Ending the “Gap”

A Master’s Research Project Presented to

The Faculty of the Patton College of Education and Human Services
Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

by
Tahnesha Lynette Cook Anyik,
Masters of Education
August, 2015
This Master's Research Project has been approved for the Department of Teacher Education

Ralph Martin, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus
Department of Teacher Education

Frans Doppen, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair
Department of Teacher Education

☒ Checking this box indicates that the IRB Consent form is appended to this document.

☒ Checking this box indicates this document has been submitted and successfully cleared a plagiarism check. Supporting documentation has been provided to the Department Chair and is appended to this document.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. 5  

Chapter One ........................................................................................................... 6  
Introduction ........................................................................................................... 6  
  Background ......................................................................................................... 6  
  The problem ....................................................................................................... 6  
Research Questions ................................................................................................. 8  
Hypothesis ............................................................................................................. 9  
Definition of terms ............................................................................................... 9  

Chapter Two ........................................................................................................... 11  
Literature Review .................................................................................................... 11  
  Introduction ....................................................................................................... 11  
  Teaching Middle School ...................................................................................... 11  
  “Opportunity Gap” or “Achievement Gap” .......................................................... 12  
  Being Black in American Public Schools .............................................................. 14  
  Alternative Teaching Approaches ...................................................................... 15  
  How the Gap Effects Math Education .................................................................. 16  
  Poverty in America ............................................................................................ 17  
  Summary ........................................................................................................... 20  

Chapter 3 .................................................................................................................. 21  
Methods .................................................................................................................. 21  
  Participants ........................................................................................................ 22  
  Research Design ................................................................................................. 22  
  Instrumentation .................................................................................................. 23  
  Procedures .......................................................................................................... 24  

Chapter 4 .................................................................................................................. 26  
Data Analysis and Results ....................................................................................... 26  
  Findings ............................................................................................................. 26  

Chapter 5 .................................................................................................................. 32  
Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 32  
  Findings ............................................................................................................. 32  
  Interpretation of Results .................................................................................... 32  
  Limitations ......................................................................................................... 33  
  Implications ....................................................................................................... 33
Abstract
The purpose of this study was to examine what the educational gap looked like in an urban impoverished classroom and what impact this gap had on achievement. This is an important topic to examine because a gap exists between the opportunities of minorities and whites in this country. Since, education is seen as a way to address disadvantages, it is important to start to improve the quality of education to begin to help close any gaps in opportunity that may exist.

The study was based on looking at the problem through a teacher’s perspective. Interviews were conducted with teachers at the North Focus on Collective Integrity (FCI) campus in Columbus, Ohio. Interviews were conducted with four teachers, one paraprofessional, and one administrator. Eight surveys were distributed and three were returned from teachers that taught at FCI a school recognized for its high level of poverty with the Columbus City School District.

The main research questions were:
1. What factors perpetuate the educational gap and the "poor performance" cycle in impoverished urban areas from a teacher's perspective?
2. What self-reported methods are teachers using to close the gap in impoverished urban areas?
3. Based on teacher reports, what does the opportunity gap look like in the urban classroom?

In conclusion, it was found that factors such as lack of resources, misappropriation of funds, single parent homes and socio-economic status perpetuate the educational gap and “poor performance” cycle. Teachers use various methods including small groups, hands-on activities, kinesthetic activities and personal resources to help bring up student achievement. The initial conclusion is the gap resembles the lives of the students in the school. More research needs to be completed to reach a concrete conclusion.
Chapter One

Introduction

Background

The United States is a very diverse country; one built on the efforts of many different people from different cultures. The US seems to pride itself on this idea of an “American Dream” that so many have heard about and come from around the world to obtain. However, for many people living in poverty in the United States the “dream” appears to just be a dream. For some reason, many people living in poverty seem to live in a modern day caste system. If a young man is born into poverty, he has an extremely hard time being able to move out of poverty and into a higher pay bracket when he reaches adulthood (Lang 2007). There seems to be a few factors involved in this scenario that seems to play over and over again in city after city across the nation. I argue that the main factor seems to be education. Without an education, persons cannot compete in a competitive job market or even defend themselves during a traffic violation. In our society, people look at how much you know and what you have to show for that knowledge. So, without an education, one can imagine it being almost impossible to move out of poverty. I believe the other factor seems to involve family and income. Children learn from their parents or guardians. Sadly, if a parent or guardian is living in poverty, then the child is learning to live in poverty, as well. It tends to take more effort to break out of this way of life, than it does to stay in that comfort zone and continue to live like you have always lived. Also, without some type of wealth it seems almost impossible to get an education that is comparable to wealthier counterparts.

The problem

I became a teacher to make a difference in the lives of my students. No matter their race or socio-economic status, everyone deserves the same education. As Americans, we are lucky to be provided free education. In several countries, education is only free through elementary. Beyond elementary school the family must pay for the education or the child cannot attend. If there is a free
school, it is not good and it is almost guaranteed you will not find a very nice or good paying job as a result. All Americans should have an advantage in the global economy that is being built today because of their access to education. However, there is a "gap" that exists between the white students and the African American students on achievement scores across the nation. Whites make up about 72% of the population of the US, while African Americans only make up 13%. Even so, there should not be this disparity when it comes to the test scores among school aged whites and African American students.

