

Running head: PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY AND  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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by  
SYDNEY HERBST  
Dr. Ruth Ann Roberts, Dissertation Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY AND  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

presented by Sydney Herbst,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of education

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Ruth Ann Roberts, Ph. D. Advisor

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Margaret Dalton, Ph. D. Member

---

Lisa Bertrand, Ed. D. Member

---

Robert Buchanan, Ph. D. Member

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Paul Watkins, Ed. D. Member

## Poverty and elementary student achievement

Special thanks to

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my children, Erin, Allyson, Taylor, Travis, and Claire,

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TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY AND  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Sydney Herbst

Dr. Ruth Ann Roberts, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine teachers' perceptions about students from poverty and their academic achievement using the independent variable of the schools' free or reduced lunch population. Responses to the survey were separated into two groups: those from schools with 51% or more of students receiving free or reduced lunch, and schools with 50% or less of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Teachers' perceptions were the same on 36 of 47 survey responses. While differences did exist for 11 of 47 responses, the overall rankings and opinions were similar as high importance was given to parenting techniques, student behavior, and class sizes. Responses with significant differences pertained to mentoring, class size, ability grouping, parenting, and standardized testing. Of the four issues on the survey, the achievement gap ranked highest.

## Chapter One

The achievement gap between students living above the poverty line and those living below it has been discussed in many arenas. Legislators, business people, civic leaders, and educators are all concerned about this discrepancy in achievement. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was federal legislation that provided specific achievement goals for students. In addition, this law delineated consequences for schools whose students could not reach the established achievement goals. As educators have struggled to understand and correct the achievement gap occurring between many different subgroups, it has become very important to research situations where the gap exists as well as ones where the gap has been overcome. Educators across the nation have continued to seek information and possible solutions to close the achievement gap and provide the best possible education for all students.

Children from poverty often are found in the lowest performing groups academically. Historically, federal programs such as Head Start, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Title I), and summer food programs have been implemented to address this group of students. The national government has required each school district to report academic progress on specific disaggregated student groups such as free or reduced lunch, race, gender, and special education needs. By disaggregating the scores of these groups along with other information, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has evaluated the performance of individual schools and school districts. The disaggregated data is used to inform and impact curriculum and instruction. Historically, classroom teachers have had enormous influence on all students, especially those in the elementary school self-

contained classrooms as these teachers typically have spent the most time and have taught the most subjects to one group of students. This elementary teacher influence potentially could have affected all areas of student performance, specifically academics.

### *Conceptual Underpinnings*

Much has been written concerning poverty as it is related to student achievement. In general, poverty indicators are negatively related to student achievement (Bourke, 1998; Fisher & Adler, 1999; Schellenberg, 1998). Other researchers have shown that both education and socioeconomic status of parents has played a decisive role in student attitudes toward school (Lareau, 2000; Epstein and Hollified, 1996). “Schools with higher proportions of their students receiving free or reduced-price lunch had lower achievement than others, particularly in reading” (Bourke, 1998, p. 7). According to Fisher and Adler (1999):

Children who continue to struggle as readers at the end of the primary grades, a disproportionate number are also poor. While low and slow progress in reading has serious consequences for all children, it is especially critical for children who are already placed at risk by poverty. (p. 5)

Data from the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report indicated the percentages of students receiving free or reduced lunch and scoring proficient or above in Grade 4 reading have remained relatively constant since 1998, peaking at 41% in 2007 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Those students not eligible for the National School Lunch Program having scored proficient or above in Grade 4 reading have also remained relatively constant, peaking at 52% in 2007. While the percentages have remained basically the same for each group, the gap between the



groups has also remained constant. Interestingly, the scores have not changed significantly either between or within groups since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

The poverty factor has been identified as a negative influence on student achievement for many years. “Average early reading performance for a school tends to decrease as the proportion of students eligible for free and reduced lunch increases” (Fisher and Adler, 1999, p.6). Bourke also noted in his study that the poverty measure was more closely related to the variance in reading scores than ethnicity variables. “Once the school variable *poverty* was in the regression equation, little or nothing was added to the explanation of achievement by the subsequent addition of the individual student ethnicity variable” (Bourke, 1998, p.9). In other words, poverty has had a major impact on achievement, more so than can be explained by other variables including race.

Researchers have attempted to explain this achievement gap for those students from poverty. Sider and Unruh (2007) enumerated many reasons why these children enter school behind. They included lack of resources in the home to provide clothes, food, shelter, and healthcare. As these students entered school, they were often attending under-resourced schools lacking adequate space, technology, and materials. The schools they attended often had the weakest, lowest paid, and newest teachers. Ruby Payne (2001) stated many of today’s educators have had little connection to poverty outside what they have encountered in their classrooms. According to Payne, this disconnect has occurred because:

. . . an individual brings with him/her the hidden rules of the class in which he/she was raised. . . . Schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use

the hidden rules of middle class. For our students to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school and work. (p. 11)

Payne has provided professional development for teachers and principals and has constructed programs for schools based on assisting educators and others in understanding the culture of poverty. The programs have helped schools to bridge the gaps between children and families of poverty and the general culture of the schools. Socioeconomic variables also have influenced multiple aspects of the school and its community. Bourke (1998) wrote:

It was suggested that aggregated variables have a community context. The suggestion is that such a variable . . . takes on a character of its own which has something to do with the school itself, including the facilities and the views and backgrounds of the staff, and the wider community in which the school is based, and is not simply a function of the characteristics of families of the students who attend. (p. 9)

The Schellenberg (1998) study of a Chicago school district reported that eighty percent of poor students lived in areas of sixty percent free or reduced lunch or higher. A related finding reported by Schellenberg (1998) indicated that “poor children who attend relatively affluent schools have fewer problems and fewer risk characteristics than those attending schools filled with other poor children” (p.4). These studies indicated the effect of student poverty amounted to more than just individual student poverty. Studies on students of poverty by Rosenbaum (1987, 1988) showed “the students in the higher poverty neighborhoods were not doing as well in school as those in less stressed

neighborhoods. However, it could be argued that other concerns, such as reduction in crime and increased availability of work, led to the improved achievement” (Schellenberg, 1998, p.5). Regardless of neighborhood type, the test results indicated that the free lunch group consistently scored the lowest, the reduced-price lunch group scored better, and the non-eligible group scored the highest (Schellenberg, 1998, p. 10). When they looked at neighborhood type, researchers found a steady decline in test scores from the richer neighborhoods to those of extreme poverty. Additionally, “the gap between free and non-eligible students decreased as the economic level of the neighborhood declined. In other words, the least difference in test scores is found in the poorest neighborhoods” (Schellenberg, 1998, p.10). This added more evidence to the argument that collective poverty of a neighborhood was more than just the sum of an individual’s poverty. Possibly, teachers perceived children from poverty and their achievement differently from the achievement of middle class students. If this attitude were present, it could explain some of the achievement gap phenomenon between these two groups.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

The issue addressed in this research was elementary school teachers’ perceptions regarding the achievement gap between students from poverty and those from middle class. Research done by Schellenberg (1998) indicated low socioeconomic students attending middle class schools had greater academic achievement than students from poverty attending schools with predominantly low socioeconomic students. The problem statement centered on the idea that teachers’ perceptions were somehow different in schools educating predominantly low socioeconomic students than they were in schools with mostly middle class students.

*Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to determine what teachers think about students from poverty and their academic achievement. In addition, the researcher intended to determine if teachers' perceptions were different based on the socioeconomic status of the school where they taught. If differences were present, they could be related to the students' academic achievement. The different perceptions may have resulted from teachers' experiences in the classroom, the number of years a teacher has taught, or various other factors.

This study determined in what ways the teachers' perceptions of the achievement gap differed between predominantly middle class elementary schools and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary schools. This research also examined how teachers' perceptions of poverty impacted student achievement. Ultimately this study may enlighten teachers and administrators in developing some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class.

In addition, there was a strong desire personally and professionally to understand why the achievement gap exists between low socioeconomic and middle class students. Heppner and Heppner (2004) believed “. . . having a sense of passion and commitment to your ideas can often help you persevere and stay motivated through the obstacles that are a normal part of the process” (p. 190). As a teacher and an administrator, this researcher has focused on improving student achievement for years. Although much has been written concerning the achievement gap, nothing has provided a definitive answer. This research provided data regarding teacher perceptions of poverty students. If expectations

for learning were different in low and middle socioeconomic schools, the findings could be applicable to changing classroom instruction and reducing the achievement gap.

*Potential implications for the study*

Findings of differing teachers' perceptions in low socioeconomic schools from teachers' perceptions in middle class schools could potentially impact many aspects of teaching. Instructional time, individual attention, student assistance, instructional methods, and positive interactions with students all may be impacted by teachers' perceptions. Many individuals and groups have had a strong desire to understand why the achievement gap exists between students from poverty and those from middle class. This study has provided information regarding teacher perceptions and provided information to inform potential changes in classroom instruction and subsequent reduction of the achievement gap.

*Hypothesis and Research Questions*

The null hypothesis of this research was: Teachers' perceptions of the student achievement gap will not differ between those teaching in middle class elementary schools and those teaching in low socioeconomic elementary schools. Research questions answered in this research were:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of how poverty impacts student academic achievement?
2. In what ways do the teachers' perceptions of the socioeconomic achievement gap differ between predominantly middle class elementary school teachers and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary school teachers?

3. What are some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class?

#### *Limitations*

Limitations of this study included the small geographic area chosen for this research. While schools with a variety of socioeconomic variables were included in the three county region of the study, the subjects were all living and teaching in southeast Missouri, a high poverty area of the state. Additionally, teachers shared beliefs about students and their achievement, so honest responses were wanted but not guaranteed.

The researcher was an elementary school principal working in a school experiencing increasing numbers of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Professional development, both at the personal and building level, has encompassed many aspects of students and families from poverty with the researcher having a particular interest in this area. In addition, the researcher was raised and currently lives in a middle-class family.

#### *Assumptions*

One assumption essential to this study was teachers in middle class schools typically have had middle class students. Students from poverty in a middle class school have not been typical; as low socioeconomic students were assumed to require more and different instruction (Davis, 2006; Johnson, 2002; Payne, 2001; Tomlinson, 2001), the teacher in the middle class school potentially had more time to interact with the students from poverty. In theory, the low socioeconomic student here has received more interaction and individual instruction leading to higher achievement.

*Definition of Key Terms*

For the purpose of this research, low socioeconomic schools were those with fifty-one percent or higher of the student body receiving free or reduced lunch, and middle-class schools had one to fifty percent of the students receiving free or reduced lunch. The National Center for Education Statistics identified five categories of schools based on the number of students receiving free or reduced lunch: less than ten percent; 11 to 25%; 26-50%; 51-74%; and 75% and above.

*Summary*

The issue addressed in this research was elementary school teachers' perceptions of the achievement gap between students from poverty and those from middle class. Research done by Schellenberg (1998) indicated poverty students attending middle class schools had greater academic achievement than poverty students attending low socioeconomic schools. The purpose of this study was to discover what teachers think about poverty students and determine if teachers' perceptions were different based on socioeconomic status of the school where they taught.

This study determined if and in what ways teachers' perceptions of the academic achievement gap differed between predominantly middle class elementary schools and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary schools. This research also examined how teachers' perceptions of poverty impacted student achievement. Ultimately this study may enlighten teachers and administrators to some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class. Instructional time, individual attention, student assistance, instructional methods, and positive interactions with students all may be impacted by teachers' perceptions.

## Chapter Two

The concept of poverty and its relationship to student achievement has been researched in various studies, many of which have been completed in the past ten years. While most have focused on varying aspects of this issue, similar conclusions have been reached. Gazeley and Dunne (2007) summarized these studies by stating, “they identified social class and underachievement as overlapping constructions that were inextricably linked to the perceptions and practices of the teacher” (p. 409). Other research has been done showing a link between the teachers’ perceptions of students and student academic achievement, specifically finding the lower the teacher’s perception of a student’s achievement, the lower the actual achievement.

