



# The “Voice” of Children of Poverty: Candid Insights to Their Career Aspirations and Perceptions of Self-Efficacy

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## Abstract

Career development in children largely involves learning about the world of work from family members, peers, and classroom exploration in elementary school. For children of economic disadvantage, a lack of resources and restricted access to information may curtail their ability to envision career attainment. The current qualitative study explored the career aspirations of fourth- and fifth-grade students living in poverty to discern their career interests, knowledge background, understanding of educational and career pathways, and their self-efficacy for achieving their vision for the future. The data collection process involved focus groups and individual case studies. The investigators highlighted the direct verbal exchange with and among students as the most critical approach to understanding children’s aspirations. Study results indicated that the children envisioned a future of educational and occupational prosperity, but their “dreams” were often circumscribed by their limited knowledge of and exposure to employment options.

**Keywords** Urban schools · Career readiness · Poverty · Leadership · Elementary school · Principal

## Introduction

Developing career interests in children is a process that in the elementary years and comes to fruition by adulthood. By the age of nine or ten, children are able to express their occupational interests and career goals (Seligman and Weinstock 1991). Yet, the schooling experience often provides minimal support to foster career development (Trice and Hughes 1995). In order to endorse a process of lifelong career planning, instruction in career exploration is critical in the elementary school years

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(Magnuson and Starr 2000; Hoffman and McDaniels 1991). Moreover, it behooves educators to consider students' sense of self-efficacy and its impact on their career aspirations (Gillies et al. 1998). Bandura et al. (2001) further contend that children's belief in their potential to achieve their career dreams/goals may strongly affect their occupational aspirations for the future.

For children who experience economic limitations, determining career aspirations in elementary school is of paramount importance because they may have negligible access to resources that enrich career exploration, such as books, computers, and visits to libraries or worksites (Bradley et al. 2001). Weinger (1998) further states that under-resourced children may have limited career aspirations or may have never really reflected about careers because they have had little exposure to or familial experience with occupational prosperity. Consequently, envisioning success may be illusory. Furthermore, the notion of career development may never be considered a priority in an impoverished environment (Gorski 2013). Watson and McMahon (2008) purport that the unique characteristics and circumstances of some students of color, such as children of low socioeconomic status (SES) must be addressed when researching the career development of children. Thus, the research site selected for the current investigation was Newhope Elementary School, located in a subsidized public housing community on the outskirts of an urban school district on the East Coast and with a student poverty rate of 92% free and/or reduced lunch.

## Research Problem

During the elementary school experience, children may have had few opportunities to learn about career options and pathways. While children may develop a knowledge base regarding occupations from a variety of resources, perhaps schools most frequently provide formal instruction. Guidance counselors may offer some career exploration. However, the increased emphasis on standardized testing in recent years has often called upon educators to focus almost solely on Reading and Math proficiency, to the detriment of other content, such as Social Studies, the curricular area in which career development is explored (Fletcher 2006). This process is critical for under-resourced students since envisioning occupational prosperity in the future may be impossible. At the same time, there is a paucity of information on the career development process in the elementary years for under-served children. Therefore, career development theory and practice should be revised in order to serve an increasingly diverse population in the twentyfirst century (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey 2013). For the current study, *career* was defined in broad terms as a life-style concept, that is all the life roles one plays, including homemaker and volunteer (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey 2013).

## Research Purpose

This study aimed to explore the career aspirations and perceptions of self-efficacy of fourth- and fifth-grade students of low SES regarding their perceived future in the workforce. The investigation included the unique perspective of this age group and demographic subgroup and revealed participants' limited background knowledge of career options and pathways to attainment as well as their future aspirations. Furthermore, the researchers offered recommendations for elementary school educators that emphasized the imperative to address the occupational decision-making process of under-served children. The researchers recommended a broad question to guide this investigation—Do economically under-resourced children envision a future of occupational opportunity?

### Research Questions

1. How do participants describe their career aspirations and knowledge of career interests?
2. What factors and/or significant others, as reported by participants, influence their career
3. aspirations and self-efficacy in enhancing their career aspirations?
4. How do underserved/under-resourced participants describe their career pathways and career goals?
5. How do participants perceive their self-efficacy in attaining career aspirations?
6. What gender differences in responses exist between participants?

## Significance of the Study

This study explored three variables rarely researched together in extant literature—elementary under-served children, career aspirations, and perceptions of self-efficacy. The investigation utilized a qualitative research approach in order to give “voice” to the participants. The researchers gathered first-hand accounts of children's perspectives regarding their future aspirations and gained a better understanding of the life factors that influenced their “dreams”. Additionally, this study aimed to raise the awareness of K-12 school educators, so they might implement career development interventions in the elementary years, especially for under-served children. As Meier (2002) contends, without adequate academic and emotional scaffolding, some children are unable to connect education to future career outcomes.

## Limitations

First, the participants formed a sample of convenience. The children were chosen from fourth- and fifth-grade classes and they could all be considered under-resourced. Second, the school community was largely Hispanic. However, the

investigation did not explore ethnic values or aim to link ethnicity and poverty. Cultural factors, nevertheless, such as ethnic traditions, beliefs, and the roles of family members, not under investigation in this study, may have affected students' perspectives. Third, researchers' biases must be considered as the school administrator (who was one of the researchers) conducted focus group and one-on-one interviews. In order to ensure credibility, the researchers used member checking by inviting students to verify personal responses and the data collected. Finally, this investigation focused on a selected population and school. Research findings are only credible when attributed to a participant pool of similar demographics and setting (Creswell 2013).

