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Chelsea Rowe
Salem State University

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TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS BASED ON SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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By

Chelsea Rowe

Dr. Joanna Gonsalves

Faculty Advisor

Department of Psychology

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to determine whether teachers' perceptions of students are affected by students' socioeconomic status (SES). It was hypothesized that teachers perceive students from lower socioeconomic classes as less capable than students from higher socioeconomic status, and that teachers unconsciously set lower achievement expectations for low SES students, based on these original perceptions. All empirical studies conducted in the last decade on the topic were reviewed, including studies that used both naturalistic methods and those that used hypothetical scenarios. The hypothesis was supported through the analysis of past research, finding the presence of classism in teacher perceptions. Implications for teacher training are discussed to help address the biases revealed in this research.

Keywords: socioeconomic status (SES), teacher perception, teacher expectation, classism, student ability

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Teachers' Perceptions of Students Based on Socioeconomic Status: A Literature Review

A concern in the fields of education and psychology is whether teachers prejudge the behaviors and educational abilities of their students before they really get to know them. Research suggests the same expectations are not set for all students, and those expectations are usually based upon the original presumed abilities of the students (Alvidrex & Weinstein, 1999). This thesis will review the relevant literature to investigate whether these expectations are based, in part, upon the students' socioeconomic status (SES). Research by Auwarter and Aruguette (2008) claims that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often have lower expectations from their teachers than students from higher socioeconomic classes. The reasoning behind this is that teachers assume lower SES students do not have the supports at home to possibly meet higher expectations. In making such assumptions, teachers would then unfairly limit the success of some students within their classroom.

The research on classism in education is unfortunately very limited, and often focuses on other "isms" such as, sexism and racism. When searched on multiple databases, such as PsychInfo, Academic Search Premier, and ERIC, research on racism in schools yielded over 13,000 results, while classism in schools yielded less than 300 results. For racism, multiple studies, as reviewed by Hughes, Gleason, Zhang (2005) and DeMeis and Turner (1978), have found that teachers set low expectations for students of color, in comparison to their white peers. These lowered expectations for students of color lead to their lowered achievement in comparison to their white peers. Similar studies have also been conducted around sexism in schools, finding that teachers assume male students are less capable of success than their female classmates (See Heyder and Kessels, 2015 for a review). The presence of racism and sexism in schools is apparent, and plays a major role in student motivation and ability. Clearly, teachers hold biases that they may or may not recognize, but still need to be addressed. There is a trend in

the data that suggests teachers set different expectations for students based on external qualities, and socioeconomic status is one of those qualities. Research is extensive regarding sexism and racism, but in our current economic climate, research on classism is needed more than ever to document and address teacher bias based on SES.

Educational organizations may be reluctant to investigate biases toward different classes of students; therefore, independent research is necessary to discover whether biases exist. The main question of the current review is whether these biases are fueled by SES, and whether teachers are consciously aware of the differing expectations they have for their students. It is expected that teachers perceive students from lower socioeconomic classes as less capable than students from higher socioeconomic class, and that teachers unconsciously set lower expectations for low-SES students, based on these original perceptions.

The premise of public education in America is to create equal opportunities among all our students regardless of class, race, sex, and ability (Dewey, 1916). The presence of various "isms", sexism, racism, etc., directly goes against this founding principle of education. Through these "isms", assumptions about student ability are being made. Research has begun to directly address these issues in regard to racism and sexism, but there is lack of research addressing classism. Achievement gaps related to income have continuously increased among students over the last few years. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), an achievement gap occurs when "one group of students (such as, students grouped by race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status) outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant". For example, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2014), individuals within the top family income quartile are eight times more likely to obtain a Bachelor's Degree by age 24 as compared to individuals from the lowest family

income quartile. Research performed by the NCES claims that these statistics are a direct correlation to the achievement gap that exists within schools. NCES states that K-12 students from lower SES do not perform as well in school as their high-SES peers, and therefore fall into these statistics of lowered college completion rates and more. Given research findings regarding racial and gender bias, schools and communities have to address some of these issues. It is my hope that with additional research focusing on classism, we can begin to train our teachers to address (and close) the observed achievement gaps related to family income that has been forming in our school system.

Review of the Literature

The research reviewed looks at empirical studies from the year 2007 to the present (2017). Articles were found through an advanced search on the EBSCO host, limited to scholarly, peer reviewed studies. The search terms used included: teacher expectations, socioeconomic status, SES, student ability, classism, social class, and teacher bias. Out of the approximate 200 studies that appeared, only six were empirical studies that directly related to the topic. Aside from empirical studies, there were also a few theoretical articles obtained to further understand the idea of classism.

