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Understanding the Factors that Challenge Students Below the Poverty Level in a Large Suburban Middle School Setting

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research study was to understand the factors that challenge students below the poverty level in a large suburban middle school setting and to develop strategies to close the opportunity gap for low socio-economic students.

Participants and data collected in Cycle 1 consisted of 7 interviews with educational professionals and 257 student surveys at a large suburban middle school setting. Action steps including a parent survey and focus group that was designed, implemented, and evaluated in Cycle 2 to help bridge the gap between the school and home setting. Findings included a disconnect between the school and home setting on the meaning of parental involvement and the understanding of the multi-layered barriers faced by many in the community as indicated by parents. Implications for the organization included more guidance and information on low-income students in the community. There was a consensus among the focus group that parental involvement and engagement is set forth and maintained by the parents and school as a team. The tools needed for success are stronger communication strategies and more opportunities for parents to feel safe and welcomed in the school environment.

Keywords: opportunity gap, low-income students, academic achievement, the role of poverty in education, Title I

Introduction

The opportunity gap that exists in the educational system is substantial and has created many barriers for students of low income (Miretzky et al., 2016). The opportunity framework examines the societal, school, and community inputs that create the lack of opportunity and educational outcomes for low-income students (Carter & Welner, 2013). Recent reports from the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP; Koball & Jiang, 2018) have found that among all children under 18 years in the United States, 39% are low-income children, and 19%—approximately one in five—are poor. This means that children are overrepresented among the nation's poor. Notably, they represent 23% of the population but comprise 32% of all people in poverty. In Massachusetts, statistics show that for children under the age of 18,

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13% are poor, and 28% are low income. Furthermore, academic achievement numbers are low for the children of families who struggle to meet their basic needs, and more children live in families with incomes just above the poverty threshold (Koball & Jiang, 2018, paragraph 3).

As an administrator in a public-school setting, the researcher understands that many factors can contribute to poor academic performance. However, poverty is a significant contributor, as is evidenced by the literature review, statistics (NCCP; Koball & Jiang, 2018) and personal experiences. For example, as a middle school administrator, some dialogue with students can be daunting and surprising (e.g., "I missed the bus and couldn't get to school"; "I don't have money for project supplies", or "I'm hungry"). As such, it is evident that parents with no transportation, children not being able to concentrate or behave due to hunger, or children acting out in the classroom due to family circumstances outside of their control (e.g., no money for school supplies and clothes, and no access to space to do homework) are serious concerns that stem from families with an income below the poverty line. Thus, administrators and teachers can plan interventions from the action research study to prevent students from falling victim to circumstances outside of their control.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this action research study was to understand the factors that challenge students below the poverty level in a middle school setting. By evaluating students in a public-school setting, one can better understand closing the opportunity gap. Administrators and teachers can plan interventions from the results of the action research study to prevent students from falling victim to circumstances outside of their control.

Research Questions

The overarching research questions that this research study aims to answer include the following:

1) What kind of experiences and conversations do school professionals have with students of low income?
2) How are students most impacted by poverty?
3) What interventions have made the biggest impact when helping students of low income?

To help guide the study and successfully answer the overarching questions, subsidiary questions will focus on information from the literature. These sets of questions will be addressed to the professionals at the subject site and students who will partake in a survey.

Context

The middle school of interest is located south of Boston. According to the mission statement, the middle school is committed to providing an academically excellent, developmentally responsive, socially equitable, and respectful environment that is supportive for all students' learning and growth. To achieve lifelong learners, the vision statement states that the middle school students will acquire knowledge, social and emotional skills, and growth mindsets necessary to succeed in college and their careers and be prepared to tackle and solve

the most important problems in the local and global community. To accomplish this task, three strategic levers are applied to the philosophy of the school: professional learning focused on the instructional core, effective use of data, and parent and community engagement. The total enrollment for the school is 885 students. The demographic breakdown of enrollment by race is as follows: 67.3% White, 14% Hispanic, 7.4% African American, 6.6% Asian, and 4.4% multi-race non-Hispanic. Students reported as economically disadvantaged are 37.7% compared to the state's 36.6% (see Table 1).

Table 1: *Demographic Breakdown of Enrollment*

White	67.3%
Hispanic	14%
African American	7.4%
Asian	6.6%
Multi-Race-Non-Hispanic	4.4%
Economically Disadvantaged	37.7% (compared to the state at 36.6%)

The middle school of interest recently became a Title I school. Title 1 federal funding is giving to school communities with the highest concertation of poverty. These funds are used to assist them to reach their educational goals. At the middle school of interest, all students are eligible to receive extra support in English Language Arts (ELA) and math content areas due to their status. Participants in the action research included administrators, teachers, school counselors, and students. Stakeholders included the school district, administrators, teachers, parents, and students.