## Literature Review

Theories of career development and student aspirations and their relationship to poverty and self-efficacy were utilized to form the overarching theoretical framework for this investigation.

One of the pioneering researchers of career development, Parsons (1909), contended that, ideally, career choice initiates with a self-analysis of interests, skills, resources, and limitations in order to optimize the compatibility between these qualities and the expectations for success in the work environment. Social Cognitive Career Theory contributed to this idea of self-understanding by highlighting the importance of environmental factors that influence the career development process (Lent et al. 2000). Lent et al. (2000) acknowledge the influence of real life factors, such as cultural and economic situations, that may strengthen or impede the connections among career interests, goals, and actions. Theories of poverty abound and emerge from a broad range of perspectives. Bradshaw (2007) endorses a culture of poverty theory. This perspective proposes that the value system and behavioral norms intrinsic to a subculture, and often not commonly inherent in the mainstream population, are perpetuated generationally, thereby inculcating their youth into a socially acceptable lifestyle. While the connections that fortify the networking capacity provide support within impoverished communities, they may demonstrate negligible access to the outside world, resulting in a negative outcome for upward mobility and job opportunities (Curley 2005). Finally, the Social Cognitive Theory of Self-Efficacy completes the framework. Bandura (2002) describes self-efficacy resulting from three forms of agency. Personal agency refers to children's ability to take action on their own behalf, proxy agency pertains to the impact of parents and significant others in providing direction and guidance toward achievement, and collective agency refers to the surrounding community and the norms and behaviors of an under-resourced community that may enrich or stifle self-efficacy beliefs.

## Research Studies on Career Development and Aspirations

Helwig (1998) conducted a longitudinal investigation that examined a cohort of students in second grade with follow-up assessments in fourth and sixth grades. The goal of his study was to explore hypotheses from extant research on career development. The original participant pool involved 208 s graders, decreasing in fourth and sixth grades to 160 and 130 respectively. The mixed-method study included an interest inventory and a 20-min interview. Research results revealed that boys selected more same-sex and fantasy occupations as they aged, while the opposite was true for girls. Boys and girls opted for jobs with increased social value from second to sixth grades. Additionally, as children aged, they reported more autonomy regarding their occupational goals when compared to their parents' aspirations for them.

Schultheiss et al. (2005) focused on children's written responses in their research on career development. The investigators selected students in fourth and fifth grades, 34 and 15 respectively, with a variety of ethnic heritage, of low SES, and enrolled in urban elementary schools. The purpose of this investigation was to determine children's awareness of self and occupations, the roles of influential people in their lives, educational and aspirational goals, and their decision-making process. The quantitative data analysis involved sorting students' responses by gender and grade into one of seven occupational categories. Research results revealed that more girls than boys and more fifth graders than fourth graders disclosed an understanding of career interests and reported that influential people in their lives offered social support.

## Research Studies on Issues of Poverty

Cook et al. (1996) implemented a study in which they compared career aspirations and expectations of under-served boys living in an urban environment to those of more economically advantaged boys. The authors' purpose was to determine job preference differences between these two participant pools at different grade levels. Career expectations were dictated largely by the context of a child's living environment and included positive and negative forces. The research sample included 220 boys in grades two, four, six, and eight. The mixed-method investigation included interviews and a questionnaire. Study findings revealed that the boys in the urban setting experienced a larger gap between their occupational aspirations and their expectations than that experienced by the more economically advantaged boys. Moreover, aspirations depended mostly on age, whereas expectations were related to grade level and population group, and involved mediating factors such as family dynamics, role models, perceived barriers to achievement, and educational expectations.

In her study of under-resourced children, Weinger (1998) explored career aspirations through a 45-min interview process. The goal of this qualitative investigation was to discern how underserved children perceived their potential for employment when compared to that of their more economically advantaged peers. Participants included a convenience sample of 24 students in three age groups: 5 to 7, 8 to 10,

and 11 to 13 years old attending the same elementary school. Research implementation involved showing students two photographs, one of an impoverished home and one of a middle-class, suburban ranch. The investigators questioned participants about career choices and perceptions of potential career attainment for three different situations: an imagined child living in each of the two houses, the participant's best friend living in each home, and the participant living in each house. Study findings demonstrated that the participants perceived fewer opportunities for imaginary children in the more impoverished home but expressed a clear level of optimism for their own futures, indicating their disassociation from the imagined child in the impoverished home. Interestingly, participants reported that their friends, however, would pursue a career direction much like that of the imaginary child in the impoverished house.

### Research Studies on Self-Efficacy

In a research investigation by Bandura et al. (2001), the investigators examined children's perceptions about their career efficacy and how it affected their occupational choices. The researchers maintained that participants' beliefs of self-efficacy significantly impacted their aspirations, motivation, career preferences, and occupational skills. They chose 272 students in sixth and seventh grades as participants in a quantitative study that included a survey to ascertain children's perceptions of self-efficacy and an inventory to disclose occupational pursuits. Study findings indicated that parents' aspirations positively correlated to children's perceived self-efficacy. In addition, children's perceived self-efficacy influenced their beliefs in their occupational efficacy, which, in turn, contributed to the career directions they would undertake.

