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The Impact Poverty Has on Adolescents' Experiences at School According to School

Social Workers

By

Kelly Williams

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of
School of Social Work
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas
St. Paul, Minnesota
In Partial fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of
Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the University Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

Poverty is prevalent throughout the United States and can impact an individual's childhood following them into adolescence. The purpose of this project is to look at the impact poverty has on adolescents' experiences at school according to school social workers. Using a qualitative design, seven school social workers were interviewed regarding poverty in relation to their adolescent student's experiences at school. The interviews were transcribed and coded into themes and sub-themes. The emerging themes correlated with the literature. The findings showed themes of adolescents' living in poverty, academic, social and emotional experiences, to be key experiences school social workers see with poverty-stricken adolescents.

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Introduction

In 2011 and 2012 the United States had the highest number of children living in poverty at 16.7 million (Census Bureau). Those children living in poverty represent 23% of all children in the American population. This is highest number of children living in poverty America has seen in over a decade. In the past two years this number has reduced. There are now a little over 16 million children living in poverty, which is higher than what America would like to see (<http://www.nccp.org>, 2013). According to the National Center for Children Living in Poverty (<http://www.nccp.org>, 2013), risks are greatest for children who experience poverty when they are young or when they experience profound and persistent poverty.

Research suggests that poverty is the single greatest threat to a child's well-being (<http://www.nccp.org>, 2013). The risk factors these children face due to poverty are emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stressors, cognitive lags and health and safety issues (Jensen, 2009). Due to these risk factors children often struggle in school achievement. Early childhood development in the United States has 41.8% of 4 year olds enrolled in state pre-k, Head Start or special education programs (<http://www.childrensdefense.org/cits>, 2013). Sixty-seven percent of 4th graders enrolled in public school cannot read at grade level and 60.3% are unable to do math (<http://www.childrensdefense.org/cits>, 2012). Sixty-eight percent of 8th graders enrolled at public schools cannot read at grade level and 66.5% are unable to do math (<http://www.childrensdefense.org/cits>, 2012). According to the Children's Defense Fund (2012) there are 1,000,363 16 to 19- year- olds (5.6% of the children in the United States) not enrolled in school and have not graduated from high school. In 2011, 1,053,234 high

school students dropped out of school (<http://www.childrensdefense.org/cits>, 2011).

There are clear risks of poverty that impact children doing well in school and attending school on a regular basis. The research question for this project will examine how poverty impacts adolescents' experiences at school.

Literature Review

The literature review will examine an overview of poverty, children living in poverty and the risk factors they face, poverty's impact in schools, school readiness and school connectedness.

Poverty

In the United States there are many different definitions of the word poverty. The Office of Management and Budget set the official poverty threshold and define poverty as, "persons with income less than that deemed sufficient to purchase basic needs"(Jensen, 2009 p5-6). The current poverty threshold is \$23,550 for a family of four, but most families need to double the threshold to be successful (<http://www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html>, 2014 and Wright, 2011). Poverty is more than just a lack of income; poverty can impact one's life. In Eric Jensen's book (2009), *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, poverty is defined as, "a chronic and debilitating condition that results from multiple adverse synergistic risk factors and effects the mind, body and soul."

Jensen (2009) describes six different types of poverty people may experience. First, *situational poverty*, this type of poverty is often temporary and is caused by a sudden crisis or loss. Examples of sudden crisis include, deaths in the family, a divorce or a natural disaster. Second is *generational poverty*, which occurs when two generations in a family have been born into poverty. These families are unlikely to move out of poverty, as they are not equipped with the proper tools to do so. The third type of poverty is *absolute poverty*, this involves a "scarcity of necessities such as shelter, running water and food," (Jensen, 2009 p 6). These families tend to focus on day-to-day survival. The

fourth kind of poverty is *relative poverty*, which occurs when the family's income is insufficient to meet society's average standard of living. Fifth is *urban poverty*, which takes place in areas with a population of 50,000 or more. Families classified as urban poor deal with chronic and acute stressors. Such as, over crowding, violence and noise. Families are also dependent on large city services, which are often inadequate. The last type of poverty is *rural poverty*, these families live in cities populated below 50,000. These families often have less access to services, support for disabilities and quality education opportunities. Families often feel powerless to move out of the cycle of poverty. This leads to bad relationships, vulnerability, helplessness and frustration (Black and Engle, 2008). Children born into this lifestyle are largely impacted by poverty.

Children Living in Poverty

Children under the age of 18 are considered an at-risk group to be effected by poverty. Currently, there are over 74 million children living in the United States today. One in five children (23% of Americans) in the United States lives in poverty (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997). Forty-five percent of children live in low-income families and 22% live in poor families (Ekono, Jiang and Skinner, 2014). When looking at the population of 24 million adolescents (ages 12-17), 41% or 10 million live in low-income families and 19% or 4.7 million live in poor families (Ekono, Jiang and Skinner, 2014). Poverty can impact the child's ability to learn and can contribute to social, emotional and behavioral problems (Jensen, 2009 and <http://www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html>, 2014). Therefore, the risk factors poverty has on children makes this population vulnerable.

Demographics

In the United States childhood poverty is associated with race and ethnicity (Wright, 2011). The most at-risk adolescents are Black, American Indian and Hispanic (Wright, 2011). Thirty-one percent of black adolescents live in poor families as well as, 28.6% Hispanic and 23.7% American Indian adolescents live in poor families (Wright, 2011). A study by Wright (2011) suggests that parents and children that were not born in the United States have a higher chance of living in poverty. This is just one area that poverty affects. There are other risk factors that affect adolescents as well.

