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A Qualitative Assessment of the Perceptions of Teachers  
Concerning How Economically Disadvantaged Students at  
White Pine School Are Being Served

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A dissertation  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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by  
Samuel McKinley Hollingshead, Jr.  
December 2012

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Dr. Pamela Scott, Chair  
Dr. Virginia Foley  
Dr. Eric Glover  
Dr. Elizabeth Ralston

Keywords: teacher perceptions, poverty, economically disadvantaged, economically disadvantaged students, low income, at risk, students of poverty, children of poverty

## ABSTRACT

### A Qualitative Assessment of the Perceptions of Teachers Concerning How Economically Disadvantaged Students at White Pine School Are Being Served

by

Samuel McKinley Hollingshead, Jr.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to assess teacher perception of how economically disadvantaged students at White Pine School were being served. The results of this study may help educators at White Pine School determine how to support and improve learning conditions for economically disadvantaged students.

Data collection techniques included individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document review. The following conditions were discovered in relation to economically disadvantaged students: positive home-school relationships; desire to become a full-service school; limited parent-training opportunities with limited participation; limited professional development opportunities; limited poverty discussion in professional learning communities; underuse of college partnerships; need for a mentoring program; need for programming to combat absenteeism; demand for additional early intervention programs; positive student-teacher relationships; a variety of opportunities for students of poverty to build confidence; teachers high expectations from teachers; importance given to enrichment opportunities; teaching strategies

focused on active learning; assignment of small, meaningful doses of homework; limited tutoring opportunities; and use of multiple data-collection methods.

Recommendations for improving how students of poverty are served include continuing to expand efforts concerning positive home-school relationships, investigating the possibility of becoming a full-service school, designing a powerful parent-training program, offering additional professional development training for teachers, developing poverty-related topics for professional learning communities, finding ways to improve partnerships with local colleges and universities, designing a quality mentoring program, finding creative ways to address absenteeism, finding additional means of providing early intervention, continuing to develop positive student-teacher relationships, finding additional ways to build confidence, maintaining high expectations of students of poverty, creating additional meaningful enrichment opportunities, searching for the best teaching strategies to improve learning, continuing to assign meaningful homework with assistance as needed, creating a comprehensive tutoring program, and collecting meaningful and useful data to help teachers increase students' achievement.

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my school family at White Pine School. Many of you have been a part of my life from the time that I walked through the doors of the new school in 1986 as a kindergartener. I have loved being a part of the school, and I will never forget all of the life lessons, love, and support you have given me over the years.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Poverty. What do you think of when you hear this word? What images come into your head? Maybe you think of rural areas where trailers sit in rows on both sides of a gravel road. Maybe you think of dilapidated apartment complexes with litter in the streets. Perhaps you think of people who are in need of food or who are in need of jobs. When I think of poverty, I see the faces of the children at my school – many children who are struggling and whose families are struggling.

Poverty rates have increased nationwide, and the effects of the downward spiraling economy are devastating. In 2011 the national poverty rate was 15.1% and growing (US Census Bureau, 2011). The current economic situation is comparable to the time of the Great Depression (Goodman, 2011), and the scenario in schools across the country is similar. In 2010 alone 31 million children in the United States received free or reduced-price lunches (National School Lunch Program Fact Sheet, 2011).

When I began my career in education nearly 10 years ago, I had no idea about the heartbreaking challenges that would face me. Teaching the sixth grade, I saw 100 students on a daily basis. So many children coming into my classroom were in need. Why was this such a surprise? These were children from my own community and from the school that I attended. How could there be so many economically disadvantaged students? At first it was disheartening, but then I realized I could make a difference and I simply would have to work hard to provide as much support as possible for my students.

White Pine School is located in rural Jefferson County, Tennessee in the town of White Pine. The school serves over 800 students in prekindergarten through the eighth grade. Seventy-

three percent of the student body is considered economically disadvantaged, qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches (Tennessee Department of Education Report Card, 2011). With such a large portion of the student body living in poverty, we cannot ignore their struggles. Instead, we must use our teachers' knowledge of these children to determine how we can improve their ability to learn.

### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to assess teacher perceptions of how economically disadvantaged students at White Pine School were being served. My hope is that the findings will serve as a starting point for providing additional needed supports at both the school level and classroom/teacher level.

### Significance of the Study

The results of this study will help educators at White Pine School determine how to support and improve learning conditions for economically disadvantaged students both from the perspective of the school as an institution and by individual teachers in their classrooms. The findings and recommendations for practice and application also may serve as a model for other schools serving economically disadvantaged students.

### Research Questions

In order to assess teacher perceptions on the current levels of support offered at White Pine School for the economically disadvantaged student population, the following questions guided the research:

1. What schoolwide initiatives and/or programs are in place for students of poverty at White Pine School? What do teachers perceive as the value of these initiatives and/or programs? What are the opportunities for improving learning conditions for economically disadvantaged students?
2. What classroom-level, teacher-initiated supports are in place for students of poverty at White Pine School? What do teachers perceive as the value of these supports? What are the opportunities for improving learning conditions for economically disadvantaged students?

#### Limitations and Delimitations

This study was limited to teachers at White Pine School, representing 10 grade levels including prekindergarten through the eighth grade. Teacher perception regarding how economically disadvantaged students are being served may have varied based upon the developmental needs of students at specific grade levels. In addition, this study was limited to White Pine School's teacher perceptions and cannot measure other schools' efforts at supporting economically disadvantaged students.

#### Definition of Terms

*Economically Disadvantaged.* To be economically disadvantaged is to be eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Act. Children are eligible for free meals if their family income is at or below 130% of federal poverty guidelines and reduced-price meals if their family income is 131%-185% of federal poverty guidelines (National School Lunch Program, 2012).

*Family Resource Center.* The Family Resource Center is a service that Jefferson County provides for families in need of resources they may not be able to get on their own. The center has partnerships and staff that help families obtain such services as clothing, glasses, food, and diapers.

*Full-Service School.* A full-service school is the hub of the community and provides health care, recreation, and a full range of other services to families in need (Cuglietto, Burke, & Ocasio, 2007).

*Early Intervention.* Early intervention is an attempt to assist economically disadvantaged students by providing needed support as early as possible (Newman, 2007).

*Poverty.* To be living in poverty is to be eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Act. Children are eligible for free meals if their family income is at or below 130% of federal poverty guidelines and reduced-price meals if their family income is 131%-185% of federal poverty guidelines (National School Lunch Program, 2012).

*Pre-First Grade Class.* Pre-first grade is a transition class that includes two groups of students – kindergarteners who are not ready to move on to first grade and new kindergarteners with high scores on their entrance assessments. A full-time teacher's aide is assigned to this class, providing more support than the part-time aides in most classrooms.

*School-Level Support.* School-level support is assistance provided through schoolwide initiatives.

*Special-Area Classes.* Special area classes are often referred to as related arts and include physical education, art, library, and music.

*Teacher-Initiated, Classroom-Level Support.* Teacher-initiated, classroom-level support refers to assistance provided through teacher-led initiatives.

### Chapter Summary

The lives of students living in poverty today are filled with many struggles, and these struggles are evident in classrooms everywhere. The initiatives provided by schools and teachers to support students living in poverty are vital to their success in the future. This study is an examination of teacher perceptions of the services provided by White Pine School to its economically disadvantaged students in order to recommend additional supports.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

For many children born into poverty the public school system may be the only place that offers an opportunity to be successful. Through public school children of poverty have many of their needs met. School is where these children feel the safest, where they eat their daily meals, where they feel valued, and where they are offered the chance to advance in society (Books, 2004).

Regardless of the economic status of the families served or the amount of funding provided, good teaching can make a difference in the lives of students. Good teaching not only involves holding high expectations for all students but also involves building meaningful relationships that foster resilience and enable students to achieve. Collaboration among teachers, parents, and the community is paramount in helping students of poverty succeed (Jensen, 2009).

#### Poverty Defined

Merriam-Webster (2012) defines poverty as “the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions” (p. 1). Jensen (2009) defines poverty as a “chronic and debilitating condition that results from multiple adverse synergistic risk factors that affects the mind, body, and soul” (p. 6). Payne (2005) states that poverty is “the extent to which an individual does without resources” (p. 7). These resources include financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules (Payne, 2005).

Several types of poverty are discussed within the literature. Situational poverty is caused by an unexpected event that brings about loss (Jensen, 2009). Generational poverty involves two or more generations living in poverty (Payne, 2005). Absolute poverty occurs when one lacks the necessities for survival, such as food and shelter (Jensen, 2009). Relative poverty happens when one does not have enough financial resources to meet the average cost of living (Jensen, 2009). Urban poverty involves those living in poverty in areas with populations of 50,000 or more, and rural poverty includes those living in poverty in areas with populations below 50,000 (Jensen, 2009).

### Poverty at Home

Children living in poverty are faced with many daily hardships. The environments in which they live are typically in constant crisis. Poor neighborhoods tend to have high crime rates, high traffic volume, high pollution rates, high noise levels, and few safe places to play (Jensen, 2009). Homes of the poor tend to be unsafe in nature, with damaged structures, unsafe drinking water, and poor air quality (Jensen, 2009).

Children of poverty also have fewer positive developmental experiences than other children. Many do not have meaningful interaction with caring adults who provide much-needed support. More time is spent in front of the television and less time is spent learning through reading and other educational enrichment activities (Jensen, 2009).

The nature of the poverty-stricken home environment is one where stress is ever-present. In many cases parents living in poverty are under stress due to issues such as work schedules and finances. These stresses are reflected in the children's lives and may cause instability for these children (Jensen, 2009). Jensen (2009) comments, "...poor children often feel isolated and

unloved, feelings that kick off a downward spiral of unhappy life events, including poor academic performance, behavioral problems, dropping out of school, and drug abuse” (p. 9).

### Poverty at School

Often students living in poverty struggle with excessive tardiness and absenteeism. Over time frequent absenteeism plays a large role in dropout rates. High absenteeism also may be due to poor health care and lack of dependable transportation (Jensen, 2009). Children of poverty also are more likely to have low rates of parent involvement at their school. This involvement includes parent-teacher conferences, family nights, and other family-related activities (Jensen, 2009). Due to lack of parental involvement in most aspects of their lives, children of poverty are in desperate need of meaningful relationships with adults at school (Payne, 2005).

The lack of positive relationships with adults plays out in the lives of students of poverty in many ways. Teachers may perceive negative behaviors at school as acting out, but the cause of the negative behavior may be that students do not know how to respond properly (Jensen, 2009). In addition, stress at home combined with lack of guidance and support can result in long-lasting poor academic achievement (Jensen, 2009).

### Poverty Rates and Economically Disadvantaged Percentages: United States, Tennessee, Jefferson County, White Pine, White Pine School

The United States Census Bureau (2011) reported that the poverty threshold for a family of four in 2010 was \$22,314. The official national poverty rate that year was 15.1%, an increase from the 2009 rate of 14.3%. In comparison, the poverty rate for the state of Tennessee was 17.7%, for Jefferson County, Tennessee, was 19.0%, and for White Pine, Tennessee, was 23.3% (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

The poverty measure itself does not accurately portray the poverty that exists in the country (Books, 2004). Indeed, Wight, Chau, and Aratani (2011) contend that “families need an income of about twice the federal poverty level to make ends meet” (p. 3).

The term “economically disadvantaged” indicates eligibility for free or reduced-price meals at school (Wilson, 2010). The Tennessee Department of Education Report Card reported that 60.3% of Tennessee students were economically disadvantaged in 2011. Jefferson County Schools, Jefferson County, Tennessee, reported that 64.0% of its students were economically disadvantaged (Tennessee Department of Education Report Card, 2011). White Pine School, Jefferson County, Tennessee, reported that 73.3% of its students were economically disadvantaged (Tennessee Department of Education Report Card, 2011).

### The War on Poverty and the Condition of Public Schools

A need for establishing equality for all Americans was recognized in the 1960s. Following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, President Lyndon Johnson and his administration declared a war on poverty. President Johnson sought to change the current conditions of the time by providing government interventions that would ultimately result in ending poverty in America (Edelman, 2006). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, a cornerstone of President Johnson’s poverty legislation, aimed to provide poor and minority students with extra supports through financial assistance (Barr & Parrett, 2007). Programs like Head Start, Job Corps, and Community Health Centers were created in the fight to end poverty. Most of Johnson’s programs are still active today, but they have not been successful in eradicating poverty (Edelman, 2006).

A clause of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 commissioned a study called *Equality in Educational Opportunity*, better known as the *Coleman Report*. The intent of this report was to analyze minority and majority schools concerning differences in funding and facilities (Blumenthal, 1967). Findings revealed that schools could do very little to overcome students' backgrounds (Marzano, 2003), an outcome that had an enormous impact on how the general public viewed public schooling in America.

Some educators disagreed with this view, however, believing that the school environment could affect the learning ability of economically disadvantaged students. This belief led to the Effective Schools Research (ESR) Movement in the late 1960s, during which researchers located low-income schools whose students were performing at high levels and analyzed the qualities of these schools. The following characteristics were determined to be shared by the highest-performing schools: strong leadership, high expectations for students, focus on academics, safe environment, and monitoring student outcomes (O'Brien & Roberson, 2012).

Scrutiny of public education continued for years, and, in 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued a report entitled, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Marzano, 2003). Findings indicated low academic achievement at multiple levels within the public education system. This report sparked a movement of educational reforms that carry over to the present, including the *No Child Left Behind Act* (Toppo, 2008) and *Race to the Top* (McNeil, 2011).

In contrast, the Sandia Report of 1993 determined that stringent educational reforms might not be needed. Data showed that national test scores were improving for public school students and dropout rates were declining (Tanner, 1993).

Finally, data from the Coleman Report was reanalyzed by Geoffrey Borman, who was a student of James Coleman in the 1960s. Borman discovered that, looking at schools individually, the learning environment does influence the learning ability of disadvantaged students (Viadero, 2006).

