included "my kids," "my kiddos," and "my students."

Additionally, the teachers in this study recognized the challenges of teaching students with low-socioeconomic backgrounds, and perceived their role as important because it was not a sought-after position. Judy, a fifth grade teacher shared:

Let's face it – teaching poor kids is much harder than teaching other kids.

They come to us with many issues that other kids don't have...it's not like teachers are banging on the doors trying to come to our school to teach these kids.

Likewise, Randy shared why he chose to stay at this school despite being recruited to a more affluent school in the district:

I have had principals from other campuses see my student scores and tried to steal me to come work for them at campuses across town. People think I am crazy to stay here. But the way I see it is, if I leave these kids here, someone else is going to come in that is only here because they couldn't get hired somewhere else and they won't love the challenge of these kids like I do. They will stay a couple of years until they can prove themselves worthy and move on to another campus where it's easier. Yes, these kids are harder to teach, they don't always behave as good as you'd like, I even have to spend my own money sometimes to help them with their basic needs, but you know what...I wouldn't have it any other way. These are my kids and that's really all that matters.

These teachers felt their backgrounds made them particularly connected to their students. Ladson-Billings (1994) suggests teachers who understand and embrace the culture of their students and implement certain cultural norms into their teaching practices yield better academic success for their students. Similarly, Price (2006) finds that teachers who respect each student and give their time without expecting something in return and most importantly “demonstrated respect and appreciation for cultural diversity” (p. 132) had students with higher academic performance. This study found connections to their low-income backgrounds led to similar successes.

Strategies for Success

This section focuses on the teachers' views regarding the ways in which they supported the academic success of their students. Previous research found that poor students generally performed at less successful rates on standardized tests than their more affluent counterparts (NCES, 2013), creating an academic achievement gap between the two student groups. However, in the current study, the participants' economically disadvantaged students experienced academic success. Typically, when students are successful, parent involvement, school culture, and campus leadership are credited with contributing to academic success (Kuykendall, 2004). This study, however, sought to go in a new direction by considering the role of the classroom teacher in the success (or lack thereof) of low-income students.

Three themes emerged from the data based on the distinctive point of view of teachers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds who teach low-income students. Each point reflected the strategies employed in any successful classroom, regardless of the student population. First, the teachers defined their role in creating a classroom environment that is conducive to quality learning. Second, they shared the importance of relationship-building with students and parents and how they worked to achieve this goal. Finally, the teachers discussed having classrooms that reflected cultural diversity.

Classroom strategies. The teachers recognized the home lives of their students as challenges, which made them feel even more responsible for them. The teachers spoke that one of their key responsibilities was to create a classroom structure where learning was the priority over all else. They saw their students as their babies and their scholars. There were four primary ways they accomplished that goal: classroom management, intentional planning, on-going assessment, and setting clear expectations.

Classroom management. Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering (2007) stated “teachers play various roles in a typical classroom, but surely one of the most important in that of classroom manager” (p. 4). My findings align with this study. Classroom management was a common theme in creating a successful classroom environment. The participants in this study believed it was important to have clearly set procedures, routines, and discipline to ensure both safety and learning. Sondra, a fairly new teacher with three years of experience, confirmed, “The first thing I have to do to make sure my students are successful is to have very clearly set rules and classroom procedures...a lot of poor kids do not have that at home.” Cynthia, a fourth-grade teacher with 19 years of teaching experience, explained that her students appreciate the structure of her classroom because it gives them a sense of normalcy. As she explained:

Most of my babies go from house to house, or one apartment to the next, and sometimes from shelter to shelter. They don't know where they will

be from one week to the next and they definitely don't know what to expect in all of these different places. When they come to my classroom, they always know the same procedures that they learned the first week of school will be the same in my class all year long. I don't even change my [students'] seats but twice a year because some of these poor babies just need that consistency in order to feel sane and learn. I know how it is to go through all those changes and not knowing the rules in other people's houses...no, I can't do that to my babies...they need that structure somewhere and I make sure they get it here at school.

Classroom management, more specifically, is a term used by teachers to describe the process of ensuring that classroom lessons run smoothly despite disruptive behaviors by students. The term also implies the prevention of disruptive behavior. Rhonda explained, "My classroom is a well-oiled machine. I can immediately see if students are acting up or are off-task because I have such structure." Shanyta also contributed:

I like to have an active classroom where my students can explore on their own, have lots of interaction, and work together so I have to make sure that my classroom management is on point, you know what I'm saying? I had to learn that early because I had had trouble at first trying to teach this way. I figured out that classroom structure and clear expectations are key. A lot of teachers don't teach like me because they are afraid of losing

control of their class but my kids do better because of it so I had to figure something out.

Classroom management and structure in this instance can be seen through the lens of high self-efficacy (Craig, 2006) because these teachers believe they can positively affect the outcome of her students through a structured classroom with clear routines and procedures. Bandura (1997) suggested that perceived self-efficacy affects performance because people with strong sense of self-efficacy are more likely to take more risks, persevere, and achieve success.

Intentional lesson planning. Most educational researchers agree that lesson planning is a necessary and useful practice in preparing for quality instruction (Miller, 2009). The teachers in the current study felt at this successful school that the planning of instructional lessons was also very important to the success of their students. For instance, Judy, a fifth-grade teacher with 23 years of experience, talked about the importance of her preparation for her daily lessons:

I have to make sure that each day I stand in front of my kids that I am bringing my “A” game. That means I have to have planned my lesson according to the scope and sequence, I have to know what the TEKS [the set of skills that Texas legislatures have determined are essential for students to learn at each grade level] say [the students] are supposed to get

out of this lesson. And for goodness sake, I better make sure I make the lesson engaging enough for them to get into it enough so that they can learn what I'm teaching that day. I just can't wing it. This is their future, it's too important.

There seemed to be no difference of expectations whether the teacher had many years of experience or only a few years. George, a teacher with four years of experience, noted:

My lesson planning is the most important part of my job because if I have a bad lesson, it doesn't matter how good of a job I do delivering it, if the lesson is flawed then students don't get what it is they were supposed to learn.