Children growing up in poverty are more likely to be exposed to risks in their homes and communities (Black and Engle, 2008). The environment where youth live and spend time in is important. Vanessa Wright (2011) calculated the following percentages from a population survey. Twenty-four point seven percent of adolescents who live in the city experience poverty whereas 12.9% suffer from poverty in a suburban area and 18.9% in a rural area (Wright, 2011). This relates to two of the types of poverty discussed earlier, urban poverty and rural poverty. Twenty-four point seven percent of adolescents who live in the city/urban area experience poverty because they deal with chronic and acute stressors in their environment and are often dependent on inadequate large city services (Jensen, 2009). Rural areas experience poverty at a higher percentage due to the lack of services and support systems (Jensen, 2009). Children experiencing these types of poverty are at a neighborhood disadvantage, which is defined as “the presence of a number of community-level stressors, such as poverty, unemployment or underemployment, limited resources, substandard housing and high crime rates” (Attar, Guerra and Tolan, 1994 p391).

In a study conducted by Attar, Guerra and Tolan (1994), they studied the occurrence of three types of negative life events of African-American and Hispanic boys and girls in elementary school living in urban communities characterized by varying levels of neighborhood disadvantage (Attar, Guerra and Tolan, 1994). The participants for their study consisted of 384 first, second and fourth grade African-American and Hispanic children from six different schools in the Midwest. The purpose of their study was to see if children living in disadvantaged neighborhoods experienced more negative life events and stressors. The first level of neighborhood disadvantage was moderate characterized by having a 50% lower crime rate than surrounding cities, families had an average income of \$25,000 a year and one-third of the children received free lunch (Attar, Guerra and Tolan, 1994). The second level of neighborhood disadvantage they used was high, which was characterized by two-thirds of the children receiving free lunch, families having an average income of \$8,900- \$15,000 a year and the crime rates were 50% higher than surrounding cities (Attar, Guerra and Tolan, 1994). Attar, Guerra and Tolan (1994) created a survey of 16 questions about life transition, circumscribed events and exposure to violence. They were then able to ask the children these questions and compare their answers to the type of neighborhood they lived in. The study found children living in high-level neighborhood disadvantage experienced and reported more stressors than those living in a moderate neighborhood disadvantage (Attar, Guerra and Tolan, 1994).

Chronic and Acute Stressors

Children who grow up living in poverty are more likely to experience both acute and chronic stress (Jensen, 2009). Acute stress is severe stress from exposure to such

trauma as abuse or violence (Jensen, 2009). Chronic stress is defined as high stress sustained over time (Jensen, 2009). This is due to children experiencing negative life events and daily hassles (Attar, Guerra and Tolan, 1994). Negative life events are defined as traumatic events, such as a death in the family or the divorce of parents (Attar, Guerra and Tolan, 1994). Daily hassles are described as daily ongoing frustrations and demands in everyday life (Attar, Guerra and Tolan, 1994). Negative life events can lead to adjustment problems, social withdrawal, school adjustment problems, self-reported delinquency and psychological distress (Attar, Guerra and Tolan, 1994). For low income families stress can be characterized by the following: living in overcrowded homes, substandard housing, unsafe neighborhoods, community or domestic violence, parental separation or divorce, loss of loved one, financial strain and material deprivation (Jensen, 2009). Over half of poverty stricken children experience evictions, utility disconnections, overcrowding and a lack of stove and refrigerator, where as only 13% of financially stable children experience these stressors (Jensen, 2009). The chronic stress these children face is linked to over 50% of absences in schools (Jensen, 2009). Poverty leads to family stress, which has a negative impact on parental emotional well-being and mental health (Black and Engle, 2008).

Family Functions

Poverty influences the manner in which a family functions. The effect poverty has on children are influenced by a family's behavior (Black and Engle, 2008). "Children in chronically impoverished families have lower cognitive and academic performance and more behavior problems than children who are not exposed to poverty," (Black and Engle, 2008 p244). Children born into poverty are faced with daily overwhelming

challenges. Wright (2011) conceptualizes two models that look at how poverty or families experiencing poverty impact children. The first model is the *investment model*, where income influences children's life chances because of what it can buy. Poverty limits the parents' purchasing power; therefore parents are not able to invest in the kinds of things important of a child's positive development. These parents are unable to provide cognitively stimulating materials, positive educational experiences and a safe and secure living environment (Wright, 2011). Guo and Harris (2000) state that family income influences the quality of books, newspapers and magazines a family has access to, and family income may also limit a family's ability to take their children to educational museums or trips. This article's research also states that the relationship between family income and cognitive stimulation are not as strong as the relationship between the homes physical environment and family income (Guo and Harris, 2000).