Tracey (2002) also explored children's career interests and self-efficacy in a longitudinal study of fifth and seventh graders. The purpose of his endeavor was to determine changes in students' interests over time and to discern any reciprocal effect between career interests and perceptions of self-efficacy. The student sample entailed 126 fifth graders and 221 seventh graders assessed twice over the course of a year. The Inventory of Children's Activities—Revised (ICA-R), (Tracey and Ward 1998) was utilized as a data collection instrument. This measurement was comprised of two sections, one pertaining to 30 children's activities, and another demonstrating participants' perceived confidence regarding these activities. The research findings revealed that boys scored higher on realistic and investigative careers, and girls scored higher on artistic, social, and conventional vocations. Additionally, the fifth graders scored higher on all the interest scales as well as the artistic and enterprising competence scales. Finally, both interests and self-efficacy influenced each other reciprocally over time.

## Method

The current research was a qualitative, multiple-case investigation involving descriptive data from focus groups and interviews. The case study method of inquiry served as the optimal approach to data collection since it solicited first-hand, detailed responses leading to extensive descriptions of the phenomenon of interest (Yin 2009). The participants' "voice" engendered data pertaining to their real-life experiences and personal perceptions relating to career aspirations and self-efficacy within an environment of low SES. The researchers implemented the investigation within a bounded system; therefore, specific boundaries were pre-established for this study, including one particular school, a targeted sample of under-resourced students, and a limited time frame (Flyvbjerg 2011). Newhope Elementary School served as the research site, with a total enrollment of 342 students, 92% of whom living at or below the poverty level. The majority of children in this Pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade setting were of Hispanic heritage (78%). Black and White students represented 12% and 6% respectively, and Multiracial children accounted for the remaining 4%. The school facility was recently built and in excellent condition; however, the surrounding community was impoverished. Safety concerns were evident due to illegal activities relating drugs and violence. Consequently, Newhope Elementary, the hub of the neighborhood, became a safe haven for students and their families in the midst of an economically depressed environment.

## Participants

The participant pool included fourth- and fifth-grade students who qualified to receive free or reduced-price lunch as determined by their lower SES during the 2013–2014 school year. Of the total 94 students attending these grades, 84 qualified to participate. The study sample included 54 fourth-graders in three classes and 30 fifth-graders in two classes, with a total of 47 girls and 37 boys, all heterogeneously grouped. Thus, children were placed evenly among the classes regarding academic ability/performance.

## Procedures

The researchers visited each of the five classes to discuss the upcoming research project goals, expectations for student participation, and the random selection process for participation before study implementation. Students had the opportunity to ask questions and express concerns relevant to the study and their involvement. The first phase of data collection involved focus groups. One focus group (five students) was selected from each of the fourth- and fifth-grade classes. Each focus group met for 45 min, with individual participants responding to the same open-ended questions, and engaging in discussions as prompted by the researchers' questions or student responses. At times, the investigators included additional questions as dictated by

emergent topics during ongoing dialogue. All five focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Undoubtedly, the most informative phase of the investigation entailed in-depth interviews, the basis for the four case studies. The authors selected two participants, one boy and one girl, from the fourth- and fifth-grade samplings. Creswell (2013) contends that there is no absolute number of cases to constitute a multiple-case study, however, four or five cases is commonly accepted in research. In the current study, the investigators determined that four cases would be optimal in order to have an equal number of boys and girls in each grade. This, in turn, enabled the researchers to conduct cross-case analyses by gender and grade. That is, the authors randomly selected four participants from a pool of students whose detailed responses during the focus group sessions qualified them as the most appropriate candidates to elicit an understanding of the central phenomena (Wallen and Fraenkel 2001; Creswell 2013) and to offer valuable information to address the research questions (McMillan 2012). All the open-ended questions pertained to occupational aspirations and perceptions of self-efficacy. Interviews lasted 45 min and were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning letters of the alphabet to replace participant names in focus groups and fictitious names for the one-on-one interviews. Only the researchers had access to data collection materials.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted on two main sources of evidence—focus groups and interviews. The investigators coded the transcriptions from focus group recordings to identify repeated themes. A pre-established codebook, based on *The Childhood Career Development Scale* (Schultheiss and Stead 2013), that incorporated a set of codes and operational definitions served as a guide for analyzing data (DeCuir-Gunby et al. 2011) from the focus groups as well as the one-on-one interviews. The authors then combined codes to form broader categories (Glatthorn and Joyner 2005). Transcriptions from the four case-study interviews were coded by hand to identify prominent themes. The investigators used structural coding, a process of coding text according to each specific question used during the interviews (MacQueen et al. 1998). Upon completion of all data collection a revised codebook was created to include emic codes that emerged from the vernacular jargon of the participants and further elucidated the insider “voice” (MacQueen et al. 1998). The codes from the expanded codebook were aggregated to form larger categories for each case study. In addition, a narrative interpretation of cross-case analyses was provided. Moreover, student accounts offered rich details for the investigators to gain insight to the children’s “voice” and to allow for In Vivo coding. This process was a type of emic coding that recognizes participant-generated wording, often reflecting subcultural expressions (Saldaña 2013).



## Validity/Credibility

Qualitative researchers often describe credibility as the most critical criterion for research evaluation. Credibility refers to the accuracy and trustworthiness of collected data, data analysis, and study conclusions (McMillan 2012). Guion et al. (2011) advocate methodological triangulation involving focus groups and interviews. Golafshani (2003) and Wallen and Fraenkel (2001) concur that multiple methods for data collection are imperative to ensure qualitative validity and reliability, including audiotaping. Creswell (2013) suggests additional strategies to establish validity, such as clarifying researcher bias, member checking, and vivid descriptions. Bryant (2004) also endorses member checking and triangulation as key approaches. The researchers in the current study established credibility for study results by using member checking by participants and two adults working and/or living in the community. Students were asked to peruse and comment on the data collected, the investigators' interpretations, and conclusions drawn for the accuracy and quality of the accounting (Creswell 2013). This process assured the authors that they were representing the children's "voice" with fidelity (Glesne 1999).