Classism

Throughout the literature, classism is often used interchangeably with other words with similar meaning, such as socioeconomic status and social class. For the research reviewed within this thesis, classism, social class, and socioeconomic status will be non-interchangeable terms as defined by the Classism Attitudinal Profile (CAP) (Colbow, Cannella, Vispoel, Morris, Cederberg, Conrad, Rice, & Liu, 2016), as follows.

Socioeconomic status is sociological and anthropological term used to identify groups of

people based on objective indices of wealth, which typically include income, education,

and occupation. Social Class is the subjective experience of one's position within the

economic hierarchy. Classism is a behavior acted on others, an experience of

discrimination to the self, and an internalized dissonance that occurs when an individual

perceives him or herself to be out of accord with others. (571)

According to the Classism Attitudinal Profile, classism is presented in four major forms, upward,

downward, lateral, and internalized. This paper focuses only on downward classism, which refers

to negative attitudes or behaviors held by people in, or perceived to be in, power or higher social

classes that are used to marginalize and discriminate against those in, or perceived to be in, lower

social classes (Colbow et.al., 2016).

There has been some work linking classism with the construct of cognitive distancing.

Cognitive distancing is the discrimination against people from a social group that is believed to

be "lesser" than your own (Lott, 2002). Cognitive distancing occurs in many domains, including

education. This same research determined that, as a result of cognitive distancing, poor people

and welfare recipients are typically categorized as dishonest, dependent, lazy, uninterested in

education, and promiscuous. In order to determine whether cognitive distancing actually

occurred throughout school systems, Lott (2002) conducted interviews with low income women

in adult education classes to describe their previous experiences. The results indicated that many,

"women talked about having been degraded by teachers and school officials for their speech,

styles of dress, deportment, physical appearance, skin color, and forms of knowledge. They

remembered being treated with disdain and disrespect, looked down on, and given little

encouragement" (Lott, 2002, 104). Based upon these interviews, it appears that classism limits

students' confidence and chances of success. The literature on beliefs amply illustrates cognitive distancing such that that poor people tend to be seen as other and lesser in values, character, motivation, and potential.

Socioeconomic Status

In the Classism Attitudinal Profile, socioeconomic status is defined as a sociological and anthropological term used to identify groups of people based on objective indices of wealth, which typically include income, education, and occupation (Colbow et. al., 2016). The research presented in this review of the literature operationally defines socioeconomic status through many different factors. However, in all the research, socioeconomic status identifies groups of people based upon wealth, but the factors that determine wealth are what differ among each study. Frequently used factors include, parent income, parent occupation, education level, and immigration status. Auwarter and Aruguette (2008) categorized wealth with only one factor, parent occupation. Glock and Krolak-Schwerdt (2014) also defined wealth by parent occupation, but also considered parent education. Ready and Wright (2011) and Speybroeck, Kuppens, Van Damme, Van Petegem, Lamote, Boonen, & Bilde (2012) each used the most factors in determining wealth, including, parent occupation, parent education, and parent income. The use of three factors led to a better representation of the students' socioeconomic status than those studies that only used one or two. Differently than the previous studies listed, Glock, Krolak-Schwerdt, Klapproth, and Bohmer (2013) defined socioeconomic status based upon the students' immigration status. The study authors made assumptions that immigrants were less likely to be wealthy than their non-immigrant comparison. Although the operational definitions of socioeconomic status differed among these studies, the research yields converging findings.

Methods used to Research Classism in Educational Settings

The limited research on classism has investigated attitudes and behavior in both hypothetical and naturalistic school settings. The hypothetical studies often involved a fictitious scenario about a student and a short survey that a teacher would complete about multiple student attributes, behaviors, or expectations. The descriptions used in these studies placed students into different socioeconomic statuses and determine whether the teachers would adjust their judgments based solely on that difference. By contrast, in the naturalistic setting, teachers rated their actual students on their performance, and determined their expectations for these students as they got older. Naturalistic research conducted has used both cross-sectional and longitudinal methods. Cross-sectional research investigates multiple groups of students at one specific point in time, while longitudinal follows the same group of students for an elongated period of time. The combination of real world and hypothetical results allows for stronger drawn conclusions. Experimental methods allow for careful control of students' characteristics, just targeting SES variables, to see effects on the dependent variables, whereas the naturalistic studies allow us to see how classism affects teacher decisions and behaviors in a variety of real world settings. As we will see, the results from all methods of research yielded similar results.