The second model is the *family process model*. This model states that the effect of poverty on a child's development is explained by poverty's effect on parents (Wright, 2011). The financial strain and economic instability that is hard on parents and leads to negative emotions, marital strain, depression, feelings of anger and hostility. This negative effect impacts how parents interact with their children and respond to their needs (Wright, 2011). The effect of poverty causes parents to lack the appropriate parental responsiveness, warmth and supervision leading to harsh punishment (Wright, 2011). Gou and Harris (2000) research was conducted through the data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). The NLSY has 12,686 youth participants, which ages ranging from 14 to 21. The participants were African-American, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged whites. Gou and Harris (2000) choose the NLSY because

the data describes the home environment, child's health at birth and at the time of cognitive tests, and the quality of childcare. Guo and Harris (2000) research states poverty reduces parent's responsiveness to warmth and supervision, which therefore increases inconsistent disciplinary practices and harsh punishment. These negative parenting behaviors disable children and adolescents socio-emotional and cognitive development and also affect the ways parents monitor and respond to their child's needs (Gou and Harris 2000 and Wright, 2011).

Problems Children Face Related to Poverty

Children growing up in poverty face many challenges, such as health problems, cognitive issues, school achievement, emotional and behavioral outcomes and teenage out of wedlock child bearing (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997). Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) examined the challenges stated above that poverty stricken children face compared to financially stable children. In their research they used the following surveys to collect their data, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), the NLSY, children of the NLSY, the National Survey of Families and Household (NSFH), the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) and the Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP). From these studies and surveys Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (2000) compared relationships from the data to come up with their results. When looking at cognitive issues, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (2000) results included that 5% of poverty-stricken children experience developmental delay compared to 3.8% of financially stable children. Eight point three percent of poverty-stricken children have a learning disability compared to 6.1% of financially stable children. When it came to school achievement Brook-Gunn and Duncan (1997) found 28.8% of poverty-stricken children experience

grade repetition compared to 14.1% of financially stable children. Eleven point nine percent of poverty-stricken students were expelled or suspended compared to 6.1% of financially stable students. Twenty-one percent of poverty-stricken children were high school dropouts compared to 9.6% financially stable children. Another challenge is emotional and behavioral outcomes, 16.4% poverty-stricken children's parents have reported an emotional or behavioral problem that lasts longer than three months and 12.7% financially stable children's parents have report the same. Twenty-five percent of poverty-stricken children's parents report their child has been treated for an emotional or behavioral problem compared to 4.5% of financially stable students. Lastly they studied teenage out of wedlock and childbearing and found the following; female teens who had an out of wedlock birth was 11% poverty-stricken children to 3.6% financially stable children. Fifteen point nine percent of poverty-stricken children were economically inactive at the age of 24 compared to 3.6% financially stable children. Some other big differences Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) found in their study was 15.9% of poverty-stricken children experienced hunger in the past year compared to 1.6% of financially stable children and 19.5% of poverty-stricken children were afraid to go out in their neighborhood compared to 8.7% of financially stable children.

Children experiencing health problems, cognitive issues, school achievement, emotional and behavioral outcomes and teenage out of wedlock child bearing can lead to both externalizing and internalizing problems. Externalizing problems such as aggression, theft and vandalism hinder successful development in peer relations and academic performance (Barker, Boivin, Brendgen, Lier, Tremblay and Vitaro, 2012). If a child is struggling in those two areas they are most likely to have an increase in internal

problems, such as anxiety and depressive symptoms (Barker and exec, 2012). Children raised in poverty are more likely to display acting out behaviors, impatience and impulsivity, a limited range of behavioral responses, inappropriate emotional responses and show less empathy for others misfortunes (Jensen, 2009). In the *book Teaching With Poverty in Mind* it states, “children and adolescents growing up in poverty often lack and need a caring, dependable adult in their lives and often it’s the teachers where children look for that support”(Jensen, 2009).

Poverty’s Impact in Schools

The longer children experience poverty the greater it’s negative effects (Wright, 2011). In a study by Wright (2011), found that children living in poverty have lower educational achievement, worse socio-emotional development and health consequences. Living in poverty students often live in disadvantaged neighborhoods where schools have less funding and parents have fewer resources to invest in their child’s education (Adelman and Wagmiller, 2009). These disadvantaged students in school often have chronic tardiness, lack of motivation and inappropriate behavior (Jensen, 2009). Jensen (2009) research states, “students who live in poverty have a greater incidence of health issues, which leads to an increase in school absences, duration of school absences, tardiness rates, incidents of illness during class and rates of undiagnosed or untreated health problems or disabilities.” Attendance problems may also be related to negative parent attitudes towards school. These are the parents who are unwilling to get involved in school functions or activities, contact the school about academic concerns or attend parent teacher conferences (Jensen, 2009).

Hernandez (2011) discusses how children in poverty are more likely to have low reading scores and to not graduate from high school (Wright, 2011). Hernandez (2011) conducted a study of 3,975 students born between 1979 and 1989. The parents were surveyed every two years to establish their economic status. The reading level was tracked by using the Peabody Individual Achievement Test (PIAT). This test is used to measure six content areas that can be used with students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Hernandez divided the students into three reading groups, proficient, basic and below basic. He also divided the students by family income and poverty levels in the neighborhoods they lived in. The results of Hernandez's studied concluded about 16% of third grade students who were not reading proficiently did not graduate from high school on time. Another finding was students who were economically disadvantaged for at least a year and were not reading at the proficient level, 26% did not graduate. Thirty-five percent of students did not graduate who were economically disadvantaged and lived in high poverty neighborhoods. This research is also supported in Wright's article which states exposure to poverty in adolescents leads to low academic achievement and a high drop out rate (Wright, 2011). Students who experience poverty are also at risk to experience teenage pregnancy, delinquent behavior, being unemployed in adolescence and adulthood and be poor as an adult (Wright, 2011). As Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) research found 11% of poverty-stricken female teens had a baby out of wedlock compared to 3.6% of financially stable students. They also found that 15.9% of poverty-stricken children were economically inactive at the age of 24 compared to 8.3% of financially stable students. Students who do not graduate from high school often will be

disconnected from economic independence, enrolling in post-secondary education or be employed (Wright, 2011).

