

Understanding and meeting the needs of children in poverty in the school library

By Carol A. Gordon and Deborah Ehler-Hansen

Snapshot

Through interview, Dr Carol Gordon, through interview, explores the work of Deborah Ehler-Hansen outlining both her theoretical evaluation of the needs of children in poverty and the ways school libraries can play a role in assisting their learning development. The article refers to a range of valuable further resources.

Introduction

Digital inclusion that levels the playing field for children living in poverty has emerged as the single most important dimension of social justice in our time. The current literature identifies the Social and Economic Status (SES) of these learners as Low-to-Moderate Income (LMI) learners. Initially educators focused on providing digital devices and connectivity to these learners since information technology is viewed as the pathway to closing the 'digital divide' that exacerbates social and cultural inequalities. However, this approach has not yielded the expected results. Studies have shown that access to technology across socioeconomic groups, for example, does not guarantee desired outcomes. In fact, test results decreased among low SES students in a one-to-one laptop program (Warschaeur & Matuchniak, 2010) and there is little consensus that the increase of one-to-one laptop programs contribute to improved educational outcomes (Zheng, et al., 2016). Research findings also reveal the reasons for these findings. Children from low SES households and communities develop academic skills more slowly than children from higher SES groups (Morgan, et al., 2009). They exhibit the resulting factors of poverty that influence academic achievement, including poor cognitive development, language, memory, socioemotional processing, and consequently poor income and health in adulthood (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008).

Recent school library research shifts the focus from quantitative measures of the provision of 'boxes and wires' to measures of equitable access to information and technology across low, middle, and high-income groups to determine inequities. Pribesh, Gavigan & Dickinson (2011) identified the 'Access Gap.' Their research found that schools with the highest concentration of students living in poverty had the fewest school library resources. In a statewide study of students' access to school library services and resources Gordon & Cichetti (2018) found that students from rural and urban school districts have less access to school libraries and librarians, technology, resources, services, and funding. In addition, educators and digital equity advocates are shifting their attention to the connection between digital inclusion and economic inclusion. Digital devices and connectivity are viewed

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as the means, not the ends, to the attainment of digital literacies that enable learners to achieve the economic well-being critical for their full participation in social, political, and cultural aspects of modern life. This perspective places the school library at the nexus of digital and economic inclusion for many reasons.

- The school library is the only place in the school where all the disciplines meet in a curated collection that is equitably accessible to all learners;
- The school library is where the integration of information and technology supports self-directed, hands-on learning;
- The school library offers an information literacy curriculum in the context of academic curricula and a trained information specialist to support inquiry learning;
- The school library is a laboratory for students to experiment and apply their information and technology skills to build and use new knowledge;
- The school library is the only venue for teachers to learn and apply evidence-based instructional methods in real time with their students;
- The school library provides a safe environment for exploration within and beyond its walls;
- The school library provides trained teacher librarians who support the informational and technological learning needs of their educational communities.

Rising to the challenge to realize the potential of the school library to help LMI learners, Deborah Ehler-Hansen, a school librarian in the state of Vermont, U.S.A., created ebooks for her faculty that provide information about poverty and how teachers can create deep learning experiences for all their students. Carol interviewed Deb about her work with LMI learners. The transcript of this interview reveals strategies teacher librarians can use - strategies to support LMI learners, and, in fact, all their learners.

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Carol: *Deb, this interview brings together a school library in the state of Vermont in the New England region of the United States and teacher librarians in the state of Victoria in Australia to share how you have developed strategies for teaching your LMI learners. The purpose of this interview is to learn how you got to know and understand your LMI students in order to create maximize learning opportunities for them. Can you tell us about your school, State Valley Unified School, and your school library?*



Deb: The Slate Valley Unified School District lies in the heart of the Slate Valley, sometimes referred to as 'the slate capital of the nation,' where slate tiles for roofing and flooring are manufactured. All our students have access to chromebooks that they

may take home, however not all students have internet access, or in some cases reliable internet access. All students in our school district are able to access free lunch and breakfast, which is still available to students during COVID-19. Our school libraries within this rural district are well funded and are at the heart of teaching and learning in the school district. School libraries are places where all students can meet and take advantage of equitable access to learning resources, both physically and virtually. All our school libraries are safe spaces where students also have access to the latest technologies such as Virtual Reality, 3D printing, robotics, coding opportunities, and low-tech resources, such as crocheting and origami.