The research reviewed for this thesis contains four studies that used the hypothetical method of research: Auwarter and Aruguette (2008), Elhoweris (2008), Glock et. al. (2013), and Glock and Krolak-Schwerdt (2014). In the Auwarter and Aruguette (2008) study, participants were given a paragraph description about a student with apparent academic and behavioral difficulties. Each description was identical for the students' behaviors, and only differed by the description of their socioeconomic status. The four different conditions for the student descriptions were low-SES girl, low-SES boy, high-SES girl, and high-SES boy. The participants

(all teachers) were asked to fill out a questionnaire with four categories in response to the descriptions; future expectations, need for academic support, personal characteristics, and believability. The study was mainly looking to see whether teachers rated students from the low-SES groups as in need of more academic support and less likely to succeed in the future.

The research by Elhoweris (2008) was structured very similarly to the Auwarter and Aruguette (2008) study, but instead focused specifically on placement within gifted and talented programs. The research looked to see whether students from a lower SES would be placed or considered for the gifted and talented program less frequently, compared to their high-SES peers. Participants in this study were each given a random vignette about a 4th grade student. Each vignette was identical, aside from the identification of the student's socioeconomic status. After reading the vignette, participants responded to two statements about whether the student should or should not be placed and/or referred to the gifted and talented program. Both Auwarter and Aruguette (2008) and Elhoweris (2008) randomly assigned participants to read one of the student descriptions, and to respond to one set of questions.

In comparison, Glock et. al. (2013) and Glock and Krolak-Schwerdt (2014) had participants read multiple vignettes about multiple students and then looked to see whether the participants reacted differently to students from lower SES groups. In Glock et. al. (2013), participants were given 16 different student case descriptions, only varying slightly between each. Participants were then asked to complete a questionnaire about the student's secondary school track. They had to determine how likely the student was to achieve the highest track, and they had to place the student in the appropriate secondary school track. The study was looking to see if lower SES students would be placed in the lower tracks, than their higher SES comparison. Glock and Krolak-Schwerdt (2014) also had participants read multiple student scenarios, but

focused more on the speed and recall of the responses. The study assumed that teachers who responded more quickly and recalled more information were activating their categorical/ stereotype knowledge to make assumptions about the student. Each student description only varied slightly, using different descriptions for low and high SES students. The advantage of hypothetical research is the control over the variable of interest. Every scenario in the research is identical, aside from the one variable of socioeconomic status. This allowed the researchers to determine whether the variable of interest was directly affecting the dependent variable.

For naturalistic studies, my search only uncovered one cross-sectional study and one longitudinal study. The research by Ready and Wright (2011) used a cross sectional method to look at about 9,000 randomly sampled kindergarten students. The participants were asked to rate their students' language and literacy abilities, and those ratings were compared to the actual students' work/ability. The study aimed to determine whether teachers underestimate the ability of students with a lower socioeconomic status. The research by Speybroeck et. al. (2012) also related teacher expectations to actual student ability but followed the same group of 4,000 students from kindergarten through sixth grade. They used standardized language and math achievement tests to determine students' actual abilities, and also looked at ratings of teacher expectations for different students. This study also looked to see whether teacher expectations affected student outcomes. Both of these naturalistic studies provided findings that achieve greater external validity than those using hypothetical scenarios.

Summary of Research Findings

The studies reviewed looked at many different teacher cognitions and behaviors including: tracking decisions, teacher estimations and future expectations of student ability, and processing speed/recall of information. For tracking, the research looked at whether the students'

SES would affect teachers' decisions on the placement of the student, in either gifted programs, special education, or on regular tracking for honors or college preparatory courses. For teacher expectations of student ability, the research was looking to see if teachers set lower expectations for (or underestimated ability of) students from lower SES brackets. Processing speed and recall of information was used to see whether or not teachers were making stereotypical/categorical assumptions of their students based upon their SES. The faster the participants read, and the more they remembered determined, whether they were placing students in their assumed categories. Regardless of the methods employed, one result remained the same. Teachers, whether consciously or not, made assumptions about students based solely off their socioeconomic status.

