Poverty and Education: Exploring Teachers’ Perspectives

Julia Armstrong

Vancouver Island University: Master of Education in Educational Leadership

April 2015
Abstract

The current study was developed to gain insight into teachers’ perspectives at an elementary school on Vancouver Island known to have a high degree of poverty. The purpose of the study was to investigate educational barriers related to poverty from the teacher’s point of view. As well, the researcher wanted to determine which school initiatives teachers believed to be helpful at mitigating these barriers. The research questions were prompted by the high percentage of child poverty in BC, and by the intensity of need at the school site. Data was collected by means of a survey distributed to all teachers at the school in May of 2014 and collected in June, 2014; 16 out of a possible 22 responded, a return rate of 73%. Findings indicated that poverty related barriers were significant. Themes emerged with respect to what is working and what is still needed. School initiatives that were found most helpful were those that addressed chronic hunger, diverse learning needs, social and emotional concerns, parental involvement, and sense of belonging. Teachers found that it was important for students to have access to adult mentors, to have opportunities to engage in the arts and physical activity, and to participate in learning experiences that are meaningful and culturally relevant. Teachers also stressed the importance of building trusting relationships and creating a caring, inclusive school community. Findings indicated that most teachers felt that their teacher training had not prepared them adequately to teach in areas of high poverty, but that their professional development and school in-service opportunities had increased their awareness and understanding of poverty related issues. Teacher advocacy for greater equity for low income students was woven throughout the data.
Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................. ii

Table of Contents ............................................................................................................. iii

List of Figures .................................................................................................................. vi

List of Tables ..................................................................................................................... vii

Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................... 1

  Purpose of the Study ..................................................................................................... 1

  Justification of the Study ............................................................................................. 2

  Research Question and Hypothesis ............................................................................. 7

  Definition of Terms ..................................................................................................... 8

  Brief Overview of Study ............................................................................................. 9

Chapter 2: Background and Review of Related Literature .......................................... 12

  Understanding Poverty ................................................................................................. 12

  Poverty and Education Research ............................................................................... 16

  Addressing Poverty and Education Concerns ......................................................... 22

  Summary of Research ............................................................................................... 30

Chapter 3: Procedures and Methods ............................................................................. 32
Research Design........................................................................................................ 32

Sample..................................................................................................................... 33

Instrumentation......................................................................................................... 33

Procedures................................................................................................................ 34

Validity...................................................................................................................... 35

Data Analysis............................................................................................................ 36

Chapter 4: Findings and Results.............................................................................. 38

Description of Findings........................................................................................... 38

Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion, and Conclusions ................................................. 52

Brief Summary of Research Questions, Procedures, and Results.......................... 52

Discussion of Findings............................................................................................. 53

Limitations................................................................................................................ 62

Recommendations and Suggestions for Further Research..................................... 62

References............................................................................................................... 66

Appendices............................................................................................................... 71

Appendix A: Teacher Survey.................................................................................... 71

Appendix B: Letter of Consent.................................................................................. 75
Appendix C: Letter to the Principal................................................................. 77

Appendix D: Recruitment Script................................................................. 78
List of Figures

Figure 4.1: Percentages of total responses for Question #2 on the survey – Which of the following educational barriers impact the students you work with? Check all that apply………………………………………………………………………………… 40

Figure 4.2: Teachers’ perceptions regarding the adequacy of the school breakfast, lunch, and snack program………………………………………………………………………………… 43

Figure 4.3: Teachers’ perceptions regarding the adequacy of school resources with respect to meeting learning needs and social emotional needs………………………………………………………………………………… 44

Figure 4.4: Teachers’ perspectives with respect to preparedness to teach in areas of poverty, adequacy of teacher training, and effectiveness of professional development ... 45

Figure 4.5: Percentages of total responses for Question #11 on the survey – Which of the following school initiatives do you believe are helpful at mitigating educational barriers related to poverty? Check all that apply…………………………………………………………… 46
List of Tables

Table 4.1: Summary of Likert Scale Findings ......................................................... 42
Chapter 1: Problem to be investigated

Purpose of the Study

In many schools in British Columbia students live with the daily reality of poverty. Teachers are concerned about how the lives of these students will unfold. Research has shown that a child’s performance in school is strongly related to socioeconomic status and that education often offers a means of breaking the cycle of poverty for children in low income families (Gallagher, 1991). While it is known that education can allow individuals to rise out of poverty it has also been shown that the educational barriers related to poverty affect academic achievement. Canadian research confirms poverty’s negative influence on student behaviour, achievement and retention in school (Flessa, 2007). Both Canadian and international research has shown that the effects of poverty can be reduced using sustainable interventions (Ferguson, Bovaird, & Mueller, 2007).

The current research study explored the impacts of poverty on education specifically through the lens of the teacher. Although considerable research exists on the extent of, and factors contributing to, poverty in Canada, “less is known about how teachers in BC public schools perceive the effects of poverty on students, how they respond to poverty in their school, and what teachers view as necessary to overcome educational barriers related to poverty” (White, Hill, Kemp, MacRae, & Young, 2012, p.2). The current study considered one school site on South Vancouver Island in an inner city setting, with a high percentage of families living in generational poverty, and a high Aboriginal population. The study focused on teachers’ perspectives regarding educational barriers related to poverty, and school initiatives that are helpful at mitigating these barriers.
Teachers in BC public schools must work to address social justice issues, including poverty, and must seriously consider how they can mitigate the effects of poverty in their classrooms. The British Columbia Teachers’ Federation lists specific social justice goals in its *Members’ Guide to the BCTF (2014-2015)*. These goals include the following:

To help ensure that public schools provide for the continued, intellectual, physical, social, and emotional growth and development of each individual.

To work toward the integration of social and educational services that contribute to the welfare and development of students.

To create awareness of problems in society that hinder student growth and development and to stimulate the search for solutions. (BCTF, 2014, p.80)

Advocacy is part of a teacher’s role. Poverty, especially child poverty in BC, is not likely to be reduced in the near future therefore teachers and schools must continue to develop strategies and recommendations to increase academic and life chances for children living in poverty.

**Justification of the Study**

Numerous research studies have examined the links between child poverty and academic achievement. One such study examined the effects of poverty and the quality of the home environment on changes in the academic and behavioural adjustment of elementary school aged children (Dubow & Ippolito, 1994). This longitudinal study examined the effects of poverty as well as a variety of additional risk factors which can have negative impacts on the children who experience them. Risk factors included the absence of a father figure, the number of children in the home, and maternal education. Although it is clear that these additional risk factors can have a negative impact on the children who experience them, it was chronic poverty that emerged as
the strongest single indicator of later failure to achieve in school and anti-social behaviour (Dubow & Ippolito, 1994). The study concluded that chronic poverty is associated with lags in development and educational achievement, but also with deficits in social development. It is interesting to note that while a number of researchers have suggested educational intervention as the ideal means of reversing the academic deficits of children living in poverty, one study was adamant that educational intervention with children constitutes “weak treatment” unless supplemented by many other interventions at many social levels (Gallagher, 1991).

Payne’s (2005) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, explains the pitfalls and barriers faced by people living in poverty. Payne’s carefully researched work documents the facts of poverty and provides practical and compassionate strategies for addressing its impact on people’s lives. She also makes recommendations specifically related to instruction and improving achievement. Payne (2005) points out that children raised in low-income families score lower than children from more affluent families on assessments of health, cognitive development, school achievement, and emotional well-being. Payne (2005) identifies four responses as being effective in promoting learning for at-risk students: developmental preschool programs, supplemental reading programs, reducing class size, and school wide projects in prevention and support.

Poverty affects health and child development. A significant amount of research in BC linked to this topic has been conducted by the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) at the University of British Columbia. Hertzman, the founding director of HELP, played a central role in creating a framework that links population health to human development, emphasizing the special role of early child development as a determinant of health. The purpose of HELP’s Early Childhood Development Program of Research is to develop an understanding of how families,
neighbourhoods, and early childhood development programs and services interact with biological factors and policy environments to produce a range of development and health outcomes for children (HELP, 2012). Key aspects of the research program are population level data collection and analysis. A questionnaire known as the Early Development Instrument (EDI) is used to collect data on children’s early years. In BC this questionnaire is conducted on all children attending kindergarten in the public school system. EDI measures five core areas of early childhood development that are known to be good predictors of adult education, health, and social outcomes. These five core areas are: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge (HELP, 2012).

EDI is a population level research tool, meaning that the results are not used to evaluate individual children, but instead are used to measure trends in populations of children. The EDI data is used by HELP to create maps, graphics, and reports that summarize EDI results at a provincial, school district, and even at the neighbourhood level. The focus of these materials is to provide specific information on the vulnerability of populations of BC children. The results give every community in BC a snapshot of their children’s development in the years before they begin school. EDI provides a means of identifying what kind of supports and services are needed for families and young children; thus, schools, communities, and governments can use the EDI data to inform their work (HELP, 2012). The most important use of EDI results and related research is to affect social change and improve outcomes for vulnerable children.

Children from low income families often start school already behind their peers who come from more affluent families (HELP, 2012). The prevalence of child poverty in BC is startling; in 2009 121,000 children in this province lived in families with incomes below the after- tax
poverty line. Families at a higher risk for poverty include single-parent families, families with children under six, Aboriginal families, and families newly immigrated to Canada (White et al., 2012). As of 2012, BC still had the highest child poverty rate in Canada (First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2012). The figures show that tens of thousands of BC families struggle economically. The children of these families are dealing with the effects of poverty at home and at school.

It is important to note that BC children under six are particularly at risk. In 2009, BC children under six had a higher poverty rate of 20.2%, compared to the overall BC child poverty rate of 16.4%. BC’s under six poverty rate has been higher than the national rate since 2002 (First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2011). These higher poverty rates for young children are alarming, given the importance of the early years of life for children’s development.

The 2012 Child Poverty Report Card points out the following:

What many people don’t realize is that British Columbia’s high child poverty rate is first and foremost about low pay and insufficient work. Having a well-paying job can make a huge difference in family income, but good jobs are not always available. In 2010, 43 percent of the poor children in BC – 41,300 children – lived in families with at least one adult working full-time, full year, and many others lived in families with at least some income from part-time or part-year employment. (First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2012, p.12)

The stressors of poverty can have significant family impact. Dr. Meaney of McGill University, an expert on the psychological impact of parenting, states that parenting and family function occur within a context (First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2012). Abusive
parenting most often occurs in a situation where parents themselves are carrying a mental health burden. Their mental health burden is often associated with the conditions of their life and according to Meaney, the most prevailing and profound condition that alters parenting is poverty (First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2012).

It is important to consider how poverty affects student learning and how it impacts participation in school activities. In the spring of 2010, the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation conducted a pilot research study to explore the impact of poverty on students in BC public schools, from a teacher’s perspective. This study explored the nature of poverty and education issues in BC. The study was conducted in four BC locations: Vancouver, Surrey, Penticton, and Port Alberni. Over half the participants, 62%, rated the amount of resources at the school to address the needs of students living in poverty as inadequate (White et al., 2012).

Teachers were asked about the strengths they observed in students dealing with poverty, the strategies they found helpful to support students in overcoming educational barriers related to poverty, and the challenges they encountered as teachers. Participants then explored in depth what is needed in the classroom, the school, and the community to support low income students to fully participate and succeed at school:

Many of the suggestions relate to creating a supportive, welcoming and inclusive classroom environment. Teachers also told us that education should be meaningful to the experience of students dealing with poverty…a meaningful education challenges stereotypes and promotes understanding about poverty, builds on the strengths of students, fosters hope, is sensitive and responsive to cultural heritage, and addresses multiple skill levels. (White et al., 2012, p.9)
In some schools, especially those schools with a high percentage of children living in poverty, the need for action is critical. Teachers who work in areas of high poverty face many challenges and work diligently to mitigate the negative effects of poverty. The author of the current research decided to examine school initiatives from the teachers’ perspectives at a particular school site with a highly vulnerable student population. Because poverty creates barriers to student success, it is important to ask teachers to identify effective supports that are currently in place, to consider how these supports are making a difference, and to recommend action plans for the future.

