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Emma Chambers

University of South Carolina Aiken, EC20@usca.edu

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Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Adolescents: How To Support Them in Life and Education

Emma Chambers
 University of South Carolina Aiken
 EC20@usca.edu

Abstract: Research has shown that a socioeconomic divide is occurring and only getting larger in classrooms, and it is especially affecting the young adolescent age group. While there are many different problems that these students must face in their personal and public lives, the education system should be doing all it can to prevent this divide from growing larger with different strategies and prevention tools. This article will promote the use of several classroom management strategies, suggestions, and private organizations that offer help to make classrooms a more welcome place for all students no matter their home life.

Keywords: socioeconomic disadvantage, equity, self-esteem, classroom management, relationships

Introduction

If someone were to grow up attending school anywhere in the United States, they probably would have seen students with a variety of different resources and support from home. The research, however, that is coming out day by day is showing a growing trend in children having less opportunities and resources in the United States. When a child has fewer opportunities compared to others in society, both economically and socially, then we classify that child as being socioeconomically disadvantaged. If someone were to define a socioeconomically disadvantaged or low-income child with economics then their family typically is under the poverty line, which is 19,720 dollars for a single-parent household, or the child may qualify for free lunch because they fall anywhere from 130 to 185 percent below the poverty line (ASPE, 2020, n.p.). Even though this can be a somewhat broad definition for this group of students, they may be left behind in terms of academic achievement and their own personal emotional development. This is particularly concerning for students in middle school, who are experiencing dramatic changes in all areas of development. With that in mind, there is some hope for these adolescents as there is new research and strategies coming out every day that improve their odds of closing the gap with their fellow schoolmates. Despite studies that showcase that socioeconomically disadvantaged children suffer from educational inequality, a lack of self-esteem, and poor outcomes in life, new studies suggest that with proper mentors, encouraging teachers, and parental involvement, these students are more likely to succeed.

Why is Socioeconomic Disadvantage Important?

I personally chose to research this topic because of three different reasons. One of the major reasons was that I grew up in a low-income school system where, every day, we felt disadvantaged compared to other schools because we didn't have as many opportunities and that took a toll on us. This included fewer AP Classes, less funding for our clubs, and even less opportunities to do sports and participate in band. Another reason that is similar to my first is that because of my time in that same community, I was able to meet friends who were classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged, and I personally saw the impact it had on their school career and the expectations they had for their life. The third reason that I had is that judging from what I have seen my entire life, I know that economic and social inequality is a huge problem within South Carolina, and yet it is a problem that we rarely, if ever, see addressed despite the situation leading to an educational gap between students. So, between the reasons that came from my personal experience and the reason that came from my personal knowledge, I decided to do this topic because it is very important to me personally and will be something that many teachers will come across in the classroom that they need to be informed about.

Connection to AMLE Position Statement

Ultimately, socioeconomically disadvantaged children are often thrown aside for other issues, but this issue is only growing by the day, and we see it starting to have a large effect as we see the gap growing. So, many say that this issue isn't as important as others, but the truth is that this issue is especially important when we talk about the connection to the AMLE's position statements. In fact, this issue connects to two different aspects of the AMLE's mission, such as the idea that "Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about young adolescents, equitable practices, and educational research" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p.9). Essentially, this issue is important because leaders at middle schools should be practicing everything equitably to make sure everything is being done efficiently without monetary goods being a factor, so the issue of economic and social disadvantage should be important to leaders at middle schools. On the other hand, this issue is also important because the statement also says that every student "must have access to the very best programs and practices a school can offer" (AMLE, 2010, p.1). So, throughout this paper, and as seen in the AMLE's own mission statements, the goal should be for every young adolescent to have access to the same programs and practices to make sure they all have an equal chance of success, and the problem is that we don't see that in modern-day schools.

The Current Research is Grim

Even though the issue of socioeconomic disadvantage is not covered as well as other topics within the educational field, there is plenty of research that showcases just how important it is and how prevalent the issue is in current society. In fact, it

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was found in a research project by Kids Count, a research organization based in South Carolina, that “for the middle and high school level, over 18% of kids in this state live either at or below the poverty level” (2023, n.p.). So even though the topic may not be as prevalent in the news and the media, the truth is that over 18% of students in the upper levels of school are at any time below or at the poverty level, and this is a significant number of students who may be falling behind in life and in school. To make matters worse, in an additional study done by NCES, it was found that “nationally, 50% of students are at a middle-level or high-level poverty school” (NCES, 2019, p. 110). That means that over 50% of students in the United States are currently getting their education from a school where at least 50% of the students are at or below the poverty line, and that is a huge amount. Despite this topic not being seen as important, most of these students nationally and locally qualify as being socioeconomically disadvantaged, which means it is a much bigger deal and incredibly prevalent in society.

