

Academic Performance Gaps and Family Income in a Rural Elementary School: Perceptions of Low-Income Parents

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A wide range of research has been conducted regarding reasons for the achievement gap between low income students and higher income students, but there is limited research regarding parental perspectives, and particularly fewer studies of parental perceptions of low-income, rural elementary school parents. This study examined the extent to which an income-related achievement gap existed at a particular rural school and explored low-income parent perceptions of the achievement gap and factors contributing to it. This was a mixed-method, primarily qualitative study. Quantitative data was collected from a group of sixty-two free and reduced lunch students and a comparison sample of higher income students which included academic, attendance, and discipline reports. Findings indicated a gap does exist at the school. Qualitative data included interviews of six parents of low-income students and delved into topics regarding how participants perceive various factors affect the performance of their children. Four themes emerged: parental involvement and capacity, access to resources, the role of the schools and limits, and American societal and governmental systems. Implications suggest that this particular rural school and others with similar demographics would benefit from specific strategies to assist in understanding cultural differences to improve instruction and, ultimately, avenues to include parents by exploring current practices that may be unintentionally discriminating.

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Historically, children from low-income families have performed poorly in school and on standardized achievement tests when compared to their more advantaged peers (Lareau, 2000, 2011; OECD, 2011; West, 2007). Despite significant efforts to close this achievement gap, it remains one of the central challenges facing today's educational leaders. An extensive research base suggests that a wide variety of factors interact together in different ways, cultures, and contexts to produce levels of inequality that in turn affect student achievement (Allington et al., 2010; Fry, 2007; Gordon, 1996; Lareau, 2000, 2011; Rothstein, 2008; West, 2007).

One area that is not well researched is the achievement gap in rural schools, particularly from the perspective of low-income parents of children in those schools. While successful rural schools have been studied from various perspectives (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Yiu & Adams, 2013), there is limited research dedicated to examining the achievement gap between low-income and higher-income students in rural communities. What's more, there is little research that examines this achievement gap from the perspective of low-income parents whose children attend rural schools. Yet, parents play an important role in children's education and are uniquely positioned to shed light on the issue of why children from different economic classes achieve at different levels. For educational leaders whose work involves rural communities, it is helpful to understand the particularities of the income-based achievement gap within rural contexts.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was two-fold. We first examined the academic performance of low-income and higher income students in an elementary school in rural Illinois. Additionally, we explored low-income parents' perceptions of the income-related achievement gap and the factors contributing to it in this particular school. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. To what extent is there a gap between the academic performance of students from low-income and higher-income families in this particular school?
2. What do the parents of students from low-income families perceive to be the causes or explanation for the academic performance gap between students from lower-income and higher-income families in this particular school?

Theoretical Framework

In order for school leaders to understand the dynamics affecting the achievement gap between low-income and higher-income students, they must understand the differences and similarities among students. Cultural capital theory and the concept of culturally-responsive pedagogy attempt to provide a framework for clarity. Cultural capital theory is based on the premise that the greater an individual's cultural capital, the greater the likelihood of that individual procuring additional forms of capital, including economic and social success. Culturally responsive pedagogy attempts to clarify how utilizing culturally competent services and instruction may address the cultural gap and thus improve academic performance of students from low-income backgrounds.

Schools play an important role in the process through which the cultural capital of privileged classes is converted into opportunities and rewards. As framed by Lamont and Lareau (1988), children enter the institution of school needing key social and cultural codes that middle to upper class children have already acquired. To flourish in the educational setting, students must have the capacity to operate within this system of codes, but when a system is based on the dominant culture, the low-income student is disadvantaged (Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

Culturally responsive pedagogy suggests that using culturally competent services and instruction may improve academic performance of low-income students. Specifically, culturally responsive pedagogy rejects the deficit model implicit in many responses to the achievement gap and maintains that what educators think they know is often based on a distorted view of what they have gleaned through media, critics, and popular culture (Gay, 2002). According to Geneva Gay (2002), culturally competent services include "developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction" (p. 106). The premise is that by blending connections between daily lives of students outside the school with instruction, one can improve achievement by making instruction more meaningful and taught in a context that the children understand.