White notes that many teachers feel unprepared to teach in areas of high poverty (White et al. 2009). There is some leadership shown by the BCTF with respect to addressing social justice issues including poverty, but teacher training programs could also play a role in preparing teachers to be advocates. Teachers in BC public schools are facing increasing student needs in an under-resourced education system leading some people to ask if teachers should be fundraisers in schools. Frank, the dean of education at the University of British Columbia, believes there is a better way to prepare teachers for their role. He claims that teacher training programs need to educate teachers so they are knowledgeable about going into those situations that are under-resourced and disadvantaged (Hyslop, 2012). In other words, teach teachers how to be advocates. The dean’s vision for teachers is part of the faculty of education’s new teacher education curriculum, which emphasizes social justice and sustainability on par with excellence in pedagogy (Hyslop, 2012). Interestingly, teacher advocacy emerged strongly as a latent theme in the current researcher’s findings.

Research Question and Hypothesis

There were two research questions explored in this study:
From a teacher’s perspective, what are the educational barriers related to poverty?

Which school initiatives do teachers believe are helpful at mitigating educational barriers related to poverty?

The hypothesis was that teachers are able to identify a significant number of educational barriers related to poverty, and that teachers believe that specific school initiatives can, and do, make a difference to mitigate the effects of poverty in the school and the classroom. It was also expected that themes would emerge with respect to meeting physical needs, building trust and relationships, increasing engagement and sense of belonging, and improving academic achievement. Although poverty is a complex issue, and there are no simple solutions in terms of addressing the issue of poverty itself and all of the associated risk factors, it is nevertheless an important social justice issue. This researcher believes that teachers are concerned with how they are to address the complex needs of students living in poverty, and how they can best support students to overcome educational barriers related to poverty. An examination of the teachers’ perspectives could provide insight into both what is needed, and what is working.

**Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study *school initiatives* are defined as school wide projects, programs or supports that the entire school community undertakes together as a team, and that address various student needs including physical and health related needs, learning needs, and social emotional needs (Washington Central Supervisory Union, 2014). Also included in the definition of school initiatives are professional development activities undertaken by all teaching staff at the research site to improve staff understanding of the structural causes of poverty and to develop strategies to address needs.
Educational barriers can take many forms; barriers can be physical, technological, systemic, financial, or attitudinal (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2014). These barriers can prevent students from fully participating and succeeding at school. Barriers to education associated with poverty can include access to adequate health care, lack of adequate food and clothing, lack of funds to participate in field trips and before and after school recreational opportunities, and lack of mentorship (White, 2009). Educational barriers can also include inadequate funding and resources, lack of accessibility, and negative attitudes and stereotypes.

The researcher defined poverty as determined by Statistics Canada Low Income Cut-Offs (LICO). LICOs are intended to convey the income level at which a family may be in strained circumstances because it has to spend a greater portion of its income on the basics (food, clothing, and shelter). The LICOs set in Canada change slightly from year to year and vary by family size and size of community (Statistics Canada, 2014). Persons with income less than that deemed sufficient to purchase basic needs – food, shelter, clothing, and other essentials – are designated as living in poverty. Poverty involves a complex array of risk factors that adversely affects the population in a multitude of ways. Four primary risk factors for families and children living in poverty are: emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stressors, cognitive lags, and health and safety issues (Jensen, 2009).

**Brief Overview of Study**

The current research study explored barriers related to poverty, from the point of view of the teacher, as well as school initiatives that are helpful at mitigating these barriers. In order to view the issue in context the study examined current research on the prevalence of child poverty in BC, as well as current research on child poverty and associated risk factors related to educational
outcomes. The study also examined international research related to improving educational outcomes for children living in persistent poverty. Poverty is a complex issue that concerns school communities and society as a whole. The author of this research study chose to examine the effects of child poverty from one particular perspective, the perspective of the teacher.

A school site on South Vancouver Island was chosen as the research focus. The school is known to have a highly vulnerable student population based on current demographics. A high percentage of families live in poverty, and the majority of students are Aboriginal, living both on, and off, reserve. A description of the demographics and the intensity of need at the site were included in the study. The study explored initiatives and supports currently in place with respect to: school nutrition programs, literacy support initiatives, initiatives to involve parents, access to extracurricular activities, and the role of teacher training and professional development. The study also analyzed teacher responses regarding adequacy of resources to address learning gaps and social emotional concerns, and teacher recommendations for future action. In addition, teachers were asked to identify strengths in the current school culture.

This study used a survey method as a means of collecting data. The researcher designed a survey which included a Likert scale, multiple choice questions, and open ended questions. Data collected provided both quantitative and qualitative results. The survey was administered to all full time, part time and itinerant teaching staff in the late spring of 2014. Respondents were asked to complete the survey over an initial three week period. A participation reminder letter extending the return of the survey to a total of a four week response time was undertaken after non response at the three week return period. Information sought from the data was used to identify current school strengths in addressing poverty related education issues, to identify current needs, and to provide direction for further steps to be taken to continue to improve
educational outcomes for children living in poverty. This researcher anticipated a degree of non-response from some participants. Surprisingly, 16 out of 22 teachers on staff completed the survey, providing a rich data base for the researcher to explore and analyze.

Recommendations for future action include recognition of the need for advocacy and recognition of the need for change. In order to address issues of poverty and the negative relationship between poverty and student achievement, it is important for school leaders and school teams as well as community members to believe that change is possible. Issues of poverty can be overwhelming and in low income communities where families and students face daily stressors of living in poverty, family members, and also educators, can be at a loss as to how to change the current situation. The research findings indicate that the teachers at this site are well aware of significant educational barriers related to poverty. Although these barriers can at times be overwhelming teachers were able to identify specific school initiatives currently in place than can, and do, make a difference.
Chapter 2: Background and Review of Related Literature

Understanding Poverty

In order to provide a context for the current study this chapter will examine the research and literature investigating the nature of poverty and education issues. There are a number of questions to be considered with respect to this complex issue: What is the impact of poverty on students? What challenges do teachers encounter to support children in overcoming educational barriers relating to poverty? What is needed to support students in poverty so they can participate and succeed in school? An examination of current research can lead to a better understanding of the problem and help to identify possible solutions to help children and families mitigate educational barriers related to poverty. Because the culture of poverty is complex, the issue of barriers to education cannot be considered in isolation. What is needed first of all is a closer examination of the research on poverty.

Research analyst Margaret White’s (2009) poverty and education report discusses why it is important for educators to have some understanding of the structural causes of poverty, and why they must challenge beliefs and assumptions about poverty that stigmatize low income children and their families. In order to build empathy and understanding, it is crucial to prevent students living in poverty from perceiving that they are to blame for their own economic circumstances. “How we think, feel, and communicate about poverty makes a difference in how students feel about themselves and their school community” (White, 2009, p.9). White draws on educational research to explore the issues around the framing of poverty and children. Her report also examines how economic, political and social changes over the past decade have contributed to child and family poverty. White’s (2009) research stresses the importance of understanding the
structural determinants of poverty in order to raise awareness of the external factors that undermine the efforts of many families to overcome poverty.

Many students face significant barriers as a result of living with the effects of poverty. A Toronto research study found that students living in shelters lacked a sense of belonging to their school and were not likely to participate in before and after school activities (Decter, 2007). Decter (2007) found that the students were reluctant to disclose their living situation, due to fear of being stigmatized or bullied, which was in turn a barrier to receiving subsidies to assist with the cost of extra-curricular programs. These students were homeless but because they were afraid to say so they missed out on funding which would have given them increased access to programs. Barriers to education can include access to adequate health care, lack of adequate food and clothing, lack of funds to participate in field trips and before and after school recreational opportunities, lack of home access to technology, and lack of mentorship (White, 2009).

Exploring the external or underlying factors that contribute to poverty can help prevent the stigmatization of low-income children. An increased understanding of the external factors that push families and children into poverty can build empathy and can encourage advocates for change on issues related to education and income inequality (Kumashiro, 2000). White (2009) speaks compellingly about the language and the framing of child poverty; she cautions that focusing exclusively on child poverty may reinforce beliefs that parents are to blame, that adults who are poor are less deserving of support. It is important to view child poverty within the broader context of family poverty. The role of educators can be critical; while educators may not be able to solve poverty, they can influence how the school community responds to students dealing with poverty. White (2009) believes that “by challenging attitudes and beliefs that
perpetuate harmful stereotypes about poverty, educators have the opportunity to remove a
significant emotional barrier limiting the success of low income students” (p.4).

Poverty is about inequality. Research indicates that there is a growing disparity in BC
between the rich and the poor. In the last twenty years poorer families have seen little or no
improvement in their incomes, while richer families have had large increases. The income ratio
between the richest ten percent of families and the poorest ten percent of families in BC rose
from 9.2 to 1 in 1989 to 13.5 to 1 in 2009 (First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition,
2011). Why does this inequality matter? The Conference Board of Canada states that:

high inequality can diminish economic growth if it means that the country is not
fully using the skills and capabilities of all its citizens or if it undermines social
cohesion, leading to increased social tension…high inequality raises a moral
question about fairness and social justice. (What is income inequality and why does
it matter? para.2)

This high level of inequality has far reaching effects, including limiting access to education,
especially post-secondary education.

The cost of poverty is high. Poverty is consistently linked to poor health, lower literacy, poor
school performance for children, more crime and greater stress for family members. Society as a
whole must bear the cost of poverty through higher public health care costs, increased crime and
policing costs, and lost productivity (First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2011).
While advocates agree that provincial and federal governments should commit themselves to a
comprehensive poverty reduction plan, there is a concern about what this would cost in terms of
dollars and cents. Many Canadians are worried that reducing poverty means more spending on
people living in poverty, leaving taxpayers worse off. There is a growing body of research that tells a different story. Investing to reduce poverty improves wellbeing for everyone (First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2011). There are many elements that can help government achieve poverty reduction targets. These include increases to minimum wage, increase in child tax benefits and creating a fair tax system to reduce income inequality, the creation of more affordable housing for low income people, and universal coverage for prescription drugs and dental care (First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2011). The 2011 Child Poverty Report Card makes two recommendations specifically linked to education. The first recommendation is to implement a plan for an integrated system for early child care and learning (First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2011). Universal access to quality child care is necessary if most parents with young children are to remain in the paid labour force. This access to quality care would also ensure that all children have the best possible start in the early years. The second recommendation is to remove financial barriers for low income students and to lower student debt levels through tuition fee reductions, student grants instead of loans, and interest free loans (First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2011). According to White (2009), an essential component of a poverty reduction strategy is to develop a well-funded education plan. This plan should consider what is best to support all students, including the growing number of vulnerable children who are entering the BC public school system. Hertzman recommends universal access to programs to address the early learning needs of at-risk children in BC, based on the findings of the EDI (HELP, 2012).

According to Flessa (2007), who conducted an extensive review of poverty and education literature, there is considerable evidence that education can buffer families against poverty, and that education can help move families out of poverty in the longer term. Successful high school
graduation almost doubles the employment rate for both Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. Richards (2008), a social policy advocate, conducted a study to examine the educational gap between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. His concern was that graduation rates are much lower for Aboriginal students, especially for those who live on-reserve (Richards, 2008). These low graduation rates limit the employment opportunities of thousands of Aboriginal adults in BC, making them especially vulnerable to poverty. In order to reduce the high levels of poverty a comprehensive plan is needed to address the barriers that Aboriginal students face in completing their education.