In addition to research that has been done on the prevalence of socioeconomic disadvantage among students, there have been other research projects that show the detrimental effect that this disadvantage has on students. In a research study done by a group of scientists, it was found that “for two students with the same teacher but different economic status that the kid with a low socioeconomic status would have lower confidence” (Foster, Woodhead, Barton, and Clark-Wilson, 2021, p. 515). Essentially, when you put two different students in the classroom who are the same in everything except for socioeconomic status, the child who is socioeconomically disadvantaged would automatically have lower confidence in their schoolwork. This lack of confidence also leads to feelings of deprecation, which was also proven in a study done by the government of Turkey, which concluded that students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged “...frequently identify themselves as inadequate” (Özden and Atasoy, 2020, p. 80). Both feelings combine to create a perfect storm, which makes these students feel like they must work harder and faster to keep up with everyone else in their classes. That is also why, in the same study done by the Turkish government, they found that these same students “tend to take school much more seriously and get upset with disruption” (Atasoy et al, 2020, p. 78). These students are much more dedicated to their schoolwork because they feel like they are automatically not on the same level as their classmates and feel like school is their only way to succeed. With all this research in mind, it is easy to get a clear view of the mental and emotional state of socioeconomically disadvantaged children and why this is an important issue that has to be addressed.

Demographics

When it comes to describing this group of students, there are a few things that can be said. If you were to look at this from a demographic standpoint, it was found in a study that “boys of color tend to make up a significant portion of this category and tend to suffer the most in comparison to other groups” (Pittman, 2017, p. 1172). Essentially, if we were to break the demographics down of this particular group of students, boys of color not only tend to be a significant portion of

socioeconomically disadvantaged children, but they also tend to suffer from more effects compared to the other members of this subgroup due to the double-edged sword of being both a person of color and also socioeconomically disadvantaged, which tends to lead to inequality within the school system. In fact, in recent years, many programs across the United States have even had to change their systems because “this focus on equity, and in particular on boys and men of color, has significantly increased the demand for guidance on how to help local systems and organizations already serving low-income youth and youth of color sharpen the program components and improve the program practices” (Pittman, 2017, p. 1173). Another thing to acknowledge about this subgroup is that often, these students are socioeconomically disadvantaged because they come from families that were already disadvantaged before they were born, so these students frequently come from families in poverty or from welfare centers like adoption centers or foster homes. With a basis of both what this group comprises of and the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage on these students, it can give you an idea of how it can influence these students’ education.

The Challenges are Immense

Despite the current research addressing the needs of socioeconomically disadvantaged children, the truth is that this subgroup goes through many unique challenges that other adolescents don’t. For example, children who are disadvantaged tend to struggle with self-confidence, and this ends up affecting the work they put out into the classroom. In a study done in Turkey, it was found that “most of the participants’ self-perception of success is not high. The vast majority of students believe that they could achieve a higher level of success by studying harder” (Atasoy et al, 2020, p.77).

If these students don’t feel like they can succeed and their self-esteem is low enough, then they won’t put their full force into their schoolwork because they already feel like they are set up to fail. Another challenge that many of these adolescents face is a lack of parental involvement compared to other children in their classes. Multiple studies have been done on the level of involvement of parents in their children’s education, and in a study, it was found that “with regard to the effect of SES on parent involvement... We found that, overall, parents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be involved than parents of lower SES at school and in educational expectations” (Park and Holloway, 2013, p. 116).

Due to the financial situation and educational level of these households, many of these students don’t have access to the resources and help they need to get ahead and meet the level they need at school. It isn’t because their parents don’t want to be involved, but they either can’t afford or find the time to be able to. It also hurts because many of these students can’t afford after-school programs that give them extra help. Statistically, this is horrifying when the research showcases that “caregiving quality in ECE was associated with reduced disparities between low- and higher-income disparities in STEM school performance...and STEM achievement...[was] reduced when children from lower-income families experienced more exposure to higher caregiving quality in

ECE” (Bustamante, Bermudez, Ochoa, Belgrave, and Vandell, 2023, p.1440). So, these kids aren’t just falling behind at school, but also after school because of this socioeconomic boundary. All of these issues are challenges that they face without even acknowledging the economic issue, which makes supplies and extra help impossible to afford for those who are low-income. With all of this in mind, it isn’t a shock that it is having a negative effect on their education.

Consequently, many of these challenges have a negative effect on low SES students when it comes to getting an education and learning new material. When it comes to their confidence, if a student doesn’t feel like they can succeed from the very beginning, then they are already setting up a blockade for themselves that they can’t break. So, even though there is no systematic cause in this instance to keep a student from succeeding, they socially and culturally don’t feel adept, and it is damaging their ability to succeed in school. On the other hand, parental involvement is a significant part of a child’s success in school, and if a student is already struggling at school because they aren’t adequately prepared and they come home to an environment where their family also can’t give them a boost, then these disadvantaged children don’t have a chance at closing the gap with the other children. So, these children are facing societal, systematic, and cultural challenges that are putting them at risk when it comes to their education, which can only be fixed by implementing changes that make education more equitable.

