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## The Effects of Poverty on Students' Mental Well-Being

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THE EFFECTS OF POVERTY ON STUDENTS' MENTAL WELL-BEING

A MASTER'S THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY  
OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BY  
ESTHER P. NYAGWENCHA-NYAMWEYA

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

AUGUST 2022

BETHEL UNIVERSITY

THE EFFECTS OF POVERTY ON STUDENTS' MENTAL WELL-BEING

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AUGUST 1 2022

APPROVED

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### **Acknowledgements**

First, I want to thank God for giving me this opportunity to further my education at Bethel University at a time when everything looked impossible for me. I faced a lot of challenges from cultural shock in terms of education, difficult pregnancy in the middle of my studies that coincided with the start of Covid19, very young children who needed a lot of attention, and I lost my grandma; who has always been my cheerleader throughout my life. I was filled with a lot of fear and uncertainty but God held my hand and I rejoice today for the victory.

Second, I thank my parents Ben and Beldinah for their love, support, and prayers throughout the years. I owe it all to them for their sacrifice to have me get the best education which was a stepping stone to my current position as a Special Education teacher. I also thank my siblings: Peter, Andrew, John, and Mercy for their love and encouragement through phone calls from thousands of miles away in Kenya, Africa.

Lastly, I thank my husband Paul for his support and prayers through this journey. I also thank my children Ethan, Haniel, and Priscilla who, though so young, got to understand that mommy had to study and allowed me a few minutes to study. They also ensured that I had something to eat while I did my assignments. My children are the happiest people to see me done with my studies. I also thank my cousin Naomi and niece Janet for babysitting for me when I had to go to school, do my assignments, or get a few minutes for self-care when I felt too exhausted. From the bottom of my heart, thank you to everyone who supported me in any way. I would not be here today without your support.

### Abstract

Poverty is a global problem that has impacted the mental well-being of students. Research shows that in the US, one out of five children under the age of 18 live in poverty. This literature review sought to determine the effects of poverty on students' mental well-being. Researchers have done in depth studies on poverty and their findings illustrated a close connection between poverty and an increase in mental health risks. Children born in poverty experience the effects of poverty early in life which affects their physical, behavioral, and developmental health. The gap between children from low economic status and those from families with high economic status keeps widening socially and academically. Research illustrated how stressful living conditions can lead to depression, severe anxiety, and suicide in children.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### **Defining Poverty**

Poverty is a global issue that has been in existence for many decades. According to Berger et al. (2018), poverty has different definitions depending on the context. Poverty can be defined as lack of material wealth and poor standards of living. It can also be defined as lack of economic resources or social exclusion. Poverty can lead to homelessness, an increase in health issues, and low academic achievement. There is a widely known misconception that people are poor because of being lazy and lacking motivation. Families find themselves in poverty and without support and they keep living in poverty from generation to generation. Children who are born in neighborhoods where poverty level is high can experience poverty from childhood to adulthood, and the cycle continues. Poor neighborhoods are likely to expose children to violence, insecurity, abuse, and drug abuse (Berger et al., 2018).

### **Poverty Statistics in the US**

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty:

In 2016, 41% of children in the United States under the age of 18 lived in low-income households. The highest number of those children were age five or under. Educators may not have the solution to the poverty crisis, but they do have an obligation to understand the implications of poverty on students' learning. (Boatwright & Midcalf, 2019, p.52)

According to the US Census Bureau, the poverty rate increased in 2020 for the first time in five years (Peterson, 2021). In the United States between 1990-2020, more than 11% of the

nations' population lived in poverty and close to 50% of the population lived in deep poverty. The poverty rate by race between 1990-2020 showed that Black people had the highest rate followed closely by Hispanic then Asians and white. Between 1970-2020 the poverty levels were higher in children under 18 years compared to adults who were 65 and older. Income from 1988-2020 varied across race and ethnic groups. The yearly income breakdown from the United States Census Bureau showed findings that during 1988 through 2020, individuals from an Asian background earned \$70,000 while white, not Hispanic counterparts earned \$63,000. In addition, the blacks earned \$35,000 (Peterson, 2021).

A household that lacks education or has limited education is likely to live in poverty (Gale, 2016). People with low education or illiteracy are likely to be unemployed compared to those with better education. According to the United Nations Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) there is a need for people to get educated by ensuring that there is access to quality education (Gale, 2016).

This literature will explore the effects of poverty in children, especially students. According to Gale (2016), a household that is unable to satisfy dietary requirements is likely to face malnutrition because of being undernourished. There is a need for proper nutrition for the first two years of children's life. Lack of proper nutrition in children below two leads to irreversible developmental damage, which has cognitive and physical effects. Poverty effects can impact the brain development of children and hence affect their interaction in school and academic performance. Children need proper nutrition for the brain to function properly (Gale, 2016). Parents from poor families often struggle to put food on the table and work long hours to be able to provide basic needs for their families. Children from these poor families are likely to come to school hungry, stressed, and unmotivated because of lack of resources at home and



parental absence (McKenzie, 2019). Research showed that homes facing food insecurities are more likely to eat unhealthy foods and exercise. These households are prone to face violence compared to households that have food security (Francis et al., 2018).

Along with food insecurities, stress may affect the mental well-being of students. Stress is known to have toxic effects on the brain's function mentally and physically and this affects both children and adults. Chronic stress, which is associated with unhealthy conditions, causes toxic stress in children and toxic stress affects children's brain development and function. An example of stress in children is the increase in poor physical, behavioral, socio-emotional, and cognitive functioning (Francis, 2018). Most children who are exposed to high levels of stress from early stages of life have noticeable changes in their brain development, especially the parts of the brain responsible for emotional regulation and cognitive development (Gale, 2016).

Parents and caregivers have a role to play in nurturing children by creating a safe, stable, and supportive home environment for the children (Francis, 2018). Consequently, children who lack good nurturing may experience stress and depression, which have lasting effects on their mental well-being. Parents who struggle with limited resources may have been raised in poverty themselves and could be suffering from unresolved stress, depression, and trauma. These parents may lack the ability to provide a healthy environment for their children (Francis, 2018).

Parental stress affects how they nurture and relate to their children. Parents and caregivers have a role to play in children's mental well-being (Blair & Raver, 2018).

In a body of emerging research with human caregivers, studies have shown that when families are faced with stressful psychosocial and physical conditions within the home, parents are at greater risk for becoming less sensitive and warm in their patterns of early caregiving. In turn, lower levels of maternal sensitivity

increases the likelihood that children will demonstrate elevated cortisol levels and lower executive function ability, with commensurate difficulty regulating emotion and behavior. Notably, however, just as early caregiving functions in a mediating role as a conduit for stressors in the environment, it also functions as a moderator, or a buffer of stress (Raver, 2016, p.5).

According to Schaefer (2016), Children growing up in poor families are less likely to have timely immunizations, which has adverse effects on their health. These children may face delayed access to immunizations unlike their peers from middle-income families. These have a negative impact on the students' health, income, and family status in adulthood. Another challenge faced by children living in poverty is the possibility of developing respiratory illnesses like asthma due to exposure to harmful environments. Most of the poor children's home environment has hazardous wastes and secondhand smoke exposure which would possibly harm their lungs. Exposure to these harmful substances have long term effects on children. Parents of these children may lack access to health care services and find treating these illnesses costly. One of the effects of exposure to harmful substances is low Intelligence Quotient and evident low academic achievement. For instance, the children may have less engagement in school activities and high crime rates in adolescent years. (Francis et al., 2018).