The daily stressors of poverty create barriers to education. Vulnerability for people in poverty is concrete: housing costs are high, wages are low, and methods of transportation can be unreliable. All of the elements of poverty are interlocking, making life intense and stressful. The need to act to address the daily crises of life can overwhelm any willingness people have to learn (Payne, 2005). In this way poverty robs people of their commitment to education. Poverty requires people to use reactive skills, instead of true choice making, to survive; it robs them of the power to solve problems or become agents of change in their own lives. However, the research suggests that change is possible.

**Poverty and Education Research**

*The School Entry Gap: Socioeconomic, Family, and Health Factors Associated with Children’s School Readiness to Learn,* a research study by Janus and Duku (2007), identifies risk factors that contribute to children’s vulnerability in term of readiness for school learning. School readiness in this study was measured by kindergarten teachers’ reports collected with the EDI (Janus & Duku, 2007). The EDI reflects developmental outcomes children should be able to
achieve under optimal circumstances in physical and socio-emotional health as well as in their cognitive development. It gives a picture of a child’s development in the following five domains: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, communication skills and general knowledge, before a child enters grade one. Janus and Duku (2007) pose two research questions:

What are the most relevant risk factors in the following five general areas of influence: socioeconomic status (SES), family status, child health, parent health, parent involvement in literacy support?

How do the risk factors contribute to the gap in children’s school readiness at school entry? (p. 381-382)

The data collected for this quantitative study came from the Community Component of the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY; Statistics Canada). This initiative was carried out in six sites in Canada, including one community in British Columbia, over a period of two years. The sample was drawn from large communities and families with widely varying levels of income. A total of 10,663 children participated. The instrument used was the EDI, which consisted of 103 questions grouped into the five domains of school readiness. Additional data was collected from a household interview which covered parents’ education, income, health, children’s health, literacy development and other issues. Variables in five general areas were examined for their contribution to children’s school readiness: socioeconomic status (SES), family structure, child health, parent health, and parent involvement in literacy development.
The results found that 20% of the children scored in the lowest 10th percentile in at least one domain of the EDI, and that SES, family, and health factors are strongly associated with school readiness. Scores were higher in all domains when family income was higher. Janus and Duku (2007) found that less than perfect health, being a boy, and having a family income below the Low Income Cut-Off each made it twice as likely for the child to be vulnerable in terms of school readiness. Janus and Duku (2007) also found that income was a far more powerful contributor to children’s vulnerability at school entry than parent education, and that intact families were a strong protective factor against vulnerability.

The findings of this research by Janus and Duku (2007) confirm the validity of the EDI as a population based measure, and demonstrate that children’s school readiness as measured by the EDI is sensitive to socioeconomic, demographic, and family factors. By exploring the five areas of risk (SES, family structure, child health, parent health, and parent involvement in literacy development) they demonstrated that variables in all five areas contributed to the gap. The most important use of research such as this, and the EDI, is for evaluation and improved development of public programs and policies that support children and families.

The findings of Janus and Duku (2007) are directly linked to the current author’s research on the effects of poverty on student learning and participation at school. Intervention is key, as the five core areas of early child development measured by the EDI are also known to be good predictors of adult health, education, and social outcomes. There is overwhelming evidence that children living in poverty are at risk, and that without additional support and care, may experience future challenges in school and society.
Research demonstrates the link between health, poverty, and educational outcomes. A study carried out in Manitoba links health status not only to performance in schools but also to various other factors including socioeconomic status (Fransoo et al., 2008). Educational outcomes for young children are known to be affected by numerous factors, including psychological, educational and sociological characteristics of the child, the family, the school system, and the environment in which the child is raised. The purpose of this quantitative study was to assess the effects of health status at birth and health status in the preschool years on educational outcomes to age nine in a population-based birth cohort. Specifically, the research question examines how health status affects progress and performance in schools. The study also included key social, economic, and demographic factors known to affect both health and educational outcomes.

Three health constructs were developed as latent variables in the study: health status at birth, major illness in childhood, and minor illness in childhood. Each child’s sex and exact age were also entered along with a number of social, economic, and demographic characteristics including area level average household income, and whether or not the family received income assistance. Because this study included socioeconomic characteristics, the findings are relevant to the current author’s study of the impact of poverty on student learning.

The results of the study confirmed the influence of health related factors; major illness, and to a lesser degree, minor illness in childhood, are related to educational outcomes. In terms of the current research it is important to note that almost all of the social, economic, and demographic factors in this study were significant predictors of progress and performance in school, and most were more strongly related to the outcome than were the health factors (Fransoo et al., 2008). The strongest predictors were age and area-level income. The conclusions reached by the researchers highlight the importance of incorporating longitudinal measures of health in their
analysis. Previous research had implied that health status at birth is significantly associated with school performance. This study demonstrated that poor health status at birth is related to later cognitive outcomes only because of its association with major and minor illnesses later in childhood. One of the main strengths of the study is that it used a birth cohort with few exclusions, providing a true population sample. The importance of major illness is consistent with findings from other clinical studies suggesting that children with disabilities or neurological disorders have the poorest outcomes in terms of later cognitive and educational performance (Fransoo et al., 2008).

This study points out that health status in the preschool years has a statistically significant, although relatively small effect on school performance, except that children experiencing major illness are at significantly greater risk. Many of these children could be identified early. The authors conclude that the overwhelming strength of the social, economic, and demographic factors underscores the need to address the broader social determinants of health and educational outcomes, including the development of a comprehensive program for early child health and development (Fransoo et al., 2008). The findings are linked to the current author’s research because the results identify family income level as one of the strongest predictors of educational outcomes. Poverty, even more so than health status, puts children at risk and potentially limits their life chances. It is likely, but not verified in this particular study, that children living in low income families are at greater risk for health related concerns. These researchers concluded that identification of children at risk is critical and that schools, and society, must create policy and programs to address the needs (Fransoo et al., 2008).

A recent pilot study explored the impact of poverty on students in BC public schools from a teacher’s perspective (White, Hill, Kemp, MacRae, & Young, 2012). A qualitative research
design consisting of a focus-group methodology was used to explore the perceptions of teachers on how poverty affects the school experiences of their students. The study also elicited teacher input as to what is needed to support low-income students to fully participate and succeed at school. There were twenty-nine teacher participants including both classroom and specialist teachers. Specialist teachers included Aboriginal Education, ESL, literacy/project or resource teacher, counsellor, and Learning Assistance teachers. Elementary teachers represented 75% of the total group, middle school teachers 10%, and secondary schools teachers 14%. The sample was obtained through focus group meetings. Participants were also involved in the development of research objectives, study questions, recruitment of study participants, focus-group facilitation, debriefing after the focus groups, and feedback on the research findings.

The findings of the study included teacher observations of ways in which poverty can affect students in the school community, and teacher concerns about gaps in skills and learning. Interestingly, the study also found that teachers believe students appreciate what school has to offer. Teachers voiced concerns that there is exclusion from field trips and school activities. Teachers also shared strategies they found helpful to address child poverty and identified challenges encountered. Summary findings included shared teacher ideas about what is needed at the classroom, school, and community levels to create a caring, inclusive and meaningful experience for low income students and their families. Creating schools of care emerged as a dominant theme. Schools of care would focus on social justice, build relationships with the community, and have lots of caring adults to connect with children and families. Teachers felt that education should be meaningful to the experiences of students dealing with poverty. Based on teacher discussion, a meaningful education “challenges stereotypes and promotes
understanding about poverty, builds on the strengths of the students, fosters hope, is sensitive and responsive to cultural heritage, and addresses multiple skill levels” (White et al., 2012, p.9).

White et al. (2012) provide in-depth information about the effects of poverty on students’ school experiences and what is needed to support low income students to participate fully and succeed at school. However, the study provides minimal information on some student populations for whom family poverty rates were very high. The focus groups did generate some insight into issues faced by Aboriginal students and new immigrants, but not enough information to explore these issues in depth. Although this study provides important insight into the teacher’s point of view, participants felt that the voices of parents, students, and community members also needed to be heard.

**Addressing Poverty and Education Concerns**

Children living in poverty face many challenges, challenges that are often unknown to their teachers. According to Payne (2005), a leading US expert on the mindset of poverty, poverty is the extent to which an individual does without resources. Needed resources could include financial, emotional, or physical resources, as well as access to support systems, and relationships and role models (Payne, 2005). What does this information mean in the school setting, and how can students living in poverty access the resources they need to achieve academic success? By reorganizing the school day and schedule, educators can build support systems into the school day without additional cost. Examples include supplemental school wide reading programs to increase literacy rates and a scheduled block for homework support since poor students may not have an adult at home who has the knowledge base to help them with school tasks (Payne 2005). Payne suggests that support systems at school also need to include
the teaching of positive self-talk, planning, goal setting, coping strategies, appropriate relationships, problem-solving options, access to information and skill development, and connections to additional resources.

Low achievement is closely related to lack of resources. According to Payne (2005), “the true discrimination that comes out of poverty is the lack of cognitive resources. The lack of these unseen attributes handicaps in every aspect of life the individual who does not have them” p.107). There are a number of effective ways to promote learning for at-risk students. These include: developmental preschool programs, supplemental reading programs, reducing class size, and school wide projects in prevention and support (Payne, 2005). These four responses could allow for stronger relationships, increased support for students, and increased development of cognitive strategies.

Poverty and education literature points out that it is important for teachers to understand the nature of poverty and understand how poverty affects behaviour and academic performance. Poverty involves a complex array of risk factors that adversely affect the population in a myriad of ways. Four of the primary risk factors affecting families living in poverty are: emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stressors, cognitive lags, and health and safety issues (Jensen, 2009). Jensen’s work is concerned with how poverty affects children’s brains and what schools can do about it. His extensive review of over 200 research studies integrates neuroscience with evidence based teaching strategies (Jensen, 2009). Jensen suggests that exploring the brain-based physiological effects of poverty could help teachers to increase their understanding of student behaviours. Teachers may perceive “certain behaviours typical of low income children as acting out, when often the behaviour is a symptom of the effects of poverty and indicates a condition such as a chronic stress disorder” (Jensen, 2009, p.11). Chronic stress
can alter students’ brains and lead to greater impulsivity and poor short term memory. In the classroom this can translate into behaviours such as blurting out, acting without asking permission, and forgetting what to do next.

Jensen (2009) argues that although chronic exposure to poverty can result in detrimental changes to the brain, the brain’s ability to adapt from experience means that children living in poverty can also experience social, emotional, and academic success. To make his point, Jensen (2009) refers to the neuroplasticity of the brain, “the quality that allows region specific changes to occur in the brain as a result of experience” (p.47). A brain that is susceptible to the negative effects of poverty is also susceptible to the positive effects of a rich learning environment and caring relationships that build resilience, self-esteem and a sense of agency. Jensen encourages teachers to maintain high expectations and to establish a culture of caring with emphasis on hope. Although the strategies he recommends are designed to build success with students from poverty, they will work with students of all income levels (Jensen, 2009).

Based on research, there are numerous factors that can improve cognitive capacity and ensure classroom level success. These are: using a standards based curriculum, building hope, providing access to the arts and athletics, building students’ academic skillset, and providing engaging instruction (Jensen, 2009). A standards based curriculum can help to improve teacher focus and quality, can expose social inequities in school performance, and can result in improved opportunities for disadvantaged students. Action steps to building hope within individual students include providing needed academic resources including basic school supplies, telling true stories of hope about people to whom students can relate, and treating all students as potentially gifted (Jensen, 2009). Sports and physical activity can increase energy and focus and
reduce children’s chances for depression. The arts can increase engagement and enhance essential learning skills and cognition.