## Results

### Focus Group Results

The investigators used structural coding to classify transcription data from the focus group recordings. This process entailed assigning a conceptual phrase to a portion of data as it relates to a research question (Saldaña 2013). The researchers adjusted the a priori codebook to encompass the codes most evident in student responses as well as the In Vivo codes that reflected students' verbatim expression. Additionally, the authors implemented patterned coding by discerning similar codes and arranging them into categories or themes (Creswell 2013; Saldaña 2013), and then placing the codes into broader groupings. These categories or themes at the micro level indicated the narrow context of this investigation. The researchers then combined the categories or micro-level themes to create macro-level themes relevant to a societal context. Figure 1 depicts the data analysis process for focus groups and one-on-one interviews. Table 1 reveals focus-group codes and categories as well as the frequency of student responses. An overview of children's responses relating to jobs/careers they would like to have and their expectations for future employment, as displayed in Table 2, was fundamental to understanding participants' thought processes. The authors reconvened focus groups to conduct "member checking", allowing students the opportunity to check the accuracy of data collected as well as the researchers' interpretations. A guidance counselor, with 25 years of experience working in the local community, and a 23-year resident of the neighborhood, also contributed to "member checking" by attesting to the authenticity/typicality of participant responses.

The research questions served as a resource to inform the data analysis process. The first question involved how students disclosed their career aspirations as

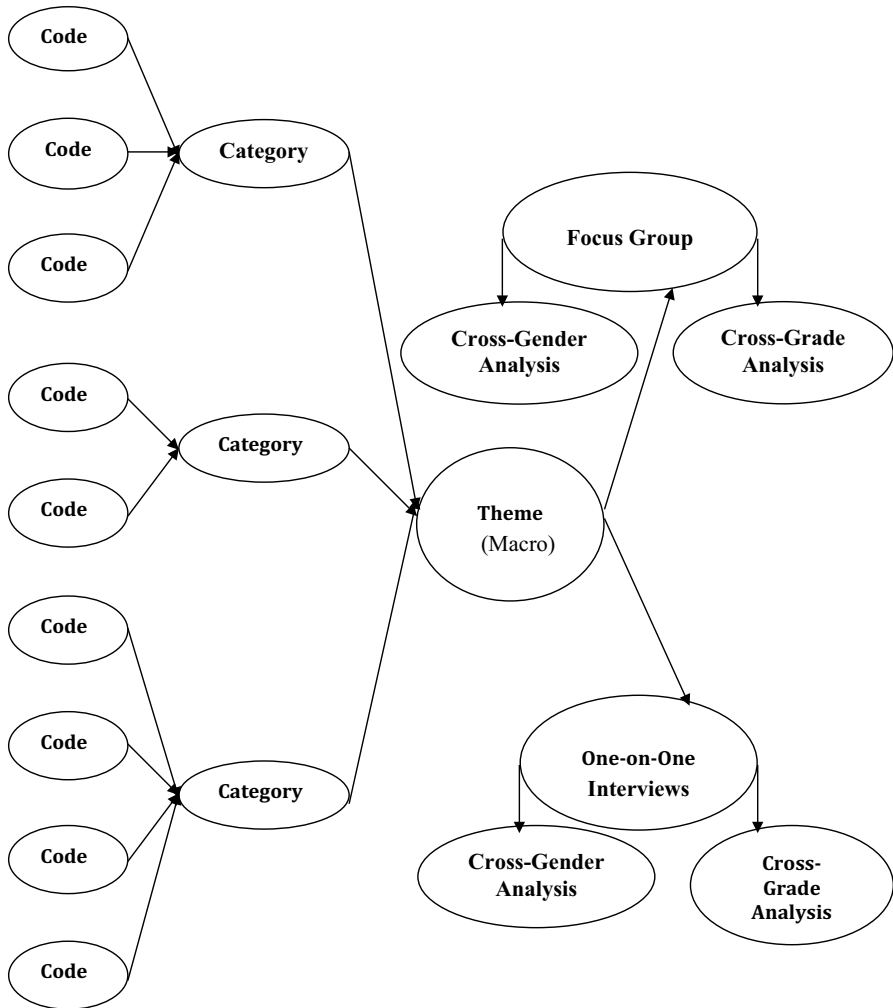


Fig. 1 Multiple case study approach to data analysis

well as their background knowledge of occupational choices. Study findings demonstrated that the majority of children were able to describe their career vision for the future in addition to their employment interests/preferences, and they could explain why they opted for their selections. However, only a few participants could specify the steps they would take to attain their vision. With respect to a career knowledge base, students described their understanding of job responsibilities as they pertained largely to positions held by immediate family members. Nevertheless, all the children expressed confidence in their ability to access career information. As one participant shared, “You could look on the internet and probably type in what job you want, and you could read through it and see if there’s actually some cool things about it.”

