EDUCATIONAL
RENAISSANCE

Research Article

# Perceptions and Understandings of Low Literacy Among Developing Teacher Candidates

**Johannah Baugher, EdD.** School of Education, Northwest Missouri State University
   email: jbaugher@nwmissouri.edu

**Everett Singleton, PhD .** School of Education, Northwest Missouri State University
   email: esingleton@nwmissouri.edu

**Abstract**

While a great deal of research is available to inform the definition of low literacy, its impact on local, state, national, and global levels, as well as commonalities that exist among those comprising this population, little is publicized about the perceptions held of this population by members of the general public.  Yet, despite this identified gap in literature, one set of themes remain: individuals of low literacy are often a marginalized population, susceptible to socioeconomic vulnerability, and disadvantaged in matters of assimilation within many social constructs (Flynn et al., 2011; Martinez & Fernandez, 2010).  Through this study, attempts will be made to formulate perceptions and understandings of low literacy among teacher candidates.

The purpose of this study was to examine developing teacher candidates' perceptions and understandings of low literacy through an intersectional lens. An additional goal of this research was to frame environmental stimuli that these candidates identify as contributing factors of low literacy.  The findings from this research study will be utilized to better understand future teachers' action plans for confronting low literacy.

*Research Questions*

1. How do teacher candidates define low literacy?
2. What perceptions influence teacher candidates' understanding of low literacy and persons with that background?
3. What prevalent factors impact teacher candidates' beliefs about low literacy?

**Theoretical Framework**

This study was based on and informed by Crenshaw's (1989) theoretical construct of intersectionality. Crenshaw, (1989) defines intersectionality as a unit of beliefs that describes the way individuals see the world. Crenshaw (1989) posited that overlapping and interconnected aspects of a person's identity should be considered when seeking to understand their perceptions, experiences, and beliefs. These aspects include education, substance use, class, socioeconomics, family support, mental health, foster care, and physical disability, as well as age and other forms of identity. However, intersectional theory is not just about personal identity in a vacuum, but the ways in which it is affected and, to some extent, defined by systems of oppression, discrimination, and privilege.

Like intersectionality, literacy research and language arts pedagogies attempt to hold accountable historical elements that create inequities. Grant and Zwier (2017) noted that

intersectional research within the scope of education has given attention to both theory and practices, though their emphasis is on the importance of practical application in the classroom setting.  Scholastic research to date has found the direct correlation between intersectional theory and classroom methods to be limited but evolving (Grant & Zwier, 2017), a promising conclusion that also indicates a more in-depth reach is needed to effectively address gaps.

Compton-Lilly et al., (2017) examined the way in which immigrant youth negotiated the intersecting categories of their unique identities and how they made sense of these identities through literacy development over a period of time. Their findings also confirmed that attending to students' intersectional identities is vital with regard to literacy development. It is important to note that theories of intersectionality are complex, interconnected, and overlapping, and they debunk the notion that categories such as race, class, culture, and language are independent of one another. "Intersectionality reveals the complexities of children's identities and the ways in which literacy learning overlaps with, interacts with, and entails multiple ways of being that cannot be untangled" (Compton-Lilly, et al., 2017, p. 136).

Clearly, classroom practices based on intersectionality could be used to enhance literacy development among students. As intersectionality has a theoretical orientation and is not an established method with confined boundaries, it provides room for open dialogue, in-depth reflection, and real-life action for change.  Using this theory as a guide, teachers of reading and writing can create lessons and curricula that give attention to the various aspects of their students' identities; they can also extend lessons to illuminate the voices of groups not physically present in the classroom, but vital to cultural awareness. For example, language arts teachers could use introduce common reading pedagogies, such as reading aloud, to ensure that students are provided with opportunities to consume stories about people whose cultural backgrounds are very

different from their own. "By including these readings as part of larger text sets around particular topics, such as refugees, diverse families, and homelessness, teachers can encourage students to pose critical questions about their own schools and classrooms" (Brochin, 2018, p. 173).

