

Comparative Analysis of Literature and Narratives Regarding Teaching Practices in Low SES School Districts

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to shed light on the educational disparities that exist within the US regarding socioeconomic status (SES). In-depth interviews were conducted with a teacher who teaches in a majority high SES school setting and compared with an interview with a teacher who teaches in a majority low SES school setting. Combining literature and narratives, I provide an overview of the pertinent issues related to SES and schools and urge continued research on this topic. Results found three distinct areas of difference: availability of resources, emotional and behavioural health, and COVID-19 response. Educational experiences should not have to vary based on socioeconomic status, and as we strive for equitable education, we ought to continue research such as this.

keywords: educational disparities, K-12 education, student behaviour, pedagogy, COVID-19

1. Introduction

With millions of children belonging to the United States K-12 educational public school system, teachers tend to have many responsibilities like preservation, reliability, and knowledge. Teachers have to preserve students' educational futures, provide them with reliable tools for learning, and give them the knowledge to move forward in their educational careers. The traditional views in the U.S. on teaching place the responsibility on the student, holding them to learn the material and having the teacher only work as a guide (Cunningham & Bao, 1986; Dover, 2009). Current changes in pedagogy have placed more responsibility on the teachers, especially those in low-income school districts. Evidence suggests that the traditionalistic values surrounding teaching practices may need to be reflected upon and changed in accordance with what is best for the student learning (Atlay, Tieben, Hillmert & Fauth, 2019). Socioeconomic status [SES] is defined as a combination of an individual's economic and social status (Baker, 2014) and is measured through variables such as familial income, parental education, etc. SES has a mixed history when thought of as a confound of educational success (White, 1982; Atlay, Tieben, Hillmert, & Fauth, 2019).

It is debated that SES is not impactful for student success, rather success is solely based on the student's natural ability. Recent research has delved into SES's importance in the classroom and how it influences other variables that impact student success. One variable in particular is trauma. Trauma is defined as psychological and physiological behaviors in response to threatening events or experiences (Nadal, Erezo, & King, 2019). Trauma and SES seem to have a unique relationship that impacts students' educational success. Trauma also seems to be more common among those who fall into a lower SES bracket (Hatch, &

Dohrenwend, 2007). Those students in a lower SES class face more trauma and have to overcome different and possibly more hurdles than those students in higher SES classes. Introductions to trauma informed pedagogy and resiliency could be helpful aids to teachers who teach in a low SES setting. Teachers have to foster a healthy environment for students regardless of homelife, traumatic incidents, socioeconomic status, or resource availability. Handling these various student situations is not a particular skill that is taught during preparatory schools for teachers and is lacking in academic research.

This paper provides a literature review of teacher and educational attitudes, reliable and valid teaching styles for students, and research surrounding differences between low and high SES schools. Following the literature review, a comparative narrative was gathered from two teachers within distinctly different contexts [teaching in high SES vs low SES schools]. Najimi, Sharifirad, Amini & Meftagh (2013) make the point that “more attention to curriculum, factors related to educator and learning environment can prevent students’ educational failure, in addition to preventing loss of resources and contribute to develop a more effective educational system” (pg. 1). This alludes to the idea that paying attention to new pedagogical changes and being reflective upon education will help strengthen the overall system, regardless of student SES. The purpose of the literature review and qualitative, phenomenological study is to describe and compare the experiences of teachers teaching in vastly different SES areas within the USA.

2. Theoretical Background

The theoretical approach taken for the current study is basic qualitative research with underpinnings sourced from philosophic phenomenological thought. Qualitative research focuses on the researcher who ends up building a, “complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1994, p. 75). Phenomenology is a theoretical framework that helps researchers have the freedom to let participants create narratives. Creswell (1994) defines phenomenology as the study of a first-hand experiences with the intention of researching it. In this case, learning about my participants by having them answer my questions, as well as self-reflect, help reveal the phenomena of teaching low- and high-income students. Phenomenology is mostly concerned with how human condition and perception influence our qualitative life moments. It is argued that phenomenology is at the forefront of all qualitative research because of its basic concern of the unique first point-of-view human experience (Relph, 2014). Similar to Devries (2013), the experiences of the phenomena of persistence through SES-based barriers in education is imperative to study. Understanding the experiences of teachers is key to understanding the actual phenomena of education. Imaginative variation is the process of using mental descriptions and eidetic methods to describe a phenomena explicitly (Mohanty, 1991). Using *imaginative variation*, I am able to see the experience of teachers from multiple angles, helping us build a more meaningful narrative surrounding these complex educational issues (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009) and hopefully paint a figurative picture of what it is like to be a student from either side of the socioeconomic spectrum. Due to limitations surrounding interviewing children, we decided to focus on the teacher perspective for this initial case study.