Research shows that engagement in the arts relates to student performance and attitudes, and that students with high levels of arts participation outperform ‘arts-poor’ students on almost every measure, and that high arts participation makes a more significant difference to low income students than to high income students (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999). The research by Catterall et al. (1999) enlisted the National Educational Longitudinal Survey, a panel study that followed more than 25,000 students in American secondary schools for 10 years. The first phase of the study examines involvement in the arts across all disciplines. The second phase examines the importance of sustained involvement in one discipline, using instrumental music, and the theatre arts as case examples. This research provides evidence of why the importance of the arts to education should be more widely recognized, and why the arts must be a basic part of the learning experience, especially for low income students.

Student engagement shows up as a vital achievement factor in most studies, although it is not always explicitly called engagement. It can include references to feedback, cooperative learning, project learning, or interactive teaching (Hattie, 2008). Research indicates a consistently strong and significant correlation between student engagement and achievement (Jensen, 2013). Jensen (2013) devotes an entire book to the exploration of engagement as the key factor in the academic success of economically disadvantaged students, and offers optimism and direction to teachers in high poverty schools. His focus is on building an enrichment mindset which he claims can be achieved in the following ways: expanding cognitive strategies to enable students to reach high goals, improving classroom behaviours, and building positive attitudes in the mindsets of students as well in the mindsets of educators themselves (Jensen, 2013).
Jensen (2013) suggests a number of school intervention strategies to address factors that are strongly tied to socioeconomic status. These factors include: health and nutrition, mindset, cognitive capacity, relationships, and stress level. Physical, mental, and emotional health all support learning. The lower a child’s socio-economic status the greater the health risks he or she faces. People living in poverty are less likely to get proper diagnosis of health problems, receive appropriate and prompt medical attention, or be prescribed appropriate medical interventions. Health factors have a significant effect on cognition and on behaviour. Many health problems experienced by lower SES children can be linked to poor nutrition, thus poor nutrition poses a strong risk to students’ learning and engagement (Jensen, 2013).

Research shows that how teachers teach matters. Teachers must make connections to students’ culture. When teachers remain ignorant of their students’ culture, students experience a demotivating disconnect between school and their home life. Because poverty is associated with lower expectations about future outcomes, mindset is critical to both students and teachers. When students have positive attitudes about their own learning capacity, and when teachers focus on growth and change rather than on having students reach arbitrary milestones, student engagement increases (Mangels, Butterfield, Lamb, Good, & Dweck, 2006). Teacher support is essential in getting students to believe in themselves and in their capacity to reach their goals and increase their own learning success.

Children need positive relationships and reliable adults in their lives (Jensen, 2013). When a child’s early experiences are chaotic, a child’s developing brain becomes insecure and stressed. This insecurity is more pronounced among children living in poverty. Poor emotional regulation and social dysfunction can affect a child’s performance at school. Children living in poverty may not have the necessary repertoire of social emotional responses for school; they may simply
not know how to behave. Developing strong student teacher relationships can help to counter the negative effects of inappropriate responses and can have a strong effect on increases in student engagement (Jensen, 2013).

Children raised in poverty are more likely than their affluent peers to experience acute and chronic stress. Stress influences children’s physical, emotional and cognitive functioning, areas that affect brain development and social competence. Acute stress can lead to aggressive, impulsive behaviours, whereas chronic stress can result in an increased sense of detachment and hopelessness over time (Jensen, 2013). Giving students appropriate amounts of control over their daily lives at school can increase engagement and lessen the effects of acute and chronic stress.

Based on narratives of turn around high-poverty schools, and his own teaching experiences, Jensen (2013) claims that engagement strategies can help to nurture a positive climate, build cognitive capacity, encourage greater effort, and build understanding. These engagement strategies include using the model of the class as family to create an inclusive classroom environment, and building social capital so that students can believe in themselves and see themselves as agents of change in their own lives. Jensen (2013) also cites the importance of a collaborative school environment as a positive driver for change.

When addressing poverty issues it is important that district policies consider how to harness family and community energy. Research has found that although school principals play a key role in fostering parent and community involvement in the ownership of the educational process, school culture is also a critical factor (Gordon & Louis, 2013). Three important characteristics of school culture related to engagement include: a caring atmosphere, significant family
volunteering, and a supportive environment for teachers’ work. Relational trust between leaders, teachers, students, and parents promotes collaboration within schools and communities. While parental involvement benefits students, it also benefits families, enhancing their attitudes about themselves, the school, and school staff members.

In his review of poverty and education literature, Flessa (2007) finds that it is not surprising that “all traditional measures of school success systematically rank students from poor families lower than their wealthier peers” (p.2). Most of the literature examines how big these differences are, what influences best explain the gap between poor students and other students, and what reforms will shrink that gap. The purpose of the Flessa’s (2007) review is to “provide a foundation for educators to assess the relationship between poverty and education, in order to take effective action” (p.2), and to build a framework that could inform teachers’ professional development. He cautions against using a deficit framework that is built into many of the policy recommendations dealing with poverty and education, and asks, “Do we look at children and see what’s there, or do we look at children and see what’s missing?” (Flessa, 2007, p.3) He is concerned with how to best target educational interventions in schools for children experiencing poverty without blaming families for their poverty or finding them to be lacking in abilities. He found that students achieve more when they when they feel a sense of community in the school, and that the strongest effects of school community occurred among schools with the most disadvantaged populations. Flessa (2007) also found that in schools where teachers had high levels of collective responsibility, “encouraged in part by reforms that provide time and resources to develop teacher professional learning communities” (p.25), gaps between high and low SES students were significantly smaller than in schools where there was little sense of shared responsibility. Flessa (2007) concludes that some schools do far better than others
through a combination of curricular and human resources, and that the challenge for educators is “to tell a consistent story about the importance of school initiatives in the context of other mutually supportive social policies” (p.37).

A recent research report by Nelson, Martin and Featherstone (2013) supports the current author’s hypothesis that school initiatives and interventions can, and do, make a difference to mitigate educational barriers related to poverty. This report is based on a systematic review of relevant United Kingdom and international literature related to intergenerational and other forms of poverty. The focus question of the report was: “What works in supporting children and young people to overcome persistent poverty?” (Nelson et al., 2013, p.2) A sub-question that was also considered was: “What factors and interventions might work to help poor children to achieve positive outcomes in adulthood?” (Nelson et al., 2013, p.2) Based on evidence from the literature review, the report provides an overview of steps that can be taken by policy makers and practitioners to overcome persistent poverty. Intervening early in young people’s lives, and with families, has beneficial effects. A coordinated multi-agency approach is crucial, and universal services need to be accessible to reduce stigma. Building resilience is an important poverty protector; effective resilience approaches include mentoring, goal-setting, and counselling.

Horgan and Monteith (2009) suggest that schools can help young people to achieve highly and close the gap in outcomes by creating mixed cohorts of children from different backgrounds and abilities, by ensuring that the curriculum is accessible and relevant, and by covering all the costs of education (as cited in Nelson et al., 2013). There is also evidence that interventions that seek to involve parents in their children’s education can contribute to closing the gap in outcomes. Enhancing parents’ engagement with their child’s education can mitigate future persistent poverty (Blanden, 2006). Although the focus of this international research was not on
educational outcomes only, it did provide important recommendations regarding what schools can do to help raise children and youth out of persistent poverty (Nelson et al., 2013).

**Summary of Research**

There is no question that there are many risk factors associated with poverty. Schools must confront the evidence that children living in poverty face significant educational barriers. It is important to identify these educational barriers, but also to identify and explore school initiatives that can mitigate the effects of these barriers.

The strong correlation between children’s SES and children’s academic performance has been well established. A report published by the Canadian Teacher’s Federation ([CTF], 2009) found that “many low-income children experience reduced motivation to learn, delayed cognitive development, lower academic achievement, less participation in extra-curricular activities, lower career aspirations, interrupted school attendance, lower university attendance, an increased risk of illiteracy, and higher dropout rates” (p.2).

Gaskell summarizes the current research about the relationship between education and poverty in the following way:

Socio-economic status continues to be the most important single determinant of educational and social outcomes….Poverty has only occasionally reached the forefront of education policy discussion and, even then, the actions arising are usually modest and often uncoordinated. Although poverty is not created by schools, and the problems of poverty cannot be resolved by schools, there are steps
that schools can take to understand the issue more fully and to cope with it more effectively. (as cited in CTF, 2009, p.3)

Certain themes emerge in the literature with respect to the steps that schools can take to mitigate the negative effects of poverty. These themes include the following: increasing awareness and understanding of poverty, including an understanding of how poverty affects the brain; addressing needs related to health and nutrition, creating an inclusive and caring school culture, building relationships, increasing engagement, applying effective teaching strategies, and encouraging parent involvement. Themes regarding the need for greater advocacy and equity were also noted in many of the research findings. What is missing in much of the research is an insight into teachers’ perspectives, especially from those teachers who work in an environment with a high prevalence of child poverty.

The gap in the research explored in the current study is concerned with what is working with respect to mitigating poverty related educational barriers. The focus of the current research is an inner city school on South Vancouver Island with a high incidence of students and families living in poverty, and a significantly high percentage of Aboriginal students, approximately 85 to 90 percent. The current study explored teachers’ perspectives regarding educational barriers related to poverty in their particular school. It also examined the role of school initiatives with respect to mitigating these barriers. Teachers were asked to identify school initiatives they found most helpful, and were asked to comment on their choices. Data collection provided evidence of the challenges teachers face and the strategies they are currently using to address educational barriers related to poverty. It was this researcher’s hope that the data would not only identify needs but would also identify significant strengths at this particular school site. Findings from the data were used to provide recommendations for future action.
Chapter 3: Procedures and Methods

Research Design

The current research aimed to contribute to the research base that explores ways to mitigate educational barriers related to poverty. Although considerable research exists on the extent and factors contributing to poverty in Canada, less is known about how teachers in BC public schools perceive the effects of poverty on students, how they respond to poverty in their schools, and what teachers view as necessary to overcome educational barriers related to poverty (White et al., 2012). The current study was developed to gain insight into the teachers’ perspectives at an elementary school known to have a high degree of poverty. The purpose of the study was to investigate educational barriers related to poverty from the teacher’s point of view. As well, the study explored which school initiatives teachers found to be helpful at mitigating these educational barriers. It was hoped that specific themes would emerge and that the findings could provide helpful information regarding what is working, and what is needed, to increase educational equity and improve life chances for students living in poverty. A potential benefit of the research is to identify current school strengths.

The present study used a survey as the means of collecting data. The survey included a Likert scale, and closed and open-ended questions (Appendix A). All teachers at the school site were given the opportunity to participate in the survey. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The study used a mixed methods design: open-ended questions allowed teachers to express their beliefs and justify their responses in order to provide qualitative data, and Likert scale and closed-ended questions provided quantitative data. The quantitative and qualitative results were then analyzed for emergent themes demonstrated by the respondents.
Sample

The participants were all teachers at one particular school site. The sample can be categorized as a convenience sample as the researcher worked at the school. In order to increase validity in this study, respondents should have some awareness of the level of poverty in their teaching environment. Research has shown that teachers working in areas of high poverty generally have a greater awareness and better understanding of poverty related issues (White et al., 2012). The school research site was chosen based on its known high incidence of students living in poverty as determined by school demographics and Wave 5 EDI results (HELP, 2013). The school has a high percentage of Aboriginal students, approximately 85 percent, living both on and off reserve. Most students participate in the free breakfast, lunch, and snack programs offered at the school. The school has a total of 22 teachers; 16 teachers chose to participate in the survey. All of the respondents had at least six years of teaching experience. The respondents included part time, full time, and itinerant teaching staff, and classroom as well as specialty teachers, to increase validity and provide a broader perspective.