Carol: *Would you describe a typical narrative or life experiences of your LMI learners?*



Deb: I would argue that there is not a typical narrative or life experience of LMI learners. Each one of us has had our very own, individualized life experiences. No two experiences are the same. That is the reason why it is so critical to really take the time to get to know each and every one of our students well. This enables us to understand where we need to meet them within their own learning/life experiences. We cannot create personalized, student-centered learning experiences that are the foundation of every deep learning experience without engaging in this process. According to the National Education Association's publication, [**Teaching Children from Poverty and Trauma**](#), there are typical symptoms of poverty that can be found in classrooms.

Educators may encounter a withdrawn student. The student reasons that 'If I can appear invisible, I won't be called on for what I don't know or haven't been able to learn. I won't get embarrassed by a wrong guess at the answer. If I can hide quietly enough in the class, perhaps the teacher won't see me or the scars and wounds on my body and my face.' (Izard, 2016, 29).



Carol: *Of all the resources you recommend, Deb, I found the Izard booklet, [**Teaching Children from Poverty and Trauma**](#) a good place to start for educators to build their empathy and understanding for the physical, emotional, and intellectual damage that poverty inflicts on children. It contains symptoms, risk factors, research, educator roles, actionable strategies, and more resources.*

What does the 'opportunity gap' in your school look like?



Deb: One identified opportunity gap in our school is poverty. Poverty looks different for each student. It could be situational poverty when circumstances such as COVID-19 create conditions beyond one's control, where one or more family members lose their jobs. Poverty can also be generational, which looks different for students compared to those who are affected by situational poverty. These students have generally grown up with a lack of resources and background experiences, which may affect their learning.



Carol: *What did you learn about the opportunity gap from your conversations with students?*



Deb: I have learned that some learners are not filled with hope that they will have a bright future. They feel that learning at school is not important. They have had different experiences than others who have access to more resources. Some must stay at school - after school - to complete online work due to internet access/reliability issues.



Carol: *In your ebook, Deb, you describe Community Mapping as a tool for understanding your LMI learners. What is Community Mapping and how does it help you to better serve your LMI learners?*



Deb: Community mapping is essential for teacher librarians to better serve all students, especially LMI learners. In order for us to support our students to connect their background experiences and personal interests we can develop a deep understanding of what their communities looks like and what resources, opportunities, or potential issues are at hand to address. You can do this by engaging in various forms of inquiry. One pathway to learning about your local community would be to visit websites such as your local community planning commission, or other governmental agency, which links to demographic, housing, employment, and industry information. You could also interview various members of the community to learn more about the community in which you teach. The local historical society would be another great place to start. There is a list of resources at the end of this article that can help teacher librarians to identify other resources or provide information and strategies to help them to support their LMI learners.



Carol: *This sounds like action research, a tool for evidence-based practice! Why is it also important for teacher librarians to look at what the research literature says about poverty and its causes?*



Deb: It is critical that teacher librarians look at what the literature says about poverty and its causes because we are the only teacher in the building who can provide students with the physical and digital resources they need. We are specifically trained to teach the skills required to engage in deep learning experiences. All students learn deeply

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when they engage in experiential learning. However, due to the consequences of living in poverty it is even more important for LMI students to learn how to learn as they dig deeply into the inquiry process, think about who they are and what they already know, as well as their background knowledge and what they have already learned from their families and connect that - their prior knowledge and experience - with something that is relevant to their lives

and interests. We are in a unique position, as teacher librarians, in that we have the resources and the training to meet each student where they are and build their learning from that point forward. The school library is where information and technology meet to support self-directed, hands-on learning and provides a place for students to tinker and explore. LMI students entering schools may not have had as many resources, or the same, or as many experiences as those who enjoy economic advantages. The school library is a place where they can experience new

things and perhaps even find something they are passionate about, providing them with a sense of hope and pride which could change the path of their lives forever.

According to current literature Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) should also be embedded within the curriculum for all students and especially students who live in poverty and/or have experienced trauma. I have another ebook I wrote which addresses how school librarians can embed social and emotional learning into school curriculum as they collaborate across academic disciplines with their colleagues. The book explains the why and how SEL occurs and provides examples, a sample rubric, and a curriculum.

