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**Research Brief 9**

**Evaluating the Impact of Economic Disadvantage on Specific Learning Disability  
Identification in Elementary School Students: A Grounded Theory Study**

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# Evaluating the Impact of Economic Disadvantage on Specific Learning Disability Identification in Elementary School Students: A Grounded Theory Study

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## **Abstract**

When a student in a public school is suspected of having a Specific Learning Disability (SLD), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates teams to consider whether a student's learning challenges are primarily the result of economic disadvantage. This mandate is of growing importance as more children living in poverty are disproportionately identified as having an SLD. The purpose of this study was to examine how school psychologists evaluate the impact of economic disadvantage when identifying a student with SLD. Results found that school psychologists lack explicit policies or procedures for ascertaining the negative impact economic disadvantage may have on student learning. This study highlights the need for improved SLD evaluation procedures and intervening supports for students from economically disadvantaged households.

## **Aim**

The aim of this research was to examine how school psychologists identify the negative impact of economic disadvantage on student learning and to understand how these students are supported to reach their academic potential. Furthermore, the researcher sought to explore school psychologists' practices that are used to distinguish learning difficulties caused by economic disadvantage from those caused by a disabling condition.

## **Problem or Issue**

Students from low income homes make up more than half of the United States public school population. This is of growing importance to educators as research has indicated that poverty has a direct impact on the psychological, emotional, and physical well-being of all individuals; with children especially susceptible to the effects of poverty (Lipina, 2017). During the early developmental years, poverty has been found to compromise the brain functioning needed to acquire skills for further learning as a child matures into adulthood (Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, & Pollak, 2015). Continued exposure to poverty has been identified as leading to increases in negative consequences throughout a child's school career (Hair et. al., 2015). Often students who are not making adequate academic progress are then referred for an evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services (Shifrer, Muller, & Callahan, 2011). However, the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA) requires schools to not associate environmental or economic factors such as poverty with a Specific Learning Disability classification (Shifrer et al., 2011). This is significant as students from low income homes are disproportionately identified to have a learning disability. The disproportionate number of economically disadvantaged students identified as having a learning disability may be an indication that these students are being misidentified.

## Methods

The researcher identifies with a transformative worldview and sought to delve into the complex reality of those who provide educational services for those living in poverty. Those with a transformative worldview have an action agenda (Creswell, 2018). The voice of the participants was critical to the researcher in order to understand current practices and create ways to reform them. The researcher sought to provide tools that can be practically used in the field. To gain insight into current practices in the field, the study explored how school psychologists who are members of the evaluation team identify the effect of economic disadvantage on student learning when considering if a student has a Specific Learning Disability.

The study consisted of interviewing 5 school psychologists from a large urban school district who work at schools with a high number of students from low income households. The researcher also reviewed statements participants wrote into student evaluation reports regarding the impact of economic disadvantage on learning. The study used a grounded theory design to explore the following questions:

1. How do school psychologists distinguish student deficits in academic achievement that are due to economic disadvantage from those that are caused by a disabling condition?
2. In what ways can school psychologists help students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds overcome barriers that may impede their academic performance?
3. In what ways are school psychologists taking precautions to limit misrepresentation of economically disadvantaged students as having a Specific Learning Disability when conducting Special Education evaluations?

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and coded to identify emerging categories and themes to answer the research questions. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the methods used to analyze the data. The evaluation report statements were analyzed by using memo writing as the transcribed interviews were coded and incorporated with the memo writing.

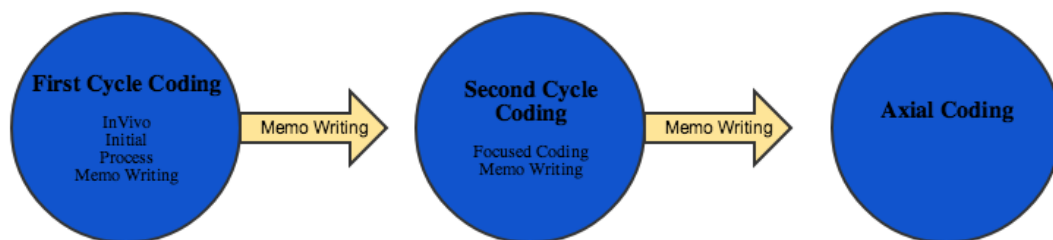


Figure 1. Stages of data collection

## Conclusion/Discussion

The study revealed concerns regarding the current mandate of IDEA to rule out whether a student's learning challenges are primarily the result of economic disadvantage.

Based on semi-structure interviews with the participants and reviewing evaluation report statements, four themes and six sub-themes emerged from the data:

Theme #1: School psychologists lack established process to identify economic impact on student learning

- Sub-Theme #1: Pressure to identify students despite economic disadvantage

Theme #2: School psychologists need to know a child's story

- Sub-Theme #1: School psychologists experience barriers to knowing a child's story

Theme #3: Support diverse student needs

- Sub-Theme #1: School psychologists experience barriers in supporting diverse student needs

Theme #4: School psychologists need a team

- Sub-Theme #1: Working with parents and building trust
- Sub-Theme #2: Coaching and working with school staff
- Sub-Theme #3: Needing additional support in the evaluation process

Participants consistently expressed that they do not work with an explicit policy to help guide their decision making in identifying whether a student's learning challenges are attributed to economic disadvantage. Participants described using their professional judgment to determine the effect of economic disadvantage on student learning which led to variances in evaluation practices. Although it is a required component in evaluation reports, some participants shared that they do not consider the impact of economic disadvantage on how it may have affected a student's learning. Participants also noted that they often do not have access to enough information to make a defensible decision regarding the impact of economic disadvantage, and that they work in isolation with the decision-making even though it is supposed to be a decision made with the evaluation team. All participants expressed their concern with appropriately supporting students that present with learning deficits caused by economic disadvantage but noted that schools often lack resources and personnel to fully support their diverse academic needs.

