

Perceived Readiness of First Year Agriculture Teachers to Teach Low Socioeconomic Students

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Abstract

Approximately 10.5% of children in Nebraska live in poverty. Poverty in a child's life impacts both physical and cognitive development. This qualitative case study explored agricultural education teachers perceived confidence when teaching students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Eight high school agriculture teachers were interviewed, and the following themes emerged from the data: (a) teacher emotions, (b) observations, and (c) accommodations. The teachers felt prepared to teach students that are impacted by poverty. It is recommended that teacher preparation programs select courses that specifically address working with students that are living in poverty. Additionally, exposure to students from low SES backgrounds early in their teacher preparation program will help them to learn how to build positive relationships with students and how to accommodate this population.

Introduction

Children were the highest likely group of individuals to be living in poverty (Dornan, 2017). Talk Poverty (2020) identified that 10.5% of children in Nebraska public schools live in poverty. This correlates directly with Dornan's (2017) identification of children being the highest likely group to live in poverty, as Talk Poverty (2021) ranked children at a higher rate of poverty than any other surveyed group. This growing issue was evident within Nebraska public schools and educators need to be prepared for it.

Throughout preservice teachers' educational experiences, professors have utilized a variety of different methods to educate their students on this phenomenon. Cho et al. (2015) explored the option of educating teachers to be anthropologists in future encounters of student poverty, while Baggerly (2006) focused on the power of service-learning experiences. With a growing need for teacher confidence in the identification and accommodation of students of low socioeconomic status (SES), teacher educators must ensure they have prepared their students to effectively accommodate classroom instruction for students living in poverty.

Child poverty has reared its head as multidimensional poverty within American schools as students lack basic resources due to availability, location, and family structures (Dornan, 2017). Roelen (2017) discussed differences between children of monetary poverty and children of multidimensional poverty. Monetary poverty is described as strictly a measurement of household income and expenses and was also defined as indirect poverty because it did not directly impact the resources of a family (Roelen, 2017). Roelen (2017) explained this concept by pointing out that not all financial funds accumulated by the household were used properly for the basic needs of all individuals within the household. Improper use of funds or lack of availability of basic needs within a community can create multidimensional poverty (Roelen, 2017). Multidimensional poverty was defined as the lack of and depletion of basic needs and resources (Roelen, 2017). This term was also referred to as direct poverty (Roelen, 2017). Each type of poverty is unique but not necessarily linked to each other depending on the economic status of the country inhabited (Roelen, 2017).

Gupta (2017) gave readers a glimpse of a family's life within poverty by providing a view of the assumptions and realities of their lives. America's social work system has been known to sometimes forget to account for poverty when visiting families (Gupta, 2017). Gupta (2017) illustrated a situation in which individuals living in poverty were surrounded with assumptions of drug use and had parenting rights removed with little to no evidence. Thiede and Brooks (2018) outlined the correlation between immigration, family history, and poverty. This quantitative analysis identified that individuals of first and second generations who had two foreign born parents had a higher likelihood than other foreign individuals of living in poverty in America (Thiede & Brooks, 2018). This unfortunate relationship has been reality for many children in public schools and should be recognized by American school systems.

The direct relationship of poverty and its impacts on a child's cognitive development was illustrated by Dolean et al., (2019) in a study done on the relation of socioeconomic status (SES) and development of reading and linguistic skills. SES was the likely root cause for many children's inability to academically excel in the classroom (Dolean et al., 2019). Research identified frequent school absences, phonetic awareness, and bilingual homes to be largely impactful on the slow development of basic academic skills (Dolean et al., 2019). SES was directly linked to poor linguistic, phonetics, reading, letter knowledge, and nonverbal IQ (Dolean et al., 2019). Li et al. (2020) hypothesized that poverty and mental health have been negatively correlated. Li et al. (2020) survey asked school aged children about their access to common educational resources relative to their current mental health state. Anxiety and depression were common themes that manifested among students with lower SES, and poverty levels were associated with increased mental health issues in children (Li et al., 2020).

Over the past few years, school systems have subscribed to the ideas of Ruby Payne and her framework for understanding poverty (Osei-Kofi, 2005). These ideas were presented to communicate social norms and commonalities amongst those living in poverty (Osei-Kofi, 2005). Although these theories outlined positive things teachers can do for students, Osei-Kofi's (2005) review identified its flaws of the framework in today's world. Being a teacher himself, Osei-Kofi had a direct point of view on the impacts of Payne's framework on his own school. He observed that the framework created biases around certain groups of people and the framework's influence on the No Child Left Behind Act gave teachers almost impossible standards to reach (Osei-Kofi, 2005). The No Child Left Behind Act created a system in which standardized tests blamed teachers for any student failure (Osei-Kofi, 2005). Although much of Payne's research was valid, she made assumptions that stretch teacher's limits and impose unfair assumptions on students (Osei-Kofi, 2005). One example from Osei-Kofi's (2005) review indicated that Payne outlined children in poverty as inadequate and in need of repair from a teacher. The responsibility of the student's so-called repair was placed solely on the teacher (Osei-Kofi, 2005).

