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An Examination of the Factors Contributing to Academic Resilience Among Socioeconomically  
Disadvantaged Individuals in Northeast Tennessee

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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  
Connie Larissa Trivette  
May 2022

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Dr. Virginia Foley, Chair  
Dr. Heather Moore  
Dr. Pamela Scott

Keywords: poverty, socioeconomic status, academic resiliency, growth mindset

## ABSTRACT

An Examination of the Factors Contributing to Academic Resiliency Among Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Individuals in Northeast Tennessee

by

Connie Larissa Trivette

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the factors of resilience that educators could replicate to increase the number of socio-economically disadvantaged students that successfully complete high school and continue to become successful adults. An examination of the factors that socio-economically disadvantaged individuals attribute to their success was conducted in this study. This study used interview data from 15 participants ranging in age from 21 to 80 years old. Nine themes emerged from the interview data that affects the resilience of socio-economically disadvantaged students. The 9 themes identified were 1) Definition of success is different for each individual, 2) Individual's mindset, 3) Resilience and perseverance, 4) Evolving family structure and circumstances, 5) Limited family resources, 6) Increase in abusive/risky behaviors, 7) Caregiver's educational support and high expectations, 8) Community support, and 9) School support. The themes presented are backed by the analysis of the data collected. Recommendations for educators and future research were made in hopes of replicating these factors to increase resilience in socio-economically disadvantaged students allowing them to become successful adults.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my loving husband and our three children Tripp, Gracie, and Addison. Thank you for your patience and understanding. I could not have completed this without you! I would also like to dedicate this work to my parents without your love and guidance this would not have been possible.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

The emergence of a global economy and the competitive job market has put stress on stakeholders to improve the education system in the United States (Bjork et al., 2014). The education system has undergone multiple changes. In the 1950s and 1960s poverty became a critical issue in the United States (Bailey & Duquette, 2014). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 required the government to research the state of the educational system in the United States and look into possible inequalities that may be present between schools that Caucasians attended and schools that African American students attended (Hanushek, 2016). In order to meet the deadline a team of researchers came together to form the Coleman research team. The Coleman research team sampled over 4,000 schools, 600,000 students in various grades from all across the country. Once the data were collected and analyzed, the Coleman team found that 87% of white 12th graders scored higher than the average black 12th grader. The team also found an achievement gap between the schools of the rural South and the urban Northeast. The biggest factor for the regional inequality was school resources. The Coleman Report failed to give the government an answer to what steps needed to be taken to fix these discrepancies. The Coleman Report's biggest impact has been the link between educational research and educational policy: until this time a school's effectiveness would have been measured by how much the school was putting into the student's education. After this report was published a school's effectiveness began to be judged based on its outputs; how much the students know, the intellectual gains made by the student, and their long-term employment and earnings.

In 1964 President Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty (Bailey & Duquette, 2014). The Economic Opportunity Act became the center of Johnson's War on Poverty. President Johnson created an antipoverty task force to consult with leaders in various fields to discuss

ways to reduce poverty rates. The Coleman Report had shown that the Southeast region was lacking in school resources (Hanushek, 2016) and in April of 1964 President Johnson began his public relations tour in the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky showing America the face of poverty. In 1965 Congress passed the first of a group of Elementary and Secondary Education Acts (ESEA) (Kessinger, 2011). Ladson-Billings (2015) recorded that ESEA allocated money to go to the states for low-income students (Title 1), money was allocated for school library resources, textbooks, and instructional aids (Title 2), money was also set aside for supplemental educational opportunities (Title 3), and the act included Titles 4-6 which funded educational research, grants to improve the state departments, and general provisions. In 1968, Congress included Title 7 to allot money to help schools with English language learners. Over the years, ESEA has been reauthorized six times. In 2001 George W. Bush signed a reauthorization of ESEA known as No Child Left Behind (Ladson-Billings, 2015). No Child Left Behind put more focus on standardized testing (Ladson-Billings, 2015) and set a hefty goal of all students being proficient in academics by 2014 (Hoerander & Lemke, 2006). ESEA continues to be modified to meet the needs of children. The latest reauthorization was made in 2015 when President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (*Every student Succeeds ACT (ESSA), n.d.*).

Education has been viewed as a means of providing the same opportunities for all individuals (Fram et al., 2007). A free and public education was designed to give children of all backgrounds an opportunity to become successful adults by excelling based on their work ethic and excellence. In the United States, an individual's success in their adult life is seen as a direct result of their success in school (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007). Hill and Sandfort (1995) found that students raised in homes that were not economically disadvantaged made 25 to 40% higher wages than students who stem from low socioeconomic homes. Limitations placed upon one's

academic success hinders them from reaching their full potential as an adult (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007; Hill & Sandfort, 1995). Students born into families living in poverty are at a disadvantage from the time they are born and on throughout their schooling (Hill & Sandfort, 1995). Loesch (2020) reported that living in poverty conditions could have a profound effect on a child's development. Loesch posited that before the child is born a lack of the parent's prenatal care can hinder the child's development. The child's development in their early years is critical for their future success.

Hill and Sandfort (1995) found evidence that poverty contributed to a decrease in physical development, impaired math and reading skills, and impaired cognitive development. Children living in poverty may be forced to deal with health problems that will follow them from their years as a child on into adulthood. Children living in a low socioeconomic environment has a limited vocabulary due to not hearing as many words as children living in middle and upper class homes (Jensen, 2019). A study completed by Hart and Risely (1995) found that students who were developing their vocabulary slower than others would mimic that slow pattern with their cognitive abilities. The effects of poverty are not fixed but without interventions, a student living in poverty will enter kindergarten behind their more affluent peers and end up achieving less than their more affluent peers (Jensen, 2019). Students living in economically disadvantaged environments are more likely to have lower grades and score lower on achievement tests than their more affluent counterparts (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007). These students are more likely to drop out of high school or not attend post-secondary schooling. As more students enter school from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, stakeholders are required to find ways to help them be successful. It is unclear why some low-socioeconomic students succeed, and others drop out or do not continue their education beyond high school. In order to increase the number of low-

socioeconomic students that are successful, stakeholders need to understand the protective factors that occur during these students' lives to increase their likelihood of academic success.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contribute to the academic success of individuals in Northeast Tennessee to determine common themes in how some economically disadvantaged individuals successfully overcome poverty to lead successful adult lives. In this study, success was measured by the individual's ability to obtain a high school diploma and continue their education by pursuing and/or completing a secondary education degree and secure a career or profession. Both internal and external factors of resilience were explored to identify common themes among the interviewees who have been successful. The intended outcome of this study was to be able to replicate the conditions that promote academic resilience in order to help other individuals living in poverty overcome the initial achievement gap and later become successful functioning independent adults. Data were collected using snowball sampling through interviews of individuals ranging from 21 to 80 years of age. These individuals self-identify as having grown up in a low socioeconomic environment and overcame the obstacles associated with poverty to become successful adults.

### **Research Questions**

With a goal of providing stakeholders a pathway to overcome poverty and the educational setbacks that can occur due to the unfavorable social, environmental, and economical situations the following research questions were addressed:

## Overarching Research Questions

What are the factors contributing to the academic resilience among socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals in Northeast Tennessee as perceived by the individual?

1. What internal factors do the individuals contribute to their academic resilience?
  - a. Attitude
  - b. Perseverance
2. What external factors do the individuals contribute to their academic resilience?
  - a. Family
  - b. Community
  - c. School
3. What familial influences affect academic resilience as perceived by the individual?
4. What influences within the community affect academic resilience as perceived by the individual?
5. What influences within the school affect academic resilience as perceived by the individual?

### **Significance of Study**

In the United States, 1 in every 4 children are living in poverty (Santiago, 2015). Students who spend their formative years living in poverty are at a disadvantage in the educational system. Hill and Sandfort (1995) found that early delays in development have a significant impact on the child's educational attainment later in life. Students from affluent families are more likely to have academic success, which translates to higher earnings in their future (Loesch, 2020). Unlike their more affluent counterparts, students from low-income families are less likely

to reach the same level of achievement as the affluent students and therefore earn less as an adult. Students coming from low socioeconomic families will need interventions to help decrease the achievement gap. This research study is important because an examination of the factors that causes these students to be successful while others are not will allow educators and stakeholders to view the protective factors and replicate them for more students living in these conditions. Thus, increasing the percentage of students living in poverty that will grow up to be successful adults.

Males and females who overcame the obstacles associated with growing up in a low-income family were interviewed. The study contributed to the knowledge of stakeholders in regards to the factors that will increase the likelihood of a student living in poverty achieving academic success and becoming a successful adult. The general knowledge gained through this study can be used to create a framework for stakeholders to use allowing students to overcome poverty.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This study was delimited to subjects who self-identify as having grown up in poverty and have become successful adults. Participants were interviewed about what led them to be successful despite growing up in a low-socioeconomic environment. The purpose of these interviews was to examine the experiences of the participants.

### **Definition of Terms**

- **Achievement Gap:** When a statistically significant gap occurs between the averages of two groups of students (Achievement Gaps, n.d.).

- **Economically disadvantaged:** Individuals who qualify for free and reduced lunch program because their household income is below the poverty line (Domina et al., 2018).
- **Fixed Mindset:** A mindset in which one believes that their intelligence is fixed and cannot be changed (Brock & Hundley, 2017).
- **Generational poverty:** Poverty that persists for at least two generations (Jensen, 2019; Payne, 2005). These families are unable to improve their financial situation with the current tools they have (Jensen, 2019).
- **Grit:** The continued pursuit of a long-term goal (Jensen, 2016).
- **Growth Mindset:** A mindset in which one believes that their intelligence is fluid and can be changed through hard work and learning from mistakes (Brock & Hundley, 2017).
- **Resilience:** One's ability to succeed in the face of adversity (Agasisti et al., 2018).
- **Poverty:** An experience resulting from detrimental social and economical factors. Poverty can be found in both urban and rural settings. Poverty can be generational or situational (Jensen, 2016).
- **Situational Poverty:** Poverty that is often temporary and is caused by a sudden emergency or crisis (Jensen, 2019).
- **Socioeconomic status:** A status designated to individuals and families based on income, level of education, financial security, as well as quality of life (Education and Socioeconomic Status Factsheet, n.d.).

## Overview of the Study

Chapter 1 presents an introduction to poverty and the phenomenon of academic resiliency among socioeconomically disadvantaged students and the purpose of the study. Chapter 2

provides a summary of the literature related to poverty, the effects of growing up in poverty, the obstacles students have to overcome to escape their environment, the educational gap, the phenomenon of the achievement trap, the relationship between poverty and education, and the interventions used to help students escape poverty. Chapter 3 presents the research design used in this study, the methodology used in this study, the research questions, the participants and how they were selected, the data collection and its analysis, and the ethical protocol. Chapter 4 presents the data obtained. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the study. This summary will include the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.



## **Chapter 2. Review of Literature**

Poverty is an economical condition in which the family or individual suffers from a lack of monetary funds (Lohmann, 1990). Santiago (2015) reported that close to 1 out of every 4 children are living in poverty in the United States. More than half of Americans are relatives of or know someone living in poverty. Jensen (2016) reported that poverty is a long-lasting experience that results from a collection of unfavorable social and economic factors. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2014), approximately 12.6 million children were living in poverty in 2018. The percent of children under the age of 18 living in poverty in the state of Tennessee was above the national average at 22%.

Poverty is an important factor to consider when discussing student achievement because it creates an unequal start for students. Loesch (2020) reported that being born into a family of limited monetary means affects the student's development and future academic pathways. Duncan et al. (2014) reported that students from poverty entered kindergarten behind their peers and this trend often continued throughout their schooling. On average, students from low-income backgrounds entered kindergarten 2 years behind their wealthier peers (Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools, 2009). Nieuwenhuis (2018) found a correlation between the child's level of poverty and their level of educational attainment.

### **Types of Poverty**

“A family is considered to be in poverty if its resources are below a poverty threshold that accounts for differences in family composition and geographic differences in housing costs” (Trisi & Saenz, 2021). Payne (2005) defined poverty as the level to which an individual lacks resources. Payne explained poverty occurring due to an event is called situational poverty. Situational poverty can occur due to a death in the family, a chronic illness, a separation or

divorce, etc. (Horn, 2011; Jensen, 2016; Payne, 2005; Stewman, 2014). A family that is experiencing a sudden crisis that is temporary is experiencing situational poverty (Jensen, 2019). If only one event occurs the family is likely to bounce back but if multiple events occur during the same time frame the family may not be as fortunate (Jensen, 2016). Situational poverty can be very traumatic for families (Horn, 2011). These families may be unaware of the resources available to them. Stewman (2014) explained that families who fall into situational poverty have hope that it is temporary and can see a way out unlike those facing generational poverty.

Generational poverty is a different kind of poverty that lasts within families for at least two generations (Stewman, 2014). Families dealing with generational poverty have little hope for change and have established routines and behaviors. Families in generational poverty usually do not have the means to rise above this condition (Jensen, 2009). Individuals living in generational poverty will have their own culture. This culture would have a different belief system and contain different hidden rules from that of the individuals living in situational poverty (Payne, 2005). Stewman (2014) reported that students living in generational poverty are often operating in survival mode. This stems from living in an environment that involves stressors such as abuse, hunger, and the responsibility of raising younger siblings.

Sengupta (2010) reported a third level of poverty, extreme poverty. These are individuals suffering from income poverty, human development poverty, and social exclusion for a prolonged period of time. Income poverty, as defined by Sengupta, means that an individual does not have the purchasing power to acquire the basic needs. Human development poverty is the prolonged lack of elements such as health, education, nutrition, or the basic elements of well-being. Social exclusion refers to individuals missing out on resources allowing them to participate in the social aspect of life. Knight (2000) wrote that social exclusion was the inability

to have normal relationships and partake in activities. Social exclusion affects the quality of life for the individual.

### **Educational Reform to Address Poverty**

In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson declared a war on poverty (Santiago, 2015). As part of President Johnson's War on Poverty, Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Acts in 1965 (Kessinger, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2015). The Elementary and Secondary Education Acts (ESEA) linked funding to the family's income and placed the responsibility of dispersing the funds to the individual state departments (Ladson-Billings, 2015). Santiago (2015) noted that President Johnson worked with Congress to pass more than 200 pieces of legislation in order to address the goals of his war on poverty. Ladson-Billings (2015) recorded that ESEA allocated money to go to the states for low-income students (Title 1), money was allocated for school library resources, textbooks, and instructional aids (Title 2), money was also set aside for supplemental educational opportunities (Title 3), and the act included Titles 4-6 which funded educational research, grants to improve the state departments, and general provisions. In 1968, Congress included Title 7 to allot money to help schools with English language learners.