## Concealment of Low Literacy

Often referred to as invisible members of society, those of low or limited literacy background commonly opt to fall under radar so-to-speak, avoiding any potential feelings of embarrassment or shame (Flynn et al., 2011; Roman, 2004).  Skills of low literacy are often hidden in full camouflage, as individuals avoid making known any deficiencies for fear of being harshly labeled, isolated, or traumatized (Mangro, 2008; Melia, 2008).  Falling victim to marginalization and others' active prejudice, many persons incur low literacy as life's outcome, not of their own choosing.

Perceptions of those who identify of low literacy are formed no differently when compared with impressions or judgments made of other populations.  Driven by an observance of common traits, background experience, and context, person perception engages cognition to construct conclusions about an individual person, or population (Cherry, 2020).  Deductions made of a person or population (accurate or otherwise) can influence subsequent categorizations and stereotypical behaviors (Cherry, 2020).  These active forces have the potential to influence the future outlook for those of low literacy.  In the same way, necessitating an awareness of trauma-informed instruction when working with individuals and family of low literacy background.

## Trauma-Informed Pedagogical Practice

Research shows that students of color, as well as those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and their families, often deal with direct and indirect traumas that appear in "problem behaviors" commonly resulting in incarceration. Trauma can manifest from a single traumatic experience caused by an accident or death of a family

member, or several continuous traumatic experiences, such as violence or mental, physical, or sexual abuse (Cook & Newman, 2014). Overlooked and subtle trauma in youth can lead to the Cradle-to-Prison-Pipeline. The "Cradle-to-Prison-Pipeline," funnels students out of school and into the streets, depriving them "of meaningful opportunities for education, future employment, and participation in our democracy" (Tyner, 2014, p. 1).

There appears to be a direct correlation between trauma and educational achievement, specifically rates of low literacy, as well as behavioral challenges, and detainment.  The numerous ramifications of undealt trauma can bring into existence adverse situations for students inside and outside of school causing challenging like predicaments for those same students (Blodgett, 2015).   Particularly, students who have endured at least two or more traumatic occurrences were almost three times more likely to be left behind a grade, more likely to have increased absenteeism, and far less likely to be involved in school (Bethell, et al., 2014).

White-Cummings (2016) provides ways that reading and writing can be used as a form of self-expression to help students cope with trauma at school. Writing can be used to help students process thinking, manage challenges, and understand emotions. Additionally, reading can also be an integral part of the healing process. Understanding the struggle of others through reading can help students validate their feelings, through individuals and characters that face similar struggles. Being able to see themselves reflected in stories can help them overcome adversity and build resilience (Nicholas-Frazer, 2019).

*Literacy and the School-to-Prison Pipeline*

The role of education and school attendance cannot be underestimated as a powerful tool in counteracting adjudication and incarceration. Providing a quality education to students can create an essential, protective element against delinquent involvement in the juvenile justice system (Development Services Group, 2015c); furthermore, education and school attendance is instrumental in the rehabilitation of incarcerated youth. Research concludes that further purports that "...75% of state incarcerated individuals did not complete high school, or can be classified as low literate" (as cited by Harlow, 2003, p. 1 in ProLiteracy, 2020).

Further research shows that 43% of adults are reading at an eight grade level or lower in the United States. Essentially 29% are reading at eighth grade level, while 14% percent comprehend materials at or lower than a fifth grade level (Zoukis, 2017). These reading deficits usually start in the early years and increase as students move through later grades. In order to reduce crime and narrow the cradle-to-prison pipeline, it's crucial to tackle the issue of widespread illiteracy in this country (Zoukis, 2017).

**Research Design and Methodology**

This study used a grounded theory approach, along with analyses of qualitative and quantitative data sources. The researchers examined teacher candidates in one educator-preparation program in a rural, Midwestern university to determine perceptions and understandings of low literacy among teacher candidates. The goal was to provide an in-depth description and analysis of a single case or multiple cases (Merriam, 2009). This approach, which entailed compiling in-depth information collected via survey (Creswell, 2014; Fink, 2013), allowed the researchers to explore a specific subject, within the field of education, in real-life settings and hopefully gain an understanding of the different aspects of low literacy as perceived by teacher candidates (McCombes, 2020).