Methods

Action Research Methodology

Brydon-Miller et al. (2003) stated that action research is grounded in a participatory worldview. It is a democratic process with the intention of developing a procedure that includes action and reflection, theory and practice, and developing solutions to issues that increase connectedness to the community. More importantly, action research rejects the notion of an objective, value-free approach to knowledge. The social engagement and democratic processes are critical components of this method. Stringer (2014) stated that the characteristics of action research are: (a) democratic, enabling participation of all people, (b) equitable, acknowledging people's equality of worth, (c) liberating, providing freedom from oppressive conditions, and (d) life-enhancing, enabling the expression of people's full human potential.

The researcher is a scholar-practitioner who engages in leadership for the purpose of social advocacy. Short and Shindell (2009) stated that in the process of defining a scholar-practitioner they have come across keywords such as "evaluators of change" that help to define the role. Overall, the scholar-practitioner has many opportunities to be an agent of change and spark interest in and attention to their topic of choice. van der Meulen (2011) asserted that in action research, individuals and groups in these positions must have their experiences and voices heard so that it does not simply become a methodology that is loaded with principles but short on practices. Participatory action research involves researchers and participants

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working together to understand a problematic situation and change it for the better. This effortlessly fits into the traditions of qualitative research due to the structure and focus of the participant and the attention of how and why something works to build understanding. Another important feature of action research and its relationship to qualitative research is the practice of critical subjectivity. According to Ladkin (2005), critical subjectivity encourages inquirers to notice the particular frames of reference they bring to any inquiry arena, including, among others, their political, racial, cultural, or gendered orientation. It is essential to view the entire context for real change to begin.

Poverty affects many domains of life. The researcher has worked with many students where poverty plays a significant role in their lives. Action research was an appropriate vehicle to explore the researcher's problem of practice because of the emphasis that is placed on being an agent of change. The agent of change is one who brings social justice to the forefront. The point of social advocacy is the attainment of justice for exploited, dominated, and marginalized people and communities. The foundation of being an agent of change helped frame the researcher's questions, as the researcher sought to understand the conversations that were happening in the school setting, the barriers professionals were witnessing, and the interventions that were best suited to close the opportunity gap for low-income students. Further evaluation of educational professionals and students in the research will promote an understanding of poverty and its relationship to the opportunity gap. Administrators, teachers, and community members can plan interventions from the results of the action research study to prevent students from falling victim to circumstances outside of their control.

Cycle 1: Data Collection

The interview portion of the study was designed to include 5–10 educational professionals working in the school system with professional status (i.e., more than 3 years in the field) and holding a master's degree. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) educational professionals including administrators such as the principal and assistant principals, teachers, and school counselors, (b) male and female participants, (c) professional status (i.e., more than 3 years in the field), and (d) currently employed in the school setting. The exclusion criteria were not holding professional status (i.e., new professionals) and professionals not employed in the school setting. Seven interviews that lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour were conducted.

The student survey portion of the study was quantitative in design, with information gathered from factual information and measures of individual attitude. The dependent variable was academic performance, and the independent variable was poverty. In defining the major characteristics of a quantitative research study, Creswell (2019) included the following key points of a quantitative approach:

1. Describes a research problem through trends.
2. Literature plays a major role in the study and creates a need for the direction.
3. Research questions and hypotheses are measurable.
4. Uses instruments with preset questions and collects data from a large population.
5. Compares groups and interprets results by comparing them with past research and then writing the report in an unbiased presentation.

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The survey was designed to include 100–300 student participants in the middle school setting. As stated, the inclusion criteria were (a) middle school students, (b) boys and girls, (c) age range: 11–13 years old (grades 6–7), and (d) participants utilizing the free lunch program were students identified as low income. The exclusion criterion was any student younger than 11 years old. To further investigate the impact of poverty on students of low income in the survey, students who did not qualify for free lunch and on the higher end of the socio-economic bracket were also examined to gain further insight into the comparative differences in each domain. The researcher received 128 surveys completed by low-income students and 129 surveys completed by students that were not identified as low income. The total was 257 student surveys. The survey questions were designed based on the domains that emerged in the literature: academics, behavior, familial, social status and climate, and free lunch program. There were three questions in each domain, totaling 15 questions.

