

IMPROVING LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT  
OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

by

Lea A. Rothmier

An Abstract

of a research paper submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science in Library Science and Information Services  
in the Department of Educational Leadership and Human Development  
University of Central Missouri

December, 2011

## ABSTRACT

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A literacy achievement gap exists between children who live in poverty and children who do not. It is the responsibility of the members of the school community to improve the literacy achievement of low-income students. This review of literature describes the literacy achievement gap; the effects teachers can have on literacy learning and achievement; the need to hold teachers accountable for teaching outcomes, using effective educational practices, engaging in professional development that enhances their educational practices; and the importance of having the school and community members put into place supports for teachers that promote student literacy achievement. The literature review then presents proven literacy programs that improve literacy achievement of low-income students. Using proven programs, teacher training, and educational supports, the school community members can close the literacy achievement gap. By closing the literacy achievement gap, school community members increase students' literacy, which provides those students a foundation for success in school and life.

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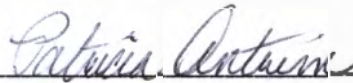
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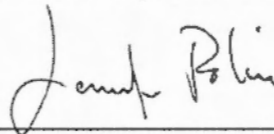
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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Kainz and Vernon-Feagans show that to be successful in school, students must have a foundation of literacy upon entering elementary school (407). To be successful in escaping the cycle of poverty, people must be able to obtain jobs that pay more than minimum wage and, therefore, need to receive a “high quality education, from a high school diploma to a college degree” (Lusted 50-51). Strong reading skills are required to obtain a high school diploma or college degree. The problem that exists for young children who live in poverty is that they start elementary school with a much lower vocabulary than children who do not live in poverty. “Low-income children come into school in kindergarten with 3,000 words in their listening vocabulary, as opposed to a listening bank of 20,000 for the middle-income child,” report Hetzel and Soto-Hinman. This vocabulary deficit puts those students at a disadvantage for academic success upon entering elementary school. Studies have shown that 3<sup>rd</sup> grade is a turning point in literacy because it is this age that students move from focusing on learning to read to focusing on reading to learn (Viadero). Viadero points out that “eighty-five percent of poor 4<sup>th</sup> graders in predominantly low-income schools are failing to reach proficient levels in reading on federal tests.” Therefore a high majority of low-income students are not proficient in reading after completing the crucial third grade year. The literacy achievement gap that was noticed upon entering elementary school for low-income students is still prominent in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. This literacy achievement gap will continue throughout the academic career of low-income students unless acknowledged and addressed.

Poverty is linked to the literacy achievement gap in three ways. Students have a gap with text, a gap with the teacher, and a gap with their peers. The student-text gap includes readability issues; barriers such as background knowledge, experience, interest, motivation, and language transfer; and their tolerance for challenge (being disengaged if the reading is too easy or difficult). The student-teacher gap exists due to the teacher's perceptions and expectations of the students' cultural and socioeconomic differences. The student-peer gap includes cultural dynamics, family background, expectations, language, book access, learning rates, and literacy levels. These three gaps will identify that the students living in poverty will have struggles with their reading and writing scores. While the home and community determine the background knowledge and foundation from which the student comes to the school, teachers must work with the students to minimize these gaps with a variety of strategies and techniques. Teachers can focus on vocabulary acquisition; a strong partnership with families; providing a safe, non-threatening environment; acknowledging and promoting diversity; and employing differentiated instruction to meet the students where they are in their academic continuum.

Teachers recognize that how and what they teach in literacy directly affects the literacy learning and achievement of their students. Some programs, such as those adopted as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind), hold teachers accountable for their students' academic test scores and promote strategies to modify or differentiate instruction to the student in need. Title I: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged (Title I) monies fund items within the school to help students improve their literacy skills, such as hiring paraprofessionals or purchasing a reading program. Teachers also participate in professional development that allows them

to learn and implement new teaching strategies for reading and writing and to evaluate and use student data to tailor the lessons to students' needs. The parents and community also play a large role in improving the learning atmosphere for the students and teachers by their donations and volunteering of time.

The school community recognizes that using programs that have been shown through testing and research to be beneficial in improving literature achievement is essential to helping students grow in their literacy achievement. This study focused on a variety of programs showing multiple solutions to closing the achievement gap where school community members determine what best fits their needs. Some programs that improve student literacy achievement are preschool outreach storytime programs; access to print materials; balanced literacy; community paraeducators; homework clubs; and high quality, academically focused summer reading programs.

Knowing that a literacy achievement gap exists between children who live in poverty and children who do not, it is the responsibility of school communities to improve the literacy achievement of low-income students. When the entire school community (administrators, teachers, staff, parents, students and community) work together using all of the available programs, training, and community supports to improve the literacy achievement of their low-income students, educators can close the literacy achievement gap between those students and children who are not low-income. By closing the literacy achievement gap, school community members increase students' literacy, which provides those students a foundation for success in school and life.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Children living in poverty have many home and community factors that contribute to performing below their potential in literacy achievement. This background knowledge and experience of low-income students begins a literacy “achievement gap” that compares their literacy knowledge to that of children who do not live in poverty. This paper recognizes that the literacy achievement gap exists for low-income students and that teachers must work together with the entire school community to help these students overcome these obstacles to reach their academic potential. These low-income children are destined to remain at an academic disadvantage to their peers of middle and upper classes if the problem is not recognized and corrected. This academic disadvantage turns into an economic disadvantage when literacy skills are not developed enough throughout their academic career to allow them to graduate from high school and college. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the school community to find proven interventions, strategies, research, and programs that are shown to raise the literacy achievement of low-income students and to implement them so that these students can have a successful academic career. This success will afford low income students the opportunity to break the cycle of poverty and to become educated, literate, successful adults.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research was to understand the literacy achievement gap that exists between students who are low-income and those students who are not, and to determine if this gap could be balanced or closed. Literature was reviewed to determine areas within education that have been, or could be, modified to affect the literacy achievement gap. Particular attention was paid to the effect that teachers and school

community members have on literacy. Reviewed literature showed examples of effective programs that close the literacy achievement gap. The results of this study show that when schools, parents, and community members work together to improve the literacy achievement of their low-income students, the literacy achievement gap of low-income children can be closed. By closing the literacy achievement gap, students' literacy is increased, which then provides those students a foundation for success in school and life. It is the responsibility of school communities to improve the literacy achievement of low-income students with effective practices so that they may be successful in school, and therefore, successful in life.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What causes the literacy achievement gap between children who live in poverty and children who do not?
2. In what ways can school community members promote literacy achievement of their low-income students?
3. What literacy research-based programs have been shown to improve literacy of low-income children?