**Table 1** Focus-group coding and frequency of responses

Codes	Categories (themes—micro)	Fourth graders		Fifth graders	
		Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
		(n=8)	(n=7)	(n=3)	(n=7)
	<b>Career aspirations</b>				
Vision for the future		7	5	3	7
Plans for the future		2	0	2	0
Job/career interests		7	7	3	6
Job/career preferences		8	6	3	7
Jobs/careers related to celebrity		3	1	2	3
Reasons for job/career preferences		8	7	2	7
	<b>Jobs/careers knowledge</b>				
Background knowledge		7	6	2	6
Information about jobs/careers		8	7	3	7
Career development in school		0	0	0	0
Reference to technology research		2	2	1	0
Reference to earning money		6	1	3	6
	<b>Support network</b>				
Communication about jobs/careers		8	7	3	7
Reference to significant others		8	7	3	7
Interest in parent's job/career		1	3	0	1
Interest in job/career of significant other		3	2	1	1
Reference to job/career aspirations of others		4	1	0	1
	<b>Schooling/education</b>				
Knowledge about college		1	1	1	0
Education/training to attain jobs/careers		7	7	3	4
Education/training plans		8	6	3	7
Reference to getting good grades		3	1	1	0
Desire to learn about jobs/careers in school		8	7	2	6
	<b>Influential factors/decisions</b>				
"You need to practice."		1	3	0	1
"I saw it on TV."		2	1	1	0
"I change my mind"		4	2	1	3
Repetition of response from previous student		5	4	0	2
Repetition of career choice of previous student		3	1	0	2
	<b>Self-efficacy</b>				
Belief in ability perform a job/career		7	6	3	7
Belief in job-related skills		7	6	3	1
Belief in job-related experience		0	1	0	5_

**Table 1** (continued)

Codes	Categories (themes—micro)	Fourth graders		Fifth graders	
		Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
		(n=8)	(n=7)	(n=3)	(n=7)
	Positive outlook				
“I think it’s fun”		3	4	0	2
Anticipated happiness		8	7	3	7

**Table 2** Focus-group participants’ job/career choices

Group	Desired job/career	Expected job/career	Fourth graders		Fifth graders	
			Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
1	Firefighter	Firefighter	X			
	Firefighter	Firefighter	X			
	Clothing designer	Babysitter		X		
	Babysitter	Daycare owner		X		
	Pediatrician	Pediatrician		X		
2	Fed X worker	Fed X worker	X			
	Construction worker	Mechanic	X			
	Pro basketball player	Mechanic	X			
	Nurse	Pro fighter		X		
	Veterinarian	Teacher		X		
3	Gym teacher	Pro video game player	X			
	Scientist	Scientist	X			
	Dancer	Police Officer	X			
	Pro gymnast	Pro skater		X		
	Veterinarian	Artist (fine arts)		X		
1	Architect	Engineer			X	
	Pro football player	Lawyer			X	
	Dancer/singer	Doctor				X
	Hairstylist	Hairstylist				X
	Teacher	Hairstylist				X
2	Pro baseball player	Disc jockey			X	
	Cosmetologist	Cosmetologist				X
	Chef for U.S. Pres.	Chef for U.S. Pres.				X
	Artist (fine arts)	Singer				X
	Cosmetologist	Seamstress				X

The purpose of the second research question was to elicit the factors and/or significant others that affected participants’ aspirations and perceptions of self-efficacy in realizing their career vision. All the students disclosed having discussed their future career interests with significant others whom they readily named. Additionally, nearly half of the children explained that their occupational preferences directly

reflected the employment patterns of family members, while a few echoed the stated career choices of their focus group peers. As one fourth grader described,

Um, one time I was with my mom at Dunkin Donuts. She worked there. I was sitting down thinking in my head, one day if I work here I probably could bring my kids...And give the kids something to eat. So I thought my mom's job would be fun.

Finally, a few students referenced the media as an influential factor in their career decision-making.

For question #3, the investigators aimed to ascertain how participants perceived pathways to achieving their career vision. The majority of students could describe their understanding of the necessary education/training to attain their occupational goals. However, their preconceived ideations of post-secondary schooling were frequently misguided. As one child explained, "Um, my sister told me that like to be a pediatrician, I'll have to go to school like 2 or 3 years." In addition, most of the students confirmed their interest in learning about jobs/careers in elementary school, and they intended to pursue higher education opportunities after high school. Nevertheless, few students could envision and articulate the relevance of academic achievement to future careers.

The purpose of the fourth research question was to ascertain participants' perception of self-efficacy in achieving their career aspirations. Study findings revealed that the children strongly affirmed confidence in their ability to perform their occupational duties. They also believed they already possessed fundamental skills that would be instrumental in their future careers. Regarding a future as a professional performer, one student explained, "I think I have skills and because I do it now. I do the singing and dancing now." Additionally, the participants unanimously expected that occupations would make them happy, indicating positive perceptions of self-efficacy regarding future career prospects.

### **Cross-Grade Analysis**

The researchers focused on each coding category (themes) to compare/contrast the frequency of participant responses in each grade. In the category of Career Aspirations, fifth graders more often expressed having a vision and plans for the future and aspirations to pursue careers that could result in celebrity/fame. However, both grades demonstrated similar responses relating to background knowledge, obtaining occupational information, and career development in school under the category of Job/Career Knowledge. In addition, fourth graders more frequently highlighted technology as an information source for career exploration, whereas fifth graders more often demonstrated an interest in job salaries. Regarding the Support Network category, all the participants reported having discussed future employment interests/options with friends and family and considered them influential in their career development. Finally, more fourth graders reported a desire to follow the same occupational path as their parents and significant others.

For the Schooling/Education category, more fourth graders disclosed an understanding of the prerequisite education/training needed to achieve their employment

aspirations, demonstrated a desire to be successful in school, and wanted to learn more about job/career options. Moreover, in the Influential Factors category, more fourth graders affirmed the importance of job skill development, described the influence of the media on their decisions, altered their ideas about job/career interests, echoed responses from focus-group peers, and mirrored the exact career choices stated by other participants. In addition, regarding the category of Self-Efficacy and Positive Outlook, fifth graders more frequently reported possessing some job-related experience, whereas more fourth graders described having job-related skills. Finally, fifth graders more often expressed confidence that they would perform future jobs successfully, while fourth graders more frequently believed their career preferences would be fun. Nevertheless, all the students maintained a positive, hopeful attitude regarding their future happiness.

