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UNEQUAL FOUNDATIONS: EXAMINING SOCIOECONOMIC DISPARITIES IN THIRD GRADE READING GATE SUCCESS RATES

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Abstract

This article explores the link between socioeconomic status and third-grade literacy in Mississippi's public schools. It emphasizes how poverty contributes to disparities in student achievement. The study uses a quantitative causal-comparative design to analyze data from the Mississippi Department of Education. It reviews reports such as the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment, the Third Grade Reading Gate Assessment, and the MAAP English Language Arts test. District poverty levels, determined by Community Eligibility Provision measures, serve as the independent variable, while readiness and proficiency scores are the dependent variables. Statistical methods, including t-tests and chi-square tests, show that students in wealthier districts tend to perform better than those in economically disadvantaged districts.

Districts classified as poverty-affected often report that over 40% of their students do not meet proficiency standards. These findings suggest that poverty has lasting effects on early literacy and highlight the need to improve support systems in early childhood education and community resources. The study relies on cross-sectional data, which limits its generalizability beyond Mississippi. Nonetheless, it adds to the growing evidence that social and economic factors significantly influence educational outcomes.

Keywords

Early Literacy, Socioeconomic Status, Poverty, Educational Equity, Third-Grade Reading Proficiency, Mississippi Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA), Mississippi Third Grade Reading Gate, Mississippi Academic Assessment Program English Language Arts (MAAP ELA), Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), Academic Disparities, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Public School Districts, Literacy Interventions

Introduction

Early literacy proficiency is a critical predictor of long-term academic success. Mississippi's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment, Third Grade Reading Gate Assessment, and the MAAP English Language Arts (ELA) test provide benchmarks for evaluating students' foundational reading skills. National research shows that children who are not proficient readers by the end of third grade are significantly more likely to struggle academically and are at increased risk of not graduating high school (Bulut, 2017; Singh et al., 2022).

Socioeconomic status plays a major role in shaping literacy outcomes. Poverty is not a single measurable factor but a cluster of challenges—including limited parental education, food and housing insecurity, and reduced access to early childhood services—that influence school readiness and reading development (Bessell, 2022; McFarlan et al., 2020). Hemingway's "Iceberg Theory" illustrates how visible indicators, such as income, mask deeper systemic contributors to educational inequity.

In Mississippi, the Literacy-Based Promotion Act requires students to demonstrate third grade reading proficiency for promotion. This legislation highlights the state's focus on early literacy. Consequently, performance gaps persist as students in high-poverty districts, often identified through Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) measures, score significantly lower on the KRA, Reading Gate, and MAAP ELA assessments than students in more affluent districts (MDE, 2018; Lynch, 2015). These districts also face structural challenges such as high teacher turnover and limited intervention resources.

This study examines the relationship between district-level poverty and literacy outcomes across Mississippi. Using a quantitative causal-comparative design, it analyzes Mississippi Department of Education data to determine whether significant differences exist between poverty and non-poverty districts. CEP classifications serve as the independent variable, while KRA, Reading Gate, and MAAP ELA scores function as dependent variables. Findings contribute to ongoing discussions about equity, early childhood investment, and the broader effects of socioeconomic disadvantage on student achievement.

Examining Disparity Gaps

Early literacy predicts success in school and later in life. Reading skills developed from birth to third grade serve as key indicators of future educational achievement. Gaps in reading abilities among children from low-income families highlight larger social and systemic issues. Kokkalia et al. (2019) point out that early education significantly shapes both learning and growth.

Socioeconomic factors, such as eligibility for free school meals, parents' education levels, family structure, and income, also play an important role in these outcomes. Taylor (2019) shares advocate Jonah Edelman's observation that poverty often leaves children starting school at a disadvantage compared to their peers.

Food insecurity linked to poverty affects many school-age children across the U.S., despite the country's leadership in agriculture and education. Coleman-Jensen and others (2022) found that state rates of food insecurity ranged from 5.4% to 15.3% between 2019 and 2021, with Mississippi among the hardest hit. Initiatives like the National School Lunch Act of 1946 were introduced to address these issues (Gunderson, 2008; Rude, 2016). However, the persistent grip of poverty continues to hinder educational progress and causes sustained cycles of poverty to be passed down from one generation to the next (Kim & Morrison, 2018; Burns et al., 2013).

Children growing up in poverty face many challenges. Their parents may have limited education, their schools often lack sufficient resources, and they frequently do not receive enough nutritious food. These struggles create obstacles to effective reading. NCES (2021) reports that in 2019, 16% of kids lived in poverty. Many of these children came from single-parent homes or had parents who did not complete high school.

Closing the Gaps

Strong early learning settings build the foundation children need to prepare for school and succeed.