### **Limitation of the Study**

The literature had limitations due to the studies conducted, the possibility of different interpretations of word definitions, and difference of subjects from one region to another or one age group to another. The scope of data collection included journals, books, and articles dealing with poverty, literacy, the literacy achievement gap, the

teacher effects on literacy learning and achievement, and successful, proven programs that increase literacy achievement in low-income children in an elementary school.

Original research was not conducted. The results of this study serve as an analysis of the literature and the conclusions were drawn by the author.

### **Definition of Terms**

Key terms of this study have been defined to clarify their meaning for the reader.

All terms are related to literacy and the relationship that they have with children from low-income families and their education.

Literacy gap - Three literacy gaps have been shown to exist for children from low-income families: the gap between the student and the text due to readability issues, barriers, and tolerance for challenge; between the student and the teacher due to the teacher's perceptions and expectations of cultural and socioeconomic differences; and between the student and his peers due to cultural dynamics, expectations, language, book access, learning rates, and literacy levels. Literacy gaps hinder students' abilities to excel in reading and writing. All three gaps arise from a student's lack of background knowledge and experience.

Literate – Being able to read and write. A literate person is considered to be educated (“Literate,” def. 1a and 1b).

Low-income - Up to twice the Federal Poverty level is considered low income because the income does not cover basic expenses (“Child National Center for Children in Poverty” 2011).

Poverty - According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, poverty in the United States is defined by the federal poverty guidelines and is \$22,050 for a family of

four and \$18,310 for a family of three. This amount was determined in the 1960s and has only been updated annually for inflation. “Families and their children experience poverty when they are unable to achieve a minimum, decent standard of living that allows them to participate fully in mainstream society. One component of poverty is material hardship” (2011).

School community members– A group of people who share a common goal of academic success for their children, and who work together to help these students achieve their academic goals. This group consists of school librarians, teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community members.

### Research Design

This study collected previously published information pertaining to poverty, literacy, and the literacy achievement gap. This existing literature, related to the topic, was reviewed for the purpose of this study. At no time was there an effort to create new research or to examine existing data, privately or publicly held, that would necessitate any type of permission.

Articles were retrieved from the following databases: *Academic OneFile*; *Academic Search Complete*; *Academic Search Premier*; *Education Research Complete*; and *Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts*. Search terms included “literacy children” and “poverty children.” After using the initial search terms and finding several good articles, I conducted future queries in the library databases with additional search terms that I found in the original articles. In addition to the library databases, I found articles by searching the *Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)* which is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. Through the *ERIC* search I was able to find a few more descriptors that helped in further searching. I was also able to find articles on the Internet by looking at the bibliographies of articles that I found useful.

This study includes three chapters related to how school community members recognize that a literacy achievement gap exists for their low-income students, the effects of teachers on literacy learning and achievement, and ways to improve literacy achievement through proven programs to close the literacy achievement gap and to provide those students a foundation for success in school and life. Chapter two is a



review of the literature. Chapter three consists of answers to the research questions posed in chapter one and a discussion that includes conclusions and recommendations.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

Because literacy is the foundation for success in school, children who live in the United States today are expected to have some reading skills when they enter elementary school (Kainz and Vernon-Feagans 407). Studies have also shown that preschool age literacy development is imperative for academic success and that 3<sup>rd</sup> grade is a turning point in literacy because it is this age that students move from focusing on learning to read to focusing on reading to learn (Viadero). Not only do many children in the United States not know how to read when they enter elementary school, but that there exists a literacy achievement gap between children who live in poverty and children who do not. It is the responsibility of school librarians to work with teachers and administrators to improve the literacy achievement of low-income students by identifying these students and collaborating with teachers to create a goal and action plan to improve their literacy achievement. This plan directs the staff to determine the research-based programs necessary to improve student literacy achievement. This paper will describe the literacy achievement gap. The research will then show the effects teachers have on literacy learning and achievement. Teachers have a positive effect on student literacy achievement when they are held accountable for teaching outcomes, when they use effective educational practices, when they engage in professional development that enhances their educational practices, and when the school and community puts supports into place for teachers that promote student literacy achievement. Finally, the research

will present literacy programs that are effective for school librarians, teachers, and administrators, to improve literacy achievement of their low-income students. Programs that promote literacy achievement include preschool outreach story time programs, access to print materials, balanced literacy, community paraeducators, homework clubs, and high-quality, academically-focused summer reading programs.

### **Literacy Achievement Gap**

Research indicates that a literacy achievement gap exists between children who live in poverty and children who do not live in poverty. According to Merriam-Webster, a literate person is able to read and write and is considered educated (“Literate,” def. 1a and 1b). Therefore, the literacy achievement gap showcases the observation that children who live in poverty are less able to read and write than those students who do not live in poverty. When school librarians work with teachers and administrators to understand poverty and how it affects the students in their school, they acknowledge and address the literacy achievement gap. This section starts by showing the relationship between poverty and literacy. Next, the three existing literacy gaps are described. A discussion of the foundational significance of vocabulary acquisition follows. Finally, this paper reviews the research of the influence of school and home environments on literacy.

### **Link Between Poverty and Literacy**

“Poverty has been regarded as one of the most profound conditions adversely affecting child well-being” (Lee 79). According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, nearly 15 million children are living in poverty in the United States, as defined by the federal poverty level. That equals 21% of all U.S. children. Moreover 42% of U.S.

children live in low-income families. Up to twice the Federal Poverty level is considered low income because income does not cover basic expenses. More than 1.5 million U.S. children live in families without a home; and of those homeless children, 42% are under the age of 6 years old (2011). That is a large number of children who deal with the affects of poverty while learning to read. When students live in poverty they have to deal with multiple issues other than education, such as affordable housing, health care, domestic violence, nutrition, homelessness, foster care, or placement with relatives. These issues increase risks for emotional, social, physical, and behavioral problems for these students, which in turn creates higher absenteeism, transiency, and negative literacy experiences (Walker-Dalhousie and Risko 84). These students spend much of their time learning survival skills; therefore, learning to read may not be a priority to them.