### Inequalities

Many inequalities exist within the public school system today. School districts composed of wealthy populations tend to receive larger amounts of funding than those comprised of less affluent populations (Books, 2004). The same can be said for the variation in reported teacher salaries. Wealthier districts pay their teachers much higher salaries than poorer districts (Books, 2004), leading to poorer districts' losing their highly-qualified teachers to wealthier districts (Machtiger, 2007). Teachers remaining in high-poverty districts many times do not have the appropriate credentials for the classes they teach, but these districts are in need of the most qualified and experienced teachers available (Machtiger, 2007). The districts that lack much-needed funding have school facilities that are outdated and need repair, whereas well-funded districts tend to have state-of-the-art facilities that offer more opportunity for meaningful participation and advancement (Books, 2004). The lack of funding for needed resources and good teachers leaves students and parents in the poor districts with a sense that they do not matter and that no one cares about their education or their futures (Kozol, 2005).

### A Call for Reform

According to Murnane (2007) reforms are needed for all students to have equal access to an education that provides them with the academic experiences necessary for today's competitive

job market. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 does not allow for realistic achievement goals that can actually be attained (Murnane, 2007). Outside factors that affect students living in poverty but are beyond control of the schools – such as lack of healthcare, poor nutrition, pollution, and violence – make the NCLB goals for high-poverty schools unrealistic (Berliner, 2010). According to Murnane (2007) the United States Congress should consider providing states with grants that will be used to develop programming designed to improve the quality of education for students attending high-poverty schools. Rothstein (2008) contends that educators need to stand together and advocate for the reforms that must take place to provide students of poverty with a chance to obtain a quality education. Kohn (2011) asserts that current policies only focus on standardized test scores, a practice that is damaging over time to children of poverty due to the practices used to drill the tested skills.

### Schoolwide Supports for Students of Poverty

At high-poverty schools that have made tremendous academic gains, stakeholders work together to ensure that economically disadvantaged students receive all of the support they need to be successful (Jensen, 2009). To become one of these successful schools, Jensen (2009) asserts that “you need to isolate the important factors for change and focus relentlessly on them” (p. 105).

#### Strong Leadership

Strong leadership is present in high-poverty schools that become high-performing schools (Cunningham, 2006). Leaders within these schools delegate the everyday duties of running the school so that they are able to focus on student achievement (Chenoweth, 2010). Effective leaders also actively involve their faculty and staff in the decision-making process (Kannapel &

Clements, 2005). Strong leaders also spend a great deal of time monitoring the learning taking place in the school (Chenoweth, 2010), and principal visibility is a key factor (Jennings, 2010). Successful leaders in high-poverty schools develop a culture that focuses on respect and tolerance for all groups within the school (Chenoweth, 2010). An effective school leader is willing to do whatever is needed to ensure that learning is taking place within the school (Chenoweth, 2010).

### Full-Service Schools

Teachers know that they cannot change the environment in which their students live, and many spend a great deal of time trying to help students obtain needed resources due to the effects of those environments. Teachers should not have to bear this burden alone (Blank, Jacobson, & Pearson, 2009). Partnerships between schools and outside agencies can make school the center of the community and lead to ways to meet a variety of needs for students of poverty and their families (Blank et al., 2009). Schools provide services such as recreation, general healthcare, dental services, and mental health services (Parrett & Budge, 2009). Schools that provide a variety of needed services to students and their families through help from outside agencies are referred to as full-service schools (Cuglietto et al., 2007). When schools become the hub of the community, parent involvement increases, resulting in more positive working relationships between parents, teachers, and students (Blank et al., 2009).

### Community Involvement

The most effective schools form partnerships with the community. Partnerships with community agencies allow the business and industry sector to work with students on activities such as career exploration (Clark, Shreve, & Stone, 2004). Schools that involve the business community benefit in a variety of ways including financially (Marzano, 2003). The combination

of efforts by multiple community organizations is essential in helping students obtain needed resources. One organization alone cannot help students overcome the barriers they face from living in poverty (Beegle, 2005).

Opportunities for students to interact with the community through recreation and community service act as protective factors in helping students become successful later on in life (Rockwell, 2006). The community is extremely important in helping students who are at risk deal with the stressors of everyday life. Families who have the resources reach out to others in need within their own neighborhood and help through encouragement and support (Santa, 2006).

### Parent Involvement

A common practice in many schools in the past was for parents to be excluded from participation and involvement with schools, and parents were simply blamed for poor student performance and behavior. Today, evidence shows that partnerships that include families working together with schools can be of great benefit to students (Barr & Parrett, 2007). These schools show appreciation to parents who attempt to get involved in their students' education, even if the involvement is not quite what school officials want it to be. Parents of students living in poverty tend to be in constant stress but do care about their children's progress (Beegle, 2003).

Communication between the school and home is extremely important in enabling parents to help their students (Marzano, 2003). Parent needs differ, and the most effective schools provide different levels of involvement for parents in order to meet these varied needs (Jennings, 2010). Work schedules of parents living in poverty may not permit time for meetings during and after school, so these educators find alternative ways for meaningful communication with parents living in poverty (Burney & Beilke, 2008). Parents who are involved in the educational process are enabled to impact their children positively in the home environment and help students set and

reach goals (Brooks, 2006). Parent involvement increases student engagement which, in turn, increases academic achievement (Finn & Rock, 1997).

Parents who volunteer and participate at school believe that their ideas and opinions are important (Marzano, 2003). Schools which maximize the benefits of parent involvement ensure that parents feel that they are welcome in the school and that their children matter (Payne, 2008).

### Parent Training

Early intervention, including parent training on topics that relate to the developmental needs of children in the early stages before they start school, is beneficial in helping children enter school with the skills necessary to be successful (Prince, Pepper, & Brocato, 2006). In addition, parents living in poverty benefit from training on the importance of good nutrition and health care (Prince et al., 2006).

Parents can improve their communication, supervision, and parental expectations concerning education when they receive training that teaches them to improve parenting practices in a manner that makes their home environments supportive of academic achievement (Marzano, 2003). The greatest benefit is seen when schools place more emphasis on parents assisting their children at home with academics and less emphasis on parent involvement through volunteering and participating in school events (Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007).

### Hiring Competent, Strong Teachers

Several high-performing high-poverty schools attribute part of their success to the quality of teachers and the manner in which they are assigned (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). The teacher is the most important factor when looking at what makes a difference in the lives of children living in poverty (Amrein-Beardsley, 2007).

According to Amrein-Beardsley (2007) high-poverty schools desperately need expert teachers, but few of these teachers are committed to working in this environment. Districts that strive to hire the highest quality of teachers possible change the lives of the countless children who live in poverty and attend high-poverty schools (Haberman, 1995). Incentives such as salary and benefits increases attract and keep high-quality teachers in high-poverty schools (Amrein-Beardsley, 2007). Other incentives include smaller teacher-to-student ratios for classes and paid sabbaticals to avoid teacher burnout (Peske & Haycock, 2006).

High-quality teachers have appropriate background knowledge in the subject matter being taught and an understanding of the ways in which students learn best (Stuht, 2008). These teachers never give up on helping all students learn, believe that learning has to take place in addition to state-mandated curricula, understand the whole picture of the learning taking place, take into account the background and environments that their students of poverty experience, care about their students, avoid dwelling on the aspects of teaching that cause burnout, and believe that everyone makes mistakes (Haberman, 1995).

### Professional Development

The most beneficial professional development opportunities offer insight on the nature of students living in generational poverty and on ways to meet their needs within the classroom (Beegle, 2005). The best opportunities foster an awareness of how poverty affects the learning process for students with such backgrounds (Gehrke, 2005). Jensen (2009) states, “Teachers don’t need to come from their students’ cultures to be able to teach them, but empathy and cultural knowledge are essential” (p. 11).

Teachers who spend time looking at their own cultural backgrounds and comparing them to their students’ backgrounds find ways to better relate and ways to better engage students in the

learning process (Gehrke, 2005). Through professional development teachers can learn to look beyond the list of stereotypes that have been used in recent years to describe the poor and instead focus on learning about students' cultural backgrounds and heritage and how to incorporate those experiences and build upon them to make learning more meaningful within the classroom (Sato & Lensmire, 2009).

### Teacher Collaboration

Teachers who work collaboratively are able to accomplish more than they could by working alone (Chenoweth, 2009). When faculty members combine their background knowledge and other life experiences, these teachers are better able to help each other solve problems and find ways to help students of poverty be successful (Chenoweth, 2009). The most effective collaborative meetings have direction and are focused on improving student achievement. Many successful high-achieving, high-poverty schools spend time working together to score student work so as to better understand students' levels of proficiency and devise plans to address areas in need of improvement (Reeves, 2003). The best collaboration also includes elements of team building, which forms and fosters positive working relationships among staff members (Jensen, 2009). One example of effective collaboration among teachers is use of the professional learning community model, through which teachers learn together to learn new content and strategies to improve areas in which students have poor scores on assessments (Hord, 2009).

In addition, common planning times for teachers in the same grade level allow for meaningful collaboration within the school day (Chenoweth, 2009). Common planning times allow educators to form small learning communities that can focus on a variety of topics including issues concerning students living in poverty (Mertens & Flowers, 2003). Schools have

to be creative in developing schedules that allow for common planning time, but the benefits outweigh the amount of work put into this scheduling (Chenoweth, 2009).

### Partnerships with Colleges and Universities

Benefits are countless for high-poverty schools that develop partnerships with local colleges and universities that train preservice teachers (Miller, Duffy, Rohr, Gasparello, & Mercier, 2005). The partnerships begin with collaboration among teachers, professors, and preservice teachers to determine how to best serve students (Miller et al., 2005). Preservice teachers are assigned to classrooms, and both the students and teachers benefit by having extra assistance in the classroom, and the preservice teachers benefit through experiences that improve their ability to enter classrooms ready to teach economically disadvantaged students (Miller et al., 2005). College professors also benefit by seeing the theories they are teaching put into practice (Miller et al., 2005). In addition, professional development for staff is provided through learning experiences that incorporate professors and their extensive knowledge of particular educational topics (Miller et al., 2005).

### Mentoring

According to Beegle (2003) individuals born into poverty struggle with issues that can be remedied through interaction with mentors who help them learn important information and build their confidence to a point that allows them to move forward without assistance. To begin the process of working through their hardships, students of poverty must establish relationships of trust with mentors (Beegle, 2003). The most successful mentoring programs include mentors who provide support by sharing their own network of individuals and organizations that can help students build their own support contacts and connections (Beegle, 2005). Adults who provide

support and guidance may be the key to helping many students of poverty achieve success in their lives (Burney & Beilke, 2008).

Students who have long-term relationships with mentors tend to have an overall positive view of themselves and the ability to obtain the needed resources that support achievement (Jensen, 2009). Many at-risk young people persisted in spite of their struggles attribute their success to mentors who developed positive relationships with them (Rockwell, 2006). The chances of individuals from backgrounds of poverty graduating from college are higher if they had mentors at a young age (Beegle, 2003). The relationship between mentors and mentees prepares the mentees for college experiences by developing effective means of communication (Beegle, 2003).

#### Academic Case Managers

Academic case manager programs are similar to mentoring programs in that adults at school are assigned to individual at-risk students. Academic case managers focus on both students' academic needs and understanding the environments in which students live (Van Kannel-Ray, Lacefield, & Zeller, 2008). Having an understanding of both allows academic case managers to help students improve their ability to persist overall. Students ultimately are able to understand the importance of an education (Van Kannel-Ray et al., 2008). Academic case managers track students' progress on all class assignments and help students understand the long-term effects of effort (Van Kannel-Ray et al., 2008).

#### School Counselors

School counselors' specialized training can assist teachers in educating students of poverty (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). Counselors are trained on multicultural issues, have an understanding of social class, and can help teachers understand the differences that exist among

the various levels of society (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). School counselors also have experience in analyzing issues from various perspectives and can assist teachers in better understanding students of poverty and their backgrounds (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007).

School counselors have specific training on effective parenting programs and strategies that can be useful for teachers in developing partnerships with their students' parents (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). By assisting parents, teachers, and community members in developing partnerships, school counselors model and lead collaborative efforts that can have positive effects for all involved in the process (Bryan, 2005). School counselors aid in developing partnerships through open dialogue that allows all members to voice their beliefs, opinions, and concerns (Bryan, 2005).

Counselors also can assist with problem solving during collaborative efforts between teachers and parents (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). Counselors are trained to help teachers understand the issues faced by students of poverty rather than passing negative judgment (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). School counselors have interaction with students through guidance lessons and career exploration, which places counselors in a position to assist teachers to design programming that better meets the needs of students of poverty (Reis, Colbert, & Hebert, 2005).

### Early Intervention

Intervention to provide social and emotional developmental assistance to students living in poverty should begin as early as possible (Neuman, 2007). Many students living in poverty do not have adults in their lives who prepare them to start school at the appropriate developmental level (Burney & Beilke, 2008). Early intervention programs, including both preschool and kindergarten, offer students of poverty the opportunity to build the academic foundation that will

prepare them for the future (Burney & Beilke, 2008). The greatest gains are made when the children with the greatest need are targeted for early intervention programs and programming that maintains high levels of intensity makes the best use of time (Neuman, 2007). Early intervention programs with well-trained, well-paid teachers and home outreach programs yield the best results (Bracey, 2009).

### Create Initiatives to Address Absenteeism

Students of poverty who are chronically absent in the primary grades most often achieve at lower levels as they progress through school (The High Cost of Low Attendance, 2008). High dropout rates can in many instances be attributed to high rates of absenteeism (Jensen, 2009). Issues with absenteeism for students of poverty may be attributed to parents' attitudes toward school if the parents had bad experiences themselves and, thus, do not place a strong importance on an education (Jensen, 2009). Schools can prevent chronic absenteeism by helping to alleviate some of the issues that surround it, such as providing supports such as after school programs and health care within the school (The High Cost of Low Attendance, 2008).

### Classroom-Level, Teacher-Initiated Supports for Students of Poverty

Evaluating where the most impact is made upon all students, the importance of the individual teacher overshadows school-level supports (Marzano, 2003). The quality of teaching within the building affects achievement within the school, so a focus on perfecting the art of teaching itself is recommended (Jensen, 2009). The following sections highlight various classroom-level, teacher-initiated supports that have been found to help students of poverty become successful in the classroom and beyond.