Similarly, Randy, a teacher for 14 years, commented "I am constantly revising my lesson plans to make sure I get to the heart of what my kiddos need. It's a lot of hard work and takes a lot of time but a necessary evil, I guess." The teachers found their lessons to be a critical part of the success of their students.

Ongoing assessments. The third sub-theme in creating a classroom environment that is conducive to learning is performing several forms of student assessments. Stiggins (2002) argues that effective teachers rely on on-going students assessments to make crucial instructional decisions. Similarly, the teachers in the current study saw a positive outcome from consistently assessing students in multiple formats. Regardless of the grade level, the teachers

understood that assessment was a critical piece to student success. Rhonda, a third-grade teacher with seven years of experience explained, “I have to constantly check for understanding when teaching, make sure my kiddos are following me...if I lose them along the way, the lesson was useless.” Shanyta, in her second year, teaches fourth grade, further commented on the value of assessments:

I assess my scholars constantly. I have pre-assessments before I begin a new lesson so that I can know what they already know and build upon that knowledge. I do post-assessments after the lessons to see what they have learned. I also do lots of assessments in between...I am constantly questioning them to see their depth of understanding. If you wait ‘til the end to assess them then you may find out they didn’t get it and you won’t know where you went wrong or where the learning stopped or the confusion began...I know where my scholars are at each level of a lesson because we don’t have any time to waste.

The teachers strive to support their students in any way that they can. Cynthia stated about her fourth graders:

Well, although I don’t believe in testing these babies to death, if I’m going to be a successful teacher, I have to do some sort of assessment to make sure [the students] are picking up what I’m putting down. That isn’t always a multiple-choice test...actually it is better if it isn’t. The best assessments is asking questions throughout your lesson in different ways

and letting the students discuss their learning with each other while you listen and take note.

The teachers had similar goals: to know where students were academically and to move them forward. The assessments determined what they taught next, what they re-taught, including their intervention and tutorials, and how they revised their lesson plans and incorporated previously taught skills with newly introduced ones. Shanyta, a teacher with two years of experience shared her thoughts on how assessments impact her lesson planning:

To be honest, I thought all of that lesson planning I had to do in college was just for my professors, but I tell you what...now that I am a real teacher it takes even more time. So many of the lessons I create in advance have to be tweaked or completely redone after I teach something and realize after the assessment piece that my scholars already have mastered... sometimes I think they had some prior knowledge and then assessing them during or after the lesson show they had none. In any event, my lessons have to be redone to make sure I meet them where they are and move them forward from there.

The teachers also agreed that one key reason for on-going assessment was not only for the teacher to be aware of the students' development, but also for the students to be aware of their own progress and learning. Schunk (2005) states:

Feedback from assessments that inform students that their answers are correct motivates them because it indicates that the students are becoming more competent and are capable of further learning. Feedback indicating an error or lack of success can also build motivation and efficacy if feedback engenders the belief that students will perform better by using methods demonstrated by the teacher. The belief of individuals that they are capable of learning raises motivation and leads to better skill acquisition (p. 91).

Judy, a 23-year veteran teacher, for instance, talked about providing after-school tutorials to struggling students:

My students know where they are at all times. They know that there are no surprises. If they have not learned what they were supposed to in a lesson, and the rest of the class has, they know that I will stay after school on any day to help them catch-on. My students know what concepts they have mastered and which ones they still need to work on.

Shanyta agrees that feedback is an important part of creating a classroom that is conducive to learning. She stated:

I provide all of my scholars with a notebook where they mark down their grades – we use a bar graph that is easy for them to see and they know if they see a drop in any particular area that we need to revisit that

assignment or whatever learning was missed during that time. This is a skill set they need to learn to use throughout their lives anyway.

The teachers found that providing feedback to their students on their progress was important. Therefore, ongoing assessments and intentional feedback in this instance can be seen through the lens of having cultural capital because the teachers understand the importance of students needing to take ownership of their learning and progress in order to operate and be successful in a school environment that expects it.

Maintaining high expectations. Finally, the teachers stated that establishing and maintaining clear expectations for students was an important role in their students' success. Randy, a teacher with 14 years of experience described the expectations he had for his students:

All of my kids know that I have very high expectations for them. I accept no excuses for anything less than their best. Our kids come from very challenging home lives and I refuse to handicap them any further with low expectations. There is no negotiation in my classroom about your performance...I agree to give them 100% of me each day as their teacher and in return I will accept nothing less of them.

The teachers stressed the importance of setting expectations for students and their learning despite their home lives or economic disadvantaged status. Judy echoed:

There is nothing more damaging to these kids than to feel sorry for them and let them get away with doing less than what I know they are capable of doing. “Poor” and “Dumb” are not synonymous. Yea, teaching these kids is a lot harder than teaching more wealthy kids, but I do it because I have had students that graduated at the top of their senior classes to come back to me and thank me for not giving up on them or expecting less of them. I learned a long time ago that kids will live up to the expectations you place on them...if you expect they will be unsuccessful, they will, if you expect that they will graduate at the top of their class – they will do that also – the same kid! As teachers we influence these young minds considerably with our expectations. I take that very seriously.

Many researchers have explored the impact of high expectations on student outcomes (Blackburn, 2012; Reynolds, 2003; Williamson & Blackburn, 2010). Students have been shown to achieve more when their teachers’ actions and words express that they expect their students to be successful (Blackburn, 2008). The same have proven to be true when teachers expect less of their students thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy in both directions.

Closely related to maintaining high expectations is the role of motivation in students’ success. Olson (1997) asserts motivation is probably the most important factor that educators can target in order to improve learning. The teachers in this study seem to agree with these findings. George, a teacher with four years of

experience, explained, “My students think they can do whatever I place in front of them. [The students] believe I think they are the smartest kids in the world because I treat them that way.” Rhonda stated the importance of motivation in her classroom:

There is an old saying that I keep posted on my computer that says, “You cannot push anyone up the ladder unless he is willing to climb himself.” That saying reminds me to motivate my kids so they will perform at their best. A lot of kids in our school come with very little self-esteem...or at least as far as school is concerned. My job as their teacher is to motivate them to believe in themselves. Each year I am amazed at how well a little motivation helps. These kids will do anything for you in you just motivate them to do it.