During this same time period, the Civil Rights Act gave the U.S. Office of Education 2 years to research and produce a report on the inequality within the educational system (Hanushek, 2016). Hanushek reported the intended goal was to highlight the differences between the schools that Caucasian children attended and the schools that African-American children attended. In 1966 the Coleman Report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, was released examining the state of American schools and the inequalities that existed. Hanushek (2016)

wrote that the Coleman Report was to provide the Department of Education with a plan to follow in order to reduce the disparities among schools. The report uncovered that racial differences existed in the schools at this time (Hanushek, 2016; Hoerandner & Lemke, 2006). Hanushek (2016) reported that the Coleman Report delivered more than expected and also reported that there were differences in the schools in the South versus the schools in the Northeast. The report, however, did not guide the Department of Education to an action plan on how to align all schools.

In 1969 the government developed the National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP. According to Kessinger (2011) this was designed to monitor the educational progress of the nation. Students in 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades would be tested to assess what they knew and what they could do. NAEP results are used to compare the student achievement from one state to another and to track the achievement in the content areas of math, science, reading, and writing.

In 1983, *A Nation at Risk*, shifted the focus away from the students living in poverty to the entire educational system of the United States (Ladson-Billings, 2015). This report warned the public that the current educational system was not up to par (Kessinger, 2011). As Bjork et al. (2014) reported the federal government published the report holding public schools accountable for failing the students. *A Nation at Risk* cited large gaps in student achievement across all economic groups and demographic groups (Hoerander & Lamke, 2006). As Kessinger (2011) reviewed the report he reported that the report encouraged improvements to the educational system by raising standards and improving content. The minimum requirements for high school graduation, as laid out in the report, were four years of English, three years of math, three years of science, and three years of social studies. The new curriculum included computer science courses, as well as two years of a foreign language for students heading into college. A

*Nation at Risk* stirred nation-wide attention and other reform reports followed (Bjork et al., 2014).

The first phase of reform reports occurred between 1983 and 1986 (Bjork et al., 2014). As Bjork et al. reported these reforms called for increasing student achievement, tougher requirements for licensure, and accountability. Between 1986 and 1989 a second phase of educational reform reports were written and published. These reports urged the nation to hold schools accountable for student achievement, included higher-order thinking questions, collaborative learning, and technology among others. This second wave of reports noted that the nation should acknowledge the demographic trends occurring within the schools, especially the students coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In 1988, Congress created the National Assessment Governing Board (Kessinger, 2011). The National Assessment Governing Board would be in charge of setting the policy for the NAEP and developing a blueprint of the assessments.

Between 1989 and 2003 the third phase of educational reform reports were published (Bjork et al., 2014). This phase was different from the other two. In this phase a call to focus on the students' learning was made. As Bjork et al. (2014) posited that the focus needed to be on the children and their learning, and that parents were a key part of the equation. Then in 1989, President Bush met with the National Assessment Governing Board to discuss the nation's educational progress (Kessinger, 2011). At the summit the president and the governors agreed to focus on improving student achievement and created an educational plan to address the nation's progress. Within the plan, 6 national goals were described and were to be met by the year 2000. The goals were concentrated on school readiness, increasing the percentage of students completing high school, student achievement and citizenship, and a focus on math and science.

Along with these goals the strategy included a goal for adult literacy and lifelong learning as well as a focus on providing students with a safe, alcohol and drug-free school (Kessinger, 2011).

As Kessinger (2011) stated, President Clinton was able to amend the plan, now named *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, and Congress approved it in 1994. President Clinton made some adjustments to the act by adding two new goals that pertained to parent participation and professional development and education for teachers (Kessinger 2011). During this same time the ESEA was being reauthorized to encourage reform at the state and local levels to meet the national goals. ESEA, now known as the Improving America's Schools Act, would require states to create improvement plans, ways to measure student progress, and select or create ways to hold schools accountable.

In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed by President Bush (Hoerandner & Lemke, 2006). As part of the NCLB Act, schools who received funding from the federal government were required to give the NAEP in order to monitor progress (Kessinger, 2011). Hoerandner and Lemke (2006) reported NCLB had the goal that all students would demonstrate an academic level of proficiency that would meet or exceed the state's proficiency level. Hoerander and Lemke reported that legislation like NCLB created a burden on the worst performing schools that were usually those that were the poorest and lacked resources. Bjork et al. (2014) reported that NCLB sparked different views. Some citizens saw it as top-notch legislation and endorsed the act that would ensure all children learn. Other citizens argued that it would derail all the progressive educational changes that had been made in the past.

## **Poverty in the Appalachian Region**

The Appalachian region stretches along the Appalachian Mountains extending from Alabama up into Canada (Cooper et al., 2011). The Appalachian Mountains are comprised of a melting pot of cultures (Blaustein, 1991). The Appalachian Mountains were settled by a variety of people from England, Scotland, Germany, Italy, as well as the Native Americans (Blaustein, 1991; Cooper et al., 2011). Each group contributes to making the area an ethnically-diverse region. The Appalachian region is mostly rural (Gallaway, 2010) and inundated with severe poverty (Hall, 2013). Rural regions have depended upon agriculture, forestry, and mining as their main source of economic growth (Gallaway, 2010). The Appalachian region has seen a decrease in agriculture, forestry, and mining. As Gallaway described, the area has had to think about using their natural amenities to attract tourists and generate income from the tourism industry. Within the Appalachian region there are numerous National Parks that pull in tourists to the area. The Appalachian Trail, a popular hiking trail, extends from Georgia up into Maine and draws in an estimated three to four million visitors each year.

Pollard and Jacobsen (2020) examined individual counties within the Appalachian region and identified them as distressed based upon poverty level, unemployment, and per capita market income. Strickland (1999) recorded that the individuals living in the Appalachian region have lower incomes, a higher percentage are unemployed, and have a lower quality of life compared to individuals living in other areas. The Northeast Tennessee region falls within the Southern Appalachian Mountains (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2020). According to The Appalachian Regional Commission, this region was reported as having a median household income of \$49,747 compared to the nation's \$60,293. In Southern Appalachia the total population was 1,195,838 with 684,217 of them identified as living in poverty. That is 57.21% of the population living in

poverty. The criteria for living in poverty was that a family of two adults and two children earn less than \$25,465 a year. This number did not include unrelated individuals that may be living with the family, students in college dorms, and family members who are living in institutions. In Southern Appalachia 20.8% of children under the age of 18 were identified as living in poverty (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2020).

The Appalachian region became the central location for President Johnson's War on Poverty when the Fletcher family was chosen to be the face of poverty (Bailey & Duquette, 2014). Bailey and Duquette reported that the Fletcher family and the region became popular when a photo of the Fletcher family and President Johnson was used as the cover of *Time Magazine*. "Johnson is said to have remarked to a reporter, 'I don't know if I'll pass a single law or get a single dollar appropriated, but before I'm through, no community in America will be able to ignore poverty in its midst'"(p. 355).

As part of President Johnson's War on Poverty, the Appalachian Regional Commission was created to help the president evaluate the area and propose ways to help the Appalachian region (Gallaway, 2010; Hall, 2013). The Commission noted large income gaps between the region and the rest of the U.S. and a lack of education attainment to name two. The Commission took the findings and created priority areas. Hall (2013) reported that the improvements needed were a highway system to overcome the geographical isolation, construction of water facilities, an emphasis on natural resources to improve the economy, and more opportunities for education and vocational training. The ARC was granted \$1 billion in 1965 and continues to receive funding each year to help the Appalachian region. Through the ARC's programs and funding the commission has been able to reduce the poverty level in the region but gaps in income, education, and growth of the economy continue to plague the area.



## **Effects of Growing Up in Poverty**

It is well documented that children living in low-socioeconomic circumstances experience more disadvantages than their more affluent counterparts (Lefmann & Combs-Orme, 2014, Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1999). In the research, two theories emerge to explain why a parent's income influences their child's chances at success: investment theory and good-parent theory (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1999). The investment theory claims that parents will use what resources they have to invest in their children. These investments may include education, health, food, housing, along with other goods and services that give their child an advantage in their future endeavors. The good-parent theory implies that children living in poverty are not hurt by the fact that the parents do not have the money to invest but rather by the quality of the interactions between the child and the parents. Parents who experience financial stress are less supportive and consistent; this is detrimental to the emotional and social development of the child.

A few disadvantages children living in poverty may have to overcome are: lower nutritional value of available food, limited access to healthcare, increased likelihood of illness, unsafe housing, environmental hazards, unsafe neighborhoods, low birth weight, the stresses of growing up in a single-parent home, parents with a low-level of education, and inadequate schools (Barton & Coley, 2009; Duncan et al., 2014; Jensen, 2013; Korenman et al., 1999; Lefmann & Combs-Orme, 2014; Letourneau et al., 2013; Loesch, 2020; Santiago, 2015). Children living in poverty have an increased risk of witnessing or falling victim to violent acts or gang activity (Santiago, 2015). Children living in poverty are far more likely to be dealing with multiple stressors, as a result, their brains are limited on new cell production and therefore pathways are rerouted (Jensen, 2019). This change in development may lead some children living in poverty to be predisposed to emotional problems (Jensen, 2013). Barton (2009)

recorded that children born with a low birth weight were more likely to repeat a grade, fail, or be enrolled in special classes. Children who have a low birth weight are more likely to suffer from delayed motor and social development. According to the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2015) young children who are being raised in poverty are more likely to have difficulties in the areas of cognition, behavior, and socioemotional.

### *Development*

In 2004, an estimated 219 million children living in low-income circumstances were on track of not fulfilling their developmental potential (Lu et al., 2016). Reyes-Aragon et al. (2016) found that 17% of the children included in their study that were living in poverty were developmentally delayed. Jensen (2019) noted that 40% of children living in poverty had developmental deficiencies. The timing of when a child experiences poverty is crucial (Duncan et al., 2011; Holmes & Kiernan, 2013; Jensen, 2019). The first 3 years of a child's life is critical due to the brain development and the formation of relationships to those around them (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1999). Children need reliable caregivers during their early years of development to offer them a consistent and predictable environment. If this consistency is not present their brains will develop in detrimental ways (Jensen, 2019). The developmental setback that occurs due to living in poverty during developmental milestones cannot be easily overcome and sometimes the child is unable to overcome it (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1999). According to Jensen (2019), there is evidence that children being raised in poverty will have different experiences than higher-income children causing their brain to wire differently. Santiago (2015) reported that children living in poverty during their early childhood or experiencing deep poverty during their childhood have an increased probability of dropping out, having lower academic achievements, and have a lower level of employment. Poverty early in a child's life can hinder

brain development and hinder the development of neural functions the child will need for future cognitive development (Duncan et al., 2014).

Letourneau et al. (2014) completed a meta-analysis examining the relationship between a child's socio-economic status and their developmental outcomes. The results of the study was that socio-economic status along with other family factors and community factors work together to create a healthy environment for child development (Letourneau et al., 2014). The experiences and interactions that a child has at a young age sets the course for their growth and development in later years (Letourneau et al., 2014; Lu et al., 2016). The factor largely responsible for a young child's development is the family unit (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1999; Letourneau et al., 2014). When a child is first born and extending on into the early years, a parent is often the only teacher the child will have exposure to (Barton & Coley, 2009). These are the individuals that the child spends the most time with, the individuals responsible for providing stimulating activities and conversations with the child, as well as the individuals responsible for making the decisions on what outside worldly contacts the child has (Letourneau et al., 2014).

Duncan et al. (2014) explained that low socio-economic families endure more stress on a day-to-day basis causing the interactions between the parents to be more agitated and more aggressive toward one another. This increase in stress affects the parenting style within the home. Duncan et al. explained that as parents struggled financially their parenting styles become inconsistent with punishment, more punitive, and harsher when dealing with discipline issues. Furthermore, Shelleby (2018) found that parents with lower stress levels employed a greater level of positive parenting style. Parents living with increased stress tend to be less nurturing to the child and not as involved in the child's life. When combined these factors cause the child to have an elevated stress level and ultimately cause the child harm by affecting their brain development (Duncan et al., 2014).

One area of the brain that stress interferes with is the part responsible for self-regulation (Duncan et al., 2014). This is the area of the brain responsible for how students react in situations and control their emotions. Students living in low socio-economic households may have issues controlling their emotions and have outbursts. Duncan et al. (2014) explained that the inequalities in the development between children from middle-class homes and children living in poverty are most evident in the regions of the brain responsible for language, memory, and mental control. Children developing in an environment with high levels of stress will have elevated levels of cortisol. Cortisol is a chemical that decreases cognitive function and can lead to problems with memory.

### ***Health and Nutrition***

When a family has limited access to food this is referred to as food insecurity (Skalicky et al., 2006). “The prevalence of food insecurity in the USA has now reached its highest level since regular monitoring began in 1995, and over 8 million households with children (21% of the total) reported an inability to afford nutritionally adequate food in 2008” (Howard, 2011, p.1852). According to the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2015), 15.8 million children lived in homes that were worried about where their next meal would come from in 2013. Food insecure refers to households where either adults or children went hungry at times. Howard (2011) determined that students exhibited lower than average social skills during the time that their families experienced food insecurity. According to Winicki and Jemison (2003), children are unable to learn if they are hungry or worried about where their next meal is coming from. Children are unable to concentrate on their schoolwork if their stomachs are empty (Barton & Coley, 2009). This inability to learn holds true for children living in homes with any kind of

food instability, not just children who are in chronic stress over the availability of food (Winicki & Jemison, 2003).

“In 2006, the World Bank reported that children are irreversibly damaged by malnutrition by the age of two...” (Barton & Coley, 2009, p. 25). Food insecurity within a child’s first 3 years of life increases the child’s chances of suffering growth, behavior, and intelligence problems (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). There is a correlation between children who lack the appropriate amount of iron during their first 2 years and cognitive impairments (Skalicky et al., 2006). Not taking in the appropriate amount of nutrients has also been linked with cognitive and emotional issues. Barton and Coley (2009) reported that children who were found to be underweight had lower test scores. Food insecurity has been linked to negative academic outcomes as well as causing behavioral problems and developmental issues in infants and young children (Miller et al., 2007). The CDC (2021) recommends that children eat 1-2 cups of fruit and 1-3 cups of vegetables daily. Studies conducted by the CDC reported that 60% of children did not eat enough fruit and 93% of children did not eat enough vegetables.

Children living in low-income families are exposed to foods that have lower nutritional value (Jensen, 2013). The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the third largest welfare program, has been effective in lifting many families out of poverty (Nestle, 2019). SNAP allows low-income families to receive assistance to combat food insecurity. Unfortunately, processed foods and fast-foods are easily accessible to parents who are working multiple jobs and struggling to find time to prepare a healthy meal (Thompson et al., 2018). As Thompson et al. recorded these quick, convenient foods help parents with time limitations but offer families an energy dense and nutrient poor diet. Developmental problems are caused by a lack of nutritious

food but it is difficult to separate what problems occur due to lack of food and lack of access to proper medical care (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002).