## Caring Relationships

Children of poverty may live in constant stress outside of school. Their relationships with adults at school may be the only positive experiences that children of poverty have on a regular basis and, thus, are of great importance (Rawlinson, 2007). Meaningful relationships between school staff and low-income students can keep students focused on the importance of an education and can improve graduation rates overall (San Antonio, 2008). Teachers who develop strong bonds with at-risk students are in positions to help these students make choices that will be beneficial in the future. Assistance from such teachers helps students strive for excellence and also helps them build social capital that will improve their ability to work with others (Kitano & Lewis, 2005).

In 2012 the challenges that young people face can be hard to manage, but relationships with caring adults teach students to handle tough situations as they arise (Larson, 2005). The importance of relationships cannot be over stressed when analyzing factors that contribute to developing resiliency for at-risk students (Hurlington, 2010). Students at risk can benefit at high levels when positive relationships are built between their teachers and their parents. These types of partnerships foster resiliency in students who are deemed at risk (Harvey, 2007). To maximize student potential analyzing and building on student strengths is recommended when developing relationships with students at risk (Hurlington, 2010).

Students living in poverty may not have adults in their lives to provide the support that is needed in order to be successful in school and later in college (Burney & Cross, 2006). Students are more likely to be engaged in their course work and have more positive attitudes toward school if they have strong relationships with adults in their schools. Higher levels of engagement also tend to yield higher levels of achievement as reflected in test scores (Klem & Connell,

2004). To excel in challenging courses students need positive working relationships with adults from within the school who hold high expectations for the individual students (Klem & Connell, 2004). Teachers with experience developing positive relationships with at-risk students describe the positive effects of the time and effort in helping students, and these teachers note the amount of effort that the students put forth in return (Downey, 2008). At-risk students' chances of success in life are increased when both parents and teachers are present in their lives to provide both academic and social support (Finn & Rock, 1997).

### A Caring Environment

Because many at-risk students may not have nurturing, caring, or supportive home environments, teachers must create that environment within their classrooms (Benard, 1993). A classroom environment that provides support and guidance helps develop resiliency in at-risk students (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007). By creating a positive classroom environment teachers also create a place for positive peer interaction between students – another factor that is extremely important and often overlooked (Benard, 1993). Positive interaction among students and teachers within a caring environment allows teachers to assess student needs instead of simply passing judgment based on socioeconomic status (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006). In classroom environments that foster equality and respect for one another, academic achievement tends to be higher (Downey, 2008). Students who feel that they are safe and that their opinion matters are better able to perform in a positive manner within the classroom (Downey, 2008).

### Feelings of Self-Efficacy

Effective teachers are encouragers for students of poverty and help these students understand that they can be successful (Barr & Parrett, 2007). Students who persevere in the face of extreme difficulties have a strong sense of self-efficacy (Sternberg, 2008). To foster resiliency

in young people who are at risk teachers must create situations that allow these students to be successful and learn from their mistakes so that the students can understand what they are able to achieve (Kitano & Lewis, 2005). Students who have a positive sense about their ability to achieve believe that they are successful due to their determination and the support they receive from those around them (Reis et al., 2005).

### High Expectations

At-risk students respond favorably to educators who hold high expectations for them and who display attitudes that demonstrate the value of working hard until success is reached (Downey, 2008). Students perform to the level that is expected of them, so teachers who hold students to the highest level possible help students meet their maximum potential (Downey, 2008). Teachers who hold high expectations for their students and provide them with assistance in setting and achieving realistic and attainable goals see those students make significant academic gains (Benard, 1993; Brooks, 2006; Hurlington, 2010).

Educators who have pity on economically disadvantaged students and lower their expectation levels may believe that they are helping the students when, in fact, just the opposite occurs (Gehrke, 2005). Many students of poverty have an inner strength that allows them to persevere in the face of hardships. Effective teachers do not underestimate their at-risk students' potential but hold these students to the same level of expectations as other students (Barr & Parrett, 2007). Often students of poverty think their teachers do not believe that the students can learn and achieve at high levels, but low-income students can attain academic success when teachers overlook economic status (Beegle, 2005). Teacher-student relationships in which teachers maintain high expectations for students help students realize their worth and, thus, develop a positive sense of self (Benard, 1995; 2004).

### Opportunities to Participate

Students who are given the opportunity to participate in the process of their educational experience are more likely to take responsibility for learning and put forth more effort (Benard, 1993). The process of brainstorming with other students generates ideas that can be used in designing the learning experience, and this practice also makes learning more meaningful because students take ownership of the topics and procedures (Downey, 2008). Other examples of participation include having multiple opportunities within a lesson to answer questions, being involved in helping classmates, and hands-on learning (Benard, 1993, 1995). Students also perceive a level of importance within the classroom when they are given the opportunity to help design procedures for governing the class. Service-learning projects provide the opportunity for students to practice the skills they have learned in class (Hurlington, 2010).

### Opportunities for Enrichment or Extracurricular Activities

Students of poverty may have little-to-no access to the outside world. Teachers can bring that world into the classroom by inviting guest speakers and other individuals to teach about their experiences (Beegle, 2003). Professionals can discuss with students the steps that the professionals took in order to achieve their success (Beegle, 2003). Field trips also are a positive enrichment opportunity for students of poverty, allowing them to travel outside of school and experience the world themselves (Beegle, 2005). Teachers can intertwine lessons with field trip experiences and, thus, make the lessons more meaningful (Chenoweth, 2009). Part of an education includes having an understanding of the world outside the classroom, and many students of poverty may not have the opportunity for those experiences if teachers do not provide them (Chenoweth, 2009). In addition, encouraging students of poverty to become involved in extracurricular activities is valuable because the experience helps students improve social skills

(Downey, 2008). Of the various factors found to influence resiliency in students who have faced hardships extracurricular activities and sports are included as meaningful enrichment opportunities with positive benefits (Reis et al., 2005).

### Effective Instructional Practices

The findings in *Equality of Educational Opportunity* demonstrate that schools can only affect 10% of students' ability to achieve, while the other 90% are controlled by students' background and home environment and cannot be affected by schools (Coleman et al., 1966). Following this study, a great deal of research has been conducted through the years and findings greatly contrast those of Coleman's (Marzano, 2003). In fact, reanalysis of Coleman's data showed that individual schools do make a difference in students' achievement (Borman & Dowling, 2010). High-performing, high-poverty schools that implement interventions including appropriate instructional strategies have made significant gains in achievement (Marzano, 2003).

### Recommended Instructional Practices

- Use cooperative learning (Downey, 2008; Marzano, 2003).
- Teach summarizing and note taking (Marzano, 2003).
- Teach problem-solving skills (Payne, 2009).
- Teach higher-order thinking through questioning (Pogrow, 2009).
- Teach study skills (Burney & Cross, 2006; Harvey, 2007).
- Focus on literacy and writing (Cunningham, 2006; Reeves, 2007).
- Conduct frequent, meaningful assessments (Cunningham, 2006; Edmonds, 1979; Lazotte, 1991; Reeves, 2003).
- Allow students to retake tests (Parrett & Budge, 2009).
- Differentiate instruction for all students (Thomas, 2009).

- Make homework meaningful and projects inexpensive (Vatterott, 2009).
- Develop a high-quality tutoring program (Parrett & Budge, 2009).
- Collect useful data and track student progress (Jensen, 2009; Kannaple & Clements, 2005).
- Celebrate successes (Reeves, 2007).

### Conclusion

Good teaching is the key ingredient in helping students of poverty obtain an education that will allow them to have brighter futures (Jensen, 2009). Educators are encouraged to make every minute of every day count and never divert from maintaining high expectations for every child they teach (Jensen, 2009). Most importantly, teachers must strive to develop positive, meaningful relationships with their students and their families (Jensen, 2009). By involving the entire school community in the process, children of poverty will have a better chance at achieving success (Jensen, 2009).

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to assess teacher perceptions of how economically disadvantaged students at White Pine School were being served. The Tennessee Department of Education Report Card (2011) reported White Pine School's economically disadvantaged population at 73.3%. The economically disadvantaged population at White Pine School is on the rise, as shown in the Report Card—56.3% in 2002, 65% in 2007, and 73.3% in 2011 (Tennessee Department of Education Report Card, 2002, 2007, & 2011). An assessment, therefore, was required to determine how the school and its teachers might better serve those students and prepare them for their future beyond their time at White Pine School.

#### Research Design

To better understand teachers' perceptions, the research design was qualitative. This method allowed me to use an emergent design in the method of data collection so that my interview questions could be adapted if necessary (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research also places a high level of importance on the researcher because the researcher is collecting the data whether through interviewing, observing, or reviewing documents (Creswell, 2009).

I conducted qualitative interviews with both individual teachers and focus groups of teachers, all from White Pine School. Data collection consisted of (1) five individual interviews; (2) interviews with three focus groups—primary (grades pre-kindergarten through second grade), intermediate (third through fifth grades), and middle (sixth through eighth grades)—with approximately four people in each; and (3) review of relevant documents pertaining to the

everyday running of the school. The individual interviews were advantageous in allowing me to gain a historical perspective on the subject in question (Creswell, 2009). The focus group interviews allowed me to create an environment in which participants would discuss their responses to questions more thoroughly than in individual interviews because ideas were triggered from the group's interaction (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). I also reviewed documents that dealt with the subject of economically disadvantaged students at White Pine School. These documents included faculty meeting agendas, professional learning community agendas, the current school improvement plan, and the school's family engagement plan.

### Population

All regular education teachers prekindergarten through eighth grade (n=40) and special education teachers (n=3) at White Pine School were contacted for this study. A letter was sent to each teacher (n=43) requesting volunteers to participate in individual interviews or focus groups (see Appendix B). Out of these 43 teachers, 26 volunteered to participate. Sixteen (16) individuals were the chosen sample that participated in this study. Fifteen (15) participants were female, and one participant was male. Fifteen (15) participants were regular-education teachers, at least one from each grade level, and one was a special-education teacher.

### Research Questions

Questions were designed to determine the supports teachers perceived as available at White Pine School for the economically disadvantaged population. The following questions were the focus of this research:

1. What schoolwide initiatives and/or programs are in place for students of poverty at White Pine School? What do teachers perceive as the value of these initiatives and/or programs? What are the opportunities for improving learning conditions for economically disadvantaged students?
2. What classroom-level, teacher-initiated supports are in place for students of poverty at White Pine School? What do teachers perceive as the value of these supports? What are the opportunities for improving learning conditions for economically disadvantaged students?

During focus group meetings I presented a variety of topics for discussion, dealing with home-school relations, full-service schools, parent training, professional development, professional learning communities, college partnerships, mentoring, absenteeism, and early intervention (see Appendix D). These focus group discussions were designed to collect data concerning school-wide initiatives and programs.

Classroom-level, teacher-initiated supports for economically disadvantaged students were explored through individual interviews using questions that dealt with relationships, building confidence, expectations, enrichment opportunities, teaching strategies, homework, tutoring, and data collection (see Appendix E).

### Researcher's Role

I conducted the individual and focus group interviews and reviewed documents in order to collect data for the study. Because I was the school's assistant principal, I only interviewed participants who volunteered, and I made it clear that there would be no penalty for choosing not to participate.

As assistant principal I have served as a link between teachers and the principal, including conducting professional learning community meetings and gathering data from teachers to present to the principal for review and consideration. This established role meant that the teachers were comfortable sharing with me their opinions concerning the topic. I designed a basic interview protocol for both the individual interviews and the focus-group interviews (see Appendixes D & E). The questions used were open-ended and allowed me to gain insight into the interviewees' experiences and opinions concerning the subject matter (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Probes were included with the questions to elicit more detail from participant responses (Creswell, 2009). I also reviewed and took notes about documents pertaining to the study. Document review provides additional information concerning the value that an organization places on the subject in question (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

#### Data Collection Methods

A letter was sent to all teachers at White Pine School requesting volunteers to participate in interviews and focus groups (see Appendix B). Volunteers were selected for either individual interviews or for focus group interviews. Interviews were conducted on site at White Pine School after the school day ended. Volunteers were selected based on who I would be of most benefit in providing meaningful answers to the research questions (Creswell, 2009). All interviewees' identities were kept anonymous, and pseudonyms were used when the data were reported. The interviews were recorded digitally and were transcribed. I also reviewed and took notes on documents pertaining to the study.

### Data Analysis Methods

The interviews and focus groups were transcribed from digital audio recordings conducted at each session. The notes taken during individual interviews and focus groups also were included with the transcripts. Participants checked the transcripts for accuracy. Notes taken from the document review also were included with the transcripts.

All transcriptions then were coded in order to find recurring themes and similarities within the data. The process of coding requires the researcher to categorize the data and search for commonalities that provide answers to the research question (Creswell, 2009). To obtain a more thorough understanding of the data collected, all transcriptions were read in detail after data were organized (Creswell, 2009). I analyzed each transcription individually and made notes in the margin (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). After all transcriptions were read and notes were taken, I listed the topics that emerged and formed categories from the data. This process was conducted again to see if any new codes emerged (Creswell, 2009). Afterwards, the categories were organized in a manner that allowed me to interpret the meaning of all data analyzed (Creswell, 2009).

### Validity and Reliability

Validity is achieved when the researcher and participants agree on interpretation of the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Within this study the strategy of participant review was employed, asking participants to carefully check for accuracy their transcript produced from the digitally-recorded interviews (McMillian & Schumacher, 2006). I also used the triangulation strategy to examine multiple sources of data, including individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document review to discover common themes (Creswell, 2009).

Reliability is achieved when the researcher is able to produce the same results each time the data are collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). This research was based on participants' perspectives and, thus, did not lend itself to reliability.

### Ethical Considerations

Because the study required teacher participation, I obtained permission to conduct the study from the director of schools (see Appendix A). A letter was sent to all teachers eligible to participate in the study (see Appendix B). At the onset of this study, special consideration was given to ensuring that all participants would remain anonymous and that their responses would remain confidential (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The researcher discussed with each participant the informed-consent document (see Appendix C) that outlined the facts that participation was voluntary and that individuals who decided not to participate would not be penalized. The Institutional Review Board at East Tennessee State University approved the study and the protocol used for the interview process.