### **Cross-Gender Analysis**

Regarding gender responses for the Career Aspirations category, study findings demonstrated that more boys could specify the path they would pursue to achieve their occupational aspirations and revealed their interest to seek fame/celebrity in future employment. In the Job/Career Knowledge category, both boys and girls responded positively, however, boys more often discussed using technology as a source for career exploration and discussed job salaries. For the Support Network category, girls more frequently affirmed their desire to follow in the “footsteps” of their parents, whereas boys more often described an interest in the careers of significant others (non-parent). Moreover, within the Schooling/Education category, more boys could articulate their knowledge of post-secondary studies and their understanding of academic achievement as a precursor to occupational endeavors. For the Influential Factors category, boys more frequently described changing their decisions about employment choices and identified TV as affecting their career selections, while girls more often highlighted skill development as fundamental in determining occupational preferences. Finally, results in the Self-Efficacy and Positive Outlook category revealed disparities. More boys specified job-related skills they believed they already possessed, whereas more girls indicated having employment-like experience and depicted their occupational selections as fun. Both boys and girls expressed confidence to execute job duties successfully as adults and they expected that their future careers would make them happy.

### **Researchers' Field Observations**

Students' responses offered a candid portrait of exactly what they knew and how well they understood the career development process. However, given the limitations of their developmental stage, their decision-making relating to career choice was often fraught with naivety, as in the case of one child who confidently asserted that she would be a good doctor because she enjoyed wearing gloves, carrying a clipboard, and talking to people about how they were feeling.

Participants further disclosed their lack of awareness and misinformation regarding higher education. Most students candidly guessed about the necessary period to complete career-related studies. One child believed she would be required to attend college for 5 years to become a cosmetologist, a doctor, and a teacher.

A noteworthy pattern of participant responses was also evident. Some students would merely echo verbatim what another student already stated, as if in that moment they made their first career decision. A few children identified one occupational interest at the initial stage of the interview, but then mimicked classmates' responses and changed their ideas rather quickly. Additionally, some participants aspired to pursue the career paths of family members as they had little or no knowledge of other employment options. One student, for example, talked about cleaning hotel rooms as his mother, father, and grandmother did.

Interestingly, the children never referred to their low SES, nor did they disclose any perceived barriers to attaining their aspirations. Moreover, they did not consider themselves to have limited opportunities to achieve the careers they desired. Most of the students briefly mentioned "money", but never as a focal point of discussion. Additionally, the participants did not appear to be aware that they were economically disadvantaged.

### **Individual Interview Data Analysis**

The one-on-one interviews with one boy and one girl from fourth and fifth grades constituted the final component of data analysis. The investigators aimed to elicit students' "voice" from a more personal perspective and a more in-depth level. The process for coding was identical to the method utilized with the focus groups. However, there were some variations in codes in order to better align with participant responses (see Table 3). Here, too, member checking served to verify the accuracy of transcriptions and the researchers' interpretations.

#### **Case #1—Wilfredo (fourth-Grade Boy)**

Wilfredo was a very socially outgoing and talkative 10-year-old child. His responses revealed that he could share specific plans about his future. His heritage was Hispanic, with one parent from Puerto Rico and the other from the Dominican Republic. Wilfredo resided with both parents and a younger brother. His father had a full-time job outside the home, and his mother was a homemaker.

#### **Case #2—Alicia (Fourth-Grade Girl)**

Alicia was a pleasant, rather quiet 9-year old. Her household consisted of a mom, a dad, and an older sister. Both parents were originally from Puerto Rico and worked outside the home at the time of the interview. The interaction between the investigator and the participant throughout the interview process was very relaxed. Alicia displayed complete candor in her responses and full cooperation to address research questions.

**Table 3** Individual interview coding and frequency of responses

Codes	Categories (themes—micro)	Fourth graders		Fifth graders	
		Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl
	<b>Career aspirations</b>				
Vision for the future		X	X	X	X
Plans for the future		X	X	X	X
Job/career Interests		X	X	X	X
Job/career preferences		X	X	X	X
Jobs/careers related to celebrity		X			
Reasons for job/career preferences		X	X	X	X
	<b>Job/career knowledge</b>				
Background knowledge				X	
Information about jobs/careers		X	X	X	X
Reference to technology research				X	
Reference to earning money		X	X	X	X
	<b>Support network</b>				
Communication about jobs/careers		X	X	X	X
Reference to significant others		X	X	X	X
Interest in parent’s job/career					X
Interest in job/career of significant other				X	X
Reference to job/career aspirations of others					X
	<b>Schooling/education</b>				
Knowledge about college				X	
Education/training to attain jobs/careers			X	X	
Education/training plans		X	X	X	X
Knowledge of steps to develop a career		X		X	
Reference to getting good grades		X	X	X	X
Reference to current academic status		X		X	X
Reference to relationship between grades and jobs		X		X	X
Reference to future academic goals		X		X	X
	<b>Influential factors/decisions</b>				
“You need to practice”		X	X		X
“I saw it on TV”		X	X		X
“I change my mind”			X		X
Decision-making and influential significant others		X			X
Factors affecting decisions		X	X	X	X
	<b>Self-efficacy</b>				
Belief in college/training success		X	X	X	X
Belief in ability to perform a job/career		X		X	
Belief in job-related skills		X		X	
Belief in job/career goal attainment		X		X	X
Belief in having control over job/career goal attainment		X		X	X



**Table 3** (continued)

Codes	Categories (themes—micro)	Fourth graders		Fifth graders	
		Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl
Belief in future job/career success	Positive outlook	X		X	X
“I think it’s fun”		X	X	X	X
Anticipated financial security		X	X	X	X
Hope for the future		X	X	X	X

### Case #3—Pedro (Fifth-Grade Boy)

Pedro lived in a single-parent household with his mother. His heritage was Hispanic, as his mother was from Colombia, and his absentee father was from Ecuador. The student was very excited to discuss his future aspirations and displayed a sophisticated level of articulation. Pedro was very cordial but somewhat reserved in his interactions. His responses, attitude, and behavior demonstrated a more advanced stage of maturity than what is typical among fifth-grade boys.