Strategies to Help These Students Succeed

Even though many teachers do implement strategies to try to help their underserved students, the truth is that socioeconomically disadvantaged students need multiple forms of challenge and support to get the help they need. One strategy that teachers need to follow is making sure every single student in their classroom feels supported. Some teachers don’t follow this strategy and instead have focused on specific students, and this needs to stop because whether the child is underserved or not, all students in a classroom should be getting the support they need. So, whether this is making sure to give your students compliments anytime they complete something or building a positive environment where your students know they can trust you. It needs to occur to make sure all your students feel like they can succeed. In terms of financial support, teachers can provide things like pencils, paper, and other school supplies to help bridge that gap because those who are disadvantaged probably don’t have the money for school supplies or can’t afford to replace them.

When it comes to challenges, there is one strategy that every teacher needs to follow, and that is never to expect less from a student just because they struggle with life. So many kids who are socioeconomically disadvantaged get left behind because their teacher or administrator doesn’t believe they need to be pushed because they just need to pass, and that is belittling them. Have high expectations for all students, and if one who is low SES seems smart and like they know the material, see if you can push that student to do harder work so you are giving them the challenges they need to succeed in class and in life.

Advocates for These Students Can Help

Equally important is the role of the adult advocate because they play a big part in helping these students succeed in life. In this situation, the role of an adult advocate is to not only encourage these students to bridge that gap but also to be there as a representative whenever these students need that extra encouragement. One of the biggest challenges that disadvantaged kids go through is not wanting to acknowledge that they need help when they need it, so an adult advocate could notice when the student is having problems and develop a strategy to either intervene or find a way for the student to overcome it for themselves. The other role of an adult advocate is to be a listening ear when these students are struggling and just want to talk. Often, it is talked about by outside sources how much these students are going through, but rarely do we let the adolescents speak for themselves, so the adult advocate can be that listener for them. It also is a good idea for counselors to be adult advocates in students’ lives because they can put them on the right track or find resources for them to succeed in life. An article was even written which showed that “school counselors can take the lead in preparing students to be college and career ready by implementing interventions that are systematic and address...career exploration, and college planning” (Péruce, DeRonck, and Parzych, 2017, p.1226). This could really help disadvantaged students who don’t get these resources from their parents and families and need that extra push to get on the right path for life. The most important role, however, of an advocate is to make safe zones and safe classrooms where students don’t have to be worried about being picked on because of their economic and social status. When students don’t feel pressure or stress from other students picking on them or attacking them because of a life they didn’t choose, then they are more likely to pay attention and succeed. That is why the role of an adult advocate in this situation is so important: if students feel less stressed and more supported, then they are more likely to succeed when it comes to their academics as well as in life, because they have the support they need to try new things and pursue interests.

Organizational Resources

Throughout this article, there has been a constant effort to showcase how serious this issue is and how it needs as much help as possible, but there are already some organizations who are doing what they can to help the issue as it stands right now. One of those organizations is Children International, which is an international organization that provides medical, educational, and housing services to children and their families wherever they have a team on the ground. Here in the United States, they provide afterschool programs, scholarships, and monetary donations to help bridge the gap between those with advantages and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. The only way to reach them is by going to their website, which can be found by searching their name. Another organization that is more known for its resources is Save the Children, which is an international organization that provides aid to children around the world in multiple areas. In terms of the United States, they oversee Head Start and multiple other educational programs to give students from disadvantaged backgrounds a head start in life

before the gap even begins in terms of education. You can contact them on their website or at 1.800.728.3843, where you can talk to a person about donations or receiving help. One more organization I would like to acknowledge is the Children’s Defense Fund, which is a United States charitable organization that provides monetary assistance in multiple areas on behalf of children. They help provide scholarships to make schools more equitable and to make sure that students of color and those who are economically disadvantaged get the same opportunities as other students. Just like the other charities, you can find them on their website, or you can contact them at their southern office, where the phone number is 601.321.1966.

Conclusion

Socioeconomic disadvantage is a large problem in society, but just because it has a large effect on our students’ living situations doesn’t mean we should allow it to affect their education and their future in life. It may be hard to identify the main problem causing the socioeconomic disadvantage in school because it is very systemic, but at the end of the day, administrators, teachers, advocates, and community members must work together to make sure all kids, no matter their status, are getting the best education they can to succeed in life, no matter what the social and economic cost is. So, at the end of the day, we are making sure that all our students are succeeding not just with their education but with their mental and emotional health to set them on a greater pathway in life.

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About the Author



Emma Chambers is an undergraduate student at the University of South Carolina Aiken and is currently pursuing a degree in Secondary Education Comprehensive Social Studies. Emma is a member of South Carolina Teaching Fellows, a president for her local Rotaract chapter, and a fervent believer in equity within education. She plans to graduate in 2025, with plans for further education and many years in the classroom.

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