I had to understand why this disparity existed. So, I began to think about what seemed to cause this difference between the education of African Americans and whites. As a young child, growing up in Montgomery, Alabama, I just accepted that the wealthy white kids went to private school and the majority of the African American students went to their zoned public school. I didn’t think much of it really. I knew that if you lived in a certain neighborhood or in a certain part of town, then you went to a certain school. I also didn’t think anything of the fact that African Americans and whites lived separately---segregated neighborhoods. However, as an adult, I see that this caused a form of segregation when it came to the schools that students attended. You can’t go to a certain school if you don’t live in that area. This also caused the type of education to be different in the various schools. The teachers who served the schools with a majority African American student body didn’t seem as engaged, as teachers who served the schools with a majority of white students. They almost seemed like they had given up. I also noticed most of the students that came from a poor neighborhood would usually continue to live in that neighborhood or would get in trouble with the law. I thought as a child that everyone deserves a great education and teachers should not teach if they are not there for the right reasons.

However, after working in the teaching field for a year now, I see that it was not completely the teachers’ fault. There are many factors involved when it comes to just how much power a single
teacher has to spur change in or out of the classroom. I believe it is the educational system in the United States that needs to make a few changes. Local and state boards of education need to agree upon budgets that allow all students to receive the same education. I believe this study is needed to begin to understand how to close the educational or opportunity gap that exists among African American and white students. This study is geared towards helping teachers pinpoint ways to close the gap in their classrooms. I believe this is the first step in closing the gap. Teachers must find creative and inventive ways to engage their students and set them on a path of lifelong learning.

Research Questions

The make-up of the education system in the US in changing with implementations such as No Child Left Behind and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) tests. These programs were implemented to help American youth keep up with their counterparts around the world. However, researchers such as, Ferguson (2003), Gutiérrez (2008), Ladson-Billings (2006), Lubienski (2008), Oakes et al. (2004) and Portes (2005) have uncovered what some are calling the education gap or the opportunity gap that exists in states across the country. These terms are often interchangeable, because a lack of education has been found to cause a decline in opportunity (jobs). I believe the “gap” represents or highlights the differences in education that exists between wealthier districts and low income districts. The goal of this research is to understand what the opportunity gap looks like in the classroom of an urban area and to understand what teachers are doing, if anything, to address and close the gap in the classroom. The intent is to find solutions that teachers use to improve achievement in their classrooms and to present those findings in a concise manner that can be used by all teachers in urban areas to help close the education or opportunity gap. The main research questions are:

1) What factors perpetuate the educational gap and the "poor performance" cycle in impoverished urban areas from a teacher's perspective?
2) What self-reported methods are teachers using to close the gap in impoverished urban areas?

3) Based on teacher reports, what does the opportunity gap look like in the urban classroom?

Hypothesis

I believe that my research will find that students in impoverished areas have lower achievement scores and attend poorer quality schools, in part, due to the poverty or socioeconomic status of the community that attends a particular school. I, also, hope to find strategies that teachers use in their classrooms that can help improve achievement among their students. I do not expect to find any solutions or "quick" fixes to this issue. I believe the educational gap is bigger than any one teacher or student. It is something that has been in place for many generations and it will take the help of our local, state and national governments to true close the gap. However, what teachers can do in their classrooms is improve their students' achievement and, in turn, their district's achievement. This small improvement will help more students be able to attend college and therefore not let the "gap" affect their opportunities later in life.

Definition of terms

Opportunity, Educational, Achievement gap- these terms are often interchangeable and represent that disparity between the achievement test scores of African Americans and whites in the United States.

Impoverished- a community that is reduced to poverty; community living in poverty.

Urban- term that usually distinguishes a city or town; living in a city.

Minority- a group in society that is less dominant than a stronger majority; African American, Hispanic in this research
African American/ Black- a person of African descent

"Poor performance cycle"- a term coined to represent the effects of poverty on an individual from a lower economic status household; usually the effects on income mobility and education.

Title I- Federal funding provided to schools to improve the achievement of disadvantaged students.

Poverty- the state of having little to no goods or means of support

Income mobility- the ability to move from one economic quintile to a higher one with ease.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

In the quest to become the most effective teacher of urban youth, it is necessary to review the literature on what effects urban students the most. The achievement gap or the opportunity gap seems to be a factor when it comes to how urban students are taught and perceived. Teachers can help fix the gap that exists among our students across the US. In order to do this, it is necessary to review strategies and teaching methods and compare notes to put a plan together that can begin to start to close the gap that exists. This review of literature will focus on six bodies of research that will help develop a deeper understanding of the “gap”. These bodies of research include: what it means to teach middle school, how to describe the gap, what it means to be Black in the US, alternative teaching strategies, how the gap affects math education specifically, and poverty in America. It is important to close the gap, so our country can stay competitive in the global society that is beginning to grow at an exponential pace.

Teaching Middle School

Teaching middle school is not for the faint of heart. According to the Association of Middle Level Educators (2010), the middle school years are the most important years of a child’s life. During this time, many aspects of a child changes. Their body is changing in ways they might not understand for many years to come. They are also changing emotionally. The changes that occur affect the teachers that are charged with teaching these young students. A teacher must understand how the students are changing and the best practices for effectively teaching them. For students at this age, it is arguably more important to shape them mentally and socially rather than only intellectually. The key is to incorporate all aspects of development into a student’s education. In today’s changing
society, it is arguably, more important than ever to provide students with an education that meets their needs (*This We Believe: Keys to educating young adolescents*, 2010).