An article by Payne and Ortiz (2007) outlined multiple factors such as socioeconomic status of a household and the talent of teachers as huge impacts on the success of students in the classroom. Many of those students who have struggled with standardized tests may also be victims of multidimensional poverty (Payne & Ortiz, 2007). Educators cannot solve child poverty; they do not have the responsibility of child poverty, but they have been doing everything they can to help children living in poverty (Payne & Ortiz, 2007).

The exploration of child poverty, cognitive development, and educator limits lead us toward identification of applicable solutions for how America's educational system can help children in poverty. Jackson (2014) explored the emotions of educators and students surrounding children living in poverty and found that there was a shocking overall acceptance of poverty by our society. Educators have a duty to promote proper emotional response to social injustices (Jackson, 2014). There was no shortage of sympathy amongst students and teachers, but empathy will be needed to impact society (Jackson, 2014). Empathy is the initial step in the emotional process and is needed to enact change within society (Jackson, 2014).

Sato and Lensmire (2009) pointed out that teachers should be culturally responsive. While teachers may already do this, it needs to be an intentional effort to really assist students in poverty. For example, teachers need to recognize that not all students, based on factors such as SES, have the same prior knowledge or commonalities that were often assumed within the classroom (Sato & Lensmire, 2009). Students of poverty may not have these shared experiences (Sato & Lensmire, 2009). An empathetic and involving teacher is one who is also culturally aware throughout their curriculum (Sato & Lensmire, 2009).

The Poverty Simulation was a program utilized in the education of college students entering social work and health care fields (Vandsburger et al., 2010). This case study utilized three common scales used in diversity education: (1) the Critical Thinking Scale, (2) Understanding of Others Scale, and the (3) Active Learning Scale are used to measure the effectiveness of this simulation (Vandsburger et al., 2010). The simulation consisted of daily tasks and navigation through life for a given amount of time as an individual of poverty (Vandsburger et al., 2010). While 82.2% of individuals who participated in this simulation experienced further contemplation of poverty's effects, only 58.4% of participants were moved to take social action (Vandsburger et al., 2010). Results of this study showed that the simulation was impactful in the education of college individuals, but true empathy was not always reached (Vandsburger et al., 2010).

Community connections and service learning are powerful educational tools that were explored by Baggerly (2006) in the setting of the education of preservice teachers. Service learning was outlined as a symbiotic relationship between urban communities and universities within them (Baggerly, 2006). A lot of students attending universities have minimal experience with poverty themselves, so properly designed service-learning projects can provide them exposure to the impacts of poverty (Baggerly, 2006). This experience was valuable for preservice teachers because it helped them understand the background of future students in poverty (Baggerly, 2006). Major goals of service learning should be for students to experience different cultures and to encourage students to take social action (Baggerly, 2006). These impactful projects can create knowledge that preservice teachers can draw from in their teaching careers (Baggerly, 2006). This experience was recognized as impactful in educating students about the realities of poverty (Baggerly, 2006).

Purpose

The purpose of this case study was to explore the perceived preparedness of first year agricultural teachers from the University of Nebraska to educate an increasing population of children of low socioeconomic status (SES) in Nebraska public schools. The preparedness of

first year agriculture teachers to educate students of poverty was defined as their feelings toward the accommodations they are able to make. The overarching research question was, do first year agricultural teachers who graduated from University of Nebraska feel prepared to educate students who are impacted by childhood poverty?

Methods

Qualitative research was conducted because it allows researchers to create a vivid interpretation of the world around them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This qualitative study was working on the assumption that there was a growing need for first year agricultural teachers to be holistically educated on child poverty to increase their confidence in the identification and accommodation techniques for these students. A case study methodology was used in this study. As defined by Creswell and Poth (2018), a case study is the study of an actual, real life, case within a real context. A case study also takes place within a system that is bounded by a place and time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The bounded system recognized in this study, and hence the participation criteria for this study, was first year agricultural teachers from University of Nebraska who were employed by Nebraska public schools.