Cycle 1: Data Analysis

Regarding the interviews, the researcher chose to hand-code the transcripts, as the researcher felt this would strengthen the connection to the participant and the overall research process. In addition, the researcher focused on in vivo coding. Saldaña (2016) stated, "in vivo coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data, and studies that prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (p. 48). The researcher was interested in honoring the participants' voice. Since the problem of practice was focused on low-income students, a subgroup significantly placed at a disadvantage and rarely heard, this style of processing was deemed most appropriate and important for the overall project.

Saldaña (2016) further stated that a code represents and captures a datum's primary content and essence. The codes the researcher chose in the process are descriptive codes that summarized the interviewees' responses to the questions. For example, some coded words that emerged were "housing issues" and "attendance." These codes were later organized into categories. According to Saldaña (2016), "coding enables you to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or 'families' because they share some characteristic—the beginning of a pattern" (p. 8). In the end, the themes that emerged were "experience," "barriers," "resources," and "active steps." The experience theme refers to the participants' identification and description of experiences related to students of low income, either personally or professionally. The barrier to success theme refers to the participants' view of the factors that challenge students of low income. The resources' theme refers to the participants' knowledge of resources currently available to students of low income. The active step's theme refers to what school personnel can do to actively get involved in identifying and helping students of low income. From the action steps, another group of themes emerged that helped the researcher conclude what interventions were effective for helping low-income students from falling victim to circumstances outside of their control.

Experience

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In regard to the experience theme, one participant stated, "When I first started teaching in public school, in Corona, Queens, the level of poverty was really something I had not experienced before." The experience theme is important as it lends insight into the first research question about the educational personnel's knowledge, experience, and conversations with students of low income. For that participant, the experience was "overwhelming". In addition, another participant stated, "I had one student tell me he was living in a shelter. I was in shock." These participant experiences coincide with the literature, as teachers are not provided with enough resources, preparation, or professional development to fully grasp the internal and external issues of low-income students caused by the opportunity gap. The current pandemic has led to further experiences with low-income students. As one participant stated, "During the pandemic, I delivered lunches to the homes of students on the free lunch program. It was eye-opening. It made me realize that we have to put ourselves in their shoes and figure out what their normal is."

In regard to personal stories or issues, one participant stated, "I've had the first-hand experiences of feeling less than, or out of the crowd because we were poor. My mother made my clothes. Early on, I realized what the other students had and I didn't." School personnel, some of whom have even experienced the first-hand impact of living in poverty, are having conversations with students of low income. However, limited resources and the lack of in-depth knowledge of the internal and external challenges for low-income students are real barriers (Gorski, 2008).

Barriers

The barriers to success theme refer to the participants' interpretation of the factors that challenge students of low income. Participants gave insight into barriers, such as attendance issues, food insecurities, familial setting and social capital. This theme provided information for the second research question (i.e., how are students most impacted by poverty?). One participant stated:

The impact of housing insecurity, food insecurity, and the lack of resources is real. I witnessed how that impacted students to a point where they didn't feel like they could continue at the middle/high school level and dropped out. This is where I became aware that students can't learn if they don't have food.…It was a point in my career where I was able to get to know a few students very closely who really explained what it was like to be going day one, day two without food or to be trying to figure out where they were going to sleep.

In addition, one participant stated, "I have experienced difficulty with attendance issues because if they are living in a shelter or if their shelter situation changes, it can be really tough to locate the student and family." During these instances, the teacher's ability to connect to those students decline. The teacher-student relationship is impacted. In other examples, transportation was a significant issue, as one participant stated, "We have a lot of families in this district that don't have a car. With that said, even just asking parents to come to the building for a meeting is a disadvantage." In regard to the familial setting, one participant stated:

One of the things that I realized about the parent or the adult at home, if his or her prior experience at a school system was negative this can even deeply impact their child's experience. You come with the assumption that a child would be ready to learn and that a parent will support their kid but this is hard due to their circumstances.

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As one participant stated:

Mostly because their parents are working and their parents weren't necessarily brought up to have school as a priority but because they have to work to be able to put food on the table and clothes on their back. They are working two jobs or 12-hour shifts and they're not home in the morning to get their kids up and out the door.

In regard to social capital, one participant stated:

If they don't fit that social cue, that social image, they can really look at themselves differently. It can even go down to having the right or coolest notebook, Kids perseverate on it, what they don't have compared to what other kids have. It's detrimental to their education.