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Carol: *Our readers can find a link to both of your ebooks at the end of this article. I think they will find them very useful because the ebooks contain examples and descriptions of the strategies and instructional methods you used with your LMI learners. What were the questions that guided your courses of action? What were the courses of action that you took?*



Deb: I had several questions after delving into the literature to help students in my school district:

1. How can I help guide students through the inquiry process so that they are able to create their own student-centered, hands-on learning experiences?
2. School administration would like all students to participate in such experiences. How can I pilot this for the district?
3. I have all the resources but how can I manage several differential experiential learning experiences for all 9-12 graders at our school all by myself?
4. How do I get my LMI students to reflect upon who they are and what they know when some students feel hopeless and believe there is no point to learning?
5. How do I motivate them to inquire and discover something they are interested in and relevant to their lives?
6. How do I get them to discover a passion within themselves that will lead to a happy, healthy life?
7. How do I get them to engage in a true learning experience?
8. How do I help those students who do not have the skills necessary to conduct an inquiry into a problem or something they are interested in?

To answer these questions, I had to develop a strategy for getting to know the community in which my students live, who they are as people, and what they already know as a result of living with their families. I also had to create a tool, to be exact, a template, which will guide each and every student in the school, step-by-step, through the inquiry process. This hyperlink is to the [template](#) I created: I have found that this template enables students to create their own student-centered, hands-on learning experiences which provide a truly deep learning opportunity for them.



Carol: *This template is a very useful tool for organizing your teaching and support to help LMI students. I know from reading your ebooks that you used differentiated instruction with your students. Can you tell us how you used differentiated instruction with an LMI student?*



Deb: Yes, according to Carol Ann Tomlinson, as quoted in Ellis, Gable, Greg, & Rock, 2008, 32) differentiated instruction is the process of ‘... ensuring that what a student learns, how he or she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he or she has learned is a match for that student’s readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning.’ I try to always include content that provides audio and visual resources to access learning. In the template linked above, you will notice that I have scaffolded the learning and the learning is completely student-centered. Students can progress through their learning - completely online - at their own pace. They have access to our school databases, which are wonderful for differentiating instruction.

Students can listen to articles, translate the text into other languages, change the font size, link to deeper learning on specific topics, and with some they may even select their own reading level. In addition, their learning is based upon their own specific interests. They choose the topic. They also can work alone on the project or in small groups. To make the template truly accessible I will eventually be transferring all the lessons and template into ebook format, using Book Creator which allows for differentiation, as students will then be able to listen to the content in the lessons, and I will be able to use dyslexic font. The key to figuring out, however, whether I need to adapt or differentiate anything for a student is formative assessment. If I don’t check regularly on their learning, I will not know that I need to adapt the lesson for them.



Carol: *Yes, formative assessment is the key to personalizing learning so every learner can succeed. Rather than assessing the outcome of students’ work, we are assessing their progress. When we embed activities that generate evidence of learners’ success or failure, we are able to give them the chance to revise their work. What do you mean, Deb, when you talk about ‘Developing Critical Consciousness for LMI learners in your books?’*



Deb: As I mentioned before, each one of us has had our very own, individualized life experiences. No two experiences are the same. Just because we, as teacher librarians,

may not have experienced poverty, prejudice, or other social injustices does not mean that our students have had the same experience throughout their lifetime. Therefore, when we develop curriculum, we really need to take a critical, hard look at what we are

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presenting and expecting them to do. We do not want to create more inequities by building lessons based upon our own personal lifetime experiences. We must consider the understandings and beliefs of our students, which are built upon their lifetime experiences - not ours. (Hinchey, 2004).



Carol: *This sounds like an intense way to teach! How do you manage your time, and how did your approaches to teaching LMI learners change your school library and your role as school librarian?*



Deb: My approaches to teaching LMI learners changed my school library and my role as school librarian because of the knowledge I have gained from delving into the research. As a result of this new learning I have created a [learning template](#) and a [R.E.A.L. Design Unit](#): where I guide students through the inquiry process so they can self-design their own student-centered, hands-on learning experiences. As students progress through the inquiry process they have the opportunity to engage in embedded lessons which focus on the skills necessary to conduct inquiry. In August of 2020 I will officially be piloting a class that I designed for use with the entire school population. The class will be the launch of the R.E.A.L. program. The name of the program was developed by our district curriculum director, Dr. Casey O'Meara. R.E.A.L. is an acronym for Relevant, Equitable, Active, Learning linked to life learning experiences. The description of this class, which is currently being offered as an elective for every student in the school, is as follows:

R.E.A.L. experiences will be grounded within our local community and context. Utilizing library and makerspace resources, such as digital database and ebook collections, computer programming, robotics, and 3D printing, students will engage in inquiry-based, interdisciplinary, personalized, experiential learning opportunities that are meaningful to them in their own lives. Design thinking and social and emotional learning components will also be threaded throughout the course. Students will be challenged to see the world through ecological, political, economic, and social lenses as they connect their personal background knowledge with a problem, challenge, or personal interest they have identified within our local community. (Slate Valley Unified School District, Curriculum, 2020)

One such example of student-centered, experiential learning involves students who are studying the problem of slate waste. They are interested in this topic, because we are 'The Slaters'...our school district is called the Slate Valley Unified School District, and we are located in the 'slate capital of the nation.' Driving through this area one notices 'mountains' of slate waste which are a direct result of mining the perfect slate tile for roofing and flooring purposes. The slate piles keep building up and they are not making money for slate manufacturers. The students confronted this issue and started engaging in the inquiry process. They asked what can be done with this slate waste? We accessed databases and other authoritative resources to answer the questions they had with regard to this issue within their own community. I have a background working with the plastic industry so we directed our

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research in that direction and found that researchers in Spain had recently developed a process that combines slate fibers extracted from slate waste with bio-based polyamide to create useful products such as brake linings. Fortunately, we still have the opportunity to continue with this experiential learning experience since COVID-19 broke out and we had to physically leave the school building. Everything I have created is in digital format and is thus perfect for distant school learning. We have a plethora of databases available on my website for students to use while learning at home and students have their chromebooks. The school has worked with families to ensure they are able to access online learning in some manner.

The next phase of our inquiry involves getting into contact with the researchers to learn more about the process to create products using slate fiber and bio-based polyamide. Even while engaging in distant learning during COVID-19 the learning does not have to stop. Students can still proceed with their inquiries online. They have developed questions to ask of researchers, who are experts in the field, such as, 'What is involved in the process of extracting slate fibers from slate waste?' This is a critical question because students want to find out if this would be an option for slate business owners in the area to use and sell their mountains of slate waste, creating jobs and income for this area in which they live.



Carol: *This project is a perfect example of connecting digital inclusion with economic inclusion! The inquiry process focuses LMI learners on their need to connect their learning to real life experiences with commerce, industry, and business in their communities to raise their awareness of how they can achieve economic inclusion when they choose post secondary training, education, and jobs to enter or improve their status in the workforce. The aim of economic inclusion for young workers is not to get a job, but to get a job that pays a living wage, challenges them to use their talents, and allows them to advance their status and participate fully in society. Your use of your experience in plastics is a great example of how teacher librarians can bring their prior knowledge and experiences to creating projects for students.*



Deb: Yes, learning experiences, such as the slate project create a win-win situation for, most importantly, the student, but also for the local community. According to the National Education Association's publication *Teaching Children from Poverty and Trauma*, 'Economically, the community will not build a stronger future when students do not graduate or graduate with less than adequate academic, life, and working skills ... The intellectual capital loss when students wounded by poverty and trauma do not fulfill the potential of their gifts and talent is tragic' (Izard, 2016, 14).



Carol: *What resources can you recommend for teacher librarians who want to learn more about supporting LMI learners?*



Deb: Here is a link to the ebook I created, [How Will You Get to Know and Understand Your Students in Order to Create an Experiential Learning Opportunity for Them?](#)



Carol: *Deb, do you have any other ebooks?*

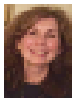


Deb: Yes, I put together a book, [*Social and Emotional \(SEL\) Learning and Experiential Learning \(ExL\): How Can You Use These to Address Challenges You May be Experiencing in Your Classroom?*](#)

There are lists of resources that you will find in the ebook, along with more specific information about Community Mapping and strategies for teaching LMI students.



Carol: Deb, can you provide any other resources for teacher librarians?



Deb: Yes, at the end of the interview is the bibliography from my first ebook.



Carol: Thanks, Deb. We will call this Deb's List. Also, the references used to write this article are also good resources for teacher librarians. Thank you, Deb for sharing your learning experiences with us and good luck with launching the R.E.A.L. program!

Deb's List of Resources for Teaching LMI Learners

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