### Chapter Summary

The qualitative research strategies used to collect data for this study were individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document review. Volunteers were interviewed individually and participated in focus groups. Documents pertaining to the study also were reviewed and notes were taken. Data were triangulated to produce themes that helped to answer the research questions. The information gleaned from this study will be beneficial in providing recommendations for future programs and practices regarding economically disadvantaged students at White Pine School.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to assess teacher perceptions of how economically disadvantaged students at White Pine School were being served. Data collection consisted of (1) five individual interviews; (2) interviews with three focus group (primary, intermediate, and middle school), with approximately four people in each; and (3) review of relevant documents pertaining to the everyday running of the school. Teachers' names were kept anonymous in the reporting of the data.

The focus-group interviews centered on teachers' perceptions of school-wide initiatives in place for serving the economically disadvantaged students at White Pine School, and the individual interviews examined teachers' perceptions on how they were serving economically disadvantaged students within their own classrooms. The document review analyzed how economically disadvantaged students were being discussed as a whole from the standpoint of school-wide plans and agendas from both faculty meetings and professional learning community meetings.

The following themes emerged from the focus group interviews: importance of effective home-school relationships, desire to become a full-service school, limited parent training opportunities and participation, limited professional development opportunities concerning poverty, limited poverty discussion in professional learning communities, need for better use of college partnerships, desire for mentoring program, limited programs to combat absenteeism, and demand for additional early-intervention programs. The following themes emerged from the individual interviews: importance of positive student-teacher relationships, maintaining high expectations, and enrichment opportunities; a variety of methods teachers can use to build

confidence; teaching strategies focused on active learning; value of small, meaningful doses of homework; limited tutoring opportunities; and multiple data-collection methods. The document review of faculty meeting agendas, professional learning committee agendas, and school plans produced very little information concerning serving economically disadvantaged students.

### Focus Group Responses

#### Effective Home-School Relationships

Participants in all three focus groups reported that White Pine School participates in a food program that distributes backpacks of food to students of poverty to take home each Friday to provide them with food for the weekend. Participants also discussed White Pine School's participation in a program that buys shoes for students in need during the holiday season. The primary and intermediate focus groups reported that the school provides dental, vision, and hearing screenings and that the school provides parenting classes.

The primary group reported some additional ways that home-school relations were developed at the primary level at White Pine School:

- *Sally* commented, "We also do a parent meeting for incoming kindergarten students and, again, that is for anyone who wants to attend. We encourage parents and try to give them some ideas of what they can expect and ways that they can help their children at home."
- *Brenda* also stated, "We use an interpreter for communicating with our Spanish-speaking parents, and a lot of our Hispanic students live in poverty."

The middle school focus group also had some additional ways that home-school relations were developed at the middle school level at White Pine School:

- *Sherry* commented, “We refer children to the Family Resource Center. They provide needs for families, whatever their need may be. They do glasses for students, shoes, home care for students that have repetitive lice issues, clothing, and just meeting with the families to see what their needs are. We contact agencies for students that cannot afford to buy their school supplies—backpacks, paper, pencils—the basic things.”  
*Sherry* named some of those agencies: “Churches. Leadvale Church, the Methodist Church, First Baptist. I believe Freedom Fellowship helps with food for the whole family.”
- *Sherry* then began to share positive comments regarding parent-involvement nights: “For our reading nights, we provide pizza. I know that is only done a few times a year, but it is an effort to try to pull those folks in... Everyone gets a free book. Prizes are given throughout the night.”
- *Amy* added, “It gets the whole family. It gets siblings, kids that will be coming to school here later, as well as those that have already graduated from here.”
- *Amy* also commented on teachers’ providing supplies: “I think lots of teachers personally buy school supplies, shoes, clothing, just when they see a need they take care of that. It goes unnoticed by everyone else... We have the closet here for them to pick up personal hygiene items that they need or microwavable foods that the kids can fix themselves if someone is not at home for the evening.”

## Desire to Become A Full-Service School

Participants in all three focus groups reported the need to transform White Pine School into a full-service school. These teachers expressed the need for volunteers and strong partnerships with local practitioners. The primary and intermediate groups mentioned that several students' families use the school nurse for medical advice. Both the intermediate and middle school groups pointed out the necessity of a coordinator to keep a full-service school organized and running properly.

The primary group pointed out some specific information about dental practices. For example, *Sally* commented, "If the parents give authorization, then the children can receive fluoride treatment and then also sealants are done as well. Currently that is what we are doing."

The intermediate group also discussed health care needs:

- *Sarah* stated, "I have kids that have never gone to the dentist in my class."
- *Tammy* commented, "With the growing first-generation immigrant population, they tend to go without medical care and dental treatment. Many of us just assume that everybody has access to it."
- *Janice* added, "Well, if a child is taken care of physically, emotionally, socially, and with their health, they are going to do better in school as far as academics."
- *Ruth*, in support of White Pine School's becoming a full-service school, stated, "I think a lot of parents here already treat this school like that. I have had a couple of kids say, 'My mom asked for me to see the nurse this morning,' or things like that. So I think that it is already – parents are already looking for that here, so it would just be a natural step."

## Limited Parent Training Opportunities and Participation

Participants in all three focus groups mentioned that White Pine School offers *Parenting with Love and Logic* annually. The primary group offered the most insight. *Jane* stated, “The parenting classes that we offer we open them up to the entire school through the eighth grade for parents that want to come. This is in collaboration with the guidance counselors, and the program that we use is called *Parenting with Love and Logic*. It comes out of Denver, Colorado... Child care is provided for anyone who brings children, not just pre-k students, students, or younger siblings... It is seven classes. The classes are 2-hour sessions. It is pretty in-depth, and it is a big commitment. We offer those in the fall usually.” When asked how many participated on average, *Jane* said, “Probably four to five families. It is very sad.”

In addition, the primary group discussed additional training opportunities of which they were aware.

- *Jane* explained, “In my class... I also offer a parent training on personal safety. It is designed specifically for parents. It tells them what all kinds of things they need to be looking out for in the way of predators, and it also gives them strategies on how to talk to their children and how to set rules in their home regarding predators and their children’s safety.”
- *Sally* spoke about the Hispanic parents: “We have a parent meeting for non-English speaking parents and try to give them ideas of how to help their children. Usually we have (someone) there to interpret.”

From the middle school group, *Kate* presented an additional idea in regards to training: “Sometimes during parent-teacher conferences, teachers give the parents literature on topics

that they might need some help with, and talk with them a little bit about it, and give them some ideas.”

### Limited Professional Development Opportunities Concerning Poverty

Participants in all three focus groups recalled a 2-day Ruby Payne poverty training that was offered a few years ago at White Pine School during in-service training. Both the primary and middle school groups mentioned additional training in which they took part.

- *Jane*, from the primary focus group commented, “I did a Ruby Payne poverty training book study in the spring of 2011, and it was excellent. I would do it again.” When asked about where it was held and how many were present, she commented, “It was at White Pine School but it was open to all schools in the district. Maybe twelve or so participated total.”
- *Kate* from the middle school focus group added, “I know they do offer the classes at Carson-Newman and other places, because previously I had taken a class. I think it was the Ruby Payne one and some of those classes on teaching kids from poverty.”

### Limited Poverty Discussions in Professional Learning Communities

Teachers were asked if they had participated in professional learning community activities that involved their students of poverty as the topic, and the three groups had different responses.

- *Sally* from the primary focus group stated, “I can’t say that there is not a time that we aren’t discussing students that are in poverty, because we have so many in our classrooms and so it is kind of an ongoing discussion, you might say, and that we are concerned that this child doesn’t have clothing presentable to come to school. What we do is keep extra clothes at school, so, if someone comes in and they need to be

changed or clean and presentable for school, then we have some clothes to put on them. Also, providing them materials for school, because they may come with nothing, so having extra backpacks, crayons, and pencils – basic things. That is something ongoing but the main thing there is to try to make that child feel that they are the same as their classmates and to help make sure they are feeling like they can belong here.”

- *Jane*, also from the primary group, added, “I think that most of our PLC time is spent on more administrative-type things because we are so unique. We have so many different types of requirements and regulations that we haven’t really dedicated the time that we probably should have to concerns of poverty, but, in our own classroom at different times, we have found that children are coming to school with clothing that doesn’t fit, and I have gone out and found donations of clothing for students in need in my classroom. I also have clothing that I have stored in my classroom.”
- *Sarah*, from the intermediate focus group, replied, “We talk about how a lot of these children do not have any help at home. As a fourth-grade parent this year, it was eye-opening – the fourth-grade curriculum and what we did at home. You think about these kids that are in poverty and don’t have the help at home, and you wonder how they survive in education.”
- *Janice*, from the intermediate focus group, remarked, “We talked about just because they are in poverty; you still need to have high expectations of them. Being in poverty doesn’t mean ignorance.”
- *Tammy*, also from the intermediate focus group, added, “The poverty status plays an extreme role in the types of school supplies we request and the types of field trips we

take – the types of projects we assign in class... We made a modification on the county website this year for fifth grade just because our families are high poverty. The county requires a science project for fifth-graders, but it does not say 'science fair project', so we chose instead to have the kids have options – whether they choose to do the board and display, which is very expensive, conduct a new experiment that costs a huge amount. We gave our kids the option of participating in the science fair or just conducting an experiment, and we called that our science fair project.”

- *Kate*, from the middle school focus group, added, “I feel like we are on the same page as well, and, when the kids see that we are together trying to help them, then they are going to want to learn even a little more. If they think you care about them, then they do want to please you.”

#### Development of College Partnerships

Participants in both the primary group and the sixth-through-eighth-grade group mentioned colleges in the area that assign students to White Pine School but acknowledged that the partnerships could be made stronger.

- *Brenda*, from the primary group, commented, “I would love to have an education major come into my room and work with just a small group of kids that might be struggling on one specific topic, because there is a lot of times where, with 20 kids, you can't back up and go back and help one or two catch where they need to be. When I was in college, we used to volunteer our time at the elementary school across the street and go in and help... The students would catch up and be on grade level.”
- *Sherry*, from the middle school group, commented on how her class benefits from college and university students: “Basically, practicum students, student teachers,

occasionally in tutoring, they will come in and do single things. I personally, this summer, am working with summer school. I have partnered with one of the professors at Carson-Newman for their summer students to come over and actually do some teaching, some reading, and different things with the students. We are still working on the details of everything, but that's going to be something that is going to happen this summer." All within the group agreed that *Sherry's* way of using college students could be expanded school-wide and that they would like to have college professors involved in their classes too.

The participants in the intermediate focus group were not aware of any partnerships but were receptive to the idea once it was explained.

- *Ruth* commented, "They need hours, volunteer hours....Why not use that to our advantage?"
- *Tammy* added, "After-school tutoring – perhaps kids that are on work study could be placed in a school like ours."
- *Ruth* also stated, "Mentoring – that would definitely help with relationship issues...I don't think that academics are going to come first. I think you have to have that relationship or you are not going to get anywhere with them. So, with some kids, I think you focus a little bit more on that and then their academics that year because of what they are going through. Maybe a college student could understand that."
- *Tammy* added, "A couple of years ago we had a program with the high school called Service Learning, and that was extremely helpful for me, especially with my ESL students, to have that high school student come in and work with them and assist them with their homework and class work as well."

### Desire for Mentoring Program

Participants in all three focus groups mentioned that there was no mentoring program available at White Pine School. All three groups did believe that it could be valuable for the students, and participants in the primary and intermediate groups made some notable comments.

In the primary focus group, *Sally* stated, “If you are focusing on children living in poverty, that is really critical because they probably don’t have role models that they need in place, and, when they face these critical periods of their life where they are going from eighth grade to high school, that is a big adjustment. So, like you say, there is no support system there, so a mentor could be very beneficial in that regard.”

In the intermediate focus group,

- *Sarah* replied, “The Boys and Girls Club has been a wonderful program because a large number are on scholarships from there and they have the Power Hour and the mentoring. I know that the kids love going down there. I am thinking it is because they get attention and get cared for. They would rather go there than to go home... I would think, if you had a mentoring program just at White Pine, that would be very positive.
- *Ruth* said, “A lot of those kids are there all summer, all day long, every day. I don’t know how many of our kids go there, but there is a bus full. Those are college-age kids there, and they love it.”

### Programs Needed to Combat Absenteeism

Participants in the intermediate focus group were not aware of any programs at White Pine School that address absenteeism, while the participants in the primary and middle school focus groups discussed a certificate program that is sponsored by Chick-Fil-A.

In the primary group,

- *Brenda* stated, “The only thing I can think of is they send those Chick-Fil-A certificates ever so often to those kids that have perfect attendance.”
- *Jane* added, “Chick-Fil-A is not in our community... It is nice and wonderful that Chick-Fil-A wants to do that, but, if we have transportation with coming to school and it’s in our community, how are we going to drive outside of the community to go and pick up a Chick-Fil-A reward?”

In the middle school group,

- *Amy* commented, “Chick-Fil-A also sponsored an attendance program here for a free sandwich or something, but you have to go to Chick-Fil-A in Morristown to redeem those.”
- *Sherry* added, “A lot of my kids... that is when I would know that they never went out to eat, because they would not take the cards. They would say, ‘Do you want mine?’ Again, we are in a poverty area, so there are very few places, which makes it very difficult. You can go 20 miles down the road, and you have lots of things and partnerships with those schools.”

Participants in the middle school group offered more insights on programming in regards to combating absenteeism:

- *Amy* said, “We offer the goal and achiever cards, and they have perfect attendance on them. I don’t know if that is something the students strive to get, maybe in younger grades.”
- *Sherry* stated, “Years ago—we were on six weeks at the time—if they had perfect attendance, they did something special for them. I mean, a pencil nowadays to a kid

is nothing, but it used to be ok. Actually, every time the grade card went out, I remember for my experience that a sticker would go a long way. But what do you do for these kids that have these game systems? Even in poverty, they seem to have the game systems. So now how does my pencil compete with a game?"