According to Caswell (2018) poverty is not just the lack of resources, it has psychological and physiological effects too which include anxiety, depression, low birth weight, and obesity. Eventually, these factors make poverty an economic health issue. School going children from low income families may face physiological stress, low academic achievement and delayed fulfillment compared to their middle-income peers. In both children and adults, there are

high risks for mental and physical health disorders. The children can also face environmental stress caused by gang activity and or pollution. Some people who do not live in poverty are ignorant of these issues because of economic and social isolation of classes. Empathy and support for social programs can be used to fight poverty (Caswell, 2018).

### **Definition of Terms**

#### ***Cortisol***

A naturally-occurring steroid hormone that plays a key role in the body's stress response (Scott, 2021).

#### ***Chronic Illness***

Conditions that last one year or more and require ongoing medical attention or limit activities of daily living or both (Centers of Disease Control, 2022).

#### ***Disorders***

An abnormal physical or mental condition (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

#### ***Economic footing***

Financial balance in debts and income

#### ***Maternal depression***

Conditions that affect women from pregnancy upto a year after delivery (Centers of Disease Control, 2022).

#### ***Mental Health***

Emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Centers of Disease Control, 2022).

#### ***Poverty***

Lack of enough resources to provide the necessities of life (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

***Psychiatric conditions***

Problems that people experience that affect their minds and moods (Centers of Disease Control, 2022).

***Socioeconomic Factors***

A combination of social and economic factors(Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

***Stagnation***

Lack of activity, growth, or development (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

**Research Questions**

The literature review seeks to answer the following questions.

1. In what ways do students experience poverty?
2. How does poverty affect students' mental well-being?
3. What strategies can be used by teachers to engage students affected by poverty?

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **How Do Students Experience Poverty?**

Poverty is not just the lack of money in families. Poverty is the lack of resources, which include financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, role models, and knowledge (Boatwright & Midcalf, 2019). Families need financial resources to be able to buy goods and pay for the services that they need. Poverty can affect how one controls their emotions, especially on how they respond to challenging situations. Lack of mental resources makes it hard for one to deal with every day to day life. Most students living in poverty lack most or all of these resources, which are essential for school readiness (Boatwright & Midcalf, 2019).

According to Brown (2017), the U. S. 2016 census showed that the number of people living in poverty in the U. S. was 47 million. In fact, one out of five children under the age 18 lived in poverty in 2016. Most of these children living in poverty eventually become homeless, which has social-emotional implications. This study raised questions because the U. S. is ranked as one of the wealthiest countries in the world (Brown, 2017). Many youths living in poverty and homelessness are school age children who lack a regular residence and face educational, emotional, and health challenges. “Additionally, their stressful living conditions can lead to depression, severe anxiety, and suicide” (Brown, 2017, pp. 82-83). The U. S. Census Bureau findings also showed that K-12 students living in poverty are likely to be disengaged at school and they feel disconnected from their peers; they feel secluded and entertain feelings of incapacity and loneliness (Brown, 2017). According to Caswell (2018), poverty elevated risks of socioeconomic difficulties and poor academic performance in children. Most of these children have higher physiological stress levels and low scores in physiological stress measures compared

to peers from middle-income families. There are higher risks of mental and physical health disorders in people living in poverty than those from middle-income (Caswell, 2018).

Poverty is a pressing issue that affects children especially those of school age. These children living in poverty are likely to face a lot of challenges that affect their schooling. “They attend school less frequently, face less school success, experience higher push out or dropout rates, and suffer poor health and nutrition” (Shields, 2014, p.127). Consequently, the poverty gap between children from high-income families and low-income families continues to widen, both socially and academically (Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Because of the long lasting effects of poverty, there is a need for an adequate response, which should include supporting children from low-income households to access educational materials and regular income support to close the widening learning gap (Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

According to Oakes (2021), there are schools that have higher poverty levels of the student population compared to others. These high poverty schools need immediate attention because the students who attend these schools lack access to resources, equal education opportunities, and the schools mainly contain a high percentage of students of color. The children from communities that have high levels of poverty are likely to be exposed to conditions that affect their learning. These adverse conditions include but are not limited to, lack of proper care for small children, poor housing and cases of homelessness, food insecurity, insecure neighborhoods, and lack of proper social health services among a range of challenges that can cause trauma (Oakes, 2021). Caswell (2018) stated that a neighborhood in poverty has high chances of high rates of gang activities and pollution, which causes neighborhood environmental stress. However, a large number of people who do not live in poverty are blind to poverty issues because of social segregation caused by economic and class differences.

Poverty has created disparities in regard to race, age, ethnicity, family structure, and geographical locations (Hodgkinson, 2016). Racial minority groups have high chances of experiencing poverty. This is because most of them live in communities where there is a high concentration of poverty (Lee & Zhang, 2021). According to Carney (2017), students of color are affected more by poverty and mental illness than other races. Urban schools have high concentrations of these students of color and this makes them more vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues. When school problems are not addressed, students are more likely to make poor choices which can lead to serious mental health problems like anxiety, depression, substance abuse and even thoughts of suicide (Carney et al., 2017).

According to Mowat (2020), children from poor families are more likely to be bullied compared to their peers from more affluent homes. Bullying impacts students' mental well being leading to an increase in suicidal thoughts. Children who have faced bullying may find it hard to keep jobs as adults and some may end up being unemployed. As a result, they are likely to have a lower income, limited resources, and have low social status in the community they live in (Johnson, 2019). Schools should ensure that students feel secure, safe and valued when in school and have preventive and awareness programs that address bullying issues (Mowat, 2020).

According to Johnson (2019), poverty is a light that is not beneficial to the economy, education, families, and the society at large. Family poverty can be closely connected with cofactors such as low school grade level attainment, teen parenting, family structure, distressed neighborhoods, and poor nutrition (Yoshikawa, 2012). Despite the fact that some communities have families living in poverty, there are communities that have high levels of poverty compared to others (Schaefer, 2016). There is a big difference between being poor in a community which has resources like good infrastructure and good schools and being poor in a community with

high poverty rates which has been going on for generations. Child poverty is more persistent in rural than urban counties; there is negligible investment in infrastructure and schools (Schaefer, 2016).

Children are born to families with unequal economic footing which may have an impact on their future life. Children who experience poverty early in life are likely to have behavioral problems, lower IQ scores, and low academic achievement (Schaefer, 2012). “Family characteristics at birth relate to childhood poverty persistence” (Schaefer, 2012, p. 4). Similarly, Gupta (2007) said that family income plays a big role in a child’s health and development. The early stages of life play a big role in a child’s development and the effects are seen in adulthood. Most of the effects are irreversible because of the impact on the development of the brain (Gupta, 2007).

The complexity of the effects of poverty on children and families is alarming. Living in poverty has been connected with poor health and the increased risk for social and mental health problems in all stages of life (Hodgkinson, 2016). This risk necessitates the need for mental health services for families living in poverty but most of these families have limited or no access to these services. Consequently, family income corresponds to children’s physical, behavioral, and developmental health. Poverty has also been linked to children’s social emotional functioning and psychological responses to stress. These responses can lead to long-term mental health effects. When parents get stressed because they struggle with food insecurity and housing, they are less likely to engage in positive parenting practices increasing the chances of child abuse or neglect (Hodgkinson, 2016).