First, we used multiple survey questions to draw on teacher candidates' perceptions. Next, we analyzed survey data and the teacher candidates' feedback, as their perceptions could provide valuable information in understanding various aspects of low literacy and the impact it has on

teacher motivation to confront barriers of low literacy in the classroom. Finally, we used emerging themes from the data to determine how teacher candidates perceived and made meaning of low literacy within the context of their own experiences.  We also used this information to extract meaning and understand the impact of low literacy and how it could be used to inform literacy instruction. The researchers employed Merriam's (2009) technique of purposeful sampling, which builds on the premise that investigators seek to uncover, understand, and formulate new knowledge by evaluating a relevant sample.

## Participants and Setting

Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville, Missouri has an enrollment of 6,000 undergraduates, and is located in a very rural, geographically remote, isolated area. Maryville has a population of 11,972. The moderately selective university enrolls approximately 1,025 students with education majors comprising 658 elementary teacher candidates and 367 secondary teacher candidates, primarily from a four-state region; each state is within 50 miles of the university. Each year, approximately 23% of the teacher candidates are Pell Grant eligible. The vast majority, 96%, identify as White, while 2% identify as Latin(x) and 2% identify as multiracial; 36% of teacher candidates are the first in their family to attend college.

For the purposes of this research study, 60 students were afforded the opportunity to participate in a five-question survey, with a total of 56 responses collected.  All students surveyed were in the course, Multiculturalism in Education, which is a requirement of all education majors. Students enrolled in this course are generally upperclassmen (junior and/or senior status) and have participated in a variety of field experiences across other program coursework.

## Key Findings and Results

From the five-question survey administered to teacher candidates enrolled in the course, Multiculturalism in Education, 56 responses were

collected.  From those respondents, the following themes were extracted, per question, as outlined in the paragraphs that follow.

Survey Question 1 asked: *What does low literacy mean to you, and what personal experiences influenced your perspective?*  Four themes extracted from survey results were identified that suggest teacher candidates interpret low literacy to mean an obstacle, outcome, level of performance, or a relative degree of achievement.

Survey Question 2 asked:  *How do you perceive individuals of low literacy backgrounds?*  Four themes extracted from survey results were identified that detail teacher candidates attach no judgment to persons of low literacy.  Additional themes suggested that teacher candidates perceive individuals of low literacy backgrounds to be disadvantaged in some way, whether at school, home, quality of health, poverty, etc.  These factors share a commonality in that they are all situationally-defined, specific to the individual person.  Teacher candidates also held the common perception that individuals of low literacy backgrounds share in conditions of absence, be it effort, opportunity, or systems of support.  The last theme identified specific to this question is that the presence of low literacy is independent of outcome.  In other words, teacher candidates majorly agreed that individuals of low literacy could and should not assume full responsibility for such an outcome.

When given a listing in excess of 15 potentially-influential factors which contribute to low literacy as an outcome, teacher candidates' responses identified the following leading factors. Of 56 respondents, 52 or 93% indicated their belief that presence of a disability could be a contributing factor to low literacy as an outcome. Conditions of poverty was also believed to be a contributing factor for low literacy as 51 respondents or 91% of candidates surveyed marked such on their completed survey.

Next, patterns of poor school attendance was acknowledged as an influential factor for low