Reading should be a priority for students according to Wamba, because it sets the foundation needed for academic success. When students have a strong foundation in literacy they are able to successfully navigate the curriculum, have success throughout their school years, and have a greater ability to move out of poverty and become self-sufficient. The opposite is true as well. Those students who are poor readers will continue to be poor readers, will become less responsive to reading intervention, and will likely fail in many of their classes at school (Wamba 109-110). These findings were confirmed in a study conducted by Lee. Lee found that the longer a family lived in poverty, the effects on children were significantly adverse; and they became more pronounced as children grew. Lee administered an inventory to mothers called the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment-Short Form (HOME-SF) to get a home

environment score. This score measured how much cognitive stimulation and emotional support a child received from his family based upon observations of the interviewer and the mothers' self-reports (Lee 81). Lee showed that early poverty negatively affected home environment scores, which in turn negatively affected reading scores in children aged 5 to 6, and continued to adversely affect their reading scores as they grew older (Lee 79).

### **Three Literacy Gaps**

Three literacy gaps have been shown to exist for children from low-income families: the gap between the student and the text; between the teacher and the student; and between the student and his peers. Literacy gaps hinder students' abilities to excel in reading and writing. All three gaps arise from a student's lack of background knowledge and experience. It is necessary for teachers to recognize that these gaps exist and determine how to address them within their classrooms to be able to promote literacy achievement to close those gaps.

The first literacy gap, between the student and the text, addresses the difference between low-income and middle-income students in relation to readability issues such as the student's ability to read a particular passage at grade level and the student's understanding of phonics, semantics, and syntax. Other barriers that can come between a child and how he or she can comprehend text include background knowledge and experience, interest, motivation, and language transfer. This gap also addresses the students' tolerance for challenge which is a very real concern to non-native English speakers. If the work is too easy or too difficult, the students become disengaged. When

students have high expectations, work that is of interest to them, and a teacher who facilitates their progress, they are most likely to be engaged. Teachers recognize these student-text gaps as they see students reading, and they can build bridges between the student and the text at that time (Hetzl and Soto-Hinman).

The teacher-student gap is the second literacy gap and it addresses the difference between low-income and middle-income students as it relates to the teacher's perceptions and expectations of cultural and socioeconomic differences. When teachers embrace the diversity of their students they have fewer misunderstandings and are able to consider the needs of the child. Teachers close the teacher-student gap by explicitly teaching literacy through the use of authentic language and purpose. This means supplying the child with background knowledge and using real-life examples so that the learning is relevant to their lives. Teachers also close this gap by holding high expectations for all of their students, by providing plenty of time for students to answer questions, allowing students to solve problems on their own without teacher intervention, giving praise when earned, giving fair and consistent discipline, and giving explicit literacy instruction that relates reading and writing to real-life examples. When teachers reflect on their own belief systems about the students that they teach, they are able to close the teacher-student gap (Hetzl and Soto-Hinman).

The third literacy gap is between the student and his peers. It addresses the difference between low-income and middle-income students as it relates to cultural dynamics, family background, expectations, language, book access, learning rates, and literacy levels. The teacher can implement classroom strategies that bridge the diversity

of the students to encourage them to work together in projects, accept and value each other's differences and cultures, ensure that each child has books at his reading level and interest accessible at home and school, and provide a safe and non-threatening learning environment.

Differentiated literacy instruction is also recommended for addressing the three literacy gaps. The teacher implements some differentiated literacy strategies in the classroom, such as building background knowledge and teaching vocabulary. This provides scaffolding for the students between their knowledge and the gaps in their understanding of the text. The teacher also works with other faculty in the building to use such differentiated literacy strategies as grouping students by literacy levels in home rooms, team teaching, using pull out programs, or utilizing volunteers or paraprofessionals to support students during classroom instruction (Hetzl and Soto-Hinman).

### **Foundational Significance of Vocabulary Acquisition**

Research shows that a lack of vocabulary for children from low-income families causes them to struggle with reading and that this vocabulary deficit causes them to lag behind middle-income students throughout their elementary school years. Hemphill and Tivnan's study identified factors impacting low-income students that affect their vocabulary and, therefore, their literacy development. These students are less likely to go to educationally focused preschools because of cost and availability. Those who are able to attend preschools experience higher teacher-student ratios. These students typically have caregivers with lower levels of education. Low-income communities offer less

access to print media as found in book stores. The parents of these students are less likely to engage in quality conversations and book-reading routines that promote literacy skills. These factors culminate with less interaction with books, less attention to letter names and sounds, less opportunity for engaging conversation, and less exposure to vocabulary and knowledge. The study shows that even with these setbacks, it is possible for low-income students to improve literacy achievement when they have schools and teachers who are teaching the right mix of language and early literacy skills and emphasizing the role of vocabulary as a reading comprehension predictor (Hemphill and Tivnan 428, 444, 447).

Sinatra found that the size of a low-income student's vocabulary is the biggest handicap in reading, because vocabulary proficiency is strongly related to understanding language and reading comprehension. Vocabulary size also leads to academic success in other subjects because it supports reading of informational text. Teachers increase vocabulary skills by having high expectations; providing challenging coursework; talking often with students about a variety of topics; conducting read-alouds, retellings, and vocabulary integration; manipulating morphemes to call attention to them (roots, prefixes, suffixes); and only retaining or assigning these students to remedial classes when all other teaching strategies have failed. Early intervention and preventative preschool programs are also beneficial and schools can provide parents the resources to conduct such programs (Sinatra 173-174). "The key ingredient in the vocabulary learning equation was found to be classroom educators in that they hold the power to influence, to use, to nurture, and to provide follow-up practice in the learning of new words" (187).