Children born to poor parents may experience poverty most of their childhood (Ratcliffe, 2012). It is unlikely that their experience with poverty will improve over time. Compared to



children who have never been poor, these children are more likely to drop out of school and have teen premature births (Ratcliffe, 2012). Taylor (2017) shared the same views that children from low income households are likely to experience physical and cognitive development inadequacies. Seemingly, most children living in poverty have limited access to healthcare and are more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to graduate from high school compared to those from high income (Taylor, 2017).

According to Johnson (2019), a lot of children living in poverty come from a home environment that is demanding. Their parents are either absent most of the time and when they are present they may have a lot of negativity-some may have many partners, use drugs, and may engage in both physical and verbal abuse. Johnson (2019) stated that most children from poor households live in environments with poor sanitation, lack resources, and some of their parents have low academic expectations for their children (Johnson, 2019). Similarly, Carney et al. (2017) stated that environmental factors like poverty, violence, substance abuse, lack of parent support, poor nutrition, and inequalities in the education system can lead to poor academic achievement in students. The available support in schools does not match the individual needs of students, a reason for an increase in mental health issues (Carney et al., 2017).

Berger et al. (2018) blamed the low-wage labor market for poverty levels in the United States. There is stagnation in wage growth, unemployment, and unstable work. There are high rates of young students who are dropping out of school to get into parenthood. These young parents who are less educated face low wages for a long period of time, they also face instability in employment and unstable working hours. Another challenge they face is minimal employer provided benefits and have limited opportunities for advancement (Berger et al., 2018).

### **Effects Of Poverty On Students' Mental Well-Being**

According to Smith-Carrier et al. (2019), There are three ways in which people perceive poverty. First, people who are poor are to blame for being poor because they have made wrong choices and have failed. Poor people are not motivated, they lack work ethics and moral stature. They need incentives for them to work and get out of dependency, addiction, and wrong behaviors. The second explanation is that people are poor because of systemic inequalities. The system favors a few and limits opportunities for other people. There are two main factors that can lead a person into poverty: economic condition and institutional support (Smith-Carrier et al., 2019). The third explanation of poverty is that, some people believe that poverty is a result of bad luck, fate, and divine will. However, with time, research has shown a shift on how people perceive poverty. Some organizations and researchers have strived to promote poverty awareness activities among students as a means of correcting the misunderstanding of poverty (Smith-Carrier, 2019).

According to Justice et al. (2019) poverty can impact on the way children and caregivers interact and this might end up influencing the children's language skills. A family stress model explains how economic hardship leads to a dysfunctional family, which can impede the interaction between caregivers and children. This model explained how parent-child interaction is negatively impacted and as a result parents are unable to provide positive emotional support to their children. When interactions between children and caregivers deteriorate, the caregivers may end up experiencing stress and depression. This in turn is likely to negatively affect the children's language skills (Justice et al., 2019). According to Rice (2017), the effects of poverty in children include poor education, low income, and maternal depression, and negativity. Rice reported that

these children rarely experience empathy from their parents and caregivers and as a result, they are less likely to show empathy to their peers.

Studies show that poverty has an effect on mental health. The main mechanism through which poverty affects mental health is physical and biological (Simon, 2018). The most toxic environment for mental well being is one in which poverty is geographically concentrated, often in urban areas. People living in poverty may display social disorders if their mental health has been affected by poverty (Simon, 2018). Murali and Oyeboode (2004) echoed Simon's findings by stating that most psychiatric conditions occur at high rates in areas that are affected by poverty but lack of money does not necessarily lead to mental health. Poverty can be a determinant and/or a result of poor mental health and can bring about emotional disturbance, anxiety, obsessive compulsive, and depressive disorders (Murali & Oyeboode, 2004).

Socio-economic factors influence the health status of families and a community at large (Elliot, 2016). An individual's mental health depends on social, cultural, political and environmental factors. The environmental factors are the family's living and working conditions, security, and the social support from the community. Anyone can experience mental health problems over their lifetime. While this is true, mental health problems vary across social groups (Elliot, 2016).

According to Elliot (2016), poverty is not the only cause of mental health problems, anyone can have mental health problems regardless of their economic status.

Poverty and mental health problems are not marginal experiences of a separate group in society: anyone can experience either over their lifetime, and there is a clear intersection between mental health and poverty. Whether or not someone develops mental health problems or moves into poverty, how long this lasts for

and its severity, and if and how someone recovers their mental health or secures a route out of poverty depends on their access to sufficient quality and quantity of resources, and the timeliness of this access. Poverty's dynamic character also means that the risk of experiencing mental health exists for more people that are in poverty. This underlines the importance of preventing poverty as well as progressing routes out of it. (p.15)

Children living in poverty are more likely to have mental health issues compared to their peers from families with high socioeconomic status (Jakovljevic et al., 2016). The mental health issues in children living in poverty may continue through each developmental stage up to adulthood. There is a concern by experts on whether childhood behavioral concerns are children's response to their environment or mental health (Jakovljevic et al., 2016). The environment shapes an individual's mental health. Most people are born, they grow, work and age in the same environment and so their mental health is shaped by the social, environmental and economic conditions of the environment they are in. Mental health problems may emerge early in children because of poverty and deprivation of basic needs (Knifton & Inglis, 2020). According to Rice (2017), poverty in children may cause chronic illnesses because of lack of access to proper medical and dental care, healthy food, and recreational activities (Rice, 2017). These children may display social behavioral and emotional difficulties early in life and this might be more pronounced throughout their childhood (Knifton & Inglis, 2020). Children living in poverty also tend to experience more stigma and discrimination compared to those from a better economic status. As a result, the children may find it harder to recover from mental health issues and the impact is likely to be felt by the entire family (Knifton & Inglis, 2020).

The geographical location of some students can influence their experiences in education (Milner et al., 2017). These students may face challenges like homelessness as well as limited access to transportation and housing, and access to basic resources. Their families are likely to face limited employment opportunities and the students are exposed to environmental conditions that can be harmful to their health. Brown (2017) talked in depth about students who experience homelessness. Homelessness can affect the students feelings and perception of education. They are likely to feel isolated from peers, misunderstood by peers and adults in the school, and they may not feel valued. According to Nguyen (2020), parents who have been unemployed for a long period of time have a high likelihood of living in isolation and getting depression. Parents' mental health problems can affect their children's academic achievement and their socio-economic outcomes. These children are also more likely to experience health, developmental, and learning problems (Nguyen, 2020).

According to Jakovljevic et al. (2016) children living in poverty have high chances of being exposed to violence and disorganized communities. Some of these children are exposed to an environment with events like divorce and domestic violence that can easily cause trauma in them. Another factor that can affect children living in poverty is being socially isolated, this is likely to impact their mental health. Assessing a student's family and social circumstances is important because there is a thin line between symptoms of poverty and symptoms of mental illness (Jakovljevic et al., 2016).

Poverty highly contributes to the children's inability to cope psychologically to their environment causing long term effects like chronic stress that negatively impacts the functioning of their immune system and brain functioning (Chaudhry & Wimer, 2016). Johnson (2019) mentioned that most children from middle class families live in environments that are safe and

they are nurtured well compared to those from poor households (Johnson, 2019). The poor living conditions and hostile environment some poor children face may lead to an increase in anxiety and depression, which lead to behavioral problems and academic struggles. Most children living in poverty most often find it difficult to interact with peers and engage in school activities (Johnson, 2019). According to Lee and Zhang (2021), a big number of children living in poverty are exposed to chaotic living conditions. They are more likely to experience both physical and psychological stressors, which alter how their brain functions. They may struggle with self-regulation, find it hard to cope with external demands, have low self confidence/self-esteem, and have difficulties in interacting with peers and change of behavior. The longer the children experience poverty, the greater the impact on their developmental deficits. If no interventions are done during childhood, poverty can cause changes in the children's neural pathways (Lee & Zhang, 2021). Children's overall well-being depends on income and the population living in relative poverty. There are high cases of homicides, low academic achievement, and mental health problems with children living in poverty (Lee & Zhang, 2021).