### *Poverty and Student Achievement*

Poverty and its relationship to student achievement have been studied by numerous researchers. In general, poverty indicators were negatively related to student achievement (Bourke, 1998; Fisher & Adler, 1999; Schellenberg, 1998). Other researchers have shown that both the education and socioeconomic status of parents played a decisive role in student attitudes toward school (Lareau, 2000; Epstein and Hollified, 1996). “Schools with higher proportions of their students receiving free or reduced-price lunch had lower achievement than others, particularly in reading” (Bourke, 1998, p. 7). “Children who continue to struggle as readers at the end of the primary grades, a disproportionate number are also poor. While low and slow progress in reading has serious consequences for all children, it is especially critical for children who are already placed at risk by poverty,” according to Fisher and Adler (1999, p. 5). Data from the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report indicated



more than twice as many fourth grade students who were eligible for free and reduced lunch scored below basic achievement levels set by NAEP (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The percentages of students receiving free or reduced lunch and scoring proficient or above in Grade 4 reading have remained relatively constant since 1998, peaking at 41% in 2007 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Those students not eligible for the National School Lunch Program having scored proficient or above in Grade 4 reading have also remained relatively constant, peaking at 52% in 2007. While the percentages have remained basically the same for each group, the gap between the groups also has remained constant. Interestingly, the scores have not changed significantly either between or within groups since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Poverty has been considered a target category for improved student achievement for many years. “Average early reading performance for a school tends to decrease as the proportion of students eligible for free and reduced lunch increases” (Fisher and Adler, 1999, p.6). Bourke also noted in his study that the poverty measure was more closely related to the variance in reading scores than ethnicity variables. “Once the school variable *poverty* was in the regression equation, little or nothing was added to the explanation of achievement by the subsequent addition of the individual student ethnicity variable” (Bourke, 1999, p.9). Basically, poverty has had a major impact on academic achievement, more so than can be explained by other variables. Shoaf and Shoaf (2006) discussed the impact of living in poverty on educational readiness and student achievement. “Much of the observed relationship between income and schooling appears to be related to a number of confounding factors such as parental education, family

structure, and neighborhood characteristics. For low-income children, a \$10,000 increase in mean family income between birth and age 5 was associated with nearly a full-year increase in completed schooling” (Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006, p. 57). Poverty, however, has been much more than just a dollar figure or an employment statistic, and it will continue to have a significant impact on education.

Noguera and Wing (2006) referred to the different types and amounts of capital that students possess. Researchers have demonstrated that parents’ income level (economic capital) was a primary factor influencing student achievement. Rothstein (2004) indicated middle-class, college-educated parents gave their children such a range of advantages that it became nearly impossible for schools to create a level educational playing field for all. Many researchers believed the gap could be lessened, however. Other types of capital influencing achievement included social capital and cultural capital, and it was difficult to separate the influences of one from the others, although neither of these factors had as much impact as income level. While schools cannot change the backgrounds of disadvantaged students, much can be done to change the school conditions that contribute to and perpetuate the achievement gap.

Researchers have attempted to explain this achievement gap for those students from poverty. Sider and Unruh (2007) enumerated many reasons why these children enter school behind. They included lack of resources in the home to provide clothes, food, shelter, and healthcare. As these students entered school, they were often attending under-resourced schools lacking adequate space, technology, and materials. The schools they attended often had the weakest, lowest paid, and newest teachers. Ruby Payne (2001) stated many of today’s educators have had little connection to poverty outside

what they encountered in their classrooms. This disconnect has occurred because “an individual brings with him/her the hidden rules of the class in which he/she was raised...Schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of middle class. For our students to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school and work” (Payne, 2001, p. 11). Payne has provided professional development and developed programs for schools all based on assisting educators and others in understanding the culture of poverty and how to bridge the gaps between children and families of poverty and the general culture of schools. Socioeconomic variables have been found to influence multiple aspects of the school and its community. This collective school and community factor:

. . . takes on a character of its own which has something to do with the school itself, including the facilities and the views and backgrounds of the staff, and the wider community in which the school is based, and is not simply a function of the characteristics of families of the students who attend. (Bourke, 1998, p. 9)

The Schellenberg (1998) study of a Chicago school district reported that eighty percent of poor students live in areas of sixty percent free and reduced lunch or higher.

A related finding reported by Schellenberg (1998) indicated that “poor children who attend relatively affluent schools have fewer problems and fewer risk characteristics than those attending schools filled with other poor children” (p.4). These studies indicated that the effect of student poverty amounted to more than just the sum of individual student poverty. Studies on students of poverty by Rosenbaum (1987, 1988) showed “the students in the higher poverty neighborhoods were not doing as well in

school as those in less stressed neighborhoods. However, it could be argued that other concerns (such as reductions in crime and increased availability of work) led to the improved achievement” (Schellenberg, 1998, p. 5). Regardless of neighborhood type, the results indicated the free lunch group consistently scored the lowest, the reduced-price lunch scored better, and the non-eligible group scored the highest (Schellenberg, 1998, p. 10). When looking at neighborhood type, researchers found a steady decline in test scores from the richer neighborhoods to those of extreme poverty. Additionally, “the gap between free and non-eligible students decreased as the economic level of the neighborhood declined. In other words, the least difference in test scores is found in the poorest neighborhoods” (Schellenberg, 1998, p. 10). This study added more evidence to the argument that the collective poverty of a neighborhood was more than just the sum of each individual’s poverty.

The issue of poverty has become a basis for viewing the lowest socioeconomic groups as a different culture, at least different from the middle class society of most educators. Learning about the home lives and cultural backgrounds of students in their classroom could be the first step in changing and potentially improving instruction for students from poverty. Bol and Berry (2005) stated:

When examining family characteristics, such as parental educational attainment, parental involvement in their children’s education, and single parent households, liberal scholars argue that the culture of school is grounded in the ethos of the White middle class culture that values and demands certain ways of talking, writing, dressing, and interacting . . . there is a mismatch between students’ home culture and the dominant culture valued by schools. (p. 35)

This disconnect has been a major emphasis of professional development programs and educator studies in schools and districts around the country. In many high poverty schools, elevated rates of teacher turnover have resulted in schools staffed with inexperienced teachers as well as those who are not well-qualified, exacerbating the problem. “Unfortunately, students in schools with large numbers of minority students and low-income populations have fewer qualified teachers than schools that have large white populations” (Bol & Berry, 2005, p. 33). By educating teachers about the differences as well as learning potentials of students from poverty, schools and school districts could improve curriculum and instruction to build on the strengths of these children.

The federal government has provided additional money to schools based on the idea that poorer students need extra services. This funding, referred to as Title I funds, has been given to schools whose populations have more than forty percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Title I funds have been spent on a variety of instructional resources, professional development for teachers, additional personnel, and tutoring programs, for example. Many studies (Fisher & Adler, 1999; McKenzie Group, 1999; McREL, 2005) have looked at the effects of additional instruction on student achievement levels in poorer schools. In general, findings have indicated that poorer students had a less academically enriched background and find traditional school subjects more challenging than students from more affluent backgrounds. In addition, poor nutrition, a focus on basic needs rather than education, and low academic expectations, especially in families from generational poverty have all been shown to be important factors (Schellenberg, 1998). Fisher and Adler (1999) agreed that “failure to acquire basic literacy skills in the early years of schooling too often leads to disappointment,

disengagement from the educational process, and drastically lower expectations for success beyond school” (p. 5). Tamara Friedman, a teacher at Berkley High School in the late 1990s disagreed with this generalization by stating:

the most disturbing piece . . . was the realization that low student achievement . . . is often not based on lack of preparedness . . . many come prepared, reading at grade level, with support of educated parents and families, and they still do not achieve. Like the rest of the school, my students learn to see themselves as nonachievers. (Noguera & Wing, 2006, p. 182)

Her experience may not have been typical of the nation, but the link between student achievement and teacher perception was demonstrated.

Early reading programs have been the focus of many Title I programs. Skills in reading and mathematics have long been considered essential for all adults in this country. Fisher and Adler (1999) identified key elements of successful school operation that allow students from poverty to achieve at levels above the average for non-poverty schools. “Analysis of the early reading program identified five key elements of school operation: focus on student outcomes; multiple reading programs in every classroom; shared responsibility for student success; strong leadership at school and classroom levels; and a veteran, knowledgeable staff” (p. 3). The relationship element stressed by Payne (2001) was missing from the Fisher and Adler (1999) study.

Payne suggested schools needed to understand the motivators for children and families from poverty in order to improve student achievement. Relationships have been demonstrated to be extremely important and need to be cultivated in order for students to achieve academic success (Payne, 2001). Educators need to be aware of the

characteristics of children from poverty and how to work with them and their families.

Payne (2001) reminded us:

As educators . . . the role is not to save the individual, but rather to offer a support system, role models, and opportunities to learn, which will increase the likelihood of the person's success. Ultimately, the choice always belongs to the individual. . . . Even with the financial resources, however, not every individual who received those finances would choose to live differently . . . . But it is the responsibility of educators and others who work with the poor to teach the differences and skill/rules that will allow the individual to make the choice. As it stands now for many of the poor, the choice never exists. (Payne, 2001, p. 148)

Parents of the poor frequently have been uncomfortable dealing with schools, often have been working two or three part-time jobs, and have continued to be highly mobile as jobs and housing change repeatedly. Teachers must do their best to ensure they have as much background information as possible about their students in order to understand the complexities of individual student's learning. Building relationships with all children and their families, especially those from poverty, has been and will continue to be an essential component of the learning process.

### *Teacher Perceptions*

Teachers have been one of the most important factors in the classroom, especially when any kind of change was involved. Some have stated they were the king or queen of their classroom, and administrators' efforts to influence classroom practice has often been very difficult. Teachers' perceptions of themselves and their students has played a role in perpetuating the achievement gap, according to Noguera and Wing (2006). "They do this

through lowered standards and expectations; by giving some students more attention and encouragement than others; and through the passion, organization, and skill they bring to their teaching . . . they can simply accept the failure of large numbers of students as normal and blame the students for their failure” (p. 199). This negative view of teachers does not have to be reality as many teachers have become positive change agents and have worked hard to change the self-perceptions of those students who see themselves as failure and underachievers.

Perceptions are personal, individual, and context-specific. People’s perceptions have influenced the way they interpreted situations and how they responded. Walker and Plomin (2006) discussed influences on perceptions, including “prior social experience and background, organizational socialization, the way in which people believe they are perceived by others, and personality characteristics” (p. 542). In a recent book detailing the study of the achievement gap at Berkeley High School, Peter Noguera and Jean Yonemura Wing spent a great deal of time discussing student poverty and the ways in which the educational system has discriminated against those who don’t know the hidden rules. Interestingly, they referred to the relationship between teacher expectations and reality by stating, “As is often the case, perception has a way of creating its own reality” (2006, p. 5). Relationships between teachers and students have always been extremely important for a variety of reasons. Perry, Donahue, and Weinstein (2007) studied teacher practices and their connection to student academic achievement among other factors:

After controlling for child characteristics at school entry, in classrooms where teachers were observed to offer more instructional and social-emotional support (i.e., attending to students’ interest and initiative, providing appropriately



challenging learning opportunities, and creating positive social relationships), children on average acquired more math skills, made greater behavioral gains, and had more positive perceptions of their academic abilities. Further, a higher percentage of students in such classrooms met academic standards. (Perry, Donahue, & Weinstein, 2007, p. 269)

This finding contrasted with other studies that showed less academic achievement in more child-centered classrooms. The authors suggested this may be due to differing definitions of the child-centered concept. This study also found a positive link between teachers' efforts to "address children's social and emotional needs and support them in their attempts to become well behaved, well-liked, and confident learners" (p. 280). Bol and Berry (2006) referred to "compelling reasons why understanding teachers' perceptions of the achievement gap and strategies for its reduction are significant. Teachers expectations and bias may play a role in the kinds of explanations offered and the types of instructional practices implemented" (p. 35).

Noguera and Wing (2006) identified a student, Pamela, who commented on teacher quality and expressed why she learned the most in her Advanced Placement (AP) classes. "Because the teachers expect us to learn the most. Like, since they don't have low expectations for us, we kind of rise to the occasion" (p. 102). In addition, these classes were taught by the most qualified subject area teachers. Not only were the individual scores important as the students went on to college, the overall success of the high school was reflected in the number of AP tests taken and successfully completed.

The teacher-pupil relationship factor has been demonstrated through numerous studies. Underachieving students often failed to make any strong relationships with either

peers or teachers (Bol & Berry, 2005; Gazeley & Dunne, 2007; Payne, 2001; Walker & Plomin, 2006). Perry, Donahue, and Weinstein (2007) stated:

It appears that when teachers are more in tune with students as individuals . . . and when they then use this information to deliver instruction that is in some ways suited to individual needs, more growth is possible for more children. In contrast, when teachers approach all children in the same manner, using the same materials, etc., it is likely that some students will be left without the opportunity to learn. (p. 281)

Walker and Plomin (2006) explained their similar research findings in this way. “. . . teacher-pupil chemistry is likely to vary widely depending on the unique characteristics of the teacher and the individual child . . . a child’s love of learning is also largely dependent on the child’s relationship with the teacher – as well as the teacher’s skill in making the subject matter come alive” (p. 555).

Beliefs and expectations held by teachers are formed in a variety of ways. Unfortunately, these expectations have prevented teachers from implementing curricula and using instruction that could benefit all students. Swanson (2006) found that when teachers implemented techniques typically used for gifted students with all pupils, all pupils benefited. These techniques included problem-based learning, inquiry, reasoning, and critical thinking. Many educators have assumed students from poverty were not capable of learning higher-level thinking skills. Bennett (2008) reported most teachers have come from middle-class backgrounds where their lives rarely encountered low-income students until they entered the classroom. There was little or no instruction given

to preservice teachers regarding working with low-income students. Bol and Berry (2005) indicated:

Teachers form different expectations of students as a function of race, gender, and social class, and these expectations seem to be established in different ways.