The theoretic orientation taken towards studying this educational research is Positivist. Positivism is described by Merriam & Tisdell (2009) as experiencing natural phenomena and observing their properties and relations. I am taking an active and passive role in collecting information to gain perspective and knowledge. This allows for the perspective of education being an object or phenomena that can be studied in a variety of ways. In this research, the

goal is to review literature and interview teachers in objective and qualitative, non-biased ways in order to provide “true” information to their experiences.

2.1. Research Questions

The purpose of the current study is to not only review the literature surrounding the impact of SES and education, but also to provide real narratives from active teachers who are practicing in schools of different SES levels. As such, the following question guided this project.

Research Question: How do the narrative experiences of a teacher from a high SES school district compared to and contrast with that of a teacher from a low SES school district?

2.2. Literature Review

Within the US, school systems can be quite different for those across different socioeconomic areas. Although there is a push for standardization, there are still huge gaps in resources available between school districts, even those in neighboring towns (Betts, Reuben, & Danenberg, 2000). There are many factors that impede or aid a student along their educational journey. Contextual influences are all of the possible features, effects and governances that shape who we are and how successful we can become (Linnenbrink-Garcia & Fredricks, 2008). Contextual influences seem to be a great branching point to start to divulge into the influences that impact students’ attitudes, behaviors, and success. Within the study, I will highlight the following factors that seemed relevant [gathered from previous research and the narratives] to educational success and student well-being.

2.2.1. Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status (SES) is defined by Baker (2014) as a measure of a person’s economic exchanges within a specific society and tends to be associated with better health and educational standards. White (1982) found conflicting correlations to answer whether SES has an impact on academic achievement. It seems that SES by itself may not have a strong correlation with academic achievement, but combined with other contextual influences, like educational aspirations (Brookover, Erickson & Joiner, 1967), teacher beliefs, and race (Dotson, Kitner-Triolo, Evans & Zonderman, 2009), it does indirectly impact outcomes. Regardless, SES has continued to be a factor in educational achievement within research (Sirin, 2005). Many teachers know about their students’ socioeconomic status based on their lunch food status. Receiving free or reduced lunch in an American school is usually an indicator that a student is low (or lower) SES. The current data for free or reduced lunch for students is “incomes below 130 percent of the poverty level or those receiving SNAP or TANF qualify for free meals. Those with family incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty line qualify for reduced-price meals” (U.S, 2021, p. 2). In addition to that, the US Census Bureau (2021) reported the average family with two parents and two kids would be within the poverty line if the total household collectively made \$27,479. This translates to 19.5% of Black students meeting the requirements for living in poverty, whereas only 10% of White students live in poverty (Bureau, 2021).

Over the past 15 years there has been an exponential increase in the percentage of the student population eligible for free or reduced lunch, which now stands around 52% (NCES, 2021). This suggests that about half of American students needed special provisions surrounding their basic needs just to ensure their educational experience is wholesome.

Teacher attitudes and prejudices surrounding SES may also affect student success, and have varying effects amongst different ethnic and racial groups (Atlay, Tieben, Hillmert, & Fauth,

2019). The teachers' beliefs about the socioeconomic conditions of their students may cause some unconscious expectancy effects. In a study that interviewed a range of teachers across the SES spectrum, Katsh-Singer, McNeill, & Loper (2016) found vast differences in teacher beliefs on students and curriculum choices. For example, teachers who teach in high SES schools regarded all their students as being able to be successful and had high expectancy effects, whereas low SES teachers had negative expectancy effects on those students who identified as Black/African American or Hispanic/Latinx. SES plays a role in teacher beliefs in a complex, prejudiced way, especially when race and academic success expectancy comes into play.

2.2.2. Trauma & Low SES

Trauma, behavioral responses to negative or harmful events, comes at an increased risk of those students who belong to the low SES class (Assari, 2020; Goodman, Miller, & West-Olatunji, 2012). Statistically, lower SES students, and in particular males, tend to have to face more traumatic life events that happen during the K-12 school years (Hatch, & Dohrenwend, 2007). Living in poverty is a traumatic experience for students and presents opportunities for other traumatic events to occur. Those traumatic events may impact students who may not receive the proper psychological care due to the high cost of therapy and stigma surrounding it. In addition, being within a lower SES puts the student at significant risk for a reduction in educational achievement. The effects of trauma on learning seem to be evident, and lead to poorer academic performance (Goodman, Miller, & West-Olatunji, 2012).