According to Blackstock et al. (2018), mental health affects all people: men, women and children. There is a big gap between children living in urban settings and those living in rural areas. Children living in rural communities are more likely to be affected by poverty and face challenges associated with poverty like limited resources and mental health stigma. These challenges hinder their access to mental health concerns. Another challenge experienced in the rural area is the possibility of failing to identify mental health and mental health disorders early and when identified, there is lack of access to mental health professionals who can treat the conditions (Blackstock, 2018). In rural areas jobs are likely to be of lower wages and childhood poverty levels are relatively higher. Blackstock (2018) reported that adults in rural settings are

likely to be less educated and less likely to go to college. This affects the availability of services and so there is high dependency on professionals from outside communities limiting access (Blackstock, 2018). There is a belief that people living in rural settings, which is also called the natural world, have less chances of having anxiety and depression (Blackstock, 2018). Research shows that children from rural settings have the same or higher rates of mental health issues just like children from urban settings. The only difference is that children from urban settings have higher chances of accessing mental health services (Blackstock, 2018).

According to Depasquale and Dunnar (2020), poverty related stress can harm a child's development. The risk factors to children's development include housing instability, food insecurity and neighborhood violence. Parents who are sensitive and nurturing make their children do better developmentally (Depasquale & Dunnar, 2020). Acri et al. (2017) found that most children and families affected by poverty portrayed high levels of depressive symptoms and behavior problems; these mental health problems can be both serious and disabling. The main factor contributing to mental health problems is the low economic status that causes hardship as well as the fact that most of these families live below the poverty line (Acri et al., 2017). There is a high need for mental health services for communities with high populations with low-income. Both parents and children also need peer models due to the high rate of depression among mothers of children with mental health needs (Acri et al., 2017).

Parents and caregivers faced with stress are at a risk of becoming less sensitive to their children's needs. When the children's cortisol levels get elevated they may have difficulty regulating their emotions and behavior. The parents and/or caregivers act as buffers to stress (Blair & Raver, 2018). On average, parents experience a significant level of depressive symptoms, so parental mental health should be addressed by family service systems. There should be an agency that caters for both parents and children's mental health needs. There are agencies that cater for children's needs but none for parents (Acri et al., 2017).

Ekono et al. (2016) found out that obesity in children is connected to psychological problems that children experience in childhood. While children from poor families and those from affluent families experience obesity, children living in poor families have high chances of experiencing obesity according to a health and nutrition survey carried out in 2012. Most of the children from poor families also have higher exposure to lead levels and developmental delays compared to children from middle income families (Ekono, Jiand, & Smith, 2016).

Young children in deep poverty also appear to be at higher risk for future health and development problems, based on the presence of family adversities.

Compared to young children in poverty, a higher percentage of young children in deep poverty have parents who are experiencing poor or fair health or mental health, frequent parenting stress, and a lack of perceived social support and security in the family's neighborhood. These family adversities have been shown to predict poor health and development outcomes in young children. (p.11)

Chaundry and Wimer (2016), during their study on the relationship between poverty and children's well-being, found that poverty may lead to parental stress which affects parental relationships. These parents undergoing stress may become incapable of engaging in warm



interactions and conversations with their children. Children who lack warm parental interactions may end up being less secure with attachment, receive less attention, and maintain a negative mood. These factors are important to children's growth, development, and socioeconomic security (Chaundry & Wimer, 2016).

According to Chueng and Wong (2020), a family's income greatly impacts the development of children. Parents with a high level of income may invest in their children by buying them educational learning materials, providing proper nutrition, paying for services like tutoring, having access to medical care, exposing their children to stimulating environments, and engaging in extracurricular activities. Most children from low-income households have limited or no access to these resources. These economic hardships experienced by low-income families can induce stress in parents, and they often end up having a poor psychological well-being. This can also reduce the parents' interaction and engagement with their children. A positive parent-child interaction is crucial for child development (Chueng & Wong, 2020).

According to Chaudry and Wimer (2016), poverty in children is not well understood. Measures used to determine poverty in children are not clear and sufficient to bring understanding of the depth of poverty of children in the United States. Child poverty rate however brings to light the clear picture of how poverty is widening and its impact on the economy (Chaundry & Wimer, 2016). Poverty can lead to scarcity of daily necessities available for use leading to material hardship. Material hardship comprises food insecurity and poor housing as well as limited access to medical care and utilities. Material hardship might not be linked directly to family income and poverty, but it has been associated with worse child outcomes. Parents going through material hardship might not be able to contribute to developmental inputs like education and child development (Chaudhry, 2016).

There is a likelihood of children living in poverty becoming vulnerable because of adverse childhood events that are risk factors for the development of mental illness (Jakovljevic et al., 2016). The children may lack proper nutrition, experience poor living conditions or even homelessness and have limited or no access to health care. According to Jakovljevic et al. (2016), children from households affected by poverty are less likely to be prepared for school. When they enter kindergarten, there is an increased likelihood of them being vulnerable in one of the following areas: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, and communication (Jakovljevic et al., 2016). Students living in poverty may find school a place for eating a healthy regular diet. Food insecurities are known to contribute to low academic achievement and are a risk factor to physical health and mental well-being of students (Lancer & Parolin, 2020). These children may face a lot of challenges during school holidays because most mental health and children's well-being issues are experienced during the summer holidays more as they are longer. The children from low-income families are likely to live in conditions that make learning from home difficult: they may not have reliable internet access, have limited access to outdoor leisure facilities and lack access to books of their appropriate reading level (Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

According to Blackstock (2018), families in poverty may find it difficult accessing mental health counseling because of direct and indirect costs that are associated with counseling. The direct costs are the costs for the services and the indirect costs are transports, food and gas. These families may depend on third party financial assistance like insurance companies and government agencies. Most of these families are likely to lack private transportation as some do not own cars and so this might hinder their access to these services (Blackstock, 2018). Lack of public transportation, lack of mental health providers, and mental health community programs

become a barrier to accessing services. These barriers are more in the rural settings as urban settings have easier access (Blackstock, 2018).

According to Jensen (2009), poverty can influence people's behavior, emotions, attitudes and how their brains process emotions. Students from poverty may find it difficult to regulate their emotions. This means that they are likely to easily give up when faced with challenges in the classroom. They may often find it challenging to work in groups (Jensen,2009). Some parents of children living in poverty use harsh words to their children. This is because they could be already stressed with their living conditions and hence they transfer their anger to the children. These children's self-esteem would probably be bruised and they may end up blaming themselves and try to hide their problems in order to please their parents/caregivers. On the other hand, the parents/caregivers could be dealing with mental issues (Jensen, 2009). There is a likelihood that these children are depressed or will end up getting depression. Another major effect of poverty on these students is that the schools they attend,that are within their environment, are substandard both infrastructure and resources, and academically because they may be understaffed. This is because these schools have a high population of students facing poverty (Jensen, 19).

According to Jensen (2019), stress impacts on a person's brain.