Every teacher shared the importance of motivating students to perform. Cynthia, a 19-year veteran teacher, stated “If you don’t motivate these babies, you’re not doing your job. We are the adults and they need that from us in order to believe in themselves.” The teachers understood that motivation was critical to their students’ eagerness to learn and academic success.

In summary, the teachers understood the importance of creating a classroom that was conducive to learning. Key factors in such classrooms included having quality classroom management, planning and delivering quality instruction, continually assessing students on their learning, and setting high

expectation for students while motivating them to be successful. Both beginning teachers with less than five years of experience and veteran teachers with 15 or more years, all of varying grade levels, agreed on the importance of having high quality learning experiences for students. The findings of this study revealed that the teachers had a motivation to ensure the success of their students, which supports Bandura's (1989) theory of self-efficacy. His theory suggests that teachers who feel their actions benefit their students work diligently to act in ways that contribute to their students' success. Also the teachers recognized the disadvantages of their students due to their economic backgrounds and worked to legitimize their experiences while exposing them to practices that are aligned with middle and upper classes, which provided the students access to benefits associated with cultural capital.

Relationship building. Relationship building or relational capacity is the level of trust and safety between student and teacher and refers to a developed relationship between them. The influence a teacher has on their students is directly related to their connection to the students. The teacher's opinions, beliefs, and directives will carry more weight if the student feels safe with and trusts the teacher. The teachers spoke of other key responsibilities to their students' success. One such responsibility was to establish and maintain strong relationships with their students. However, developing strong relationships extends beyond that between the teacher and the student. Three sub-themes

emerged from this theme: (a) positive peer-to-peer relationships, (b) teacher and student relationships, and (c) teacher-to-parent relationships.

Positive peer-to-peer relationships. Birch and Ladd (2008) suggested as early as preschool, children face such challenges as making new friends, maintaining existing friendships, and fitting into peer groups. He found that these interpersonal skills enhanced complex thinking and behavioral skills, which improved cognitive development and ultimately led to academic achievement. Ugale (2012) proposes student achievement increased when they were in classrooms where they had a sense of belonging and developed genuine relationships with other students. These sorts of connections were critical in the present study as well.

The teachers saw their roles as very important in ensuring their students had positive relationships with their fellow classmates. They reported that having a classroom of “friends” was very important. Sondra, with three years of experience, commented “I take time at the beginning of the year and throughout the year to just make time for my students to have fun and get to know each other – that’s so so important.” They saw these relationships as fundamental in the success of their students. Randy, 14-year teacher, believed, too, that students having positive relationships with other students was important:

I didn’t quite get the importance of these kids being friends until I had been in the classroom for a couple of years. I was strict teacher but good

teacher. I was doing everything besides standing on my head while teaching and I just couldn't get my kids to perform as well as I knew they could. When my mentor came observe my class a few times, she finally told me what she thought the main problem was. She said, "Your kids don't know each other. You have them working in isolation all the time. You need to let them have some fun – you know, become friends." Man, I was amazed at the difference that made in my class. I had to let go of some of my control but they actually started doing better on their work and seemed happier.

The teachers also shared that teaching students that friendship and peer-to-peer relationships were important. Judy added, "We have classroom discussions about being a family. They are all my kids and we have to take care of each other and love each other like family."

Teacher/student relationships. The teachers discussed the significance of building meaningful relationships with their students. Cynthia stated with tears in her eyes:

These babies are so precious to me and they know there is no ends to the distance I would go to make sure they are successful. I make it a point to spend some one-on-one time with each of my babies every six-weeks - even if it's just five minutes. I keep a record book to hold myself accountable. Now this isn't time going over work or private tutoring, no –

this is time for them to just talk to me about whatever they want to talk about. You won't believe how the kids look forward to that time. They stick their chests out and brag to the other students when they got to spend their 'Q-time' with me— that's what I call it. They will remind me too if they think they've been neglected and hadn't had their Q-time in a while.

Rhonda, with seven years of teaching experience, agrees that building and maintaining teacher/students relationships are important. She commented:

I know it's cliché but it's true, 'Kids don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.' That's my motto...no matter what I can teach them, they need to know that Ms. Rhonda cares about them before they can learn anything.

All the teachers agreed on the significance of teacher-student relationships.

Sondra concluded:

What makes me a better teacher than the teacher across town with all smart kids, from educated homes with two educated parents, who come to school in the latest name brands and never want for anything, and who can get 100% of her class to perform 100% of the time is that my kids come to me sometimes without even having running water at their homes to take baths before coming to school...do you think those kids are caring about what they are learning today when they are concerned that their friends may smell their bad body odor?... or the last meal they ate was here at school

yesterday for lunch... my kids though will perform for me before they will not perform for themselves sometimes, even if they don't feel like it because they care about me and I care about them.

The teachers all shared that part of their relationship building with their students involved them sharing personal things about their lives. The teachers spoke of having photographs of their own families in their classrooms for the students to see them, for examples, as mothers, fathers, and spouses. Teachers also thought to share their personal experiences about their past growing up poor in an effort to connect with students and develop deeper relationships. Randy shared:

I always talk to my kids about my struggles growing up poor...it brings us closer. If I can't seem to connect with my kids on any other level that is usually something we have in common and can be a great foundation for building a relationship.

Teacher/parent relationships. The teachers described the relationships they shared with their students' parents as significant in the students' academic success as well. Marschall (2006) found in his study of middle school, economically disadvantaged, Latino students, that parents who maintained a positive relationship with the school tended to have higher performing students than those without a significant relationship. Teachers in this study agreed on the importance of such a relationship.

The teachers described the efforts they took to develop relationships with parents. George stated, “Every one of my students’ parents know me, what I stand for, and know that I care of about their child...they have my cell phone number and we either talk or text on a weekly basis.” George went on to discuss that although he sends weekly emails to his class’ parents as a whole, he also maintains individual contact with parents to discuss issues pertaining to only their child.