### **School and Home Environment Influences**

A child's academic ability is influenced by his home environment as much as his school environment (Neuman and Celano 179). This section shows how the school environment influences a child's literacy achievement through its policies that directly target children's aptitude, mental health, or physical health; the funding allocated to literacy development; the provision of comparable literacy resources from one district to the next; and the school library's attempt to be more inclusive to minimize social exclusion. Home environments are shown to have an impact on student literacy achievement (Duncan and Magnuson). The home environments of low-income children often have material hardships as well as resource-related disadvantages such as housing, healthcare, quality and accessibility of preschool, environmental stress, employment situation, and nutrition. Influences such as large family size, residential instability, harsh discipline, few learning materials, low birth weight, young parents, and high levels of depression in mothers, have a negative impact on academic development, including literacy development. Dyson's study also showed the negative impact that poverty has on literacy achievement and the necessity of raising the parents' education level, as well as, their ability to promote the advancement of their children's literacy skills, to improve the literacy skills of their children (63). This section describes these influences and provides some solutions to create positive literacy experiences for low-income children to close the literacy achievement gap for them.

Neuman and Celano found that the school environment plays a role in closing the literacy achievement gap for low-income students (181). Different views clash on how to

close the gap. Some argue that additional funds, such as Title I funding, are needed for school districts that have students living in poverty to make access to reading resources equal to those students not living in poverty (176, 179). Others argue that family characteristics and socioeconomic status affect student learning more than schools, so additional funding would make little difference in the final learning outcomes (179). Neuman and Celano conducted a study that suggests that once students in low-income areas are provided comparable resources to students in middle-income schools, it does not mean that they are receiving equal educational experiences. They found that low-income students received less adult supervision and tended to choose materials below their reading level instead of at their reading level, materials that do not challenge them (179). They also found that narrowing the literacy achievement gap happens when low-income children are provided more resources and additional supports, as well as, having librarians who provide additional support by being a caring adult who provides stability, consistency, and mentoring (198-199).

Kainz and Vernon-Feagans found that more attention needs to be given by scholars and political leaders to socioeconomic policies for schools of low-income children if student achievement is to increase in those schools. They found that student reading performance was lowest when minority groups were segregated in elementary schools where classroom instruction and poverty were similar from class to class (407). They determined that effective teacher instruction and a building climate that promotes a strong value for reading, writing, and academic achievement are important for economically disadvantaged students (422). They also recognized that some low-income

children have poverty issues that affect them to such an extent academically that teacher instruction alone may not be enough to bridge the achievement gap for these students.

Providing comparable resources from one district to the next, through Title I funding and initiatives, will help close the literacy achievement gap by creating equitable academic environments (Kainz and Vernon-Feagans 408). Title I funding and initiatives can create the opportunity for school personnel to create equitable academic environments for school districts with low-income students by purchasing instructional support in such forms as a specialist or paraeducators as well as resources such as books or computers. Teachers raise achievement of low-income, struggling readers through the addition of instructional support and resources because these allow them to focus on individualized instruction, increase the rigor of their lessons, and modify the pace that they keep for their students (422).

Duncan and Magnuson studied the relationship between family socioeconomic resources and literacy achievement gaps. They found that although low-income families tend to have material hardships and resource-related disadvantages, increasing the family income does not close the school readiness gaps. They suggest that the most efficient way to address the school readiness gap is to implement policies that directly target children's aptitude or mental and physical health (35). Dyson also supports programs over financial aid to families. She recommends programs designed to raise the educational level of parents, increase the parents' ability to promote their children's literacy skills, and improve the literacy environment in the neighborhoods where there is a high concentration of poverty (63).

Librarians contribute to the initiative to minimize the literacy gap by making school libraries more inclusive to minimize social exclusion (Gehner 41). Social exclusion is a term used by Gehner to explain when people have a combination of problems that are linked and reinforce one another, like unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, and family breakdown. Social exclusion extends from one generation to the next (41). The library and school environment will be more conducive to supporting reading among low-income students when librarians and teachers understand poverty and the hardships that come with it for the families of their students, are able to focus on the causes of social exclusion and not the behaviors and symptoms that are witnessed, remove as many barriers as possible that alienate low-income students, get to know the families and people within the community, and create opportunities for inclusion in the school to promote acceptance and the dignity of students (Gehner 40-45). Once the faculty have a good understanding of the home environment of their low-income students and make accommodations for it in classrooms, they are better able to work with their students to increase their literacy skills.

In summary, the influence of the home environment and school environment on a child's academic performance is pronounced. Family characteristics predict early reading skills, and low-income students often have home environments with material hardships and resource-related disadvantages that affect their family dynamics. When schools put into place policies for student well-being, funding for literacy development, use literacy resources comparable to other school districts, and make the school library more

inclusive to minimize social exclusion, student literacy achievement will increase, closing the literacy achievement gap for these students.

### **Teacher Effects on Literacy Learning and Achievement**

The actions and behaviors of teachers directly affect literacy learning and achievement of students (Konstantopoulos 92). One way that the school librarians improve the literacy achievement of their low-income students is to work collaboratively with the teachers and administrators to empower the teachers with effective literacy teaching strategies and lessons. To ensure that teachers have a positive effect on student literacy achievement, teachers will be held accountable for their ability to engage the student in prepared lessons that motivate the students to read for enjoyment; use effective teaching practices and strategies; attend professional development that is focused on helping students become better readers; and work with the school and community to use multiple supports that relate to literacy (Konstantopoulos; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, and Rodrigues; Kennedy; Gilrane, Roberts, and Russell). Following district, state, and federal education guidelines as directed ensures all educators are working in a synergistic way (Kennedy 386).

### **Accountability**

With the instruction of effective teachers, low-income students improve their literacy skills and achievement (Konstantopoulos 93). Konstantopoulos shows that teachers become effective in their teaching practices by being held accountable to state and national guidelines issued within recent school reforms through standards and testing (93). Teachers search for and implement effective practices to enhance their instruction.

Being active in professional development within their building and district helps teachers become more effective. Teachers will become, and maintain their ability to be, effective educators when their school and community hold them accountable to these state and national guidelines. When teachers are held accountable for their instruction and the performance and achievement of their students, they will be better able to improve the literacy achievement of their low-income students.