### Demand for Additional Early Intervention Programs

Participants in all three focus groups spoke of Head Start and prekindergarten being available as early intervention programming. Participants also discussed speech therapy services that the school provides as an early intervention.

Participants in the primary group offered additional thoughts on early intervention programming:

- *Jane* stated, "The benefits are when they come to the class all year long; they learn social skills that are necessary before academic achievement can even begin to build. They have to learn how to be in that group."
- *Sally* commented, "Many years ago when my mother was teaching, kindergarten was more geared as the pre-k program is now. That focused on social, emotional development and interaction with peers, whereas now, pre-k does that because kindergarten is more academic. We often say to parents when they enroll their children, 'Don't expect it to be like kindergarten was when you were a child', which is a sad statement... Because developmentally five-year-olds are not really ready for the level of standards that are being presented and the expectations that are being placed upon them. It even sometimes creates behavior problems and that type of thing with the students. If you want to tie that back in to the students of poverty, if they didn't have the benefit of pre-k or Head Start, then their kindergarten year can be

spent addressing the social and emotional development and the interaction with peers that they did not get, whereas the other students are now at a level where they can address...academic and cognitive development, but the (low-income) students are at a disadvantage... And when you look at that, you think how can we reach those children? If they are children of poverty, they don't have the means if they didn't qualify for Head Start or pre-k. They don't have the means to pay for that preschool experience. So that kind of falls back to us – what can we do? Can we develop a program to where we can do home visits, or a program to put together little learning tubs of materials that parents can check out and work with their children at home? We really have a responsibility to kind of address that because it does put them at a disadvantage if they have not had some experience prior to kindergarten.”

- *Jane* added, “There are some early interventions programs that go into families’ homes and bring materials. They may visit once every other week, and they will come and talk with the parent and show them how to use the materials and how to play Candy Land with their child or whatever. They leave that game there for two weeks or so, and then they come back and bring something else... When I go to my home visits, I go one time, and I am met with apprehension. They are afraid I am coming in there to find out how horrible of a parent they are or if their house is clean. They don't understand that I am there to build rapport to help their child. They feel I am more adversarial than I really am”
- *Sally* remarked, “So when you talk about having actual people to help put this program into practice, then you would need people who are understanding of the situation and how the parents are going to react to them initially. They build a

relationship with them that they could make these visits periodically, and the children would greatly benefit from that.”

### Individual Interview Responses

#### Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

Participants in all five individual interviews discussed how they placed an emphasis on developing relationships with their students. Each interviewee had a different approach but all described the importance of relationship-building.

- *Lori*, a middle school teacher, discussed her own struggles with poverty in the past and that her background has helped her understand how to develop better relationships with her economically disadvantaged students: “Kindergarten through third grade, we didn’t always have enough food at home, didn’t have new school clothes or school supplies. What little my sister and I had was largely due to the help of my grandmothers, which a lot of these kids are getting help from their grandparents as well. I wanted to be treated like all the other students in my class. I see a lot of my kids with that same look. They don’t want to stand out. I vividly remember two particular teachers that I had who did not give me the same learning opportunities as they did the other students in my class. I felt like they singled me out. I was already scared that they were judging me based on my home life. So today in my own classroom, I pay close attention to those who might be in that same situation. I want them to have an equal chance to learn and not feel intimidated. I try to interact with my students equally and not show favoritism based on their outward appearances.”

- John*, a middle school special education teacher, discussed how his program allows him to develop positive relationships over a longer period of time. He commented on the importance of not judging his students: “I think it is probably a little bit easier for me because I am in a small group setting. I think my largest setting is about 14 students. That’s obviously much smaller than a general education classroom. I also get an opportunity to work with sixth-to-eighth grades so once I develop a relationship with the students in sixth grade; I have three years to kind of cultivate that relationship. First, I listen, and I try to stay around the students - stay around their peer groups, learn their likes and dislikes – and then, in light conversation, try to use those as the building blocks to grow our relationship. I think probably another thing that I do personally is I do not judge them. I do not condemn them for their actions outside of school. I think so many times they are expected to come right in off the bus, put on their school hat, and go to work, and they have to have the opportunity to shed what’s gone on from the night before or the day before. So if you don’t condemn or judge them for that, then they are going to want to continue. Or they gravitate towards me for conversation.”
- Emily*, a first-year elementary-school teacher, described the value of forming a classroom family: “It has to be established with trust and a valued relationship. Establish a safe environment and a sense of community and safety in the classroom... they like to think that we are a classroom family, a classroom community, and that we take care of one another.” When asked if she had seen her students’ progress throughout the year, she responded, “They had no social skills when working with

- their own age group and team building or group building exercises. They have really come so far working with one another productively and successfully.”
- *Pam*, a kindergarten teacher, discussed the importance of treating her students equally regardless of their backgrounds: “... in kindergarten we have an advantage because it is their first introduction to school, and I don’t think they realize there is a difference between them and anyone else. They do not see color difference, economic difference, so I think I do have an advantage dealing with all students, and I think we in kindergarten treat them all the same no matter where they come from. I greet them each morning as they come in the door with a hello or whatever to set their day off, hopefully, in a good way – no matter what has happened at home, no matter how their morning began.”
  - *Glenda*, a pre-first-grade teacher, talked about how she has a full-time aide and the benefits that brings for relationship-building in her classroom: “Two-thirds of my students have already had a year of kindergarten, and many times they come to me because they have had a disadvantage in their life – because they’ve not been in a pre-school program and they’ve not had the help at home from their parents that they should have – whether it’s lack of caring or whether it’s lack of time. So we try to look at each child as they come and see where they are and see how we can best get them where they need to be. The purpose of the program is to foster their skills so they can be a successful student. In order to do that, you have to understand where they are coming from. And, as I said, many of them come from situations that are not always the best and so we try to get to know them. I have a full-time aide, so there are two of us in the classroom of 18 students, rather than just one (teacher) and an aide

there sometimes. It allows us to spend more time with the students, even on a one-on-one basis, to learn about their life. You know five- and six-year-olds. They'll tell you most anything about their life you want to know. But we try to gain as much information from them as we can. I've seen some children who really needed that extra attention and that extra adult influence, because they don't get it many times outside of here. I try to learn a lot about each of my students, so I can help them in the classroom. And it does help me in the classroom."

### A Variety of Ways to Build Confidence

Participants in all five interviews discussed ways in which they instill confidence in their economically disadvantaged students. Their methods varied in several ways.

- *Lori* discussed analyzing a student's outlook before moving forward with a plan for success: "I first try to examine, even though they might be living in a poverty-type situation. I have noticed that there are two different types with our students, with anybody for that matter, not just children. You have those that want to do better and then you have those that seem to be perfectly fine with the way they are living. So you have to address them differently, I think. For some, it seems like it has just become their lifestyle. It is just the way they are choosing to live their life. It is a hard cycle to break. This may be the type of behavior they have always had in front of them. Their parents have lived this way; their grandparents have lived this way in poverty; so, here at school, opportunities given through field trips and extracurricular activities can sometimes open a lot of doors and give them a chance to see what else is out there."

- *John* discussed the importance of creating individualized opportunities for success: “Probably just giving opportunities to succeed and a lot of opportunities to succeed, like ungraded, unjudged opportunities – I do believe that success breeds success, and the successes are as individual as the student is...One thing I have learned in special education is that everything is so individualized. Every person is their own creature, and they set standards and goals. When you see their successes, their victories and their losses, they are all going to be tailored to them.”
- *John* also discussed the importance of praising his students’ achievements: “It empowers them, I think, to know that they are not the only person that has been through this – and then just praise them – praise and praise and praise.” *John* also talked about building confidence through setting attainable, realistic goals for his special-education students: “In special education, we have to do the transitional planning for students after their IEPs, and we set obtainable goals for them and they set the goals. I sometimes have to – you know, if they have goals of being the president of the United States or a brain surgeon – help guide them and their path a little bit. But I think at the end of the day, when they look at what they’ve got in front of them, they have a plan for independence. So I think that is certainly key – having a plan and building hope.”
- *Emily*, an elementary-school teacher with a high concentration of economically disadvantaged students, talked about the importance of trust prior to building confidence: “The first step is establishing the relationship, trusting, and – knowing that a lot of their particular problems are thinking that the adult is going to disappear – understanding that I am going to be here no matter what. They are stuck with me.”

And mutual trust – they know that I trust them and they trust me. So we have to build that relationship – common trust. When forming classroom rules and expectations, they are active participants in that. We came up with those together, and we came up with a classroom contract. If they are involved in it, then they have been much more willing to follow those.”

- *Pam* made remarks about controlling the school environment in order to help her students feel successful: “I think, for one thing, we do talk about what happens at school that we can control at school, whether it be language, whether it be how they feel about themselves. We try to make them feel confident at school in any way, in a little way, even if one child is reading, the other might know his ABCs. But we still make them feel safe and successful at school, hopefully to carry on when they do go home.”
- *Glenda* discussed how her program is designed to give a majority of her students a second chance at gaining skills they missed: “The program lends itself to that anyway, especially for those students who did get a year of kindergarten and did not get the skills that they need. Because when you send a child on to first grade when they’re not ready... First grade is difficult... and if they are not ready, they are going to feel unsuccessful. The purpose of the (pre-first-grade) program is to build the students’ skills as well as their confidence, and I can send them to first grade and know that they are ready for first grade so that they’re not going to feel like a failure. I feel like the program has been very successful in that, because I have seen kids who are in economically disadvantaged situations, and, when I look at just the last honor roll that came out, I look to see the kids that I had in this program. There are a lot of

them there that probably would not have been without the program. Early intervention is the key. The program is an intervention program within itself for those kids to get them where they need to be so they can be successful all the way through school.”

### Maintaining High Expectations

Participants in all five interviews discussed their expectation levels in relation to students of poverty. Each interviewee stated that their students’ economic status did not affect their level of expectations.

- *Lori* stated that she focuses on accountability when it comes to expectations: “Something else, I don’t really call it reality therapy, but it is something that I studied in one of my classes, and it is from William Glasser, *Choice Theory*. It is just getting them to understand that the only person in the world that they can control is themselves. They can’t control anybody else, but they can do something about the decisions that they make. And that...helps them be accountable for their actions and teaches them how to be successful inside and outside the classroom.”
- *John* talked about increasing expectation levels slowly: “That is key, that you raise the bar on the kiddos, but you let them know that you have changed or raised the demand... how they rose to the occasion... that kind of avoids the self doubt that they may experience if they don’t know that you have changed what you have going.”
- *Emily* explained the difference in having sympathy and expectation levels: “Having sympathy for their situation and expectations to me are two totally different things. My expectations for them are no different than the other students in my class. Now my expectations are varied/different based on each child’s abilities and skills, but

- poverty or lack of income has nothing to do with how far they can go. They can rise to their individual expectations if they have the support.”
- *Pam* described a no-excuses approach: “They know in the classroom that I expect the best out of every child, (including) behavior, and we don’t make excuses. That is one thing we do in the kindergarten classroom. They have to own up to what they have done no matter their situation, even if they have had a bad morning. That’s why I try to communicate with them so that doesn’t carry over, and that’s real important to them that they don’t put blame on anything other than themselves. They take ownership in what they do both academically and behavior(ally), and I think that makes them own up to what they have done and be more successful...But we sure don’t make any difference in expectations. They know that I expect the best from every child.”
  - *Glenda* described her pre-first-grade group’s differences as a perfect blend: “I try to treat all my students the same. Typically the students that I have that are upcoming kindergartners are... that would have been in a traditional kindergarten class who scored real well... are not in that economically disadvantaged group. I have two types of kids. And it has always been amazing to me how those two types of kids mesh with each other. I feel like it’s good for those children to get to know others from those disadvantaged situations, because I think it builds that relationship, too. I try to keep my level of expectations the same for all of my students. The children that come to me, especially from that kindergarten level, are really on the same level and so I am able to start pretty much on the same level and progress them to where they need to be. I do feel bad for some of the situations for the children, but I do try to let them

know that I do expect them to behave. I do expect them to be able to learn, I do expect them... You know if you say that enough, they'll believe it."

### Importance of Enrichment Opportunities

All participants in individual interviews described a variety of opportunities and experiences that they try to create throughout the course of the school year that open their students' eyes to the world outside of White Pine School.

- *Lori* described a field trip experience to a baseball game out of state: "Many of our students have never even left Jefferson County or visited a nearby county so to go to a ballgame, to tour the Coke plant, to see what else is out there in the world is an eye-opener and encourages them to do better and to work harder."
- *John* talked about what he would like to do in the future and briefly about what he does within his own middle school special education class: "I would love to see in the future us be able to take some of our kids and almost do like a work-release program or kind of work in conjunction with our Boys and Girls Club – something to that effect – where these kids can get out and experience some real-life situations. Probably the only other enrichment things I am able to do as a middle school teacher would be what we do through life skills training and budget training, transition planning, and then letting the kids set their goals so that by the time they have completed their educational career, they know where they are, and they know what they have accomplished, and they know kind of what is laying ahead of them."
- *Emily* described her approach to enrichment through creation of a group of supportive adults: "A big factor is making myself available to them. They know they can come to me for whatever and whenever. But a big thing this year with the group I have

was...creating a network of support. The guidance counselor here and I have worked together all year long to provide opportunities or support systems for kids that are going through different traumatic things, and I plan to continue that next year...”