Constant stress without relief increases the baseline resting stress level of a person, changes the brain, lowers the immune system and in turn, increases health and emotional issues..... if stress is experienced severe enough and long enough, certain structures of the brain can be irreparably harmed. (p. 17)

According to Johnson (2019), people living in poverty are more likely to experience trauma. Research shows that generational poverty is the main cause of many traumatic events

that make families dysfunctional. He also argues that poverty is chronic globally and calls people living in poverty “poverty-stricken people.” These people are likely to be less educated compared to those who are not poor and because of this, they become targets in school with high chances of them being bullied or demoralized. Children who face chronic stressors end up living with trauma. The poor children are likely to be bullied and retaliate with violence. These children’s self esteem is low and have high chances of depression, anxiety and have suicidal thoughts (Johnson, 2019). Bullying is one of the factors of school dropout rates among students. Children living in poverty may drop out of school and the result is an expansion of educational dividend prolonged chronic poverty. These children from low socioeconomic status may end up suffering from mental health disorders, engage in unwanted behaviors, experience psychosis and might end up having substance use disorders (Johnson,2019). Smith-Carrier (2019) study findings showed that people living in poverty are likely to engage in substance abuse as a coping mechanism for the problems they face. People of higher income can illegally abuse substances too so this is not just for people in poverty.

Children living in poverty receive less cognitive stimulation at home than their peers from wealthier families (Rice et al., 2017).

The volume of gray matter in poor children is 8-10% lower than the gray matter of children growing up in middle to upper class families. Poverty also affects how these children think. They face chronic stressors like physical, emotional neglect and abuse leading to low academic achievement and poor nutrition-which may cause disruptive behaviors and illnesses. Poor nutrition, especially iron deficiency is also known to cause not only behavior issues but also illnesses. They come to school hungry, angry and sometimes sick. (pp.107-108)

Children raised in poverty need to have positive and reliable role models who can help them develop social-emotional responses that are crucial in helping them develop relationships in a school setting (McKenzie, 2019). These children born in poverty may lack these and therefore, the teachers need to show them that they care about them by building relationships before engaging in learning. Teachers should ensure that the classroom environment is conducive for them by making them feel included and valued. This will help improve their overall mental health (McKenzie, 2019). Students from households affected by poverty come to school with lack of or limited language and literacy skills. These deficiency creates a gap between them and those from wealthy families (Sloan, 2019).

Covid-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the health and economic status of most households, especially households in deep poverty (Cookson, 2020). Deep poverty rates affect the daily lives of families and public policy. Cookson (2020) identifies a gap in addressing the depth of family poverty and provision of subsidized services for these families. These families struggle with needs like food, housing, insecurity, bills, healthcare and access to the internet for students. With covid-19 , learning has moved to online and most of the students from households in poverty are unable to access the internet (Cookson, 2020).

Sudden life events is another cause of mental health problems (Elliot, 2016). These are events that put a lot of pressure on someone. An example is a transition or change in one's financial status. Difficult life events impact mental health and opportunities for basic life needs. People with mental health problems are likely to live in neighborhoods that are socio-economically low (Elliot, 2016).

According to Andermann (2016), people living in poverty and are less educated are likely to have more health problems compared to those who are rich and more educated (Andermann,

2016). Some subgroups of the population who are less empowered and with low socioeconomic status are likely to live and work in deplorable environments which expose them to diseases and impact them psychologically, ending up with chronic stress (Andermann, 2016). According to Johnson (2019), “Children living in poverty have higher levels of cortisol and other stress markers that have dangerous effects on emotional intelligence regulation, academics and executive functioning” (p.81).

According to Blackstock (2018), school aged children’s mental health care is affected by several barriers. These barriers include the struggle to pay for mental health care services, the stigma associated with mental health, lack of infrastructure, and difficulty in identifying mental health concerns. The barrier which has raised more concern is stigma because it impacts on the preventive measures for mental health care. This impact is largely felt in small neighborhoods with a close knit nature and people know each other and talk about each other. creating awareness of potential mental health care issues is very crucial because this issue requires attention. Parents and school staff need training to recognize that a mental health concern exists. Lack of awareness means that no one will seek help (Blackstock, 2018).

### **Strategies For Engaging Students Affected By Poverty**

Education plays a big role in eradicating poverty and so, teachers and parents have a role in educating students in poverty. (Johnson, 2019). Johnson (2019) describes education as a vehicle that can be used to bring people out of poverty. Research shows that making education accessible to people living in poverty and building relationships will help them get out of it. Therefore, parents need to be trained first and then take steps in educating their children alongside the teachers. They need to be educated on how to instill the value of education while educating their children. Poverty eradication is a process and so those in poverty need time to

accept poverty and learn on how to decrease poverty problems (Johnson, 2019). Educators should practice patience when teaching students living in poverty. There is a need for the educators to understand the students' culture(s) before introducing them to a culture that can transform their mental faculties. The educators should be part of the solution and should lead as the students follow (Johnson, 2019). However, survival is more important than education in families living in poverty. The students living in poverty lack support or a challenge that can help them succeed in school and in life (Johnson, 2019).

Hai (2021) stated that education is a lasting solution to ending the transferral of poverty. One major strategy that educators can use to reduce poverty is using extrinsic drive and turning it into intrinsic drive. This is one way that can motivate students living in poverty to do well in school. Schools should also implement policies according to households because different households have unique needs. It is the educators' responsibility to stimulate and awaken the students' educational potential. The teachers should include good moral qualities in their teaching styles. These qualities can influence students, guide, and nurture them in areas of emotions, behavior, thoughts and scientific knowledge (Hai, 2021).

Blackstock (2018) lists some strategies that can be used to solve mental health problems. These strategies include the use of classroom interventions and parent-training, behavioral intervention and talk therapy, and the teaching self-regulation intervention when addressing the educational and behavioral needs of students.

The government can fight poverty by funding families living in poverty (Sloan, 2019). This is one strategy that will help families that are struggling to provide basic needs to their children. The struggle in families living in poverty causes stress to the whole household making it difficult for students, in these families, to have a positive connection at school (Sloan, 2019).

Educators can try to close the gap brought by poverty by ensuring that the school environment is positive and they teach positive social behaviors. The school should be a safe place for these students to feel comfortable. This will help them to succeed academically and build positive relationships. Students succeed in school when they have someone they can trust and they are made to feel worthy and valued (Sloan, 2019). Students living in poverty need help in building strong social behaviors for them to succeed academically. Students need skills to be taught social skills by educators and families. These skills will be helpful to them when they face difficult situations. Educators should model the positive behaviors and teach the students strategies useful in building these skills. Educators need training and professional development opportunities to prepare them on how to best support the students living in poverty. Parents should be involved and supported in helping students build social skills. Children should be taught skills like resilience from an early age to help them be independent as they grow. These skills help them for self-regulation, overcome feelings of anxiety and reduce stress (Sloan, 2019).

Gale (2016) said that poverty can decrease if there is economic growth at national and regional levels. He however points out that this alone cannot solve problems that come with poverty (Gale ,2016). When the economy grows, people are lifted from poverty by getting better job opportunities and pay rise.without education, a household is likely to live in poverty because people who are uneducated or lack better form of education are likely to be unemployed or still remain in poverty even while employed because of minimum pay (Gale, 2016).