Health and achievement are interwoven. Children must have a healthy environment to grow and learn at optimal levels (Jensen, 2013). Children growing up in poverty have lower physical health (Jensen, 2019). Unfortunately, health insurance can be priced outside the reach of families struggling financially. This leads families to use the Emergency Room for medical visits instead of scheduling routine well child visits (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). The lack of health insurance may cause families to wait to seek medical treatment causing conditions and infections to worsen before a medical professional can intervene (Jensen, 2019). Infants are less likely to receive immunizations at the appropriate time (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1999). Pollard and Jacobsen (2020) reported 51% of Southern Appalachians, 491,160 people out of 961,896 people, do not have health insurance. Saman et al. (2011) found that families living in a portion of the Appalachian region found in rural Kentucky were less likely to have dental insurance. Therefore, children in these families were less likely to visit a dentist to maintain good oral health. They discovered that a large number of individuals had to have permanent teeth extracted due to tooth decay and gum disease. Saman et al. wrote that children and the elderly were most vulnerable to oral disease and that oral disease was linked to an increase in heart disease.

### ***Environmental Factors***

The child's swift development causes them to be vulnerable to the environmental conditions in which they live (Duncan et al., 2014; Jensen, 2019). Korenman et al. (1995) reported that children living in poverty for an extended period of time will have developmental disadvantages. The family environment accounts for 33% to 50% of these developmental

setbacks. Students living in low-income areas are more likely to be living in cramped quarters, living with extended family members, and lack a quiet location in order to concentrate or study (Duncan et al., 2014). Jensen (2019) communicated that children living in low socio-economic status conditions are more likely to have polluted air and water. According to Duncan et al. (2014), children coming from families of limited means are more likely to live in homes that are in need of repair, lack proper heating and cooling, and are in need of help dealing with rodent infestations. These children are more likely to live in areas that have higher crime rates, outdated buildings, abandoned buildings, houses, and lots. Their neighborhoods are less likely to have adequate public services.

Families living in poverty are more likely to live in buildings with lead-based paints and have higher air pollution (Duncan et al., 2014; Jensen, 2019). Barton and Coley (2009) reported that the exposure to lead is one of the many environmental factors that children living in poverty are exposed to. Barton and Coley reported that 35% of children were found to have an elevated level of lead in their blood. This could come from the lead paint in old buildings and homes or possibly the dirt at old factories that still has the contaminants. High levels of lead can cause behavior problems, disabilities in the areas of math and reading, as well as a reduction in IQ. As Barton and Coley wrote, elevated levels of lead could cause a reduction in attention span. Mercury poisoning has also risen. Barton and Coley reported that people have known that mercury is poisonous for years but over the last 5 years it has become part of the national debate. The effects of mercury are severe. Barton and Coley reported that 8% of women within the ages of 16 to 49 (prime child-bearing years) had concentrations of mercury higher than the recommended level. Increased mercury levels while pregnant can have irreversible side effects. When a fetus is exposed to methylmercury it can cause the child to have neurological defects.

Barton and Coley reported, exposure to methylmercury exposure can negatively affect the baby's brain and nervous system. Children exposed to methylmercury in the womb may suffer impairments in vision, lack coordination, have impairments of speech, hearing, walking, and even muscle weakness. "These environmental conditions create physiological and emotional stress in the lives of low-income children that may impair their socioemotional, physical, cognitive, and academic development" (Duncan et al., 2014, p.103).

### ***Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension***

A child's vocabulary plays an important part in their education, their lives, and their future paths (Beck & McKeown, 2007). An extensive vocabulary is linked to proficient reading levels. Jensen (2013) stated that the lack of vocabulary for students can be very detrimental. According to Mayo and Leseman (2008) vocabulary is influenced by a child's home environment. An effective way to build a child's vocabulary is to read story books with them, or have discussions about general topics that have been in the newspapers or on the news. Barton and Coley (2009) reported that the correlation between reading a book to a child and their language outcome is a strong positive relationship. These strategies provide children opportunities to develop a rich vocabulary and stimulate the development of language skills (Mayo & Leseman, 2008). Jensen (2019) recorded that students living in poverty have fewer books at home, spend more time watching TV, and visit the library less often than their affluent counterparts. Coyne et al. (2007) stated that reading comprehension begins by developing a strong reading vocabulary. The positive effects of these strategies come from the lexile level of the text, the child directed questions, and the academic language used in the books (Mayo &



Leseman, 2008). Smith-Adcock (2019) reported that reading achievement scores were higher for students that read with their families at a young age.

A knowledge gap may occur if the child has not been exposed to stimulating activities and experiences needed to develop a solid foundation of skills needed by the age of 5 (Curtis, 2012). Noble et al. (2007) found that children living in poverty fall behind their more affluent counterparts in the areas of language, working memory, and cognitive control. Noble et al. found that 30% of the difference in language tasks was contributed to the child's socioeconomic status. According to Mayo and Leseman (2008) children who have been introduced to a rich vocabulary at home before the age of 5 were more apt to participate in classroom discussions and were able to understand classroom instruction better. According to Jensen (2013), children living in a middle-class home are exposed to 26 million words by the age of 4. Children in upper-income families are exposed to 46 million words by the age of 4, and the children living in low-income families are only exposed to 13 million words. Barton and Coley (2009) noted that children mimic their parents so the more vocabulary and language used within the home will increase the child's vocabulary and language. Unfortunately, once a child has an established gap in vocabulary knowledge it remains and often gets worse over time (Juel et al., 2003).

### *Effort*

Effort is the amount of time and energy one spends to meet academic requirements (Levi et al., 2013). Students living in an environment of stress are more likely to experience symptoms of depression. Jensen (2013) stated that decades of research show that students suffering from stress disorder and depression may exhibit an attitude of "I give up". This mentality of not putting forth effort may be learned helplessness, a symptom of stress disorder and depression.

Stronge (2011) wrote that teachers of students from low-income families must take into consideration the needs and characteristics of their students. Teachers with low-income students need to include rigor in their classroom for students to stay motivated (Stronge, 2011). Rigor does not mean assignments that are too complicated for students to complete but rather consistently high expectations. Rigor means providing students opportunities to work at their level and progressing them to higher standards.

### ***The Growth Mindset***

Ladson-Billings (2015) stated that knowledge is not static. Claro et al. (2016) found that mindset was a highly significant predictor of student achievement. There are two mindsets that one may exhibit, a fixed mindset or a growth mindset (Hildrew, 2018). Hildrew posited that a fixed mindset is one in which the person believes their intelligence is set and cannot be changed. These individuals believe they are born with a certain amount of knowledge and ability and they cannot change it. An individual who has a fixed mindset may believe that some people are smarter than they are and some are not as smart. The priority for someone with a fixed mindset is to look smart at all costs. They will be less likely to try something new in fear that they will not maintain their image of being smart. Hildrew suggested that this idea of not wanting to look stupid in front of others leads students to not participate in class, become the class clown to divert the attention, or acting out to get out of classroom assignments.

The contrasting mindset is a growth mindset. This mindset is one in which the individual believes intelligence is not stable (Hildrew, 2018). Students perform better if they believe that their abilities intellectually can be changed (Claro et al., 2016). A growth mindset is not something that one is simply born with. When using a growth mindset teachers and students

believe that intelligence is always changing and through hard work one can always change how much intelligence they have (Hildrew, 2018). “Students with a growth mindset outperformed the other group on test scores and had more effort and interest over three times as often” (Jensen, 2016, p. 64). Brock and Hundley (2017) suggested that when a student has a growth mindset their achievement increases as well as their motivation. Classrooms that practice the growth mindset set very hefty goals and work very hard to meet them. Hildrew (2018) stated that when teachers use the growth mindset within their classrooms it creates opportunities for students to grow and learn through challenging situations. Students with a growth mindset will see a challenging situation and view it as an opportunity to learn and grow. Brock and Hundley (2017) posited that students who adopted the growth mindset outperformed those students with a fixed mindset.

Luckily, mindsets can be changed (Hildrew, 2018). The language used in the classroom can help change the path of a student’s mindset. The student needs to be praised for their effort and hard work to encourage a growth mindset. A teacher’s language in the classroom should convey the importance of persistence, the process, and the effort. The student’s environment can influence their mindset (Brock & Hundley, 2017). Reaching out to parents and explaining the growth mindset is an important step to take to establish the mindset change (Hildrew, 2018). Parents need to be aware of the praise language and how to use it effectively. Parents also need to be advised about allowing their students to struggle with difficult tasks. Parents and teachers alike must encourage students to learn from their mistakes. A study out of Chile found that low-income students who had a growth mindset were able to narrow the achievement gap between themselves and their higher-income counterparts (Brock & Hundley, 2017).

## **Educational Gap in Poverty**

“One of the reasons it is getting more and more difficult to conduct school as we have in the past is that the students who bring the middle-class culture with them are decreasing in numbers, and the students who bring the poverty culture with them are increasing in numbers” (Payne, 2005, p. 61). Jensen (2019) explained that the middle class is disappearing because the good paying jobs that only required a high school diploma are disappearing and technology has begun to replace those positions.

Differences in achievement between students living in poverty and their more affluent counterparts, called the achievement gap, does not look like it is going to go away (Gamoran, 2007). The gap in student achievement among different groups of students is well known and widely acknowledged in the educational system (Barton & Coley, 2009). The differences in brain development between low-income students and their counterparts cause an achievement gap to appear as early as birth and continue throughout the student’s K-12 education. McCarter (2016) reported that some progress has been made to improve the inequality between affluent students and low-income students. Unfortunately, despite the progress, an achievement gap still remains.

The educational gap was brought to the top of the nation’s priority list during the 2000 presidential campaign. Both presidential candidates pledged to establish federal legislation to overcome the achievement gap (Barton & Coley, 2009). President Bush enacted the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, which required states to track the student achievement scores by subgroups and included accountability factors (Barton & Coley, 2009; Bjork et al., 2014). No Child Left Behind created mixed results (McCarter, 2016). The pressure to do well on the tests could have an unintended consequence of increased anxiety placed on the students and teachers

(Stiggins, 1999). Stiggins posited that teachers who are placed under stress due to high-stakes testing could become frustrated and leave the profession altogether. Ladson-Billings (2015) concluded that due to schools being pressured to produce high test scores, many of the schools began to focus on the drill and kill strategies as well as teaching to the test. McCarter (2016) posited that the use of high-stakes testing does not identify the reason for the achievement gap and ignores the opportunities gap and materials gap that occur.

The Coleman Report, released in 1966, concluded that schools had little to do with the achievement gap and the biggest contributing factor to the gap was the child's family environment (Downey & Condrón, 2016). Downey and Condrón stated that the Coleman Report's determination was incorrect due to not measuring the student's environment when they were not in school. Downey and Condrón stated that recent scholars found schools do not create the gap in achievement but rather schools have the opportunity to compensate for the disparity among students, exacerbate the differences, or make no change to the situation.

In contrast Barton and Coley (2009) listed seven school factors that correlates to the achievement gap. Rigor of the curriculum was identified as a school factor that was closely related to academic achievement. It is difficult to gage the rigor of a course. Barton and Coley reported that normally the only way one could identify the rigor of a course would be by the name listed for the course. There has been an increase in students taking these rigorous courses but the scores have not improved. Unfortunately, the increase in student enrollment in these courses may have led to an unintended consequence of placing less-prepared teachers in those courses causing a loss of rigor. This could account for the lack of correlation between student enrollment and stagnate test scores.

Secondly, teacher preparation was identified as having a strong correlation to student achievement. NCLB requires teachers to be highly qualified in order to teach (Barton & Coley, 2009; Palardy & Rumberger, 2008). NCLB also requires states to make sure that students from poverty backgrounds have the same access to highly qualified teachers as other students (Barton & Coley, 2009). Barton and Coley reported that teachers who were not highly qualified were three times more likely to be teaching in a low-income school.

Thirdly, teacher experience was identified as a school factor that has a strong correlation with student achievement (Barton & Coley, 2009). Research has shown that there is a difference in student achievement between teachers with five or less years of experience and teachers with more than five years of experience (Murnane & Phillips, 1981). The fourth school factor identified was teacher absence and turnover. Research shows that when a teacher misses 10 days of instruction the students' achievement scores drop (Miller et al., 2007). Also, teachers who left before the end of the year had a negative effect on student achievement. The fifth school factor is class size (Barton & Coley, 2009). Students in smaller classes have higher achievement. Unfortunately, class sizes are decreasing more in the schools that have a low percentage of minority students. It remains that schools with higher proportions of students in the minority groups have not reduced their class sizes so the gap remains about the same.

The sixth school factor is the use of technology in the classroom. Barton and Coley (2009) reported that in 1997 a meta-analysis was conducted by the President's Committee of Advisors on Science and Technology. They reported that technology integrated into the classroom would have a positive effect on student achievement. However, some debate has occurred regarding the application of computers and their use in the classroom for higher-order thinking questions, hands-on activities, and group work (Barton & Coley, 2009).

Lastly, the seventh school factor reported by Barton and Coley (2009) was fear and safety at school. This factor refers to the disciplinary climate within the school. Barton and Coley concluded that research shows that a positive disciplinary climate is linked to higher student achievement. Students who do not feel safe will not perform at their best (Jensen, 2019). Violence in school as well as community violence may contribute to lower test scores (Jensen, 2019).

Ladson-Billings (2015) posited that schools are unable to remedy all factors that prohibit students living in poverty from being successful. Students growing up in conditions of poverty encounter more obstacles than affluent students making being successful academically harder (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007; Rebell & Wolff, 2012). Williams et al. (2017) documented that children from affluent backgrounds score 60% higher than low socio-economic students on cognitive tests when they enter kindergarten. This gap in achievement continues to appear in fourth grade and eighth where a 20 point gap in scores on the math and English assessments is apparent. Children growing up in poverty are at a greater risk of having a low school attendance and are at higher risk of dropping out of high school (D'Agostino et al., 2019).

According to the National Center of Educational Statistics (2014), students from low-income families are less likely to graduate from high school and pursue college degrees. Jensen (2019) examined the dropout rates and calculated that two-thirds of the students who dropped out were from families living in poverty. Trisi and Saenz (2021) reported that a wide gap in college completion was also evident between students in poverty and other students. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2014) surveyed a group of high school sophomores in 2002 and then followed up 10 years later to discover that only 14% of the students who identified as low

socioeconomic had earned a Bachelor's Degree. This was in comparison to 29% of their middle-class counterparts and 60% of their upper-class counterparts.

### **The Achievement Trap Phenomenon**

Wyner et al. (2019) discussed how the high-achieving students from low-income families have not received as much attention as their low-achieving counterparts. The phenomenon that takes place is that these particular low-income students enter school behind the higher-income students but not as low as other low-income students; therefore, not receiving the same interventions as the other low-income students but not having the resources to continue this success as the higher-income students. In this report, to be considered high-achieving one must be in the top 25% on standardized tests and come from a family whose income is below the national median. By first grade only 28% of the high achievers are from low-income families. Out of those 28%, only 56% maintained their status as high achievers in reading by the fifth grade. When these low-income students begin scoring in the top 25% of their class research and interventions are not focused on their achievement any longer. Wyner et al. stated that without interventions these students will not maintain their high-achieving status. Unless interventions are in place for these students they will continue to start out behind, students will continue to drop from high-achieving status during high school, and they will complete college and graduate school at lower rates than their higher-income counterparts.