All of the information coincided with multiple domains that were identified in the literature. In this study, the themes of the school setting, social, and community inputs were examined with an understanding of the opportunity gap (Carter & Welner, 2013). Academic testing and grades are no longer a sufficient lens to determine academic achievement. The opportunity is not equal. The inability to pay for school supplies, tutoring and test-preparation services impact grades. A student's inability to get to school due to transportation or living situations impacts their relationship with their teacher and other peers. The disconnect between parents and school due to unclear expectations of parental involvement and difficulty connecting with the school team impacts the relationship between the school and home setting. The school setting, social and community inputs are significant domains that determine opportunities and success. With that said, low-income students face many barriers in these domains impacting their circumstances.

Resources/Active Steps

The resources' theme refers to the participants' knowledge of resources currently available to students of low income at the research site or knowledge they found effective in their career. One participant was able to acknowledge on-site resources such as "counselors," "free lunch program," and "parental connections." This theme helped with the third research question (i.e., what interventions have made the biggest impact when helping students of low income?).

The active step's theme refers to what school personnel can do to actively get involved in identifying and helping students of low income. Participants were able to identify the following: "Teachers need to meet to discuss their students," "better communication with parents," and "teachers can look for signs: do they have fresh clothes, are well-groomed? Are they hungry a lot?" This coincides with the literature as there has been an increase in support in the creation of professional learning community's (PLC), parent teacher organizations (PTO) with community input, importance of the teacher-student relationship and parental involvement.

Ultimately, parental involvement strengthens the gap and partnership between the school and home setting. Parental involvement is related to a host of student achievement indicators, including better grades, attendance, attitudes, expectations, homework completion, and state test results (Smith, 2009). The importance of a healthy relationship between the school and home setting was a significant topic that reoccurred in all participants during the interview process. As one participant stated, "the bridge between the school and home has to be there or else communication will suffer. Parents need to know we are a team." However,

there is a strong disconnect between what is needed by whom and when. As one participant stated, "the expectations are not really defined and it's hard to communicate that sometimes with a parent"

However, despite all the barriers, school personnel do find alternative solutions to try to connect with parents. As one participant stated:

I understand that we all have different things happening in our lives or a parent might work two jobs. So that is why I have to change it up. That might be talking to parents on the weekends, that might be talking during a different time of the day.
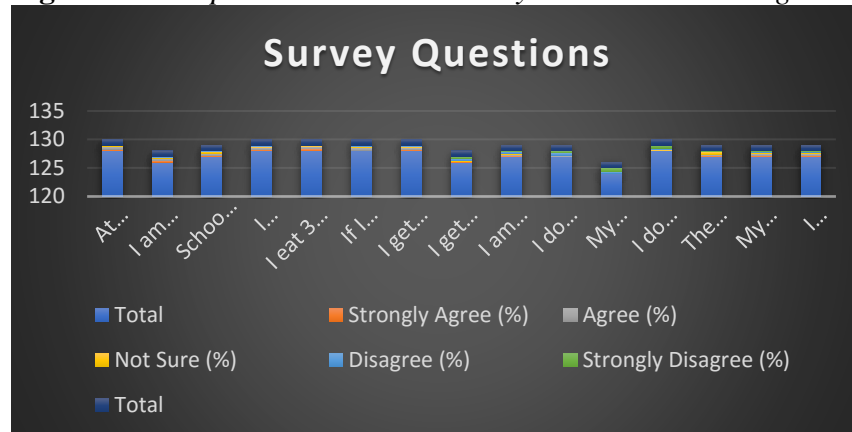
In addition, another participant stated, "I found texting parents works really well because people are much more apt to check their texts than their emails or to answer an unknown phone number."

Along with participant interviews, the student survey data was another tool used to gauge the hardships of low-income students as explored in the researcher's preliminary literature review. The following domains were assessed in the Likert scale questionnaire: academics, lunch, behavior, familial and social setting. To further investigate the impact of poverty on students of low income in the survey, students who did not qualify for free lunch and on the higher end of the socioeconomic bracket were also examined to gain further insight into the comparative differences in each domain. The researcher received 128 surveys completed by low-income students and 129 surveys completed by students that were not identified as low income. The total was 257 student surveys. Regarding low-income students, 51 sixth-grade and 77 seventh-grade ($n = 128$) students completed the survey. Regarding gender, the breakdown included 60 males, 62 females, three non-binary, and three not providing an answer ($n = 128$). Regarding race, 54% identified as non-Hispanic White, 13% African American, and 20% Latino American. With regard to students who did not represent a low-income population, there were 32 sixth-grade and 97 seventh-grade ($n = 129$) students who completed the survey. Concerning gender, the breakdown included 60 males, 67 females, and two that did not respond. Regarding ethnicity, 85% identified as non-Hispanic White, 7% African American, and 10% Latino American.