- *Pam* created a variety of enrichment opportunities ranging from farm animals to guest speakers: “Well, other than the field trips, which we just do a few a year, which we do introduce them to different things, but...I bring farm animals and farm things to the classroom, so they actually get to feel, touch, be around farm animals – whether it be chickens, pigs, goats, sheep – those things that children have never seen. And that helps them understand where groceries and other things come from. It really makes it real to them. And we also bring in community helpers from our community. We bring in nurses and other employees that actually talk to the children and through the computer now and through the Promethean board. It also opens up so we can show them film on Africa or we can show them film on ocean animals, which we are doing right now. So that’s something that is available to all kids in the classroom.”
- *Glenda* spoke of meaningful field trips for her pre-first-grade class and the reasons these trips are important: “Some of my favorite trips are like when we take them to see a play performed on stage...because many of them...that is something they have never experienced. They may have gone to a movie and watched in on a screen. And I’ve had some of them say when we’ve sat down, ‘Where’s the screen?’ And this is in the theater, and I tell them you are going to have live people come out. So that’s a neat experience for them. We’ve taken them to the zoo which is really amazing for them because those animals they may have seen on TV, but not live. This past year, we took our kids to the Rainforest Adventures in Sevierville, and they had some

really unique unusual animals... Before the trip, I had gone just to see what it was about and so I was telling them about some of the animals that they were going to see, and they were just so excited...I told them they had a two-headed turtle, and I heard about that turtle for about a week before we went on the trip. It was just something they had never seen, something they had just never done. It was a really good trip, and they got to see some things they would have never been able to experience. I like giving them that opportunity.”

### Teaching Strategies Focused on Active Learning

Participants described a variety of teaching strategies that involved movement, hands-on opportunities, and connections to the real world.

- *Lori* commented, “...cooperative learning, peer tutoring, think-pair-share, active learning, whatever you want to call it. A lot of times these students have difficulty concentrating, so getting to talk or move around in a structured environment helps them to learn better. They enjoy working with manipulatives, so, since I teach math, that just goes right along with it... hands-on not just them sitting there listening to a lecture. And then I always try to incorporate a little humor. I mean it keeps their attention, and it alleviates a lot of stress for these kids.”
- *John* discussed the importance of connections: “The strategy that I hang my hat on is connecting to real life. Making real-life connections out of every lesson that we teach, whether it be...reading a passage or a selection, and then I have them make real-life connections, or, in math, I have them make real-life connections. I just think that it is imperative, so many times with my crew. They definitely are going to verbalize their discontent. They are going to let me know, ‘Hey, when are we ever

going to use this?’ or ‘Why do I need to know that?’ So anytime I can put a real-life situation, I use their lives. I wrap it around hunting or babysitting – their current interests as well as where they can go with that. The lessons are probably shorter. I don’t give them as much. They are kind of like an inch deep and a mile wide, but at least it is connected to what they know, and that helps them relate.”

- *Emily* talked about the balance of strategies: “Well, going back to the social skills, balance was huge this year for mine. Balancing whole group with small group, with team or individual, was very important. Giving them different modes of learning, so they can build those essential social skills – that was huge for them this year. They have made so much progress and growth.”
- *Pam* talked about placing as many objects as she could in their hands: “Well, I think it has to be hands-on, something they can touch, feel...books, for example. Sometimes that is a disadvantage that they have never seen, held books/literature. That’s one disadvantage that I think they may have, and so I try to have a lot of print available to them, different print. But they need to touch it, feel it. We write with many different objects, because kids may not have pencils and crayons at home. We have a writing center where they get to use a pen like they may find at mom and dad’s or a marker... a piece of chalk...shaving cream and other things. Just gives them different things where, even if they don’t have a book,...we teach them that they can read signs. They can read a newspaper – to circle things (on) a circular that they get from the supermarket that’s available to all of them. They can circle words that they know, so that gives them tools that they can use in their everyday life. Learning numbers by using the remote control is another tool... Connections to the real world

that they don't have to buy, but they have it in their house... That's the main strategy. I guess that would be hands on."

- *Glenda* emphasized the use of art and one-on-one attention: "I think it helps a child who is economically disadvantaged to give them hands-on opportunities... to manipulate things... even if it's paint or a paint brush. I try to enrich the class with art. We have a wonderful art program, but they only get that experience once a week. So I try to provide them with opportunities there. Because I have a full-time aide, she and I are able to do a lot of small groups and even some one-on-one work. I have found that your economically disadvantaged kids are the ones who typically do not have a lot of help at home, so it helps to do a lot of one-on one with them or small group with them to make up for that loss at home."

#### Small, Meaningful Doses of Homework

During the individual interviews the participants discussed their use of homework. They all seemed to assign homework sparingly for a variety of reasons they explained.

- *Lori* described her practices: "We have a little bit of homework each day... When I first began teaching, I expected more of it to be done at home... At that time, it seemed like students did complete more of it at home, and I had more parents involved helping them. Here in the last few years, I can't count on that. If there's anything that I send home, it usually winds up getting lost, unfinished, or it is just left at home. Or, if the student has taken it home and needed help, they couldn't get any help. Most often, that's the children's comment: 'I tried to take it home, but no one could help me with it.' I try to allow enough time in class so they can get it done... Also, for any kind of paper that needs to go home, my students won't take it

home or, if they do take it home, I don't know if parents look at it, so I have to offer extra credit. If they will get their parents to sign it and bring it back to me showing that somebody has looked at it, for example, I will give ten points to a homework assignment."

- *John*, who rarely gives homework, explained, "Well, I just think it's my job to facilitate their learning and make sure that before they leave that day that they have a handle on what they are doing. And I definitely don't want them going home and...be exposed to incorrect practices so that, not only do they not know the subject matter, but they know it...incorrectly. I am definitely not implying that my way is the only way that they can practice or learn something; however, I don't want them to go home and try to rush through something because something else is going on..."
- *Emily* talked about her homework assignments regarding reading and mathematics: "Usually, reading every night is the big thing in first grade. I tell my parents no more than 20 minutes or so. As far as what they read, we have a weekly story we are reviewing certain skills with. I send home phonics readers or self-selected reading, such as library books or anything like that. Usually three to four times a week, they have some type of math skill-building homework...The math series we have now in first grade is very wordy, so I have to go over directions/instructions so they can understand it, because there is no one at home that is going to help them go over it. Some don't get it accomplished. We end up going over it during morning meeting or morning work with them." When asked about whether the books were hers or the schools, *Emily* replied, "Some are mine that they take home. Well, it was a building process. Some at the beginning of the year took advantage of that, but, now that we

- have gone over that Ms. Emily has to buy them and purchase them out of her own money, it is a big deal that they get to borrow one of my books.”
- *Pam* also talked about how much her students enjoy the books she sends home: “One thing we do is I send a book bag with every child, no matter what, and if those get lost, then they get lost and I’ll replace them. That’s not an issue for us, but we just send Ziploc bags with a little reader, so those parents have a book to read daily or look through with those children. Even if the parents cannot read, they have something they can look through... Even if they can’t read it, they look at it with their parents, and all their parents have to do is sign off that they read it... Out of our 20 students, I get about 17 or 18 books brought back a day... Those economically disadvantaged students are the ones that are the most proud of their book bag because they cherish that... You just have some that forget, and I don’t make a big deal when they do not bring it back that day... I tell them, ‘Some days your parents and you may have other things to do... Read it the next day’, and it goes back in. Most of the time they tell me, I didn’t get to read it tonight – can I please read it again?’ I tell them, ‘Yes’, and that’s all that is done. I don’t make a big deal. It’s just not a competition. It’s just something fun that they get to do with their parents, and I think that it helps.”
  - *Glenda* talked about the way she is able to get her parents involved with helping their child at home: “I do send math homework home... it’s nothing major, but I do send it home maybe a couple times a week. I’ll send reading books home maybe a couple times a week for them just to practice their reading skills. I try to notice who brings that math homework back the next day, because they are required to bring it back the next day, and I send home a card that the parent has to sign with the reading book. It’s

wonderful if they practice their reading skills, but the main thing I would rather they do is just sit down and spend that time with their child. Whether it's getting the homework done or whatever, it's a time of maybe ten to fifteen minutes of them just sitting down with their child and just spending some time with them. And if it takes homework to get that done, then that's what has to happen. I never send home anything that's a long, drawn-out process or anything – very short and very easy, because they're five and six and their attention span is very short. I provide the materials, and sometimes those are my own personal materials... To me, that's part of the job.”

### Limited Tutoring Opportunities

Three out of five participants offered limited tutoring during second-load bus duty time, one incorporated tutoring during the day, and one did not offer any tutoring.

- *Lori* explained, “When I see the need that a child needs to be tutored, it seems to be most effective if I do it. Several of them ride the bus home in the afternoon, so I try to get them during that time. Otherwise, it is hard for them to get a ride home. Or, if I can, (I) pull them out of a special area during the day, which is my last resort.”
- *John* said he did not offer tutoring but explained an alternative provided for his students: “The special education department in Jefferson County offers a tutoring program county-wide. We have it here at White Pine School. I personally am not involved in it. We have another lady that works here in our school system that comes to school for the gifted and talented program. She takes care of the after-school tutoring, and then our elementary special-education teacher takes care of our after-school tutoring for our K-5.”

- *Emily* described her efforts at tutoring: “I don’t do any kind of formal tutoring. I have three kids that have little-to-no support at home, so they are second-load bus riders. So I have extra time with them in the afternoons. They stay with me two to three times a week, and we go over assignments or homework or review things/skills that we have done that day. Maybe extending that next year would be a goal.”
- *Pam* talked about tutoring within the school day: “We do RTI (Response to Intervention), which is available when my assistant is in the room. We do get to pull them one-on-one. We also do what is called work jobs in my classroom... It’s kind of like center time, where they have some play areas. But I mix it in with academic areas, where I can pull those who are needed for extra help... Also,... especially those boys and girls who ride the bus early or are late here in the afternoon, we have as a kindergarten group. We will and can pull them, if need be, just to read a book with them or spend five minutes here or there with them.”
- *Glenda* also talked about use of the second-load bus duty time for tutoring: “I had a group the year before last. I had three little boys who were really struggling, and it just so happened they rode a late bus. So there were many days that I would keep them in the classroom, and we would work on word-wall words or play some type of learning game, just to provide them with a little extra because they were struggling. We had that 25 or 30 minutes that they would have just been sitting in the hall waiting for their bus.

### Teachers’ Multiple Data Collection Methods

Participants were able to name several means by which they collect data on their students’ progress throughout the year.

- *Lori* stated, “Before we begin a new lesson, I start off with daily oral questions from the previous material. That way I get everybody engaged. They are talking; they are on track. I give frequent quizzes to keep their memory fresh (and do) a lot of formative assessments. Of course, it is based on previous performance... Then the daily homework problems – we always do some together and then, after I have guided them through those, I expect them to do a little on their own. I also look at data from T-CAP scores, ACT Explorer, and all those Discovery Assessments. I take that into consideration as well.”
- *John* discussed his list of data collection methods: “The special education department county-wide has several ‘programs in a can.’ There are a lot of computer-based programs that offer repetition, and all of those generate data. They all have reward games at the end of a section or something like that, so the kids see their progress both through the data and the games or trophies or whatever it is they receive. I personally have to monitor progress from the beginning of the year, to the end of the year because of the number of students I have with specific learning disabilities. I think this year I had four reevaluations on students with SLDs alone... I kind of use the same monitoring techniques with my entire caseload that I use with those guys, so it just kind of keeps continuity with all of them... I personally use a lot of formative assessments. I use small snapshots daily of what the kids are doing and then allow them to self-assess and discuss with me... I kind of go back to my teaching technique that I hang my hat on. It really lends itself to discussion, and, when you have good, small-group discussion, you are going to see what they are getting and what needs to be revisited.”

- *Emily* produced a detailed list of assessments: “Well, we do weekly assessments; we do benchmark assessments, small group testing, observations, and formative assessments. We have reading series testing, the Fry words, the Yopp-Singer assessment.”
- *Pam* also discussed her various data collection methods: “Of course the different summative assessments that we do... We also use RTI if they are on that... and also sight words/Fry words. That’s done weekly with every single child, and, that way, I know exactly when we pull them in small groups. I try to group a few that need the same skill to work on – and numbers as well, so that’s done with math as well. It is just basically one-on-one and that doesn’t take that long.”
- *Glenda’s* data collection is unique in that she works with material from two grade levels in a year’s time: “The way the (pre-first-grade)program is set up, I do more type of kindergarten skills at the first half of the year...I use a Scott-Foresman system to do the letters and sounds. The Envision math comes with benchmark assessments and end-of-the-chapter assessments, and so I use those. With the letters and sounds, I kind of do my own assessing as far as giving them a sound test or something like that, where I give them a sound and they have to write the letter that corresponds with the sound, so I can see if they have mastered that for that week. The last half of the year, I do more first-grade skills. I use an older first-grade reading series, and it has some assessment tools with it. I also start spelling tests when I start the first grade stuff, so that I can see that they’ve gone from knowing the letters and sounds to being able to put it together. And then I use the first-grade Envision the second half of the year and use those benchmark assessments to assess the math.”

## Summary

Analysis of the data concerning teacher's perceptions of how they and the school as a whole have been serving the economically disadvantaged population yielded several themes. Concerning home-school relationships teachers were able to list several ways that the school works with the community to assist families in need. There was a consensus that turning the school into a full-service school would further benefit economically disadvantaged families. Only a few parent training opportunities could be named, and it was noted that very few families attend. Teachers discussed only a few professional development opportunities focusing on students of poverty that had been offered in the past few years.

In addition, participants named only two professional learning community topics that were discussed throughout the year. Partnerships with local colleges were discussed, and all agreed that they could be improved. Teachers noted that no mentoring program was in place but thought it could be beneficial to students. Absenteeism initiatives were also discussed. The teachers felt that few initiatives were in place but believed the need exists for them at school. Teachers noted early-intervention programs in place but relayed the need for more programs to meet the high demand.

Teachers discussed the importance they place on developing positive relationships with students of poverty through the interactions they have with their students. All participants talked about providing opportunities for success within their classrooms to build confidence. These teachers also maintained high expectations for all of their students. All discussed the importance of providing meaningful enrichment opportunities for students of poverty and gave examples. Teachers reported using hands-on teaching strategies to help their students of poverty learn, and they reported giving only small amounts of homework. Tutoring opportunities were discussed,

and teachers pointed out few examples. Also, teachers listed several ways that they collect data on their students.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to assess teacher perceptions of how economically disadvantaged students at White Pine School were being served. This qualitative study was conducted by interviewing five individual teachers and three focus groups with approximately four teachers in each group. The researcher sent a letter to all teachers at White Pine School requesting volunteers to participate (see Appendix B). Participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix C), and a protocol was used for both individual interviews and focus-group interviews (see Appendixes D & E). A document review also was conducted using faculty meeting and professional learning community agendas, and school plans were analyzed.