Instrumentation

The study focused on teachers’ perceptions of educational barriers related to poverty and school initiatives that are helpful at mitigating these barriers. The instrument used to collect data was a survey. The survey used a variety of question formats and followed the recommendations found in Guidelines for Devising Questionnaires (Mills, 2014). The length and the presentation of the survey were carefully considered to encourage maximum participation.

The survey covered two areas: teacher perspectives regarding educational barriers related to poverty, and teacher beliefs regarding school initiatives that can help. The Likert scale and
closed-ended questions were asked at the beginning to give teachers the opportunity to identify and rate barriers related to poverty. This first section was intended to provide a context for the open-ended questions that followed. The open-ended questions were asked at the end of the survey to allow teachers to reflect on their responses and express their own beliefs about school initiatives that can mitigate educational barriers related to poverty.

Children and families living in poverty face many stressors, including barriers to school success. Educational barriers related to poverty can include health and nutrition concerns, lack of participation, cognitive lags, and learning challenges. A number of questions regarding educational barriers were adapted from a BCTF survey (White, Field, & Kuehn, 2013). The remaining questions were designed by the researcher based on current poverty and education literature as well as the researcher’s personal experiences. The questions relating to specific school initiatives were based on information gathered at the school and the researcher’s own teaching experience at this site for two years.

The qualitative data was analyzed and coded for manifest and latent content. A number of emergent themes were discovered in this qualitative data, these were presented in summary and brief descriptions.

**Procedures**

Upon final acceptance of the research from Vancouver Island University’s Research Ethics Board, the researcher obtained permission from the Superintendent of the School District to conduct research amongst teachers at a particular school site. Prior to the distribution of the survey, teachers were informed by the researcher at a staff meeting about the purpose and importance of the study. At this time teachers were asked to voluntarily participate by filling out
surveys that would be distributed to their mailboxes at a later date. All teaching staff at the school site were given a consent form (Appendix B) by the researcher in May 2014 to be read before completing the attached survey (Appendix A). The consent form outlined the goals of the research and the intended use of data collected. As well, the consent form reassured teachers that participation was voluntary and completely anonymous. Participants were informed that they could choose to discontinue participation by simply not submitting their survey. Participants were informed that by completing and submitting their survey they were providing consent to participate in the study.

Once teachers had completed the surveys they were to return them to the drop box located in the resource teacher’s office. The surveys were picked up by the researcher at the end of the specified three week time period.

Validity

Prior to the survey being used in the current study, the researcher presented a trial survey to six teachers from various school districts on Vancouver Island to provide validation of the questions and to help ensure that the survey would provide reliable data. This procedure improved the instrument’s validity by ensuring that questions were clearly worded and that interpretations among participants were likely to be consistent.

In order to minimize threats to internal validity the survey included items that elicited quantitative data as well as qualitative data. Data collector bias was avoided as participants responded directly to the survey. It was assumed that respondents would be more likely to answer genuinely through an anonymous survey rather than being interviewed, as the interviewer was a teaching colleague, and thus was known to all the participants. The collegial relationship
between the researcher and the participants could have influenced the nature of the responses in focus groups or face to face interviews. The location may have been a threat to the validity of the survey. Depending on the participant’s surroundings, the quality and quantity of some responses may have been impacted. The present researcher attempted to minimize the threat by allowing the participants to complete the surveys independently, at a convenient time, and in a setting of their choice.

External validity was low because the sample was not random and therefore results are not generalizable in the present study. The sample was relatively small and confined to one school site, a site that is known to have a high degree of poverty. However, because the chosen site has such a high degree of poverty, it is thought that there would be some transferability of results to other schools experiencing poverty related concerns. This study is context bound and as such its transferability depends largely on whether the consumer of the research can identify with the setting. It is the researcher’s belief that many educators in BC will indeed be able to identify with aspects of the described setting. It has been noted that the power of action research is not in its generalizability, but rather in the relevance of the findings to the researcher or the audience of the research (Mills, 2014).

Data analysis

The data collected in the current research was intended to measure teacher perspectives regarding educational barriers related to poverty at their specific school site, and to explore teacher beliefs regarding school initiatives that are helpful in mitigating educational barriers related to poverty. The current researcher was looking for any major themes that emerged
regarding teachers’ beliefs about poverty related barriers, and themes related to school initiatives that can, and do, make a difference for students living in poverty.

Once the surveys were collected, quantitative data from the Likert scale was studied and analyzed, and was then placed into bar graphs to provide a strong visual representation of participant responses, especially with respect to the prevalence and severity of educational barriers. Qualitative data was also carefully studied, and summarized and categorized for emergent themes. The themes were then examined to identify areas of strength in school initiatives, and to provide meaningful recommendations for future action.
Chapter Four: Findings and Results

Description of Findings

The purpose of this research study was to examine teachers’ perspectives regarding educational barriers related to poverty. The study also aimed to explore teachers’ perspectives regarding school initiatives that are helpful at mitigating these barriers.

The current research gathered information from teacher participants at an elementary school on South Vancouver Island. The school site was chosen for its known high incidence of poverty, and because the author of this research had taught at the school for two years. Data was collected using a survey (Appendix A) distributed to all 22 teaching staff members. Staff members included full time, part time, itinerant, and support staff in order to provide as broad a perspective as possible. Sixteen surveys were completed and returned by mid June 2014, indicating a response rate of 73 %. The survey used a mixed methods design to provide both qualitative and quantitative data. Likert scale statements and closed-ended questions were placed at the beginning of the survey to give teachers the opportunity to identify educational barriers related to poverty. This first section was intended to provide a context for the open-ended questions that followed. The open-ended questions were asked at the end of the survey to allow teachers to reflect on their responses and express their own beliefs about school initiatives that can mitigate educational barriers related to poverty. Teachers were also given space to write any additional comments or to clarify or justify their responses.

In September of 2014, the author of the present study collated the data submitted by the participating teachers. Questions regarding teacher demographics were purposely kept to a minimum to preserve the anonymity of the respondents as the author was a teaching colleague at
the school site. All of the participants had at least 6 years of teaching experience; 14 respondents
had taught at this particular school site for 1 to 5 years, and 2 respondents had taught at the
school for 6 to 10 years.

The first survey question had teachers respond to which percentage of their students they
believed were living in poverty. Over half of the respondents (56%), thought more than 75% of
their students lived in poverty, 31% of the respondents thought that between 51-75% of their
students lived in poverty, and two respondents (13%) indicated don’t know for this question, but
one of these suspected that the percentage of students living in poverty is “very high”.
Responses to this question indicate that most teachers are aware of the high incidence of children
living in poverty in their student population.

The second question asked teachers to identify educational barriers or challenges that impact
the students they work with by means of a checklist (refer to Figure 4.1 for results). Language
and cognitive development was identified as a barrier by all respondents. Low attendance,
nutrition and health, emotional concerns (including anxiety and stress related concerns), social
knowledge and competence (social skills, ability to self-regulate), and lack of parental
involvement and engagement were identified by 94% of the respondents, all but one.
Achievement gaps and lack of adult mentorship were identified by 81% of teachers, and
transportation was identified by 75%. Teachers were also given space to identify other barriers.
Teachers identified an extensive list of additional barriers including: no preschool experience,
lack of experience to make connections to learning, low family literacy levels, lack of extra-
curricular involvement, lack of agency - the belief in personal ability to make change, inter-
generational trauma related to residential school mistreatment and cultural “near genocide” of
assimilation policies toward aboriginal parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. Also listed
were domestic violence in the home, homelessness, and addiction by parents or other family members. One respondent mentioned children in care, causing feelings of sadness, depression and disconnect. Lack of sleep was also mentioned.

Figure 4.1 Percentages of total responses for Question #2 on the survey – Which of the following educational barriers impact the students you work with? Check all that apply.

The third question asked teachers what challenges they experienced while teaching children affected by poverty. Some of the teachers’ responses read:
• “Basic needs must be met before you can begin teaching. We spend a lot of time feeding, clothing, solving personal issues, providing emotional support”.

• “Students often feel tired and hungry and not able to focus on learning activities”.

• “Basic needs have to be met before academics; establishing trust can take time, needs to occur for successful academic, many students significantly below grade level”.

• “Lack of time/people to help with social-emotional needs of student, large gaps in learning – need much more L.A. type programming and very smart teaching”.

• “Low literacy levels make curriculum access hard. Poverty equals hunger equals fatigue”.

• “Poor attendance/home support – resulting in minimal progress, lack of background knowledge – overall development delays”.

• “Every day brings new challenges and you need to be prepared to change things on the fly. When you are dealing with children of poverty there are often crisis situations. Often academic learning is put on hold until emotional calm is restored”.

Survey statements 4 to 10 asked teachers to respond using a five point Likert scale. The Likert scale statements and the tally of the teachers’ responses are illustrated in the Table 4.1. The numbers in the table illustrate the range of teachers’ perceptions with respect to various poverty related issues.
### Table 4.1: Summary of Likert Scale Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likert Scale Questions</th>
<th>1=Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>2=Disagree</th>
<th>3=Neutral</th>
<th>4=Agree</th>
<th>5=Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. The school breakfast program is adequate to meet the nutritional needs of students who come to school hungry.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The school snack and lunch program are adequate to meet the nutritional needs of students throughout the day.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I feel that there are adequate staffing resources at my school to meet the learning needs of students who require extra support to address learning gaps.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I feel that there are adequate resources at my school to meet the social emotional needs of students living in poverty.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I feel well prepared to teach in a school where poverty related issues are present on a regular basis.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I feel my teacher training was adequate in preparing me for teaching students who live in poverty.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. My professional development and school in service opportunities have increased my awareness of poverty related issues.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Approximately half of the teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that the school breakfast, and snack and lunch programs were adequate. All teachers either strongly disagreed or disagreed that the staffing resources at the school are adequate to meet the learning needs of students who require extra support to address learning gaps. Again, 100% of teachers either strongly disagreed or disagreed that the resources at the school are adequate to meet the social emotional needs of students living in poverty. Interestingly, 68.75% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they felt well prepared to teach in a school where poverty related issues are present on a regular basis. Most teachers, 81.25%, either strongly disagreed or disagreed that their teacher training had prepared them adequately for teaching students who live in poverty. And yet, 75% agreed or strongly agreed that professional development and school in-service opportunities had increased their awareness of poverty related issues. Figures 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 provide visual representations of the Likert statement responses.

Figure 4.2 Illustrates teachers’ perceptions regarding the adequacy of the school breakfast, lunch, and snack program.
Figure 4.3 Illustrates teachers’ perceptions regarding the adequacy of school resources with respect to meeting learning needs and social emotional needs.

Teachers’ perceptions regarding the adequacy of the breakfast and lunch program (statements 4 and 5) are illustrated in Figure 4.2. The variance in responses indicated that teachers are not in agreement with respect to the adequacy of the school’s nutrition programs. Teachers’ perceptions regarding the adequacy of resources to meet learning, and social emotional challenges (statements 6 and 7) are represented in figure 4.3. Figure 4.4 compares responses with respect to statements 8, 9, and 10. This graph illustrates teachers’ perspectives regarding the following: preparedness to teach in a school where poverty issues are present on a regular basis, the adequacy of their teacher training in preparing them to teach students who live in poverty, and the degree to which professional development and school in-service opportunities have increased their awareness of poverty related issues.
The eleventh question asked teachers to identify school initiatives that they believed were helpful at mitigating educational barriers related to poverty. All respondents felt the breakfast, lunch and snack programs were helpful; 94% thought that school wide literacy support, and events to welcome parents and families such as the Christmas breakfast, family picnic, and Parent/Teacher interview dinner were helpful; 75% identified Big Brothers, Big Sisters mentorship programs as helpful, and 69% identified Hul’q’umi’num language instruction as helpful. The following initiatives were identified as helpful by 63% of the respondents: extra-curricular activities available to students, school celebrations, Golden Eye cultural dancing, P.A.L.S. (Parents as Literacy Support), and use of Daily 5 classroom strategies. Figure 4.5 illustrates which school initiatives teachers believed to be helpful ranked in descending order.
Figure 4.5 Percentages of total responses for Question #11 – Which of the following school initiatives do you believe are helpful at mitigating educational barriers related to poverty? Check all that apply.