School Readiness

Poverty impacts children's education and development by an increase in risk factors, limiting protective factors, opportunities for stimulation and enrichment (Black and Engle, 2008). School readiness is a skill that affects the ability to learn in school including physical health, motor skills, self-care, emotional and behavioral self-regulation, social skills, communication and motivation (Black and Engle, 2008). Children living in poverty are often not ready to begin school because they often lack school readiness. Black and Engle (2008) research from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, reported 30%-40% of children entering kindergarten are not ready for school. Sadly these children experience a gap in their knowledge compared to other students and most likely will not be able to fill this gap, if anything it will get wider according to Black and Engle (2008). This may occur because parents are not involved in their child's education or they simply do not have the funds available to prepare their children for school. As mentioned early in research by Guo and Harris (2000) and Wright (2011), poverty may affect the parents in ways in which they monitor and respond to their children's needs. Also in a study by Gou and Harris's (2000) research found that the relationship between family income and cognitive stimulation in children. The relationship being families with low-income had less access to providing cognitive enrichment experiences to their children than financially stable families. By improving school readiness and children's development can reduce poverty related disparities (Black and Engle, 2008). This can be done through

family based safety net programs, preschool intervention and through programs to improve parenting (Black and Engle, 2008).

School Connectedness

School connectedness consists of, high academic standards coupled with strong teacher support, the environment in which adult and student relationships are positive and respectful and physically and emotionally safe school environment (Hawkins, Monahan and Oesterle, 2010). In simpler terms school connectedness is about attachment, by close affective relationships with those at school and by commitment, students have an investment in school and do well in school (Hawkins, Monahan and Oesterle, 2010). In a study by Hawkins, Monahan and Oesterle (2010), they report that students who feel connected to their school are less likely to participate in delinquent behaviors or violent behaviors (Hawkins, Monahan and Oesterle, 2010). Also when students have their parents support they are more likely to be connected to their school (Hawkins, Monahan and Oesterle, 2010). Often students who experience poverty are not connected to their schools. Hawkins, Monahan and Oesterle (2010) research article also states that by high school 40-60% of students report being disconnected from school. These students report they do not like their teachers, have a lack of interest and do not find schoolwork meaningful or engaging (Hawkins, Monahan and Oesterle, 2010). When students feel this way they are less like to attend school. The low school connectedness is also associated to mental health and emotional well being, students may have greater anxiety or depressive symptoms, marijuana use and be less likely to graduate from high school (Hawkins, Monahan and Oesterle, 2010). It is important for students living in poverty to feel they have reliable and safe relationships and the feeling of belonging or feeling

special at school in order to have a successful future. Children and adolescents also experience low-quality relationships with their parents, which is associated with behavior problems, fighting, lying and cheating (Hawkins, Monahan and Oesterle, 2010).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how poverty impacts adolescent's school experience according to school social workers. An exploratory qualitative study was conducted to show how poverty may influence adolescents attending school. The focus of this research was to help expand knowledge and understanding of poverty and how it impacts adolescents' experiences at school.

Sample

A non-probability sample of seven Minnesota school social workers from the Minnesota School Social Work Association (MSSWA) in the Twin Cities Metro area was obtained. Qualitative interviews were conducted with social workers. Interviews were completed with licensed social workers that have been working in the schools for longer than 6 months. All participants were over the age of 18 years old. Six of the participants were female and one was male. This population was sought out as this study was specifically looking to explore the risks adolescents face due to poverty and how it impacts their school experiences. The seven interviews were audio recorded.

Data Collection

Data was gathered through a semi-structured interview. The MSSWA sent a letter of approval (Appendix A). A description of what the study and the interview questions would be like was sent in a letter via email to MSSWA members (Appendix B). The participants responded to the email and stated they would be willing to participate in the study. The participants responded with times they were available for the interviews. The interviews were conducted at the participant's offices. The interviews were then conducted with those willing to participate.

Measurement

The research was conducted by utilizing a semi-structured questionnaire. Questions were developed to identify what participants feel adolescents experience at school due to poverty. Questions in the interview asked participants about their experiences with adolescents at school and poverty risk factors they see at their schools. (For a list of all interview questions see appendix D.)

Protection of Human Subjects

Approval from a research committee and the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas was given prior to any research being conducted. Before each interview the researcher had participants sign a consent form agreeing to participate in the study (Appendix C). This study presented some risk to the participants as it asked them to share their experiences when dealing with adolescents in poverty. When asking participants the interview question there was a chance their personal biases and prejudice would be revealed. Personal information will not be shared. Participation in this study was completely voluntary. The participants were able to choose not to answer any question for any reason. The researcher presented the study to participants and informed them of the possible risks before they agreed to participate in the study. After the participants agreed to participate in an interview a consent form was signed (Appendix C).

In order to protect participants, safeguards were put into place. The researcher did not disclose any identifying information about the participants other than the fact they are school social workers and members of the MSSWA. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed without any identifying information. The researcher transcribed the

interviews and was the only one to have had access to the audio recordings. The audio recordings were kept on the researcher iPhone, which is locked with a passcode. The consent forms were kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's residence. The consent forms will be destroyed and the audiotapes will be deleted after the completion of this study.