These two theories, cultural capital theory and cultural responsive pedagogy, are intricately intertwined and suggest that parents and parents' knowledge play important roles in the process through which cultural capital (and the lack thereof) contributes to differences in academic achievement and the inequality that results from those differences. Cultural capital theory suggests that some parents, particularly those from the middle and upper-middle classes, possess cultural advantages that their children carry with them into school. Conversely, parents from outside these privileged classes lack the cultural advantages and thus, their children enter school at a disadvantage.

One response to this gap is to bring children of low-income families into conformity with, or at least contact with, the cultural norms of the privileged classes. This approach is reflected in the work of Ruby Payne (1996) and the Knowledge is Power Program (Lack, 2009). However, this approach imposes the dominant culture onto children from outside that culture and places such children at odds with the cultural norms and values of their parents and communities. In contrast, culturally responsive pedagogy suggests that schools can address this gap in ways that avoid such hegemonic practices, and instead, make schools and teachers knowledgeable about and responsive to the cultural norms and values, as well as economic and social realities, of the less privileged parents and students in their midst.

Overall, cultural capital and culturally responsive pedagogy provide a conceptual framework from which to explore the achievement gap from the perspective of low-income families. Additionally, building upon Gay's (2002) assertion that much of how schools respond to low-income students is based upon assumptions about them, it is important to explore parents' perceptions to better understand the cultural background of low-income students, improve our pedagogical practices, and better serve children of low-income families.

Review of Literature

Researchers in the United States have confirmed that economically disadvantaged students do not perform as well academically as students from groups of higher socioeconomic status (SES); however, they disagree on what explains this achievement gap (Allington et al., 2010; Gordon, 1996; Lareau, 2000, 2011; OECD, 2011; Rothstein, 2008; West, 2007). The literature is varied and sometimes contradictory. For the purposes of this study, we grouped the approaches found in the research into three somewhat overlapping conceptual categories: cultural capital deficits, economic inequality, and familial conditions/circumstances.

Cultural Capital Deficits

Cultural capital refers to the skills and knowledge that are typically passed from one generation to another and these skills become capital that allows for advantages for members of the dominant group (Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Sullivan, 2011). Sullivan (2011) posited that middle class children are more readily able to accrue educational credentials due to their cultural capital. Sullivan also stated that cultural capital is evident within the home (language, etiquette, social cues) and impacts performance of children on examinations, which many assert are culturally biased to the dominant middle-class culture (2011). Dumais (2005) contended that while sociologists have studied cultural capital for the past twenty years, results have been mixed as to whether applying the cultural capital theory to the American education system is appropriate. However, Gorski (2012) reported it is the misinformation inherent in stereotyping that most affects student outcomes and that theories regarding poor academic performance and the underprivileged student are tied to preconceived ideas that are held by members of particular identity groups.

Economic Inequality

Economic deficiencies in the home and the institution affect academic achievement. For example, Allington et al. (2010) and Rothstein (2008) agreed that limited access to financial assets within the family (such as technology, books, or education-rich experiences) affects performance. Additionally, characteristics of low-income families that influence children's performance include the inability to afford healthcare and high mobility/absence rates as parents move from place to place following work/job opportunities (Rothstein, 2004; 2008). Schools serving these students often lack quality teachers and resources that more wealthy districts may provide (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Gorski (2012) contended that teachers and school officials may have lower expectations of economically disadvantaged students, which plays into the bias that people from low-income circumstance cannot learn, so there is not a pervasive reason for expecting them to achieve. Further, Gorski (2012) and Thomas (2010) felt that teacher workshops intended to assist in bridging cultural differences perpetuate the negative stereotypes by giving indicators of poverty that are not necessarily factual in every case and current professional development for educators oversimplify such issues.