Engle and Black (2008) gave ideas that are useful in alleviating poverty issues. They suggest “comprehensive programs that deal with preschool, improved health and nutrition services and parenting education and support” (p.250). Families will benefit from counseling, provision of nutritional supplements and media outreach (Engle & Black, 2008). Olivares-Cuhat



(2011) also highlighted important strategies like differentiated instruction, teaching social and behavioral skills, provision of food and health services, giving an assurance for safety in the classroom and school at large and getting involved in families and community

According to Brown (2017), school is a refuge for students experiencing homelessness. It protects them from the real life encounter with extreme poverty. While implementing the curriculum, educators should also include the socioemotional component (Ernest, 2016). Children from poverty can heal and learn when a school and classroom environment is safe for them therefore, educators should make the learning environment a safe place for children in poverty (Jensen, 2009). Educators need to address the challenges faced by students from poverty before starting the day's tasks. One example of creating a safe learning environment is by receiving the students with a smile and kind welcoming words when they step into the school and classroom (Ernest, 2016). Ernest (2016) suggested strategies that can help in creating a safe environment for learning and improve learning as well: educators should give students a sense of control, teach empathy, listen to the students stories, teach hope, use meaningful touch, and teach expressive writing among other strategies (Ernest, 2016).

Poverty has adverse effects on children if no interventions are put in place (Huston, 2011). There are programs that are offered nationally that offer interventions with positive outcomes. One of these programs is Head Start which targets preschoolers. Children who attend the Head Start program have better language and literacy skills, have fewer behavior issues, positive social behavior, are more independent and have better health by the end of the year (Huston, 2011). The program also offers positive parenting practices whose result is a more stimulating home environment. Huston (2011) however stated that these interventions offered by the Head Start program can not eliminate poverty. While the program cannot eliminate poverty, it

can eliminate some of the effects of poverty on children's intellectual, behavioral and health problems. There is still a need for lasting solutions for the causes and problems associated with poverty (Huston, 2011). Justice et al. (2019) also proposed the Head Start program for language development in children. The program gives subsidized support to children in the early childhood program. They also recommend home visit programs which is an intervention that can help children and parents increase response to interactions. The home visits reduce parental distress and improve language development in children. Another intervention is the early childhood intervention model which also helps the children with language growth. This strategy is practiced by caregivers who utilize contingent responding-to respond to a child's conversation instead of changing focus (Justice et al., 2019).

According to Coleman-Jensen et al. (2019), children from poor households, especially those facing food insecurity have a high tendency to be absent from school. School feeding programs were started with an aim of increasing students' enrollment and reducing absenteeism. The provision of these meals is a short term solution that helps students concentrate while in school (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2019). There are agencies that serve underprivileged students by providing meals at school. These agencies include, U. S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants(USCRI), After School Program, and Food Bank (Caswell, 2018). Berger et al. (2018) discussed the Anti-Poverty Policy which is a proposal for addressing poverty in the United States. This policy has programs funded by the federal government and they include food stamps,medicaid, headstart, legal services, and job corps.

According to Francis et al. (2018), The programs include:

The United States Department of Agriculture operates several food and nutrition assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

(SNAP); Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and the Child and Adult Care Food Program to help vulnerable families consume quality foods in appropriate amounts (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.). The existence of these nutrition programs, however, does not guarantee the eradication of food insecurity among children. Furthermore, the survival and expansion of these programs rely on a healthy budget determined by a politically transient Congress. (p.6)

A child's brain develops during the child's first five years of life (Elliot, 2019). Children who are born in poverty are exposed to hardships (violence, housing instability, discrimination and drug abuse). These hardships affect their parents' ability to nurture them well and provide them with a safe and stable life. Children need protection, they need to grow in a safe, stable and nurturing environment. Social and community networks help parents to be nurturing, responsive and have an attachment with their children. Most parents raising children in poverty may have also been raised in the same conditions so, they could be suffering from trauma and lack the ability to provide a safe environment for the children (Elliot, 2019). Parents can work with social and community networks to get support in raising their children in a safe, stable and nurturing environment (Francis et al., 2018). Depasquale and Gunnar (2020) argued that parents need to be given external help and support to enable them to provide sensitive care to their children. Gale (2016) gave an example on how some parents are getting external help. He talks of the U.S. Agency for International Development which with other agencies give food aid with an aim of improving food security. One way they do this is by giving school lunches that have been seen to boost educational outcomes. Gale (2016) said that poverty leads to malnutrition which has cognitive and physical effects on children (Gale, 2016). They recommend that policy makers come up with programs that can support parents to provide high quality nurturing for their

children. The policy makers should make these programs accessible to families and communities.”Parental sensitivity and nurturance are important mechanisms for establishing biological,emotional and social functioning of childhood” (Depasquale & Dunnar, 2020, p.53).

A child’s first three years of life need sensitive care because this is the age when attachment and relationships are formed (Depasquale & Dunnar, 2020). A child’s development at this stage has lifelong consequences. Good nurturing can prevent the effects of poverty, so the parent-child relationship is crucial in a child’s well-being. Good nurturing creates empathy among children and helps the child to have the ability to regulate emotions. Parents who are sensitive while nurturing their children are less likely to have mental health problems. This promotes social competence and high cognitive functioning (Depasquale & Dunnar, 2020).

Promoting literacy and arts can help children living in poverty to improve their literacy skills (Brown, 2017). Children living in poverty face literacy challenges and hence are behind their peers in reading and writing. In addition to education, these children face mental and emotional health issues (Brown, 2017). While literacy skills are important, they are not sufficient on their own in creating a significant impact on poverty reduction. This necessitates that there be training like seminars and workshops for parents living in poverty and emphasis on how to improve their living conditions. Adult education programs can help train parents on how to train their children to be self-sufficient and self-motivated. They also need to prepare them educationally for school and for life in the community. This home preparation helps the students come to school motivated and eager to learn (Brown, 2017).

Poverty schools use a narrow curriculum that has limited opportunities for authentic literacy, bombard students with testing and neglect the arts due to slashed music, theater and/or art programs. Focusing on literacy across content

areas and integrating the arts is shown to increase learning engagement, foster connection and collaboration, and improve academic performance among students particularly children living in poverty. It can also promote creating self expression, psychological healing, resiliency, self esteem and social emotional growth. (p.91)

Teachers need to understand that poverty is not just a lack of finances but lack of essential resources (Boatwright & Midcalf, 2019). This understanding can help them plan on how to best serve the students that come from households affected by poverty. Teachers who are equipped with knowledge and skills to teach learners in poverty have a potential of breaking the poverty cycle that has been going on for generations (Boatwright & Midcalf, 2019).

Bazemore-Bertland and Hadsfield (2019) discussed the need for teacher training programs to address poverty before teachers start working with students living in poverty, especially those that work in high poverty schools. Many teachers have little understanding of their students living in poverty. There is a popular misconception about poverty, that people who live in poverty are inferior and so, they should be understood first before helping them get out of poverty. Most teachers assume that students living in poverty and their families are unmotivated, have poor work ethics, they do not have value for education and that they are substance abusers. These teachers have established biases, stereotypes or made assumptions before they get to meet the students in the classroom. These assumptions are based on their own experience, what they see and hear about students living in poverty. Media is the main source of influence on how teachers perceive students living in poverty, the media portrays high poverty schools negatively (Bazemore-Bertland & Hadsfield, 2019). Similarly, Hilton and McCleary (2019) said that students from poor households are successful contrary to the stereotype that people living in

poverty need to be saved from poverty. Teachers need to demystify the preconceived ideas about poverty by training new teachers on how to address poverty issues in the classroom (Hilton & McCleary, 2019).