Teachers added a variety of comments including suggestions for initiatives not yet in place:

- “All sports initiatives are great. Dance is important, especially performances”.
- “Laundry facilities, extra clothes” (in place)
- “Hallowe’en costumes, bathing suits/towels, running shoes” (suggestion)
- “Many students seem positively impacted by extra-curricular activities. Our school seems to have less compared to others, less parent support, rides, etc.”
• “MORE! Friday family soup! Once a week family breakfast, families need nutritional support, how to make a healthy, cheap dinner. More basic activities to get parents/grandparents/students involved/sewing/knitting/cooking” (suggestion)

• “Any events or activities that provide social development and community building are beneficial to any child’s development. Confidence comes from experience so the more opportunities the better.”

The twelfth question asked teachers to identify school initiatives that have been most helpful in decreasing the learning gaps and improving learning outcomes for students affected by poverty. Almost all of the respondents identified school wide literacy support as most helpful (94%). There were many references to small group literacy support; all students from kindergarten to grade 7 currently receive small group literacy support at least three days a week. There were several references to the breakfast, lunch, and snack program as being most helpful in improving learning outcomes. Teachers identified what was working, but there were also references to lack of resources, the need for more books, and references to needed support teacher positions that have been cut. Some of the teachers’ responses read:

• “School wide literacy support. There is a lot of ground to be made up with regards to literacy, small groups help provide more individualized attention. Food program, you can’t learn if your stomach is empty”.

• “School wide literacy program. Focused reading groups improve confidence and expand knowledge”.

• “Literacy support – grouping children at appropriate reading levels and direct reading instruction to small groups”.
• “Leveled reading groups are most important because they help us deal with the huge range of readers in each class.”

• “LIF funds – more support to help students with their reading, Learning Assistance, EA support”.

Question 13 asked teachers to identify school initiatives that have been most helpful at increasing parent involvement. Responses included references to various initiatives that create a welcoming environment and help parents feel more at ease: invitations to events with food, mentioned by 75% of respondents, or any community building exercise. These included references to P.A.L.S., family picnic, Christmas family breakfast, and providing dinner at parent/teacher interviews. Also mentioned was the importance of a caring and supportive staff and administration on a daily basis. Some of the teachers’ responses read:

• “Anytime we open the school and invite parents it helps to create an attitude of openness and trust”.

• “Events with meals, many more families come to these”.

• “Frequent phone contact through Aboriginal Support Workers, including a meal in special events, showcasing dance program and Hul’q’umi’num at parent events, going the extra mile by helping with transportation via Aboriginal Support Workers”.

• “All events where we serve families. Ultimately teachers that take the time to build relationships with parents build the best bridge to parents”.

Question 14 asked teachers to identify school initiatives that have been most helpful in fostering social-emotional growth and, or instilling hope. Responses included many references to dance and sports teams (62.5%), Big Brothers and Big Sisters mentor programs,
the presence of positive role models, and access to caring adults in the building. The importance of mentor programs was identified by 87.5% of respondents. Numerous responses referred to the importance of acceptance and a sense of belonging. Several respondents mentioned small group instruction as a tool to foster social-emotional growth. A sample of responses follows:

- “Small group instruction – gives children a chance to talk and problem solve, Big Brothers/Sisters – I’ve seen students really light up and be excited to have a buddy.
- “Cultural events/learning – for many F.N. children this really gives them a sense of belonging/acceptance, small group support reinforces skills – “I can do it” – improved self-esteem.”
- “Teachers and staff having a positive attitude and not sweating the small stuff, really accepting the students and their families – not being judgemental, for aboriginal students having Hul’q’umi’num creates an atmosphere of acceptance and cultural affirmation”.
- Having Aboriginal role models, aboriginal language, sports teams. Using Aboriginal problem solving and sharing circle approaches. Simple smiles and sharing positives with every child, every day, particularly the most challenging ones”.
- Extracurricular sports, Big Brothers, Girls Group, Boys Group help foster social emotional growth. These programs offer positive role models for students.
- “Sports, big brothers/sisters – helping to have a mentor is a positive support for children. Sports are fun! Community involvement/teamwork – allows kids to have a positive learning experience that is not related to academic performance”.
Teachers frequently not only identified initiatives and programs that are working, but also commented on what is still needed. With respect to fostering social emotional growth and instilling hope one teacher stated “we need MORE of these programs. More role models need to come to the school and talk to classes, people who achieved even though they grew up in poverty, more people in the community need to come to the school and show what they do”.

Question 15 asked teachers to identify school initiatives that have helped to increase identity and engagement, and have helped to foster a sense of belonging. Teacher responses to this question were fairly consistent. Most responses referred to the importance of Aboriginal cultural experiences and field trips (87.5%). These included the salmon school wide art project, artist in residence, trips to the river for fishing, Big House visit, elder visits, and first nation’s art and literature. Many respondents referred to the importance of Golden Eye dancing (81%), and Aboriginal language instruction (50%). Several respondents referred to sports teams and boys and girls clubs. The following responses give an indication of teacher perceptions regarding school initiatives that increase engagement and identity:

- “All school wide events help students belong. Relationships between students and teachers are key”.
- “Golden Eye dancing, sports, cooking program, students like to have something to belong to”.
- “Hul’q’umi’num language instruction, dance group, Salmon art project – trips to river for fishing, Big House visit”.

The final survey question asked teachers for additional comments and thoughts on current school strengths and successes, and recommendations for school initiatives that they would like
to see in place for the future. Suggestions were varied and included references to current successes:

- “This school does a great job of trying to help break the cycle of poverty. We need to make sure all staff are on board working with each individual child”.
- “Continue professional development on issues of poverty and culture. Systematically use literature that demonstrates hopefulness, optimism, success, resiliency, celebrate student success in a BIG WAY. Integrate art, dance, Media as alternate ways of demonstrating learning”.
- “Consider a section on trauma and some of the research around neuroscientific treatment of trauma in teaching”.

Collectively, the participants’ comments provided rich qualitative data to inform this author’s research. The implications of the teachers’ perspectives regarding both educational barriers related to poverty, and school initiatives that can help, will be considered in the following chapter. Some of the teachers’ responses will also be used to frame recommendations for future actions.
Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion, and Conclusions

Brief Summary of Research Questions, Procedures, and Results

The current study was developed to gain insight into the teachers’ perspectives at an elementary school known to have a high degree of poverty. The purpose of the study was to investigate educational barriers related to poverty from the teacher’s point of view. As well, the researcher wanted to find out which school initiatives teachers believed to be helpful at mitigating these educational barriers. The research questions were prompted by the high percentage of child poverty in BC, and by the intensity of need at the school research site. The researcher anticipated that specific themes would emerge with respect to what is working, and what is needed, to increase educational equity for low income students, and that the findings could be used to generate recommendations for future action. The researcher hoped that the study would identify not only current educational barriers, but that it would also identify current school strengths.

The focus of the study was a particular inner city school site on South Vancouver Island that was chosen based on school demographics and a high incidence of student poverty. The school also has a high percentage of Aboriginal students, approximately 85%, living both on and off reserve. All teachers on staff were invited to participate, and 16 out of a possible 22 completed the survey indicating a return rate of 73%. This high return rate suggests that teachers at this site are concerned about the negative effects of poverty on their students, and also that they value the opportunity to comment on the initiatives currently in place at their school. Frequently their responses referred not only to the strengths of current initiatives, but also to what is still needed.
The procedure used for the current study was a survey (Appendix A) with a mixed methods design. The survey consisted of Likert scale statements, multiple choice questions, and open-ended questions. Additional space was provided for teachers to comment on their responses. Questions about teacher demographics were kept to a minimum to preserve teacher anonymity since the researcher was a teaching colleague who also taught at the school. The teachers who responded to the survey were all experienced teachers; 5 teachers had between 6 and 10 years of teaching experience, and 11 teachers had over 10 years of teaching experience.

Results indicated that teachers believed that the poverty related barriers experienced by their students were significant, and sometimes overwhelming. Teachers were able to identify many barriers, beyond what the researcher anticipated. Teachers were also able to identify many current school initiatives that can mitigate these barriers to varying degrees. An exploration of the teachers’ perspectives identified current school strengths, but also identified what is still needed at the school in order for students to fully participate and succeed at school.

**Discussion of Findings**

“Where does the inequality in educational outcomes (however measured) associated with children affected by poverty originate, and, correspondingly, what can be done about it?” (Flessa, 2007, p.6) A discussion of the findings in the current study illustrates that the teacher respondents have a strong understanding of how poverty related barriers affect their students, and also, that they can eloquently articulate how the initiatives at their school are making a difference.

Many of the themes that emerged through the data analysis process mirrored the themes found in the related research and literature review of Chapter 2. The survey provided some
quantitative data, and also rich qualitative data, regarding teacher perspectives with respect to both educational barriers related to poverty, and school initiatives that can mitigate these barriers. Themes included but were not limited to: understanding of poverty, including how poverty affects the brain; health and nutrition concerns, adequacy of resources, student learning, engagement and sense of belonging, adult mentorship, and parental involvement. Latent themes include advocacy and a belief in agency. Comments about the importance of creating an inclusive, caring school culture, recognizing students’ strengths, and building hope and resiliency were woven throughout the qualitative data.

Teachers at this site are strongly aware of the negative effects of poverty and how this gets played out at school every day. Teachers identified many poverty related barriers that affected their students. Most, but not all, of these barriers have been identified by several studies (Flessa, 2007; Nelson et al., 2013; Payne, 2005; White et al., 2012). The most prevalent barriers included language and cognitive development, low attendance, nutrition and health concerns, emotional concerns (including anxiety and stress related concerns), lack of social knowledge and competence (social skills, ability to self-regulate), lack of parental involvement and engagement, achievement gaps, and lack of adult mentorship. Other barriers identified by respondents included no preschool experience, lack of experience to make connections to learning, low family literacy levels, lack of extra-curricular involvement, and lack of agency, the belief in personal ability to make change. Domestic violence in the home, homelessness, or addiction by parents or other family members were also considered to be barriers that affected learning. One respondent expressed concerns over children in care who “experience feelings of sadness, depression, and disconnect.” Some of the barriers are context specific, as this is a school with a high percentage of Aboriginal students. An example of a context specific barrier is the inter-
generational trauma “related to residential school mistreatment and cultural ‘near genocide’ of assimilation policies toward aboriginal parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents.”

These barriers are significant, and teachers expressed concerns about how they could be addressed. Flessa (2007) states that there are two false assumptions about poverty and education: “first, that schools can do nothing, and secondly, that schools can do everything” (p.4). An examination of teachers’ perspectives at this site supports Flessa’s findings that effective schools can address poverty related issues, but also, that they cannot do it alone.

Teachers at this site described many challenges and agreed overwhelmingly that basic needs must be met first, before learning can take place, “we spend a lot of time feeding, clothing, solving personal issues, providing emotional support.” The findings indicate that strong initiatives are currently in place to address student hunger. Teachers expressed concerns about health issues such as lice, undiagnosed vision and hearing issues, infections, and untreated dental problems. At present, the school has no means of addressing these health concerns, and what is needed is a change in policy to make public health support available at the school. Teachers’ responses support Jensen’s (2009) findings regarding the chronic stress caused by poverty, and how this stress affects the brain, and consequently, student behaviour. As one respondent commented “when you are dealing with children of poverty, there are often crisis situations, often academic learning is put on hold until emotional calm is restored.” Many respondents referred to students’ inability to self-regulate, or manage their emotions, and the fact that tired, hungry children can be unfocused or disruptive.