Familial Conditions/Circumstances

Some research reports that there are specific characteristics of low-income families that contribute to low performance of children. For example, Fry (2007) and West (2007) felt that parental educational levels are directly related to whether youths stay in school. For example, professional parents produce children more likely to remain in school. West (2007) posited that less educated parents could contribute to lower achievement levels of their children by the nature of their own education or experiences. Additionally, parental involvement, in terms of home-school relationships and the differences in performance, appears to be less evident in low-income homes (Lareau, 2000; 2011).

While some research suggests that early learning environment (Brown, 2009) and skill gaps in expressive language (West, 2007) play a role in predicting school problems for at-risk students, others state that persistence is a key factor in student performance. The Organisation of

Economic Co-operation and Development (2011) reported that these students do not sustain persistence when faced with academic challenge which is the ultimate cause for the difficulties in school, whereas the children from higher socioeconomic groups are better equipped to persist because they may attack challenging tasks with a better self-concept and positive attitude. Thus, the low-income child who is unable to persist in the face of difficult academic tasks will continue to fall further behind, in fact widening the achievement gap (Brown, 2009).

The literature related to the achievement gap reflects agreement that the gap is a problem, but there is considerable disagreement regarding the causes of that gap. The research suggests that several dynamics contribute and that addressing them will require taking multiple factors into account. However, regardless of what factor or factors are evident as the explanation, the perspective of parents is important for two reasons. First, parents play a central role in the education of children. Parental attitudes, behaviors, and resources have significant impact on student achievement and contribute to gaps in that achievement. Second, parents are knowledgeable in ways that teachers and school administrators are not. Yet there exists little research examining parents' perceptions. This study partly addresses this lack of research.

Methodology

Research Design

This study was primarily a phenomenological exploration of the "meaning and interactions of ordinary people in a particular" setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006, p. 25), specifically, low-income parents in one rural community. Inherent in this type of research is the process of posing questions, gathering data, composing codes and themes, and reporting findings (Esterberg, 2001). In addition, the study was secondarily quantitative, with sources regarding the academic achievement gap gathered from the school's data bases. In combination, these two methodological approaches captured both the extent of the income-related achievement gap in the school and parental perspectives on its causes.

Sample/Participants

This study focused on students from low-income families attending a small rural elementary school in southwest Illinois. For the purposes of the study, students who qualified for support through the federal free and reduced lunch program were identified as "low-income." Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the current poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals (USDA, 2012).

The school is located within a small rural community that is part of a larger, primarily suburban school district that encompasses nearly 200 square miles. The community once prospered from the coal industry and now relies on income from the agriculture sector. The elementary school serves approximately 300 students in grades 3, 4, and 5. Students are predominately Caucasian and the Illinois State Report Card denoted a nearly 25% free and reduced lunch participant enrollment, which comprised the low-income population for this study.

For the quantitative component of this study, we aggregated performance data for low-income students as determined by the free and reduced lunch program. This is typically about 50 students, but does change annually due to changes in enrollment. We used Illinois Standards

Assessment Test (ISAT) results, AIMSweb scores, discipline reports, and attendance records. To provide a comparison group, we used stratified random sampling to select a number of students who do not qualify for free and reduced lunches equal to the number of low-income students who do. This was a layered approach whereby we examined the low-income group in terms of numbers of students within the group that have certain attributes (grade level, ethnicity, and gender). Then, all other students were grouped together by those attributes and we randomly drew from each layer of students who do not qualify for free and reduced lunches, a number equal to those layers in the low-income sample group. This ensured similar data sets in number, gender, and race for the low-income sample and the comparison sample. Care was taken in this research investigation to ensure demographics from each sample group were the same. The free and reduced lunch group (FRL) and the comparative group were each comprised of 62 students (n=62). There were 29 males and 33 females in each group. Grade level demographics were 14 third graders, 27 fourth graders, and 21 fifth graders. Ethnicity was 55 Caucasian, 5 Hispanic, and 2 Multi-race in each sample, which is representative of the overall ethnic population of the research school.