Judy shared her views on teacher-parent relationships:

These kids are with me more than they are with their own parents... in fact I have a couple kids who don’t even get to see their mommas until the weekend because [their mothers] work evenings and nights. I know the situation of every child in my class. I learned a long time ago that I just don’t teach kids, I teach adults too...I mean, I have to teach my [students’] parents too about what I need from them to make sure their sons and daughters are learning. My students and their mommas know I will pick up this phone in a heartbeat to talk about what’s going on. It really is a partnership – these kids can’t learn without the support of their parents and I can’t teach them as well without it either.

Cynthia talked about the measures she is willing to take to get to know and develop a relationship with her parents. She stated:

I make home visits every year – my [students’] parents already know that if their child is in my classroom that I will eventually be knocking on their

door. Sometimes I don't even enter the house...I just stop by if I hadn't seen them at a school event lately to let them know their daughter made a 100 on a test and sometimes I go in and stay so long that I am offered dinner...I've even helped with dishes a few times.

Many of the teachers took on responsibilities well out of the realm of their teaching duties to help foster relationships with their students' parents. Sondra shared "I have helped parents fill out applications for food stamps...housing and welfare and that is very sensitive information. They trust me though." George concurred, sharing similar experiences:

Many of my non-English speaking parents will bring their important paperwork or any important mail they have received to me so that I can help them fill out any important documents or translate it or explain it to them. This may seem minor but you would be surprised how it helps us to build on our relationship and helps me to have their support whenever I need it with their child's learning.

The teachers all spoke of ways in which they built relationships with their students' parents, from home visits, to classroom parent-nights, to parent outings. The teachers established the importance of such relationships early on in the school year and made efforts to support and maintain those relationships for the benefits of their students' success.

Creating a culturally diverse classroom. The teachers in this study emphasized the importance of having a classroom environment that supported, embraced, and celebrated the diversity among the students. Although the teachers shared a similar economic background with their students, their ethnic backgrounds were not always related, the teachers therefore took deliberate efforts to create a culturally diverse classroom environment. Three sub-themes emerged: (a) learning students cultures, (b) using culturally diverse teaching resources and curriculum, and (c) acknowledging a culture of poverty.

Learning students cultures. Lack of cultural understanding can easily disrupt classroom learning (Birch & Ladd, 2008). The teachers in this study agreed with this premise, all stating that learning the culture of their students was something that they took seriously. Cynthia stated “I can’t just assume because these babies live in this town or in this country with me that they have the same values or culture as I do...as their teacher, that’s my responsibility to find out.” George echoed her sentiments:

I had a girl [student] last year who told me that she was Hindu. I have to admit... I didn’t have a clue what that meant...I didn’t even know if that was an ethnicity or a religion, or neither, for all I knew. As her teacher though, I knew I had to learn a little bit about it so that I could understand who she was a little more and make sure that I was sensitive to her needs as they related to her being Hindu. I’m glad I did that because I learned a

lot about her and we had a great year... she actually made straight A's in my class all year. The whole class benefited from her being a Hindu and I'm sure she benefited from some of the cultures of the other students, too. George went on to express how some of his instructional choices throughout the year were made with this student's background in mind such as choosing books for the class to read that had characters that reflected his students' cultural backgrounds and inviting guest speakers that shared cultural experiences with his students.

Sondra expressed how learning more about her students' cultures helped her be a better teacher. She states:

I like to celebrate every culture in my class...in fact, I celebrate cultures that are not represented in my class because my kiddos still need to know that. The kids think it's because I just want them to be well rounded and although that is partly true, I learn so much more about them when I do this, so it's actually for my benefit as well. The more I know about them and can connect with them the better it is for their learning and success which also benefits my learning...

Judy summed up the thoughts of the teachers with her comment "Learning and coming to understand my students' cultures is a very important part of teaching because their [students'] cultures affect their perceptions, their values...their behavior while in class, which ultimately affects their learning."

All teachers mentioned efforts taken by the school as a whole to embrace, learn, and better understand the cultures of their students. Such efforts included monthly events and programs associated with cultural identity (i.e. a Black History Assembly in February); an annual “Taste of the World” day that allowed each classroom to invite parents to prepare a dish from their culture and share it with the class, and Cultural Dress Day, which took place around Halloween and instead of wearing traditional Halloween costumes, the students were allowed to dress in a cultural garment or folk costume. Then, they gave an oral presentation to the class about the culture illustrated by their dress. These events give students the opportunity to share their culture with their peers and for students to learn from each other.

Using culturally diverse teaching resources and curriculum. The teachers also spoke of the significance of using culturally diverse teaching strategies in their daily instruction. Previous research found the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students improved when they were taught using their own cultural experiences that are filtered through their understanding of the world as they know it (Au & Kawakami, 1991; Foster, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). The teachers in this study shared this sentiment as well. Rhonda, a seven-year teacher stated:

My kids [students] are going to learn and know about almost every culture that is out there. I go out of my way to research books we can read that

have characters of different backgrounds...in math and science I find scientists and mathematicians that my kids can relate too. They need to see themselves in their learning. I don't want my kids to leave my classroom thinking that only White people, or only Americans of any race, have made significant contributions to our world. That does not motivate them to want to grow and learn. They need to see all cultures, and countries, and races doing many great things that they can relate to and other things that they can't...but they know about it.

Shanyta expressed her contentment with the school district's approach to curriculum, because it does not dictate every topic that teachers should cover.

She reported,

Our curriculum is written in such a way that it allows the classroom teacher to include culture as she sees fits. It's not a one-size-fits-all...I get to choose how I teach my kids and I always include something about the different cultures.

Gay (2000) finds that students respond best when teachers' instructions include curricular resources that contain images, symbols, icons, awards, mottoes, and celebrations to teach students knowledge, skills, morals, and values. Randy spoke about how culturally diverse resources aid his students' learning. He stated "I love to travel and I always am looking for little gadgets and unique things I can

bring back to my kids [students] to teach them and make my lessons more exciting. They love it!” Sondra agreed:

My classroom is full of pictures and collages from my travels around the world and to different states so my students can see and experience different cultures. I always incorporate them into my teaching too and if I know one of my kids [students] is familiar with that culture, I ask them to share too. We always talk about culture. No matter what we are learning it somehow just becomes part of the discussion. I think my kids [students] have come to expect it so if I don’t relate our learning to culture, they will often bring it up or ask themselves.