White Pine School is located in rural Jefferson County, Tennessee, in the town of White Pine. This pre-kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school serves over 800 children, and 73% of the student body is considered economically disadvantaged, qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches (Tennessee Department of Education Report Card, 2011). With such a high population of students living in poverty, a study was required to learn teachers' knowledge of these children and how their ability to learn can be improved.

#### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to assess teacher perceptions of how economically disadvantaged students at White Pine School were being served. The researcher hoped that the findings could serve as a starting point for providing additional needed supports at both the school level and classroom/teacher level.

## Conclusions from Research Questions

### Research Question #1

1. What schoolwide initiatives and/or programs are in place for students of poverty at White Pine School? What do teachers perceive as the value of these initiatives and/or programs? What are the opportunities for improving learning conditions for economically disadvantaged students?

### Effective Home-School Relationships

Participants in all three focus groups were able to name a variety of ways that White Pine School works to build positive home-school relationships between families of poverty and the school. All three groups pointed out the food that is sent home on the weekends for students in need and their families. *Brenda* discussed the benefits of an interpreter to assist communication between Spanish-speaking families and teachers. It was evident that use of the Family Resource Center was an important tool for helping families in need with a variety of areas, including clothing, food, and supplies. The importance of help from area churches also was emphasized.

*Sherry* pointed out the success of parent nights, stating that several families attend and enjoy the free food and books provided. *Amy* noted that many teachers provided for students in need out of the teachers' personal funds to ensure that these students had school supplies, personal hygiene products, clothing, and food. All participants from the three focus groups were positive about White Pine School's outreach to families in need.

### Desire to Become a Full-Service School

Participants in all three focus groups cited a strong need for White Pine School to become a full-service school. All participants agreed that partnerships with practitioners and other community volunteers would be necessary in order to make the program a success. *Sarah* stated

that she had students in her class who had never gone to the dentist and felt that offering dental treatment would be very beneficial. *Tammy* pointed out that many of the Hispanic students of poverty in her classroom had never had medical care and thought that the full-service concept could benefit students in need. *Ruth* also talked about how she felt that parents already were looking to the school for medical help, because some of her students reported that their parents wanted them to see the school nurse to seek advice concerning treatment.

#### Limited Parent Training Opportunities and Participation

The data revealed that only a few training opportunities for parents and families of poverty are offered at White Pine School. Participants from all three focus groups stated that *Parenting with Love and Logic* classes were offered for families who were in need of support concerning appropriate parenting styles. *Jane* stated that it was “sad” that so very few families participate. She also stated that she offered an important training on personal safety for the parents of her students. *Sally* discussed a parent night offered for non-English-speaking parents, but this event did not focus on families living in poverty. *Kate* commented about literature that sometimes was passed out for parents at parent-teacher conferences for training on particular topics but did not mention whether it was effective. Beyond these few examples, teachers were not able to name additional training opportunities offered for parents and families of poverty.

#### Limited Professional Development Opportunities Concerning Poverty

The data revealed that only three opportunities for professional development on the topic of poverty have been offered to teachers at White Pine School over the past few years.

Participants from all three focus groups commented about a 2-day Ruby Payne poverty training offered a few years ago during teacher in-service time. *Jane* commented about a Ruby Payne poverty study offered in the spring of 2011 open to the entire county. *Kate* talked about a Ruby

Payne seminar that she attended at an area college. No other professional development opportunities were named.

#### Limited Poverty Discussions in Professional Learning Communities

The data revealed that structured discussions on the topic of poverty were few in number during the time allocated for professional learning communities. *Sally* from the primary group pointed out that discussion concerning students in need often took place and that she and her coworkers tried to provide for those students. *Jane* stated that her professional learning community time was used mostly for administrative duties. An intermediate focus group participant, *Tammy*, was able to discuss modifications that she and her coworkers made to the science fair project to make this activity more affordable for students in need. Participants produced no other professional learning community discussions concerning students of poverty.

#### Development of College Partnerships

Participants in the study indicated that White Pine School works in conjunction with area colleges by hosting practicum students and student teachers. When other possibilities for college partnerships were discussed, participants were extremely open to additional assistance. *Tammy* commented that the partnerships could be made stronger in areas of tutoring, with assistance that could be provided by college students participating in work-study programs. *Ruth* pointed out that a mentoring program could be designed that includes partnerships with area colleges. Participants from the middle school focus group had positive comments regarding the possibility of involving professors from area colleges to obtain assistance beyond assignment of students to White Pine School.

### Desire for Mentoring Program

The data revealed that White Pine School did not have a mentoring program in place. There was consensus, however, that a mentoring program would be beneficial for students of poverty. *Sally* discussed the need for positive role models for students of poverty from mentors who could provide support for an extended period of time. *Sarah* talked about the success of the Boys and Girls Club's mentoring program and how their model could be adopted by the faculty and staff at White Pine School. All participants agreed that the students of poverty at White Pine School could benefit from a comprehensive mentoring program.

### Programs Needed to Combat Absenteeism

The data indicated a few incentives offered for students that maintained perfect attendance. Participants in the intermediate focus group were not aware of any programs that were available to prevent absenteeism. Participants in the other two focus groups, however, discussed perfect-attendance certificates offered by Chick-Fil-A and pointed out their ineffectiveness because the restaurant was not located in the White Pine area. *Jane* commented that many students had transportation issues in regards to getting to school and, therefore, could not travel out of town to a restaurant. *Sherry* commented that she could point out the students that did not have the means to go to Chick-Fil-A, because they gave their certificates away. One participant in the middle school focus group, *Amy*, noted that a card with coupons to local businesses was distributed to students with perfect attendance. Overall, participants felt the need for additional programs that offered incentives within the community of White Pine.

### Demand for Additional Early Intervention Programs

The data revealed that two early-intervention programs were offered for students of poverty at White Pine School: Head Start and prekindergarten. The participants in all three

groups pointed out that there was a demand for additional early-intervention programs. *Sally* discussed the fact that kindergarten used to be focused on meeting the developmental needs of students beginning school but that kindergarten was now more focused on academic learning. She stated that the students who did not have the opportunity to participate in Head Start or prekindergarten were at a disadvantage. *Jane* discussed some sources that could provide materials to students in need that did not have the opportunity to participate in early intervention programs. Participants were eager to brainstorm about ideas to provide additional opportunities for early intervention for students of poverty not receiving services.

### Conclusions from Research Question #2

2. What classroom-level, teacher-initiated supports are in place for students of poverty at White Pine School? What do teachers perceive as the value of these supports? What are the opportunities for improving learning conditions for economically disadvantaged students?

### Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

All five participants interviewed described how they valued developing relationships with their students. Each participant had his or her own way of developing relationships, but a common theme was the use of conversation to learn about their students.

*Lori* discussed that she came from poverty and was, therefore, able to relate well to her students of poverty. She talked about recognizing “the look” from students – the same look she felt she once had. She said that look indicated that they did not want to be singled out or appear different in any way. *Lori* indicated that because of her experiences she tried to treat every student the same and give them an equal chance to learn.

*John* said he had the same students for 3 years and was able to get to know them very well. He also discussed the importance of not judging students and giving them the necessary time in the mornings to forget about what has gone on at home before they can focus on school.

Relationships were developed in the classroom of one respondent, *Emily*, through looking at the whole picture. She tried to create a family atmosphere and have her students take care of one another as if they were family. She stressed the importance of learning to work together and building social skills, because she feels that many of her students of poverty are lacking in that area.

*Pam* talked about the benefits of developing relationships with her students in kindergarten. She stated that her students did not realize that they may be different from each other in the area of socioeconomic status. She, therefore, took advantage of that fact and worked hard at developing relationships with her students by talking to each student individually.

Relationships were described by *Glenda* as being a very important part of her class design. She talked about having a full-time aide (not available to the other participants) and how this extra assistance allowed her and the aide to work with each student in her class on a one-on-one basis.

#### A Variety of Ways to Build Confidence

The data revealed that all teachers tried to find ways to help their students of poverty so that all students become confident in their abilities to be successful. Each participant had a unique way of building confidence.

*Lori* discussed how she analyzed her students' outlook on life and then moved toward developing opportunities that help each child individually build confidence. *John* also talked about helping each child with an individual plan to help them build confidence. He also

discussed the effectiveness of praising his students and helping his students set realistic and attainable goals.

*Emily* pointed out the importance for her students of poverty to trust her and to believe that she would not desert them. Having that security helped them to maintain confidence. *Pam* also pointed out that having a controlled, safe environment in her classroom allowed students to feel confident, focus on learning, and being successful.

*Glenda*, who taught a transition class, described her class as being a second chance for most of her students. This second chance allows them to gain confidence by mastering skills that they did not the previous year.

#### Maintaining High Expectations

The data revealed that teachers perceived that their expectation levels for their students of poverty were the same as the rest of the student body. Each participant in individual interviews focused on different aspects of expectation levels. *Lori* felt that making her students accountable for their actions was her greatest expectation for all students. *John* felt that it was important to raise expectation levels slowly and tell the students that the bar was being raised. *Emily* mentioned that she varied expectations based on her students' abilities and not their socioeconomic status. *Pam* felt that she had high expectations for all of her students and that she stressed that no excuses were accepted from her students who tried to do less than their best. *Glenda* felt that teachers got what they expected – so, if the best was expected, then that was what would occur.

#### Importance of Enrichment Opportunities

The data revealed that teachers at White Pine School thought that enrichment opportunities were important for their students of poverty. Each participant discussed different

opportunities that provided enrichment. *Lori* talked about how excited her students were and the benefit that they received by being able to travel outside of Jefferson County to attend a baseball game. *John* discussed his practice of teaching students how to manage money and other life skills. He desired to expand enrichment opportunities for his middle school students, including a work-release program.

*Emily* felt that building a network of support for her students, which includes the school counselor, was a very beneficial tool for enrichment for her students of poverty. *Pam* described how she incorporated farm animals and other guest speakers, including community leaders and professionals, into her curriculum to serve as meaningful enrichment opportunities for her students. *Glenda* mentioned the benefit of incorporating the arts into her curriculum. She stated that she loved to take her students to see live plays, which many had never seen.

#### Teaching Strategies Focused on Active Learning

The data revealed that teachers believed that students of poverty benefitted most from teaching strategies that incorporated movement and hands-on experiences that had real-world connections. *Lori* described her use of cooperative learning and other activities that incorporate movement. She mentioned that many of her students of poverty had difficulty concentrating for extended periods of time and that movement was of great benefit. *John* felt that his most useful strategy was to show his students how the lessons correlate with the real world.

*Emily* talked about how she used a variety of groupings and felt that her students of poverty benefitted from different modes of learning. *Pam* discussed how she had her students use a variety of manipulatives, and she also commented on the importance of making real-world connections. She mentioned that she tried to teach students to use objects that they found at home at no cost, so that learning could be extended to the home. *Glenda* described her teaching

strategies as varied and including hands-on opportunities and the use of art. She also talked about her students of poverty benefitting from one-on-one instruction, because no one works with them at home.

#### Small, Meaningful Doses of Homework

The data revealed that teachers at White Pine School were not in the practice of giving a lot of homework to their students. *Lori*, stated that she gave students time in class to complete their assignments. *John* mentioned that he did not give homework to his students because he has found that a lot of the parents did not help their children or did not know how to do the work. *Emily* stated that she gave a little reading and a little mathematics homework daily but that she went over it with her students the following morning because many of them had no help at home.

*Pam* stated that her main goal was to get students to enjoy reading, so she sent books home with every child daily and did not penalize them if they did not read the books. She felt that her students of poverty were proud of the books and took better care of them than her students with adequate incomes. *Glenda*, mentioned that she too assigned reading for homework and required parents to sign off on each book that they read with their child. She stated that her goal was to get parents reading and spending time with their children.

#### Limited Tutoring Opportunities

The data revealed that White Pine School had no comprehensive tutoring program and that some teachers offered tutoring opportunities while others did not. *Lori* stated that she offered tutoring but has found that it is hard for many of her students to find a ride home. She mentioned that she pulled students out of their special-area classes if necessary. *John* stated that he offered no tutoring but that Jefferson County Schools Special Education Department offered tutoring to special education students county-wide. Both *Emily* and *Glenda* mentioned that they tutored

some students in need during the second-load bus time, while students waited for their busses to arrive. *Pam* talked about incorporating her tutoring into the regular school day. She stated that she tutored individual students in need while others worked in small groups at centers.

### Multiple Data Collection Methods

All participants were able to name a variety of ways in which they collected data on their economically disadvantaged students and all students. *Lori* discussed frequent use of multiple formative assessments. She also mentioned using summative data such as the TCAP reports to obtain data on her students. *John* spoke in a negative tone about several of the “canned” programs that he was required to use, but he did speak positively about the progress monitoring tool that he used. He also mentioned the use of a variety of formative assessments that were beneficial. *Emily*, *Pam*, and *Glenda* each discussed weekly assessments that they used with their reading and mathematics series. *Glenda* added that she used assessments that she created, in addition to the reading and mathematics series assessments.

### Implications for Practice

The following lists describe implications and recommendations for practice based on the findings from this study.

#### Implications for Schoolwide Initiatives for Students of Poverty at White Pine School

1. Developing positive home-school relationships for economically disadvantaged families has a far-reaching impact on the success of students living in poverty (Barr & Parrett, 2007). White Pine School needs to expand its efforts in developing positive home-school relationships by finding additional ways to assist families in need in the areas of academics, social-emotional status, and health.