Concerning academics, when asked: "At home, I have access to all materials needed to be successful at school (e.g., books, writing tools, desk with lighting, computer)," 30% of the students of low income responded strongly agree compared to their counterparts at 47%. Regarding the lunch domain, when asked: "If I don't eat lunch in school, my next meal will be dinner (do not include snacks)," 13% of the students of low income responded strongly agree compared to their counterparts at 28%. Regarding the behavior domain, when asked: "I get easily frustrated by school work I don't understand," 23% of the students of low income responded strongly agree compared to their counterparts at 14%. Regarding the familial domain, when asked: "My parents or guardians do not have access to a car," 65% of the students of low income responded strongly disagree compared to their counterparts at 75%. Finally, in regard to the social domain, when asked: "I make friends very easy," 16% of the students of low income responded strongly agree compared to their counterparts at 17%. Figures A1 and A2 detail the complete questions and answers.

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Figure A1: *Responses to Student Survey: Students Receiving Free Lunch*

Figure A2: *Responses to Student Survey: Students Not Receiving Free Lunch*
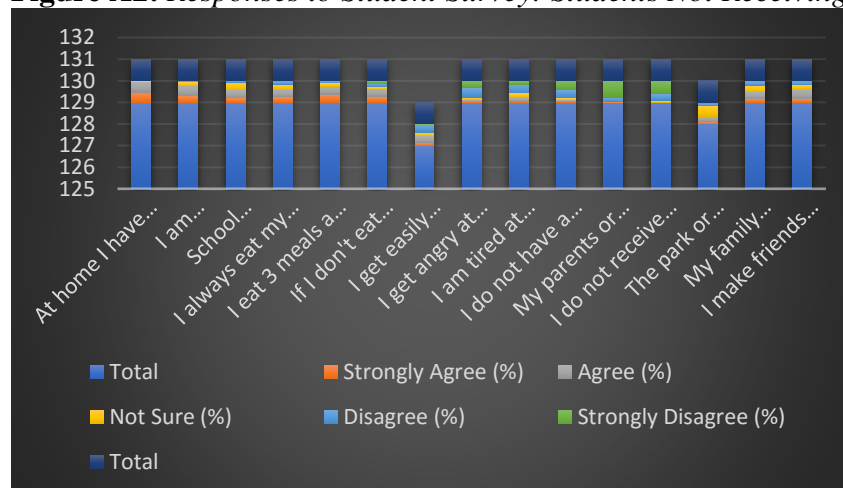
Cycle 2: Data Collection

The parent survey portion of Cycle 2 was obtained from the following source: "Test-Retest Reliability of the Parent and School Survey (PASS)," by M. Ringenberg, V. Funk, K. Mullen, A. Wilford, and J. Kramer, 2005, *The School Community Journal*, *15*(2), pp. 121–134. Copyright (2005) by Academic Development Institute.

All parents of the middle school were asked to participate in the study. In Section 1 of the parent survey, there were 22 questions utilizing a Likert scale questionnaire with the following options: "strongly agree," "agree," "neutral," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." Section 2 of the survey also utilized a Likert scale questionnaire but focused on the barriers that make parental involvement in the school community difficult. The answer options included "a lot," "some," and "not an issue." There was one open-ended question, which asked parents to help define parental involvement and what was needed to bridge the gap between the home and school setting. Only 74 responses were returned via Google forms.

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The focus group portion of the study was designed to include 5–8 educational professionals working at the middle school. Seven educational professionals were able to participate in the focus group. The participants included two administrators, three teachers, and two school adjustment counselors. The focus group lasted for about 75 minutes. The researcher used the data and information obtained from the survey to help facilitate and develop a shared understanding of parental involvement and incorporate short- and long-term goals to bridge the gap between the home and school setting. Ultimately, the community will connect the importance of parental involvement for low-income students and the plethora of benefits from the engagement.

Following a successful dissertation proposal defense, IRB amendment approval, and a greenlight from the school district, the researcher utilized a validated parent survey with the intentions of gathering information from middle school parents where results were later used to facilitate a focus group of educational professionals to create a shared understanding of parental involvement and incorporate short- and long-term goals to help bridge the gap between the home and school setting.