Culture played an important role in the participants’ classrooms and they took advantage of opportunities to incorporate it into their lessons for the benefit of the students’ learning.

The culture of poverty. Payne (2009) suggested that people living in poverty have their own traditions, values, and norms. Although not explicitly verbalized, the teachers seemed to agree. The teachers spoke of the need to be examples to their students, exposing them to middle class norms. Cynthia, for example, stated:

There is not a day I come to work without wearing pantyhose...and I absolutely hate wearing pantyhose. I do it though because these babies need to see what it is like to dress for success. Most of them never see

their parents dress up for work because they mostly wear uniforms or something.

Randy shared his sentiment by stating “I wear a tie to work every day because I want my kids to know what a professional looks like.”

Likewise, the teachers were also very deliberate in their speech patterns when they spoke with their students. Shanyta declared, “I speak well at all times with my scholars. I use vocabulary that I know they don’t use at home.” Judy agreed that the use of proper English is beneficial to the students’ development. She voiced:

Our students come with very little vocabulary when we get them...most of them cannot distinguish between real words in the English language and slang. My job is to teach them the difference between the two and to show them that there is a time and a place for each one.

In these instances the teachers’ actions and responses can be seen through the lens of cultural capital. The teachers understand the need to share experiences with their students and be role models to them of what is acceptable in middle class environments and within the workforce. This information will contribute to their success in the future.

Teachers Adolescent Educational Experiences

What follows are descriptions of the teachers’ views as they relate to their own personal educational experiences during their adolescence. Teachers

discussed, in detail, the quality of the education they received and their relationships with their teachers.

Quality of education. There are many definitions of what it means to have a quality education, testifying to the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept. The terms efficiency, effectiveness, and equity have often been used synonymously when discussing a quality education (Kuykendall, 2004). The U.S. Department of Education (2013) defined quality education as “an education [that] enables people to develop all of their attributes and skills to achieve their potential as human beings and members of society” (p. 19). The teachers in this study identified key aspects of their education in two ways: (1) the environmental factors including safety, facilities, and adequate resources and (2) outcomes that encompassed knowledge and skills.

Judy, the most experienced teacher in the study, reflected on the quality of her education as the only White child in a segregated Black school. She recalled:

I remember always being aware of the fact that I was White and everyone else was Black. That alone made me think, for whatever reason, I was not getting as quality of an education as other White kids were. I remember the school building was in very bad condition...some of the windows were boarded up where there used to be glass and the roof leaked when it rained...the books always had writing and marks in them from the White schools' kids who had used them before they were even brought to our

school. We didn't have buses back then and Momma and Daddy lived too far for me to walk to the White school so I was with the Blacks who went to school just a few blocks from where we lived.

Cynthia also spoke about the condition of her school while attending grade school in a segregated environment. She stated:

I went to school with only kids from my neighborhood and we all knew that our school was known in town at the school on the wrong side of the tracks...it was the school where all the poor Black kids went. Even Black people that could help it didn't come to our school. It was one raggedy place too...I think I was in about third grade when we got indoor plumbing, we had a playground...an old dirt field with no equipment and we used the same text book no matter what grade you were in...the math book was the math book whether you were learning addition, multiplication, or algebra.

Other teachers expressed their experiences as well. Rhonda recollected on her elementary experiences stating:

I grew up in an inner-city school in the same poor neighborhood where I lived. There were times when we literally had to get on the floor, cover our heads, and wait for shooting to stop before we could continue with class.

George shared a similar experience saying, “Our school was in the hood. The biggest problem we had was the local gangs used our school as their recruiting grounds.”

The teachers in this study also defined the quality of their education by the learning experiences they obtained. Sondra asserted:

Do I think I learned as much as the rich kids in the more middle class schools? – No, but I don’t think I got a bad education either. The teachers did what they had to do. I do think though that I struggled a bit in middle school because some of the elementary curriculum was watered down.

Shanyta had quite a different experience in her elementary school. She remarked, “Although most of the kids in my school were poor just like me, our teachers made sure that we were learning. I think my elementary school could’ve stood up against any school as far as academics were concerned.”

The teachers shared many experiences that were similar as well as many experiences that were unique to them. In either event, their experiences had shaped them into the individuals they are today.

Relationship building with their teachers. Research indicates that “academic achievement and student behavior are influenced by the quality of the teacher and student relationship” (Jones, 2006, p. 380). The teachers in this study agreed that the relationships they developed and maintained with their teachers had a significant impact on their learning and elementary school experience.

George revealed that he grew up in foster care in a small town and discussed the close relationship he had with his teachers

...they loved me like no other adult in my life had. I longed to go to school and hated summers and vacations because I knew the teachers cared about me and wanted me to grow up and become somebody... I didn't get that at home.

Rhonda shared a similar experience stating:

I had some of the best teachers in the world...seriously...that is the main reason I am a teacher today. I still remember the smells of the perfumes that my teachers wore... their warm hugs... their smiling faces... their tender voices. I loved going to school even more than I liked summer vacation or holidays, believe it or not. I try to be that to my students every single day.

The teachers took both the positive and negative experiences of their own elementary school experiences to enhance their current quality as a teacher. Judy stated:

I have both good and bad memories about my early years in school and the relationships that I had with my teachers, but I make sure that I duplicate the good for my own students and never repeat the bad.

The teachers strived to be a better teachers to their students based on the relationships they shared with their teachers. Rhonda stated:

I remember my third grade teacher would always tell us that we were her babies and when you think about it, it is kind of true. Look, I spend more time with my students than with my own biological children...so I take the relationships that I build with them very seriously. I am their mother in a lot of senses and they love me just like a parent because I love them like my own kids...I have high expectations for them just like I do for my own kids and I treat them like my own. A lot of [my] teachers..., made me feel like that and I remember how good it felt so I try and make my kids feel like that now. A lot of the teachers around here feel the same way. I truly think that's why our school always out performs the other schools in the district.

The teachers believed that the relationships they shared with their teachers were important to their successes and therefore they mimic them with their own students. The relationships involve caring, motivating, and spending time with students.