### **Poverty Interventions**

Trisi and Saenz (2021) reported that economic security programs have been effective at lifting all major subgroups out of poverty. Jensen (2016) reported the government has spent over



\$16 trillion dollars trying to fight poverty. Trisi and Saenz (2021) reported that governmental assistance programs have helped raise millions of people out of poverty in the last half-century. Furthermore, studies have shown that government assistance programs providing families with assistance in nutrition and health coverage have helped to improve children's future outcomes. Hoerandner and Lemke (2006) posited that 30%-50% of the achievement gap was due to circumstances outside the teacher's control. One of those factors is a child's resource availability due to lack of monetary funds or economic status. As Jensen (2019) reported, if teachers know and understand the differences between the middle-class and low-income students then they can start to make changes in their classroom and help to reduce the negative effects of poverty.

### ***Relationships***

One way to bridge the gap between educators and students in general are relationships. Forming relationships with the students is crucial. "Effective teacher-student relationships contribute to student achievement, and this contribution varies depending on students' socioeconomic status and grade level" (Jensen, 2019, p. 13). Research shows that teachers may be the biggest intervention for students living in poverty (Allen et al., 2004). Children raised in poverty lack a dependable, caring adult, this role is often filled by a teacher (Jensen, 2019). Parents dealing with the economic hardship of poverty have a difficult time creating a trusting environment in which their children can form secure attachments. Jensen (2019), reported that student-teacher relationships are in the top 10% of interventions to have a positive impact on student achievement. He elaborated that a student will be more willing to behave and learn better if they feel like their teacher cares about them and they have a connection with their teacher. Irvin et al. (2011) collected research from 60 high-poverty schools and found that the primary factor in a student's motivation and achievement was the teacher and the school. The student's

home environment did not play as large of a role as thought previously. Fram et al. (2007), explained that teachers are important to student success because they can be used to help students navigate the social and learning environments as well as be used as a resource for students. Brock and Hundley (2017) wrote that 33% of students identified as not having a mentor to encourage their development. Brock and Hundley posited that teachers feel pressured to cover the curriculum and they cannot find time to build relationships with their students. This is very disheartening given how valuable the teacher-student relationship is. However, Brock and Hundley explained that teachers could start building relationships by simply talking to their students about their work or any interests the students may have.

“As you might guess, the effect size on student achievement from effective relationships is stronger for behaviorally and academically higher-risk students and for students of color than for low-risk learners” (Jensen, 2019, p.13). Jensen described that teachers can build relationships with the students by personalizing the learning, connecting everyone for success, and showing empathy. Personalizing the learning for students is not a difficult concept. Teachers should know the students’ names, greet them at the door, and wish them a good morning, sit down and set goals for the student, and be a role model for them. Connecting everyone for success needs to be planned a bit more than personalizing the learning. Students need to feel connected and a part of the class. One way to encourage this is to have independent time to work and collaborative time to work with their classmates. And lastly, students need to have an adult that is willing to listen. They need an adult that can see that they are having a rough day and allow them to sit and talk about it in confidence. “The classroom teacher is still the single most significant contributor to student achievement; the effect is greater than that of parents, peers, entire schools, or poverty” (Jensen, 2016, p. 16).

### ***Parental Involvement***

Parental Involvement is important well before the child enters school. Barton and Coley (2009) found that the achievement gap may start well before kindergarten. Reading to the child daily in the first 36 months of life can make a difference. Reading aloud to children can help them acquire the prerequisites needed to be able to learn to read when they enter school. Barton and Coley reported that a strong positive correlation exists between reading to a child during their preschool years and the child's reading achievement in elementary school.

Barton and Coley (2009) posited that a student's success in school depends on the cooperation between students, parents, and teachers. A parent who is involved in their child's education will be able to monitor the activities that their child is a part of. This involvement is correlated with better academic performance and less behavioral problems. Barton and Coley reported that parental involvement was lower for students coming from lower household incomes. Cooper and Crosnoe (2007) completed a study examining economically disadvantaged students, their parents' involvement in school, and the student's academic orientation. They found that students coming from families that are economically disadvantaged, but had parents that were very involved with their education were among some of the highest academically oriented students in the study.

Thus, teachers need to encourage parental involvement, create an environment where parents feel welcomed in the classroom, and form relationships with the parents to help encourage this academic resilience that Cooper and Crosnoe (2007) examined. Rak and Patterson (1996) reported that if students need help getting their parents involved they can turn to their counselors for support. Counselors could provide the parents with consultation on how to promote resiliency at home.

## **Student Resilience**

Reynolds and Reynolds (1998) defined resilience as “functional competence in the presence of multiple risk factors such as poverty, stress, and low educational attainment” (p. 84). Holmes and Kiernan (2013) communicated that resilience is a combination of experiences and characteristics of a group that allowed them to achieve success through adversity (p. 21). Waxman et al. (2003) viewed educational resiliency as a changing factor that can have an impact on a student’s academic success. However, the most common definition of educational resilience is “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences (Wang et al., 1994, p.9). Reynolds (1998) posited that resilience is developmental and is influenced by the child’s characteristics as well as environmental factors. Ladson-Billings (2015) reported that resilience among low-income families can be produced by positive beliefs and positive thinking.

Rak and Patterson (1996) reported that personal characteristics of the students could account for their resiliency. Personal characteristics such as: ability to gain positive attention, an optimistic outlook, an ability to problem solve, and the ability to seek out unique experiences. Family factors found to promote resilience are: the age of the mother or father when they became parents, the number of children within the family, a primary caretaker that showed a lot of interest in the child in the first year of life, alternative caregivers that can help, a network of family to help counsel the child, someone around the child’s age who is responsible that could act as the child’s confidant, and lastly rules and structure at home. Other ways one can promote resiliency is by using parenting practices that are education-specific, support education, create networks within the family, work together with the school to promote education, and promote various forms of resiliency (Ladson-Billings, 2015). Ladson-Billings reported that students could

increase or promote their academic resilience by identifying at least one adult in their lives that could be a source of support and inspiration. Schools can promote resilience by working hand in hand with the community. Rak and Patterson (1996) posited that role models outside the family were important to students for guidance and support. Reynolds (1998) identified three sections of factors that promoted resiliency: child, family, and social factors. Reynolds reported that individual factors of self-esteem, how social the child is, and cognitive performance. Family factors such as economic status, family structure, and family size. Social support also plays a role in resilience. Reynolds identified social networks, school influences, and family influences as social support systems.

## **Summary**

Poverty is a complex concept. Jensen defined poverty as “a chronic and debilitating condition that results from multiple adverse synergistic risk factors and affects the mind, body, and soul” (2009, p.6). Poverty can strike at any time and may be a temporary setback for the family placing them in situational poverty, or poverty can be across multiple generations placing them in generational poverty (Horn, 2011; Jensen, 2016; Payne, 2005; Stewman, 2014). Children living in poverty encounter obstacles from birth all the way through their education. These setbacks and obstacles were reviewed to get a full picture of the hardships that one has to overcome to be academically successful. Wyner et al., (2009) helped to shed light on the achievement trap that students from poverty may fall into. The work of Ladson-Billings (2015), Hildrew (2018), Jensen (2016), Brock and Hundley (2017), and Claro et al. (2016) reported on the concepts of a growth mindset, relationships, and parental involvement that helped predict the success of students living in poverty that have resilience and perseverance. The goal was to

better understand what contributed to the success of low-income students and what interventions can be used to assist other students.

### **Chapter 3. Research Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contribute to the academic success of individuals in Northeast Tennessee to determine common themes in how some economically disadvantaged individuals successfully overcome poverty to lead successful adult lives. A phenomenological approach focuses on the experience of growing up in poverty and overcoming the experience to become successful adults (Patton, 2015). In a qualitative study the researcher aims to make sense of what is happening around the participant and pays attention to the context during data collection and when reporting the findings (Patton, 2015).

This qualitative study used in-depth interviews as the means in which to collect data from the participants. The use of in-depth interviewing allowed the researcher to gather responses about the person's experience during the time they lived in poverty. The interview questions were open-ended in order to elicit more detailed responses from the participants. These questions provided the researcher with primary sources of data for a qualitative study (Patton, 2015). Intensive interviewing allowed the researcher to gather information on the participants' perceptions, feelings, and experiences. The in-depth interviews were used to identify shared experiences that led the participants to overcome the obstacle of socioeconomic status to become successful adults.

During the interview process the researcher kept an open mind and refrained from allowing their preferences or judgements about the phenomena to be added to the research data (Hays & Wood, 2011). Refraining from judgement during the interview process ensured that the researcher remained objective while the phenomenon was being studied (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). In this study, success was measured by the individual's ability to obtain a high school diploma and continue their education by pursuing and/or completing a secondary education degree and secure

a career or profession. Both internal and external factors of resilience were explored to identify common themes among the interviewees who have been successful. The intended outcome of this study was to be able to identify the conditions that promote academic resilience in order to help other individuals living in poverty overcome the initial achievement gap and later become successful functioning independent adults.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The researcher used the Total Environmental Assessment Model of Early Childhood Development (TEAM-ECD) framework to better understand the experiences of living in poverty and the obstacles associated with growing up in an economically disadvantaged environment. This framework has three primary principles, 1) A child's development is a combination of the individual's internal factors and the environment, 2) A nurturant environment (physical, social, and economic) is needed for a child's development, and 3) The availability of a nurturing environment to all children will close the achievement gap (Siddiqi et al., 2007). The Total Environmental Assessment Model of Early Childhood Development framework suggests that the child and adolescent development occurs through the integration of socio-economic status, one's individual qualities, family influences, and outside community influences (Letourneau et al., 2011). The researcher used this framework to gain clarity on the impact of living in a socio-economically disadvantaged environment on one's development and life success.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions for a qualitative study aim to describe a phenomena or understand the experience (DeCarlo, 2018). To explore perceptions of the participants the following questions



guided this study:

Overarching Research Question:

What are the factors contributing to the academic resilience among socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals in Northeast Tennessee as perceived by the individual?

Supporting Sub-Questions:

1. What internal factors do the individuals contribute to their academic resilience?
  - a. Attitude
  - b. Perseverance
2. What external factors do the individuals contribute to their academic resilience?
  - a. Family
  - b. Community
  - c. School
3. What familial influences affect academic resilience as perceived by the individual?
4. What influences within the community affect academic resilience as perceived by the individual?
5. What influences within the school affect academic resilience as perceived by the individual?

**Researcher's Role**

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors contributing to academic resilience of socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals in Northeast Tennessee. Qualitative studies involve a small number of samples (Patten, 2015). Snowball sampling was the method used to identify potential interviewees. In this study, 15 individuals were interviewed. After the

interviews were completed, they were transcribed and the transcripts were given to the participants to check their responses were transcribed correctly. The researcher then took the transcripts and coded them looking for common themes. The data from the interviews were used to determine factors, both internal and external, that contribute to socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals overcoming the effects of poverty to function as successful independent adults. The researcher has worked for 15 years as an educator of students living in low socioeconomic conditions. The researcher selected to use open-ended questions to alleviate any bias from her experience with this population to distort the data.

### **Site Selection**

The sites used for the interviews were locations convenient to the participants that were also private. Due to the pandemic, some interviews were conducted over the zoom platform. The zoom conferences were created with a private code and password to ensure a secure interview. The site selection was different for each participant.

### **Population and Sampling**

Fifteen individuals who identified as growing up in poverty conditions that are successful adults were interviewed for this study. These adults were classified as successful if they overcame poverty to obtain a high school diploma and continued their education by pursuing and/or completing a secondary education degree and secured a career or profession. Snowball sampling was used with participants identifying other participants who would identify as growing up in poverty and overcoming the obstacles of poverty to become successful adults. Invitations were sent to participants as their names were provided by individuals who knew they

identified as overcoming obstacles involved with growing up in poverty to become a successful adult. Due to the phenomena being studied, purposive sampling was used. Padilla-Diaz (2015) reported that purposive sampling relied on choosing participants that met certain criteria, in this case overcame the phenomena of growing up in poverty to become successful.

The participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study by providing a consent form before the interview. All interviewees were notified that they had the right to stop the interview at any time and could also choose to not answer all the questions asked during the interview. Participants were also given the opportunity to review the transcripts of the interview and had the opportunity to edit or change any information collected if they were not comfortable with it. All participation was voluntary and the participants were given the option to stop at any time. Participants were notified that pieces and parts of their answers may be directly quoted within the results of this study but their identity would remain anonymous.

## **Interviews**

Interviews of 15 individuals who identified themselves as growing up in poverty provided the data for this research. The researcher used the interview protocol provided in Appendix A for this study. Open-ended interview questions were used during the interview process to encourage participants to open up and lead the discussion of the phenomena leading them to overcome poverty to become a successful adult. Interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes.

## **Data Collection**

Each participant was informed about the phenomena being studied. A consent form was provided to each participant that explained how the researcher would protect their personal information and keep it secure. The consent form alerted the participant that the researcher intended to record their interview session in both an audio and video format and that a transcript of the interview would be available for the researcher to use to gather information. The participants were informed that their names would not be disclosed. The researcher used pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants and all identifiable information was removed from the transcripts. Thirteen participants were interviewed using the Zoom platform under a secure password. These interviews were scheduled at a convenient time for the participants. The site selection was chosen by the participant and was different for each one. Two participants were interviewed in-person at a private location of their choosing. Participants were encouraged to schedule their interviews at a time and location when and where they would be able to open up privately about their experience. Participants were alerted that they could stop the interview at any time if they began to feel uncomfortable and they could request that their answers not be included in the study. Participants were also informed that they were not required to answer all the interview questions. Participants were given the right to check the interview data and make changes to the transcript if needed.

The researcher used an interview protocol tool to guide the interview and ensure consistency among the questions asked of each participant. The interview protocol helped the researcher ensure that the researcher's thoughts and experiences did not lead the conversation. After the interviews were completed the researcher asked some follow-up questions to ensure a

full understanding of the participants' experiences and ensure accurate demographic data was used.

## **Data Analysis**

The researcher used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Framework when analyzing the interview data. This approach allows the researcher to study how participants perceive their world. This framework attempts to make sense of the participants' experiences and personal accounts of overcoming the obstacles associated with growing up in a socio-economically disadvantaged background (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Each interview was transcribed and the transcripts were then given to the participants for member checking. Transcriptions of the interview were provided to the participants for them to approve and edit if needed. Participants were notified that they could delete or clarify any part of the transcript they felt needed clarification. Through member checking the researcher ensured that the participant's experiences were documented correctly (Carlson, 2010). After the participants endorsed the transcripts and made changes (if needed), the researcher coded the transcripts looking for common themes and patterns to emerge from the data. The researcher read the transcripts multiple times coding them and identifying themes. The themes from the transcripts were compared to identify common themes. Once the researcher identified common themes among the participants the transcripts were given to a second researcher to conduct a peer review and see if similar common themes emerged. It is important to mention that the themes were not predetermined by the researcher before the data collection but rather the themes came from the data collected through the interviews. A second researcher who was trained in phenomenological

research coded the transcripts. This process was completed in order to validate the coding process. The findings in the coding are presented in Chapter 4.