### **No Child Left Behind Act.**

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) was created as a means to hold teachers accountable for student learning, to close the achievement gap between low-income and middle-income students, and to make sure that all students become academically proficient in their grade level (Konstantopoulos 93). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has stringent accountability measures and includes the Reading First initiative, which focuses on five areas of literacy for beginning readers: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Reading is fundamental to this legislation. If young students cannot read, or are poor readers, then they might continue to be poor readers and become less responsive to reading intervention strategies as the reading becomes more difficult in later grades (Wamba 110). NCLB has introduced tools that the government uses to measure schools. Therefore, the teachers within those schools are being held accountable for ensuring that all children, especially those who live in poverty, increase their literacy skills so that they are reading at grade level.

**Title I.**

Title I schools are schools that serve students at risk because of poverty. Specifically, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 6301 et seq.) is called Title I: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged, referred to as “Title I” in this paper. This act was created to ensure that all children, even disadvantaged children, “have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments.” These schools have been awarded federal monies to make them more comparable to schools that have mainly middle-income students. Stichter, Stormont, and Lewis conducted research to see if teachers in Title I schools offered the same instruction and had similar behaviors as teachers in non-Title I schools when both types of schools had the same physical assets. The study found that teachers in Title I schools being studied had undesirable behaviors and spent more time talking about unrelated topics so that students were not receiving effective instruction. Teachers will administer effective instruction when opportunities exist in schools for teachers to learn about effective instructional practices and reflect on their own practices. Suggested practices include engaging more often in instructional talk with students, spending less time for transitions, giving more positive feedback to students, and learning how to keep students from exiting the classroom during literacy time (Stichter, Stormont, and Lewis 172-173, 179-180).

The evaluation of literacy programs in Title I schools is also important to ensure that the best programs are chosen for Title I schools as well as non-Title I schools.

Parsons and Harrington found that many Title I schools adopted literacy programs without much research or evidence to demonstrate that they increase student literacy scores and that those programs were low-level, teacher directed, skills-based instruction. They believe that a balanced approach to literacy instruction that includes higher expectations for children in literacy skills will develop students who are more confident and motivated, who can read and write for their own purposes, who embrace change, work collaboratively to accomplish shared goals, and who evaluate their reading by asking relevant and meaningful questions.

### **Effective Practices**

When teachers recognize that their students live in poverty, they find and use different teaching strategies for teaching to help their students become better readers. One teaching strategy that teachers use to introduce unfamiliar concepts and academic skills is to understand, build upon, and respect the cultural backgrounds and practices of these students (Wamba 110). Another effective teaching practice that encourages reading growth is asking purposeful, higher-level questions that challenge the students to think about what they read. Effective teachers also actively involve students in literacy activities like using journal articles and defending their own opinions, and use coaching and modeling to make students responsible for their own learning (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, and Rodriguez 21-24).

Effective teaching practices, such as taking time to understand students and their hardships, showing compassion and genuine care for their students, and offering safe classroom spaces, prepares the students for learning and creates a positive reading



environment in the classroom. Teachers provide materials that students take home and keep without worrying about losses. When teachers know their students, they use that personal information about the students' talents and experiences to make connections between the students and the reading and writing activities they are doing. Some students especially benefit from the integration of art, music, and dance into literature.

Vocabulary development, comprehension, reasoning skills, and confidence increase when teachers and librarians integrate reading and writing activities with sets of books based on themes of interest to students (Walker-Dalhousie and Risko 85). This is a popular strategy that public libraries use to bundle books together for preschoolers that have a similar theme while introducing the child to different authors, genres, vocabulary, characters, and settings. Effective teaching increases literacy success, helps students to close the achievement gap, and lifts students from poverty.

### **Professional Development**

Good professional development empowers teachers to improve literacy achievement in high-poverty schools according to Eithne Kennedy (384). Teachers who succeed in helping their students in literacy performance have the common characteristic of excellent classroom management skills. They implement a balanced literacy framework, emphasize higher order thinking skills, teach basic skills in meaningful contexts, and use a range of formative assessment tools. Good professional development is customized, takes place over extended time, uses research-based approaches, and enables teacher creativity and individuality. Professional development gradually introduces change and builds upon early successes in the process of change. In

conjunction with good professional development, the reading curriculum is systematic, coherent, integrated, and cognitively challenging. Effective teachers learn to schedule blocks of time for uninterrupted classroom activities that focus on reading to signal that reading is a priority (Kennedy 384, 386). Effective professional development focuses on enriching the school culture and involves changing teacher behaviors in a way that the teachers use new materials, incorporate new instructional practices, and modify their beliefs concerning student achievement (Collins). Gilrane, Roberts, and Russell found that professional development is most effective for teachers when they had a voice in determining their own needs, structures were put into place that supported teaching (such as materials, time, and space for collaborative planning), support personnel were available, and teachers had access to data on student achievement (333).

### **School Improvement Supports and Community Supports**

Teachers provide one component of helping low-income students improve literacy achievement while the schools and communities provide another important component to that success. Elements that are beneficial for students are increased family involvement, school improvement with focus on student-centered learning, and high-quality preschool programs leading into the schools. When schools address these areas it helps children improve their literacy skills (Collins; Viadero; Walker-Dalhousie and Risko; Byrd; and Mead).

When schools and communities work together to create positive literacy experiences, and academic programs include the families, the students are motivated to increase their literacy skills (Collins). Such experiences include one-to-one tutoring,

homework assistance or clubs, and theme-based educational activities. Parents become more involved by participating in literacy workshops, field trips, signing and enforcing learning contracts, communicating with teachers often, and attending parent-teacher conferences. Low income students lose reading instruction time due to higher rates of absenteeism and disproportionate learning losses over the summer break. Therefore, parent support of the school calendar is important to increase literacy skills (Viadero). Teachers also make social and cultural connections between teaching and learning when they join students and families in community-based projects that support children and families in poverty (Walker-Dalhouse and Risko 85).