Participants for the qualitative component were chosen via purposive sampling. After identifying the parents of the 62 low-income students through the student management system, eSchoolPlus (Sungard, version 2.4), the lead author drew 31 names randomly and contacted those parents or guardians via the telephone to ask for volunteers for the study. Of the 31 households called, the lead author spoke directly to 20 parents. Of the remaining 11 households, 9 did not return the call and 2 phone numbers were disconnected. Six parents from 6 different households agreed to participate. The interview participant gender demographics included 5 females and 1 male. Ethnicity demographics included 3 Caucasian, 2 Hispanic, and 1 Multi-race. Grade level demographics included 1 third grade parent, 3 fourth grade parents, and 2 fifth grade parents. Additionally, three participants were from single female parent homes and three participants were from two-parent homes.

Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected through aggregate performance measures including 2013 Illinois Standard Achievement Test results, May 2013 AIMSweb scores, discipline reports, and attendance records for both the low-income group (n=62) and the comparative group (n=62). Discipline and attendance records were obtained through the district's student management system, eSchoolPlus (Sungard, 2.4). Qualitative data were gathered from parents through interviews using open-ended questions and a semi-structured format (Creswell, 2008). Each participant was interviewed once with the interviews lasting from 45 to 90 minutes in length. The interviews were audio-taped to guarantee accuracy of participants' responses and written notes were taken during the interviews to document aspects of the interview that may not be readily apparent from an audiotape (Creswell, 2008).

Data Analysis

The lead author examined data for the quantitative portion of this study to determine and describe the extent of the gaps between the academic performance, attendance, and behavior of students from the low-income group and the comparative group. Data points included: ISAT and AIMSweb raw scores and the percentage of students in each group who met and/or exceeded

expectations; the total number of office referrals for students in each study group; and total days missed between September 1, 2012 and August 31, 2013 for students in each study group. The lead author analyzed the qualitative data using Esterberg’s protocol (2001). The overall intent was to make sense of the data by breaking it into parts and analyzing each component. Attention was placed on common threads throughout the data and, eventually, focused codes were mined from the information. Once the lead author ascertained themes and subthemes, she compiled the data and reduced them into a summary of findings.

Findings

Quantitative Results

Overall, the quantitative data confirmed that gaps existed between the academic achievement, attendance, and behavior of low-SES students and higher-SES students. Two-sample t-tests were conducted and the first specific, significant finding was that the comparative group outperformed the FRL group on all four academic measures. The mean scores from both tables show that the comparative sample group consistently scored higher in math and reading on both ISAT subtests and AIMS assessments (see Tables 1 and 2). Overall, there was a 26 percentage point difference in reading scores between the FRL sample group and the comparative sample group: 82% of the comparative sample group met or exceeded standards on the ISAT reading assessment while 56% of the FRL sample group met or exceeded standards. Similarly, there was a 35 percentage point gap in math scores between the FRL sample group and the comparative sample group: 87% of the comparative sample group met or exceeded standards on the ISAT math assessment while 52% of the FRL sample group met or exceeded standards. When examining AIMSweb results, 91% of the students from the comparative sample group scored above the 25th percentile while 63% of the FRL sample group scored above the 25th percentile, accounting for a 28 percentage point difference in performance. Eighty-one percent of the students from the comparative sample group scored above the 25th percentile on the AIMSweb math assessment while 58% of the FRL sample group scored above the 25th percentile, accounting for a 23 percentage point difference in performance.

Table 1
Central Tendencies of Academic Performance of the FRL Sample Group

Measure	n	μ	Mdn	Mode	SD
ISAT Reading	62	221	225	246	24.54
ISAT Math	62	230	228	228	26.46
AIMs Reading	62	123	120	102	37.42
AIMs Math	62	37	34	33	19.77

Table 2
Central Tendencies of Academic Performance of the Comparative Sample Group

Measure	n	μ	Mdn	Mode	SD
ISAT Reading	62	238	238	256	21.06
ISAT Math	62	246	242	226	22.18
AIMs Reading	62	150	154	135	32.76
AIMs Math	62	44	47	49	17.87

While not proven statistically significant, it may be important to note that the low-income student group had more recorded discipline incidents and a higher number of days absent than the comparative sample group. The comparative group had 29 discipline referrals and the FRL group had 65, more than double the number of incidents. Additionally, students from the comparative sample group missed an aggregate of 404 days of school while the students from the FRL sample missed 581.5. That equated to an average of almost three days more per student in the low-income group than the comparative group.