One aspect of understanding students and their motivation is self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) discussed how efficacy can affect a person's behavior. He points out that cognitive processes help to shape a person’s behavior. This then plays a role in whether or not a person continues in a particular behavior or not. He also discussed the role that motivation has on self-efficacy. An interesting note from Bandura is that a person’s preconceived notations or beliefs will override outside stimuli. Therefore, if a student has already learned that when a teacher asks a question after they give an answer, then they must be wrong. This student will always associate being wrong with being asked a question after giving a response, even if the teacher is only trying to get the student to use higher order thinking skills. Knowing this information can help teachers when teaching young students. Teachers must stay persistent and continue to encourage each student to succeed. It was found that goal setting and self-evaluation are the ways in which most people motivate themselves. Self-efficacy is a very important part of student motivation and effort in the classroom (Bandura, 1977).

It is important to keep these aspects in mind when considering ways to improve the education that impoverished urban students receive. If teachers believe that the gap that exists between students in America must be fixed, then teachers must understand how students learn and are motivated to continue to learn. By understanding the middle school student, teachers can start to understand how to improve the gap that exists.

**“Opportunity Gap” or “Achievement Gap”**

In the literature, the gap is sometimes called an opportunity gap and sometimes it is called an achievement gap. The opportunity gap refers to the undeniable difference that exists between the opportunities for minorities versus their white counterparts. There seem to be several factors that
influence this gap. A study by Oakes, Rogers, Silver, Horng, & Goode, (2004), observed that modern
day schools in some California cities do not even meet the criteria for the landmark case *Plessy vs
Ferguson* (Oakes et al., 2004). These schools are still segregated and there is an extreme disproportion
of funds between the schools that service mainly minorities and those that service mainly whites. The
schools that have a white majority usually tend to receive funding from local community members or
the parents of the students that attend. While the schools that are made up of minority students,
usually tend to be underfunded and the conditions inside the schools are not always the best (Oakes et
al., 2004).

Ferguson (2003) raised an interesting view of what drives the opportunity gap when observing
the discrepancy between test scores of African Americans and whites. He argued that it was the
teacher’s perceptions and their expectations of the students that continues to keep the gap wide. This
view is a controversial one because of the underlying tone that somehow racism could be causing the
gap. However, it has been stated that sometimes teachers form a preconceived notion about their
students and that notion ultimately affects how they treat their students, what is expected of their
students and how the students begin to perceive themselves. He suggested using the proper amount of
“wait time”, proper feedback, and mirroring the “Great Expectations” initiative for implementing a
teaching approach that African American students will excel under (Ferguson, 2003).

Portes (2005) took a cultural and historical approach to solving the “achievement gap”. He
examined several elements to address how to solve the inconsistencies that exist in American Public
schools. He suggested looking at the differences between the cultures as a way to address the gap. For
example, Delpit (2006) noticed that her African American students did not respond in the same way
as their white counterparts did in a classroom in the 1970s. She discusses how wonderful she thought
the open classroom approach was for all of her students. However, she noticed that the African
American students were not showing the growth that the white students were showing in the same
environment. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to this issue. Teachers and communities must work together to help all students from all backgrounds succeed. Portes (2005) also points out that smaller student to teacher ratios are necessary for success. Having the proper resources and teacher preparation are also necessary for improving the gap (Delpit, 2006; Portes, 2005).

Ladson-Billings (2006) took an interesting approach to the "achievement gap" by looking at the gap as a debt that exists in our country, not just a comparison between races. No matter the cause for the difference, there is a debt that is going to affect everyone sooner or later. If this debt continues to grow where will that leave the future youth in our country? Ladson-Billings discussed moral debt, historical debt, sociopolitical debt and economical debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The most interesting debt was the idea of moral debt, the cost of doing something that is wrong. This debt involves debt that can never be repaid. For generations, there has been a gap between African Americans and whites in the United States. In 1986, Levin argued that educational reform was needed to address the rising crisis in American among disadvantaged youth. Levin’s argument and his fears are still valid today, almost thirty years later. He discussed the inevitable occurrence of a dual society, negative effects on higher education, and a blow to the country’s workforce, if action was not taken.

**Being Black in American Public Schools**

Brill (1999) explored what it means to be Black in America. He reviewed the parts of history that effect Blacks today. He, also, examined the effects of slavery and affirmative action on the Black community. As cited by Brill, in 1832, De Toqueville predicted that whites and Blacks could never live equally in the society. He predicted that, once freed, former slaves would revolt due to the lack of civil rights that they would receive in America. Shockingly, these words hold true even in 2014. The
evident tensions that exist today in cities like Ferguson, Missouri are racially charged and are due to the lack of equality that exists between Blacks and whites in our country.

Watson (2011) discussed the views that pre-service teachers had when it came to teaching urban students. Watson interviewed pre-service teachers who were in a teaching program that catered to the needs of urban school districts. It was observed that these candidates had preconceived notions as to what urban meant. Some teachers were in shock to find out that these students did not live up to the expectations—or lack thereof—they had set for “urban” students. None of these pre-service teachers were Black with only one of sixteen being of Asian descent. The majority of the teachers interviewed wanted to teach in an urban school, but they did not want the students to be too urban (Watson, 2011).

**Alternative Teaching Approaches**

Chalker and Brown (1999) discussed alternative education programs for at risk youth. They state that such programs should be based on understanding that there are many ways to learn. They also highlighted programs that were found to be successful among 6th through 8th grade students, who are at risk. The most common strategies that helped teachers were quality classroom management plans, basic competencies, and different support solutions to support teachers and students (Chalker & Brown, 1999).