2. Full-service schools can be very beneficial for communities that have high percentages of people living in poverty. This approach transforms the school into the hub of the community and provides health care, recreation, and other assistance to families in need (Blank et al., 2009). White Pine School is urged to investigate the possibility of becoming a full-service school in an effort to help students and their families have access to much-needed resources. The partnerships that are formed in the process will benefit all stakeholders.
3. Parent training is an essential tool for assisting economically disadvantaged families in a variety of areas (Marzano, 2003). White Pine School needs to design a powerful parent-training program specifically for economically disadvantaged families. This training should include a variety of topics along with finding ways to motivate families/parents to participate.
4. High-quality professional development is an invaluable tool for teachers in helping them find ways to best serve their students (Beegle, 2005). White Pine School should design and offer professional development opportunities for teachers on topics related to serving economically disadvantaged students because many teachers have no such training.
5. Professional learning communities (PLCs) allow teachers the means to explore and gain in-depth knowledge in areas that are studied (Hord, 2009). Topics that focus on meeting the needs of students of poverty should be researched and a study-discussion format designed for teachers to learn and discuss during PLCs. One effective avenue for discussion of those topics is analysis of the current literature on poverty.
6. Partnerships with area universities and colleges can benefit all parties involved. Partnerships that go beyond practicums and student teaching experiences should be

developed to allow the teachers, college faculty, and college students to work together to help better the chance of success for students of poverty (Miller et al., 2005). White Pine School is encouraged to work with local institutions of higher education to develop such partnerships.

7. Mentoring programs have been proven to be beneficial for students of poverty who so desperately need long-term support from caring adults (Beegle, 2003). White Pine School should design a mentoring program that involves both the school and the community in supporting success for economically disadvantaged students.
8. Absenteeism is an issue for schools with high populations of economically disadvantaged students for a variety of reasons (Jensen, 2009). The incentives currently in place to combat absenteeism are not effective. Incentives need to be designed that are applicable to student interests and that are accessible within the town of White Pine.
9. Early intervention for students of poverty is essential, because many have not had the developmental experiences that allow them to enter school ready to learn (Burney & Beilke, 2008). White Pine School does not offer enough opportunities to meet the needs of all of the economically disadvantaged students in the community. Additional means of providing early intervention should be explored and implemented.

#### Implications for Classroom-Level, Teacher-Initiated Supports for Students of Poverty at White Pine School

1. Relationships between caring adults and students of poverty are one of the most important supports that have lasting positive effects for economically disadvantaged students (Kitano & Lewis, 2005). Teachers should continue to work at knowing each child individually and providing assistance for those in need.

2. Building confidence for students of poverty is essential in helping them to understand that they can persist in spite of their negative circumstances (Kitano & Lewis, 2005).  
Teachers at White Pine School appear to do a good job at creating opportunities for their students of poverty to obtain confidence through success and should continue to find ways to build confidence for their economically disadvantaged students
3. Having high expectations for students of poverty is essential in helping them achieve success. Having pity because of their situation will prove to be of no benefit for students if that pity means that teachers lower their expectations in an effort to be kind (Downey, 2008). Teachers at White Pine School appear to have the same expectations for all of their students and should continue to maintain especially-high expectations for their economically disadvantaged students.
4. Students of poverty many times are at a disadvantage when it comes to opportunities for enrichment and learning about the world around them, so teachers must find ways to bring that world into their classrooms (Beegle, 2003). The teachers at White Pine School provide a variety of enrichment opportunities for their students and should continue to look for opportunities that will open doors for their students of poverty.
5. Economically disadvantaged students receive significant academic benefits from teaching strategies that include movement, working together, and hands-on activities (Marzano, 2003). Teachers at White Pine School appear to use these types of teaching strategies, and these teachers are encouraged to continue these practices and to share successes with other teachers in their professional learning communities.
6. Students of poverty can be at a disadvantage when it comes to completing homework assignments that require both help at home and resources outside the classroom

(Vatterott, 2009). Teachers need to continue to monitor homework assignments and find ways to assist students of poverty who may need additional assistance.

7. Tutoring programs for students of poverty can give them the extra one-on-one assistance that increases their chances of academic success (Parrett & Budge, 2009). White Pine School does not have a comprehensive tutoring program and should begin the process of looking at options for starting such a program. Partnerships with community members and areas colleges and universities may be options for assistance.
8. Data collection can be overwhelming for teachers due to the high volume of data that is made available from a wide array of assessments. Collecting data that is meaningful and that helps teachers know how to help students of poverty, as well as other students, should be the focus (Jensen, 2009). Teachers at White Pine School should advocate for elimination of data-collection practices that are of little value in increasing student achievement.

### Possibilities for Future Research

The following list provides possibilities for further research that stem from the findings of this study:

1. Teacher perception of both schoolwide and teacher-level initiatives to support students of poverty can be studied further to include a plan of action to address insufficient areas. This study would be a valuable next step toward implementation of current findings.
2. A similar study might examine perceptions of administrative personnel at White Pine School concerning how economically disadvantaged students are being served. Those

interviewed could include principals, school counselors, special area teachers (music, art, library, and physical education), and support staff.

3. One could conduct this study at a school with a similar percentage of economically disadvantaged students and compare the results. This study would determine whether the current results could be useful in designing programming for economically disadvantaged students in schools other than White Pine School.

### Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to assess teacher perceptions of how economically disadvantaged students at White Pine School were being served. Data collection from focus groups, individual interviews, and document review suggests that the school has made positive efforts at serving its economically disadvantaged population, but there is room for growth in several areas. The implications for practice align with the research conducted for the review of literature. The economically disadvantaged population is continuing to increase at White Pine School. In order for today's students of poverty to gain success in school and in life beyond school, they will need every possible support that public schools can provide. The results of this study are presented as a work plan for the future to White Pine School—and potentially to other schools with large numbers of economically disadvantaged students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Letter to Director of Schools

03/30/2012 09:06 8656748383

WHITE PINE SCHOOL

PAGE 02/02

East Tennessee State University  
IRB – Office for the Protection of Human Research Subjects

Educational Research

I, Charles Edmonds (Institution Representative-Print Name), grant permission to Samuel Hollingshead (Primary Investigator-Print Name) to

conduct research for the study titled A Qualitative Assessment of the Perceptions of Teachers as to How Economically Disadvantaged Students at White Pine at the following institutions: School Are Being Served

White Pine School

As Director of Schools for Jefferson County, TN (Institution Representative Title), I attest that our educational institution has policies

developed in conjunction with parents regarding the following:

- The right of a parent of a student to inspect, upon the request of the parent, a survey created by a third party before the survey is administered or distributed by a school to a student.
- Any applicable procedures for granting a request by a parent for reasonable access to such survey within a reasonable period of time after the request is received.
- Arrangements to protect student privacy that are provided by the agency in the event of the administration or distribution of a survey to a student containing one or more of the following items (including the right of a parent of a student to inspect, upon the request of the parent, any survey containing one or more of such items):
  - Political affiliations or beliefs of the student or the student's parent.
  - Mental or psychological problems of the student or the student's family.
  - Sex behavior or attitudes.
  - Illegal, anti-social, self-incriminating, or demeaning behavior.
  - Critical appraisals of other individuals with whom respondents have close family relationships.
  - Legally recognized privileged or analogous relationships, such as those of lawyers, physicians, and ministers.
- Religious practices, affiliations, or beliefs of the student or the student's parent.
- Income (other than that required by law to determine eligibility for participation in a program or for receiving financial assistance under such program).
- The right of a parent of a student to inspect, upon the request of the parent, any instructional material used as part of the educational curriculum for the student.
- Any applicable procedures for granting a request by a parent for reasonable access to instructional material received.
- The administration of physical examinations or screenings that the school or agency may administer to a student.
- The collection, disclosure, or use of personal information collected from students for the purpose of marketing or for selling that information (or otherwise providing that information to others for that purpose), including arrangements to protect student privacy that are provided by the agency in the event of such collection, disclosure, or use.
- The right of a parent of a student to inspect, upon the request of the parent, any instrument used in the collection of personal information before the instrument is administered or distributed to a student.
- Any applicable procedures for granting a request by a parent for reasonable access to such instrument within a reasonable period of time after the request is received.

P.I. Samuel Hollingshead (Signature) Institutional Rep. Charles Edmonds (Signature) 3/30/12 (Date)

## APPENDIX B

### Letter to Faculty Requesting Volunteers

Spring 2012

WPS Faculty:

I am collecting data for my dissertation on how WPS is serving its economically disadvantaged students, and I am in need of volunteers for individual interviews and for small-group interviews (focus groups). If you would be willing to help me by participating, I would be very appreciative. Of course I understand if you do not want to participate!!

The interviews/focus groups will take place after school in Mrs. Myers' classroom. I will take notes and transcribe a script from a recording from the sessions. Your name will not be used when I report the data in my dissertation.

I hope to finish all of my requirements for my degree by the end of the summer!!

Sincerely,

Mr. Hollingshead

## APPENDIX C

### Informed Consent Form

#### **EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT (ICD)**

I am currently working on my Doctorate of Education degree at East Tennessee State University, and I am conducting some research in order to gather information for my dissertation research project.

This Informed Consent will explain about being a participant in a research study. It is important that you read this material carefully and then decide if you wish to be a volunteer.

#### PURPOSE:

The purpose(s) of this research study is/are as follows:

To look at how White Pine School is meeting the needs of and providing support for its economically disadvantaged students. The results of this study will be used to recommend other supports not being utilized at this time for White Pine School's economically disadvantaged students. This research will be conducted through your participation in interviews and focus groups.

#### DURATION

You will be asked to take part in an interview or focus group and less than one hour of your time will be needed.

#### PROCEDURES

The interview will consist of me asking you questions and you responding to those questions.

The focus group will consist of me asking a question and each participant will be able to respond and discussion may follow involving all members of the focus group.

#### ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES/TREATMENTS

There are no alternatives at this time.

#### POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

The possible risks and/or discomforts of your involvement include:

There are no known or expected risks or discomforts associated with your participating in the interview or focus group.

#### POSSIBLE BENEFITS

The possible benefits of your participation are:

When the study is completed, there will be a list of recommendations made available that will help you in finding additional ways to help your economically disadvantaged students.

FINANCIAL COSTS

There are no financial costs associated with your participation with this study.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this research experiment is voluntary. You may refuse to participate. You can quit at any time. You may quit by calling Samuel Hollingshead whose phone number is 865-548-5663.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

If you have any questions or problems at any time, you may call Samuel Hollingshead at 865-548-5663 or Pamela Scott at 423-439-7618. You may call the Chairman of the Institutional Review Board at 423/439-6054 for any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject. If you have any questions or concerns about the research and want to talk to someone independent of the research team or you can't reach the study staff, you may call an IRB Coordinator at 423/439-6055 or 423/439/6002.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of the records from this study will be stored in East Tennessee State University's Education Leadership and Policy Analysis Department for at least 5 years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a subject. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the ETSU IRB, and personnel particular to this research such as the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis Department have access to the study records.

By signing below, you confirm that you have read or had this document read to you. You will be given a signed copy of this informed consent document. You have been given the chance to ask questions and to discuss your participation with the investigator. You freely and voluntarily choose to be in this research project.

---

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

---

PRINTED NAME OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

---

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

DATE

## APPENDIX D

### Focus Group Questions

1. The economically disadvantaged population at White Pine School according to the Tennessee Report Card for 2011 was reported at 73.3 percent. The need for outreach and support to students and families living in poverty is very important at this time. How do you describe the efforts that White Pine School has made in order to develop positive home-school relationships that provide support for families in need? What would you like to see happen that is not happening at this time?
2. The professional literature on high-performing, high poverty schools discusses forming full-service schools that turn the school into the community hub—a place for offering multiple services that include meeting medical needs, dental needs, parent training, etc...What are your thoughts on full-service schools? What would it take to make WPS a full service school?
3. Concerning parent training, what types of training are offered at WPS at this time that help families living in poverty? What could also be offered?
4. What types of professional development have teachers at WPS had concerning understanding and meeting the needs of students living in poverty? What types are needed?
5. In your professional learning communities, have you been involved in any collaborative efforts concerning students of poverty? What are some possibilities?
6. Does WPS have any partnerships with local colleges? If so, please explain how they are utilized. What could be improved?

7. Does WPS have a mentoring program for students of poverty? If so, please explain. If not, what would it take to design a mentoring program?
8. Does WPS have any initiatives designed to address issues of absenteeism? If so, please explain. If not, what are some ideas you have that address issues of absenteeism?
9. What types of early intervention programs are available at WPS? What are some ideas you have concerning early intervention programming?

## APPENDIX E

### Individual Interview Questions

1. Research on poverty indicates the importance of developing caring relationships with these students—and all students for that matter. Please describe your efforts.
2. Many economically disadvantaged students have a sense that there is no hope for their situations to improve. Please describe what you do to build hope and foster feelings of confidence and self-efficacy for your students of poverty.
3. How do you feel about the importance of your level of expectations for students? Many have lower levels of expectations for students of poverty. Have you ever found yourself in this category?
4. Enrichment opportunities are so very important for economically disadvantaged students. What are some opportunities that you have provided for your students of poverty?
5. Concerning the teaching strategies that you use on a regular basis, have you found any in particular that work well with helping your economically disadvantaged students achieve at higher levels?
6. Describe the type of homework you assign on a regular basis. How much time do your students spend per night on average?
7. Do you provide tutoring for your students? If so, please explain.
8. How do you track your students' progress? What types of data do you collect?

VITA

SAMUEL MCKINLEY HOLLINGSHEAD, JR.

Personal Data:                   Date of Birth: March 12, 1980  
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Education:                        Ed. D., Educational Leadership, East Tennessee State  
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  B.A., Liberal Studies in Elementary Education, Carson-  
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  Public Schools: Jefferson County, Tennessee

Professional Experience:       2012-Present Assistant Principal, Mt. Horeb Elementary,  
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  2010-2012 Assistant Principal, White Pine School,  
  Jefferson County Schools, White Pine, Tennessee

  2009-2010 Interim Principal, White Pine School,  
  Jefferson County Schools, White Pine, Tennessee

  2008-2009 Assistant Principal, White Pine School,  
  Jefferson County Schools, White Pine, Tennessee

  2002-2008 Middle School Teacher, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, White Pine  
  School, Jefferson County Schools, White Pine, Tennessee