### **Assessment of Quality and Rigor**

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness of the research and the researcher's method of collecting, analyzing, and reporting the data (Carlson, 2010). In order to ensure the research reflects a true picture of the participants' experiences member checking was used. Participants were allowed to review their interview transcripts checking for accuracy. Participants were given the opportunity to make changes to the transcripts if they found any variance. This study used peer review to address credibility. Peer review allowed two researchers to code the transcripts independently of each other. The researchers compared their codings and only the themes that both researchers agreed upon were included in the results.

Transferability refers to the degree in which the results of this study can be applied to other settings and contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Thick description was used to enable outside individuals to determine transferability. Through thick description the researcher provided a detailed account of the interviewees description of their experiences of growing up in poverty and how they overcame poverty to become a successful adult. A detailed description of how participants were chosen, what questions were asked to examine the effects of poverty, and how the researcher recorded the responses.

Dependability refers to the consistency of the findings over time (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In order to ensure dependability, the researcher used the same interview protocol (Appendix A) for each participant. The same consent form was used to gain consent to be involved in the study and informed the participants of the purpose of this study along with how

their information would be used, secured, and stored. These protocols were included along with detailed information on the participants so the information and findings of this study can be included in future research. The data were coded by two different independent researchers and then compared. The overlapping themes were then used in this study. Both researchers coding the data have been trained in qualitative research methods and have undergone CITI research training.

Confirmability refers to the degree in which the findings of the study are free from researcher biases (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The researcher used an audit trail to describe the research process from beginning to end. Efforts are made to ensure that the findings are grounded in the data and represent the perceptions of the participants and not the bias of the researcher. Triangulation was used to alleviate researcher bias. Triangulation was used during the data analysis stage when a second trained researcher analyzed the transcripts and coded them independent of the primary researcher (Carlson, 2010).

## **Ethical Protocol**

The researcher has been an educator working with socioeconomically disadvantaged students for the last 15 years. The researcher strived to be unbiased in their writing and approach to this subject. The researcher of this study gained prior approval from the dissertation committee in the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis department of East Tennessee State University before any participants were recruited for this study. After the research study was approved by the dissertation committee, the researcher requested approval and received from the East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). All participation in

this study was voluntary and the participants were given the option to stop at any time. Each participant was given a full explanation of the purpose of this study. IRB requirements were explained to each participant. Each participant signed an informed consent. Under IRB regulations, the researcher will protect the identity of all participants by keeping their identity anonymous by coding their responses and using numbers and letters to identify the interviewees instead of using their names. The employment and location of the participants will also be anonymous to protect their identity. As required by the IRB, the transcripts of the interviews and the digital recordings will be housed in a secure password protected file for 6 years.

## **Summary**

In Chapter 3 the researcher described the research design, the research questions, how many participants, how the participants were selected, the interview process, and an explanation of how the data were collected, analyzed, and checked by peer review. The findings of this research study are presented in Chapter 4. The recommendations based on the findings of the data are presented in Chapter 5. The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contribute to the academic success of socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals in Northeast Tennessee.



## **Chapter 4. Findings**

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contribute to the academic success of individuals in Northeast Tennessee to determine common themes in how some economically disadvantaged individuals successfully overcome the obstacles associated with poverty to lead successful adult lives. The researcher used the Total Environmental Assessment Model of Early Childhood Development (TEAM-ECD) framework to better understand the experiences of living in poverty and the obstacles associated with growing up in an economically disadvantaged environment. A child or adolescent's environment plays an integral part in their development (Letourneau et al., 2011). This framework helped the researcher better understand the connection between the family's economic status, one's internal qualities, the influence provided by the family members, and the influence that members outside family have on the development and success of an individual. In this study information was gathered from 15 participants, both male and female, ranging from 21-80 years old. These subjects successfully graduated high school and have either successfully earned an Associate's Degree or higher or are currently pursuing a degree.

### **Description of Participants**

The 15 individuals who participated in this study self-identified as being raised in a low socio-economic environment. Out of the 15 participants one is African American and 14 participants are Caucasian. Five of the participants were male and 10 were female. Out of the 15 participants all but one were born and raised in the Northeast Tennessee region, one female participant lived in Florida before moving to Tennessee in the third grade. Five come from homes where the biological mother and father were present, four come from homes where their

biological mother and stepfather were present, one comes from a home where the biological mother left the family and the participant stepped in to raise their siblings, one comes from a home where grandparents were the primary caregivers until they passed and then the mother was unfit so the participant was adopted by other family members, two come from a home where the biological mother lost custody so then the biological father gained custody, and two come from homes with their grandparents took over the role of primary caregiver. Out of the 15 participants two are teachers, one is a principal, two are college students, one works in Software Development and Implementation, one works in Child Support Enforcement, one waitress, one Registered Nurse, one is a County Mayor, one works as the Director of Workforce Development for IACME, one insurance agent, one individual works in the technology field, one is the CTE Director and Maintenance Director of a county school system, and one participant is a retired Navy NCIS agent. To keep confidentiality each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Table 1 is a summary of the participant's demographic information.

**Table 1***Participant's Demographic Information*

Participant	Age	B-Both Parents in Home M-Mother Only F- Father Only S-Shared Custody G-Raised by Grandparent(s) O - Alone/On Own/Outside Family Member	Identified as Low-Income	F-First Generation College  P-Parents did not Graduate High School	Occupation at time of interview	Completed Level of Education HS - High School B-Bachelor's Degree M-Master's Degree EDS- Educational Specialist
1	29	G	Yes	F	Software development	B
2	39	F/G	Yes	F, P	Child Support Enforcement	HS
3	55	B	No	–	Principal	B M EDS
4	22	M/G/O	Yes	F	Stay at Home Mom/Student	HS
5	52	M	Yes	F, P	Teacher	B M EDS
6	21	M/G/O	Yes	F, P	Working part time/Student	HS
7	55	M	Yes	F	Teacher	B
8	21	F	Yes	F	Waitress	HS
9	24	B	Yes	-	Registered Nurse	B
10	44	M/O	Yes	F	Mayor	B
11	45	B	Yes	F, P	Director of Workforce Development	B
12	24	B	Yes	F	Insurance Rep and STEM nonprofit startup	HS
13	36	M/SF	Yes	F	Job in Technology	B
14	46	B	Yes	F, P	CTE Coordinator	B M EDS
15	80	M	Yes	F	Retired NCIS Agent	B

## **Analysis of Data**

The main question of this study was: What are the factors contributing to the academic resilience among socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals in Northeast Tennessee as perceived by the individual? In order to gather data to address this question, 15 participants were interviewed using open-ended questions and an interview guide to ensure consistency. The interview guide used was based around these five questions:

1. What internal factors do the individuals contribute to their academic resilience?
  - a. Attitude
  - b. Perseverance
2. What external factors do the individuals contribute to their academic resilience?
  - a. Family
  - b. Community
  - c. School
3. What familial influences affect academic resilience as perceived by the individual?
4. What influences within the community affect academic resilience as perceived by the individual?
5. What influences within the school affect academic resilience as perceived by the individual?

Chapter 4 presents the participants' perceptions as to what factors contributed to their success as found in their recorded responses to the interview questions.

## **Perceptions of Participants of Low Socio-Economic Families**

The interviews began with an explanation of the purpose of the study. The first question presented to the participants was the open-ended question “Tell me about yourself”. At this point most participants started describing who they are and started describing their life journey. The next question asked participants to “Describe your family as a child and adolescent.” This allowed the participants to describe what their childhood was like when they were growing up. The next open-ended questions asked the participants to open up about their family’s employment and economic situation, their educational background, and events that helped shape who they are today. Additional open-ended questions were asked to allow the participants to describe the impact that educators, community members, and family members had on shaping who they are today and their success. Nine themes were identified. The nine themes identified were 1) An unique definition of success for each participant, 2) Individual’s mindset, 3) Resilience and perseverance are needed internal qualities, 4) Evolving family structure and circumstances, 5) Limited family resources, 6) Increase in abusive/risky behaviors, 7) Caregiver’s educational support and high expectations, 8) Need for community support, 9) Importance of school support.

## **Success Definition Varies from Participant to Participant**

Participants were asked to define success and whether or not they thought they were successful. Many participants paused when asked this question. The participants explained that their definition of success is different from others’ definitions of success because it is a personal measurement. Three participants stated that success is different for each person. Two of the 15 participants stated that success is having a job that brings them joy. Six of the 15 participants

stated that having a family they can love and support or having relationships was their definition of success. Four participants stated that success was setting a goal and achieving that goal. Many participants stated that success was not monetary, rather it was happiness. Other participants stated that success was a level of perseverance and resilience. Two participants stated that success was being able to support yourself and not rely on anyone.

Pausing for a moment, Participant Three defined success by stating:

How would I define success? Success is just a level of perseverance to me. You know, you have some levels of success that are better than others. Some things you just completely succeed at. Some things you do pretty good at. But I think a lot, a lot of success just comes from perseverance, and a work ethic and just sticking it out.

Revealing that success changes for individuals over time, Participant Five added:

Well, if you'd asked me that 20 years ago, I would have said a big fancy house and a nice car, but I don't define success like that anymore. I'm older. I have had some hard times. I've been through some traumatic things. And success to me is probably being resilient, being able to get up when you're knocked down, and just to keep pushing forward. Because life is not easy, life is hard. And we need to, you know, keep pressing on. So, success to me is not money. It is having good relationships with the people that you love. It is respecting yourself and having some integrity.

Participant Eight also posited:

Well, success is different for everybody, I believe. Because for some people it's going out and finding their dream job in the dream city that they've always wanted to do. Some people it's settling down with a family and moving in with each other. It just kind of depends, I guess. Happiness, honestly, just happiness, and finally being able to do what you've wanted to, things going the way they should. I mean, not having a lot growing up. Now that I have things to do for myself. It's definitely, definitely pointing me in the right direction for success.

Adding to the sentiment of Participant Eight, Participant Fourteen reiterated:

Success, success is different for everybody. Success is doing what you can for your family and for you. It can be measured, whatever it takes to make you happy. Everybody has a different level, I think of what they strive to do or different goals. Some people don't set their goals high enough. And some people may set them too high. But I think success is just living the life that you can live.

### **Personal Success**

When the participants were asked if they considered themselves successful many paused for a moment to reflect before answering. Some found this to be a difficult question to answer. Many of the participants stated that they felt successful when they reflected back on their beginnings and where they came from. Some went on to clarify that to be successful one must continue to learn or continue to strive to meet the next goal. Eight of the participants identified as being successful, four participants stated that they were successful at this time but needed to keep working on it because it changes, and two stated they were not successful. One of the

participants who stated that they were not successful stated that he was a work in progress and would continue to work to be successful. He self-identified as being unsuccessful because he is his own worst critic and he stated that he is a perfectionist so he did not consider himself successful. The second participant that identified as not being successful stated that she was a work in progress.

Explaining their measurement of success, Participant Six stated:

At this point, I think I'm successful in a way that I made it out of; I'm where I always wanted to be as a kid. There were a lot of things that could have gone wrong. So, I think that definitely, I'm not where I want to be 10 years from now. But 10 years ago, I'm where I wanted to be. So, I would say, yes.

When asked if successful, Participant Nine explained:

I feel like everything that I came from and growing up the way that we did for me to be able to go through and finish college and move away for a job and do travel nursing and get the experiences that I have that I can say that I am successful. And not just as a person, but as a nurse.

Revealing that success is a journey, Participant Thirteen remarked:

I consider myself in progress. I'm not quite where I thought I would be, but am certainly adjacent to that. I am currently considering new goals in life. Is this successful? Reaching a goal and no longer feeling content with that? Or is success a path, a journey? This I am



currently pandering. But ultimately, I did reach my former goals, even if not by the means I expected.

### **Individual's Mindset**

Participants were asked how they handled a challenge when they encountered it. All the participants described their own plan of attack when dealing with a challenge. Five out of 15 participants demonstrated a high-level of problem solving when dealing with a challenge. They stated that they would take a step back and think about the situation and then make a plan on how to tackle it. Some participants discussed looking at the challenge from different perspectives to identify the best approach. One participant stated that she made a list of people who would be interested in the challenge and then employ their help to work through it. Another participant stated they pull all their resources and then evaluate the challenge before acting. One participant became excited when asked about challenges and stated that they loved a challenge! He stated that he seeks out challenges as a way to stay interested in things.

Seven out of the 15 participants viewed their failures as learning opportunities and demonstrated a growth mindset. These participants perceived their failures or negative situations as a means of motivation. Participants spoke of setting goals and working to reach those goals. Others reported an internal motivation and determination that keeps them working hard to achieve their goals.

Discussing how to handle a challenge, Participant One stated:

I've kind of shifted how I handle challenges now. Again, if you'd asked me like 3 or 4 years ago, I probably would have told you that I would kind of just barrel right through it,

but as aggressively as I can, which is not always the best approach. So, nowadays, when I encounter a challenge, I have to step back and think about it very strategically at a high level, and try to figure out how I can navigate my way through the challenge. Not around it but through it. Because I truly believe that, you know, getting through to the end, rather than trying to go around, will make you a stronger person by taking that journey.

Excitingly, Participant Thirteen added:

I love a good challenge! I in fact find myself seeking challenge as a way of staying interested in things, which surely helps me gain competency in new areas of study and hobbies. I will generally find the tallest mountain to hike, the hardest game to play, or just set goals for myself that often seem unattainable. I tackle a challenge hard and without relief until I've overcome it.

Participant Fifteen noted how faith and perspective are important when faced with a challenge by stating:

Ah, good question, I think when you really get challenged by something, you know, there's different degrees. I think of issues that really challenge you. And we've talked about a lot with long range type decisions and successes or whatever. But I think sometimes when you really get challenged by something that you've got to keep your faith in mind, keep your perspective. And more than anything else a hard work ethic and dedication to whatever the issue might be. A time will probably serve you well, if you've overcome any challenges. I mean, it's awfully easy to get depressed sometimes. Even

every day as a youngster or college or working or whatever. And you just need to, to rein that in and keep a positive attitude.

## **Resilience and Perseverance**

Interview data showed a common link in the internal qualities of resilience and perseverance. Fourteen out of 15 participants credited internal qualities such as resilience, perseverance, and personal motivation. Many participants reflected on learning how to navigate through hurdles, obstacles, and failures they encountered. Many participants credited resilience and perseverance with helping them work through the obstacles and become successful.

