



## **Teachers' Impact on the Learning of Low-Socioeconomic Status Children**

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### ***Introduction***

Socioeconomic status (SES) has long been a divider among children. This discrepancy can impact the way children are treated, both at home and at school (Duke, 2008). Children, here being defined as individuals up to the age of fourteen, are likely to be heavily impacted by their income status. Being poor or even homeless can add significant stressors to a child's life. When starting out at school, these stressors can put children at a disadvantage from the beginning. In the education system we see many issues stemming from this gap (Duke, 2008). Frequently discussed issues related to this are poor nutrition, lack of resources, and poor parental preparation. Many of the issues discussed have much to do with home and community impacts on children's learning. It is extremely difficult for children to be performing well in school if they have little to eat or got no sleep the night before. However, problems will only become worse if educators cannot contribute positively to the education of these children. It has been found that teacher effects are higher in low-SES schools, meaning that it can make a crucial difference which teacher a child is placed with (Nye et al., 2004). It is possible that children with similar grades attending the same school can have very different outcomes based solely on their teacher (Nye et al., 2004). There are many aspects where the schools and teachers themselves are not providing adequate support for low-SES students when they should be trying to offset the issues of what is happening outside of class. Children from low-income families are burdened with many issues, but school should not be one of them. The influence of teachers can impact the course of low-income students' life through many different avenues; however, some may be less discussed than others. Here, we will look at the role teachers play in low-income students' success with relation personal perceptions and bias, the amount of referral to special education, and how teaching and learning styles can impact the role of learning in these children.

### ***Teachers Perceptions and Judgements of Students***

Many important aspects of school can be greatly impacted by teachers. Teachers can set students up for success and be the ones to help and identify struggling students. The study by Nye,

Konstantopoulos, and Hedges (2004) found that teacher effects have a greater impact on students grades than school effects do. Their opinions of their students can be the deciding factor for a child's grades or classroom placement. One study found that teachers who have more positive attitudes of their students were more likely to have positive impacts on them at the end of the year (Dolev, et al., 2021). They concluded that the teachers' positive expectations of the students in turn makes the students feel more confident in themselves. This can be important in setting children up for the rest of their lives. This specific study was done on kindergarten students, and this would have likely been their first impression of school, other than preschool (Dolev, et al., 2021). The earlier that teachers can give students this impression, the more of an impact it could make.

Another study by Auwarter and Aruguete (2008) looked at how teachers made assumptions about hypothetical students. They found that most teachers rated children from high-SES backgrounds better than students from low-SES backgrounds, even when the students had similar academic performance. They also found that teachers who had poor impressions of low-SES students from the start were less likely to try to help them. These teachers' first impressions of these students become a self-fulfilling prophecy because they put less effort towards them and then those students had a worse outcome. Another interesting point they found was that teachers would rate low-SES girls higher than low-SES boys and sometimes even low-SES girls higher than high-SES girls (Auwarter and Aruguete, 2008). This once again reveals how personal bias can greatly impact perceptions of students. Since teachers are likely to know which students are falling behind, it is important that they do not carry biases in who they feel deserves extra assistance. One study found that a student's performance was impacted by how those around them perceive them (Van den Broeck et al., 2020). Teachers who had high opinions of their students from low-SES backgrounds, increased those students views of themselves. Teachers could buffer the negative effect of low aspirations by having more confidence in the students. This finding shows how important it is for educators to show faith in all their students. Another important aspect discussed was that high levels of support for students came from teachers who felt more responsibility for their students' success (Van den Broeck, et al., 2020). However, teachers with this view tended to come from schools in high-SES areas. This is important because it can explain some discrepancies in how children from low-income families are treated. Some teachers may feel that when children come from low-income backgrounds, poor performance at school can be attributed entirely to their background. However, as we have seen here, teachers can have a significant impact on the performance of these students.

One study found that teachers who taught early elementary school grades were more likely to interrupt low-SES children when they were reading with them (Mertzman, 2008). Another important aspect they found was the content of the interruptions. They found while high-SES students were reading, teachers would interrupt them to explain the context of the story or meaning of the words. With low-SES students, teachers interrupted reading to correct grammar and pronunciation mistakes. What was interesting is that the teachers did not feel that they interrupted any one type of student, or for different purposes (Mertzman, 2008). These results can help to explain how even with good intentions, sometimes unconscious biases tend to get the better of people. When teachers learn about these biases and work to challenge them, they can provide better opportunities for their students.

### ***Special Education and Referral Rates***

Another important aspect that can stem from teachers' judgements is how children from different SES backgrounds are treated with relation to special education. Many children in school require extra assistance. This can vary from getting extra time for exams to having one on one help with an educational assistant, all of which are meant to improve the education experience for these children. However, there have been some questions raised in recent years about potential negative aspects of these programs. Some research has found that children referred to special education programs suffer from poorer quality of education and lower self-esteem (Webster and Blatchford, 2015). In one case, children who were part of a regular classroom were often physically separated from their peers at a separate workstation (Webster and Blatchford, 2015). They also found that children were having less quality interactions with their teachers and that instead teaching assistants were the ones making decisions about those students' education with little teacher involvement. Some research has found that in separated classrooms, the quality of literacy taught was significantly poorer than in regular classrooms. These problems are likely to be exacerbated when it comes to low-SES students. One study by Podell and Soodak (1993) found that some teachers tended to refer low-SES children with mild learning difficulties more often than trying to keep them in a regular classroom. They also found that children who did not have an obvious cause for learning difficulties, for example, physical disabilities, were referred more often when they came from low-SES backgrounds. This shows us how this bias alone can set low-SES students up for failure. The children were seen as the issue, instead of considering the environment they are living in (Podell and Soodak, 1993). Teachers need to take into consideration other factors that may be involved, as referring the children may not have the effects that are intended.