This study utilized purposeful sampling to select the individuals who provided experiences and information that were consistent to this bounded system. An initial recruitment email was sent to 28 agricultural teachers who met the participation criteria. There were only eight first year agriculture teachers from University of Nebraska that agreed to participate in the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) posited that five participants are adequate for a case study, however, we used eight participants to help achieve data saturation.

Participant/School Description

Teacher one came from a school in northeastern Nebraska and was the only agricultural teacher at this school. Student diversity included about a 69% population of white individuals and around a 22% population of American Indian individuals (Nebraska Department of Education, 2021). Teacher two was one of two agricultural teachers at a large high school in eastern Nebraska. This diverse school had a population of about 68% Hispanic students with 13% white as the next highest race within the population (Nebraska Department of Education, 2021). Teacher three came from a one teacher agricultural education program at a school in southeastern Nebraska with a high majority white student population (Nebraska Department of Education, 2021). The fourth, fifth and sixth teachers interviewed were also in one teacher programs at schools in the central (T4), northern (T5), and southern (T6) parts of Nebraska with high majority white student populations (Nebraska Department of Education, 2021). The seventh and eighth teachers came from small, one teacher program schools, while being located in western (T7) and central (T8) Nebraska schools. Both T7 and T8 were located at schools with a high majority white student population as well (Nebraska Department of Education, 2021).

Data Collection and Analysis

This qualitative case study used semi-structured interviews to collect data during September 2021. The semi-structured interviews took place over Zoom and lasted approximately 20

minutes. The interview questions allowed for open-ended answers that encouraged storytelling and real-life examples. The interviews were recorded and transcribed through Zoom. Data was analyzed for the emergence of themes. The transcripts were read three times and reoccurring words, phrases, and ideas were categorized together and used to identify the themes that emerged. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, “themes are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea.” (p. 186). Codes were organized into themes using tables to help conceptualize the overarching concepts.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness measures were used to determine the truth, value, credibility, and reliability of the research study (Dooley, 2007; Erlandson, et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation was achieved in this study by use of multiple researchers (Dooley, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing was used and allowed a researcher that was not associated with the study to review the data and give insight on how the data was analyzed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Dooley, 2007).

Subjectivity Statement

As an agricultural education teacher at a public school and the lead researcher on this article, I have encountered a higher rate of students living in poverty or of low SES than I expected. This study was completed during my third-year teaching and I found myself still having to adapt to many new and shocking situations. For example, many of my students lack funds available to supply their own jeans and boots for welding classes and other students have told me about nights they spend in their cars. The reason why I wanted to select my sample specifically from agricultural teachers because in my personal experience, many disadvantaged students are ‘dumped’ in agricultural courses to explore careers. Even though school counselors have good intentions, students in poverty can easily fall behind in these hands-on classes. These students may have a difficult time purchasing or providing the extra supplies that are typically needed. As a teacher, I would like to be better prepared to help these students and to identify tools to help support them as an empathetic, positive role model in their lives.

Findings

The following themes emerged from the data: (a) teacher emotions, (b) observations of poverty, and (c) accommodations. Within these themes, various codes were identified to help sort and categorize data and commonalities throughout the interviews.

Theme #1: Teacher Emotions

The theme of teacher emotions was defined by the internal feelings’ teachers have as they navigate difficult decisions when working to accommodate students of poverty. During interviews, many emotions were discussed. Teachers identified common emotions of empathy, concern, and compassion. Empathy was expressed by T1, T2, T4, T5, and T8 when acknowledging that many students were in poverty situations through no fault of their own. T1 indicated that students were usually helpless in their own availability of resources. T2 explained

that many students living in poverty missed out on opportunities teachers try to provide, this leaves teachers feeling heartbroken. T2 continued to explain their feelings on this issue by saying, “I know they’re going to have these struggles in life because they are already behind the eight-ball compared to many other peers, and for no reason than being born into the circumstances.” T2 and T4 also expressed an interest in breaking the cycle of poverty experienced by many of their students.

When the concerns of participants were addressed, the collective consensus of T1, T3, T6, and T7 was that all teachers feel the stress and difficulty of helping these students. T3 illustrated their own worry over the physical conditions these students live in each day and how the physical conditions impacted their abilities within the classroom. T3 and T7 both expressed a feeling of helplessness in many of the situations they encountered. Emotions of grace and compassion were also identified with T2 and T8. Prioritizing what was best for students and having a forgiving attitude was emphasized by T2. T8 described a deep respect for students who juggled the complications of a life in poverty yet maintain a positive influence within school.

Theme #2: Observations of Poverty

Observations of poverty was defined by the identifying factors of poverty teachers have witnessed within their first couple of months teaching. These observations were broken down into the following sub themes: physical observations, impacts of poverty, and lack of resources.