Data Analysis

This researcher used the data from the semi-structured interviews to identify common themes from the participant's responses. Themes and sub-themes were found and organized within the data.

Findings

Participants in the study identified six themes including: adolescent students living in poverty, academic, social and emotional experiences, other barriers and supporting students in poverty.

Adolescent Students Living in Poverty

Six participants (86%) identified that 'adolescent students living in poverty' as a major problem confronting many youth in the schools. These participants stated their schools are considered a Title 1 school and they have a high percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. As one participant states:

So this school itself is a Title 1 school, personally I'm guessing of the kids I see about 80-85% are probably living in some degree of poverty.

Academic Experiences

This theme emerged from the data analysis with a few sub-themes as well. The participants discussed areas where they see poverty impacting adolescent's academics. These include attendance, school performance and lack of resources.

Attendance. Four of the participants (57%) identified that one of the first ways they identify a student living in poverty is by their absence in school. The participants discussed how they notice a decline in attendance, which is usually related to an economic problem and also how students miss school because they are taking care of other family members. As one participants state:

Yeah I think sometimes they'll run into things like mom is sick somebody has to stay home and take care of the baby or mom has to go to work or there's an appointment or court or public assistant meeting so somebody has to stay home and take care of the

younger ones and who's that going to be? The older ones. So that can affect things like attendance but very few kids will actually present it that way, they get called in sick but the reality is maybe they're at home taking care of another family member.

Another participant states:

Well because we are in the business of education, we're a school, we are not a social service agency, so our kind of flags that we watch for are attendance and academic performance so if we see either of those starting to decline then we try to look at what the reason is and a lot of times it's attached to something economic, they've been highly mobile because they've been evicted, or lose their home or housing.

School Performance. Participants (71%) stated that poverty had a negative influence on school performance. The participants discussed the student's focus at school and how they often have other issues related to poverty on their mind, which then makes school a low priority for them. The following quotes support this sub-theme:

It is like until their basic survival needs are met it is sometimes challenging for them to even care very much about school or to do well in school. If their basic needs aren't being met, then it's hard to put school as a priority.

Another participant states:

The students that I see living in poverty look at school as a low priority. While at school they may be more concerned about where they are going to stay that night, will there be food on the table rather than completing a homework assignment. So these adolescents have a hard time sitting down and focusing on school. Their mind is in a constant state of worry.

Lack of Resources. Five participants (71%) identified students' lack of resources at home as having a negative impact on their academic performance. Participants stated students have a lack of educational material at home and less access to enrichment activities. Participant describes the lack of resources by stating:

I do home visits and a lot of times when you go into a home they are very neat, clean and safe. Clearly people are taking pride in their environment but there are no books no magazines no educational types things in these homes. So I think limited resources for providing some of the educational stuff affects my students academically and I know that there is the public library and loaning programs through the school but a lot of people don't know about them or aren't interested in getting them.

Another participant states:

We have some students that we have caught on to the fact that maybe their utilities are shut off at home and they come to school and we find out they're showering in the gym locker room before school. Sometimes students who hardly come to school at all, we'll see them coming in for breakfast or lunch, so they'll come here because this is where they can get fed and sometimes if they're here everyday this is the only food they get.

Another participant states:

Due to the lack of resources at home a lot of my students can't complete their homework because they don't have Internet access at home. The largest obstacle I see is the lack of post-secondary funds. A lot of my students don't believe they have a future at college due to a lack of resource so I see a lot of my students not caring about their academics.

Social Experiences

Five participants (71%) identified two ways in which living in poverty impacted students socially. This theme emerged for the data analysis because the participants described what they see students living in poverty experience socially. Seventy-one percent of participants identified the social aspects of living in poverty as having a major impact on the adolescents. The participants reported how poverty impacted adolescents' family life and peer groups. One participant supports the impact poverty has on adolescent's family lives when they state:

I think sometime socially if you have parents who are not successful in school which a lot of our student's parents did not have a great school experience, a lot of them receive special education services themselves or you had children very young or dropped out school, a lot of them have gone back as adults to complete their high school diplomas or GED's, or have gone on to college or trade school. These parents try to help their kids avoid what they went through but of course their kids don't listen. So I think there is kind of a generational thing, if it wasn't good for me, I want what's best for you but I don't really know how to provide that. Another thing that comes up is that parents who are working end up working either long hours or multiple jobs or strange hours so they may not necessarily be as available to that kind of stuff. It's like where do we fit in family enrichment activities.

Another participant states:

Sometimes we will learn about one of our students through siblings, you know who are at a different school because they are more open to talking and they'll share something our student would have not shared. I think parents are also more connected to

elementary supports. They're less likely to get involved when students get older, I think parents do that natural development of letting go and our kids fend for themselves a lot more but if they got a little brother or sister that parent may be more engaged there.

Participants also identified that students living in poverty as interacting differently with their peer group. The participants described students living in poverty as not wanting to stand out because they do not have access to items that financially stable students do. Also the lack of time they spend outside of school to hang out and socialize with friends. Participants stated:

Well our population is teenagers and they don't want to look different, they don't want to stand out, they don't want to be seen as outside the norm, so sometimes we learn about what our student is going through by others.