Teacher expectations and perceptions had a significant effect on sixth grade students' grades and performance on a standardized mathematics assessment . . . teacher expectations were almost three times greater for white than for African American students, and the effects were also large for girls and low-income students. (p. 34)

All people's perceptions have been influenced by prior experiences; this was also the case with teachers. Expectations were formed based on experiences teachers have had in classrooms as they have gone through school in addition to their experiences as educators. "Research about teaching suggests that self-definition is the result of dynamic interactions with others, students, parents and principals," (Ben-Peretz, Mendelson, & Kron, 2003, p. 281). Bol and Berry (2005) found:

Teachers' expectations of their students and their belief that achievement differences are caused by characteristics of their students may make it less likely that they will modify their instructional practices to better align with NCTM standards and principals. Similarly, Ferguson (1998) concluded teachers' expectations, perceptions, and behaviors sustain and even expand the gap in achievement between white and black students. (p. 41)

Many educators believed all students were treated alike in their classrooms. Differing perceptions for different groups of students generally was not discussed or even

recognized by most teachers. In a study of secondary mathematics teachers' perceptions of the achievement gap, Bol and Berry (2005) discussed differences between how minority and white students were taught:

. . . Many minority students are not experiencing instructional practices consistent with the recommendations suggested by the National Council Teacher of Mathematics (NCTM). In comparison more white students are experiencing NCTM standards-based instruction (Lubienski, 2003). This differential instruction might be explained by teachers' expectations. Ferguson (1998) found that teachers' expectations, perceptions, and behaviors sustain and even expand the black-white achievement gap, and concluded that the effects accumulate from kindergarten through high school. (p. 33)

Tamara Friedman, a teacher at Berkley High School in the late 1990s stated "the most disturbing piece . . . was the realization that low student achievement . . . is often not based on lack of preparedness . . . many come prepared, reading at grade level, with support of educated parents and families, and they still do not achieve. Like the rest of the school, my students learn to see themselves as nonachievers" (Noguera & Wing, 2006, p. 182). Her experience may not have been typical of the nation, but the link between achievement and perception could have been a factor in student achievement. These were powerful words which most educators would be surprised to hear, but the awareness of this discrepancy in perceptions could do much to solve this problem. Teachers' perceptions of parents has also been shown to influence interactions with students and parents. Parents of the poor were frequently uncomfortable dealing with schools, often worked two or three part-time jobs, and were highly mobile as jobs and housing changed

repeatedly. Noguera and Wing (2006) reported a study where several perceived parental deficiencies were reported by teachers even as the teachers themselves admitted no contact or familiarity with the parents. These deficiencies included lack of involvement and guidance, lack of encouragement and support, and low expectations for their children. Teachers also felt the parents served as poor role models both educationally and socially. Research reported by Amatea (2007) revealed when “teachers perceive parents are uninvolved, they expect lower academic performance from their children” (p. 85).

Teachers’ self-concepts and perceptions of students could have far-reaching effects on academic achievement. Interestingly, most teachers were unaware of their own perceptions and beliefs, especially as they related to student achievement (Gazeley & Dunne, 2007). Student teachers involved in this particular study emphasized the importance of the teacher’s view and expectations of students and how those expectations determined how they behaved. An Italian study of junior high teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs as determinants of students’ academic achievement demonstrated the impact of perceptions. Capara, Barbaranelli, Steca, and Malone (2006) stated:

Teacher’s self-efficacy beliefs may influence a student’s achievement in several ways. Teachers with high self-efficacy beliefs are more likely than teachers with a low sense of self-efficacy to implement didactic innovations in the classroom and to use classroom management approaches and adequate teaching methods that encourage students’ autonomy and reduce custodial control . . . to take responsibility for students with special learning needs . . . to manage classroom problems . . . and to keep students on task. In addition, teachers’ perception of self-efficacy has been associated with enhanced student motivation, increased

self-esteem, strong self-direction, ease in managing school transitions, and more positive attitudes toward school. (p. 475)

Student perceptions of teachers were in contrast to teacher perceptions of themselves with some studies indicating teachers' perceptions of themselves were quite different than those of their students. Research on academic achievement suggested that those student perceptions of teachers were less important to student achievement than what the teachers believed about themselves (Ben-Peretz, Mendelson, & Kron, 2003; Capara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006; Walker & Plomin, 2006). Ben-Peretz, Mendelson, and Kron (2003) found:

half of the students participating in their study of teachers' perceptions considered teachers to be 'super-controller' (i.e., policeman, big boss, judge), but only 13.3% of the educators shared this view; more than half of the educators' views of themselves were positive (i.e. listening ear, supporting shoulder, protective tree) . . . the educators tended to perceive themselves more in a caring role, whereas student tended to focus on the evaluative, controlling aspects of teaching. (p. 279)

Professional development for educators should include self-reflection activities as well as learning activities to help teachers better understand students.

As discussed earlier, higher student achievement was found in schools with higher middle to upper class socioeconomic student populations. Conversely, lower levels of student achievement were more typical in those schools with higher populations of students from poverty. This correlation would be cyclical if the following research was considered. Capara, Barbaranelli, Steca, and Malone (2006) discovered a:

reciprocal effect between a teacher's perceived self-efficacy and a student's achievement, showing that teacher's perceived self-efficacy is particularly high in schools with high-achieving and well-behaved students . . . as teachers of talented and disciplined students are more likely to be successful in their activities and tasks than teachers of students who present learning or disciplinary problems, the repeated experiences of success with students may enrich their experience and contribute to their robust sense of efficacy. (p. 475)

This study confirmed that "previous student's academic achievement predicted subsequent achievement as well as teacher's self-efficacy beliefs, which, in turn, contributed significantly to student's achievement and teacher's job satisfaction" (p. 483). A study done by Ben-Peretz, Mendelson, and Kron (2003) of Israeli high school teachers found that "the teaching context has a significant impact on teachers' images of their professional selves" (p. 277). This context-image connection needs to be explained to all teachers in order to break down misconceptions about teacher efficacy and student achievement.

Classroom teachers have had and will continue to have enormous influence on all students, especially those in the elementary school self-contained classrooms. These teachers typically have spent the most time and have taught the most subjects to one group of students. Their influence could potentially affect all areas of student performance, specifically academics. Gazeley and Dunne's (2007) findings supported the fact that "They [students from poverty] are over-represented in lower teaching sets and are at a greater risk of exposure to reduced teacher expectations, pupil disruption and loss of self-esteem" (p. 412). The teachers' perceptions of students and their academic

achievement were related, specifically the lower the teacher's perception of a student's achievement, the lower the actual achievement. Students from poverty needed teachers who understood their economic and cultural background as they built relationships with each other. It was these relationships that formed the basis for increased achievement for these children who were often among the lowest-performing group academically.

This study determined what ways teachers' perceptions of the achievement gap differed between predominantly middle class elementary schools and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary schools. In addition, this research also examined how teachers' perceptions of poverty may impact student achievement. This research also examined how teachers' perceptions of poverty impacted student achievement.

Ultimately this study may enlighten teachers and administrators in developing some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class. Teachers' perceptions of the academic achievement gap may have an impact on many factors of teaching including instructional time, individual attention and assistance, and positive interactions with students.

### *Possible Solutions*

Many educators and state governments have begun advocating for high-quality public preschool programs and full-day kindergarten programs. Barnett (1995) stated "preschool intervention can help close the achievement gaps and can have important long-term impacts on students through middle school, high school, and even into adulthood" (p. 50). Results from Barnett's meta-analysis of 35 studies of early childhood programs indicated "large short-term benefits on intelligence quotient (IQ) and sizable long-term effects on school achievement, grade retention, placement in special education,



and social adjustment” (1995, p. 25). The effects of preschool programs have meant the difference between failing and passing, regular or special education, dropping out or graduating from high school for some students (Barnett, 1995). In terms of cost-benefit values, providing at least two years of quality early childhood education at a cost to society of approximately \$12, 356.00 resulted in total benefits to society of over \$100,000.00 in terms of earnings, employment, crime, and welfare (Barnett, 1995).

Parent involvement and support was often pointed to as a solution to the academic achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class. Federal legislation has mandated parent involvement in such programs as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Title I), and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Often parents of underachieving students were reluctant to participate or even come to school due to a variety of factors. They may have felt intimidated by school personnel, may have had negative school experiences themselves, or may have believed they had nothing to offer the school or the students. Parents of the poor were frequently uncomfortable dealing with schools, often worked two or three part-time jobs, and were highly mobile as jobs and housing changed repeatedly. Amatea (2007) reported parents described themselves as being talked down to and patronized when dealing with school personnel. Sometimes, these parents did not attempt to contact school personnel or get involved until they were angry. Noguera and Wing (2006) quoted a student, explaining “by the time parents of color get to school, they’re pissed off. They typically find out way too late that something is wrong, so by the time they get to school, they’re angry, and teachers are going to know it” (p. 214). Several programs have been successful in soliciting parent involvement to the benefit of the students. One of these was organizing

small group meetings in locations outside of school such as homes, churches, parks, and even laundromats. In addition, food and transportation were often provided to eliminate as many barriers as possible to attendance. Focus groups and small group meetings may have been more effective in establishing open communication than letters, parent councils, or large meetings. Collaboration with other agencies and organizations such as social services, youth agencies, and community organizations that have established relationships with parents may encourage and increase parent involvement in schools.

Educators should make every attempt to involve parents early, to get to know them at the beginning of the school year, and to elicit their support. Too often, the first contact a parent had with a teacher was negative; this did little to encourage the parent to be involved in the child's education. The parent voice needed to be heard individually and as a collective group. However, school administrators continued to be frustrated in their efforts to gain meaningful parent participation and feedback into federal programs. Shoaf and Shoaf (2006) emphasized the need to identify and hear from parents that are identified from different groups such as "generationally urban poor, generationally rural poor, situationally urban poor, or situationally rural poor. These different circumstances may lead to varying needs in service" (p. 58). Situationally poor families had more resources and skills than those from generational poverty. However, parents from poverty overwhelmingly believed that schools were the most prepared to provide educational assistance for their children.

Title I was created to eliminate the achievement gap and to provide additional support for children from poverty. This federal legislation required parental participation in the evaluation of the programs at each school; usually participation in informational

meetings was limited due to the same reasons these parents rarely come to school.

Interestingly, Shoaf and Shoaf (2006) reported the major roadblock to communication between parents and their children was a lack of confidence on the part of the parent. Parents lacked the confidence to help their children with academic problems, so they strongly supported programs like Title I that provided academic assistance they believed they could not. In addition, parents believed regular class sizes did not allow teachers to work in small groups. Programs such as before- and after-school tutoring and others outside of the typical school day were requested and supported by parents who did not believe their help would improve the academic achievement of their children. These parents also favored extended school days and school years for their children. Summer education programs were also strongly supported by parents from poverty who want them to include academic programs and enrichment to stop the “summer learning slide” (Shoaf and Shoaf, 2006, p. 65). Some characteristics of effective summer education programs included a focus on accelerating learning, firm commitment to youth development, and a proactive approach to summer learning, according to Bell and Carrillo (2007). They emphasized that an effective program speeds up learning rather than letting it slip away over the summer. Continued funding of and school participation in meal programs such as the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program was supported by parents and educators as ways to help children with academic pursuits.

School counselors have played important roles in the education of children from poverty. Amatea (2007) cited research stating children from poverty were significantly more likely than other children to report increased anxiety levels and depression, more behavioral difficulties, greater incidence of school failure, and higher rates of

absenteeism. In addition, children from poverty were twice as likely as other children to demonstrate serious mental health and educational needs while being much less likely to have access to these services. In traditional roles, school counselors have worked with children to be successful in these areas; this work needs to be continued and expanded, if possible. Counselors were also key individuals in the school who educated teachers in many areas of student life. They have specialized training in multicultural counseling, student and family behavior, and problem-solving. These skills can be taught to teachers and utilized in ways to bridge cultural gaps between teachers and students, teachers and families, and teachers and the curriculum. For example, counselors have helped teachers see that a focus on blaming parents for a child's problems only increases parental defensiveness and blocks efforts to work together.

Teachers played a critical role in educating and empowering children from poverty. Sider and Unruh (2007) compared the role of teachers to that of airline pilots, stating that you would not want to fly with a pilot who lands 90% of the planes he flies. These researchers believed that teachers and principals need to approach educating children from poverty as a matter of life and death. If they did not receive a high school diploma, it was highly unlikely they would ever have a job with decent health insurance or middle-class wages. These students would more than likely end up living in unsafe neighborhoods and working dead-end jobs, never developing to the potential they could have. Professional development in the areas of relationship building, understanding poverty, and instructional strategies relevant to low-income students will enable educators to be more effective with children from poverty. Preservice teachers need specialized instruction regarding working with low-income students. School counselors

can assist teachers in identifying areas of strengths in students in order to design instructional activities that are more meaningful to students. School districts must strive to keep class sizes low, to offer time for educators to learn about and connect with parents, and to keep searching for ways to increase achievement for children from poverty.

Sider and Unruh (2007) stressed that it is not enough to close the achievement gap on test scores. “What is needed is a pervasive and shared educational ideology that can make the school the hub of the neighborhood – a place where all youth and their parents are equally welcomed and served, and where the interests of the entire community are promoted” (p. 60). They advocated for teacher persistence, preserving learning students at all costs, and putting theory into practice. Educators needed support to avoid burnout, to accept fallibility, and to take risks. Teacher recruitment and retention were important factors in closing the achievement gap for children from poverty. These efforts should focus on building relationships of trust with students, not the attainment of advanced degrees or years of experience.