Participant One explained that perseverance was an internal quality needed for success by stating:

It is good to have someone there to push you so far but in the end, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. And so, you have to have the perseverance to drink the water. Metaphorically speaking... I had to have the perseverance to up my education, the perseverance to learn. School was not, um, I was not getting help with my homework from my grandfather. You know again I love him to death, he was one of the greatest people in my life. But he dropped out of high school. He couldn't help me with Algebra or Calc. He did not have the knowledge so... it can be a small amount of drive. But what I have found is that that tiny spark of perseverance can create a large flame if stroked appropriately. And if you have people who help you make that spark grow, I don't think I would be where I am at if I hadn't had direction and guidance from the right people. I had Ms. Gayle, Ms. Jenny, Coach Marian, my high school guidance counselor. I had all these

people rooting for me and cheering me on. One of their jobs, all of these were teachers in some capacity and one of their jobs is to get someone to see that they have all the need to succeed. The most important thing I've gotten out of, you know, my entire experience was someone taking the time and the interest to help me figure that out.

Supporting the comments of Participant One, Participant Ten added:

Determination and perseverance. Always trying to reach your goals. Setting goals very high and at least trying to get close to them. You know, routine, being that person in a routine, those are key components of my success. I think relationships. I think you know, good relationships with certain people can make you a very successful individual. My faith. My faith has been my ultimate guidance for everything that I do. I pray daily. And I think the good Lord puts me where he needs me. And even though I'm scared sometimes to do the things that I knew I knew him anyways. Yes, so I think some of those definitely define my success. It's just, I have a lot of determination and drive. And I don't, when I'm asked to do something, I'll do everything I can to see if I can make it happen. It's just, there's just something in me that wants to be successful, you know, I just want to be the best I can be. And that's just that's just the drive I have.

Participant Thirteen added:

My educational success honestly came down to my own drive. I always wanted more than the rest of my family. I was never pushed to pursue education, it was never even brought up. Instead, I knew the kind of life I wanted to live, and I simply analyzed the ways I thought that I would get there. Education seemed like the safest bet, and I am a

self-motivated individual, so I pursued it on my own. I had a few friends who gave me helpful pointers, especially with achieving financial aid and such, but otherwise I have been riding on my own steam.

Supporting the comments of Participant One and Ten, Participant Fifteen revealed:

Well, I think more than anything else is, as we grew up, in this area, under the circumstances we did, I don't think we realized that we were that much different from anybody else. Until we probably went to college and started associating with other people. But I think my academic success has been hard work, having goals that you didn't give up on, and pursuing your dreams, and not letting everyday routine interfere with that. You certainly had setbacks, and you had to overcome some difficulties. But as long as you maintain that push and desire, and didn't let it get you down, as so many people do now, I think that was what drove us more than anything and I include my wife in all this because she was a partner from the start. And she didn't have any more than I did.

### **Evolving Family Structure and Circumstances**

Six of the 15 participants discussed having to relocate due to changes in the family structure due to divorce or death. Three of those participants had to relocate due to custody issues. Five of the 15 participants grew up in a home with both their biological father and mother present. Two participants identified as living with a single parent and described the struggles that accompanied that family structure. One participant described their parents' divorce as a blessing because their father was an alcoholic but then their mother could not handle the mental and psychological toll that the abuse had on her and she "checked out" and left the children alone.

When asked about the family structure and circumstances, Participant Three explained:

I lived with my mom for a couple years. Whenever I was young she was pretty absent. She would just leave me alone. Let me do my stuff. And so, I lived with my grandma for several years. And then, she pretty much raised me as far as any needs I had. And I lived with her until I was in high school. And then I moved back in with my mom until I was a sophomore and then I moved out completely. I lived by myself for several years.

Commenting on their family dynamic, Participant Six added:

So, until I was 14, I lived in Johnson County, and I lived with my biological mother. She had custody of me but I stayed primarily with my grandparents until they passed away when I was 12. So, I was kind of like back and forth because the way we lived, we lived right beside them, like I was there and then sometimes I'd be with my mom. So, it's kind of a little chaotic. I had an older brother too that he would stay with me but it was very chaotic. I'm not quite like... I don't have, didn't have a biological dad in my life or like a father figure. So, there was a constant rotation of whoever my mom wanted to bring around. So, like I said, chaotic, not a lot of, my grandparents are great, but elderly, they did what they could. So, it was kind of, and especially after they passed away in the two years, that I was like, with my biological mother, I was home alone by myself a lot, like I was 12, 13, or 14. So it wasn't like, you know, a kid, but also like, I wasn't able to take care of myself, I guess. So, kinda hard. And that really like affected school too a lot of the times I wouldn't necessarily have a way to school, because I wasn't good at waking myself up for the bus. Because, you know, I was 12. But so chaotic is a really good word to describe it.

Participant Ten also supported the theme of an ever-changing family structure by adding:

My mom divorced when I was 12 years old, and she divorced from an abusive relationship, an alcoholic. And he was very abusive physically and mentally. She never worked. She was a stay at home mom. And I think the abuse and just the psychological, what it done to her when she divorced him, she kind of just basically, I always say checked out for a while. She pretty much left us and I think I was 12 and I have three younger brothers that are all two years younger than me. And it kind of left me at the helm to pretty much raise and take care of them for several years that she would come and go and she was just at the time we were just we just thought you know, that was normal. She would come and go and you know, bring food every now and then.

### **Limited Family Resources**

Fourteen of the 15 participants identified with a lack of income in the home. Three participants stated that their biological mother's income was unstable and was not enough to make ends meet. One participant stated that he and his mother had to move back in with her parents to survive. One participant stated that they grew their food because money was scarce. Two participants stated that their families raised tobacco, cattle, and corn to help pay the bills. One participant described how she kept her situation a secret from people around her because she did not want DCS to get involved. However, a friend found out her situation and her friend's family bought her groceries but never told the authorities. One participant explained that he and his brother would collect scrap metal to get money to pay for sports equipment. Another participant recalled eating frozen burritos for a month in order to buy basketball shoes. One participant described his college path as a four-year plan because that is all he could afford. One

participant rode a train to Washington State to work in the fields all summer to earn enough money for his college tuition.

Commenting on limited family resources, Participant Five stated:

But she could have gotten food stamps, and she could have lived on the system. And there's probably times she should have. But she never did. She took pride in the fact that she could work. She could take care of her family. And she did that. We always knew we were loved. My mother was sacrificial. I remember, my stepdad got her a coat one year for Christmas. And she took it and sold it, took it back, got the money out of it and bought both my brother's a pair of shoes. So I think she put people first and showed us what's really important. And that's the people in your life and the relationships that you have is what matters. It's not material things but people and we were taught.

Commenting on their family's economic situation when growing up, Participant Seven shared:

I call it poor, but my mom says she wouldn't call it poor. She would just say we had enough money to pay the bills. And that's it. We didn't have anything extra. We didn't go to UT football games even though we lived, you know, 20/30 minutes away. We didn't go to anything extra like that.

Aligning with Participant Five and Participant Seven, Participant Fifteen added:

Also, I would mention that while I was in college, I went to the state of Washington, two summers to earn money for college expenses working in the pea harvest out in the state of Washington. I had met some roommates at ETSU. And we went out there, I made



enough money one summer to pay my way through college for a year. And the next year, we decided we would go back with my cousin, and my best friend from high school, and we actually hobo the freight train to get out to Spokane, Washington. We worked out there the summer, made some good money and hitchhiked our way back to East Tennessee. And that experience now that we look back on it was a kind of a life opportunity that I think provided a lot in my career because I wasn't afraid to take these challenges.

### **Increase in Abusive/Risky Behaviors**

Six of the 15 participants described some form of abuse within the family. Three participants reflected on alcoholism within their families. One participant described his drinking habits and reflected on his attempt to commit suicide. One participant described mental and psychological abuse that her mother endured. The toll of the abuse later resulted in the mother abandoning the children. Two participants described how they would be at home alone for periods of time. Those participants also reflected on what it was like having their mother bring various men into the home. One participant talked openly about changing the lock on her door so strangers that her mom brought home could not get into her room. One participant was removed from the home due to mental and verbal abuse. Many participants discussed the cycle of poverty and how alcohol and drugs were a way out for those who believed they were stuck and could not rise above the poverty.

Recalling their childhood Participant Two revealed:

I just had my dad and my grandmother. My grandmother was mean to me. But my dad was, he was pretty good to me. He didn't finish school. I think he got maybe sophomore in high school, maybe. He never even finished high school. My birth mother, she left when she and my dad split up. She took me with her and left me in school in Mountain City at a place where I didn't even know. And so then my dad got custody and he moved in with his mom, with my grandmother and she resented me for years.

Participant Two further revealed:

So, she actually filed a petition with the court for dependency and neglect, which in turn got DCS involved. And so, a social worker came out to the house. And she met with us and my grandma started her nonsense by degrading me and just being really ugly. The social worker and I drove away. And she said, I'll make sure that you never go back there. And so that next day, which happened to be my 16th birthday, a social worker called me at school and she said that don't be alarmed because the police are going to come and pick you up. They're going to take you to the police department until Faith can get off from work and come pick you up. So exactly that happened after lunch. And I never went back. I had to have supervised visitation with only my father. I had to go to court every month until I turned 18. But that was it. They were fined with dependency and neglect, and I never went back home.

Participant Four described a similar experience:

No, she never went without a pack of cigarettes. But we might not have had anything to eat. I mean, she never went without, she would have her little she would go to work. And

I know she had her lunch, cater it in, or whatever. But then I had no clothes to fit me. Or I'd have no shampoo. And it's like, little stuff like that, that you don't even realize is going on until you look back.

Participant Four also recalled:

At my mom's there were other people there, it was never just us. So I'd just come in. Hi, hello. Beeline up the stairs in a bedroom door locked. And that was like a lot in my childhood. Like it wasn't even like just a couple times. It was most of the time. There were people in and out in and out filtering through. And like it's still like that. I went over there to get some mail a couple days ago and she was like, let me see. I want to see the baby.

Revealing that depression was an issue, Participant Twelve stated:

A lot of stuff with my home life, it was just that I didn't know at a young age that I had a very, very bad chemical imbalance, it caused years and years of depression. I've been very open with my story and hope that it reaches parents that my first suicide attempt was at 10 years old. And it wasn't my parents' fault, it was just more of just that chemical imbalance. Then there was the poverty, the poverty causes bullying, you know, arguments over that, there's just so much stuff added in that you take a child who has all of this creativity, has all of this where I was overfilled with emotions, and you throw in all this chaos, it was just a recipe for disaster. I didn't know any of that my junior year of high school. And even then, I was made fun of. I was ashamed. There were all kinds of

different lies, there was so much and then I had to go home and my dad didn't believe in that stuff.

### **Caregiver's Educational Support and High Expectations**

A common theme pulled from the data was the support and/or high expectations from the caregivers. Twelve of the 15 participants described their caregiver's as being supportive or having high expectations for them. Participants reflected on their motivation to do well in school and said that it stemmed from their parents, grandparents, or caregiver's support and high expectations. One participant expressed that they did not want to disappoint their parents by not being successful. Two participants stated that they used their parent(s) as a measurement of what not to become.

Revealing that educational support and high expectations from caregivers is important,

Participant Three stated:

Well, my parents just made sure I went to school. I mean, that was a huge thing. And you know, when I grew up, I grew up in a system, a school system and a school and a community where nobody really had a ton more than anybody else. You know, I was fortunate in the fact that we weren't poor but we weren't rich either. Nobody was really wealthy either. We never knew any difference. But my parents made sure that I went to school and made sure I knew the value of education. Of course, my mother had a college degree from the time I was in fourth grade on so you know, they made sure that was imperative. But my dad you know, they never say it, you know, that they you know, they just said you have to go to school. They didn't say you have to go to college, they said

you need to learn skills, whether that be and of course I went on to school and things of that nature but I mean they wouldn't have said anything had I wanted to be a mechanic. They wouldn't have said anything had I wanted to become a welder. They wanted me to have some type of skill set or training that comes after high school.

Commenting on caregiver's support, Participant Eight added:

I don't really think they played negative roles. They were always really supportive. My dad always wanted to make sure we had the best grades and my step mom, multiple accounts, I can remember math specifically, we would stay up until probably 1 or 2 in the morning sometimes looking up every way to solve these math problems that we couldn't figure out even if we had notes if we had, so they were definitely supportive. They always wanted the best in it.

Participant Ten noted how the caregiver provided an example of what not to be by stating:

So, I think in the end, she was a positive role model for me, just wanting to do better, and not be in the situation that she was in, being able to be independent and be able to take care of myself because she never could. She always had to depend on him financially. She never had her own anything. So that's what I'm trying to teach my daughter, be able to take care of yourself, be able to financially, take care of yourself, mentally take care of yourself, never be dependent on anyone, because you just don't know when that's going to fall apart and you're left with nothing.

## **Community Support**

Thirteen of the 15 participants credited community support with helping them navigate obstacles and achieve success. Two participants reflected on being a part of organizations that allowed them to make connections and network with others. Three participants reflected on the involvement in church or members of the church helping them in various ways. One participant reflected on how a couple from her church intervened in her unfortunate circumstances and ended up adopting her. Another participant reflected on her youth pastor taking her and her brother in when their mother was not in the picture. Two participants reflected on the involvement of a community member and referred to the member as a second mother or second father. Many participants stated that without the help of these community members they could not see a path to a successful future.

Participant Four noted the layer of support provided by a member in the community by stating:

I had a friend who I guess her parents somehow figured out that we didn't have anything. I don't know if they if, you know, the daughter said, Hey, I've been over to her house and they don't have anything to eat or they don't have blank. They don't have clothes or shoes or whatever it may be. And so, I remember one time, like, we're sitting there and somebody pulls up, and the parents were like bringing in groceries. And I was like, what's going on? So, I'm assuming that his daughter told parents, it was like, she doesn't have anything. We need to go get them something. Like we had a refrigerator full of groceries. And I'm like, how do you like, I was excited. Yeah, I'm like, we have got meals, like I can make some meals with this. And so that it was never mentioned again. And I was friends with that girl for a long time.

Discussing the topic of community support, Participant Ten revealed:

I had a friend. I always used to call her my little best friend. Her mom was and I am still to this day in debt to her, just wonderful to me. I mean, actually, she had two daughters and I was in between ages of them. I was one of the family. I was one of the girls. I mean, she treated me just like one of them; Christmas gifts, birthday gifts, family events, family functions, Dollywood trips. I knew I didn't need to do any of that. They treated me just like one of the family. You know, and every year I send her a Christmas card. And she's older now and she's raising grandkids. But she's, it was so fun to be with her. And that family kind of helped me let go of the situation that I was in. And they were just she was just a wonderful person. And probably a lot of being able to have just a normal, if you want to call that normal teenage female life. I can contribute to her allowing me to participate with her family.