Elhoweris (2008) and Glock et. al. (2013) researched the effect of SES on tracking decisions made by teachers. Elhoweris (2008) looked at placement and referral of students into the gifted and talented program. The only factor that differed in each hypothetical scenario was the socioeconomic status of the student. With this control of the independent variable, the study was able to draw conclusions in support of the hypothesis. The study found that teachers tended to refer the student who represented an upper-middle socioeconomic status for the gifted and talented program more frequently than the student who represented the lower-middle socioeconomic status. Although all factors were identical, the participants rated the lower SES students as capable of less than their high-SES peers. Similarly, Glock et. al. (2013) asked participants to recommend students for the appropriate high school track, based on identical scenarios, differing only in immigrant status. The study claimed that students identified as non-immigrants were viewed as being from a high-SES, while students identified as immigrants, were assumed to be from a low-SES. Again, in support of the expected results, the study found

that participants recommended the highest school track more often for students without immigrant backgrounds than for students with immigrant backgrounds. In both studies, the participants (teachers) assumed that the students from the lower socioeconomic status were less intelligent and less capable than their identical high-SES peers. The participants not only made the assumptions about these students, but also carried out actions that would have affected their success in a real-life scenario. Although the lower SES students would have been capable of the gifted and talented programs, and the higher school tracks, the participants' assumptions held them back from these opportunities.

Several studies reviewed looked at teacher expectations of student ability, and all reported similar results. Auwarter and Aruguette (2008) had participants determine the future expectations of the students. The participants rated the low-SES students as having less promising futures than high-SES students. Although all factors were the same, teachers made assumptions that students living in a lower SES were less likely to be successful in the future. The studies by Ready and Wright (2011) and Speybroeck et. al. (2012), both found similar results, but used a naturalistic design. In the Ready and Wright (2011) study, teachers rated their students' literacy skills. Even in the realistic setting, the study found that teachers underestimated the average low-SES child's literacy ability by roughly one-fifth standard deviation compared to a higher SES peer. Although the teachers knew these students and saw the work they produced, and still assume they are capable of less than they actually are. The Speybroeck et.al. (2012) study looked at the same group of students for over seven years, and similarly found that teachers rated students from high-SES more favorably than students from a lower SES. Teachers set lower expectations for the low-SES students than the high-SES students, even over a span of many years. Speybroeck et al. (2012) took the results a step further and began to look at how

these lowered expectations affect the students. The research claimed that "the effect of socio-economic background on achievement is at least in part due to teachers' expectations. Teachers may play a role in exacerbating existing individual differences between children" (Speybroeck et.al., 2012, 2). Students respond to the expectations set for them, and if those expectations are lowered, students will not be motivated to succeed beyond them. This not only increases the achievement gap between students, but forces students from the lower SES to believe they are not as intelligent or as capable as their high-SES peers. They find themselves fitting the "mold" that the teachers have laid out for them.

The study by Glock and Krolak-Schwerdt (2014) took a different approach to the topic, and analyzed teachers' reading response times and information recall for descriptions of students. According to the study authors, if categorical knowledge based on group membership is activated participants will recall more information and/or read faster. It is assumed that once categorical knowledge is activated with study prompts, teachers will make assumptions about students' abilities based on the category they fit into. If the information provided in the testing condition is consistent with their stereotypes it will be processed faster and more accurately than information that is inconsistent.

In their study, Glock and Krolak-Schwerdt had teachers read a description about a fictitious student (with average ability and average classroom behavior) and measured reading speed and text recall. They found teachers recalled more information and read faster when they were led to believe (in the text) that the student was from a high SES background than from a low SES background. The authors argued that categorical knowledge facilitated the processing of descriptions about students from high SES households, compared to students from lower SES households (average student performance was inconsistent with beliefs and led to longer reading

times and less recall accuracy). Overall, the study found that the high-SES student descriptions led to shorter reading times, better recall rates, and to a higher number of intrusions compared to the low-SES student descriptions, indicating the activation of stereotypical knowledge.

Discussion

Overall, the expected result that teachers perceive students from lower socioeconomic classes as less capable than students from higher socioeconomic class was supported across multiple studies. Teachers assumed that students from a lower socioeconomic status were less capable, so they underestimated their abilities in the classroom. It appears that classism does exist in classrooms. Teachers may not intentionally or consciously have these biases, but these biases do exist and need to be addressed. Education is meant to provide all students with the opportunity to meet their highest potential, and unfortunately these biases are limiting many students' success. The collective results provide us with knowledge to begin to address these problems, and provide all students with equal opportunities for success.

In looking at these results, the bigger question becomes why these biases exist. The research looked at many different qualities of the participants, including age, gender, and years as a teacher. The one quality that was missing was the socioeconomic status of the teacher. According to the idea of cognitive distancing, mentioned previously, people tend to distance themselves from people that are "lesser" than them. This distancing typically occurs when people of a higher socioeconomic status try and distance themselves from people poorer than they are (Lott, 2002). The larger the divide between a teacher's SES and a student's SES, the greater the cognitive distancing effect (i.e., the greater the discrepancy between the teachers' judgements of student ability versus actual student ability).