In May and June, a survey draft was sent to the three main administrators at the site in addition to two teachers and counselors to solicit feedback. The overall response was positive and the only major changes involved the data capturing around demographics.

In early September, the final survey was distributed to parents of the middle school community via Google forms. Only 74 responses were returned. In mid-October, the researcher closed the online survey and began to disaggregate the data. The researcher used the data and information obtained from the survey to help facilitate a focus group consisting of school personnel to develop a shared understanding of parental involvement and incorporate short- and long-term goals to bridge the gap between the home and school setting.

On October 20th, the researcher conducted the focus group with seven educational professionals. The participants included two administrators, three teachers, and two school adjustment counselors. The focus group lasted for about 75 minutes.

Cycle 2: Data Analysis

Regarding the parent survey, the researcher received 74 responses. Please refer to Table A3 for the demographic breakdown of the parent survey by race and Table A4 by socioeconomic status, which was determined by their participation in the free lunch program.

Table A3: *Demographic Breakdown of Parent Survey by Race*

Race	Percentage
White	80.8%
Hispanic	4.1%
African American	8.2%
Asian	1.4%
Multi-Race-Non-Hispanic	1.4%

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Table A4: *Demographic Breakdown of Parent Survey by Socioeconomic Status*

Do you qualify for free lunch?	
Yes – 29.7%	**No** – 70.3%

Concerning the school domain of the parent survey, when asked, "I feel very comfortable visiting my child's school," the following responses were given: 50% strongly agree, 33.8% agree, 13.5% neutral, and 2.7% disagree. When asked, "Talking with my child's teacher makes me uncomfortable," the following responses were given: 55.4% strongly disagree, 31.1% disagree, 9.5% neutral, and 4.1% agree. When asked, "I have visited my child's school or virtually attended all parent-teacher conferences in the past year," the following responses were given: 63.5% strongly agree, 23% agree, 9.5% disagree, and 4.1% neutral. The responses shed light on the comfort level of the parents and indicates a need for a more welcoming environment. Mitchall and Jaeger (2018) found that many parents from low-income or racially, ethnically, or linguistically diverse communities may not feel welcome in the schools or have no idea how to navigate the school setting.

Concerning the home setting domain of the parent survey, when asked, "I don't understand the assignments my child brings home," the following responses were given: 36.5% disagree, 28.4% strongly disagree, 24.3% neutral, 8.1% agree, and 2.7% strongly agree. When asked, "If my child was having trouble in school, I would not know how to get extra help for him/her," the following responses were given: 32.4% strongly disagree, 21.6% disagree, 21.6% agree, 13.5% strongly agree, and 10.8% neutral. When asked, "I always know how well my child is doing in school," the following responses were given: 37.8% agree, 25.7% strongly agree, 24.3% neutral, and 12.2% disagree. The responses provide some significant insight as some parents need more communication around their child's engagement in school and parents also need assistance in identifying sources of support.

Concerning the barriers portion of the parent survey, when asked, "if the time of the program or event was a barrier", the following responses were given: 55.4% some, 25.7% not an issue, and 18.9% a lot. When asked, "if lack of time was a barrier", the following responses were given: 44.6% some, 28.4% a lot, and 27% not an issue. When asked, "if their work schedule was a barrier", the following responses were given: 44.6% some, 28.4% a lot, and 27% not an issue. When asked, "if transportation was a barrier", the following responses were given: 84.9% not an issue, 9.6% some, and 5.5% a lot. When asked, "if small children were a barrier", the following responses were given: 75.7% not an issue, 13.5% some, and 10.8% a lot. Low-income families face additional challenges that make involvement more difficult. The inability to take time off from work, secure childcare, or arrange transportation are severe obstacles that take resources and time (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018).

In regard to the open-ended question, when parents were asked how they define parental involvement and what is needed to improve engagement, there were various responses. Parent 1 stated:

Communication, it is not always made accessible either due to late notice, lack of options, or lack of advertising. Things seem to be mostly via word of mouth or Facebook so if you don't know people or don't use social media, you can miss things.

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Parent 2 stated, "I need more communication with school staff. Work is hard to get involved." Parent 3 stated, "Minimal due to working and studying myself all the time, trying to improve our situation. It's made worse by a massive volume of school spam making it hard to find important info and multiple systems."