However, not everyone has the same access. In the U.S., 40% of three-year-olds enroll in early learning programs, compared to 70% in other OECD nations (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2018). Bassok and Engel (2019) pointed out that many early childhood classrooms fail to provide the supportive interactions kids need to thrive. The Education Commission of the States (2021) emphasized that improving the learning pathway from pre-K through third grade results in better outcomes over time.

Head Start, which the federal government initiated in 1965, aimed to close gaps for children from low-income families by offering wide-ranging support (Early Childhood Knowledge and Learning Center, 2018). Studies indicate that full-day programs for young children yield better academic results (Wechsler et al., 2016). Despite these advancements, access remains limited. Mississippi ranks 39th in pre-K availability and 42nd in spending per child (Royals, 2021).

Assessments like the MKRA help predict the academic success of students by third grade. When students score under the benchmark, they often face challenges meeting future standards (Mississippi Department of Education, 2022). Readiness gaps appear larger in racial and income groups, with low-income and minority students beginning school with fewer basic skills (Valentino, 2018; Brockway & Ghoting, 2019). The Renaissance Star Early Literacy tool places students into categories of emergent, transitional, or probable readiness. These groupings guide how schools plan support (Mississippi Department of Education, 2021).

Mississippi created the Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA) in 2013, establishing rules to hold back third graders who cannot demonstrate strong reading skills. This law was intended to provide assistance but ultimately places a heavier burden on students from underfunded schools and districts with limited resources. Therefore, these areas faced difficulties in implementing the policy (Schwerdt et al., 2017; Mississippi Department of Education, 2022).

Good teachers play a crucial role during the early learning years. However, schools in low- income areas face challenges in hiring and retaining strong teachers. Studies reveal that over 90% of weak-performing teachers are employed in schools with high poverty levels (Adnot et al., 2017). Issues such as frequent teacher turnover and temporary licenses negatively impact the quality of education that students receive (Goldhaber et al., 2019; Curry, 2014). When teachers effectively connect with students and foster a positive classroom environment, students are more likely to stay engaged and perform better (Stipek & Chiatovich, 2017).

Outside of school, poverty hinders access to activities that foster children's growth and complicates parent involvement. Families experiencing poverty spend less and devote less time to educational opportunities, which exacerbates developmental delays (Sengonul, 2021). Issues such as unstable housing, food insecurity, and family dynamics, which Facing History and Ourselves (2021) refers to as the iceberg beneath the surface, contribute to the risks children face. Data from NCES (2021a & 2021b) indicates that black children are more likely to grow up in

single-parent households and encounter poverty, which correlates with challenges in academic performance.

Method

This study examines whether an analysis of retrieved data from the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment, the Third Grade Gate Assessment, and the MAAP Third Grade English Language Arts Assessment reveals differences in proficiency levels between school districts affected by poverty and those that are not. The study aims to identify any micro-level poverty metrics that may relate to lower readiness and proficiency rates in districts, such as the percentage of children receiving special education services in both impoverished and non-impoverished school districts. Additionally, the study seeks to find correlation or indicators that may further influence efforts to emphasize the urgency required to enhance support for children in districts with high poverty regarding early intervention.

Research Design

A quantitative research design was employed for this study, utilizing secondary data sources to analyze large-scale educational datasets. Quantitative methodologies are particularly well- suited for examining broad patterns within extensive datasets, such as those derived from district-, state-, or national-level assessments. This investigation adopted both correlational and causal-comparative approaches to explore potential relationships among variables of interest and to assess whether observed differences could be attributed to the influence of a specific independent variable.

Causal-comparative methods are instrumental in identifying potential cause-and-effect relationships, particularly when experimental manipulation is not feasible. Koziol et al. (2012) similarly utilized secondary data to investigate early reading readiness among children in rural environments, highlighting the utility of such data in educational research. As noted by LeTourneau University (2020), the principal aim of quantitative inquiry is to classify, enumerate, and analyze data features to construct statistical models that help explain observed phenomena. Quantitative coding enables nuanced data interpretation and helps identify patterns not easily seen through qualitative analysis. According to QuestionPro (2021), causal-comparative research goes beyond simple bivariate analysis, providing a framework to evaluate how multiple variables or groups may be affected by one or more independent variables.

In the present study, quantitative methods were used to assess three dependent variables: kindergarten readiness levels, third grade reading gate passage rates, and performance on the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) in English Language Arts (ELA) at the third grade level. The independent variable was the socioeconomic status of each school district, measured by the proportion of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, as determined by CEP poverty eligibility criteria. Notably, CEP eligibility status remains valid for four years, offering a stable indicator of district-level poverty.