Home life environment for learning. The teachers in this study had different childhood experiences with parental involvement and home environments that supported their learning while in grade school. They all agreed though that their teachers understood the dynamic of their home lives and adjusted their instructional practices to accommodate them. George shared

My teachers all knew that when I got home there was no way I was doing any homework, reading any books, or working on anybody's project.

There was just too much going on at any of my placements to do that. I remember I always stayed after school to finish everything I needed for the next day. If my teacher couldn't stay on a particular day, another teacher would volunteer. I never had to take anything home though because they made sure I did it before I left school.

Sondra shared a similar experience about teachers modifying her at-home work to accommodate her home situation. She stated:

We lived in an apartment and it always seemed like we were either on the verge of being evicted because we couldn't pay the rent or the rent was paid and something was off – gas...lights...the water. My teachers knew about everything so they always help me get my work done in other ways. I remember one teacher would meet me every morning when I got off the bus and we would go to the library to do my homework before class.

Another teacher, Mrs. Nivens...I remember, gave me a "magic" flashlight and told me that when I used it to read it would make me smarter. I didn't even realize until I was older that she knew we didn't have electricity at the time and was trying to make it easier for me to be able to read and complete my assignments.

Not all teachers had situations in their homes that hindered their academic responsibilities at home. When home conditions were favorable for extended learning opportunities, the study participants' teachers took advantage of those as well. Cynthia shared:

Everybody in my elementary school knew that equity and equality were different. Although we were poor, my parents made sure I had everything I needed for school. There were other kids in my class though that were in situations where they didn't have that support at home and I remember they got what I thought at the time was special treatment....like if I didn't have my homework I would have to walk around the field at recess instead of play but if other kids didn't have theirs, they were allowed to do their homework during recess and if they finished they still got to play. I didn't understand it at the time but now I understand that they were simply treating us as individuals and not lumping us all together. I was a better student and am now a better teacher because of it.

It is clear that teachers viewed their own educational experiences as impacting their current roles as teachers of students of poverty.

Summary

This chapter included the findings and analysis from the interviews. Data provided from the interviews included the teachers' perceptions of their role in the education and academic success of their students with the understanding of self-

efficacy and cultural capital as to why the teachers were successful. The data also provided the teachers' views of their own personal educational experiences and how it impacts their current situation as teachers in a Title I school with majority economically disadvantaged students. The next and final chapter addresses implications for research, theory, and practice.

CHAPTER 5

Summary, Implications, and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of teachers from low-income backgrounds and their experiences with teaching economically disadvantaged students. Understanding this concept further has been an interest of mine for quite some time. Being raised in an underprivileged household, I realized that teachers seemed to make a difference in my academic success. The teachers I remember most fondly and those that made a larger imprint on my academics also grew up poor.

Data trends show that the largest K-12 academic achievement gap is between students living in poverty and those who are not. Additionally, the percentage of our youth living in poverty is on the rise. Studies show that having quality teachers throughout school can substantially offset, or even eliminate, the disadvantages of low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Wayne & Youngs, 2009). Because of this, I decided to take a closer look at the perceptions of teachers from low-income backgrounds who teach economically disadvantaged students.

The specific setting for this study was a single elementary school. Pinewood Park Elementary (a pseudonym) located in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. Demographically, the student population was 96.2% economically disadvantaged and 84.6% were at-risk at the time of data collection. This campus was a successful school despite its challenging student make-up (e.g., low-

income, economically disadvantaged, and at-risk students). The school earned a rating of “Exemplary” and a rating of “Recognized” by the Texas Education Agency for the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 school years, respectively. This particular site was chosen for this study because the students on this campus were successful although students with similar demographics and backgrounds are more frequently low-performers academically and less successful than their more economically advantaged peers.

The participants for this study were chosen through selective sampling. Teachers from grades three, four, and five, were selected because the school’s academic rating was based on standardized tests (TAKS) that were given in those grade levels. The teachers, who participated in this study, all identified as coming from backgrounds of poverty during their adolescence and grade school years. There were a total of seven participants, ranging from two to 23 years of teaching experience. The seven teachers were interviewed individually. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and member checking and peer debriefing were used to ensure trustworthiness.

Summary of Findings

Below is a summary of the key findings for each of the research questions.

Research Question 1

What is the classroom experience of elementary school teachers from low-income backgrounds of low-income students?

The teachers all commented on the importance of having and maintaining a quality instructional environment that lent itself to student learning. Most importantly, they maintained high expectations for their students in an effort to not further “handicap” them and to advance them academically. To achieve this objective, the teachers employed instructional strategies that have been proven to aid in student success regardless of economic background while still making accommodations for the personal lives of the students to help them succeed. Further, having good classroom management and setting expectations for students’ behavior and achievement were critical components of these teachers’ classrooms. They also paid great attention to the planning and delivery of their particular lessons and ensured that students were assessed regularly in an effort to be constantly aware of their students’ comprehension and mastery of the curriculum.

The teachers also stressed the importance of students having time to develop relationships among themselves and make friends. There were various ways that the teachers ensured that these relationships developed such as scheduling one-on-one time with students, conducting home-visits to speak with the students’ parents, and allowing time for students to visit and collaborate with one another in class. These actions helped them develop meaningful relationships with the students, both in and out of the classroom.

Finally, the teachers embraced the diversity of their students and celebrated their individual cultures. Teachers found that it was important for students to connect their own culture and the culture of others to their learning. The teachers felt it was important to learn and know about the culture of their individual students including race, ethnicity, religion, and language. They created opportunities to bring cultural celebrations and traditions into the day-to-day learning and interaction of their students.

Research Question 2

How do teachers from low-income backgrounds perceive their role as teachers of students currently living in poverty?

Teachers described their roles as teachers of economically disadvantaged students in many different ways. They believed that their backgrounds made them destined to be the teachers of these students. This is critical, because they believed that few potential teachers wanted to come work at a school with these challenging demographics. Some of the teachers saw their roles as parents to their students, because just like parents they were emotionally invested not only in the academic success of these students, but in all aspects of their development. Others felt that taking on the role of a parent was important because of the absence of a parent in the students' home lives. Others did not see themselves as parents and would outwardly express to their students that they were their teacher

and their teacher only. They felt their role with these students was the same as with any classroom in any school – to see their students succeed.