In regard to the focus group, it was designed to include 5–8 educational professionals working at the middle school. Seven educational professionals were able to participate in the focus group. The participants included two administrators, three teachers, and two school adjustment counselors. The focus group lasted for about 75 minutes. The researcher used the data and information obtained from the survey to help facilitate and develop a shared understanding of parental involvement and incorporate short- and long-term goals to bridge the gap between the home and school setting. The participants were first asked to participate in a personal self-reflection and were asked, "How do you define parental involvement in the school community? What are your expectations? What is needed to bridge the gap between the home and school setting?" After the study, they were asked how their thinking changed. Teacher 1 stated:

I thought the results provided great information, but made me reflect on current practices, and what role I can play to increase parent engagement at school. One parent's response struck me in that he/she referred to the volume of emails and possibly trying to condense information. Also trying to suggest resources parents may find helpful to provide their child with curriculum, social emotional support. The thinking process of putting myself in their shoes, I will try to provide more evening, non-threatening opportunities throughout the school year for families to come to the school.

Teacher 2 stated:

My definition for parent involvement is similar to what I said initially. Parent involvement is something that happens when a school creates a safe space for all families. I believe that parent involvement should go both ways, and I believe that it is on the school, teachers, admin, etc. to initiate that communication. As a teacher, I expect a parent to read information that is being sent home and respond if necessary. Going off of that, I hope parents know that I, too, will read any communication being sent my way, and I will also respond within 24 hours. Communication should cover both positive and negative events that are going on in the student's life in school. The survey was great to see. It allows me to be more empathetic as a teacher and have a better idea as to where all of my students are coming from. I definitely think specific positive communication is key to creating a solid relationship with families. I think we need to get better at creating a welcoming environment for all families.

Collectively as a group, there was a consensus that parental involvement and engagement is set forth and maintained by the parents and school as a team. The tools needed for success are stronger communication strategies and more opportunities for parents to feel safe and welcomed in the school environment. Table A5 describes short- and long-term strategies that can implemented in the middle school as discussed and formulated by the focus group.

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Table A5: *Short- and Long-Term Strategies for Parental Involvement*

Short term (3–6 months)	Long term
More robo/live calls in different languages; the importance of hearing diverse languages in the community for all events	Incorporate parent welcome letter addressing engagement in the handbook and formal letter in the beginning of the year
Parent conference meetings at different times (e.g., breakfast/morning coffee chats, Zoom); the opportunity for families to have a round table discussion within each homeroom	Every adult at the middle school is responsible to reach out to five families per month
Parent workshop once a month around mental health or various topics, or one social event per month	Grassroots campaign to hire diverse educators
Streamline email communication, incorporate Google Translate with every email	Connect with community programs and build relationships with liaisons
Meeting with elementary staff regarding high-need students for wrap–around services	Outreach efforts; neighborhood meetings in their safe space

Discussion

The researcher utilized important members of the school community to gather information, including educational staff, administration, school counselors, students, and parents. The opportunity gap that exists in the educational system is substantial and has created many barriers for students of low income (Miretzky et al., 2016). The purpose of this action research study was to understand the factors that challenge students below the poverty level in a large suburban middle school setting and develop strategies to close the opportunity gap for low socioeconomic students. The familial setting was an overwhelming common theme found in interview responses, student and parent surveys, and the literature review. The family environment is a significant indicator of overall success. The foundational elements of support are found in family dynamics. However, for students living in impoverished households and communities the host of obstacles within the familial and community setting are not always positive. Research has shown that the children of parents who are more involved in the school, who talk with teachers and counselors more, and who speak with their children about school

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are more prepared in the classroom (Dearing et al., 2006). Parental involvement is related to a host of student achievement indicators, including better grades, attendance, attitudes, expectations, homework completion, and state test results (Smith, 2009). The focus group members are now equipped with more information regarding students of low income and the overall important need of parental involvement for student success. The short- and long-term goals can be utilized to help increase parental engagement and accountability for the middle school educational community.

Ethical Considerations

Miles et al. (2019) stated that all researchers' work must be guided by the code of humane conduct: First, do no harm. The researcher is a current employee of the research site and has already established relationships with the participants in this study. As a public-school administrator at the research site, the researcher is an insider in collaboration with other insiders. Herr and Anderson (2015) stated that insider researchers that collaborate with others within the same setting could produce a greater impact in the setting and there is potential to be more democratic. The researcher is an agent of change within the setting but provides data and research that could potentially raise awareness on multiple levels. However, Herr and Anderson (2015) also pointed out a couple of flaws in the practice of insider researchers, one being power relations within the setting. In addition, McDonald (2012) explored the challenges of this method, which include: (a) its inclusion of community members in the research team, who may struggle to maintain their commitment to the research project over time, and (b) possible misunderstandings regarding the participants' perceptions and the social issue to be addressed, as well as conflict about the interpretations and analysis of the research.