The concept of poverty and its relationship to student achievement has been researched in various studies, many of which have been completed in the past ten years. While most have focused on varying aspects of this issue, similar conclusions have been reached. Gazeley and Dunne (2007) summarized these studies by stating, “they identified social class and underachievement as overlapping constructions that were inextricably linked to the perceptions and practices of the teacher” (p. 409). Other research has been done showing a link between the teachers’ perceptions of students and student academic

achievement, specifically finding the lower the teacher's perception of a student's achievement, the lower the actual achievement will be.

## Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

Much has been written recently concerning poverty as it relates to student achievement. In general, poverty indicators were negatively related to student achievement (Bourke, 1998; Fisher & Adler, 1999; Schellenberg, 1998). Other researchers have shown that both education and socioeconomic status of parents played a decisive role in student attitudes toward school (Lareau, 2000; Epstein and Hollified, 1996). Research done by Bourke (1998) found “Schools with higher proportions of their students receiving free or reduced-price lunch had lower achievement than others, particularly in reading” (p. 7). According to Fisher and Adler (1999):

Children who continue to struggle as readers at the end of the primary grades, a disproportionate number are also poor. While low and slow progress in reading has serious consequences for all children, it is especially critical for children who are already placed at risk by poverty. (p. 5)

Data from the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report indicated the percentages of students receiving free or reduced lunch and scoring proficient or above in Grade 4 reading have remained relatively constant since 1998, peaking at 41% in 2007 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Those students not eligible for the National School Lunch Program having scored proficient or above in Grade 4 reading have also remained relatively constant, peaking at 52% in 2007. While the percentages have remained basically the same for each group, the gap between the groups has also remained constant. Interestingly, the scores have not changed significantly either between or within groups since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. It was discovered that “average early reading performance for a school tends to

decrease as the proportion of students eligible for free and reduced lunch increases” (Fisher and Adler, 1999, p. 6). Bourke also noted in his study that the poverty measure is more closely related to the variance in reading scores than ethnicity variables. It was noted that “once the school variable *poverty* was in the regression equation, little or nothing was added to the explanation of achievement by the subsequent addition of the individual student ethnicity variable” (Bourke, 1999, p. 9). In other words, poverty has had a major impact on achievement, more so than can be explained by other variables such as race.

Researchers have attempted to explain this achievement gap for those students from poverty. Sider and Unruh (2007) enumerated many reasons why these children enter school behind. They included lack of resources in the home to provide clothes, food, shelter, and healthcare. As these students enter school, they were often attending under-resourced schools lacking adequate space, technology, and materials. The schools they attended had the weakest, lowest paid, and newest teachers. Ruby Payne (2001) stated many of today’s educators had little connection to poverty outside what they encountered in their classrooms. According to Payne (2001), this disconnect occurred because:

an individual brings with him/her the hidden rules of the class in which he/she was raised. . . Schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of middle class. For our students to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school and work. (p. 11)

Payne has provided professional development and developed programs for schools all based on assisting educators and others in understanding the culture of poverty and how



to bridge the gaps between children and families of poverty and the general culture of schools. Socioeconomic variables have been found to influence multiple aspects of the school and its community. Bourke (1998) wrote:

It was suggested that aggregated variables have a community context. The suggestion is that such a variable . . . takes on a character of its own which has something to do with the school itself, including the facilities and the views and backgrounds of the staff, and the wider community in which the school is based, and is not simply a function of the characteristics of families of the students who attend. (p. 9)

The Schellenberg (1998) study of a Chicago school district reported that eighty percent of poverty students lived in areas of sixty percent free and reduced lunch or higher. A related finding reported by Schellenberg (1998) indicated that “poor children who attend relatively affluent schools have fewer problems and fewer risk characteristics than those attending schools filled with other poor children” (p. 4). These studies indicated the effect of student poverty amounted to more than just the sum of individual student poverty. Studies on students of poverty by Rosenbaum (1987, 1988) showed “the students in the higher poverty neighborhoods were not doing as well in school as those in less stressed neighborhoods. However, it could be argued that other concerns, such as reductions in crime and increased availability of work, led to the improved achievement” (Schellenberg, 1998, p. 5). Regardless of neighborhood type, the results indicated that the free lunch group consistently scored the lowest, the reduced-price lunch scored better, and the non-eligible group scored the highest (Schellenberg, 1998, p. 10). When looking at neighborhood type, researchers found a steady decline in test scores from the richer

neighborhoods to those of extreme poverty. Additionally, “the gap between free and non-eligible students decreased as the economic level of the neighborhood declined. In other words, the least difference in test scores is found in the poorest neighborhoods” (Schellenberg, 1998, p. 10). This added more evidence to the argument that collective poverty of a neighborhood was more than just the sum of individual poverty.

### *Problem and Purposes Overview*

The issue addressed in this research was elementary school teachers’ perceptions of the achievement gap between students from poverty and those from middle class. Research done by Schellenberg (1998) indicated low socioeconomic students attending middle class schools had greater academic achievement than students from poverty attending schools with predominantly low socioeconomic students. The problem statement centered on the idea that teachers’ perceptions were somehow different in schools educating predominantly low socioeconomic students than they were in schools with mostly middle class students.

The purpose of this study was to find out what teachers think about students from poverty and their academic achievement. In addition, the researcher determined if teachers’ perceptions were different based on socioeconomic status of the school where they teach. If differences were present, they could be related to the students’ academic achievement. The different perceptions may result from teachers’ experiences in the classroom, the number of years a teacher has taught, or various other factors.

This study determined what ways teachers’ perceptions of the achievement gap differed between predominantly middle class elementary schools and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary schools. It also identified teachers’ perceptions of how

poverty impacts student academic achievement. The study has provided information pertaining to some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class.

### *Research Questions*

Research questions answered in this research were:

1. In what ways do the teachers' perceptions of the socioeconomic achievement gap differ between predominantly middle class elementary school teachers and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary school teachers?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of how poverty impacts student academic achievement?
3. What are some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class?

### *Design of the Project*

The basis for this research was a survey to determine teachers' perceptions. The survey was originally used as a research tool for a North Carolina study focusing on differences between black and white teachers' perceptions (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). With permission from the study's authors, the researcher used the basic survey with a few minor changes to reflect this study's emphasis on poverty as opposed to race (see Appendix). The majority of the survey questions contained forced-choice responses; however, a few questions at the end provided open-ended questions to allow teachers the opportunity to give individual answers.

Because survey data was used, the research paradigm utilized was positivism. Positivism is often assumed when one discusses research, especially in the science arena.

The positivist belief assumed that social and natural realities had an existence not dependent upon human cognition. In simpler terms, this means there were things in our world that were *real* to all and not dependent upon humans to interpret or experience them in order for them to exist. The epistemology associated with positivism was objectivist, accepting a theory-neutral language and the idea that it was possible to be objective when conducting research. As one considered scientific research, positivism was often what came to mind as it was focused on discovering some truth that could be uncovered by anyone without regard to the human interaction factor of the researcher.

The positivist view of theory emphasized generalizability. Research should create knowledge with the aim of predictability. The positivist point of view maintained that careful control of the research situation and its variables allowed for generalizing of results to other situations. Reflexivity involved the relationship between the researcher and the research itself. The positivists considered this relationship to be purely objective with no interaction or investment by the researcher in the study. The positivist researcher must be removed from the study and remain as unbiased and uninvolved as possible.

Using quantitative methods helped detect researcher biases and assumptions. Because of their reliance on measurable data, quantitative studies were more precise in measurement and more sensitive to biases that were unavoidable in qualitative research (Heppner & Heppner, 2004; Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 2006). Validity and reliability were important aspects of quantitative research. Validity was established as the researcher demonstrated the survey instrument accurately measured teachers' perceptions (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2004; Heppner & Heppner, 2004). Reliability of research was dependent upon the consistency of the results (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2004; Heppner &

Heppner, 2004). By gathering data in several schools falling into each of the two categories of poverty school and middle class schools, the researcher determined the survey results were consistent among each school category. A pilot study was conducted in May 2008 utilizing staff from one poverty school and one middle-class school. Statistical tests were done to determine if significant differences existed between the responses from the two schools. In addition, tests were done comparing the answers from each school in May 2008 with the answers obtained in September 2008.

In terms of statistical methods, the researcher used t-tests to determine significant differences in teachers' perceptions of the causes of the achievement gap as well as possible solutions using the independent variable of school type. This was determined by using a handout entitled *Quantitative Research Design and Methods* (Maxcy, Messner, & Piveral, July 12, 2005). This research was a comparative study looking at significant differences between the means of two groups. The data was disaggregated according to free and reduced lunch percentage, teacher gender, and teacher experience.

### *Methods*

#### *Setting*

Public schools in three Southeast Missouri counties (Bollinger, Cape Girardeau, and Scott) were used for the study. Statistics from the 2006-2007 school year were obtained from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Schools and were used to determine free and reduced lunch percentages. Poverty schools were those with fifty-one percent or higher of the student body receiving free or reduced lunch, and middle-class schools had twenty to fifty percent receiving free or reduced lunch.

### *Participants*

Participants were selected based on their employment as certified elementary teachers in public schools in three Southeast Missouri counties (Bollinger, Cape Girardeau, and Scott). Permissions were sought from and granted by superintendents in these districts which had free and reduced lunch percentages ranging from a low of 20.8% to a high of 62.8% with individual buildings ranging from 17.5% to 92.8%. Surveys were completed by the teachers under the direction of the building principal. The researcher made arrangements with district superintendents and building principals to distribute the survey to staff members in a way that was most convenient to the teachers.

### *Variables*

The independent variable was the family income level of elementary schools and the dependent variables were teachers' perceptions of the socioeconomic achievement gap and how those perceptions differed between predominantly middle class elementary school teachers and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary school teachers. Poverty schools were those with fifty-one percent or higher of the student body receiving free or reduced lunch, and middle-class schools had twenty to fifty percent receiving free or reduced lunch. Information was sought as to teachers' perceptions of the causes of the academic achievement gap and possible solutions.

### *Researchers*

The researcher worked independently in gathering and analyzing information. Subjects were certified elementary teachers employed by public school districts in Bollinger, Cape Girardeau, and Scott counties in Southeast Missouri.

### *Sources of data*

Survey results contained the primary information needed in this study.

Demographic information of schools and school districts including free and reduced lunch status and size was obtained through the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Schools website. Survey information on teachers' perceptions was obtained as well as demographic information on the teachers themselves including years in teaching, gender, and race/ethnicity.

### *Data collection methods*

Survey data was collected from educators in public schools in three Southeast Missouri counties (Bollinger, Cape Girardeau, and Scott). Permissions were sought from superintendents in these districts which have free and reduced lunch percentages ranging from a low of 20.8% to a high of 62.8% with individual buildings ranging from 17.5% to 92.8% (see Table 1). Surveys were completed by the teachers under the direction of the building principal. The researcher made arrangements with district superintendents and building principals to distribute the survey to staff members in a way that was most convenient to the teachers.

### *Procedures*

#### *Time line*

Permission was obtained from the authors of the survey instrument before the research was conducted. This permission was solicited during the spring of 2008. The researcher contacted the schools and school districts in the three Southeast Missouri counties (Bollinger, Cape Girardeau, and Scott). Arrangements were made to have teachers complete the surveys during the fall of 2008.

Table 1

*Percentages of Elementary Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunch in Bollinger,  
Cape Girardeau, and Scott Counties, 2007*

School District	School Building	Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunch (%)
Cape Girardeau	Alma Schrader	17.7
	Blanchard	79.0
	Clippard	47.9
	Franklin	74.5
	Jefferson	92.8
	Central Middle	58.3
Delta R-V	Elementary	38.7
Jackson R-II	Gordonville	37.8
	Millersville	36.2
	North	31.7
	Orchard	42.8
	West Lane	37.4
	Jackson Middle	27.5
Kelso C-7	K-8	17.5
Leopold R-III	Elementary	26.0
Meadow Heights	Elementary	59.3
Nell Holcomb	K-8	38.3
Oak Ridge	Elementary	38.7
Oran R-III	Elementary	60.6



Scott City R-I	Elementary	50.5
	Middle School	39.4
Scott County R-IV	Elementary	54.4
	Middle	53.0
Scott County R-V	Elementary	65.2
Sikeston R-6	Kindergarten Center	65.7
	Lee Hunter	62.3
	Matthews	63.9
	Morehouse	77.7
	Southeast	62.2
	Southwest	67.8
	Middle School	58.0
Woodland R-IV	Elementary	59.3
Zalma R-V	Elementary	56.0

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*Note.* From “2006-2007 School Accountability Report Card,” Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (n.d.). Retrieved January 31, 2008, from [http://www.dese.mo.gov/schooldata/school\\_data.html](http://www.dese.mo.gov/schooldata/school_data.html)

#### *Materials/instruments*

The instrument used for data collection of educators’ perceptions was entitled “Survey: Educators’ Perceptions of the Achievement Gap” (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). Minor changes were made in some wording to ensure a focus on the achievement gap between students of poverty and middle-class, removing as much focus on race as possible (see Appendix).