2.2.3. Resiliency Based Pedagogy

Students within lower SES brackets are at risk and forced to deal with events that higher SES students may never have to face in their lifetime. Building resiliency is a key characteristic to increasing the success odds of a students' education. "Children of lower socioeconomic backgrounds may be at greater risk of experiencing traumatic stress because of to the vulnerability of marginalized groups" (Sirin, 2005, pg. 253). Having a teacher who is well versed in the tribulations that surround students in lower SES groups is imperative to them building a trauma-based pedagogy that guides their students to an equitable education. Two emerging themes in trauma-based pedagogy are relationship building and access to *good* psychological services (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2019). Further advocacy for increased access to psychological services has been further concluded by Naik (2019).

2.2.4. Literature Gap

The existing qualitative literature seems to be missing a lot of information about the impact of educational context across the SES spectrum within the past 20 years, especially within the context of COVID-19. There are no meta-analyses describing all the previously found contextual influences for student success. It seems recent literature is geared towards technological advances, which may be limited to low SES areas that cannot afford to update or upgrade yet. Additions of these factors that improve education for lower SES students need to happen within American K-12 public school systems in conjunction with longitudinal studies to ensure positive change is occurring. Continual research needs to be done to ensure students across all school districts are equitable.

3. Methods

A literature review of teaching methods was done and then compared to a qualitative review from the interviews of 2 current K-12 American teachers. Teachers who worked within the American K-12 public school system were chosen through snowball sampling. Similar to

Diane Thomas (2008), I chose to interview teachers from both an extremely high SES and an extremely low SES school district to allow for a comparative narrative to form.

3.1. Participants

Participants were sought out using purposeful or snowball sampling with a goal of having up to 10 participants. Maximum variation in the sample was sought, seeking participants from a variety of SES spectrums, ages, genders, and geographic location in order to provide data that is denser and more descriptive of a wide variety of teacher experiences and to improve the trustworthiness of the research. Participants were recruited through emails sent to the University of Northern Colorado's graduate student cohort, as well as snowball sampling with the hopes of catching a wide demographic net. Participants were asked about their students' SES status during the zoom interview, then confirmed with demographic research done on their particular school districts. Maximum variation was attempted, but due to the small sample size ($n=2$), it was hard to achieve. I contacted possible participants through email to discuss the purpose of this study and their willingness to participate.

Table A.

Teacher Demographics

	Gender(s)	Years of Experience	Geographic Area	Subject(s) Taught	Grade(s) Taught	Students Age	SES
Teacher 1 "Ms. Jane"	Female	7	New Jersey, USA	Special Education, Mathematics	3 rd Grade	8-9	Low
Teacher 2 "Ms. Doe"	Female	20	New Jersey, USA	Special Education, Mathematics	5 th grade – 8 th grade	11-14	High

3.2. Data Sources, Evidence, Objects, or Materials

3.2.1. Ms. Jane

Ms. Jane is a female teacher from New Jersey who teaches 3rd grade in a low SES school district. She stated that every student within her class and many of the students in her district (99 %) are receiving free or reduced lunch. The most recent statistic was 77% of the district was eligible for free or reduced lunch (*US News, 2021*). She teaches math for streamline students and special education students. She works on professional development and curricular development for the district and plays an active role in her students' lives.

"I feel given the environment in which I teach, I wear several hats. I am a teacher, social worker, behaviorist, therapist, parent, nurse, listener, older sibling, etc."

Since she works within a low-income school district in New Jersey, she has to prepare for her students by being more than just a teacher. Her roles within the classroom extend past teaching the curriculum. She stated that she felt like her work was never done, and that growing is a part of the learning process.

I feel like you are never really "prepared" to teach. You can prep your lessons with a fine-tooth comb, and plan each night, but experiences and teachable moments are what truly make you an educator, and a solid one at that. You have to be able to think on your feet and be prepared to go 'off script'.

Ms. Jane is someone who must dedicate more time to her teaching than just academic related things. She has to ensure the safety and wellbeing of her students, while accommodating to their basic needs. She does not just teach math; she cares for and nourishes her students.

3.2.2. Ms. Doe

Ms. Doe is a female teacher from New Jersey with 20-years of experience, who teaches multiple grade levels (5th -8th). She also teaches special education and mathematics. Less than 12% of her entire school district is eligible free or reduced lunch (Lopatcong Elementary District, 2022). She has a required 100 hours of educational training and professional development to complete every 3 years and feels like she is pretty prepared for teaching. She did state that it is important to stay up-to date and aware of new advances in education. She felt the responsibility of learning was wholly placed on her and that engagement from parents was remarkably high.