Having taught at this school for two years, the researcher is familiar with current school initiatives. The school does not charge for any school supplies or books, nor are students
expected to pay for field trips, so the survey did not ask questions related to school fees. This school is already making many attempts to make education as inclusive as possible for its students, and to maintain the dignity of students and families by avoiding situations where families are asked to pay for things that they may not be able to afford. Approximately one third of students participate in the school’s fully funded daily breakfast program, and over half participate in the lunch and snack program. Students and families do not need to sign up for these programs so there is no shame or stigma attached. Students simply indicate by show of hands, after classroom attendance is taken, how many will be participating in the lunch program that day. Breakfast is available to students at the start of the school day, served in the school gymnasium. Although 100% of the respondents felt that nutrition and health were barriers, about 50% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the breakfast program, as well as the lunch and snack program, were adequate to meet students’ nutritional needs. This indicates some degree of effectiveness of the school meals programs, however, approximately 30% of teachers felt that the meal programs were not adequate. The current study found that hunger is a significant barrier to learning, second only to language and cognitive development. Teachers commented repeatedly that basic needs must be met first, that hungry students cannot learn, and that hunger equals fatigue. Although Jensen (2009) comments on the importance of adequate nutrition for students he does not recommend any strategies or initiatives to actually address the issue of hunger at the school site. With respect to school fees, Nelson et al. (2013) comment that schools can help young people achieve highly and close the gap in outcomes by covering all the costs of education.

As has been mentioned, all of the respondents were experienced teachers, having a minimum of 6 years of teaching experience. Most respondents, 63%, in the current research study felt well
prepared to teach in a school where poverty issues are present on a regular basis. A province wide study conducted by White et al. (2013) to examine teachers’ beliefs regarding poverty and education found that most teachers do not feel they are adequately prepared to respond to poverty related issues in the classroom. On average, White et al. (2013) found that teachers who work in schools located in low income areas felt most prepared to teach where poverty issues are present, while teachers in high income areas felt least prepared. Interestingly, in the current study, although teachers’ responses indicated a high awareness and understanding of poverty related issues, the majority felt that their teacher training was inadequate in preparing them to teach students who live in poverty. This indicates that teacher training programs need to do a better job of preparing teachers to teach in low income areas or under-resourced teaching environments. Most respondents had more than 10 years of teaching experience, so it is possible that some teacher training programs may have changed and are currently addressing the need for increased awareness of student diversity, including poverty, and the need for teacher advocacy. It was also interesting to note that teachers in the current study did indicate that their professional development and school in-service opportunities had increased their awareness of poverty related issues. This finding illustrates the power of collaborative professional development. Increased awareness of poverty and education issues can improve teacher efficacy and increase teacher agency in high poverty contexts (Flessa, 2007).

With respect to adequacy of resources, all teachers felt that current staffing resources at the school were inadequate to meet the learning needs of students who require extra support to address learning gaps. All teachers also felt that current resources at the school were inadequate to meet the social emotional needs of students living in poverty. This corresponds to the findings by White et al. (2013). A comparison by socio-economic context of school showed that the need
for staffing resources, including specialist teachers to address learning gaps and counselling services for students and families, was rated highest by teachers in schools located in low-income neighbourhoods, and rated lowest by teachers for schools located in high-income neighbourhoods (White et al., 2013). These findings imply that current school resource allocations are inequitable for students living in poverty.

In terms of effective school initiatives, teachers found that many of the school initiatives currently in place are helpful at mitigating educational barriers related to poverty. All participants identified the school meals programs, 94% identified the school wide literacy support program, and events to welcome parents and families, and 75% identified Big Brothers, Big Sisters mentor program as helpful. Over half of the respondents identified culturally relevant activities such as Hul’q’umi’num language instruction (69%), and Golden Eye dancing (63%). Also identified as helpful at mitigating barriers were: the PALS program (Parents as Literacy Support), school celebrations, Daily 5 teaching strategies, and extra-curricular activities available to students, including volleyball, basketball, cross-country, and track and field. Clearly, these teacher perceptions indicate a variety of school strengths with respect to addressing chronic hunger, addressing learning needs, welcoming parents, increasing engagement, making learning culturally relevant, and providing opportunities for students to excel in areas that may not be related to academic achievement. As one respondent put it “any events or activities that provide social development and community building are beneficial to any child’s development. Confidence comes from experience, so the more opportunities the better.” The value of these school initiatives is supported by the review of poverty and education literature in Chapter 2. Nelson et al. (2013), state that enhancing parents’ engagement with their child’s education can help to mitigate the effects of poverty and lead to more positive outcomes.
Nelson et al. (2013) also refer to the importance of mentorship programs with respect to building hope and resilience, and helping students to develop self-efficacy and a sense of agency. White et al. (2012) refer to the importance of a culturally relevant curriculum and meaningful learning experiences. Jensen (2013) refers to the importance of effective teaching strategies, and the importance of engaging students through the arts, and through physical activity.

One initiative that was perceived clearly as a school strength was the current literacy initiative. Most teachers in this study, 94%, identified the school wide literacy intervention program as the initiative that has been most helpful at reducing learning gaps. The entire student population from kindergarten to grade 7 receives small group literacy intervention support, with intensive, direct instruction, at least three times a week. Poverty and education literature recognizes that intensive programs that focus on helping small numbers of children most in need tend to have the strongest evidence of effectiveness (Nelson et al., 2013). Numerous researchers site the importance of effective teaching strategies and supplemental small group support (Jensen, 2013; Payne, 2005; White et al., 2012). Although the literacy initiative is a school initiative that is working in terms of improving student learning success, teachers felt that more staffing was needed, groups were still too large to address all learning gaps, and more books were needed. In this case, teachers used the survey not only to highlight school strengths, but also to advocate for what is still needed.

Teachers identified numerous school initiatives that were helpful at increasing parent engagement. In general, teachers felt that any events where food was served created a welcoming environment. Examples include serving dinner at parent teacher interviews, family picnics, and the Christmas family breakfast. Although special events and celebrations were mentioned frequently, many respondents also referred to the importance of “community building” exercises,
teachers taking the time to build relationships, creating an attitude of openness and trust, and the presence of a supportive, caring staff and administration on a daily basis. Key factors to increasing parent engagement were building trust and establishing relationships. The implication here is that although school initiatives make a difference, it is not the single initiatives that matter the most, but the collective, caring culture of the school.

With respect to fostering social and emotional growth and instilling hope, teachers offered many comments regarding what is working, and many comments advocating for what is still needed. Almost all school initiatives received some mention here, initiatives that provided role models, big buddies or mentors, small group instruction that allowed students to talk and problem solve, initiatives that create “an atmosphere of acceptance and cultural affirmation”, dance, sports, and daily teacher student interactions. Once again, the implication is that it is not only the initiatives that make a difference, but that relationships are key. Teachers referred to the importance of providing mentorship support for students and allowing students to have positive learning experiences that are not related to academic achievement. In terms of advocacy teachers asked for more programs for primary students, more community role models to come into the school, more access to extra-curricular activities, and more cultural learning events.

School initiatives that address identity and sense of belonging can increase student engagement. Teacher respondents at this school site indicated a strong awareness of the importance of learning experiences that are meaningful to the lives of students, and culturally relevant. Nelson et al. (2013) found that increasing curriculum accessibility by making curriculum more relevant to the lives of students can support children to overcome persistent poverty. Initiatives at this school that addressed sense of belonging included Hul’q’umi’num language instruction, Golden Eye dancing, elder visits, school wide Salmon art project, visits to
river for fishing, and big house visits. Teachers also mentioned the importance of Aboriginal role models, and bringing in community members to participate in the children’s learning. Not all references were cultural; there were also references to sports programs and cooking programs. As one teacher stated “students like to have something to belong to”.

When asked to provide additional comments or recommendations at the end of the survey, teachers provided thoughtful suggestions for future actions, and once again, used the space to advocate for their students. Comments referred to current school successes, the collective responsibility of school staff, continued professional development on the issues of poverty and culture, and continued efforts to increase community connection. The following comment illustrates the importance of belief in teacher agency: “this school does a great job of trying to help break the cycle of poverty. We need to make sure that all staff are on board, working with each individual child.” In order to address the social emotional needs of students who are experiencing chronic or acute stress, one respondent suggested that staff “consider a section on trauma, and some of the research around the neuro-scientific treatment of trauma in teaching”. Other suggestions included the systematic use of literature that demonstrates hopefulness, optimism, success, and resiliency; celebrating student success in a big way; and integrating art, dance, and media as alternative ways of demonstrating learning. Overall, comments expressed hope and a belief that students need to work from their strengths.

In summary, respondents at this high poverty site were able to identify many educational barriers related to poverty that affected their students. Teachers observed, on a daily basis, how poverty negatively affects student learning. Teachers were also able to articulate, compellingly, just how their current school initiatives are working to mitigate these barriers. In addition to responding to survey questions, most teachers also used the survey as an opportunity to advocate
for their students by making frequent references to additional supports and resources that are still needed.

**Limitations**

Although there was a high return rate to this study, 16 out of a possible 22 teachers, the sample size is relatively small. The school site itself is unique in that it has a very high prevalence of families living in poverty, and also a high percentage of Aboriginal students. Validity, in the case of this study, is highly context bound. Findings, although relevant, are not considered generalizable because of the specific site demographics.

An internal validity limitation for this study is the lack of control over survey location. Depending on the participants surroundings, the quantity and quality of some of the responses may have been impacted. Teachers may have discussed their opinions with each other regarding the survey, resulting in possible bias. There was also no control over the time the respondents filled out the survey; teachers’ perceptions may have been affected by filling out the survey at the end of a challenging school day.

Finally, interviewing respondents after the survey may have helped the author to gain more in depth insights into teachers’ perspectives. However, it was assumed that the respondents would be more likely to answer genuinely through an anonymous survey as opposed to being interviewed as the researcher was a teaching colleague and was known to the participants.

**Recommendations and Suggestions for Further Research**

This researcher believed it was important to view poverty and education issues through the lens of the teacher, and that the teachers’ perspectives could be used to inform recommendations
for future action. Collectively, the school initiatives described in this study contribute to a caring and inclusive school culture that demonstrates a strong sense of community. Flessa (2007) found that “the strongest effects of school community occurred with the most disadvantaged populations” (p.25), indicating that a caring, supporting, and responsive school community is particularly important for poor student populations.

Although the relationship between poverty and schooling is extremely complex there are numerous steps that schools can undertake to mitigate the effects of poverty. These include initiatives to address basic needs such as hunger, including school meals programs that do not stigmatize students. It is also important to ensure that school budgets provide for all the costs of education, including school supplies, school trips, and after school activities, so that students do not miss out on crucial learning and social activities. Nelson et al. (2013) recommend the creation of schools with mixed cohorts of pupils from both advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. Although this is a sound recommendation, it is not always possible to implement, as school populations are largely determined by the neighbourhood demographics. Interventions to include parents in their children’s education are also recommended. Findings in this study indicate that this is a school that is working hard to strengthen school community connections, including relationships with parents.