Figure 1: *Factors believed to contribute to the outcome of low literacy*
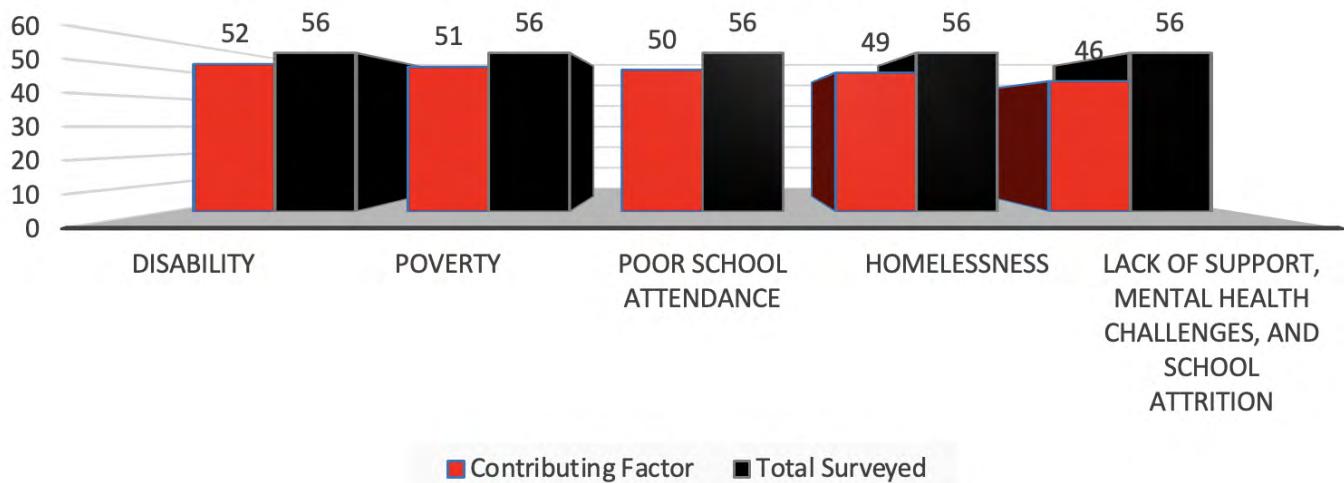


literacy to result by 50 survey respondents or 89%. The fourth factor believed to influence low literacy as an outcome was homelessness. Forty-nine teacher candidates or 88% of those surveyed checked this factor as significant. Lastly, three factors tied in fifth place. They include: lack of support, mental health challenges, and school attrition. Eighty-two percent of those surveyed (46 respondents) acknowledged these factors equitably play a contributing role in low literacy as an outcome.

By the same token, teacher candidates identified five factors to be least impactful in their contribution to the outcome of low literacy. Specifically, 23 of the 56 survey responses, or 41% believed teen pregnancy to be a contributing factor for outcomes of low literacy. Forty-three percent or 24 of the 56 responses believe life as a single parent weighs heavily upon low literacy as an outcome. Experiences in the foster care system are believed to influence occurrences of low literacy by approximately 53%, or 30 survey respondents. Fifty-nine percent of those surveyed, or 33 of 56 responses, believe bullying to play a significant role in low literacy resulting. Lastly, family challenges were perceived by 68% to be impactful in influencing low literacy as identified by 38 of the total 56 respondents. This information is further captured in the following visual.

Survey Question 4 asked: *How do you plan to confront barriers of low literacy as a future educator?*

Four themes were extracted based on candidates' responses. They include: a) act, respond, and intervene; b) invest in students; c) connect with families; and d) equalize educational opportunity and access to resources. The value of relationships and power of connections were also noted repeatedly.

**Discussion and Implications**

From the findings, an interesting perception surfaced. As detailed above, 88% of survey respondents believed homelessness to be an influential factor for low literacy to result. According to findings from Voices of Youth Count (2017), "one in ten young adults ages 18 to 25 endure some form of homelessness in a year" (p. 1). Moreover, the millennial generation sadly leads in the number of households in poverty, when compared with other generations' household data (Fry, 2017). Given that the majority of survey respondents would fall into this age bracket, it is difficult to dismiss the influence that group norms might have played into the formation of this perception (Johnson, 2006; Levi, 2013). Further research might illuminate the prevalence of low literacy as it exists within the ecological systems of the teacher candidates surveyed (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Opportunities for further research have potential to inform the validity of the presumption above, in addition to revealing patterns of homelessness as