According to Rice (2017), teachers should address poverty issues in their classrooms. This is because poverty can impact children's brain growth and hence their ability to think, their language, socio-emotional competence and physical health. Teachers should show empathy to the students because some of them come to school hungry, dirty, ill, stressed and angry (Rice, 2017). Teachers should strive to create awareness that people who are poor are not so because they are lazy and not interested in education. Teachers should work on their biases too and try to accommodate the students affected by poverty. They should use individualized instruction and hold high expectations for all the students across the board (Rice, 2017). Rice also proposed the participation of learners in poverty simulation-this is a problem solving strategy that helps students mimic real-world scenarios. The only shortcoming of this strategy is that it needs a lot of time in planning. The simulation strategy helps learners to apply learning to real life situations (Rice, 2017).

According to Bernal (2014), childhood is a stage that needs attention because this is a critical time when children need to be safe and have healthy development. Children's needs are unique at this critical period of physical, cognitive, socioemotional and behavioral development. When children lack food and other basic needs, their daily program is altered and the result is a high level of absenteeism. Some of these children have to bear with living hard lives because of responsibilities of adulthood as young as they are and in the process, this interferes with their development (Bernal, 2014).

Elliott (2016) argued that the mental health risks that people living in poverty are exposed to are preventable. Prevention of mental health problems is a strategy that can effectively help reduce poverty. Through his study, he believes that people should be prevented from becoming poor and those who are already in poverty can be helped move out of it. He also says that people who already have mental health problems can be helped recover. A lot of people with mental health problems do not get any treatment (Elliott, 2016). An example on how the prevention strategy can be used is by involving people with experience in mental health problems. This involvement includes peer-support and establishing self-management programs. This will empower people to be in charge of their health care. Evidence based programs can be used to provide social support, make job opportunities and economic resources more accessible to them and provide social and health care (Elliot, 2016).

One strategy offered by Jordan (2013) that can help communities experiencing mental health to recover is taking mental health services to these communities. Trauma and mental health needs to be addressed in the poor communities. This will facilitate brain development in children and help them deal with challenges that come with poverty. Adults will also get help in coping with mental issues like stress and anxiety brought by poverty (Elliott, 2016). Knifton and Inglis (2020) shared similar ideas with Jordan (2013) by offering one solution to poverty-the assessment of poverty to establish its existence and respond by providing care to the people living in poverty. People in poverty should be taught how to manage their finances/debts, healthcare services should be taken to them and be informed on employment opportunities (Knifton & Inglis, 2020). There is need for support on anti-poverty programs that are aimed at changing social attitudes (Caswell, 2018). One such program is service-learning that is beneficial for students because it has benefits that are beyond traditional academic learning. The service

learning courses helped students improve in personal, social, academic, and citizenship outcomes. The students understood social problems better and developed a greater ability to be compassionate (Caswell, 2018).

According to Blair and Raver (2018), children living in poverty need to be cared for and supported. caregivers have a big role to play in children's growth and behavior change, this is mainly by reinforcing positive behavior. Parents and community leaders can educate caregivers on how to give care to infants. Children and parents need to be screened for mental health risks and given services that can help improve their mental health and parenting behavior (Blair & Raver, 2018).

According to Blackstock (2018), some of the barriers that exist between school aged children and mental health care include the cost of services, the stigma associated with mental health, lack of infrastructure, and being unable to identify mental health concerns because of lack of awareness. Mental health concerns can be addressed at school level by teachers, school counselors, and school psychologists. Their role can be working towards increasing the number of mental health resources in schools. Teachers would need professional development opportunities that will train them on mental health concerns (Blackstock, 2018). According to Starr (2020), school psychologists, social workers, and community agencies can work collaboratively to address mental health issues but they are overstretched. Schools with the help of policy makers should invest in expertises. They should invest in having more trained staff and more resources to help address mental health problems. Creating awareness of mental health is another step that can be used by counselors to advocate for their clients when they cannot advocate for themselves because of existing barriers. To extend support to students and families, counseling can be done online to help students access mental health services (Blackstock, 2018).



It is unrealistic to expect schools to work alone in addressing issues that affect the mental well being of students and their families (Elliot, 2018). Schools serve families dealing with domestic violence, addiction and mental illness which is a result of racial, socioeconomic and geographical divides. These are issues that students bring to the classroom and the school is expected to address them. One way of dealing with these issues is creating a collaboration between schools and community partners. Community is a powerful tool that schools can tap into in addressing the mental well-being of students and families (Elliot, 2018). Blackstock (2018) talked of collaboration too. He proposed collaboration among school stakeholders as a tool of preventing and addressing mental health issues. The main goal of the collaboration between teachers, human resource professionals and parents is working on preventive measures and treatment of children who are at risk of mental health problems. School staff should practice compassion so that they can learn the physical, social and emotional challenges that students and their families face. Coordination with community partners is also a good step that can help schools provide mental and behavioral health support (Elliot, 2018). The integration of resilience in school programs is another way of dealing with the mental well-being of students. Schools can use new practices throughout the school day and even in after school programs. Some of the practices include self-care, mindfulness practices, promoting racial equity and social justice within schools. The main focus should be on promoting resilience, socioemotional well-being, and experiential education (Elliot, 2018).

Schools are in a position of promoting children's mental health if they are provided with the essential resources (Starr, 2020). According to Carney et al. (2017), school counselors play an important role in addressing mental health issues affecting students. They have been trained to recognize and respond to students' needs. Mental health needs impact the academic success of

students so school counselors should address students' mental and behavioral needs by use of early interventions. Students can have similar behaviors but have different mental health problems (Starr, 2020). According to Denny (2018), one of the strategies that educators can use to address mental health problems in students is School-Based Health Services (SBHS). These services provide comprehensive and appropriate care that is accessible and comes at low-cost. Another strategy that can be used to effectively address these problems is trauma informed care. Educators should be trauma informed and be aware that most students from poor neighborhoods need specialized support. Starr (2020) however noted that not all students from these neighborhoods experience mental illness or trauma so, educators need to be careful in identifying students' needs. They should not make assumptions that every student's outburst in the classroom is an indicator that the student has mental health problems. They should understand individual students' needs and not generalize students' needs based on a few students' behaviors (Starr, 2020).

Educators face a challenge in building relationships with students and families from poor neighborhoods (Starr, 2020). This requires extensive personal outreach through home visits or diagnostic interviews and this involves assessing their mental health needs and learning their stories which is time consuming. It is hard to get enough time to do this because the trained personnel like the school psychologist and social worker are overstretched. In addition to assessing and addressing the students' mental health needs, there is a need for schools to create safe and supportive environments. The environment should not make the students' mental health worse, it should not cause them stress and anguish. The best way to create a conducive environment is by avoiding punitive disciplinary practices like the use of ranking students and

practicing healthy norms. The school should have a culture that helps the students see the need for school and look forward to coming to school to learn (Starr, 2020).

According to Moore et al. (2020), school leaders should emphasize on the students' mental health and well-being. Listening to students' stories and working with professionals will help schools address mental health concerns. Schools need to improve and expand mental health resources in school and bring more counselors on board as there is a shortage. The shortage of these professionals has hindered the efforts in addressing mental health issues in schools. The addition of more mental health resources will help reduce suspensions, expulsions, incidents of violence and create a safe and supportive environment (Moore, 2020).