Teachers who saw themselves as role models thought it was important to demonstrate to their students their potential to rise above poverty. These teachers shared stories of their personal success with their students in efforts to encourage them to strive and reach a higher socioeconomic status in life.

Research Question 3

Do elementary teachers perceive their backgrounds affect their students' success? If so, in what ways?

The teachers in this study believed their backgrounds made them better equipped to teach students from low-income families. The teachers referenced many of their own personal experiences as children growing up in poverty and examples of how their teachers treated them. The teachers often relied on these past experiences to inform their current practices as teachers of economically disadvantaged students.

They felt they understood their students' lives and the teachers took strides to assist their students to overcome challenges they may face due to currently living in poverty. Such strides included being sensitive to the students' parents' work schedules and modifying assignments, if necessary, because of the students' living conditions. Teachers also felt they served as examples and role models to their students. They did this by sharing their personal backgrounds of poverty in

class. They also made a point to dress and speak in certain ways to demonstrate successful attributes.

Research Question 4

How does the theory of self-efficacy help explain how teachers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds perceive their role as teachers of economically disadvantaged elementary students?

In general, if a person has a high sense of self-efficacy they perceive that they are capable of influencing or impacting their students' learning. The teachers in this study showed they had a strong sense of self-efficacy. They all believed that their students could and would be successful under their classroom instruction. Teachers believed this, in part, because they had personally been "in the same shoes" as their students and had been successful themselves.

Because these teachers had experienced success in the past, they believed they had the skill set necessary to reach economically-disadvantaged students and therefore worked towards that objective. When faced with challenges, these teachers persevered because they felt their goal was attainable and they were capable of helping their students be successful.

Research Question 5

How does the theory of cultural capital help explain how teachers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds perceive their role as teachers of economically disadvantaged elementary students?

Bourdieu (1973) argued that knowing how to succeed in school privileged those from the middle and upper classes. For this reason, students at low-income schools are less likely to succeed academically. However, this school was successful in spite of these challenges. Although the teachers came from equally challenging backgrounds as their students, they succeeded. They used their past experience and knowledge or cultural capital to impact their students' academic achievement.

Payne (2009), in her research of people living in poverty, asserts that poverty, much like race and ethnicity, is its own culture. She further emphasized that the culture of poverty, much as any other culture, has its own customs, principles, and standards. Because teachers in this study understood the culture of poverty, they used this knowledge to relate to their students through personal stories and experiences. Teachers accommodated the parents' lifestyles and personal circumstances that were a result of living in poverty. Additionally, these teachers took efforts to assist their students in overcoming obstacles that they encountered as a result of being economically disadvantaged. This also aided in gaining and building trust with the students and their parents, which was identified as a critical component of student success.

Research Question 6

What else was revealed about the experience of teachers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and teaching economically disadvantaged

elementary students during the study that contributed to the students' success?

This study revealed many similarities between Ladson-Billings' (1995) work with African American teachers of successful African American students and subsequent research by others of other ethnic groups. The teachers, although never explicitly identifying poverty as a culture, engaged in many of the same teaching practices that are commonly associated with culturally relevant pedagogy.

Gay (2010) stated that teachers who practice culturally relevant teaching understand that students learn through a cultural lens and teachers must adapt their teaching practices to engage students and capture their attention and make connections that they can understand. The teachers in this study seemed to recognize this and provided a variety of instructional practices to support student learning (e.g., cooperative learning groups, culturally diverse resources, etc). Other teaching strategies associated with culturally relevant instruction and practiced by the teachers in this study were creating positive learning environments with attentive skills, teaching skills, and teacher/student interaction (Good & Brophy, 2003), utilizing a diverse curriculum (Gollnick & Chinn, 2012); knowing, understanding, and working with families that come from different race and ethnicities and exposing children to role models from their own culture as well as those from other cultures (Jackson, 2008); as well as utilizing students'

cultures to help them learn the subjects and skills taught in school (Gollnick & Chinn, 2012).

Implications

This study reaffirms the belief that the classroom teacher is an important factor in student achievement. The research findings provide implications for research practice, and theory.

Implications for Research

This research is indeed a starting point for understanding the role teachers from low-income backgrounds play in the success of economically disadvantaged students; as such, there are many potential research opportunities that remain. First, the current study represents teachers in higher elementary grades who were responsible for administering the state assessment (TAKS) to their students. It would be valuable to extend this research to the teachers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds who teach in earlier elementary grades but are not responsible for administering state assessments. Research notes the importance of those early grades in setting the foundation for the students' entire educational journey (Kuykendall, 2004), so the findings from that study would provide more information about how these teachers' previous experiences shape their experience in the classroom with students with similar backgrounds in those critical early years. Secondly, further research examining the perceptions of how teachers who are not from low-income backgrounds yet work with majority

economically disadvantaged students believe their backgrounds affect their classroom success.

Additionally, more research should be done with high poverty Title I elementary campuses that are not experiencing academic success with their students. Capturing the perceptions of the teachers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds employed on these campuses could provide helpful information about how their backgrounds influenced their roles and actions and better our understanding of the differences between teachers at the high-performing and low-performing schools.

Furthermore, researchers can conduct a study similar to the current one that includes administrators, parents, and students in the participant pool at one and/or multiple campuses. Such an extension to the current study would allow for triangulation of the data as well as add to the body of literature on perceived strategies for impacting the success of economically disadvantaged students.

Finally, future research can be replicated at the secondary level, both middle school and high school, to better understand the role the teachers' economic backgrounds have on their teaching practices. It should explore if the culture of poverty affects teachers of older students in the same ways as it did with the participants of this study. Each of these studies would bring better awareness and provide further insight into the role of the teacher in impacting the success of students from poverty.