*Quality Standards and Strategies to Maintain Quality in Research*

The trustworthiness of the study was established by conducting the research in an ethical manner, collecting data in reliable and valid ways, and reaching conclusions based on the data. Quantitative methods enabled the researcher to report precise numbers related to how much or how many. These methods allowed for prediction and confirmation of a hypothesis in statistical terms, according to Merriam (1998). The independent variable was the family income level of elementary schools, and the dependent variables were teachers' perceptions of the achievement gap. Poverty schools were those with fifty-one percent or higher of the student body receiving free or reduced lunch, and middle-class schools had twenty to fifty percent receiving free or reduced lunch. Information was sought as to teachers' perceptions of the causes of the achievement gap as well as possible solutions.

The researcher looked at three criteria that Heppner and Heppner (2004) discussed: testability, feasibility, and significance. This study met the criterion of testability by having the variable of teachers' perceptions being quantified using a number scale. The element of assigning a number value met the criterion for quantitative research. The feasibility criterion was met by having school district data including free and reduced lunch status on the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website. By limiting the research to the three counties in Southeast Missouri, the researcher reduced the potential expense of the study. The significance of this research could be quite useful dependent upon a significant difference existing between the teachers' perceptions in the two types of schools. Previous research had reported that poverty students in middle-class schools had higher achievement than poverty students in

poverty schools (Schellenberg, 1998), so the connection between the school's economic status and student achievement was previously documented. These factors determined the appropriateness of the study as well as the potential impact of the results. The researcher contended a quantitative approach to this study revealed usable information in a relatively short time period. Quantitative methods allowed for statistical analysis of data and generalizability of information. "Generalizability is a key issue in considering what type of sample is most appropriate for your thesis or dissertation" (Heppner & Heppner, 2004, p. 180). Quantitative methods enabled the researcher to report precise numbers related to how much or how many, and including all public school teachers in this area increased the ability to apply this research.

### *Summary*

This study determined in what ways the teachers' perceptions of the achievement gap differed between predominantly middle class elementary schools and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary schools. In addition, this research also examined how teachers' perceptions of poverty may impact student academic achievement. Ultimately this study may enlighten teachers and administrators to some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class. Teachers' perceptions of the achievement gap may have an impact on many factors of teaching including instructional time, individual attention and assistance, and positive interactions with students.

## Chapter Four: Results

The issue addressed in this research was elementary school teachers' perceptions of the achievement gap between students from poverty and those from middle class. Research done by Schellenberg (1998) indicated low socioeconomic students attending middle class schools had greater academic achievement than students from poverty attending schools with predominantly low socioeconomic students. The problem statement centered on the idea that teachers' perceptions were somehow different in schools educating predominantly low socioeconomic students than they were in schools with mostly middle class students.

The purpose of this study was to find out what teachers think about students from poverty and their academic achievement. In addition, the researcher determined if teachers' perceptions were different based on socioeconomic status of the school where they teach. If differences were present, they could be related to the students' academic achievement. The different perceptions may have resulted from teachers' experiences in the classroom, the number of years a teacher has taught, or various other factors.

This study determined in what ways teachers' perceptions of the achievement gap differed between predominantly middle class elementary schools and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary schools. It also identified teachers' perceptions of how poverty impacts student academic achievement. The study should inform the profession of some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class.

The instrument used for data collection of educators' perceptions was entitled "Survey: Educators' Perceptions of the Achievement Gap" (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002).

Minor changes were made in some wording to ensure a focus on the achievement gap between students of poverty and middle-class, removing as much focus on race as possible (see Appendix).

#### *Organization of data analysis*

Data from the pilot study is presented first. This study was conducted in May 2008 and utilized the staff from one poverty school and one middle-class school. Following this, data from the research study done in September 2008 is presented. Each data set is organized according to the three research questions.

1. In what ways do the teachers' perceptions of the socioeconomic achievement gap differ between predominantly middle class elementary school teachers and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary school teachers?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of how poverty impacts student academic achievement?
3. What are some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class?

#### *Descriptive characteristics of respondents*

The respondents were all educators living and teaching in southeast Missouri, a high poverty area of the state. The pilot study conducted in May 2008 utilized teachers from two elementary schools in the Cape Girardeau Public Schools District. The research study conducted in the fall of 2008 involved teachers who were working in public schools in Bollinger, Cape Girardeau, or Scott Counties during September 2008. They were overwhelmingly white and female with the vast majority being classroom teachers. The pilot study group had a mean of 15.4 years of experience with no significant difference

between the poverty school and the middle class school. The research group had a significant difference between the two groups when looking at years of experience. Teachers in the predominantly low socioeconomic school group had a mean of 11.47 years of experience while the predominantly middle class schools had teachers with a mean of 13.86 years of experience. This difference was significant  $t(226) = -1.997$ . The range of experience for both the pilot study and the research study went from less than one to over 40 years.

*Research questions and associated hypotheses*

This study utilized three research questions to determine whether or not a difference exists in teachers' perceptions of achievement gap issues between teachers working in middle class elementary schools and those working in low socioeconomic elementary school.

1. In what ways do the teachers' perceptions of the socioeconomic achievement gap differ between predominantly middle class elementary school teachers and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary school teachers?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of how poverty impacts student academic achievement?
3. What are some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class?

The null hypothesis of this research was: Teachers' perceptions of the student achievement gap will not differ between those teaching in middle class elementary schools and those teaching in low socioeconomic elementary schools.

*Analysis of data**Pilot study*

The respondents were all educators living and teaching in southeast Missouri, a high poverty area of the state. All were teaching in public schools in the Cape Girardeau Public School District during May 2008. They were overwhelmingly white and female with the vast majority being classroom teachers. Their years of experience ranged from less than one to over 40 years with the mean being 15.4 years.

Research question 1 - In what ways do teachers' perceptions of the socioeconomic achievement gap differ between predominantly middle class elementary school teachers and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary school teachers?

An independent samples *t* test was conducted to evaluate the hypothesis that there is no difference in teachers' perceptions between those teaching in middle class schools and those teaching in low socioeconomic schools (see Table 2). Low socioeconomic schools have a 1 under the school heading of the table while middle class schools have a 2. No significant differences were found,  $t(39) =$  range from -1.827 to 1.894,  $p < .05$ .

Research question 2 - What are teachers' perceptions of how poverty impacts student academic achievement? The achievement gap was perceived to be the most significant of the four issues listed facing educational policy makers with the teacher shortage being the least (see Table 2). Looking at the possible causes of the achievement gap, teachers from both groups identified low parent income, segregation in schools (where most students are low socioeconomic), and parenting techniques as some of the most significant. The teachers also believed student behavior (disruptive or inappropriate) and large class sizes to be problematic. Factors not considered significant

Table 2

*Pilot Study Statistics, May 2008*

Survey criterion	school	n	M	SD	<i>t</i>
1. informed about achievement gap	1	20	1.65	0.49	
	2	21	1.86	0.57	-1.25
2. importance of achievement gap	1	20	1.25	0.44	
	2	21	1.19	0.40	0.45
3a. importance – teacher shortage	1	20	1.85	1.04	
	2	22	1.77	1.07	0.24
3b. importance – achievement gap	1	20	3.10	0.97	
	2	22	3.22	0.97	-0.43
3c. importance – ending social promotion	1	20	2.30	1.21	
	2	22	2.40	1.18	-0.29
3d. importance – teacher salaries	1	20	2.75	0.91	
		22	2.31	1.17	1.34



Table 2 (continued)

*Pilot Study Statistics, May 2008*

Survey criterion - Causes	school	n	M	SD	<i>t</i>
4a. low parent income	1	20	2.80	1.10	
	2	22	2.95	1.09	-0.46
4b. student fear of being teased	1	20	1.90	0.97	
	2	22	1.63	0.95	0.89
4c. low teacher expectations	1	20	2.55	1.14	
	2	22	2.95	0.90	0.28
4d. segregation (economic)	1	20	2.75	1.11	
	2	22	2.95	0.90	-0.65
5a. parenting techniques	1	20	3.15	1.22	
	2	22	3.40	0.96	-0.76
5b. students watching too much TV	1	20	2.75	0.85	
	2	22	2.63	0.95	0.41
5c. ability grouping or tracking	1	20	2.00	0.92	
	2	22	1.77	1.02	0.76
5d. types of teacher discipline	1	20	2.10	1.11	
	2	22	2.18	0.91	-0.26
6a. teacher acting discriminatory	1	20	1.90	1.07	
	2	22	1.95	1.04	-0.17
6b. student disruptive behavior	1	20	2.90	1.16	
	2	22	3.40	1.05	-1.48

Table 2 (continued)

*Pilot Study Statistics, May 2008*

Survey criterion - Causes	school	n	M	SD	<i>t</i>
6c. summer effect	1	20	2.95	0.89	
	2	22	2.45	0.80	1.89
6d. standardized test administration	1	20	2.25	1.06	
	2	22	2.45	1.79	-0.45
7a. parent education	1	20	2.80	1.19	
	2	22	2.86	1.16	-0.17
7b. instruction not meeting student needs	1	20	2.35	1.26	
	2	22	1.90	1.23	1.14
7c. standardized tests	1	20	2.05	0.83	
	2	22	2.27	1.03	-0.78
7d. lack of student effort	1	20	2.80	1.05	
	2	22	2.95	0.72	-0.55
8a. lack of access to computers at home	1	20	2.55	0.89	
	2	22	2.68	0.84	-0.49
8b. low teacher quality	1	20	2.55	0.89	
	2	22	2.68	0.84	1.03
8c. large class sizes	1	20	3.35	0.81	
	2	22	2.95	1.00	1.41
8d. student lack of potential	1	20	2.10	1.02	
	2	22	2.73	1.20	-1.82

Table 2 (continued)

*Pilot Study Statistics, May 2008*

Survey criterion - Causes	school	n	M	SD	<i>t</i>
9a. more training in diversity issues	1	20	2.20	1.15	
	2	22	2.59	1.14	-1.10
9b. different standards for low SES	1	20	1.90	1.11	
	2	22	1.81	0.91	0.26
9c. use social workers and resource teachers	1	20	3.40	0.68	
	2	22	2.77	1.07	2.30
9d. enforce stricter discipline at home	1	20	2.50	0.95	
	2	22	2.82	1.14	-0.99
10a. reduce class size	1	20	3.50	0.76	
	2	22	3.14	0.94	1.38
10b. teach more test-taking strategies	1	20	1.90	0.97	
	2	22	2.32	0.84	-1.50
10c. recruit more low SES teachers	1	20	1.80	0.89	
	2	22	1.41	0.91	1.40
10d. more parent outreach and education	1	20	2.80	0.95	
	2	22	3.14	0.83	-1.21

Table 2 (continued)

*Pilot Study Statistics, May 2008*

Survey criterion - Solutions	school	n	M	SD	<i>t</i>
11a. better classroom instruction	1	20	2.45	1.28	
	2	22	2.18	1.22	0.69
11b. more accountability for students	1	20	2.05	1.023	
	2	22	2.09	1.06	0.17
11c. mentoring programs	1	20	2.10	0.85	
	2	22	2.55	0.86	-1.67
11d. more preschool/early learning	1	20	3.30	0.66	
	2	22	3.18	1.05	0.44
12a. more available tutoring, summer school	1	18	3.50	0.51	
	2	22	3.32	0.95	0.77
12b. assessment other than standardized test	1	18	2.89	1.08	
	2	22	2.86	0.89	0.08
12c. give parents great say in school choice	1	18	1.61	0.78	
	2	22	1.68	1.09	-0.24
12d. more rigorous teacher preparation	1	18	2.00	0.97	
	2	22	2.14	0.83	0.47

Table 2 (continued)

*Pilot Study Statistics, May 2008*

Demographics	school	n	M	SD	<i>t</i>
16. school level	1	20	1.00	0.00	
	2	22	1.00	0.00	
17. years as a professional education	1	20	14.00	7.89	
	2	22	15.43	9.42	-0.54
18. current position	1	20	1.05	0.22	
	2	22	1.00	0.00	1.00
19. gender	1	20	1.90	0.31	
	2	22	1.95	0.21	-0.67
20. race/ethnicity	1	20	1.00	0.00	
	2	22	1.05	0.21	-1.00

\*  $p < .05$

to the achievement gap issue included student fear of not doing best work for fear of being teased, ability grouping or tracking, or teacher acting in a discriminatory manner (whether or not the teacher meant to). Teachers also did not consider classroom instruction not accommodating students' needs as a cause of the achievement gap.

Research question 3 - What are some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class? The educators in the pilot study believed home and school should share responsibility for improvements in the achievement gap (see Table 2). Some solutions given the most emphasis include increase use of school social workers and resource teachers to communicate with home, enforce stricter discipline at home, more programs that offer parent outreach and education, and more preschool/early learning initiatives available. Educators also indicated the schools should reduce class size, as well as making tutoring, after-school programs, and summer school more available. Low rankings were given to suggestions such as recruiting more teachers from low socioeconomic backgrounds and using a different standard for considering low socioeconomic students' test scores such as lowering ACT/SAT requirements for college admission. Teachers also did not believe that giving parents greater choice in school selection would solve the achievement gap.