Bryk found five supports that were essential for school improvement, which in turn, can lead to literacy improvement. First, school improvement takes place when schools have a coherent instructional guidance system that articulates what the teacher teaches, including learning tasks and assessments, and how the instruction is delivered, including teacher feedback and scaffolding of instruction. The second support for school improvement is when teachers work together to solve problems. Schools with strong ties with parents and community members create the third support. The fourth support for school improvement is to have a student-centered learning climate within the school. Student needs are considered as the school climate is built to ensure that the school is safe and orderly and each member of the school community holds high expectations for every student. This type of climate allows students to gain confidence, encourages them to persist in their studies, and increases the likelihood of higher academic achievement. Last, leadership within the building will drive and demand change in the hiring and

development of staff, core instructional programs, and collaboration between the staff members with the common goal of raising student achievement in reading. This leadership begins with a principal who cultivates a cadre of leaders (teachers, parents, and community members) to keep the momentum of change occurring, while supporting, valuing, and sharing responsibility for student academic achievement.

According to Vikki Collins, a collaborative urban partnership can be successful in raising student reading achievement because it provides school and community supports to families through support agencies like the public libraries, child care centers, after school programs, health departments, and parks and recreation facilities. This partnership also provides in-service and resource support for the teachers through training from local universities and colleges; collaboration and sharing of resources and ideas with public libraries and organizations such as Parents As Teachers, allowing time in the school calendar for professional development of teachers in research based programs of literacy instruction; and donations of materials and resources, like books and refreshments, from local businesses to use in such programs as open houses, parent workshops, library nights, and family literacy nights. These community supports increase parent involvement and increase the parent and community expectations for student achievement, which in turn positively affect student literacy achievement. These community supports help increase the morale of the teachers and alter the teachers' beliefs so that they raise their expectations of student performance (Collins).

One additional support for student achievement increasingly being backed by schools and communities is the inclusion of high-quality preschool education. According

to Mead, studies have shown that children who attend high-quality preschools have stronger academic and cognitive skills than those students who do not (Mead). The preschool experience also helps students develop their emotional skills. Low-income students who attend quality preschool programs are better equipped to enter elementary school. Elementary school students gain much if their preschools have focused on developing social and emotional skills, as well as, academic skills. When elementary school leaders integrate pre-K programs, they serve children better in their elementary years. Mead, however, noted that the increased academic skills learned by lower income preschoolers disappear by third grade when those students attended lower-performing public schools. Calling this phenomenon fade-out, she says that “Third grade is a turning point when children shift from learning to read to reading to learn.” She advocated for good literacy instruction by qualified teachers to continue the preschool reforms through third grade and on into subsequent school years to avoid fade-out. This academic reform for lower elementary grades yields great benefits in closing the literacy achievement gap with low-income students.

In summary, school and community supports are vital for the literacy development of students (Collins, Mead, Viadero). Viadero found an increase in student motivation when families are involved in the education of their students with such activities as tutoring, volunteering, and getting students to school on time. When school leaders invest in improving the professional development of their teachers, increasing parent and community involvement, creating a student-centered learning environment, focus on student development, and put programs in place to increase student

achievement, students will increase literacy skills. Lastly, when school leaders include high-quality preschool education in their planning, and have students attend these programs before attending elementary school, they will see an increase in academic skills. Therefore, the case can be made for schools and communities of low-income students to put supports in place that improve the literacy development of their students to close the literacy achievement gap for these students.

### **Programs to Improve Literacy Achievement**

This paper shows several programs that provide quality learning opportunities for students who live in low-income areas (Cahill; Lindsay; Bitter, O'Day, Gubbins and Socias; Manz, Power, Ginsburg-Block and Dowrick; Vantassel-Baska and Stambaugh; Kellett; Borman, Goetz and Dowling). The school librarian works with teachers and administrators through such programs to improve the literacy achievement of low-income students. Programs that promote literacy achievement include, but are not limited to, preschool outreach story time programs; programs that provide access to print materials; balanced literacy programs like Project Athena; community paraeducators; homework clubs which provide opportunities to build literacy confidence; and high-quality, academically-focused summer reading programs.

#### **Preschool Outreach Storytime Programs**

Preschool outreach storytime programs, conducted by school librarians in the school library are one positive way to introduce young low-income children to literacy while preparing them to enter elementary school. These programs are conducted weekly for one hour to cover the early literacy goals of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001:

oral language, phonological awareness, print awareness, and knowledge of the alphabet (No Child Left Behind). This program is also a way for the elementary school librarian to model effective literacy teaching skills to preschool teachers so that they will continue to support the literacy needs of their students. According to Cahill, preschoolers participate in storytime through read aloud stories with finger plays, action rhymes, songs, and enrichment activities. Features of the program are that these children are surrounded by print resources, have the opportunity to respond with reading and writing, and are allowed to bring a book home. The cost is minimal for the sponsoring school but the benefits are great. Benefits include opening communication with preschools, daycare centers, and families, and developing relationships for other projects. In addition, parents learn to value literacy development; children establish relationships early with school faculty; and transitions to the elementary grades are minimized. Preschool outreach storytime programs are one way to bridge the literacy achievement gap of young, low-income students (61-62).

### **Access to Print Materials**

Reading Is Fundamental (RIF), a children's literacy nonprofit organization in the United States, commissioned a comprehensive study that found that programs which gave children access to books, by lending or providing for ownership, showed a positive literacy outcome (Lindsay). The study was conducted by Jim Lindsay of Learning Point Associates, a nonprofit education research and consulting organization. The research showed that when students have access to print materials four specific benefits emerged. The first benefit of having access to books is it improves children's reading performance,

especially with kindergarten students. The second benefit of having access to print materials is it allows children to develop basic reading skills such as word identification, phonemic awareness, and completion of sentences. The third benefit is that print materials allow children and their parents to share reading and motivates students to read for longer periods of time. Lastly, having access to books improves children's attitudes toward reading and learning. Giving students access to print materials allows for the above benefits and is an effective way to begin to bridge the literacy achievement gap in young, low-income students (Lindsay).