Participant Ten continued by describing another community member who helped, by adding:

Yes, my youth leader, which was Dena Shoun. They owned Shoun Lumber, but they were very influential in our lives. They gave us, they gave me structure. And I will tell you the one thing, the one hard thing I did have when I moved in with them, was I went from being the one setting the structure to having the structure. And it was very hard for me. It was, I will not deny, it was very hard. She and I butted heads a lot, because I had already been in that mother role. She was trying to Mother me. And it was very hard for me and her to see eye to eye, because I just couldn't put those roles in perspective, because I had been in the mother role for so long. And then I finally was stepping into a role where someone was trying to take care of me and help me. We had a neighbor, and I

love him to death. And he's passed away since and we went back to try to seem to thank him, but he would stop. He had a summer home because we lived up on the lake. It's a cabin and he would come up maybe on the weekend or every other weekend. But he would always bring us a huge bag of Little Debbie Cakes. And that was like the biggest we loved it, we would be standing outside just to see Jack come up the road. I mean, you know, we haven't forgotten that. I mean, all three of us, me and my brothers, we always talk about those Debbie Cakes. They were just I mean, we would be like I wonder if Jack's coming up this weekend? We can get some Debbie Cakes. Just you know, but he knew he knew we were there all the time, ourselves. And what was the strangest thing with the environment is most of everybody knew. And nobody ever reported it or told. And they just kind of let us do what we were doing as it was not hurting anybody. And everybody was stopping and checking on us and seeing how things were going if we needed anything. And you know, I think back to that, and I think how did we ever. Yeah, we never got sick or anything to you know, you think about doctors and nurses and things like that you do I do with my kids all the time. We never did dental or any of that. But, Lord, we must have just been looking out for us in that situation. That's all I can think of that is amazing.

Participant Twelve also supported this theme:

I had to make the change whether it killed me or I died trying. And it was also that I wanted to show people that if I could do it, others could. Right around that time, I met a gentleman by the name of Scott Stein. And till this day, he's still like a second father to



me. Had it not been for running into him. I don't know where I would be. I don't know if I'd be alive. I don't know if I would be the success I am.

### **School Support**

Thirteen of the 15 participants reflected on individuals connected with school (i.e. teachers, principals, and coaches) and the impact they left on their lives. They reflected on how teachers made learning fun and it sparked their interest in their career field. Many participants credit the support of an educator with helping them achieve the success they have today. One participant reflected on an instance when his math teacher drove him to his college orientation. Another participant discussed how his teachers made science fun and it sparked his love for science so he later earned his Bachelor's degree in Biology. Many participants reflected on teachers that took interest in their well-being and cared for them. Participants also described teachers who would come in early and stay after school for tutoring sessions. One participant recalled an Agricultural teacher who would allow them to travel to Soil Judging events and allow the students to see what the world was like outside of Johnson County. This sparked his interest in agriculture and allowed him to see the world outside of what he knew. One participant reflected on how the principal would run her brothers to and from ball practice so they could participate in sports.

Explaining how a former teacher took an interest, Participant One stated:

And that's exactly what you know, that's exactly what her and Gayle have been like, they've been like a second and third mother to me. Um, you know, Gayle drove me to my college orientation. Jenny helped me with my application for my scholarship that I got to

get to college. But I got it. And yeah, I mean, they have been, you know, so my biggest supporters in my life, which I sometimes just need. So, yeah, I mean, that's kind of the role they play. They were my surrogate mothers to me. And there, again, I adore them, you know, to pieces. I love them both dearly. I think it is important to kind of note having Gayle, having the really strong women in my life definitely helped give me that push. It is good to have someone there to push you so far but in the end, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink.

Supporting the comments of Participant One, Participant Five shared:

The little school that I went to was huge, because it was very nurturing. And you could tell that they really care about their kids and I had a lot of good teachers who you know, positively influenced my thinking for sure. And encouraged me to do something.

Participant Eleven revealed:

I always was interested in science, so I feel like working with composites is something that keeps my interest. I received the biology award in high school so I think that probably gave me a little confidence to keep delving into things that pertained to science.

Participant Fourteen also supported this theme:

Now the whole reason I ended up going to college to do what I did was all because of a teacher I had in high school. His name was Harvey Bernstein. And when I joined FFA, we would go places. We'd go to Florida. We'd go here and we'd go there. And I said, Hey, if I can do this, and help kids the way he's helped me, that's what I want to do. So

that's why I wanted to be an Ag teacher. And then as an Ag teacher, I felt like I got to do a lot of that. Because until, you know, we didn't do vacations and that kind of stuff growing up.

## **Summary**

Chapter 4 reviewed the findings that stemmed from this research study. Participants for this study had to qualify by identifying as growing up in a low socio-economic environment and achieved or currently pursuing a level of education above a high school diploma. The researcher conducted 15 open-ended interviews. The interviews were a combination of in-person interviews and interviews conducted over the Zoom platform. All interviews were recorded to ensure accurate transcribing. Interviews completed over the Zoom platform were recorded in both the video and audio format. Interviews completed in person had the audio recorded to ensure proper transcribing. Once the interviews were transcribed, they were shared with the participants to make sure their words and meanings were recorded accurately. Once the transcriptions were shared with the participants and they did not need to add, change, or delete anything the researcher coded the data looking for common themes. The findings were then reported in Chapter 4.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

Chapter 5 consists of the findings, discussion, conclusions, and recommendations from this study. Implications of this research is discussed in Chapter 5. Chapter 1 presented an introduction to poverty and the phenomenon of academic resiliency among socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals and the purpose of the study. Poverty is an important factor to consider when discussing student achievement because it creates an unequal start for students. Loesch (2020) reported that being born into a family of limited monetary means affects the student's development and future academic pathways. Chapter 1 showed trends in the present data and expressed the need for further investigation into the data in order to identify the factors helping these individuals overcome poverty to become successful adults. Chapter 2 provided a summary of the literature related to poverty, the effects of growing up in poverty, the obstacles students have to overcome to escape their environment, the educational gap, the phenomenon of the achievement trap, the relationship between poverty and education, and the interventions used to help students escape poverty. Chapter 3 presented the research design used in this study, the methodology used in this study, the research questions, the participants and how they were selected, the data collection and its analysis, and the ethical protocol. The common themes that emerged from the data were presented in Chapter 4.

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contribute to the academic success of individuals in Northeast Tennessee to determine common themes in how some economically disadvantaged individuals successfully overcome the obstacles associated with poverty to lead successful adult lives. The Total Environmental Assessment Model of Early Childhood Development (TEAM-ECD) framework suggests that the child and adolescent

development occurs through the integration of socio-economic status, one's individual qualities, family influences, and outside community influences (Letourneau et al., 2011). In this study, success was measured by the individual's ability to obtain a high school diploma and continue their education by pursuing and/or completing a secondary education degree and secure a career or profession. Both internal and external factors of resilience were explored to identify common themes among the interviewees who have been successful. Data were collected using snowball sampling through interviews of 15 individuals ranging from 21 to 80 years of age. These individuals self-identify as having grown up in a low socioeconomic environment and overcame the obstacles associated with poverty to become successful adults. Transcriptions of the interviews were coded to identify common themes among the participants. The themes that appeared in the data became the findings of this qualitative study and linked to the factors that individuals in Northeast Tennessee contribute to their success.

### **Statement of the Problem**

A qualitative approach was used to examine the trend of numerous studies that indicated an achievement gap between economically disadvantaged individuals and their more affluent counterparts. Hill and Sandfort (1995) found that students raised in homes that were not economically disadvantaged made 25 to 40% higher wages than students who stem from low socioeconomic homes. These students are more likely to drop out of high school or not attend post-secondary schooling. As more students enter school from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, stakeholders are required to find ways to help them be successful. In order to increase the number of low-socioeconomic students that are successful, this study included the data of 15

participants who graduated high school and have become successful adults despite the challenges and obstacles of spending their formative years in an economically disadvantaged background. This research study is important because an examination of the factors that causes these individuals to be successful while others are not will allow educators and stakeholders to view the protective factors and replicate them for more students living in these conditions. Thus, increasing the percentage of individuals living in poverty that will grow up to be successful adults. By using a qualitative approach, the experiences of these 15 participants were recorded in words allowing an examination and exploration into the issue of contributing success factors of economically disadvantaged individuals in Northeast Tennessee.

### **Summary of Findings**

The perceptions of economically disadvantaged individuals' experiences and challenges were recorded after an interview was conducted using open-ended questions. For example, 14 of the 15 participants described limited family resources when asked, "Please describe your family's employment and economic situation when you were growing up." The researcher used open-ended questions to allow the participants to give a detailed account of their experience without any bias from the researcher. After analyzing the data, common themes emerged from each research question. A common theme of abuse or risky behavior emerged from the data. This theme is not directly linked to the research questions, but the participants viewed it as a family influence that modeled how they did not want to be. This was then used as a motivation for those participants. More discussion on this can be found in under Research Question 2.

### *Research Question 1 Discussion*

Research question 1 focused on the factors that the individuals contributed to their academic resilience. Nine themes emerged from the research data. Out of the nine themes, three common themes emerged related to the individuals' internal factors perceived to contribute to their academic resilience. The themes uncovered an unique definition of success for each participant, an importance in the individual's mindset, and resilience and perseverance as internal qualities that play an important role in the success of economically disadvantaged individuals.

The perceptions of economically disadvantaged individuals regarding the internal qualities that contributed to their academic success contained some common themes in their interviews. The participants had unique definitions and measures of success. When asked, "How do you define success?" Many participants had to pause and think about their definition of success. One stated: "I can only define it for myself, because everyone else has different parameters for what they think is success for them". But ultimately, the definitions varied from setting goals and persevering until you reach those goals, having a loving family that they can support, or having a job that they enjoy. Another participant added: "Success for me is having a job that I don't mind going to, having a family that I can love and support. And, for me, family means a lot to me, I would like to have kids one day and be married. But also, my friends are my family. And so, I want to have a nice abundant circle of people in my life". Another added: "And success to me is probably being resilient, being able to get up when you're knocked down, and just to keep pushing forward. Because life is not easy, life is hard. And we need to keep pressing on." This is supported by the research that found that resilience is a combination of experiences and internal characteristics that allow individuals to overcome adversity to achieve success. (Holmes & Kiernan, 2013). Another participant added to the definition of success by stating:

“Determination and perseverance. Always trying to reach your goals. Setting goals very high and at least trying to get close to them. You know, routine, being that person in a routine those are very key components of my success. I think relationships. I think good relationships with certain people can make you a very successful individual”. Rak and Patterson (1996) noted that personal characteristics such as an optimistic outlook or the ability to problem solve could account for one’s resiliency.

The participants had varying answers when asked if they thought they were successful. Many participants described being successful as changing. Once they achieved one goal then they were on to the next goal. One stated: “Success is harder to define today than when I was younger. Success can be simply having a dream job, reaching a certain pay bracket, or simply acquiring happiness. But ultimately, success to me seems to be something similar to achieving contentment, in one form or another”. Some participants stated that they found themselves to be a work in progress because they weren’t where they wanted to be yet. One participant added: “Maybe not quite yet. I’m in the process of it, there’s still things I want to get done. Like, I still want to go back to college and get a good house. I’m in the process of it, I’m working my way up to it. Everybody’s got to start somewhere”. Another participant added: “No, but to me, I’m a perfectionist, I am constantly evaluating myself, I am constantly trying to improve my weakness and improve my strengths”. These participants’ transcripts described a growth mindset. Research completed by Claro et al. (2016) found that mindset was a highly significant predictor of student achievement. In support of the growth mindset, Brock and Hundley (2017) suggested that when a student has a growth mindset their achievement increases as well as their motivation.

The participants perceived perseverance and resilience as character traits needed to be successful and work through challenges. Some participants discussed failures as learning



opportunities. More supporting evidence on a growth mindset comes from a study out of Chile that found low-income students who had a growth mindset were able to narrow the achievement gap between themselves and their higher-income counterparts (Brock & Hundley, 2017). One participant stated: “So for me, long term failures are not an option. So, I think there's a lot to be learned from failures in your life. But for me, long term failures are not an option for me. And so, I will keep striving for success no matter what, I might get down and out a little bit. But I will keep pushing through whatever I need to push through. I won't, I can't give up because, you know, there's no one else that can push me to my goals and my future. And so, it's really just like that drive and like that perseverance and that stubbornness too”. Findings from Ladson-Billings (2015) reported that resilience among low-income families can be produced by positive beliefs and positive thinking. Other participants talked about working with others, using relationships to help navigate the challenge, and pulling resources to overcome obstacles. One stated: “Pull in all my resources. Because there's a lot of challenges that at where we're at now that I can't do on my own. So, you just kind of have to look at the team around you”. Supporting evidence from the TEAM-ECD framework further explains, one’s emotional health and way of reacting to challenges and new situations are formed through the interactions and relationships formed during their formative years (Siddiqi et al., 2007).

### ***Research Question 2 Discussion***

The participant’s comment about working with the team around you is echoed through the findings of Research Question 2. The second research question examined the participants’ perception of external factors that contributed to their academic resilience. This research question broke the external factors into three subgroups: family, community, and school. The

study identified three common themes shared by the participants. The themes of evolving family structure and circumstances, limited family resources and increase in abusive/risky behaviors emerged from the research.

### *Evolving Family Structure and Circumstances*

Six of the 15 participants stated that they had to relocate due to family issues. Three of the participants experienced custody issues. One stated: “My birth mother, she left when she and my dad split up. She took me with her and left me in school in Mountain City at a place where I didn't even know. And so then my dad got custody and he moved in with his mom...” Two participants described similar situations: “She always was moving people in and out of our house. Always had people sleeping on the couch, always had people in and out every single day. Like I never know who's going to be there. And I would stay in my room upstairs with my door locked. All the time. I never even come out of my room to go to the bathroom. And that was pretty much it....I would come home, there'd be cars all over, you know all these people at the house, doing whatever they were doing”. One participant added: “Well, I was raised on a farm, which I'm sitting on right now, which is on the Holston River in Churchill, Tennessee. My parents were divorced at a young age. And my mother and I were required to live with her parents because of a lack of financial resources”. The supporting research by Letourneau et al. (2013) and Lu et al. (2016) stated that the experiences and interactions that a child has at a young age sets the course for their growth and development in later years. The participants perceived changes in living arrangements, marital status, and the family dynamics had an impact on their childhood. The Coleman Report concluded that schools had little to do with the achievement gap and the biggest contributing factor to the gap was the child's family environment (Downey &

Condron, 2016). Furthermore, according to Brock and Hundley (2017), the student's environment can influence their mindset. These themes align with the evidence presented in the TEAM-ECD framework, families are the fundamental group responsible for the growth and well-being of children and adolescents. Children living in homes with single-parent can have negative effects on the child's development due to increase stress and conflicts. The framework states that the family provides the best resources for increasing a child's resilience (Siddiqi et al., 2007).