#### *Research study*

Fifteen school districts consisting of 33 schools in the target area were contacted and asked to participate in the research study. Superintendents in 11 of those districts granted their permission, and principals at the 27 eligible schools were contacted by letter and email. Of the 27 schools in those 11 districts, 19 of the elementary schools had surveys returned. The total number of surveys returned was 253 with 141 coming from

predominantly low socioeconomic schools and 112 from predominantly middle class schools. The survey respondents were all educators living and teaching in southeast Missouri, a high poverty area of the state. The research study conducted in the fall of 2008 involved teachers who were working in public schools in Bollinger, Cape Girardeau, or Scott Counties during September 2008. They were overwhelmingly white and female with the vast majority being classroom teachers.

Research question 1 - In what ways do the teachers' perceptions of the socioeconomic achievement gap differ between predominantly middle class elementary school teachers and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary school teachers?

An independent samples *t* test was conducted to evaluate the hypothesis that there is no difference in teachers' perceptions between those teaching in middle class schools and those teaching in low socioeconomic schools (see Table 3). Low socioeconomic schools have a 1 under the school heading of the table while middle class schools have a 2. The test was significant for 11 out of the possible 47 responses to the forced choice items with equal variances not assumed for all data. An item showing a difference was demographics question 17 concerning years of experience. The difference between the poverty schools and the middle class schools was significant  $t(226) = -1.997, p < .05$  with teachers in the low socioeconomic school group ( $M = 11.47, SD = 9.21$ ) having fewer years of experience than middle class school teachers ( $M = 13.86, SD = 8.73$ ).

The first two questions on the survey asked about how informed the teachers felt about the achievement gap and how important they felt it was also showed significant differences between the two groups. Interestingly, the teachers in the middle class schools indicated they felt more informed about the achievement gap,  $t(251) = -2.871,$

Table 3

*Research Study Statistics, September 2008*

Survey criterion	school	n	M	SD	<i>t</i>
1. informed about achievement gap	1	140	1.69	0.59	
	2	111	1.87	0.45	-2.87*
2. importance of achievement gap	1	140	1.30	0.46	
	2	111	1.60	0.70	-3.92*
3a. importance – teacher shortage	1	141	2.33	1.08	
	2	110	2.41	1.04	-0.56
3b. importance – achievement gap	1	141	2.87	1.05	
	2	110	2.62	1.10	1.85*
3c. importance – ending social promotion	1	141	2.18	1.11	
	2	110	2.29	1.17	-0.78
3d. importance – teacher salaries	1	141	2.72	1.10	
	2	110	2.76	1.12	-0.33



Table 3 (continued)

*Research Study Statistics, September 2008*

Survey criterion - Causes	school	n	M	SD	<i>t</i>
4a. low parent income	1	139	2.94	1.07	
	2	112	2.96	1.10	-0.33
4b. student fear of being teased	1	139	2.12	0.99	
	2	112	2.09	0.98	0.26
4c. low teacher expectations	1	139	2.18	1.13	
	2	112	2.31	1.11	-0.94
4d. segregation (economic)	1	139	2.74	1.07	
	2	112	2.68	1.09	0.51
5a. parenting techniques	1	141	3.38	1.00	
	2	112	3.57	0.78	-1.69
5b. students watching too much TV	1	141	2.57	0.99	
	2	112	2.58	0.89	-0.05
5c. ability grouping or tracking	1	140	2.15	0.97	
	2	112	1.79	0.74	3.31*
5d. types of teacher discipline	1	140	1.93	0.96	
	2	112	1.87	0.97	0.51
6a. teacher acting discriminatory	1	140	1.81	1.05	
	2	112	1.90	1.06	-0.66
6b. student disruptive behavior	1	141	3.30	0.98	
	2	112	3.20	0.91	0.85

Table 3 (continued)

*Research Study Statistics, September 2008*

Survey criterion - Causes	school	n	M	SD	<i>t</i>
6c. summer effect	1	141	2.69	0.89	
	2	112	2.78	1.04	-0.72
6d. standardized test administration	1	140	2.37	1.04	
	2	112	2.30	1.02	-0.72
7a. parent education	1	140	2.79	1.10	
	2	112	2.82	1.10	-0.26
7b. instruction not meeting student needs	1	140	2.05	1.16	
	2	112	1.87	1.04	1.33
7c. standardized tests	1	140	2.58	1.11	
	2	112	2.28	1.06	2.20*
7d. lack of student effort	1	141	2.79	0.94	
	2	112	2.92	0.94	-1.11
8a. lack of access to computers at home	1	139	2.51	0.96	
	2	112	2.37	1.03	1.14
8b. low teacher quality	1	139	1.84	1.11	
	2	112	1.82	1.03	0.15
8c. large class sizes	1	139	3.09	0.97	
	2	112	3.04	0.96	0.40
8d. student lack of potential	1	140	2.56	1.07	
	2	112	2.73	1.06	-1.25

Table 3 (continued)

*Research Study Statistics, September 2008*

Survey criterion - Solutions	school	n	M	SD	<i>t</i>
9a. more teacher training in diversity issues	1	138	2.55	1.06	
	2	110	2.52	1.06	0.24
9b. different standards for low SES student	1	138	2.01	1.10	
	2	110	1.97	1.09	0.30
9c. use social workers and resource teachers	1	139	2.96	0.99	
	2	111	2.83	0.95	1.04
9d. enforce stricter discipline at home	1	138	2.48	1.17	
	2	111	2.66	1.18	-1.20
10a. reduce class size	1	141	3.21	1.09	
	2	112	3.42	0.88	-1.73
10b. teach more test-taking strategies	1	141	2.24	1.00	
	2	112	2.13	0.86	0.99
10c. recruit more low SES teachers	1	140	1.81	0.95	
	2	112	1.58	0.87	1.98*
10d. more parent outreach and education	1	141	2.84	0.89	
	2	112	2.88	0.89	-0.28
11a. better classroom instruction	1	141	2.26	1.10	
	2	112	2.10	1.15	1.10
11b. more accountability for students	1	141	2.50	1.19	
	2	112	2.48	1.19	0.15

Table 3 (continued)

*Research Study Statistics, September 2008*

Survey criterion - Solutions	school	n	M	SD	<i>t</i>
11c. mentoring programs	1	141	2.33	0.94	
	2	112	2.58	0.98	-2.08*
11d. more preschool/early learning	1	141	3.00	0.66	
	2	112	2.86	1.05	1.05
12a. more available tutoring, summer school	1	140	3.26	0.51	
	2	112	3.58	0.95	-2.68*
12b. assessment other than standardized tests	1	122	3.08	1.08	
	2	107	2.93	0.89	1.18
12c. give parents great say in school choice	1	121	1.68	0.78	
	2	107	1.52	1.09	1.32
12d. more rigorous teacher preparation	1	121	2.06	0.97	
	2	107	2.02	0.83	0.35

Table 3 (continued)

*Research Study Statistics, September 2008*

Demographics	school	n	M	SD	<i>T</i>
16. school level	1	124	1.06	0.25	
	2	105	1.06	0.23	0.23
17. years as a professional education	1	121	11.48	9.22	
	2	105	13.87	8.74	-2.00*
18. current position	1	124	1.02	0.13	
	2	106	1.03	0.17	-0.62
19. gender	1	124	1.94	0.25	
	2	106	1.93	0.25	0.05
20. race/ethnicity	1	124	1.01	0.13	
	2	106	1.00	0.00	1.42

\*  $p < .05$

and considered it more important,  $t(251) = -3.926$ ,  $p < .05$  than those teachers in the low socioeconomic schools. On the survey, questions 4 through 12 required the participants to rank some possible causes of the achievement gap and some potential solutions.

Significant differences were found in the responses of the two groups on question 5,  $t(253) = -1.687$ ,  $p < .05$ . Teachers in middle class schools ranked parenting techniques as a more significant cause of the achievement gap ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = .779$ ) compared to the teachers in poverty schools ranking parenting lower ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = .997$ ). In addition, teachers in low socioeconomic schools ranked ability grouping or tracking as a more significant cause of the achievement gap than did teachers in middle class schools  $t(252) = 3.311$ ,  $p < .05$ . Teachers in low socioeconomic schools felt ability grouping was more significant ( $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = .966$ ) than did teachers in middle class schools ( $M = 1.79$ ,  $SD = .736$ ). Both groups, however, believed that parenting techniques were more influential in causing the achievement gap than ability grouping or tracking. Another significant difference was discovered on question 7 when standardized testing was one of the forced choice items for ranking,  $t(252) = 2.198$ . Teachers in poverty schools indicated standardized testing was a more significant cause of the achievement gap ( $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) than did teachers in middle class schools ( $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ).

In the section of the survey concerning possible solutions to the achievement gap, there were significant differences found between the two sample groups on questions 10, 11, and 12. On question 10, the teachers in poverty schools did not believe reducing class size was as important as did the teachers in middle class schools,  $t(253) = -1.734$ . However, those educators did believe it was more important to recruit teachers from low socioeconomic backgrounds to teach low socioeconomic students,  $t(252) = 1.977$ . Both

groups felt reducing class size was more important than teacher recruitment with poverty schools ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) for class size and ( $M = 1.80$ ,  $SD = .951$ ) for teacher recruitment, and middle class schools ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = .876$ ) for class size and ( $M = 1.58$ ,  $SD = .866$ ) for teacher recruitment. Question 11 had significant differences between the two groups concerning the importance of mentoring programs utilizing volunteers from the community,  $t(253) = -2.078$ . Teachers from poverty schools believed mentoring had less of an impact on the achievement gap ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = .944$ ) than did teachers from middle class schools ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = .983$ ). Question 12 was also significant concerning the possible solution of making tutoring, after-school programs, and summer school more available,  $t(252) = -2.673$ . Teachers in poverty schools ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = .789$ ) did not see this as being as important as did teachers in middle class schools ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = .747$ ), although both groups ranked this solution higher than the other choices for question 12.

Research question 2 - What are teachers' perceptions of how poverty impacts student academic achievement? The achievement gap was perceived to be the most significant of the four issues listed facing educational policy makers with ending social promotion being the least important for both groups (see Table 3). When looking at the possible causes of the achievement gap, teachers from both groups identified low parent income, segregation in schools (where most students are low socioeconomic), and parenting techniques as some of the most significant. The teachers also believed student behavior (disruptive or inappropriate) and large class sizes to be problematic with the mean for both groups above 3.18, indicating their perception that student behavior was a major cause of the achievement gap. In addition, the educators surveyed believed large class sizes to be an important factor in the achievement gap with a mean ranking above

3.04, more so than low teacher quality with a mean below 1.85 or student access to literature and computers at home with a mean below 2.52. Factors that were not considered significant to the achievement gap issue included the types of discipline used by teachers and teachers acting in a discriminatory manner (whether or not the teacher meant to) with means below 1.91. Teachers also did not consider classroom instruction not accommodating students' needs as a cause of the achievement gap with means below 2.05. Low teacher quality (looking at factors like teacher certification status, the teacher's test scores, and type of degree held) was given low rankings with means for both groups below 1.85.

Research question 3 - What are some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class? The educators in the research study believed home and school should share responsibility for improvements in the achievement gap (see Table 3). Some solutions given the most emphasis included increased use of school social workers and resource teachers to communicate with home with group means above 2.82, enforce stricter discipline at home with means above 2.47, more programs that offer parent outreach and education with means above 2.84, and more preschool/early learning initiatives available with means above 2.85. Educators also indicated the schools should reduce class size, and make tutoring, after-school programs, and summer school more available. Lower rankings were given to suggestions such as recruiting more teachers from low socioeconomic backgrounds with means below 1.81 and using a different standard for considering low socioeconomic students' test scores such as lowering ACT/SAT requirements for college admission with means below 2.02.



Teachers also did not believe that giving parents greater choice in school selection would solve the achievement gap with mean rankings below 2.68.

The issue of elementary school teachers' perceptions of the achievement gap between students from poverty and those from middle class was the subject of this research. Research done by Schellenberg (1998) indicated low socioeconomic students attending middle class schools had greater academic achievement than students from poverty attending schools with predominantly low socioeconomic students. The problem statement centered on the idea that teachers' perceptions were somehow different in schools educating predominantly low socioeconomic students than they were in schools with mostly middle class students.

The purpose of this study was to find out what teachers think about students from poverty and their academic achievement. The researcher conducted an independent samples *t* test to evaluate the hypothesis that there is no difference in teachers' perceptions between those teaching in middle class elementary school and those teaching in low socioeconomic schools (see Table 3). The test was significant for 11 out of the possible 47 responses to the forced choice items with equal variances not assumed for all data. While differences existed for certain achievement gap cause and solution data, the overall rankings and opinions were largely the same as high importance was given to parenting techniques, student behavior, and large class sizes. High ranking solutions for both groups included reducing class sizes, parent outreach, more preschool and early learning initiatives, and more availability of tutoring, after-school programs, and summer school. Teachers' perceptions of how poverty impacts student academic achievement were largely the same regardless of where they taught. Of the four concerns listed on the

survey, the achievement gap was the highest ranking issue facing education today.