Another participant states:

I have students who are moving all the time so their social group is inconsistent. They keep having to reconnect and disconnect with friends. These students also don't have the resources to do things with other kids out of school, so they don't want to go to class because they want to hang out with their friends. They text each other to meet in the bathroom during class just to hang out because this is the only time they get to see one another.

Emotional Experiences

This theme was identified through the analysis of data from the interviews. Fifty-seven percent of the participants discussed the way they see poverty affecting their students on an emotional level. The participants stated students have parents who have

their own emotional issues making it hard for them to help their child. This following quote supports this theme:

Correlation, but not causation, a significant portion of my students with severe mental health diagnoses (PTSD, Depression, Anxiety) live in poverty. Frequently their parents are not in emotionally stable places to support their needs OR are working so many jobs that the children are more frequently left to care for themselves.

Another participant states:

Emotionally, I see students having minimal access to mental health services. I also see a lack of parental support and a lack of adults who believe in the student.

In these quotes the researchers found enough emotional experiences students face due to poverty to make it a theme.

Other Barriers

'Other barriers' was another theme found through the interviews. These other barriers mentioned by participants (43%) did not fit in with the other themes but remained important to include in the findings. The other barriers found did not have enough codes to be split into sub-themes and are therefore are listed under one theme.

The participants stated transportation, realistic hope and abuse as barriers they see impacting their students. The following quotes support the other barriers:

Things like transportation is huge. I know a lot of our families have marginal cars and if a part goes out and hey don't have the money to replace it how are they going to get their kid here and there? How are we going to participate in things? It makes it much more difficult especially when they're looking at things like attending conferences,

attending dual process meetings “your kid got suspended again you’re going to have to come to school for a meeting again.” How am I going to get school I don’t have a car? I don’t want to spend an hour and a half on the bus and so poverty can affect transportation.

One participant states:

Realistic hope, hope in terms of considering what is possible, when you look at your fellow grad students I’m sure most of them figure yeah college was an option and that there was something more for them and they could go to college whether they had the money or not and a lot of these students say well I can’t go to college I can’t afford that well there’s financial aid but yeah we cant afford that. So somethings aren’t even on their radar. Then the realistic part that goes along with hope is what can I do? Well, I’m going to play college football and then play in the NFL but it’s like your 35 credits short of graduating as a senior. The reality is that even if you had the athletic ability you’re not going to college because you haven’t done what you need to do to get there. The idea that I can do something more. That’s realistic for me and I can make this happen.

Another participant states:

In my experiences I’ve noticed a lot of the poverty students and families also have some sort of abuse in their home whether it’s emotional, sexual or physical. Poverty can affect student performance by: increased home stress for students resulting in less academic and social engagement; often times children have less supervision at home if parents are working multiple jobs; potential for more exposure to domestic violence and drug abuse due to environmental stressors placed on parents.

This theme shows the other barriers the participants mentioned as important influences poverty has on their student's experiences.

Supporting Students in Poverty

This theme was identified through the data analysis. All of the participants discussed ways to support students living in poverty. The participants stated the importance of being a trusting adult in these students lives and helping them find services in the community that would be a benefit to them. The following quotes support this theme:

Become a constant and stable support system for them; hook them up with mentoring if possible with community members.

Another participant states:

We need more funds to help pay for college applications and a lot of support services. I would also like to see more flexibility in academic demands because when students are out of school for a long time there is not a good system for them to get their work done.

Another participant states:

We wanted to provide these students the same opportunity that every body else get. We understand it's going to be hard and they're going to struggle but if we continue to keep them separate, because of their language skills or their learning needs in all assents we are keeping them separate because they're poor and not white so looking at it from a racial equity thing. Continue to support and try to find ways to make that inclusion equity intervention work. Continue to advocate for these students so they have the chance to become successful. So the answer to your question, how do we support

these students in poverty? Continue to provide them access to services, class service and a curriculum where they can go on these field trips. Hoping that they would feel successful.

This theme shows the many different ways the participants in the study believe we can support poverty-stricken adolescents' at school.

Discussion and Implications

Interpretation of Findings

The six themes and sub-themes identified above by the researcher encompassed most of the content from the interviews. Beginning with the theme adolescents living in poverty, this was communicated clearly by the participants' responses to the interview question regarding the description of the population they serve. The participants' answers show how many of their students are living in poverty. The researcher's understanding of this theme was six out of the seven participants (86%) were from Title 1 schools and had more than forty percent of their students receiving free and reduced lunch, which revealed the number of adolescent students living in some level of poverty.

The second theme, academic experiences, was communicated clearly by participants' responses to the interview question regarding the effect poverty has on students academically. From the participants' answers the researcher identified three sub-themes of academic experiences: attendance, school performance and lack of resources. The researcher understood the three sub-themes as what the participants noticed with their students living in poverty and the effect that has on their academics.

The third theme, social experiences, were communicated through the participants' answers to the interview question regarding the effect poverty has on their students socially. From the participants' answers, the researcher identified family life and social peer groups are impacted by poverty. The researcher's understanding of this theme was described by the participants as the social experiences poverty-stricken students face.

The fourth theme, emotional experiences, was communicated by the participants' answers to the interview question regarding the effect poverty has on students

emotionally. The researcher's understanding of this theme are the emotional experiences poverty-stricken students face.

The fifth theme, other barriers, was communicated through the participants' responses to the interview question regarding other experiences students living in poverty may have. The researcher understood this theme as other important barriers that students living in poverty experience.