A very novel idea to how to improve achievement endorsed by Garrison and Rud (1995) is to approach teaching with a hospitality mindset. They took the idea of classroom environment and turned it into everyday language. A teacher’s classroom should feel like a home where students are welcome and feel safe (Garrison & Rud Jr., 1995).

This idea of applying hospitality is a very valid one. Hospitality is necessary in school. It is part of building rapport among teachers and students. By building rapport, a teacher can affect many
students in a positive way. The teacher will convey that the student matters not just the grade they receive in the class or how well they do on a test. A possible way to close the gap that exists is to find ways to teach and reach the students. These alternative teaching approaches can begin to help teachers focus on improving student performance.

How the Gap Effects Math Education

“Gap gazing” is a term that has been coined for the way people talk about the opportunity or achievement gap. When it comes to math, teachers are always concerned with data. Teachers have to review scores on standardized tests, classroom tests and so on to evaluate their own teaching ability. Many math teacher’s jobs depend on test scores. So, some would assume that it is only right to continue to evaluate the data to monitor the differences between various groups. However, some researchers do not agree that math teachers should focus on the “gap gazing” method. While, some believe “gap gazing” is necessary and beneficial.

Gutierrez (2008) does not agree with the gazing phenomena, because he believes it can have drastic effects on the groups involved. Let’s consider the effects that consistently telling a student how “inferior” or “behind” they are would have on that student. This is what Gutierrez believes is happening. The question was also posed, “What happens when the Black students close the gap?” A follow-up question could be, “How would the white students feel?” By focusing on a gap, efficient or “smart” groups and inefficient or “dumb” groups are formed. Gutierrez believes that there should be a focus on improving achievement, not a focus on the discrepancies between races. Focusing on the discrepancies only widens the divide that exists between the races (Gutiérrez, 2008).

Lubienski (2008) has a different opinion when it comes to “gap gazing” and math education. She believes that by strategically analyzing the data, the data can be used to improve the discrepancies that exist among the races or various groups considered in the “gap gazing”. She has approached the
idea from an equity standpoint. The question, “Is it fair for the math education of our country’s students to be in the hands of people who know nothing about mathematics?” was raised. Lubienski believes this would be detrimental to the country’s youth (Lubienski, 2008).

Flores (2007) suggests using the data to observe the discrepancies and using it as a means to correct the causes for the discrepancies. He pointed out that the current research may lead teachers to perceive certain students as being incapable of learning. This leads some teachers to use only multiple choice math tests or to not challenge these students by using high order thinking questions. It was also discussed that some teachers are less likely to recommend minority students for gifted and talented student services. Flores points out that the known problems for the gap are lack of highly qualified teachers, funding, resources, and advanced or honors classes for the minority students. Teachers should not use the data of the gap to increase the gap, but to diminish the gap (Flores, 2007).

**Poverty in America**

In the book, *Poverty and Inequality*, it is noted that many people look at the economy and poverty status in the 60s to gauge how to solve poverty today (1997). The sixties saw the longest and strongest economic growth in US history. The unemployment rates went from twenty two percent to thirteen percent. The economy grew 4.3 % every year. This leads many economic analyses to tie the bustling economy with the declining poverty level. The eighties saw two short recessions before the second longest and strongest growth in US history. The unemployment rate went from just over ten percent to just over eight percent. It is important to note that the poverty rate only fell slightly during this period. By 1990, the poverty rate had only declined 2.4 % and was still higher that it was a decade earlier. The early 90s saw a mild recession and then a short period of economic growth. However, the poverty rate went up during the recession and continued to rise in the period of economic growth (Neill, 1997).
According to Lang, education is viewed as a path to social mobility. Disadvantaged children can use education to make up for their disadvantages. However, high poverty areas differ from the rest of most metropolitan cities when it comes to the quality of the schools in high poverty areas. The schools in these areas are usually of lower quality. Lang also notes that money is not necessarily the answer to improving the quality of schools. He notes that most suburban schools spend less per student than their urban counterparts. Most of this money is spent on helping urban students gain a social education that their suburban counterparts learned at home before they entered school (Lang, 2007).

Early childhood education and care has also been linked to increased success rates in school. High quality early childhood education and care programs have been found to play a major role in development. Low income children can benefit the most from these programs. This is due to the fact the parents may not be able to provide these skills at home due to work schedules or other responsibilities. However, the low income children that do attend early childhood education care centers usually attend centers that offer lower quality education and care than their wealthier counterparts (Gambaro, Stewart, & Waldfogel, 2014).