With this concept in mind, we wonder if these biases develop in the classroom, due to the differences between students and their teacher. If the teacher is part of a higher social class than their students, do they experience this distancing? Is this one of the reasons they have biases toward low socioeconomic status students? Cognitive distancing could be a cause of these biases, and in knowing the cause, solutions can be better developed. Based on this, schools could focus on hiring teachers from a similar social class to the students. With a smaller gap between the teachers' and students' social class, it will be less likely for teacher to develop that distance from their students. Teachers can better relate to their students when they have grown up in a similar environment. They will be less likely to make assumptions about students, especially if some of those assumptions were made about them in their lifetime. Decreasing the gap between the teachers and students, although challenging, may also decrease the biases and false assumptions teachers make about their students.

The problems associated with hiring only local teachers have potential to be very challenging. An alternative solution to decrease the distance, would be to give preservice teachers more exposure to varying environments and students. Again, according to the idea of cognitive distancing, when people know more about a specific group, they are less likely to make categorical assumptions about them. Further research needs to look into the SES of the participants, analyzing whether cognitive distancing is a cause of the classism found in the research. These solutions to prevent distancing can be applied in schools and implemented into teacher training programs.

Implications for Teacher Training and Practice

The results show the presence of classism in schools, and how classism influences student success and engagement. With these results, the question then becomes what schools can

do to change these biases and create equal opportunities for all students. The most direct solution to this problem would be to create teacher training programs that help teachers address these biases and develop methods to alter their teaching. Many teacher programs, for both current and preservice teachers, have been developed to help teachers process their biases and effectively teach with an anti-bias attitude. The majority of these programs have been centered upon racial and cultural diversity, but could definitely be more broadly applied to addressing classism.

The two most successful anti-bias teacher training programs focused on many similar methods in order to help teachers both identify and address their biases. The ways in which these programs help teachers can be extended to apply to diversity issues more broadly, including socioeconomic status. One of the programs studied by Marbley, Bonner, McKisick, Henfield, & Watts (2007), employs a culture specific pedagogical counseling (CSP) model. The goal of the CSP model is to provide teachers with a large variety of cultural experiences, in order to expand or alter their current worldviews, toward diverse students. The key to this model is to have teachers critically reflect on their own identity and see if the construction of that identity has led them to make assumptions about other populations of people. This model was found to be most effective with preservice teachers, as they were better able to honestly reflect on their current worldviews, and accept expansion through new, positive experiences. According to further research on this program by Severiens, Wolff, & van Herpen (2014),

> If teachers see diversity as a positive, enriching and valuable source of learning, they will explicitly use it in their teaching 'with an air of excitement, expectancy and adventure'. If, on the other hand, teachers have negative ideas about diversity, it may result in avoidance, denial and stress (or even fear). Such feelings act as an obstacle to the ability to teach diverse classes successfully. (297)

In this model, counselors would help preservice teachers identify their biases, and then provide

them with training experiences in direct response to the biases they hold. The CSP model intends

to help preservice teachers become comfortable with varying students and their backgrounds. It

does not intend for teachers to shy away from diversity, just because they may not have

experience with it (Marbley et. al., 2007). Providing teachers with these vast experiences, in all

types of diversity, allows them to better understand the inconsistencies within the stereotypes

they believe in.

 The other successful program focuses on both preservice and in-service teachers, by

promoting techniques for teachers to get to know their students and families. The key in the

study by Lin, Lake, & Rice (2008) was teaching techniques for family involvement. The research

found that the more teachers understood about their individual students and their families, the

less likely they were to make biased decisions about the students. Home visits, parent invitation

to the classroom, and service learning were all the techniques promoted throughout the program.

The study found that, "these anti-bias activities are powerful and assist teachers and teacher

candidates to develop critical cultural consciousness, an understanding of and respect for their

own identities and cultural values, as well as for those of others" (Lin, Lake, and Rice, 2008,

196). Spending time at students' homes and with student families gives the teachers a much

greater understanding of their culture and values. They will no longer need to make assumptions

about their students' abilities and home life, if they are actively involved within it. Similarly, to

the CSP program, the goal was to remove stereotypes and assumptions that the teachers may

hold against certain students based on their group membership. The combination of both

programs could be used to help expose teachers to diversity, especially economic diversity. The

more knowledgeable teachers are, the less stereotypical assumptions they will make about their

students' abilities.

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