### **Balanced Literacy**

Literacy outcomes of low-income students improve in an urban setting when balanced literacy is aligned with improved instructional practices according to Bitter, O'Day, Gubbins, and Socias. The balanced literacy approach to reading and writing engages students in literacy activities so that they get meaning from their interaction with the text. Balanced literacy is a framework for teachers to use that describes how to teach literacy to students, but it is flexible in what books the students read. The use of higher level questioning, accountable talk among students, and scaffolding techniques by teachers, are effective instructional practices in facilitating positive student learning outcomes in reading and writing using balanced literacy strategies. The role of the teacher is to encourage and scaffold the learning process so that students improve comprehension and creativity while being engaged. Reading comprehension improves when literacy instruction is focused on keeping the students actively engaged with text. Balanced



literacy is another effective reading program that can bridge the literacy achievement gap for young low-income students (17-19, 36).

Project Athena is a reading program funded by the United States Department of Education. Its goal is to help children of poverty develop literacy skills in the areas of reading comprehension, literary analysis, and persuasive writing according to VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh. This reading program uses the balanced literacy approach to help teachers design a framework in which to teach reading and writing. Teachers are trained in workshops on how to scaffold instruction through the use of concept maps, questions, and core activities that engage learners in thinking about what they are reading and writing (59). VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh found that this systematic approach of high-powered curriculum and multiple types of student assessments, combined with trained teachers, led to greater engagement and higher literacy achievement by low-income students (63). Project Athena, and other reading programs with a balanced literacy approach, serve as a bridge for the literacy achievement gap for low-income students.

### **Community Paraeducators**

Manz, Power, Ginsburg-Block, and Dowrick show that community paraeducators offer a positive, community-based solution to increasing literacy development with low-income students. Paraeducators are non-certified staff working alongside teachers and administrators to assist with instruction to help students achieve academically. They are in a position to foster home-school-community relationships because they live in the neighborhoods surrounding the schools. This gives the paraeducators an advantage of

representing the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students and families through communication and mutual respect. Paraeducators offer insights into student progress and regression that sometimes goes undetected by teachers. Paraeducators become a contact person within the school for the families so that families are connected to the services offered within the school and community (55-57).

Manz, Power, Ginsburg-Block, and Dowrick show how schools can effectively model the partnership between the school and community by using paraeducators in the Reading Partners literacy program. Paraeducators from the community were trained for the Reading Partners program to tutor children in reading, provide progress-monitoring activities, communicate with the families of the participating children, and plan celebration events for the participating children and their families. The program showed that using community paraeducators was challenging at times, but with training and encouragement of school staff and student family members, it had positive effects on the participating children's reading scores (69-74). Using paraeducators through a program such as Reading Partners can be an effective community-based early literacy program in urban schools that offers another bridge for the literacy achievement gap with low-income students.

### **Homework Clubs**

Mary Kellett found that low-income children reported that homework clubs are a valuable resource to develop literacy skills. Because of poor homework habits, too many distractions (such as smoking, banging, loud music, or television), and not having adults at home who could answer homework questions, students fall behind academically.

Homework clubs that have the greatest impact on raising low-income student's literacy improvement happen after the school day; are staffed by teachers offering help and checking completed homework; offer material resources such as desk, pens, paper, and pencils; offer a quiet environment with comfortable reading areas; and offer good quality books for reading.

Other beneficial literacy approaches for homework clubs include creating classroom environments where students 'privately' build their literacy confidence, providing opportunities for children to read quietly or to younger students in non-threatening environments, facilitating 'private' writing opportunities for children, and offering help and training to parents to support their children's literacy achievement. These are ways for teachers to be aware of addressing motivation and enjoyment when teaching literacy (402-407). Providing low-income students with opportunities to build literacy confidence is an effective way to bridge the literacy divide.

### **High-Quality, Academically Focused Summer Reading Programs**

Over 30 years of research has demonstrated that summer vacations slow the academic progress of all students (Borman, Goetz and Dowling 133). This "summer slide" is more pronounced for low-income and urban children in math and reading. The members of school communities and public libraries realize this and create summer reading programs to make reading a fun activity during the summer time to keep the "summer slide" from happening and to build literacy skills for low-income students. School educators are also starting to create academically-based, replicable summer programs for their students to overcome this summer slide. These summer school

programs are designed with the goal to increase literacy knowledge and literacy skills by engaging students with reading through field trips, athletics, and art and science lessons. According to Borman, Goetz, and Dowling, KindergARTen is a very successful example of this type of summer reading program that integrates art and science activities along with literacy into the curriculum (133-146). KindergARTen Camp is a free, six week, full-day summer enrichment program in Baltimore, Maryland, where class sizes are limited to a maximum of ten children. This camp is structured to start with breakfast, followed by three hours of structured literacy instruction (language and word study, shared reading, interactive writing, guided reading, and independent writing), a lunch break, physical activity, a 20-minute read-aloud time, and ending with a science and art block. After the morning reading session is completed on Fridays, the students participate in field trips to such places as museums, zoos, and nature centers that provide an experience from which the children can draw meaning and apply to their learning. The study of KindergARTen by Borman, Goetz, and Dowling found causal evidence that the program had positive effects on low-income student literacy achievement. Overwhelmingly, the students, parents, and teachers had a positive view of the program and the effect it had on the children's reading ability, confidence, and attitude towards school (133-136).

Public librarians also know the value of summer reading programs as a means to promote literacy, use the library, develop the habit of reading, develop an interest in books, and have an opportunity for family time. The American Library Association (ALA) promotes summer reading programs for children by sponsoring and administering

the Association for Library Service to Children/Book Wholesalers, Inc., (ALSC/BWI) Reading Program Grant. The grant is made possible by an annual gift of \$3,000 by BWI to provide financial assistance for public libraries to run the program. This grant also recognizes ALSC members for outstanding program development.

ALA does not set a theme for summer reading programs but many public libraries throughout the country use the ones determined from the Collaborative Summer Library Program (CSLP) (American Library Association, “Library Summer Reading Programs”). The CSLP is a consortium of libraries from different states that combine their ideas, resources, expertise, and costs to provide a unified and high-quality program that includes promotional items at a discounted rate to all participants. The consortium is comprised of public libraries from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, and the Mariana Islands (Collaborative Summer Library Program, “About CSLP ”). High-quality, academically focused summer reading programs are an effective way to close the literacy achievement gap for low-income students.