In a study compiled in 1999, Blacks fell behind whites in almost every economic category. The study looked at areas such as household wealth, individual wealth, poverty rates and wealth and assets to name a few. It was found that white households hold five times more wealth than Black households in the United States. The individual poverty rates for Blacks and whites in 1999 was 25% and 9% percent respectively. It was also noted that the poverty rates for female-headed families is generally 2.5 to 5 times greater than those for married couple families. For Black single female-headed homes the poverty rate was 36%--- for whites 20%. Blacks’ income per capita is almost $10,000 less than whites and they hold, on average, a net worth that is 5 times less than that of whites in the US. It is important to note that Hispanics fell behind whites in most categories, as well.
However, in some cases they surpassed their Black counterparts. For example, the net worth of Blacks, whites, and Hispanics in 1998 was $64,000, $335,000, and $87,000 respectively. It should be noted that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act was supposed to end or reduce racial inequality by ending discrimination in the labor force. However, all this seemed to change was the equaling of wages in the workplace. The employment rate of non-whites declined after this title was enforced. Factors such as the digital divide may influence why Blacks fall behind their counterparts in education and employment opportunities. It should be noted that Blacks have increased the number of students that obtain a college degree, but still lag behind their white and Asian counterparts. The rates for Blacks without a high school diploma is also much higher than that of whites and Asians. Blacks, whites and Asians without a high school diploma in 1999 was 28%, 16%, and 20% respectively. It has been noted that the children of the poor tend to stay poor and the children of the rich tend to stay rich. This trend is not reflective of the IQ or intelligence of the child. The top .01% of the top 1% holds the most wealth and continues to gain more wealth than any other quintile. As a result, the United States has one of the lowest income mobility rates. The US falls behind several countries such as, Germany, Canada, Sweden and Finland when it comes to income mobility (Sims, 2006).

President Johnson described the War on Poverty as a continuation of the basic American notion that all people should have a chance to achieve their life goals and maintain secure and stable lives. The American people deserve basis hopes. These hopes include a fair chance to be successful, be protected under the law, find a full time job, have a decent home in a decent neighborhood, and send one’s children to a good school with good teachers and to have peaceful mind in old age. It is important to note that 25% to 33% of Americans experience some type of hardship. This is higher for Millennials and people of color. A surprising fact is that in America, 61% of families’ income falls behind their cost of living and only 6% of families income actually helps them get ahead financially. Some factors that lead to poverty are single parent households headed by women, lack of college
education, and access to higher education. It is important to note that children that grow up in a single parent home are four times as likely to be poor. This further adds to the poverty rate in the United States. A Brookings analysis found that if the US had the same marriage rate that existed in the 1970s today, then the poverty rate would fall by 25%. Research continues to show that more education leads to more money and is the key to overcoming poverty. Without a college degree, 45% of the children from families in the lower quintile of wealth will themselves become adults in the bottom quintile. However, by obtaining a college degree those children cut their odds by 29%. The odds of making it to the top quintile also increase with a college degree. However, there is still a large gap between high school graduation rates between whites and Blacks and Hispanics---80% and 65%, respectively. Even more discouraging is that 79% of children from the top quintile enroll in college and 53% obtain a degree, while only 34% of children from the bottom quintile enroll in college and only 11% receive a degree. The effectiveness of the K-12 education system is under scrutiny due to our countries results in comparison to other countries. On one assessment, the Program for International Student Assessment, the US scored 27th in math, 17th in science, and 12th for reading. These results portray a picture that American students are falling behind their international counterparts (Thompson, 2015).

Summary

The education gap is a real is issue that exists among our youth in America. It seems to mainly affect youth in our urban and rural areas for reasons of poverty and economic distribution. These areas are not always the most sought after areas to work in for teachers. However, there are teachers who dedicate their lives to teaching these students. It is these teachers who can help begin to close the gap that exists among these students in the impoverished urban areas across our country.
Chapter 3

Methods

The education system in the US is changing with implementations such as No Child Left Behind and PARCC tests. These programs were implemented to help American youth keep up with their counterparts around the world. However, researchers, such as, Ferguson (2003), Gutiérrez (2008), Ladson-Billings (2006), Lubienski (2008), Oakes et al. (2004) and Portes (2005), have uncovered what some are calling the education gap or the opportunity gap that exists in states across the country. The terms go hand in hand because the lack of education has been found to cause a decline in opportunity or the jobs that would be available to students. The “gap” represents or highlights the differences in education that exists between wealthier districts and low income districts. The goal of this research is to understand what the opportunity gap looks like in the classroom of an urban area and to understand what teachers are doing to address and close the gap in their classroom. The intent is to find solutions that teachers use to improve achievement in their classrooms and to present those findings in a concise manner that can be used or edited by all teachers in urban areas to help close the education or opportunity gap.

The main research questions were:

1) What factors perpetuate the educational gap and the "poor performance" cycle in impoverished urban areas from a teacher's perspective?

2) What self-reported methods are teachers using to close the gap in impoverished urban areas?

3) Based on teacher reports, what does the opportunity gap look like in the urban classroom?
Participants

The teachers, as research subjects, in my study were selected with the help of the principal at Focus on Collective Integrity (FCI) Academy in Columbus, Ohio. She suggested participants based on their experience and knowledge in the classroom. I was looking for qualities such as classroom management and expertise to select various teachers that I wanted to interview. After speaking with the principal, I approached the suggested teachers and asked if they would willingly participate in my research. I approached new and experienced teachers. I assumed all teachers could give me an insight into what the gap looks like in the classroom; even if, they may or may not have the concrete and tested answers to solutions that could help improve the gap in their area or across the nation currently. Ultimately, all opinions matter and can be used to construct a solution to the problem.