### Case #4—Arianna (Fifth-Grade Girl)

Arianna was a very energetic, gregarious 10-year old, eager to verbalize her ideas. She lived in a very full household, with both parents, a younger and an older sister, an aunt and uncle, and a baby cousin. Both parents emigrated from Costa Rica before Arianna was born. Her father worked full-time, while her mother only worked in the summers. It was evident as the interview ensued that Arianna relished being in the spotlight. Her responses became increasingly more detailed, and she was clearly disappointed when the interview ended.

### Cross-Grade Analysis

The investigators conducted a cross-grade analysis to determine similarities and differences in responses for each code category. Regarding Career Aspirations, all four students could reveal their aspirational vision and identify their occupational interests, career preferences, and their decision-making process. In the Knowledge of Jobs/Careers category, however, differences in student responses were evident. Only one fifth grader offered extensive information regarding his career preferences and recognized the imperative to attain technology skills. However, all four participants could discuss their basic knowledge/understanding of their occupation selections. Additionally, regarding the Support Network category, all the interviewees affirmed having had discussions with significant others who provided support, shared information about jobs, acted as role models, and influenced students’ career aspirations.

One-fifth grader described her interest to pursue her parents' employment direction, whereas the other three students considered following the careers held by significant others, excluding parents. For the Schooling/Education category, all the participants affirmed their plans to seek post-secondary education and acknowledged the significance of school achievement, though the fourth graders had minimal understanding of higher education. Only one child in each grade commented on the kind and extent of post-secondary education required to attain occupational preferences and could specify the pathway to reach aspirations. In the Influential Factors in Decision-Making category, all the students described critical factors that influenced their career goals, such as academic performance, having access to resources, and the status of the economy/job market. All but one-fifth grader also named the media as an influential factor. Additionally, one participant from each grade maintained that they would most likely alter their decisions and recognized that a significant other would probably help them with decision-making. Finally, in the Self-Efficacy category, both fifth graders and one-fourth grader affirmed their belief in reaching their career aspirations and having control over the realization of their vision. Moreover, all the participants were confident that future educational endeavors would result in positive outcomes, envisioned their career choices as fun, expected to attain financial security, and remained hopeful for a prosperous future.

### **Cross-Gender Analysis**

Regarding the Career Aspirations category, all the study participants were able to discuss their career "dreams", reveal a basic outline of the plans for the future, and disclose interests and preferences. The boys alone, declared their desire to achieve celebrity in a profession. Response differences were also apparent in the Job/Career Knowledge category. Only the boys provided extensive details about career aspirations and commented on the role of technology. Boys and girls, however, specified the resources they would explore to obtain more information about occupations and commented on job earnings as a pivotal factor in goal attainment. For the Support Network category, all the children affirmed having solicited input from significant others about their employment interests. Moreover, participants reported that the occupations held by significant others, excluding parents, appealed to them. The girls alone revealed an interest in following the career paths of their parents. Regarding Schooling/Education, boys' and girls' responses were largely congruent. They all referred to pursuing post-secondary education, the importance of academic achievement, the necessary components involved in career development, and long-term schooling goals. Only boys were able to depict, to some degree, what it meant to attend a higher education institution. The category of Influential Factors and Decisions disclosed mostly common ground regarding gender responses. Boys and girls could identify factors that influenced their career choices, including occupational interests that could develop in the future, their potential for college readiness, the role of the media, and significant others. However, only girls acknowledged the possibility of altering their employment interests as they got older. Finally, several similarities were discerned between boys and girls relating to the Self-Efficacy category. All the students reported confidence in attaining their aspirations, in performing job

duties, and in their sole responsibility to achieve their dreams. Only the boys, however, believed they already possessed employment skills. Overall, all the study participants depicted a positive vision for their future.

## Discussion

An overview of the study results requires a three-prong consideration that includes emergent themes at the macro level to discern societal implications; feedback for improved career development practices in schools; and suggestions for further research. By highlighting study participants' "voice" as the most critical point of analysis, the investigators were able to de-emphasize any a priori thematic framework and prioritize themes that emerged during the data collection process. By applying the data obtained from student discourse to a societal context, the researchers could gain a comprehensive perspective at the macro level of understanding. Moreover, students' repeated reference to family members who influenced their career ideations spotlighted the construct of social capital as the prominent theme. A second emergent theme involved student resilience and fervent optimism that persisted during the data collection process.

## Social Capital

For children, the concept of social capital refers to the resources inherent in their social network that can influence their lives by affording them opportunities or posing obstacles (Belcher et al. 2011). Family capital is especially critical for elementary school children as it relates not only to economic support, but also to family dynamics and how the family unit can develop a social network to improve each member's opportunity to prosper (Yosso 2005). Evans (2004) explains, however, that under-resourced children experience greater family turmoil, violence, and have a limited support system when compared to more economically advantaged children. That is, since family members and residents in the same community also live in poverty, the students have minimal opportunities for interaction with influential others outside their immediate environment (Wages 2015). Consequently, social capital for underserved children may be circumscribed due to the lack of access to a larger social network.