Although there were relatively few significant differences found between the groups, the results of this research can be utilized in further exploring the basis of the academic achievement gap. A discussion of implications of this study and possible avenues for future research follows in Chapter Five.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

*Summary of the study*

Poverty indicators were negatively related to student achievement, according to several studies (Bourke, 1998; Fisher & Adler, 1999; Schellenberg, 1998). Other researchers have shown that both education and socioeconomic status of parents played a decisive role in student attitudes toward school (Lareau, 2000; Epstein and Hollified, 1996). Research done by Bourke (1998) found “Schools with higher proportions of their students receiving free or reduced-price lunch had lower achievement than others, particularly in reading” (p. 7). According to Fisher and Adler (1999):

Children who continue to struggle as readers at the end of the primary grades, a disproportionate number are also poor. While low and slow progress in reading has serious consequences for all children, it is especially critical for children who are already placed at risk by poverty. (p. 5)

Data from the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report indicated the percentages of students receiving free or reduced lunch and scoring proficient or above in Grade 4 reading have remained relatively constant since 1998, peaking at 41% in 2007 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Those students not eligible for the National School Lunch Program having scored proficient or above in Grade 4 reading have also remained relatively constant, peaking at 52% in 2007. While the percentages have remained basically the same for each group, the gap between the groups has also remained constant. Interestingly, the scores have not changed significantly either between or within groups since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. It was discovered that “average early reading performance for a school tends to

decrease as the proportion of students eligible for free and reduced lunch increases” (Fisher and Adler, 1999, p. 6). Bourke also noted in his study that the poverty measure was more closely related to the variance in reading scores than ethnicity variables. It was noted that “once the school variable *poverty* was in the regression equation, little or nothing was added to the explanation of achievement by the subsequent addition of the individual student ethnicity variable” (Bourke, 1999, p. 9). In other words, poverty had a major impact on achievement, more so than can be explained by other variables such as race.

Researchers have attempted to explain this achievement gap for those students from poverty. Sider and Unruh (2007) enumerated many reasons why these children entered school behind. They included lack of resources in the home to provide clothes, food, shelter, and healthcare. As these students entered school, they were often attending under-resourced schools lacking adequate space, technology, and materials. The schools they attended had the weakest, lowest paid, and newest teachers. Ruby Payne (2001) stated many of today’s educators had little connection to poverty outside what they have encountered in their classrooms. According to Payne (2001), this disconnect occurred because:

an individual brings with him/her the hidden rules of the class in which he/she was raised. . . Schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of middle class. For our students to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school and work. (p. 11)

Payne has provided professional development and has developed programs for schools all based on assisting educators and others in understanding the culture of poverty and how to bridge the gaps between children and families of poverty and the general culture of schools. Socioeconomic variables have been found to influence multiple aspects of the school and its community. Bourke (1998) wrote:

It was suggested that aggregated variables have a community context. The suggestion is that such a variable . . . takes on a character of its own which has something to do with the school itself, including the facilities and the views and backgrounds of the staff, and the wider community in which the school is based, and is not simply a function of the characteristics of families of the students who attend. (p. 9)

The Schellenberg (1998) study of a Chicago school district reported that eighty percent of poverty students lived in areas of sixty percent free and reduced lunch or higher. A related finding reported by Schellenberg (1998) indicated that “poor children who attend relatively affluent schools have fewer problems and fewer risk characteristics than those attending schools filled with other poor children” (p. 4). These studies indicated that the effect of student poverty amounts to more than just the sum of individual student poverty. Studies on students of poverty by Rosenbaum (1987, 1988) showed “the students in the higher poverty neighborhoods were not doing as well in school as those in less stressed neighborhoods. However, it could be argued that other concerns, such as reductions in crime and increased availability of work, led to the improved achievement” (Schellenberg, 1998, p. 5). Regardless of neighborhood type, the results indicated that the free lunch group consistently scored the lowest, the reduced-

price lunch group scored better, and the non-eligible group scored the highest (Schellenberg, 1998, p. 10). When looking at neighborhood type, researchers found a steady decline in test scores from the richer neighborhoods to those of extreme poverty. Additionally, “the gap between free and non-eligible students decreased as the economic level of the neighborhood declined. In other words, the least difference in test scores is found in the poorest neighborhoods” (Schellenberg, 1998, p. 10). This added more evidence to the argument that collective poverty of a neighborhood was more than just the sum of individual poverty.

The issue addressed in this research was elementary school teachers’ perceptions of the achievement gap between students from poverty and those from middle class. Research done by Schellenberg (1998) indicated low socioeconomic students attending middle class schools have greater academic achievement than students from poverty attending schools with predominantly low socioeconomic students. The problem statement centered on the idea that teachers’ perceptions were somehow different in schools educating predominantly low socioeconomic students than they were in schools with mostly middle class students.

The purpose of this study was to find out what teachers think about students from poverty and their academic achievement. In addition, the researcher determined if teachers’ perceptions were different based on the socioeconomic status of the school where they taught. If differences were present, they could be related to the students’ academic achievement. The different perceptions may have resulted from teachers’ experiences in the classroom, the number of years a teacher has taught, or various other factors.

This study determined what ways teachers' perceptions of the achievement gap differed between predominantly middle class elementary schools and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary schools. It also identified teachers' perceptions of how poverty impacts student academic achievement. The study should become a source of information for the profession concerning some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class.

Research questions were:

1. In what ways do the teachers' perceptions of the socioeconomic achievement gap differ between predominantly middle class elementary school teachers and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary school teachers?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of how poverty impacts student academic achievement?
3. What are some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class?

Survey data was collected from educators in public schools in three Southeast Missouri counties (Bollinger, Cape Girardeau, and Scott). Permissions were obtained from superintendents in these districts which had free and reduced lunch percentages ranging from a low of 20.8% to a high of 62.8% with individual buildings ranging from 17.5% to 92.8% (see Table 1). While schools with a variety of socioeconomic variables were included in the three county region of the study, the subjects were all living and teaching in southeast Missouri, a high poverty area of the state. In addition, the respondents were overwhelmingly white and female.

The concept of poverty and its relationship to student achievement has been researched in various studies, many of which have been completed in the past ten years. While most have focused on varying aspects of this issue, similar conclusions have been reached. Gazeley and Dunne (2007) summarized these studies by stating, “they identified social class and underachievement as overlapping constructions that were inextricably linked to the perceptions and practices of the teacher” (p. 409). Other research has been done showing a link between the teachers’ perceptions of students and student academic achievement, specifically finding the lower the teacher’s perception of a student’s achievement, the lower the actual achievement will be.

### *Findings*

Fifteen school districts consisting of 33 schools in the target area were contacted and asked to participate in the research study. Superintendents in 11 of those districts granted their permission, and principals at the 27 eligible schools were contacted by letter and email. Of the 27 schools in those 11 districts, 19 of the elementary schools had surveys returned. The total number of surveys returned was 253 with 141 coming from predominantly low socioeconomic schools and 112 from predominantly middle class schools. The survey respondents were all educators living and teaching in southeast Missouri, a high poverty area of the state. The research study conducted in the fall of 2008 involved teachers who were working in public schools in Bollinger, Cape Girardeau, or Scott Counties during September 2008. They were overwhelmingly white and female with the vast majority being classroom teachers. Their years of experience ranged from less than one year to over 40 years with the mean being 13.8 years.



Research question 1 - In what ways do the teachers' perceptions of the socioeconomic achievement gap differ between predominantly middle class elementary school teachers and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary school teachers?

An independent samples *t* test was conducted to evaluate the hypothesis that there was no difference in teachers' perceptions between those teaching in middle class elementary school and those teaching in low socioeconomic schools (see Table 2). The test was significant for 11 out of the possible 47 responses to the forced choice items with equal variances not assumed for all data. One of those items was demographics question 17 with the teachers in the predominantly low socioeconomic school group having a mean of 11.47 years of experience while the predominantly middle class schools had teachers with a mean of 13.86 years of experience.

The first two questions on the survey asked about how informed the teachers felt about the achievement gap and how important they felt it was also showed significant differences between the two groups. Interestingly, the teachers in the middle class schools indicated they felt more informed about the achievement gap than those teachers in the low socioeconomic schools. On the survey, questions 4 through 12 required the participants to rank some possible causes of the achievement gap and some potential solutions. Teachers in middle class schools ranked parenting techniques as a more significant cause of the achievement gap compared to the teachers in poverty schools who ranked parenting lower. In addition, teachers in low socioeconomic schools ranked ability grouping or tracking as a more significant cause of the achievement gap than did teachers in middle class schools. Teachers in low socioeconomic schools felt ability grouping was more significant in relation to the achievement gap than did teachers in

middle class schools. Both groups, however, believed that parenting techniques were more influential in causing the achievement gap than ability grouping or tracking.

Another significant difference was discovered on question 7 when standardized testing was one of the forced choice items for ranking. Teachers in poverty schools indicated standardized testing to be a more significant cause of the achievement gap than did teachers in middle class schools.

In the section of the survey concerning possible solutions to the achievement gap, there were significant differences found between the two sample groups on questions 10, 11, and 12. On question 10, the teachers in poverty schools did not believe reducing class size was as important as did the teachers in middle class schools. However, those educators did believe it was more important to recruit teachers from low socioeconomic backgrounds to teach low socioeconomic students. Both groups felt reducing class size was more important than teacher recruitment. Question 11 had significant differences between the two groups concerning the importance of mentoring programs utilizing volunteers from the community with teachers from poverty schools believing mentoring had less of an impact on the achievement gap than did teachers from middle class schools. Question 12 was also significant concerning the possible solution of making tutoring, after-school programs, and summer school more available. Teachers in poverty schools did not see this as being as important as did teachers in middle class schools, although both groups ranked this solution higher than the other choices for question 12.

Research question 2 - What are teachers' perceptions of how poverty impacts student academic achievement? The achievement gap was perceived to be the most significant of the four issues listed facing educational policy makers with ending social

promotion being the least important for both groups. When looking at the possible causes of the achievement gap, teachers from both groups identified low parent income, segregation in schools (where most students are low socioeconomic), and parenting techniques as some of the most significant. The teachers also believed student behavior (disruptive or inappropriate) and large class sizes to be problematic indicating their perception that student behavior was a major cause of the achievement gap. In addition, the educators surveyed believed large class sizes to be an important factor in the achievement gap, more so than low teacher quality or student access to literature and computers at home. Factors that were not considered significant to the achievement gap issue included the types of discipline used by teachers and teachers acting in a discriminatory manner (whether or not the teacher meant to). Teachers also did not consider classroom instruction not accommodating students' needs as a cause of the achievement gap, and low teacher quality (looking at factors like teacher certification status, the teacher's test scores, and type of degree held) was given low rankings by both groups.

Research question 3 - What are some potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class? The educators in the research study believed home and school should share responsibility for improvements in the achievement gap. Some solutions given the most emphasis included increased use of school social workers and resource teachers to communicate with home, enforce stricter discipline at home, offer more parent outreach and education programs, and make more preschool/early learning initiatives available. Educators also indicated the schools should reduce class size, and tutoring, after-school programs, and summer school should be

made more available. Lower rankings were given to suggestions such as recruiting more teachers from low socioeconomic backgrounds and using a different standard for considering low socioeconomic students' test scores such as lowering ACT/SAT requirements for college admission. Teachers also did not believe that giving parents greater choice in school selection would solve the achievement gap. These findings coupled with previous research in the field could give more direction to the effort to reduce and eliminate the achievement gap between students from poverty and those from middle class.

### *Conclusions*

The three research questions in this study were answered in the following ways. As far as the ways teachers' perceptions of the socioeconomic achievement gap differed between predominantly middle class elementary school teachers and predominantly low socioeconomic elementary school teachers, the majority of perceptions evaluated in this study were not significantly different. However, there were some differences concerning the importance of the achievement gap. Of the four concerns listed on the survey, the achievement gap was the highest ranking issue facing education today. This indicated that educators in this study believed the achievement gap to be a genuine concern and is one that should be considered in all areas of education. Teachers did not place sole responsibility for the academic achievement gap on the home environment but did consider the home an important factor.

Research question two asked for information about teachers' perceptions of how poverty impacts student academic achievement. Again, responses from the two groups, teachers working in low socioeconomic schools and those working in middle class

schools, were very similar. When looking at the possible causes of the achievement gap, teachers from both groups identified low parent income, segregation in schools (where most students are low socioeconomic), and parenting techniques as some of the most significant. The teachers also believed student behavior (disruptive or inappropriate) and large class sizes to be problematic indicating their perception that student behavior was a major cause of the achievement gap. In addition, the educators surveyed believed large class sizes to be an important factor in the achievement gap, more so than low teacher quality or student access to literature and computers at home.