Research Design

The consent process with the teachers occurred before the interviews were conducted. I asked each teacher to participate in my study privately. Each teacher received a consent form that allowed them to read about my research. This was necessary, because I wanted to make sure all participants understood the goals, benefits and any foreseen discomforts that could be caused by participating in the research study. The teachers could agree or decline to participate after reading the consent form. All of the teachers were able to ask questions before we began the interview, as well. The teachers were given a survey when I initially spoke to them about participating in my research. I asked them to bring the completed survey back at the time of our scheduled interview. The survey questions helped the teachers understand the types of questions that I would ask during the interview. The participants were also informed that their personal information would be kept confidential and their name would not be used to track information.
Instrumentation

I developed my survey and interview questions by thinking about what I really wanted to know about teaching in an urban school setting. I had knowledge of growing up in an urban area, but not what it was like to teach in an urban classroom in an impoverished neighborhood. While growing up, I began to observe what I coined the “poor performance cycle”. The cycle I observed was one where students followed in the footsteps of their parents or parent. These parents might have not finished school, or were unemployed, went to prison, used drugs, or lived on government assistance. In turn, their children continued down the same path that their parents laid for them. I observed that for some reason, most students were unable to see past this path that had been laid to create a new one for themselves. I was interested to know if teachers could make such an impact in these students’ lives so that they could break the cycle and be more successful and begin to create a legacy for their family. This intrigued me more and more, because of the phrase “the American Dream”. I wondered why was it that foreigners from China, India, Nigeria, and South Africa could come here and start businesses and become entrepreneurs and Americans couldn’t break out of the poor neighborhoods and economic situations they were born into. Research led me to see that the term I coined the “poor performance cycle” had been documented before. For example, in the book, Is the Gap Between the rich and Poor Growing?” author Charles Morris highlights in his essay that “The children of the poor now tend to stay poor while the children of the rich tend to stay rich…” (Sims, 2006, p.50). This is a direct reflection of what I saw growing up.

This understanding led me to inquire more about how the classroom teacher was addressing the issues of the gap; since, education is the easiest way to overcome a disadvantage, according to Lang (2007). However, Lang (2007) also points out that higher poverty schools tend to have lower quality schools. This led me to question what factors teachers saw in their classrooms that seem to perpetuate the gap. I was guided to see if the research would match my results. Next, I began to think
about what methods or teaching strategies were helping teachers improve achievement. Some gap researchers give various suggestions to improve the gap, such as, proper wait time and feedback, examining cultural differences and applying various educational reforms (Ferguson, 2003; Portes, 2005). I wanted to hear from the teacher because the research I found never focused on teachers directly. Finally, I was interested in how the teachers perceived the gap in their classrooms. Delpit (2006) noticed in the 1970s that her African American students did not respond to a particular teaching approach in the same way her white students had previously. I wanted to know what teachers in this urban setting found that worked for their students to bring up achievement. From my research and inquiry, my research questions were formed.

**Procedures**

I handed out surveys to get a sense of how the teachers felt about teaching. Originally, the survey was meant to get them thinking about their teaching experience and the methods they use every day, before the interview took place. However, none of the teachers had the survey completed before the scheduled interviews. So, I conducted the interviews before they turned in the completed survey. The interview questions were aimed at getting to the heart of what it is like to teach in an urban classroom. From the research that I have compiled, it seemed as if these students are the students at risk and the ones that experience the repercussions of the education and opportunity gaps. So, my questions were designed to invoke what the teacher sees and faces every day and how they try to combat what they witness. Out of six interviewees, I only received three surveys back. This could have been due to the timing of the interviews (end of the school year). This led me to classify this research as a preliminary study on the subject. This study will be used guide future research.

After completing the interviews and gathering the surveys, I looked for any themes that appeared among the teachers. To do this, I use the method of coding to analyze the data. I began by
initially writing down what I remembered from the interviews and looking for the main themes that initially connected all of the interviews. Then, I listened to all of the interviews again. This time, I typed a rough transcript of what the interviewee said along with the questions that I asked during the interview. After this was done, I went through my documents to see what major themes stuck out. From here, I came up with a final list of commonalities that were present in most or all interviews.
Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Results

Findings

The original purpose of my research was to find out what the gap looked like in the urban classroom and what teachers were doing to close the gap. Through my interviews and the very few surveys I received I found that several factors affect the students in an urban school. Those factors were family life, resources and inconsistency in the home and school. As a result of my limited participants and survey collection, this study became an initial study that will guide future research.

My first research question was: What factors perpetuate the education gap and the "poor performance" cycle in impoverished urban areas? The factors that seemed to come up in almost every interview were the fact that many students come from single parent homes, lack of resources, the misappropriation of funds, lack of services given to needy students, and inconsistency in and out of school. My findings are based on what teachers expressed that they saw daily or what they felt was difficult to handle on their own as classroom teachers.

When I coined the term, "poor performance" cycle, I was thinking of the role that the family played on the education of the child. Five out of six participants observed that parental involvement was a key factor to how the students behaved or conducted themselves in class. Teacher S observed that she had the most productive class when she had high parental involvement through the use of notebooks that allowed her to communicate with the parents and the parents to communicate with her. She also observed that when students were shuffled around midyear that she lost parental involvement and that her class productivity declined. Teacher S also noticed that home life played a major role in how well her students performed in class as well. She spoke of one student that was recently separated from his father and was being used as a weapon against his father by his mother. This student
continuously acted out in class and lashed out at female figures in the school, because he was angry with his mother and missed his father. A large majority of these students had unstable home lives.

Teacher J observed that most students in her class were from single parent homes and that her students struggled to complete homework at home. Most of her students would come home to their older siblings and would go outside and “play” after school. Teacher J spoke of a student that always turned in her homework, but never did well on classroom assignments. She found out the student’s sixteen year old sister was completing the homework for the student. The older sister thought she was helping when she was really hurting her little sister academically.

Teacher T observed that two of her students were homeless by the end of the year. A handful of her students were forced to come to school with dirty clothes or clothes that were too small, due to family economic status. She observed that it would be hard to focus on your school work, if you are wondering where you are going to sleep later that night. She also had students that were in the middle of a battle between their parents, as well.