Figure 2: *Non-factors believed to contribute to the outcome of low literacy*
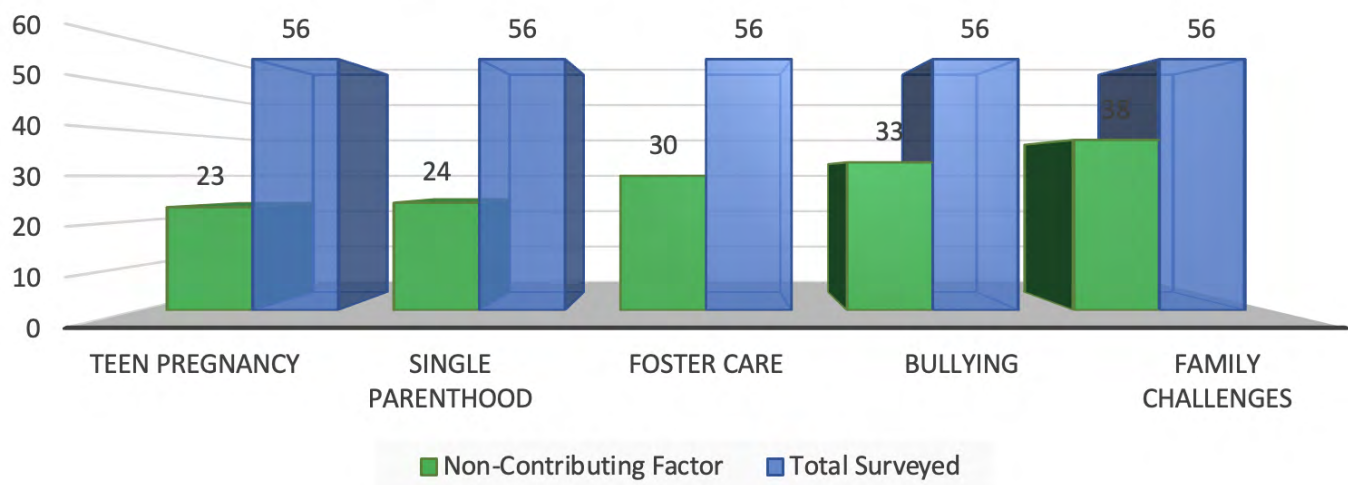


it exists in type: chronic, episodic, transitional, or hidden (Jaggi, 2019).  Jaggi (2019) further details the lead differentiator between these four layers of homelessness lies in the frequency of the pattern.

In other words, chronic reflects persistent, ongoing patterns of homelessness that exists for up to and beyond a year's time.  Episodic is considered to reflect up to three instances of homelessness within a span of 12 months.  Transitional seasons of homelessness result because of significant changes or interruptions in life patterns and/or catastrophic events.  Lastly, hidden homelessness is just that because of an absence of documentation or reporting pattern.  Jaggi (2019) further likens the layer of hidden homelessness to couch surfers, being very fluid and spontaneous in their arrival, length of stay, and departure.

Given this unexpected theme which emerged from the survey data, continued research is justified, working to further investigate the correlation between rates of low literacy and homelessness (on any level) among millennial, college students. This factor was an overarching theme that emerged from the data set uniquely as homelessness was not found to be a predictor of low literacy in other cited research.  Thus, making it an important theme to examine within the context of our research study.

**Summary**

While little is known of the perceptions held by members of the general public toward persons of low literacy background, this research study worked to inform a subset of those perceptions as held by developing teacher candidates. Additionally, this study sought to more concretely frame contributing and non-contributing factors which this same population believed influenced occurrences of low literacy.  Anchored in the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), this study collected and analyzed 56 survey responses which yielded informative themes that further defined low literacy as an obstacle, outcome, level of performance, or degree of achievement.

Teacher candidates further demonstrated an understanding that conditions of low literacy were often situationally-defined as those persons were commonly disadvantaged in some way. Candidates' responses further purported their action plan in confronting low literacy in their classroom was founded upon these verbs: act, invest, connect, and equalize.  In educator preparation programs, it will be important to create opportunities for developing teachers to notice predictors of low literacy in order to guide an appropriate response.  Authentic opportunities to share this information with students and the University community alike will help create an awareness of low literacy and the shackles it can place on individuals for a lifetime.  Though this study alone is not comprehensive or absolute in its

findings, it does help to inform a step of the journey that will lead to a more accurate understanding of the perceptions held of low literacy and its many, influential tentacles.