The researcher remained mindful of the power dynamics, biases, and assumptions from participants, including being self-aware of his own set of beliefs. Growing up, the researcher's immigrant parents instilled particular beliefs about money and work ethic which to them were heavily correlated to poverty. More importantly, the researcher has never lived in poverty. Briscoe (2005) stated that "someone from a privileged position may not have had the experiences to construct appropriate horizons of meaning to correctly interpret the words, practices, and experiences of the other" (p. 26). Briscoe further questioned, "How likely are members of an oppressed group to speak or act freely when in the presence of a member of a group that has the means to grant or deny access to economic and other goods?" (p. 25). The researcher maintained an awareness of these components during the research process. Additionally, the researcher utilized methods of self-reflection, understanding of positionality, and transparency to navigate the ethical concerns during the research process. Also, the researcher used a journal to help document feelings along the process that could be reexamined for later reference.

Regarding the survey, the researcher understood that many concerns could arise when working with a vulnerable population and a difficult topic. As such, it was important for parents and students to receive information about the study in a fashion that was easily understood. Participants knew that they could, at any time, decide not to move forward with the survey or not answer a question they were uncomfortable answering. It was also important to outline that participation at any level would not have an impact on their grade or family status. The

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selection of students and parents were random, and the students or parents could not be individually identified.

The researcher conducted the interviews and surveys and handled all of the data collected during the research process. The audio recordings were uploaded and saved in a password-protected online file storage program. The surveys were conducted using Google forms. All electronic files (i.e., signed consent forms) will be stored in a password-protected online file storage program. The data will be retained for 3 years and then destroyed.

Trustworthiness

With regard to credibility, the researcher utilized the method of member checking. This involves the act of returning transcripts to interviewees/collaborators to validate and solidify the credibility of the interview. For this activity, the researcher chose to conduct interviews (using the interview transcript). Birt et al. (2016) claimed that the process of returning transcripts and then conducting a second interview to discuss data provides an opportunity to empower participants. It also opens the door for more information. The researcher sent the transcript to the interviewee/collaborator and followed up with an interview. The questions focused on the verification of the interview. The researcher wanted to ensure power dynamics did not interfere with the process (researcher with authority). The main goal was to confirm their thoughts and words. For example, during member checking with Administrator 2, it was confirmed that she enjoyed being a part of the process. The participant's evaluation of the transcript helped to reaffirm her thoughts and validate her responses for the research project. Overall, she was pleased with the outcome.

Miles et al. (2019) stated that findings should include enough "thick description" that others can assess the transferability to their own setting. The researcher thoroughly examined and applied thick descriptions regarding the research site, participants, methods, and analysis that others could determine the extent to which the findings might apply to their setting. Furthermore, Miles et al. (2019) discussed that reliability is the process to confirm the study is consistent and reasonably stable over time and across researchers and methods. The researcher thoroughly examined the research questions and determined they were clear and that the features of the study design were congruent with them. In addition, data were collected across a full range of appropriate settings and respondents as suggested by the research questions. During the research process, the study was viewed by other scholar-practitioners through external audits (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to foster the accuracy or validity of the research study. The confirmability of the study is supported by the comprehensive details of the methods and procedures that were used in the study. Moreover, the researcher was explicit about positionality and biases throughout the process. The use of self-reflexivity and journaling was significant in the process.

Limitations

There were several limitations to the study to consider. Regarding methodology, the researcher's position at the subject site could have elicited certain responses from the interviewees/collaborators and surveys. The position of power was a significant issue. Since observations can be subjective, understanding and reflecting on positionality and bias was

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critical in the process. COVID-19 added additional barriers to the research process. For example, the subject site remained mostly remote for a significant period of time. The researcher was interested in adding interviews with students; however, due to the pandemic, this was difficult. In addition, the desired number of participants for the interview with educational professionals was 10; only seven participants were able to complete the process. In addition, the parent survey response was not high. Regarding transferability, the location of the subject site was in a large suburban setting, and diversity among the population was limited. For example, of the low-income students who completed the survey, only 13% identified as African American.

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