Implications for Practice

The present study made an important contribution to our knowledge about how teachers' socioeconomic backgrounds shaped their teaching practices with elementary-aged students of poverty. The teachers in this study were familiar with the culture of poverty and worked consistently to help students bridge the achievement gap that their impoverished lifestyles and limited mainstream experiences created for their students. However, most teachers do not come from similar backgrounds. In fact, NCES (2013) reported that 83 percent of public school teachers identify as having middle- or upper-class backgrounds. Therefore, schools should provide professional development to teachers in regard to the experiences of students who live in poverty; because, unlike the participants in this study, they are unable to draw upon their past experiences when working with this population of students. Having such trainings would enhance the knowledge of these teachers and, in turn, impact classroom practices to better accommodate the culture of poverty. Similarly, universities could use the findings of this current study to inform their curriculum and instructional practices with education majors and those studying to become classroom teachers. Finally, these findings may help students at unsuccessful Title I schools as well. Perhaps the examples shared by these teachers from poverty backgrounds can be adapted by teachers with similar backgrounds teaching at less successful schools.

Implications for Theory

The current study utilized Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Bandura's concept of self-efficacy as a framework for its findings. These theories were appropriate to better understand how these teachers view their role and were able to assist their students achieve success. Further research might apply different theories to the study such as social capital which stresses the importance of networks in students' success. The teachers in this study provided valuable connections and relationships with the students and their parents that were critical lifelines and networks for their success. Therefore, this theoretical lens might also be helpful in understanding what led to these students' success.

Conclusion

Previous researchers have studied the idea of culturally relevant pedagogy with various groups but little to no research has been conducted using "poverty" as a culture. The teachers in this study came from low-income backgrounds and they taught students from similar circumstances. Because they understood the culture of poverty, they took strides to teach their students lessons and skills that would aid their success in this school environment. In addition, these teachers had high self-efficacy and believed that they were capable of defying the odds and consistently producing high-achieving students.

The achievement gap between students with unequal economic circumstances is wider than any other two subgroups, including race or ethnicity.

This study exposed the specific actions that these successful teachers from low-income backgrounds took and the beliefs they held. Classroom teachers, educational administrators, researchers, and policy makers can use this information to better understand the needs of this target population.

The findings of this study have provided a deeper understanding of how poverty impacts teaching from the viewpoint of the teacher. The experiences shared in this study are from unique perspectives from individuals with their own stories, histories, and journeys. I heard powerful stories from one teacher growing up in foster care with teachers from school being the only caring adults encountered during childhood (George, third grade teacher), another teacher growing up in the Jim Crow south during the era of segregated schools (Cynthia, fourth grade teacher), and another teacher dropping out of high school because she became pregnant as a teenager only to return to school later to complete her GED and then her bachelor's degree in teaching (Rhonda, third grade teacher). These stories and others may help researchers understand how the backgrounds of teachers can often inform their realities and passions as educators. They can also assist researchers and educational leaders to make choices and form conclusions regarding the experiences of our students that consider not only the students' backgrounds, but that of the teachers as well.

It is my hope that the implications emerging from this study contribute to necessary reform efforts that narrow the academic achievement gap between the

“haves and have-nots.” With the monumental task facing educators of leaving no child behind, the findings from this study should inform teacher education to better prepare all teachers to ensure the success of this struggling population.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

1. How would you describe your K-12 educational experience?
2. Describe your career path within the field of education.
3. Describe your home life from adolescence until adulthood.
4. Thinking back on your childhood and adolescence were there any experiences you feel made you more or less equipped to work with the students on this campus? Please describe them.
5. How would you describe your experience working with the economically disadvantaged students at this school?
6. How would you describe your relationship with the students in your class?
7. What is your definition of educational success? Do you feel you fit your definition? Do your students fit in your definition?
8. What teaching strategies do you have and use with the students in your class to help them be successful?
9. What do you feel are the main challenges your students face and how do you address these challenges as their classroom teacher?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding how your background has prepared you to teach your current students?

Appendix B

Participant Invitation Letter

Study Participant Invitation Letter

Study Title: Do teachers' backgrounds matter? Examining the Experience of Teachers from low socioeconomic backgrounds' perceptions of their role as teachers of economically disadvantaged students.

Dear (Personalized Greeting),

My name is Demetrus Liggins. I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department at the University of Texas at Arlington. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in K-16 Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, and I would like to invite you to participate.

I am studying the experience of teachers with low socioeconomic backgrounds and their perceptions of their role as teachers of economically disadvantaged students. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet with me for a one-on-one interview to discuss your backgrounds and your own educational. In particular, you will be asked questions about your background as it pertains to your socioeconomic status and experiences therein. Additionally, you will be questioned regarding your experiences as a teacher of economically disadvantaged students.

The one-on-one meeting will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place, and should last anywhere between about 30 to 90 minutes. The interview will be audio taped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The tapes will only be reviewed by me, the researcher, who will transcribe and analyze them. They will then be destroyed.

You may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to. Although you probably won't benefit directly from participating in this study, I hope that others in the community/society in general will benefit by providing insight on perceptions for success for students currently living in poverty.

Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location in my home. The results of the study may be published and presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed.

Taking part in the study is your decision. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at 817-360-1119, my mobile telephone, or via email at demetrusliggins@yahoo.com or my faculty advisor, Barbara Tobolowsky at email address tobolow@uta.edu if you have study related questions or problems. If you have any questions about your rights.

As a research participant, you may contact the Office of Regulatory Services at the University of Texas at Arlington at 817-272-3723.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please contact me at the number listed below to discuss participating.

With kind regards,

Demetrus Liggins
817-360-1119, mobile
demetrusliggins@yahoo.com

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Biographical Information

Demetrus Liggins currently works as an Executive Director of Human Resources in a large urban school district in North Texas. He has previously been an effective bilingual teacher and successful principal in Elementary School, Middle School, and High School, respectively. He is a passionate educator that and is committed to the success of all students despite their backgrounds and previous educational challenges. His research interests include bilingual education, low-income minority students, education and culture, and educational leadership. His Bachelors of Arts degree is from California State University Fresno in English and Sociology. His Masters of Education degree is from Stephen F. Austin State University with an emphasis in Educational Leadership. He plans to one day become a public school superintendent and continue to impact student learning and work towards narrowing the academic achievement gap between student groups.