### ***Limited of Family Resources***

Another theme that emerged from the interview data was limited family resources. Loesch (2020) reported that being born into a family of limited monetary means affects the student's development and future academic pathways. A lack of resources created obstacles that the participants had to overcome in order to go on and achieve a post-secondary degree. 14 out of 15 participants expressed a lack of income in the home during their childhood and adolescent years. Three participants stated that their mother's income was unstable. One commented: "My mom did not have a job after I think I was like, maybe first or second grade. She did not have a job after that. At all. So, her parents were paying all of her bills that she had to have, but anything else she wouldn't have". Six out of 15 participants reflected on ways that the family tried to offset the financial burden. One participant stated: "We grew the majority of our food and new clothes were scarce". Two other participants grew up on farms and discussed that watching their families grow tobacco helped instill a good work ethic in them. One added: "We bought a pretty good boundary of land there beside the house, and all that was paid for with tobacco money, set up on yearly payments through Farm Credit. But just to think that you are so

dependent on Mother Nature and, and different things for, you know, to pay for the things that you want to do you need it. So, you know, I value those times and those experiences, but I think that played a great deal and seeing how hard money was to get”. One participant recalled a sacrifice made by her family so they could afford her ball shoes. She stated: “We grew up really poor. I mean, there were weeks where when I was playing ball, I played ball since I was in third grade, if my basketball money for shoes were due, we would have to eat bean burritos or ramen noodles for two or three weeks to make sure that my shoes got paid for and stuff like that. But we didn't have the extra money for me to go on field trips or go do extracurricular things really other than play ball”. According to the theoretical framework, there is ample evidence to suggest that children and adolescents living in low socio-economic situations could be exposed to a variety of adverse conditions causing development delays (Siddiqi et al., 2007).

### ***Abusive and Risky Behavior***

One theme that emerged from the participant interviews was an increased likelihood of living in an abusive environment or taking part in risky behavior. 6 out of 15 participants reflected on abusive behavior or taking part in risky behavior during their childhood. Three participants shared experiences of neglect. One stated: “My mom divorced when I was 12 years old, and she divorced from an abusive relationship, an alcoholic. And he was very abusive physically and mentally....And I think the abuse and just the psychological, what it done to her when she divorced him, she kind of just basically, I always say checked out for a while she.. she pretty much left us and I was I think I was 12 and I have three younger brothers that are all 2 years younger than me”. Alcoholism was seen in three of the participants' recounts. One stated: “I grew up in an alcoholic home. And with five kids. My real dad died when I was two. And my

mom married, remarried and had two more kids for total of five. And so there was five of us. And my stepdad was an alcoholic also. And so we have a lot of adversity, and but we had a lot of love, too”. One participant explained that he struggled with thoughts of suicide. He stated: “Going into college, my freshman year, my best friend, which was actually my Papaw Hardin. He died of alcoholism, it ran in my family, on both sides. And I found myself not suicidal, but in a place to where I had no fear”. This theme was not present in other participants’ experiences but this needs to be mentioned due to the increase in deaths due to suicide in youths. These findings align with reports from Stewman (2014) that stated, students living in generational poverty are often operating in survival mode. This stems from living in an environment that involves stressors such as abuse, hunger, and the responsibility of raising younger siblings. Moreover, according to Levi et al. (2013) students living in poverty are more likely to experience depression. The Total Environmental Assessment Model of Early Childhood Development (TEAM-ECD) framework states that the family unit is the most important piece in a child’s development. However, when the family unit exposes the child to abusive behaviors multiple factors (individual, family, and community) combine to determine how the child emerges from the abusive situation (Siddiqi et al., 2007).

### ***Research Question 3 Discussion***

The third research question examined the influences that the family had on academic resilience as perceived by the individual. Family influences ranged from making sure the participant went to school to setting the expectations that college or a skill was expected after high school. The participants reflected on their educational experiences and a caregiver’s educational support and high expectations played an integral role for the participants. Fourteen of

15 participants said that they were supported or encouraged by their primary caregiver. Participants who did not have parents in the picture, stated that their parents played a part as what not to be when they grow up. One stated: “So I really think that instilled those morals and values in me to be successful, and not want my family to be raised, you know, in the aspects that I was raised in, being able to provide for my kids, being able to have food in the cabinets”. One participant stated that it was not her mother who pushed her to go to college. She stated: “And, oddly enough, my stepdad is probably the one who pushed my sister and I both to get a college degree, because he knew that women were at a disadvantage in comparison to men. And he pushed us harder than he ever did the boys. So, they both played a huge role and positive role in saying that we had an education, they always told us it was important”. The supporting research from Ladson-Billings (2015) reported that students could increase or promote their academic resilience by identifying at least one adult in their lives that could be a source of support and inspiration. Another participant relied on her grandmother to set high expectations for her. She stated: “She [grandmother] gave me everything I had to have. But she held me to a lot of high standards. Even though I wasn't having to try a lot. You need to make sure you have all A's. Well, I had all A's anyway. So it wasn't, it wasn't like I was failing. And she was like, Okay, you need to have all A's or there's going to be consequences”. The supporting research from Letourneau et al. (2013) stated the factor largely responsible for a young child's development is the family unit.

#### ***Research Question 4 Discussion***

The fourth research question looked at the influences that the community had on the participant's resilience. One of the major findings of this study was the intervention provided by

community members, or outside family members and the success that participants were able to achieve because of their intervention. This aligns with the TEAM-ECD framework, communities provide an extra support system to children and adolescents by providing informational support, emotional support, and instrumental support (Siddiqi et al., 2007). Thirteen of 15 participants reflected that they had someone from the community step in to help them. Participants perceived that their success was attributed to the additional support given to them by members in their community. Participants credited their success to have as much to do with school support intervention as much as interventions from the community. One participant credited his success to two different community members. He stated: “Her name is Jenny Locke Miller. She's pretty well known in the Johnson City area. She's involved in a lot, but we moved across the street from her when I was four and they just kind of adopted me. I was like their surrogate son because they don't have any children. And they basically adopted me, my brother and my sisters as their surrogate children....Jenny helped me with my application for my scholarship that I got to get to college”. He also reflected on an outreach group for helping him become successful. “For a long time, I was part of an after school for at risk youth program, Boys to Men, I think it's called something else now started by Mike Marian. So there was a mentorship program out of that, in which I made some lifelong friends through people that are, you know, like, 10 years older than me now. But I still keep in contact with them. And you know, we uplift each other and cheer each other on, which is, which is wonderful. So that's definitely another aspect. That definitely had a big influence on who I am now. And my success for sure”. The findings align with Rak and Patterson (1996), they found that role models outside the family were important to students for guidance and support.

Two other participants remember church members stepping in to help raise them when things went south for them. “They're not even related to me, but I went to church with them. And Nanny Faye, her daughter, was coming up around the house because we went to church together. So, Steph was coming around, and she was seeing how my granny treated me. And then, you know, I was getting really close with them. So, my nanny, who also worked for the state until she retired, saw how I was getting treated. So, she actually filed a petition with the court for dependency and neglect, which in turn got DCS involved”.

One participant recalls a community service group she was involved in through her high school. “Key Club in high school, because all the people on Kiwanis and like all their connections through there, they really took me in and anything I needed, like, whether it was like recommendation letters, or just putting me in touch with people that would like when I like when I was interested in nursing school... he introduced me to all these different people and they have recently got me a scholarship that basically paid for my school and then some”. The findings of Letourneau et al. (2011) meta-analysis found that socio-economic status along with other family factors and community factors work together to create a healthy environment for child development.

### ***Research Question 5 Discussion***

The fifth and final research question in this study was what influences within the school affected academic resilience as perceived by the individual. One of the major themes that emerged from this study was the importance of members from the school taking an interest in the lives of students. In support of this finding, Jensen (2019) found that student-teacher relationships are in the top 10% of interventions to have a positive impact on student



achievement. Twelve of 15 participants reflected that they had someone from the school intervened to help them. Participants perceived that their success was attributed to the additional support given to them by school personnel. One participant was unable to make it to his college orientation so his teacher took him. “Gayle (Ms. Hughes) drove me to my, to my college orientation”. Another participant added that her teachers made her keep redoing her assignments and really pushed her to do better. “Some of those teachers made you keep redoing stuff until you got it right and was good at it. I had some great teachers, one English teacher that really drove me. She kept making us redo stuff, too. We got it good, and showed us that we could do it better and better”. One participant reflected on her first-grade teacher and how she would check in on her long after first grade. “She followed me all the time in school, like checking on me to make sure I was okay”. This participant also stated, “they were really great about if I needed help, like staying after school and helping me”. These participants’ statements align with the Total Environmental Assessment Model of Early Childhood Development (Siddiqi, 2007), which describes the role a teacher or member of school personnel can take to provide support to these children and adolescents and help them overcome the obstacles of poverty.

One participant added: “I remember times JR would bring us home and would take my brothers to ball practice because they wanted to play sports, but we just didn't have a vehicle or way to get back and forth”. Another participant when asked “Can you identify any specific turning points or experiences in your life that pointed you to the profession or the academic path that you chose?” replied, “Yep, that sophomore year in high school, when I took my first Ag class, that was it. Whenever I got in there and we started doing things. I knew I was going to college, because that's what I've been told, you're going to college for something. So, it was at that point. And you know, we were doing leadership events and soil judging and going different

places and doing different things and, and being fairly successful. So, yeah, it was at that point". The findings align with Irvin et al. (2011) stated the primary factor in a student's motivation and achievement was the teacher and the school. In conclusion, individuals striving to overcome the obstacles of poverty will need multiple layers of support during their educational experience and a growth mindset in order to become a successful adult.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The following recommendations for practice are made based on the findings of this particular study:

- Organize parental involvement events that educate parents on the importance of setting high standards and expectations for their children
- Include session about resilience and perseverance into the counseling classes in elementary and middle school
- Increase the dialogue between educators and students about college, trade school, and the skills
- Expand college and career readiness programs to middle and elementary schools
- Organize parental involvement events that educate parents on the different opportunities available to students and what is required to be successful in each one of them
- Create staff development opportunities for teachers and school support staff (elementary to high school) on how to be mentors to low socio-economic students
- Create partnerships with local businesses to offer job-site training for individuals without jobs or who are in danger of dropping out

- Expand or create mentor programs that involve individuals in the community to provide another level of support
- Provide additional tutoring opportunities for students from low socioeconomic status

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The following recommendations for future research are made based on the findings of this particular study:

- Replicate this study using the perceptions of the parents of low socioeconomic students to see what they view as the needs and areas of improvement
- Replicate this study in the future to get an understanding of how Covid and school closures have affected student perceptions
- Replicate this study with a focus on low socioeconomic minority students
- Conduct research on the current mentoring programs at the elementary, middle, and high school levels

### **Summary**

This phenomenological study examined the factors that contributed to the academic success of individuals in Northeast Tennessee to determine what factors helped them overcome the obstacles of poverty to become successful adults. This study used a review of literature and interview data from 15 participants to gather common themes from their experiences. The data collected from the interviews were coded and nine common themes emerged from the data. These findings align with the Total Environmental Assessment Model of Early Childhood

Development (TEAM-ECD) framework which states that the child and adolescent development occurs through the integration of socio-economic status, one's individual qualities, family influences, and outside community influences (Letourneau et al., 2011). The findings of this research study were used to make recommendations for practice and recommendations for future research. The findings of this research will help direct educators and parents to emphasize the areas identified to be most effective in helping individuals overcome low socio-economic setbacks. Through the experiences of the participants one can see the need for interventions and support for the individuals living in low socio-economic environments.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Interview Protocol

#### Questionnaire for Interviews

##### Interview Guide

Hello, my name is Larissa Trivette and I am currently enrolled in the doctorate program at East Tennessee State University in Education Leadership. The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contribute to the academic success of students in Northeast Tennessee to determine common themes in how some economically disadvantaged students successfully escape poverty to lead successful adult lives. The purpose of this interview is to determine your perceptions in what you attribute to your success. All personal information will remain confidential and used only for the purpose of this research. With your consent I will record this interview. In-person interviews will have the audio recorded and interviews conducted on Zoom will have both audio and video recorded. I am doing this to be able to record your words accurately. You will be able to review the content of your responses to make sure they are accurate before they are used in this research.

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Describe your family as a child and adolescent?
3. Please describe your family's employment and economic situation when you were growing up.
4. Where did you go to school, elementary, middle school, high school, college?
5. In what ways did your parents play a positive or negative role in your education as a child?
6. Please describe the character traits and values that were modeled for you as a child.
7. How would you define success?
8. Do you consider yourself successful? Why? / Why not?
9. To what do you attribute your educational successes?
10. Are there any internal factors that you contribute to your success?
11. Are there any individuals other than your parents who played a prominent role in

your childhood? Please explain.

12. Looking back, are there any events in your childhood that you feel are responsible for shaping who you are today?
13. Are there any individuals connected to the school that influenced your childhood or success?
14. What factors molded your educational experience?
15. Looking back, are there any influences in the community that you feel are responsible for shaping who you are today?
16. When you encounter a challenge how do you handle it?
17. Looking back, can you identify any specific turning points or experiences in your life that pointed you to the professional and academic path that you are on today?
18. What do you contribute to your perseverance in striving to be where you are now from where you started from?
19. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Thank you for your time, I will type the transcript of this interview and email it to you. Please read it to make sure your words are recorded correctly.

## Appendix B: Recruitment Email

### Recruitment Email

Hello, my name is Larissa Trivette. I am a Doctorate student at East Tennessee State University in the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis Program. I am doing a research study that involves examining the factors that contribute to the success of students who grew up economically disadvantaged. I am looking for individuals from Northeast Tennessee who identify as being successful despite the challenges of growing up in an economically disadvantaged environment. This study involves interviews which should take about 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews will take place in-person or online via zoom in a private location of your choosing. Please think about participating. Participation is voluntary. If you have any questions, please contact me at [zclh16@etsu.edu](mailto:zclh16@etsu.edu) or 423-213-4924.

Sincerely,

Larissa Trivette

VITA

CONNIE LARISSA TRIVETTE

Education: Ed. D. Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, 2022

East Tennessee State University

Johnson City, Tennessee

Ed. S. Educational Specialist, 2015

Union College

Barbourville, Kentucky

M.A. Educational Leadership and Administration, 2014

Lincoln Memorial University

Harrogate, Tennessee

B.S. Mathematics and Secondary Education, 2005

East Tennessee State University

Johnson City, Tennessee

Professional Experience: Algebra 1A/Honors Algebra 1 Teacher (2020 - Present)

Science Hill High School, Johnson City, TN

Principal (2019 - 2020), Unaka Elementary School

Carter County Schools, Elizabethton, TN

Carter County Math Coach (2017 - 2019)

Carter County Schools, Elizabethton, TN

Assistant Principal/Pre-Calculus Teacher (2015 - 2017)

Unaka High School, Elizabethton, TN

Algebra 1/Integrated Math 1 Teacher (2012 - 2015)

Unaka High School, Elizabethton, TN

Level 5 Effectiveness of Algebra 1 EOC (TVAAS Data)

High School Mathematics Teacher (2010 - 2012)

Cloudland High School, Elizabethton, TN

Level 5 Effectiveness on Algebra 2 EOC (TVAAS Data)

Algebra 1 Teacher (2008 - 2009)

Jacksonville High School, Jacksonville, NC

High School Mathematics Teacher (2006 - 2008)

Unaka High School, Elizabethton, TN

Algebra 2 Teacher (2005 - 2006)

Daniel Boone High School, Gray, TN