The third research question concerned potential solutions to the achievement gap between students from poverty and students from middle class. The educators in the research study believed home and school should share responsibility for improvements in the achievement gap. Some solutions given the most emphasis included increased use of school social workers and resource teachers to communicate with home, stricter enforcement of discipline at home, more programs that offer parent outreach and education, and more preschool/early learning initiatives. Educators also indicated the schools should reduce class size, and make tutoring, after-school programs, and summer school more available. Many of these solutions have been tried with varying degrees of success and research is still ongoing. Some recommended solutions were part of The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, federal legislation providing specific achievement goals for students. Research continues into evaluating the success of these solutions and the legislation.

*Implications*

Although there were few significant differences found between the groups, the results of this research can be utilized in further exploring the basis of the academic achievement gap. Because teacher perceptions of student achievement differed on fewer than 25% of survey responses, these perceptions cannot solely explain the achievement gap that exists between students from poverty and those from middle class. Based on this research, educators can find areas of strong agreement between teachers from different socioeconomic classes of schools. Increased emphasis on professional development for effective tutoring, after-school programs and summer school could result in those specific interventions being more successful. Teachers strongly believed that smaller class size could be a possible solution to the achievement gap. Increased funding for more teachers to lower class size and for more professional development focusing on small group and one-on-one instruction could begin to close the gap for many students, not just those from poverty.

Teachers involved in this research study agreed that disruptive behavior was a leading cause of the achievement gap, and solutions can be sought for ways to improve student behavior and create a positive learning environment. Ways to resolve the achievement gap should be a priority when writing curriculum, selecting materials, creating schedules, and hiring personnel. Professional development for educators in communicating with parents should be a priority for school districts as well as learning various methods and strategies for teaching different concepts. These teachers also agreed that parent outreach and education are important factors in the reduction and elimination of the achievement gap. There was also strong agreement that more preschool and early

learning initiatives are essential for success. Children from poverty need more exposure, more instruction, and more practice on basic concepts than their peers from middle class homes. For many of these children from poverty, school is the first place they have encountered reading and been exposed to its importance. Educators need to learn how to instruct these children and give them the foundation they need to succeed in school.

Previous research has documented the importance and power of teachers' perceptions as they relate to student achievement. Teachers rated the highest causes of the achievement gap to be large class size, disruptive student behavior, and parenting issues. These issues, as well as others, are ones that teachers feel they are powerless to change. Could this perception by teachers perpetuate some of the achievement gap?

In addition, the highest rated solutions to the achievement gap were those that home and school should share responsibility for implementing. School solutions given the most emphasis included increased use of school social workers and resource teachers to communicate with home, reduced class size, and more tutoring, after-school programs, and summer school programs. Educators also believed the achievement gap could be reduced by offering more programs for parent outreach and education, and more preschool/early learning initiatives. All of these school solutions require funding in order to be implemented. Most educators feel quite powerless as to issues of increased funding. A frequent and major complaint of teachers continues to be parenting issues. Even if more parent education and preschool initiatives could be offered, there is no guarantee these would be implemented and supported at home. Teachers also feel parents should enforce stricter discipline at home. Similar to the above causes of the achievement gap, educators feel powerless to affect change in most of these areas. Could these feelings of

powerlessness contribute to the achievement gap by influencing teacher interactions with students and parents?

Because the educators believed many factors were responsible for the achievement gap, there could be many solutions. Teachers and parents need to work together to discover what is best for students. These strategies may vary from state to state, school to school, and child to child. However, the communication between school and home may be the most important factor in the ultimate success of the child. School personnel should concentrate on ways to get parents involved in the daily academic life of the students. Teachers should also be more informed about the power of their perceptions and interactions with students and their families. By acknowledging their own perceptions, teachers would be taking the first step toward changing their behavior, however unintentional they may be. The research into perceptions and their effects on student achievement should be shared with teachers, and work should be done on district and school levels to promote understanding of this important issue.

#### *Future research*

Continued research into the factors involved in this study is certainly warranted. Continuing research into the academic achievement gap between students from poverty and those from middle class should remain a priority until more answers can be found. The achievement gap between students from poverty and those from middle class continues to be a concern and will be a focus of much research in the years to come. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires student achievement to continually increase with the achievement gap between all disaggregated groups decreasing. This federal legislation will continue to ensure student academic achievement is in the forefront of



discussions involving public education. The idea of students from poverty performing better academically in middle class schools than in poverty schools is an extremely interesting one, and more research should be done to investigate the possible reasons for this difference. The issue of teacher perception is only one of many variables to be considered as part of the achievement gap question.

The power of perception can be exceptionally strong, as was indicated in chapter two. Future research into teachers' perceptions would be extremely valuable. Expanding the scope of this study to include teachers from different parts of the country could show significant results and regional factors could be important in the research.

One of the significant differences in this study between the teachers in low socioeconomic schools and those in middle class schools was teacher years of experience. Future research into the differences in teacher perceptions between less experienced teachers and those with more experience could be extremely important, especially if significant differences were discovered between those groups. However, it often seems that the teachers' attitudes toward their profession and their students are much more significant factors in student learning and in classroom environment than years of experience.

### *Summary*

The concept of poverty and its relationship to student achievement has been researched in various studies, many of which have been completed in the past ten years. While most have focused on varying aspects of this issue, similar conclusions have been reached. Gazeley and Dunne (2007) summarized these studies by stating, "they identified social class and underachievement as overlapping constructions that were inextricably

linked to the perceptions and practices of the teacher” (p. 409). Researchers have attempted to explain this achievement gap for those students from poverty. Sider and Unruh (2007) enumerated many reasons why these children enter school behind. They included lack of resources in the home to provide clothes, food, shelter, and healthcare. As these students entered school, they were often attending under-resourced schools lacking adequate space, technology, and materials. The schools they attended had the weakest, lowest paid, and newest teachers. Research done by Schellenberg (1998) indicated low socioeconomic students attending middle class schools had greater academic achievement than students from poverty attending schools with predominantly low socioeconomic students. Other research has been done showing a link between the teachers’ perceptions of students and student academic achievement, specifically finding the lower the teacher’s perception of a student’s achievement, the lower the actual achievement will be.

In this study on teacher perceptions of poverty and elementary school student achievement, the survey respondents were all educators living and teaching in southeast Missouri, a high poverty area of the state. The research study conducted in the fall of 2008 involved teachers who were working in public schools in Bollinger, Cape Girardeau, or Scott Counties during September 2008. They were overwhelmingly white and female with the vast majority being classroom teachers. Their years of experience ranged from less than one year to over 40 years with the mean being 13.8 years.

Because teacher perceptions of student achievement differed on fewer than 25% of survey responses, these perceptions cannot explain the achievement gap that exists between students from poverty and those from middle class. Based on this research,

educators can find areas of strong agreement between teachers from different socioeconomic classes of schools. Increased emphasis on professional development for effective tutoring, after-school programs and summer school could result in those interventions being more successful. Teachers strongly believed that smaller class size could be a possible solution to the achievement gap. Increased funding for more teachers to lower class size and for more professional development on small group and one-on-one instruction could begin to close the gap for many students, not just those from poverty.

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Appendix

**Proposed Survey: Educators’ Perceptions of the Achievement Gap**

*Please respond to each of the following questions. For purposes of this survey we will define the “Achievement Gap” as the average differences in performance on standardized tests (e.g. end-of-grade tests, the SAT or ACT, or IQ tests) between low socioeconomic and middle class students when comparing large samples of students. Other socioeconomic groups have not been included in an attempt to keep the project focused and manageable.*

- |   |                   |                         |                         |
|---|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. How well informed do you feel about the “Achievement Gap” issue? ( <i>Circle one</i> )   | Well<br>Informed  | Somewhat<br>Informed    | Not at all<br>Informed  |
| 2. As a matter of educational emphasis, how important do you view the “Achievement Gap” issue?  | Very<br>Important | Somewhat<br>Important   | Not at all<br>Important |
| 3. Listed are several significant issues currently facing educational policy makers. Please rank, in your opinion, the importance of the following issues from 4 (most important) to 1 (least important): | _____             | _____                   | _____                   |
|   |                   | Teacher Shortage        | _____                   |
|   |                   | Achievement Gap         | _____                   |
|   |                   | Ending Social Promotion | _____                   |
|   |                   | Teacher Salaries        | _____                   |

**The following lists include some possible causes of the achievement gap. For each list, please rank the items in that list from 4 (most significant cause) to 1 (least significant cause).**

*→All items refer to conditions involving low socioeconomic students or behaviors of low socioeconomic students.*

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Low parent income levels  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Student fear of not doing best work for fear of being teased  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher has low expectations  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Segregation in schools (schools were most students are low socioeconomic)
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Parenting techniques used by their parents (i.e. discipline style, how they interact, etc.)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Students watching too much TV  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Ability grouping or tracking  
 \_\_\_\_\_ The types of discipline used by teachers



6. \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher acting in a discriminatory manner (whether or not the teacher meant to)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Students often behaving in disruptive or inappropriate manner  
 \_\_\_\_\_ “Summer Effect” (low socioeconomic students falling behind academically because of less access to learning opportunities – camps, library, travel, etc. – during the summer months.)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ The way in which standardized tests are administered
7. \_\_\_\_\_ The level of education of low socioeconomic students’ parents  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Classroom instruction not accommodating students’ needs  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Standardized tests (including content bias – tests contain content that is unfamiliar to the student due to low socioeconomic conditions) do not legitimately measure students’ ability  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Lack of student effort (student is unmotivated and does not try)
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Students lack access to literature and computers at home  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Low teacher quality (looking at factors like teacher certification status, the teacher’s test scores, and type of degree held)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Large class sizes (high student-teacher ratio)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Students may not have the potential to succeed on grade level

**The following lists include some possible solutions to address the achievement gap. For each list, please rank the items in that list from 4 (most useful/effective solution) to 1 (least useful/effective solution).**

9. \_\_\_\_\_ Give teachers more training in diversity issues and sensitivity  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Use a different standard for considering low socioeconomic students’ test scores such as lowering SAT/ACT requirements for college admission  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Increase use of school social workers and resource teachers to communicate with home  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Enforce stricter discipline at home
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Reduce class size (lower student-teacher ratio)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Teach more test-taking strategies  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Recruit more teachers from low socioeconomic backgrounds to teach low socioeconomic students  
 \_\_\_\_\_ More programs that offer parent outreach and education
11. \_\_\_\_\_ Better classroom instruction (using ‘best practices’ in given subject)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ More or stronger accountability for students (testing tied to promotion, etc.)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Mentoring programs utilizing volunteers from the community (e.g. big brother/sister, etc.)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ More preschool/early learning initiatives available (e.g. Head Start, etc.)

- 12. \_\_\_\_\_ Make tutoring, after-school programs, and summer school more available
- \_\_\_\_\_ Use a method of assessment other than standardized tests
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give parents a greater say in school selection
- \_\_\_\_\_ More rigorous teacher preparation and higher standards for teacher selection/hiring

**Using the items above or others you may think of, please answer the following questions:**

13. Overall, what do you think are the two most significant causes of the achievement gap?

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

14. Overall, what do you think would be the two most useful/effective things that could be done to address the achievement gap (at any level – classroom, school, district, legislative, etc.)?

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

15. Overall, considering the condition of K-12 education in the United States, what do you think are the two most important issues currently facing educational policy makers?

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

**Demographic Information:**

16. What level of school do you currently work in? (*Circle one*)      Elementary School      Middle School

17. How many years have you been a professional educator? \_\_\_\_\_

18. What is your current position? (*Circle one*)      Teacher      Administrator

19. What is your gender? (*Circle one*)      Male      Female

20. What is your race/ethnicity? (*Circle one*)      White      Black      Hispanic/Latino

\* If not one of those listed, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**Do you have any other thoughts or opinions you would like to share about the achievement gap?**

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**Thank you for completing this survey!**

April, 2008

Dear Elementary School Teacher:

A survey of elementary school teachers is being conducted to examine if teachers' perceptions of poverty student achievement differ between those teaching in middle class schools and those teaching in high poverty schools. This survey is being conducted in conjunction with a doctoral dissertation examining the affects of poverty on student achievement.

Your school has been selected to participate based on the percentage of free and reduced lunch students in your building. Your cooperation in obtaining the requested information is extremely important as it will help determine the factors making a difference in student achievement. Please give serious consideration to your answers.

All responses will be held confidential with no identifiers on the survey. Schools will not be named individually. Only general characteristics and results will be reported.

The final report will be available in the fall of 2008. If you wish to obtain a copy of the final report, please send an email request to [herbsts@cape.k12.mo.us](mailto:herbsts@cape.k12.mo.us).

Again, I appreciate your cooperation in making the results of this survey a valid and useful source of information for improving student achievement. Thank you for providing the expertise, time, and energy to cooperate.

Sincerely,

Sydney Herbst

VITA

Sydney Herbst was born December 19, 1963 in Manhattan, Kansas. She moved to Cape Girardeau, Missouri at the age of three, and has lived in this southeast Missouri river town ever since. Sydney has been a student her whole life, completing both a Master of Arts Degree and a Specialist in Education Degree before tackling the doctoral program offered by the University of Missouri in conjunction with Southeast Missouri State University. She was a fourth grade teacher for 11 years, and has served as the principal at Charles C. Clippard Elementary School since 1999. Sydney and her husband, Charlie, have five children who all understand how much their mother loves to go to school.