Data Collection and Analysis

Secondary data retrieved from the Mississippi Department of Education's publicly accessible Reports and Data portal was utilized. Informed consent was not required, as the data used are publicly available and do not involve human subjects or any personally identifiable information. These datasets included district-level results for the three academic assessments under investigation, as well as poverty indicators based on eligibility for the CEP for free and reduced-price lunch.

Statistical analyses for the study were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). All study variables were operationally defined and examined using descriptive statistical methods. Inferential analyses, including independent samples t-tests and analyses of variance (ANOVA), were employed to assess whether statistically significant differences exist in scale scores, proficiency rates, and passage outcomes between school districts classified as high-poverty and non-poverty according to Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) criteria.

The analysis focused on examining the relationship between district-level poverty status, measured by the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch under CEP guidelines, and key educational outcomes. These outcomes included kindergarten readiness levels, third-grade gate assessment passage rates, and third-grade performance on the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) English Language Arts (ELA) assessment. In this study, poverty status serves as the independent variable, while the educational indicators represent the dependent variables under investigation.

Results

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to examine whether there was a statistically significant difference in Third Grade Reading Gate Assessment passage rates between school districts classified as poverty and those classified as non-poverty. As presented in Table 8, non- poverty districts had a higher mean passage rate ($M = 77.90$, $SD = 9.29$) compared to poverty- designated districts ($M = 58.92$, $SD = 12.87$). The difference was statistically significant, $t(134) = 9.963$, $p < .001$.

These results indicate that students in non-poverty districts significantly outperformed their counterparts in

poverty-designated districts on the Third Grade Reading Gate Assessment. The findings suggest a substantial disparity in early literacy outcomes based on district-level socioeconomic status.

Table 1 2022 Passage Rates on the Third Grade Reading Gate Assessment by District Poverty Status

District Classification	Mean	Std. Deviation	*t*	*df*	*p*
Non-Poverty	77.90	9.29	9.963	134	< .001
Poverty	58.92	12.87			

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant association between school district poverty classification and the percentage of students not meeting the Third Grade Reading Gate Assessment passage threshold (defined as districts with ≥ 40% of students not passing). The results are displayed in Table 8.1.

The analysis revealed a significant relationship between poverty status and not met passage rates, $\chi^2(1, N = 136) = 42.979$, $p < .001$. A substantially higher proportion of poverty-designated districts (89.7%) had not met passage rates of 40% or more, compared to only 10.3% of non- poverty districts. These findings suggest that districts with higher poverty rates are disproportionately represented among those with elevated rates of students not meeting proficiency on the Third Grade Reading Gate Assessment.

Table 2 ***2022 Third Grade Reading Gate "Not Met" Passage Rates (≥ 40%) by District Poverty Status***

Poverty Status	≥ 40% Not Met	< 40% Not Met	Total	% Within Group
Non-Poverty	4 (10.3%)	70 (72.2%)	74	54.4%
Poverty	35 (89.7%)	27 (27.8%)	62	45.6%
Total	39 (100.0%)	97 (100.0%)	136	100.0%

These findings reinforce the conclusion that poverty status is significantly associated with low third-grade literacy outcomes at the district level.

Discussion

The present study investigated the relationship between district-level poverty status and third grade reading proficiency in Mississippi public schools, using passage rates from the Third Grade Reading Gate Assessment. The results of the chi-square test of independence indicate a statistically significant association between poverty classification and student performance, $\chi^2(1, N = 136) = 42.979$, $p < .001$. Specifically, 89.7% of high-poverty districts had not met passage rates at or above 40%, compared to only 10.3% of non-poverty districts. This pronounced disparity underscores a persistent pattern in which socioeconomic disadvantage is strongly associated with lower academic performance in early literacy.

These findings align with prior research demonstrating that poverty is a robust predictor of academic underachievement (Koziol et al., 2012; Taylor, 2019). The overrepresentation of high poverty districts among those with the highest proportions of students not meeting third grade reading benchmarks suggests that structural inequities continue to undermine equitable academic outcomes. Contributing factors may include reduced access to high-quality early childhood education, limited parental engagement due to economic pressures, chronic teacher shortages, and under resourced instructional environments.

Such disparities signal an urgent need for targeted policy interventions. Education leaders and policymakers should prioritize expanding early literacy programs, increasing funding for instructional support in high-need areas, and implementing school-wide initiatives that promote culturally responsive and differentiated instruction. Without addressing these systemic inequities, students in high-poverty districts are likely to remain on academic trajectories marked by limited opportunity and diminished educational attainment (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010; NCES, 2021).