## References

Bethell, C. D., Newacheck, P., Hawes, E., & Halforn, N. (2014). Adverse childhood experiences: Assessing the impact on health and school engagement and the mitigating role of resilience. *Health Affairs, 33*(12), 2106-2115.

Blodgett, C. (2015). *No school alone: How community risks and assets contribute to school and youth success.* Washington State Office of Financial Management.

Brochin, C. (2018). Assembled identities and intersectional advocacy in literacy research. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice, 67*(1), 164-179.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development.* Harvard University Press.

Development Services Group, Inc. (2015c). *Protective factors against delinquency. Literature review.* Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/litreviews/Protective%20Factors.pdf

Cherry, K. (2020). *How person perceptions helps us form impressions of others.* https://www.verywell mind.com/person-perception-2795900

Cook, J.M., & Newman, E. (2014). A consensus statement on trauma mental health: The New Haven Competency Conference process and major findings. *Psychological Trauma: Theory Research, Practice, and Policy, 6*(4), 300.

Compton-Lilly, C., Papoi, K., Venegas, P., Hamman, L., & Schwabenbauer, B. (2017). Intersectional identity negotiation: The case of young immigrant children. *Journal of Literacy Research, 49*(1), 115–140.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). *Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics.* The University of Chicago Legal Forum.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th

ed.). Sage.

Fink, A. (2013). *How to conduct surveys: A step-by-step guide* (5th ed.). Sage.

Flynn, S., Brown, J., Johnson, A., & Rodger, S. (2011). Barriers to education for the marginalized adult learner. Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 57(1), 43-58.

Fry, R. (2017). *5 Facts About Millenial Households*. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/5-facts-about-millennial-households/

Grant, K., & Zwier, E. (2017). *Intersectionality and Education*. http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756810/obo-9780199756810-0188.xml

Harlow, C. W. (2003). *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report: Education and Correctional Populations.* https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ecp.pdf

Jaggi, S. (2019). *The many forms of homelessness.* https://joinpdx.org/the-many-forms-of-homelessness/

Johnson, A. G. (2006). *Privilege, power, and difference* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Levi, D. J. (2013). *Group dynamics for teams* (4th ed.). Sage.

Mangro, K. (2008). Exploring the experiences and challenges of adults from war-affected backgrounds: New directions for literacy educators. *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal, 2*(1), 24-33.

Martinez, R. & Fernandez, A. (2010). *The Social and economic impact of illiteracy: Analytical model and pilot study*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000190571

Melia, E. (2008). Can read, can write. *Adults Learning, 20*(1), 28-29.

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation.* Jossey-Bass.

McCombes, S. (2020). *How to do a case study*. https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/case-study/

Nichols-Frazer, E. (2019). *How writing (and Reading) can help heal trauma*. https://clifonline.org/how-writing-and-reading-can-help-heal-trauma/

ProLiteracy. (2020). *U.S. adult literacy facts.* https://www.proliteracy.org/Portals/0/pdf/PL_AdultLitFacts_US_flyer.pdf

Roman, S. P. (2004). Illiteracy and older adults: Individual and societal implications. *Educational Gerontology, 30*(2), 79-93.

Tyner, A. R. (2014). *The emergence of the school-to-prison pipeline.* https://www.americanbar.org/groups/gpsolo/publications/gpsolo_ereport/2014/june_2014/the_emergence_of_the_school-to-prison_pipeline/

Voices of Youth Count. (2017). *Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America.* https://voicesofyouthcount.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ChapinHall_VoYC_1-Pager_Final_111517.pdf

White-Cummings, C. (2016). *Reading, writing, and traumatic stress: Helping kids cope during the school year.* https://ourselvesblack.com/journal/2016/9/27/reading-writing-and-traumatic-stress-helping-kids-cope-during-the-school-year

Zoukis, C. (2017). *Basic literacy a crucial took to stem School To Prison Pipeline*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/basic-literacy-a-crucial-tool-to-stem-school-to-prison