Physical Observations

Location of observations made by educators who participated in these interviews ranged from the general community to inside the school building. T1 reported their own physical observations of poverty by simply driving around town and seeing where students were living. Behaviors observed inside the schools by T1, T2, T5, T6, T7, and T8 included students missing school due to babysitting responsibilities, wearing old clothes every day, lack of hygiene, taking home school lunch to share with family, difficulties focusing, and a lack of engagement whenever money was mentioned in class. T6 stated, “As I discussed details for a fieldtrip, I watched a student physically slump in their chair when I requested students bring money for lunches.”

Impacts of Poverty

Many teacher observations were made individually through strong personal relationships built with students in poverty. Through relationships, students can reveal details about their lives that identify themselves as children of poverty. These conversations created observable information for teachers. T4 and T5 discussed being shocked at the sheer lack of confidence many students express during conversations with students of poverty. T2 described one situation by saying, “I’ve got one student, I know, that works until 11 o’clock every night to help her family pay the bills, so they have a lot of missing assignments.” T3 and T7 also could identify students in similar situations. T2’s students also expressed interests in being the first generation in their families to attend college or trade school. T1 theorized that many students living in poverty were highly motivated by simply wanting to break their own cycle. T4 expressed their observations of high levels of hard work and determination from students living in poverty. T3, T4, and T8 identified lack of sleep and emotional stress as two consequences of poverty. T3, T4, and T8

reported students helplessly falling asleep in class after working a long night shift. T3 also reported having students act distant and emotional due to the stresses of their everyday life. These two impacts had a severe negative toll on the student's abilities to learn and participate in class. Through personal conversations with students T3 and T8 concluded students who were consistently overly tired in class usually spent time working to pay bills. Students could easily be overscheduled, and some employers may not recognize the demands on their time. T3 said, "Our school actually reached out and said, hey, just be aware that these are high school students and we know that they're working a lot. First and foremost, they need to be students." T3 and T4 pointed out that poverty may not allow children to experience as many opportunities.

Lack of Resources

All teachers interviewed identified examples of actual lack of resources from students in poverty. During the shutdown of many schools, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students were expected to learn from home using technology and the internet. However, T1, T2, and T4 identified the lack of reliable internet and technology was problematic for many students in poverty. T4 indicated that students living in poverty had issues sourcing these necessary resources and sharing them with siblings in the same situations. This lack of resources could include a lack of equipment within a household, lack of bandwidth, or lack of reliable internet. All teachers interviewed also indicated that transportation and financial support impact students' school experiences. Although public education is free, extracurricular activities that compliment classroom learning are not. T2, T4 and T8 explained different situations in which students could not afford opportunities that FFA provides. However, these teachers made their own accommodations for these students.

Theme #3: Accommodations

The theme of teacher accommodations was defined as any adaptations or changes teachers made to help students of poverty. The different accommodations teachers made all fell into the following sub themes: (a) advocacy, (b) relationships, and (c) monetary support.

Advocacy

Some great points brought up through discussion with T3 included strong intentions to advocate for students. T3 stated: "I will do whatever I can to make sure that you're (students are) supplemented with whatever you (students) need." T1 stated that agricultural educators, have a unique advantage compared to other teachers because of their preparation to mentor a student to explore certain careers and trades. Agricultural educators teach classes directly tied to real life careers. Students who have taken agricultural classes were taught basic skills needed for entry level positions out of high school within agricultural careers or the trades. T1 also expressed focusing class content on trades that all students could explore. All teachers interviewed believed it was their job to advocate for their own students.

Relationships

Relationships, built through classroom experiences, were a huge asset when working with students. Through strong student relationships, T1, T2, T3, T4 and T6 provided examples of simple accommodations provided. Based on student suggestions, accommodations made by T1, T2, and T6 included virtualizing assignments for accessibility, providing class work time, and allowing retakes. These simple steps provided a more stress-free environment for students. T3, T4, T7, and T8 also accommodated students by providing all materials needed for class and creating an open line of communication where teachers can easily check in on students.

Monetary Support

T1 and T4 mentioned that FFA provided help to support students who cannot afford opportunities that exist within the organization. T5, T6, and T7 also discussed how they discretely provided extra cash to students who cannot afford lunches on trips and hold fundraisers for all students to provide free opportunities within FFA. These young teachers were already expressing the importance of finding a way to include all students in all activities to create a strong organization and environment.

Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

Educators of today are almost certain to encounter a significant percentage of students living in poverty. America's public school system has not clearly set the expectations of educator's role in these student's lives. Child poverty is a phenomenon that increasingly plagues our world and is currently being addressed through policy changes. These policy changes in our nation as well as others have the intent of bringing children out of poverty through economic focuses (Dornan, 2017). Nations are working to assist the growing population of children in poverty.

Teachers interviewed in this study were able to convey how they have felt while accommodating students of poverty. Emotional stress of teachers is a real issue and relating it to their education of students of poverty may be an indicator of their preparation to deal with this issue. Feelings of helplessness was a key concept identified through these interviews that could indicate deficiency in the preservice teacher's education. When looking at the emotions reported by teachers interviewed, concern was likely stemming from the level of care they have for students. Most teachers interviewed appeared to genuinely care about their student's wellbeing and little to no emphasis was placed on the teachers' own feelings about their own abilities. Empathy was a concept utilized by all teachers interviewed. As Jackson (2009) mentioned, empathy is critically important in creating a learning environment that accompanies all students. The fact that all teachers interviewed were aware of and practicing empathy was a clear indication that they know what they need to do to help their students in poverty. However, teachers need to be taught how to take care of their own mental health needs. Agricultural teacher preparation programs should incorporate stress management techniques into their programming and develop units or workshops on how to take care of your mental health. A focus on taking of your mental health should be embedded into the entire agricultural teacher education program. Preservice agriculture teachers need to see positive examples of self-care and they also need structured opportunities throughout their program to practice self-care.

Although these young teachers were only a couple of months into their teaching career, they have been able to report a wide array of observations that can be used to identify students in poverty. Signs of poor health, both mental and physical, were used as identified by the teachers, which aligns with Li et al. (2020) assertion that students living in poverty struggle with maintaining their mental and physical health. All teachers interviewed had some sort of observation or story to report in which they identified poverty. These young teachers were able to see poverty in front of them; therefore, something in their education has prepared them for this issue. All of the teachers that participated in this study completed a 20-hour service learning project that required them to work with after school programs in a city. The service learning projects during their agricultural teacher education preparation program exposed the teachers to students of various social economic statuses. The incorporation of a service-learning project at after school programs is recommend for agricultural education teacher preparation programs to help expose the future teachers to a diverse group of students.

The accommodations explained by the teachers interviewed were both effective and creative in their nature. Financial, emotional, and health focused support was given by all teachers interviewed through simple accommodations they made in their classrooms and organizations. Teachers interviewed explained how they listen to student's needs and communicate with them to create great relationships and effectively help students. This use of relationships to benefit students was a major sign of competency amongst these teachers. Similarly, this could be attributed to the service learning project that exposed the preservice agriculture teachers to students from diverse backgrounds.

Many children living in poverty not only lack financial resources, but also emotional resources, role models, and a general support system (Cuthrell et al., 2007). All of the teachers interviewed identified experiences they had in which positive relationships with students helped them provide individualized support to students in need. Positive relationships not only help students emotionally but will likely lead to higher academic achievement. It is recommended that agriculture teacher preparation programs emphasize the power of positive student teacher relationship and give the preservice teachers multiple opportunities to work with high school students so they can practice building relationships.

The young teachers interviewed demonstrated that they felt adequately prepared to deal with the realities of educating students of poverty. Although some indications of helplessness were communicated through interviews and many creative and adapting accommodations were discussed by each teacher. There were great solutions that already exist amongst this group of young agricultural teachers. Agricultural education is unique because it is so closely related to careers and hands-on opportunities. Because counselors push students of poverty towards career focused opportunities, many are enrolled in agricultural classes. These interviews revealed the young agricultural teachers were aware of this poverty issue, and they are up to the challenge of bettering student lives. We recommend that teacher preparation programs select courses that specifically address working with students living in poverty. Additionally, exposure to students from low SES backgrounds early in their teacher preparation program will help them to learn how to build positive relationships with students and how to accommodate them. The development of a sustained mentorship relationship between a preservice agriculture teacher and a low socioeconomic high school student is recommended. This mentor/mentee relation should

be sustained over a long period of time so that the high school student and the preservice agriculture teacher can both experience growth and development. Ideally, the mentor/mentee relationship would start when the preservice teacher is in the first year of their program and the high school student is a freshman. If possible, the mentor/mentee relationship could last between two to four years depending on the duration of the agricultural teacher preparation program.

Future research that should follow up this study to include identifying what specific education methods for poverty education are the most impactful. A phenomenological case study should be conducted to better understand the feelings, perspectives, and needs of low socio-economic agriculture students. An analysis of current poverty educational methods used may give teacher educators a better idea on how to create the most impactful experience for their students.

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