Implications

The findings of this study reveal a significant disparity in third grade reading proficiency between school districts classified as high-poverty and those designated as non-poverty. The overrepresentation of poverty designated districts among those with 40% or more students not meeting the Third Grade Reading Gate Assessment benchmark highlights deep rooted systemic inequities in educational outcomes. These disparities are likely driven by multiple interrelated factors, including limited access to high quality early childhood education, reduced instructional resources, and broader socioeconomic challenges that hinder academic achievement.

Practically, the results underscore an urgent need for targeted and sustained interventions in high-poverty districts. Addressing foundational literacy skills in these contexts requires comprehensive efforts such as expanding

access to early literacy programs, enhancing instructional support, and ensuring adequate resource allocation. The evidence suggests that poverty must be treated not as a peripheral issue but as a central consideration in discussions surrounding educational equity, policy development, and systemic reform.

Theoretically, this study reinforces and extends existing literature by emphasizing the persistent and profound influence of socioeconomic status on early academic performance. It underscores the necessity of recognizing poverty as a crucial explanatory variable in educational research and policy formulation. By positioning socioeconomic status as a primary determinant of student achievement and academic trajectories, the study affirms the significance of equity focused frameworks in shaping educational discourse and practice.

Limitations

Although this study offers meaningful insights into the relationship between district-level poverty status and third grade reading proficiency, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the use of **secondary data** from publicly available sources presents inherent limitations related to the depth and specificity of the data. While such data allows for broad comparisons across districts, they do not capture nuanced factors that may influence student outcomes, such as individual student characteristics, teacher quality, school level interventions, or instructional practices.

Second, the **correlational nature** of the research design restricts the ability to draw causal inferences. Although significant associations were observed between poverty status and reading proficiency indicators, causality cannot be established. Other unmeasured variables may also contribute to the observed differences, such as community resources, parental involvement, or disparities in school funding.

Third, the **generalizability** of the results is limited by the study's geographic scope. The analysis focused exclusively on school districts within the state of Mississippi, a state with unique educational policies, demographic compositions, and socioeconomic challenges. As such, the findings may not be fully applicable to other regions with differing contextual factors.

Finally, the **temporal scope** of the study was confined to data from a single academic year (2022). This cross-sectional design does not account for potential trends, fluctuations, or longitudinal effects that may influence third grade reading outcomes over time.

Recognizing these limitations provides essential context for understanding the study's scope and highlights potential areas for future research. Addressing these constraints in future studies – through longitudinal designs, mixed-method approaches, and multi-state comparisons, can deepen our understanding of how poverty affects early literacy development and inform more targeted and sustainable educational policies and practices. Addressing these limitations in future research will enhance our understanding of the complex relationship between poverty and literacy outcomes and inform the development of more effective, data-driven educational strategies.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations are suggested to address the persistent disparities in early literacy outcomes between poverty affected school districts and those that are not. These recommendations are intended to guide policy, practice, and future research, promoting better reading results in high-poverty schools.

First, policy level interventions are crucial for reducing the educational inequalities faced by students in high-poverty districts. State and local policymakers should prioritize allocating additional resources to these districts, emphasizing targeted investments in early literacy programs, educator professional development, and access to high-quality instructional materials. Strengthening foundational literacy skills in the early grades is a crucial step toward narrowing the achievement gap.

Second, community engagement should be utilized as a strategic approach to enhance literacy support beyond the traditional classroom setting. Schools in economically disadvantaged areas are encouraged to establish and sustain partnerships with community-based organizations, libraries, and local nonprofits. These collaborations can provide extended learning opportunities through after school reading programs, literacy tutoring, and initiatives that promote parental involvement in children's reading development.

Third, additional research is needed to identify specific intra-district factors that lead to low reading performance in high-poverty areas. Future studies should explore variables such as instructional practices, curriculum implementation fidelity, student motivation, and access to support services. Understanding the local dynamics of underperformance can help develop more targeted and context aware interventions.

Finally, adopting a longitudinal research design is advised to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of literacy focused interventions. Monitoring students' academic progress over multiple years would yield deeper insights into how ongoing support affects literacy development and academic achievement. Such studies could also assess the extent to which early interventions impact graduation rates and other long-term educational outcomes in high-poverty districts.

These recommendations aim to create a comprehensive, equity focused strategy that improves literacy results and expands educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes the vital role socioeconomic context plays in shaping educational outcomes, especially during the early years of schooling. Third grade reading proficiency serves as a key milestone in academic development, and the disparities observed indicate that high-poverty districts continue to face systemic challenges. Addressing these inequities requires strategies that are comprehensive, data informed and sustained over time. Through deliberate policymaking, community collaborations, and ongoing research, educators and policymakers can work together to ensure all students, regardless of their economic background, have equal opportunities to achieve literacy success and long-term academic growth.

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