You get 100% participation for back-to-school night, you get 100% participation, When you know, like meet the teacher prepared conferences...they expect communication. Our principal like if a kid was failing and you didn't like speak to their parents at least three times that would be an issue, you know, like you just can't let it go.

Ms. Doe has shown through her narrative that she has high expectations for herself, her students and from others upon her. She is considered a teacher and a communicator with parents to ensure the success of every single student.

3.2.3. Setting

All interviews took place virtually via Zoom; thus participants and researcher were not in the same location. The approximate location of interviewees was asked within the demographic information questionnaire [state]. Participants have all graduated from universities in the United States and both reside and work in the United States.

3.2.4. Method for Data Collection

In order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the case, I used informal, semi-structured interviews for data collection. The data collection included one-on-one Zoom interviews and demographic questionnaire responses. First, participants were asked to give their verbal consent to help ensure they understand the purpose of the study and that they and anyone who was mentioned during the interview by the participants would remain confidential, and a written copy for the participant was returned prior to the interview's completion. Before the interview, participants completed a questionnaire that provided information related to their undergraduate studies (see Appendix A). Next, the participants completed an audio-recorded semi-structured interview in which participants were asked seven structured questions with unstructured follow-up questions, as necessary (see Appendix A). Interviews were approximately one hour due to the nature of semi-structured questions. The data collected included demographic information, audio-recorded interview data, and transcriptions of the interviews.

3.2.5. Data Analysis

To analyze the data I used thematic analysis to draw out themes from each individual teacher and then compared them. Thematic analysis approach is an accessible and flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There are six steps to performing thematic analysis. The first step getting to know the data and create an initial list of ideas about intriguing data points. Those data points are then assigned a code (Step 2). Those codes were explored by the researcher and analysis is done for emerging or repetitive codes (Step 3) Then, I reviewed the themes that emerged (Step 4). Those themes are then defined and named (Step 5) before the final report is done (Step 6). The themes are discussed and expanded upon in the following results section.

4. Results

A high SES and low SES teacher from school districts in New Jersey were compared to understand their unique experiences teaching from vastly different perspectives. There are obvious advantages in higher SES areas, like smaller class size and increased access to resources. There were three major differences that I found from their narratives: availability of resources, mental and emotional health resources, and COVID-19 response.

4.1. Availability of Resources

In regard to whether every student has a notebook, backpack, or a utensil to write with, many assume that American children have it all. A major theme difference was found in the amount and access to resources that students had. Ms. Jane [low SES] described having to do between 2-5 Go Fund Me donation projects per school year, whereas Ms. Doe described the situation as an overflow of resources. Ms. Jane said,

“I typically do Go Fund Me Projects 2-5 times a year to replenish school supplies, acquire headphones for students, resources for special ed population such as therabands, fidgets, etc.”

Through donations, she is able to support her students in their basic school needs. There is a school counselor on site, but they are rarely used and overworked within her school. In comparison to the same question, Ms. Doe [high SES] had responded with,

“I can't tell you the amount of brand new stuff that kids would be like, oh, there's like a notebook I never used, or brand new unopened crayons, or whatever and these kids were just throwing it away... literally just putting it into the garbage cans, and we got to the point where we're like you know what guy, we started collecting it all to give to give away, like for charity because we were like, Why are we throwing this out?” (Ms. Doe)

Instead of having the obstacle of not having enough access to resources, Ms. Doe's students had an abundance and a disregard for saving it for later. The access to resources seems to be overly abundant in Ms. Doe's case, which tends to be the assumed case for all students in the US, regardless of SES.

4.2. Behavioral and Emotional Health

The second most striking difference related to the handling of behavioral situations. It was not the case that students were being neglected, but Ms. Jane had to be more creative in her approach towards tending to her students social, behavioral, and emotional growth. Ms. Jane has many different ways to help with behavioral disruptions, like a corner in the room dedicated to calming students with many handmade resources. Ms. Doe has a counselor in her school that works with her students, parents, and works with their personal medical providers to give a holistic treatment to whatever the student is going through.

“any social, emotional issues...our students have access to private counseling. Like I feel like the counseling that they get at school, only supplements their counseling that they are getting outside of school, like she kind of works one on one with their, their private provider to support what is going on” (Ms. Doe)

Whereas Ms. Doe has complete access to a behavioral healthcare system for her students, Ms. Jane has had to create tactics and other handmade resources to help foster her students social,

emotional, and behavioral growth. There is a stark difference in teacher responsibility dependent of SES and availability of school resources.