### **Conclusion**

Research indicates that a literacy achievement gap exists between children in poverty and children who are not living in poverty. This chapter presents what takes place when educators, parents, and community members work together to improve the literacy achievement of their low-income students. The literacy achievement gap can be closed by identifying the areas of literacy instruction to be addressed within schools, providing professional development on literacy teaching practices and strategies along with accountability structures for teachers, and determining what research-based

programs can be put into place at school to improve student literacy achievement. By closing the literacy achievement gap, schools increase students' literacy, which then provides a foundation for success in school and life.

### **CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

A literacy achievement gap exists between children who live in poverty and children who do not. It is the responsibility of school communities (school librarians, teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community members) to improve the literacy achievement of low-income students. School community members accomplish this by asking and reflecting on three important questions that address poverty and literacy achievement. The first question that helps school communities begin necessary conversations is, “what causes the literacy achievement gap between children who live in poverty, and children who do not?” School communities can then learn about the impact that they can have on student achievement of low-income students by asking, “In what ways can school community members promote literacy achievement of their low-income students?” Once the roles and expectations of the school community are clear and agreed upon, the process of choosing and implementing proven programs for literacy achievement are determined by asking, “What literacy research-based programs have been proven to improve literacy of low-income children?” When schools, parents, and communities work together to improve the literacy achievement of their low-income students, the literacy achievement gap of low-income children can be closed. By closing the literacy achievement gap, schools increase students’ literacy, which then provides those students a foundation for success in school and life.

### **The Literacy Achievement Gap**

What causes the literacy achievement gap between children who live in poverty, and children who do not, and how can it be addressed? Reflecting on this question helps school community members to understand poverty and how it affects the students in their school, acknowledge and address the literacy achievement gap, understand the relationship between poverty and literacy, describe the three existing literacy gaps, understand the foundational significance of vocabulary acquisition, and understand the influence of school and home environments on literacy achievement. Understanding the relationship between poverty and the student population of a school community allows the school leaders to put into place policies for literacy development funding, literacy resource acquisition, and school climate (such as minimizing social exclusion) which increases student literacy achievement, therefore, closing the literacy achievement gap for these students.

Fifteen million children live in poverty and deal with multiple issues related to poverty while being a student. The three literacy gaps shown to exist for children from low-income families are the gap between the student and the text; the gap between the teacher and the student; and the gap between the student and his peers. Literacy gaps hinder the students' abilities to excel in reading and writing, and all three arise from a student's lack of background knowledge and experience. The size of a low-income student's vocabulary is the biggest handicap in reading because vocabulary proficiency is strongly related to understanding language and reading comprehension, leads to academic success in other subjects, and supports reading of informational text. Early intervention,



preventative preschool programs, and caring classroom educators reduce vocabulary deficits. The influence of a low-income student's home environment often negatively influences that child's literacy achievement. Therefore, it is important for the school environment to be a positive influence on those children's literacy achievement through policies that directly target children's aptitude, mental health, and physical health; the funding allocated to literacy development; the provision of comparable literacy resources from one district to the next; and the school library's attempt to be inclusive to minimize social exclusion.

### **Impact of School Communities**

School community members can learn about themselves and how they would like to positively impact student achievement of low-income students by asking, "In what ways can school communities promote literacy achievement of their low-income students?" The actions and behaviors of teachers directly affect literacy learning and the achievement of their students. The home environment also plays an important role in directly affecting literacy learning and achievement of children. When the school community members recognize the weaknesses and strengths that they each contribute to the literacy achievement of the students, or lack of, then they will be better able to work together to recognize what they can do individually and collectively to increase student literacy achievement of those children identified as needing help.

School community members have found specific areas for improvement to reach higher literacy achievement of their students. Collaboration among school community members can be improved as it empowers the teachers with effective literacy teaching

strategies and lessons. Teachers improve their instruction by being held accountable for their ability to engage students in prepared lessons that motivate them to read for enjoyment. Other methods to engage students include using effective teaching practices and strategies, attending professional development that is focused on helping their students become better readers, working with the school and community to use multiple supports that relate to literacy, and following district, state, and federal education guidelines as directed. With the instruction of effective teachers, low-income students improve their literacy skills and achievement.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) is federal legislation that holds teachers accountable for student learning in order to close the achievement gap between low-income and middle-income students; to ensure that all children, especially those who live in poverty, increase their literacy skills so that they are reading at grade level; and to measure school performance. Reading is fundamental to this legislation. Federal monies are awarded to schools that serve students at risk because of poverty. These are called Title I schools. This money allows them to be more comparable to schools that have mainly middle-income students.

Teachers who succeed in helping their students in literacy performance have the common characteristic of excellent classroom management skills. They implement a balanced literacy framework, emphasize higher order thinking skills, teach basic skills in meaningful contexts, and use a range of formative assessment tools. Good professional development is customized, takes place over extended time, uses research-based

approaches, and enables teacher creativity and individuality. Professional development gradually introduces change and builds upon early successes in the process of change.

### **Proven Programs for Literacy Achievement**

Once school community educators have reflected on the literacy achievement issue of their low-income students, taken action, and are held accountable for their instruction promoting learning and literacy achievement with their students, they choose and implement programs for literacy achievement by asking, “What research-based literacy programs have been proven to improve literacy of low-income children?” Programs that are proven to promote literacy achievement include, but are not limited to, preschool outreach story time programs; programs that provide access to print materials; balanced literacy programs; using community paraeducators; homework clubs which provide opportunities to build literacy confidence; and high-quality, academically focused summer reading programs.

### **Conclusion**

It has been shown that a literacy achievement gap exists between children who live in poverty and children who do not, and it is the responsibility of school communities to improve the literacy achievement of low-income students. When the entire school community works together using all of the available programs, training, and community supports to improve the literacy achievement of their low-income students, the literacy achievement gap between their those students and children who are not low-income, will close. By closing the literacy achievement gap, schools increase students’ literacy which provides those students a foundation for success in school and life.

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