The final theme, supporting students in poverty was communicated clearly by the participants' responses to the interview question regarding what the schools can do to support students living in poverty. The researcher understood this theme as was could be done to support the students who are living in poverty.

The themes and sub-themes identified above address the components of this qualitative research project, the impact poverty has on adolescents' school experiences. Through the participants' interviews, the researcher was able to identify, adolescents living in poverty, academic, social, emotional experiences and other barriers students living in poverty experience and how to support poverty-stricken students. The researcher interpreted this as the impact poverty does have on adolescent experiences at school.

Findings and the Literature

The findings of the first theme, adolescents living in poverty, is somewhat connected to the findings in the literature above about defining poverty. The participants made statements about being a Title 1 school and having more than 40% of their students on free and reduced lunch. A school is defined as a Title 1 school when it has a high percent of children from low-income families. The literature defined poverty as a person with income less than the amount needed to purchase basic needs. At the Title 1 schools

there are more than 40% of students receiving free and reduced lunch because their parents are unable to meet that basic need of providing a meal for their child. The relationship between the findings and the literature being in order to be defined as a Title 1 school it must have a high percentage of children from low income families, in order to receive free and reduced lunch the family must qualify for not being able to meet that basic need due to your income, bringing us back to the definition of poverty. Attar, Guerra and Tolan's (1994) study discussed how families with low-income are likely to come from neighborhoods that experience more negative life stressors. Forty-three percent of the participants discussed how low income families are likely to stay in neighborhoods where they experience negative life stressors. They reported that they could not move due to poverty.

The second theme, academic experiences along with its three sub-themes, attendance, school performance and lack of resources was present throughout the findings and was also present in the literature. Jensen (2009) states that students who live in poverty have an increase in school absences, duration of school absences and are more likely to have attendance problems if parents have a negative attitude toward school. The literature also discusses school performance and how students living in poverty are likely to have school performance problems. Hernandez (2011) discussed how students living in poverty were more likely to have low reading scores and not graduate from high school. The literature discussed how this could be due to a lack of resources at home. Participants in this study recognized students not attending school and their lack of school performance as red flags to students living in poverty. The participants also discussed how the lack of educational resources at home affect a student's academic performance.

The relationship between the literature and the findings are, they both see attendance, school performance and a lack of resources as something students living in poverty are likely to experience.

The third theme, social experiences, related to adolescent families was present through the finding and the literature. In the literature generational poverty is discussed and how these families are unlikely to move out of poverty because they are not equipped with the proper tools to do so (Jensen, 2009). Generational poverty was also brought up by the participants, stating that if an adolescent's parent grew up in poverty, they may want a better life for their child but are not able to do so because they simply do not know how to provide that. The literature also discussed Wright's study (2011) containing the family investment model, where poverty limits the parents' purchasing power: therefore parents are not able to invest in the kinds of things important in a child's development. The participants discussed the lack of resources parents have, but also the lack of time some of the parents have, to invest time with their children due to strange or long work hours. Two participants discussed parents not attending conferences or calling the school when it comes to their adolescent child but are still involved in their elementary-aged child's schooling. The participants discussed how they thought this was due to the parents "checking out" or the natural process of letting go once their child enters their adolescent years. The researcher did not find a relationship between the literature and findings about peer social groups.

The fourth theme, emotional experiences, was also connected to the findings in the literature above about emotional and behavioral outcomes of poverty-stricken children. The literature discussed how children living in poverty were more likely to have

externalizing and internalizing problems. These types of problems include aggression, unsuccessful development in peer relations, academic performance, anxiety and depression (Baker and exec, 2012). In Brooks-Gunn and Duncan's study 16.4% of poverty-stricken children's parents have reported an emotional or behavioral problem and 12.7% financially stable children's parents have reported the same (1997). In the same study 25% of poverty stricken children's parents report their child has been treated for an emotional or behavioral problem compared to 4.5% of financially stable students. In the findings participants discussed how some of the adolescents they know are living in poverty they see low academic performance, anxiety and depression. The participants also stated poverty stricken children's parents are often unable to support them emotionally or have their own emotional problems going on. This is in relation to the literature finding on the family process model. This model discusses parents living in poverty are financially strained and are not economically stable, which leads to negative emotions. This impacts how parents interact with their child and react to their needs (Wright, 2011). In other words these parents are unable to respond to their child's needs properly, impacting the child's emotionally needs, which is what the participants were saying they notice about their students.

Regarding fifth theme, a discussion on other barriers was not found in the literature.

The last theme, supporting students in poverty, is somewhat connected to the findings in the literature. The literature discussed school connectedness and how it is important for students to feel safe and supported at school. If students feel safe at school and have trusting relationships with staff, they will be more likely to be successful at

school. Hawkins, Monahan and Oesterale (2010) discussed in their study low quality relationships with school staff leads to students feeling less motivated to complete school work. The relationship here is the participants discussed the importance of having a great stable support system at school for these poverty-stricken students. The participants stated if students have adults at school that they trust, the students are more likely to complete schoolwork.

Research Implications

Combined with previous research, there are some implications that can be extended from the present study. First, there is very little research done on the impact poverty has on adolescents in relation to school. It would be beneficial to have more research done on poverty stricken adolescents and school because this is the time when school staff may see the long term effects poverty has had on their students and how it is going to impact their future.