## Resilience

Study participants displayed unwavering optimism and conviction to pursue their career aspirations, regardless of the loftiness or mundanity of their occupational goals. This positive outlook and perceived tenacity despite life's challenges may be derived from a pattern of family dynamics that fosters reciprocal support among family members and is intrinsic to cultures of poverty (Vandsburger et al. 2008). Throughout the participants' discourse during the focus group and interview sessions, the children imparted their unique hopes and dreams and unanimously

displayed enthusiasm regarding their prospects for the future. Bondy et al. (2007) proposed that resilience in children who perpetually encounter adversity refers to perceptions of a bright future as it relates to aspirations, optimism, and hope. Students' expectations that they would prosper in their career pursuits were a testament to their intrinsic resilience.

## **Suggestions for Educational Practice**

### **Equity in Education**

Williams-Boyd (2010) purports that poverty and deprivation are the root cause of limited student academic achievement rather than race, ethnicity or gender. Therefore, a challenge for educational administrators involves determining whether or not schools adequately provide opportunities for under-served students to access knowledge and experiences typically unavailable to them, such as the career development process. Gorski (2013) suggests that educators develop resiliency in students, foster evidence-based student engagement, and promote higher expectations and higher-order pedagogies. Findings from the current study confirmed that participants had had no prior career exploration instruction in school. Moreover, while the students did not disclose perceptions of limited opportunities, their responses indicated minimal access to career-related information.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Ladson-Billings (2006) contends that educators who utilize culturally relevant pedagogy not only incorporate the social context of students but also prepare students for postsecondary education and the workforce. In the current investigation, this entails a formidable focus on participants' "voice" to ascertain deficiencies in awareness and understanding to offer responsive occupational exploration opportunities. For under-served children, career development must include instruction that presents a wide array of job options, academic prospects, and pathways to achieving occupational goals in order to enrich children's aspirations (Weinger 2000). In addition, Bagin et al. (2008) endorse field trips to local worksites as a valuable instructional strategy. First-hand interaction with the broader community could also include educational institutions to enhance students' awareness of potential extended learning possibilities. Under-resourced students may not be privy to a wide range of career options because they are unaware that these options exist.

### **School Leadership and Staff Development**

School leaders establish the direction for professional development in their schools as it aligns to the school mission (Reeves 2009). Therefore, it is the principal's imperative to establish practices to address the specific learning needs of the student population. This administrative responsibility involves prioritizing curricular endeavors, allowing funding for relevant programs, and ensuring access to

technology and the extended environment. School leaders who endorse equity aim to develop connections between their schools and institutions in the larger community (Beachum et al. 2018). Moreover, effective principals engender leadership capacity throughout the faculty. It behooves school administrators to capitalize on the expertise of teachers who understand and skillfully address the learning needs of under-served children by inviting these instructors to share their knowledge and strategies with colleagues (Fullan and Hargreaves 1996). It is critical, therefore, for school leaders to tailor professional development opportunities to respond to the needs of the school.

### Parental and Community Involvement

Engaging parents and the local community as learning resources can be invaluable to enrich the schooling experience. Bagin et al. (2008) purport that establishing parent-teacher partnerships indicates a lofty endeavor to promote the educational enterprise. Regarding the career development process, parents can share first-hand job descriptions and explain the realities of the work-a-day world to enlighten children about occupational responsibilities and describe the workplace environment. Moreover, Fullan (2001) endorses partnerships outside the immediate community, that is, continual communication between schools and organizations to develop support networks. Ford (2006) also touts school-community connections and maintains that schools alone cannot adequately resolve all the concerns and needs of schools in low SES settings. Therefore, support networks can be instrumental by engaging students in learning experiences beyond the classroom.

### Implications for Future Research

Future research could extend current study findings by exploring same-age samples from different socioeconomic strata. Results could highlight any disparities that may emerge between underserved students and their more affluent peers regarding career aspirations and self-efficacy. In addition, extended qualitative research is warranted to gain an understanding of the emergent “voice” of children. By utilizing open-ended questioning, researchers allow children to disclose their thoughts their way, without filters, in addition to the researchers’ preconceived parameters. Throughout the data collection process, the investigators were privy to students’ hesitations, reactions to peers, voice tone when referring to significant others, expressions of confusion, and excitement about sharing personal thoughts. The small group and one-on-one interaction between the investigators and the participants allowed for a more in-depth understanding that was critical to the research findings. In addition, the insights that emerged from the exchange of ideas among the students in the group sessions provided unbridled testament to the reality of career ideations from the perspective of under-resourced children. For researchers working with children, allowing them to “speak their minds” with absolute candor can provide the most optimal data for analysis. This is especially critical for marginalized subgroups, such

as children of economic disadvantage. Weinger (2000) crystallized the importance of listening to children’s “voice” by writing:

As adults we frequently ask children what they want to be when they grow up. Finding their answers cute and changing all the time, we often dismiss and devalue the significance of their responses. In fact, children are attempting to define themselves and their responses are reflective both of their inner need ‘to be somebody’ and of their recognition of the social consequences attached to occupations. Their responses show their view of their future, how their life will play out, what socio-economic class they will be in, and the opportunities that will be available to them throughout their lives. Once we hear what children are truly saying we are in a better position to respond to their unasked questions and needs. (p. 33)

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