According to Mowat (2020), networks of peer support is one strategy that can be used to help address students' mental well-being in school. Lack of friends can lead to depression. Strong peer networks can help students improve on psychological well being, self esteem, academic achievement, and social adjustment to school. Another strategy is constant communication between school and home, this will foster and nurture supportive relationships across the school and community. It is important to have high degree collaboration between school, community, and all stakeholders. The goal of the collaborative team should focus on working with families by listening to their concerns and utilizing community strengths (Mowat, 2020).

## CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

### Summary of Literature Review

Poverty has been a global concern over a long period of time. Developing countries have the highest levels of poverty compared to developed countries like the U. S. The U. S. census data shows that the number of children experiencing the effects of poverty is higher than the number of adults (Peterson, 2021). Nearly 22% of the children population live in poverty and the highest number of people who are less educated are the poor. The poor may also experience more health problems compared to those that are not poor. Children raised in poverty are likely to face a lot of challenges, some of which have long term effects like altered brain structure. They may also face homelessness at an early age some of the factors that lead to depression, anxiety and suicide (Johnson, 2019).

Poverty may cause developmental delay in children. In addition to developmental delay, poverty may also cause delays in school readiness for preschoolers. Children in poverty may lack positive parental interaction which helps in acquiring basic skills useful for school readiness. This is because most parents are absent from their children because they have to work long hours to meet the families needs (Chaundry & wimer, 2016). In some households, maternal stress, low parent education level and abuse of drugs in pregnancy can affect the children's development placing them behind their peers from middle class families. The children from poor households may lack good nurturing from their parents as the parents could already be depressed. Some of the parents are school drop-outs who started families early and might not see the need to prioritize their children's education when they are struggling to put food on the table (Brown 2016). There are programs that children from low income families can be enrolled in to prepare

them for school. These programs include headstart that is offered for preschool children (Huston, 2011).

According to Johnson (2019) and Fancis (2018), most children from poor households live in dangerous communities. The dangers in the communities include but are not limited to: crime activities and pollution which leads to health problems like respiratory issues. Most of the families in poor neighborhoods have limited access to health services and this impacts their overall health and mental well-being. Children from these neighborhoods are also likely to have low education attainment, drop out of school as most of them might not make it to college, and be absent from school most of the days if they have to take care of their younger siblings as their parents work. Some of the strategies that can be used to reduce poverty issues in communities are the use of anti-poverty policies that address the poverty issues, support from the government by allocating funds to provide subsidized services for families, provision of free meals, and making housing affordable for poor households.

According to Lanker and Parolin (2020), school is one of the places where children from poor families can feel safe, loved and cared for. Changing the home environment might not be easy but educators can make school their second home. Some of the children come to school because they know they will get free meals that are offered by the government. An example is the free lunch program that offers meals to students at school. Some households might not afford proper meals for their children on a daily basis because of the high cost of living. Apart from meals, these children may find school a place where they have a sense of belonging as they interact with peers and teachers. Educators have a role to play in ensuring that the school environment is safe for these children and that they feel respected, valued and secure (Mowat,2020). According to Johnson (2019), there is a high likelihood of children from poor

households to be bullied by peers from middle in-come households so schools should have policies that discourage bullying. Schools need to have open communication with families and create relationships that are helpful in addressing individual needs of students both at school and home.

According to Carney (2017), students from poor households are more likely to experience stress, depression and some have suicidal thoughts. This is because of the deplorable home conditions and crime activities in most poor neighborhoods. These students may find it hard to regulate their emotions when in school and end up having behavioral issues because of mental illness (Jensen,2009). Educators and school service providers like the school social worker and psychologist need to understand these students' backgrounds and address mental illness issues at school level by counseling and do referrals to mental health specialists if needed. According to Blackstock(2018), the students' mental well-being is crucial for their brain development and education achievement. Students with mental illness are less likely to interact well with peers, be ready for learning and cope with life situations. However, children from middle income families also experience mental illness like their peers from low income families but those from poor households have high chances of experiencing this. The children from middle income families have more access to mental health services while those from low income families have limited access because of the cost of the services. Most families from poor households also face transportation and food challenges when they have to commute to get the services. Therefore, the government should work with schools to ensure that these services are brought close to them. While these services are already being provided at school level, the professionals are overstretched because of the rate of students that need mental health services and the limited number of service providers (Blackstock, 2018).

### **Limitations of Research**

This study was a review of 67 articles on poverty, its effects on students' mental well being, and strategies for engaging students affected by poverty. Many studies have extensively examined the effect of poverty on overall well being of students but a few have focused on prevention of mental health problems in students. Recent research suggests a gap between the mental health needs of school-aged children and access to mental health care and structural response to poverty. Most of the studies that examined the effects of poverty on the mental well-being of children did not give an accurate measure of poverty in every household impacted by poverty.

This study will add to the body of literature by examining how poverty affects the mental well-being of students and offers strategies that can be used to address poverty and mental health problems in students. This study however did not gather data on the effects of poverty at post secondary level and the preventive measures in addressing poverty and mental health. I limited my research to studies that focused on students' mental well-being.

### **Implications for Future Research**

I found the research and data to my topic relevant to my teaching career presently and in the future. I have plans to continue looking for data in the next 5-10 years to help in identifying more strategies that can be used to provide sufficient school-based health services for students with mental health problems. Future study will also help in recognizing mental health concerns in students early and focus more on preventive measures for mental health problems rather than waiting for symptoms and effects of mental health in students to be visible and start the process of addressing the problems. I will continue to do research on how the gap between students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students from high socioeconomic backgrounds can be closed. It will also be useful for future research to examine more on practices that schools can implement schoolwide and in classrooms to address poverty issues and students' mental well-being.



### **Professional Application**

The effects of poverty in children are complex. Poverty can affect students' experiences in school and make learning in the classroom challenging. Educators have a responsibility of ensuring that there is a positive climate in the classroom and addressing students' concerns (Hogkinson, 2017). The main challenge that students living in poverty may face is mental health problems. Educators, in collaboration with families, can focus on prevention and intervention for mental health problems in the early childhood period. However, accessing mental health services remains a big challenge for families and students. There are existing barriers that prevent the access to mental health services. These barriers can be social, psychological and or physical. Educators can play a role in breaking these barriers and connecting students to professionals that offer quality mental health services (Hodgkinson, 2017).

As an educator I strive to make the classroom environment welcoming and safe to my students. A safe environment helps students to relax and open up to learning and interacting with peers. The strategies for engaging students from low income families, highlighted in this paper, can work well in small groups discussion and circle time. This is the time when students can learn social skills that are helpful in self-regulation, build self-esteem, build strong classroom relationships, and motivate students to learn.

## Conclusion

The process of research, and gathering data on the effects of poverty on students' mental well-being has been worthwhile. This experience helped me understand how poverty affects the mental well-being of students. Poverty is linked to psychological, physiological and emotional problems in children (Jensen,2009). According to Schaefer (2012), children's brain development can be affected by poverty right from infancy to adulthood. This affects how their brains function and hence impacts on their behaviors and how they control their emotions. Poverty has an effect on school readiness, especially on language development in children (Jakovljevic et al. 2016). Educators can implement programs that promote literacy in preschool to help meet the needs of children from low income families because children from middle income families get early exposure to educational resources (Justice et al. 2019). I gathered valuable strategies that can help me as an educator to address poverty issues in the classroom. The strategies include understanding the students' backgrounds by listening to their stories and creating a safe environment where students feel loved, respected and have a sense of belonging. According to Blackstock (2018), mental illness services should be made accessible to all students. Schools should invest in professionals who can address students' mental health problems by addressing preventive measures and helping those who already have mental health problems.

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