Second, there were a few other implications while completing this study. The researcher had a difficult time finding eight school social workers to participate in the study and ended up only completing seven interviews. The researcher had to send out multiple emails to find respondents. Also, out of the seven interviews, five were completed in person and two had to be completed on the phone due to scheduling conflicts. The phone interviews were more difficult to transcribe as the researcher could not go back and listen to what the participant had said.

Third, future research can be completed in a few areas. As stated above there is little research focusing on the impact poverty has on adolescents at school. Future research in this area would be helpful to school professionals in order to better support

the students they are working with. Future research on the academic, social and emotional experiences adolescent students face at school due to poverty would also be worth exploring. Also future research on supporting poverty-stricken adolescents at school in order for them to have a successful future could be completed. With future research done in these areas school professionals will have a better understanding of how poverty impacts adolescents at school and find ways that they can help and support their students.

Contributions to Clinical Social Work

There are also implications from this study for further social work research. Many of the themes and sub-themes that emerged both from the literature and the present study related to the negative impact poverty has on adolescent school experiences. When looking at what can be done in the future to help these poverty-stricken students, awareness has a lot to do with it. During the interviews and in the literature it was discussed how many employees in the school systems are unaware of how poverty impacts a student in the school setting. School social workers would benefit from reading Eric Jensen's book (2009), *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, as it breaks down the different types of poverty, how poverty impacts students and how to help poverty-stricken students. This way school social workers can help spread awareness in their schools about the experiences these poverty-stricken students may face and how the schools can help these students.

The findings in this study have shown the different types of experiences adolescents' living in poverty face at school. These findings contribute to clinical social work by showing the different experiences adolescents' living in poverty face at school.

When working with an adolescent student it may be difficult to find an underlying cause to the problems the student presents to the social worker. This study will help school social workers identify what may be impacting their students academic progress, attendance and their behavior. The findings serve as a guide for school social workers to identify how poverty is impacting their students at school, as well as warning signs that a student might be living in poverty. In other areas of clinical social work the findings from this study may be eye opening to how poverty does impact adolescents' experiences at school. Lastly, the findings show the need for social workers in Title 1 schools. The teachers in these schools do not have the same training as clinical social workers do to address the problems these adolescents are facing at school due to poverty. The more support these poverty-stricken adolescents have at school will hopefully help lead them to a successful future and a way out of poverty.

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Appendix A

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Appendix B

Dear MSSWA Members,

My name is Kelly Williams, I am a graduate student at the University of St. Thomas, studying social work. I am conducting a study about the impact poverty has on adolescents experiences at school according to school social workers. I am looking for your helping by participating in my study. Participation is entirely voluntary. This is a qualitative research study, so I will be conducting 30 -45 minute interviews with participants. I have attached the questions that will be asked during the interview and a consent form with more information regarding the study.

If you choose to participant all your information will be kept confidential. There are no risks and benefits involved in this research study. If you choose to participate or not it will have no impact on your relations with the University of St. Thomas.

If you are interested in participating in my study or have any questions you can email or call me at will0449@stthomas.edu (the 0 is the number zero) or 952-956-4185.

Thank you,
Kelly Williams
will0449@stthomas.edu
952-956-4185

Appendix C

CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

**The Impact Poverty has on Adolescents Experiences
at School**

698750-1

I am conducting a study about the impact poverty has on adolescents experiences at school according to school social workers. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you're a part of the Minnesota School Social Work Association. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: The researcher Kelly Williams. My research advisor is Colin Hollidge Ph.D., LICSW, Social Work Department. Both are affiliated with the University of St. Thomas.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is: To gain an understanding on the impact poverty has on adolescents experiences at school according to school social workers.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: Participant in a 30-45 minute interview. The interview will be audio tapped. The interview question will be given to you before the interview if you agree to participant in the study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

There are no risks involved in completing this survey. Due to the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, there are no foreseen risks due to taking part in this project. There are no direct benefits of participating

Compensation:

There is no compensation for this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include the audio recording from the interview and a transcript of the interview and the signed consent form. To manage your confidentiality the audio recording will be kept in a password protected iphone and the signed consent forms and the transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home. After the completion of this research project the audio recording will be deleted and the transcripts will be destroyed. The signed consent forms will be kept for at least three years after completion of this research project, per federal regulations.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the MSSWA or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until March 30, 2015. Should you decide to withdraw data collected about you will be deleted or destroyed. If you decide to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher and let her know you need to withdraw from the study. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Kelly Williams You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 952-956-4185. My advisor's name is Colin Hollidge, if you have any questions you can contact him at 651-962-581. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6038 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I am a school social worker. I have been working as a school social worker for over 6 months. I agree to be audio tapped.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix D

1. Demographics, what level of licensure do you hold? How long have you been working in schools?

2. Can you tell me about the population you serve?

Prompt:

How many students does your school serve?

How many of your students live in poverty?

3. How do you see poverty affecting the students you work with?

Prompts:

Socially

emotionally

academically

4. In what ways can poverty impact a student's performance in school?

5. Any other experiences you think adolescents in poverty experience compared to financially stable adolescents?

6. When working with a student you have determined is living in poverty, how is your therapeutic approach to working with that adolescent different compared to adolescents who are financially stable.

7. From your experience, what seems to be the largest obstacle that adolescents in poverty have to face that makes academic success more difficult.
8. What do you feel the school could do to support these poverty stricken adolescents?