### **Research Implications**

Based on the research findings, school districts appear to be in need of an established policy or procedure to identify the negative impact of economic disadvantage on student learning. Through research findings, a model emerged that may be helpful for school psychologists to use when they examine the impact of economic disadvantage on student learning (See Figure 2). Participants described taking the lead with this topic on evaluation teams but noted that they would appreciate a stronger team approach which is the intent of IDEA. Evaluation teams need to improve on compliance with IDEA to ensure that students receive a comprehensive evaluation with meaningful input from all members of the evaluation team.

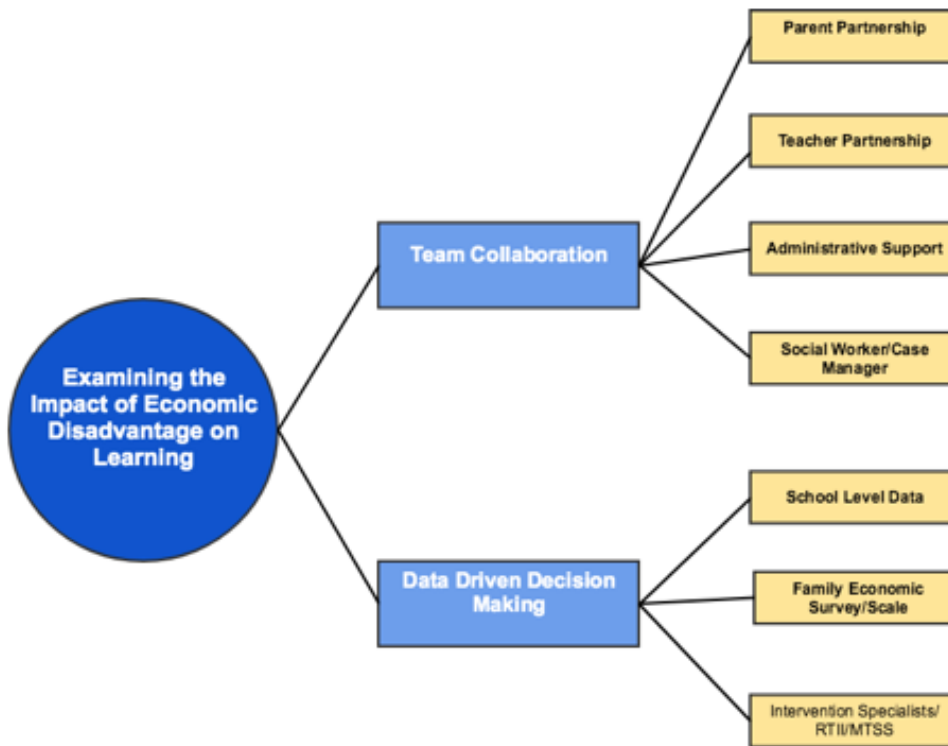


Figure 2. Model for examining the impact of economic disadvantage on learning

Further research is also needed on this topic as there is growing research on the effects of poverty on student learning and how this fits into the legal definition of a learning disability. Because of the variance in evaluation practices, school psychologists would benefit from pre-service programs that include training and research on this topic to ensure that school psychologists are able to assist evaluation teams in identifying the impact of economic disadvantage. School psychologists would also benefit from a scale or tool to help with decision making or to collect the data need to defensibly identify a student’s level of economic disadvantage and how it could affect their learning.

Lastly, improved programming for students from economically disadvantaged households is needed. Often students who have been economically deprived from accessing enriching resources may need schools to accommodate their deficits. Specific academic interventions and resources targeted for students from economically disadvantaged households should be used to help students reach their academic potential and limit disproportionately identifying students from economically disadvantaged households as having a learning disability.

### Author Biography

Angel Shelley Royal has a strong commitment to providing superior programming for children with special needs. She passionately advocates for the services that students with special needs require to make life long gains. Angel has worked as a certified school psychologist for over 10 years with the School District of Philadelphia. In this position she works closely with all members of the school community to provide consultation, intervention, and assessment to promote student success, both academically and emotionally. Angel's professional experiences also include teaching special education and research on topics in urban studies and education. Through experiences in special education and research, Angel developed a strong interest in inclusion. She believes that each student's unique strengths should be a major force in his or her educational programming. Angel's goal is to continue her career in the field of education to create and implement programs and services that better serve students, parents, and schools in urban communities.

Dr. Royal recently completed her doctorate in Educational Leadership and Management at Drexel University. She obtained a Master of Science degree in School Psychology from Eastern University, Angel earned both a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Bachelor of Science in Special Education from Millersville University.

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