It is important to point out that not all of the single parent homes produced children that exhibited behavior issues or lack of focus in class. Teacher J spoke of a few students whose mothers were single moms, but very organized and made sure that their children were neat and stayed on top of their school work. It is also important to point out that while family life doesn’t always have to affect a student’s behavior or productivity in class, it definitely seems to have an effect on most.

The next major factor that came up often was the lack of resources all of the participants I spoke with spoke of a lack of resources. These resources ranged from no set curriculum guide for the teachers to use to no books or lab equipment. Every teacher noted that they did not have books for their students to use at the beginning of the school year. For teachers that taught younger grades, that still needed to improve their reading skills, there was no curriculum to help them improve those skills.
What factor that I found astonishing was that in some rooms there were class sets of books with no teacher’s manual or a teacher’s manual with no matching set of books. The books were often outdated, as well. The classrooms had one computer in it mainly for the teachers to use. There were no Smartboards or Chromebooks for these students to use in class. Some teachers had overhead projectors. However, if the bulb broke, then the overhead was out of service. Teacher C spoke of how the science equipment was out of date and how he didn’t have enough for all of his students to use materials without sharing. He also didn’t have a proper lab facility to conduct experiments with sinks and lab tables and stools. The lack of resources hindered the students from learning to the best of their ability. Currently in the teaching field, Twenty First Century Skills is a common phrase. Unfortunately, these students in this school district aren’t necessarily learning these skills. These students aren’t learning to be digitally literate and without certain resources they may not learn how to be inventive thinkers. The lack of resources leads into the misappropriation of funds that occurred at this school.

The next major issue that every teacher mentioned was that Title I services were not being provided, even though money for Title I was being given to the school. Title I services are in place to help students that struggle with math and reading, who need extra help get it in a one-on-one setting. Midyear, district leaders hired a lead teacher that was also the Title I coordinator. All of the participants I interviewed thought that, as the lead teacher and Title I coordinator, she should be able to help other teachers improve classroom management and work with struggling students one-on-one. However, she informed the staff that it was not her job to work with the students—only to order materials that the teachers requested. Therefore, the responsibility was completely left on the shoulders of the teachers to try and help a classroom full of struggling students. Without this extra help the students that could have improved were left to fall further and further behind. Every teacher I interviewed stated that their students were below average or below grade level. These students needed
these services. Money was being given to the district for Title I services, but no services were being
given to the students.

The last issue was inconsistency. Teacher C pointed out that consistency was important for his
students to be able to succeed. After speaking to him, I realized that all of the participants had
mentioned some form of inconsistency in school or in the home. Teacher T played a major role in the
inconsistency that the students faced at school. She did not intend for certain situations to arise
throughout the year; however, Teacher T and her students has to contend with some obstacles. First,
Teacher T was not the teacher of record at the beginning of the school year; she began teaching her
students around November. Next, in the spring, around March or April, she had a death in the family
that resulted in her missing about three weeks of school. So, as a result of these incidents, students
were forced to adjust to new teachers three times in the school year. It should be mentioned that the
students made this adjustment for Teacher T’s class and many students also made at least one or two
adjustments in other classes. The students had a music teacher that passed away in her home over the
weekend in the early spring semester, as well. Various teachers left the school or were let go during
the fall and spring semesters. Many students’ family life was reported to be inconsistent due to
custody agreements among parents or break ups. Teacher J spoke of one student that lived with her
grandmother during the week and on some weekends she would stay with her mother. There was one
particular day that this student spent the night with her mother on a Sunday night. The mother didn’t
set a certain bedtime for her daughter and kept her daughter up really late. As a result, the little girl
was so tired that she was falling asleep in class on Monday. This little girl was so excited to be with
her mom that nothing else mattered. Sadly, her mom did not seem to realize the importance of a good
night’s sleep. Teachers reported that several students were used as weapons to attempt to hurt the
other parent. This type of behavior led to sometimes violent incidents of acting out or in one case
what seemed to be the early stages of depression. There were also incidents of students becoming
suicidal due to the actions of their parents. One third grader expressed to her teacher that if she did not come to school the next day, then she would be dead. This was because of a recent break-up between her mom and dad. Her dad moved to Cleveland and she wasn’t able to see him often. She was also being bullied because of the color of her skin. She was biracial--- white and African American. This little girl lost her support system in her father and she was being picked on because she had a white mother. The administrator had to step in and find some help for this student, because many people were concerned that she might harm herself.

Next, I wanted to find out what methods were teachers using to help close the gap in their classrooms. This question became what methods helped bring up achievement in the classroom. Most teachers talked about using small groups to allow more one-on-one time with students, hands-on learning activities and in some cases kinesthetic activities. One teacher mentioned that he would like to purchase his own resources to help his students’ improve their achievement. One teacher also mentioned that being consistent and setting clear goals also helps students increase achievement. The bottom line to these teachers’ approaches to their classroom was that the teacher should never give up on the student. Each class is different and what may work for one class may not work in another. However, the glue that held these classrooms together was that all of the teachers did their best with the situation at hand and kept their heads held high to help their students. I was looking for a particular answer to what teaching method helped the students the most. Instead, I think I found what type of teacher helps the students the most. These teachers need resources and basic supplies to help these students and the students need well maintained facilities, but everyone in this building puts their head down and they work as hard as they can to make some improvement where ever they can.