4.3. COVID-19 Response

The final difference that I found was the response and resources that happened from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Whereas Ms. Jane had difficulty connecting virtually, and having students been through Ms. Doe states that,

“the things that stand out most to me just that, especially through the pandemic. A lot of the parents are stay at home parents, or work at home. There's a lot of support and a lot of expectation for communication.”

The implications of COVID-19 on education have not been thoroughly researched because of its novelty and complexity. From these narratives, I can use imaginative variation to know it was difficult for teachers to teach. The number of adaptations was impacted by the number of resources available and the overall SES of the school district. To make this point clearer, low SES school systems had to learn to adapt since not all students had access to computers or Wi-Fi. Those in a higher SES system felt that their kids did not have too much of a COVID learning gap because of the ease of access for parental or tutor aids.

5. Scholarly Significance

From the narratives and themes drawn out from the teachers' experiences, we can see that there are large differences in the responsibilities of teachers from different SES backgrounds. Having two teachers from polar opposites of the SES spectrum help us to see differences in the academic road of students. Similar to Atlay, Tieben, Hillmert, & Fauth (2019) findings, we see that the high SES teacher (2) has extremely high expectancy effects of all her students and even so far as the principal and families are assuming their student will pass with high grades. Ms. Jane has difficulty connecting with parents, let alone having them impact her teaching. As Betts, Reuben, & Danenberg (2000) predicted, there are stark differences in the access and availability of resources for students. If SES were not a factor, there would be equal and equitable experiences amongst Ms. Jane and 2, but instead we see the enormous impact of SES on all factors of student success, experience, and achievement.

Changing our viewpoint from low SES being a fault and disadvantage, to a proactive stance in which we prepare and make the path equitable for low SES students is key to positive change in the American educational system. Living through poverty is a trauma in itself, added with higher risk factors for other types of traumatic events. For many children, school can either become a nuisance or a reprieve from their daily lives.

5.1. Implications & Improvements

Improvement of the American educational system is necessary which involves an in-depth reflection on teachers, teaching practices and classroom climate (Gómez-Monarrez, Caso-López & Gutiérrez-Anguiano, 2019). Thrupp (1998) suggests a mixing of schools and resources. Having students across districts comingle with others and have equal access to resources tends to help overall achievement. In regard to implementing technology in low SES school districts; “Our findings indicate [positive] effects of using digital tools in ways that promote complex compositional tasks, discussion, and critical thinking” (Jesson, McNaughton, Rosedale, Zhu & Cockle, 2018, pg., 1). It is suggested that there is standardization in both curriculum and resource availability. Having classroom management

skills and techniques for the accompanying variety in students is also integral (Atlay, Tieben, Hillmert & Fauth, 2019; Warschauer, 2003).

“Parents and community members anticipate that learning about technology will not only improve students' academic achievement but also ensure their socioeconomic future, especially if they are from groups that are marginalized such as people from low socioeconomic backgrounds” (Thomas, 2008, pg. 13)

Both teachers desired having teacher developments that focus on handling students, whether it is handling personal biases or understanding those contextual influences. Understanding contextual influences, cultural effects, and effective pedagogy were found to be tools used by effective teachers (Gómez-Monarez, Caso-López & Gutiérrez-Anguiano, 2019). Educational trends are pushing for more education that could help teachers handle the varying problems that accompany teaching students regardless of their place of the SES spectrum. There have been many articles promoting the idea of having better attitudes towards students in low-income areas. Halvorsen, Lee, & Andrade (2009) found that teacher attitudes were most negative and varying in lower SES areas. They recommend inquiry into the responsibilities held by students and teachers to understand attitudes better. Having access to resources that teach trauma related or trauma sensitive pedagogy ought to become regulatory for all teachers, regardless of socioeconomic status.

6. Conclusion

Despite the limitations, several conclusions were found through the qualitative analysis. Through the two narratives, it is evident that there are vast differences within the US educational system based on SES. The students face unique challenges in their own ways, but it seems that having a higher SES means having more resources to help any potential education-based issues. Low SES students seem to have multiple disadvantages, as well as the teachers having to deal with more issues, like providing basic needs for school, i.e. school supplies, books, and snacks for students. Another key difference brought up was the amount of parental involvement within difference SES classes. In my opinion, “characteristics of the school environment and the characteristics of the children interact, so that school is beneficial for some children, but not for others” (Atlay, Tieben, Hillmert & Fauth, 2019, pg. 2). Ensuring that our educational system cares for, and nourishes each students needs is part of our ethical responsibility as educators. Our goal is to ensure students learn, and if there are hurdles to that learning, the only thing we ought to do is remove or possibly make a bridge around them. Students are the future of the world, and this world depends on positive, educated minds to flourish into the future.

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