Another study found that children who received free or reduced-price lunches were also more likely to be referred to special education programs (Sullivan and Bal, 2013). They found that between gender, race and income status, low-income status was the largest predictor of who would get referred to the program. Another interesting result they found was students at school with high retention rates were less likely to be referred to these programs than ones with low retention rates. They concluded that schools that used detention and retention as a means of solving poor academic performance were more likely to refer children to these programs (Sullivan and Bal, 2013). This shows again that how teachers' and schools' perceptions of these children who need additional support can determine these children's outcomes. It is vitally important that teachers can refrain from using any biases towards these children because the choices they make about their education make can impact the course of it. Teachers should consider other options instead of referring low SES children.

### ***Classroom Environment and Teaching Styles***

Classroom environment and teaching styles are another way that children's learning may be impacted. Teachers and schools have different ways of teaching students, setting up classrooms, organizing programs and more. Therefore, different schools with the same curriculum or in the same school board can have different experiences. In one study, researchers went to different high-SES and low-SES neighbourhood schools and observed what reading and literacy were like in

those schools (Duke, 2000). They observed 20 grade one classrooms that were from the highest and lowest SES areas of their district, and they visited on four separate days throughout the school year. At one of the high-SES schools, there was an abundance of books in the classroom library, sorted by difficulty level for the children to read. There was also a theme shelf where books were displayed based on what they were learning. In contrast, one of the low-SES classrooms had a small selection of books on a cart that were rarely changed out. Duke (2000) found that many new books were purchased or found by the teacher and not the school. Even when the teacher tries to make a difference, it can be difficult because they have limited resources themselves. They also found that one of the low-SES schools had a school wide 10-minute reading block that was to be used every day. However, from the four visits the researchers had, they found that twice it was not used for reading at all and reading was done for less than 10 minutes the other times (Duke, 2000). Schools must make more of an effort to foster a good environment for children to learn in. Putting in a daily reading block will not likely be enough if there is a lack of reading material or the children are struggling with reading itself. This again shows how low-SES students are put at a disadvantage.

There is little research looking into how often experimental classroom designs are implemented in high-SES and low-SES classrooms. Without this, it is difficult to determine what types of classrooms and learning designs are being used on children from different backgrounds. One experimental type of learning that has some research related to it is project-based approaches. This approach has children learn by being active and doing, instead of listening to a teacher talk (Halvorsen et al., 2012). Halvorsen et al. (2012) looked at how this type of learning affected grade two children from low-SES schools. The results found the children had improved scores on their post-test results from their pre-test scores. Furthermore, the teachers who implemented this method believed that the children were learning better from this experience (Halvorsen et al., 2012). These results show us that it is important to try new methods with children from low-SES classrooms because we are constantly learning about new ways that children can improve their learning. With little data about how often these methods are used in low-SES versus high-SES classrooms, it is hard to tell what ways children from low-income backgrounds are being taught. Some teachers may not have time to figure out how to incorporate these ideas into their classrooms, so it is important that school boards give guidance to teachers how they could be implemented.

One study found that children from low-SES backgrounds benefitted from having more outdoor time before they spent time learning in the classroom (Lundy and Trawick-Smith, 2021). This study looked at preschool children and found that they had improved on task behaviour after this extended period of play. They explain that the importance of this is because many low-SES children have trouble focusing on tasks and can later fall behind their peers. They also determined that children had to engage in active play for this effect to take place, simply being outside did not have a strong effect (Lundy and Trawick-Smith, 2021). This finding shows the importance of educators in making sure children are being active in their play and not spending outdoor times sitting around. This is more likely to be done in a preschool setting where class sizes are smaller, but structuring play early on may instill this habit into children for later years of school. As well, teachers in elementary schools could try to involve more active time into their lesson plans when possible. While it can be difficult for teachers alone to make some of these changes, even small

ones could help benefit the education of low-SES children. While many high-SES children are likely to have more time for free play and unstructured learning outside of the school, school is an important place for low-SES children to have these experiences they may not get at home.

### ***Conclusion***

Overall, we can see many issues pertaining to how low-income students are treated within the school system. There are many areas of opportunity for educators to try and make positive impacts in these children's lives. For teachers, there needs to be improved accountability for decisions made about these children and how their treatment of students can impact them. However, there are many teachers out there who already work hard to make a difference in children's lives but are failed by school boards and administrations. Therefore, there needs to be an effort from those above teachers as well. Further research may include looking at how often experimental class and learning environments are used in low-SES area schools. This could give a better idea of how children from these areas are learning and if any ideas like outdoor classrooms or extended play time is happening. School is an important determinant for success in life and it is vital that educators try to make it as even a playing field as possible for students from all backgrounds. These areas, tied with community supports and increased funding, can give low-SES children the support they need to set themselves up for success. Ultimately, teachers work with these children more than anyone, and it is important that they fully understand how they can make a difference in children's lives.

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