My final question was geared towards finding out what the opportunity gap looked like in the classroom. This became what did the gap look like or what do urban classrooms look like in impoverished areas? My initial findings were that it resembles the family and home life of the
students, if there isn’t a set of rules in place that allow the students to know what is expected of them while at school. It must be noted that more research is needed to come to a more concrete conclusion. More data should be collected in a more extensive study to really begin to pinpoint this conclusion.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

Findings

Based on my initial research questions, I found specific factors that most of my participants agreed upon or were common throughout my interviews. I found that factors, such as, single parent homes, lack of resources, the misappropriation of funds, lack of services given to needy students, and inconsistency in and out of school seem to perpetuate the gap. Next, I found that teachers are using methods like small groups and hands-on and kinesthetic learning activities to help students improve their achievement. Finally, I concluded a preliminary finding on what the gap looks like in the classroom to be that it resembles the family or home life of the students in a particular school. More extensive research needs to be compiled to be able to reach a concrete and final conclusion for this question.

Interpretation of Results

After compiling research and conducting the interviews with the participants in my research, I have concluded that the gap is closely tied to poverty status or socioeconomic status of the students in a particular school. This school was in an impoverished neighborhood and most families seemed to have a lower socio-economic status. The school itself was older and did not have various resources and facilities that the students and teachers needed to thrive. All of the participants expressed that their students were below average on test scores or well below grade level. This data supports my initial hypothesis that students in impoverished areas would have lower achievement scores and attend poorer quality schools. I also found methods that helped most teachers improve their students’ achievement throughout the year. Throughout this process, I stumbled upon a key factor that I had not
anticipated--- the teacher who never gives up. I found that it was the drive and perseverance that these teachers had that really made a difference in their students’ achievement.

**Limitations**

The limitations to this research were the limited pool of participants in this study, location of research, and ethnicity of participants. I conducted interviews with six participants and only received three surveys out of eight that were handed out. As a result, this became a preliminary study that can be used as a starting point for future research on this topic. Another limitation was the location where the research took place. I only interviewed participants at one school in a particular district. This could result in some bias. Also, I was only able to interview African Americans. The white teachers were not available for interviews. This limited the viewpoints that I received in this initial study, as well.

**Implications**

Research has shown that income mobility in the US, or the ability to move from one income bracket to another easily, is very difficult to overcome (Lang, 2007). As a result, the students that grow up in low income families must work extremely hard to try and overcome the hurdles placed in front of them to obtain a better life for themselves and their family. The book “Is the Gap between the Rich and Poor Growing?” highlights that the way to overcome disadvantages is through education; however, the education in high poverty areas tends to be less adequate than its’ wealthier counterparts (2007).

The gap and poverty seem to be closely related. More research needs to be conducted to pinpoint which one is causing the other or if poverty and the gap are the result of another source all together. I believe the best way to improve the gap and the income mobility stagnancy in the US is for the US Department of Education to invest more money in schools in higher poverty areas. This
money can’t be spent strictly on programs to manage students; it needs to be spent on programs that will help the teachers, students, and the community get the education they need and deserve. I suggest that this support should be in the form of positive team building events with coworkers to foster a positive work environment, useful and effective professional development that is geared towards the teacher’s needs, and in class support such as intervention specialists, aides, or paraprofessionals.

Ultimately, more research is needed to form concrete opinions on how to end the gap, what perpetuates the gap, what works to build achievement and what the gap looks like every day in the classroom.
References


This We Believe: Keys to educating young adolescents. (2010). Westerville, Ohio: National middle School Association.


Appendix A

Thank you for participating in this survey. I will use the information you provide in my research on the educational or opportunity gap. My research aims to look at the views of teachers in an urban area. All information will be kept anonymous.

Survey

1. What is the main factor that keeps you in the teaching profession?

2. What--- if anything--- do you think is your student’s biggest hurdle when it comes to achievement?

3. What have you found to be the most helpful teaching method(s) for your students’ success in the classroom?

4. What is one piece of advice you would share with a new teacher to help them improve achievement quickly? Why?
Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. What brought you into the teaching profession?
2. What is your teaching philosophy?
3. What brought you to this school or community?
4. How long have you been teaching?
5. What have you noticed about your students over the years?
6. Are there any trends that you have noticed?
7. Do you think there are any specific traits that you can say are common among your students?
8. What keeps you coming back year after year?
9. How would you classify your students' achievement?
10. What do you think affects their achievement?
11. What have you found helps students improve?
12. How much do you do until you leave it up to your students?
13. Have you ever looked at how your students compare to students in other districts?
14. What did you find?
15. What do you think causes the differences?
16. How do you try to make a difference with your students to try and reduce these differences?
17. What do think needs to happen to alleviate the differences?
18. What teaching methods do you use the most with your students?
19. What have you found to be the most successful technique?
20. In your opinion what needs to change to improve achievement?
Appendix C

A determination has been made that the following research study is exempt from IRB review because it involves:

Category 2 - research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior

Project Title: Ending the "Gap"

Primary Investigator: Tahnesha Anyik

Co-Investigator(s):

Advisor: Ralph Martin

Department: Teacher Education

Robin Stack, CIP, Human Subjects Research Coordinator
Office of Research Compliance

Date: May 14, 2015

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
Appendix D

Plagiarism report

0% of non-unique content
Content appears in 0 internet pages

Sources:

Amount of matching content

Full Text

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine what the educational gap looked like in an urban impoverished classroom and what