Based on the teachers’ perspectives in the current study, this researcher recommends that teacher training programs support new teachers to be agents of social change. Frank, the dean of education at UBC, has acknowledged the need for teacher training programs to educate teachers so they are knowledgeable about going into those situations that are under-resourced and disadvantaged (Hyslop, 2012). Teacher training programs could play a role in emphasizing social justice issues and could teach teachers how to be advocates for their students.
Findings in this study indicate the importance of professional development opportunities and the role these opportunities can potentially play in increasing teacher awareness and understanding of poverty. Flessa (2007) recommends the creation of genuine professional learning communities to develop a common sense of purpose and create the notion of collective efficacy among teachers, particularly among those teachers who work in high poverty neighbourhoods. Flessa (2007) found that the professional skills that teachers need to be effective can be built and developed over time, but that these skills “in the absence of a positive disposition towards students and families living in poverty are not enough” (p.35). Teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about poverty matter: “what teachers think about the communities they serve, and how they articulate their own responsibilities to learners who come from poor families are the most important predictors of school success” (Flessa, 2007, p.35).

Suggestions for further research include recommendations to investigate how schools, communities, and social agencies can work together to improve educational outcomes and life chances for students living in poverty. Flessa sums up the challenge that educators face in the following way:

The socially just response to what we know about the relationship between poverty and schooling is not only to work within schools to improve the quality of schooling children receive, but also to work outside of school to address the poverty that negatively shapes students’ learning opportunities to begin with. School, in other words, cannot do it alone. (as cited in CTF, 2009, p.3)

Based on the findings, this researcher suggests that schools affected by poverty implement initiatives that nurture a strong sense of community within the school, initiatives that build on
the strengths of students, that foster hope and resilience, that are culturally relevant, and that address multiple skill levels and diverse learning needs. What makes strong, effective schools cannot be measured simply by standardized achievement scores. What makes the current school a strong, effective school is the collective sense of teacher efficacy, and the many school initiatives that contribute to the school’s strong sense of community.
References


White, M., Hill, I., Kemp, S., MacRae, J., & Young, L (2012). *Poverty and education: A Teacher’s perspective Summary of the findings of the focus group research.* (Volume 2012-EI-01). Vancouver: BC Teacher’s Federation.
Poverty and Education: Exploring Teachers’ Perspectives

Please attach another sheet if you need more room for any of the open-ended responses in this survey. Directions: Please respond to each question as accurately as possible by checking one, or more if applicable, of the responses.

Basic Demographic Information

Years of teaching experience: ___0-5 years ___6-10 years ___10+ years
Years of teaching experience at this school site: ___0-5 years ___6-10 years ___10+ years

Teacher’s Perspective

1. What percentage of your students do you believe are living in poverty?
___None ___Less than 25% ___Between 25% to 50%
___Between 51-75% ___More than 75% ___Don’t know

2. Which of the following educational barriers or challenges impact the students you work with? Check all that apply.
___Low attendance ___Transportation
___Nutrition and health ___Achievement gaps
___Language and cognitive development ___Lack of adult mentorship
___Emotional concerns (including anxiety and stress related concerns)
___Social knowledge and competence (social skills, ability to self-regulate)
___Lack of parental involvement and engagement
___Other (Please describe):
3. What challenges do you experience while teaching children affected by poverty?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 = Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>2 = Disagree</th>
<th>3 = Neutral</th>
<th>4 = Agree</th>
<th>5 = Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4. The school breakfast program is adequate to meet the nutritional needs of students who come to school hungry.

4

5. The school snack and lunch program are adequate to meet the nutritional needs of students throughout the day.

5

6. I feel that there are adequate staffing resources at my school to meet the learning needs of students who require extra support to address learning gaps.

5

7. I feel that there are adequate resources at my school to meet the social emotional needs of students living in poverty.

5

8. I feel well prepared to teach in a school where poverty related issues are present on a regular basis.

5

9. I feel my teacher training was adequate in preparing me for teaching students who live in poverty.

5

10. My professional development and school in service opportunities have increased my awareness of poverty related issues.

5
11. Which of the following school initiatives do you believe are helpful at mitigating educational barriers related to poverty? *Check all that apply.*

___Breakfast Program
___Lunch and Snack Program
___School wide literacy support
___Golden Eye Dancing
___Daily 5
___P.A.L.S. (Parents as Literacy Support)
___Friday Fitness at the track
___Hul’q’umi’num language instruction
___Big Brothers, Big Sisters (e.g. Go Girls)
___School celebrations (sports day, assemblies, performances)
___Events to welcome parents and families (Christmas breakfast, family picnic, P/T interview dinner)
___Extra-curricular activities available to students (volleyball, basketball, cross country, track and field)
___Other (Please describe):

12. In your opinion, what school initiatives have been *most helpful* in decreasing the learning gaps and improving learning outcomes for students affected by poverty? (e.g., school wide literacy support program, Daily 5, etc.) Please comment or explain your response.

13. In your opinion, what school initiatives have been *most helpful* at increasing parent involvement? (e.g., P.A.L.S., family picnic, serving dinner at parent teacher interviews, Christmas family breakfast, etc.) Please comment or explain your response.
14. In your opinion, what school initiatives have been most helpful in fostering social-emotional growth and/or instilling hope? (e.g. sports, Big Brothers Big Sisters) Please comment or explain your response.

15. In your opinion, what school initiatives have helped to increase identity and engagement for students, and have helped to foster a sense of belonging? (Hul’q’umi’num language instruction, Golden Eye Dancing) Please comment or explain your response.

16. Please include any additional comments which you believe would aid my research, including your thoughts on current school strengths/successes and recommendations for school initiatives you would like to see in place in the future.

Please feel free to attach another sheet with more thoughts you would like to share with me about educational barriers and school initiatives.

Thank you for taking the time from your busy life to complete the survey! The return of your survey indicates your consent to participate in this research and for the information you provided to be included in the study results.
Appendix B

Participant Letter of Consent

“Poverty and Education: Exploring Teachers’ Perspectives”

Principal Investigator: Julia Armstrong, Master of Education Student at Vancouver Island University

Supervisor: Rachel Moll, Ph.D., Faculty of Education, Vancouver Island University, 250-753-3245 (ext. 2161), Rachel.Moll@viu.ca

Purpose: I am a student at Vancouver Island University in a research methods course. As such, I have designed a research project to study teachers’ perspectives on educational barriers related to poverty. The research will also explore school initiatives that teachers believe to be helpful at mitigating educational barriers related to poverty. You are being invited to participate because you work at Alexander Elementary School.

Study Procedures: During this study, you will be asked to complete a paper based survey. The survey consists of 16 questions. Your participation will require approximately 10-15 minutes of your time and I would appreciate your help. You may choose not to answer any question for any reason. Once you have completed the survey, please return it to the drop box provided in your Resource Teacher’s office. Participants should not return their surveys directly to me. Please do not provide any identifying information about yourself or others on the survey. There are no known potential risks.

Key Terms: For the purpose of this study the researcher defined school initiatives as school wide projects, programs or supports that the school community undertakes, and that address various student needs including physical and health related needs, learning needs, and social-emotional needs (Washington Central Supervisory Union, 2014). Also included in the definition of school initiatives are professional development activities undertaken by teaching staff at the research site to improve staff understanding of the structural causes of poverty and to develop strategies to address needs. Educational barriers can take many forms; barriers can be physical, technological, systemic, financial, or attitudinal (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2014). These barriers can prevent students from fully participating and succeeding at school. Barriers to education associated with poverty can include access to adequate health care, lack of adequate food and clothing, lack of funds to participate in field trips and before and after school recreational opportunities, and lack of mentorship (White, 2009). Educational barriers can also include inadequate funding and resources, lack of accessibility, and negative attitudes and stereotypes.
Confidentiality: Please do not identify yourself on the survey. I will ensure that all survey responses are kept confidential. Since direct quotations from the survey responses may be used it is possible that one or more participants may inadvertently be identified. Anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Given the possibility of identification based on handwriting, paper copies of the surveys will be destroyed immediately following transcription. Only I and my supervisor will have access to the information. Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet within the supervisor’s office. Paper data will be burned and electronic files will be deleted. Electronic data will be destroyed in June 2018, approximately 3 years after the completion of the research project. Information about the project will not be made public in any way that identifies individual participants.

Concerns about your treatment in the research: If you have any concerns about your treatment as a participant in this research, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer by telephone at 250-753-3245 (ext.2665) or by e-mail at reb@viu.ca

Consent: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. However, if you choose to withdraw after your survey responses have been submitted your data cannot be removed from the sample because it is not possible to identify it from other participants’ data. You may choose to not answer any question for any reason. The return of your completed survey indicates your consent to participate in the research and for information you provide to be included in the results of the study.

Contact for information about the study: The results of the study will be published as a thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Education program. This research will be shared in the form of a presentation at the Annual Action Research Conference at Vancouver Island University in the spring of 2015. If you have any questions, or would like further information about the research project, please feel free to contact me at the email address below:

Julia Armstrong
Master of Education Student
Vancouver Island University
Letter to Principal

Dear Kristi Clifton,

I am currently enrolled in the Master of Education Program in Educational Leadership and am required to take research methods course. As such, I have designed a research project to study teachers’ perspectives on educational barriers related to poverty. The research will also explore teacher beliefs about school initiatives that are helpful at mitigating these barriers. Teachers at Alexander Elementary School will have the opportunity to complete an anonymous survey. The survey consists of 15 questions. Participation in the research study is completely voluntary. There are no known potential risks to participants. A potential benefit of participating in the study is that participants will be able to identify school initiatives as school strengths, which may generate positive feelings, feelings of success and accomplishment, and a sense of empowerment. A potential benefit of participation lies in the identification of current school strengths, affirming the value of the work that is being done.

All records of participation will be kept strictly confidential. Only I and my supervisor will have access to the information. Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet within the supervisor’s office. Data will be destroyed in June 2018, approximately 3 years after the completion of the research project. Electronic files will also be deleted at this time. Information about the project will not be made public in any way that identifies individual participants.

If you have any concerns about the treatment of participants in this research, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Officer by telephone at 250-753-3245 (ext.2665) or by e-mail at reb@viu.ca

Contact for information about the study: If you have any questions, or would like further information about the research project, please feel free to contact me at the phone number or email address below:

Julia Armstrong

Principal Investigator: Julia Armstrong, Master of Education Student at Vancouver Island University,

Supervisor: Rachel Moll, Ph.D., Faculty of Education, Vancouver Island University, 250-753-3245 (ext. 2161), Rachel.Moll@viu.ca
Recruitment Script

“Poverty and Education: Exploring Teachers’ Perspectives”

I am currently working on my Master’s Degree in Education at VIU. Part of the requirement for the degree is to design a research project. The topic I have chosen is poverty and education because I am passionate about increasing advocacy and equity for students living in poverty. My interest in this area stems from current poverty statistics in BC and my own elementary and secondary experiences at high poverty schools.

I want to find out what teachers think and believe about what is working and what is needed to help students fully participate and succeed at school. The research will also explore school initiatives that teachers believe to be helpful at mitigating educational barriers related to poverty. You are being invited to participate because you work at Alexander Elementary School. I have chosen this school as my research site as Alexander Elementary has a known high incidence of students and families living in poverty. I believe that teachers at this school site are strongly aware of the educational barriers related to poverty. Teachers’ perspectives could provide valuable insights into what is working, and what is needed, to support students who are adversely affected by poverty.

Participation is voluntary and includes filling out a short survey, which will take about 15 minutes to complete. I would really appreciate your help.

I will distribute the survey to your mailboxes immediately after this meeting. Attached to the survey is a letter of consent that you should read carefully to decide if you would like to participate. If you choose to fill out the survey, return it to the drop box provided in your Resource Teacher’s office. Participants should not return their surveys directly to me. The return of your completed survey indicates your consent to participate in the research and for information you provide to be included in the results of the study.

If you have any questions, or would like further information about the research project, just ask.

Julia Armstrong