Qualitative Results: Four Themes

Four themes emerged from the interviews with parents. Within the first theme, parents pointed to both a lack of parental involvement in their children’s education and a lack of parental capacity to be more involved. Within the other three themes, parents addressed broader institutional and social factors that they saw as contributing to the achievement gap in the school.

Theme 1- Limited parental involvement and capacity. Most participants discussed parental involvement as a critical issue affecting the academic progress of economically disadvantaged students, citing that parental support is essential but sometimes lacking. It seemed that most participants wanted to help their children, but could not see a way to obtain the resources, be it financial or other, needed for them to be on a level playing field with more wealthy children. The reasons for this varied.

Overall, participants felt that parents should be involved in their children's education to ensure success in the classroom, and, more widely, in life. The majority of participants felt that parents are not as involved in their children’s schooling as they should be. One parent stated, "[My child] is okay, but some of these parents just don't care what happens at school," while another said, "parents need to help their kids with their homework and make sure they get to school." The exception to this pattern was one parent who focused more on the role of larger social forces, believing that there was not a pressing reason for parents to assist with homework as children are destined to remain in the same social class as their parents.

Most participants also felt that low-income parents do not know what to do or how to help their children achieve at higher levels. For example, one participant said, "Maybe they just don't know how to help their kids." A second parent explained, "I think they don't know what to do, what questions to ask you all [school personnel], or don't know how to help their kids." However, one parent in particular felt that there is not a pervasive reason that he should be involved:

The only reason I'm here today is to keep you all from bugging me. I got work to do and things to see to. He's got an IEP, so I know I have to come up here and sign those papers, but other than that, there ain't a reason for me to be here. Home is home and school is school.

Theme 2- Limited access to resources. Participants believed that a lack of resources establishes a barrier to successful academic performance because low-income students have limited access to technology and other educational or financial resources. Parents also believed that this gap in access affects student performance and self-esteem.

Parents felt that the inability to access technology affects student performance in terms of parents' ability to assist their children with homework, lack of access to email communications from the school, and inability to monitor their children's progress via the online grading system. One parent explained, "I can't look it up on the internet and I don't have money for gas to take him back to school or to the library." A participant noted that it was difficult to know what was going on at school because the family does not have internet to check grades (progress). She felt it was unfair for her family to not have access when other families do.

It was also prudent to note that generally parents felt limited financial resources also affects student self-esteem and/or social interactions. One participant noted that students find it difficult to fit in socially as it is "tough growing up without all the cool gadgets all your friends have." Another parent stated:

I don't have gas money to run her into [town] to play soccer or go to kids' birthday parties. I think she gets upset and her friends don't understand that we just can't afford it. If you're upset, you can't do as good at school.

Theme 3- The role of the school: barriers and limits. The majority of participants noted that a good education and unbiased, caring teachers were important to the ultimate future success of their students beyond the school years. For example, one parent stated, "[School] is so important or she'll never get out and have a better life than me." Another noted, "It's important you have good teachers who don't take it out on the kids 'cause they can't pay for a field trip." For the most part, the parents reported that their children were getting this sort of education and that the school was treating low-income children well.

Despite this vote of confidence in the school, parents also reported that the attempts the school personnel make to include families are problematic for various reasons. Some parents noted that the ways in which the school communicates with families were ineffective. For example, one parent stated, "You all try to get us to come in. But you do it by sending home newsletters. We don't have time to read those. You need to call us up if you want us to come in." Other parents pointed to reasons why they are unable or unwilling to attend school meetings and events. One parent stated, "I don't want to come up here during the day--I can't anyway, someone has to take care of the babies until the older ones get home." Another said, "We are either working, or we're taking care of younger kids." In addition to these sorts of practical hurdles preventing parents from coming to the school, a third parent noted that parents may be uncomfortable attending some school events. She said, "We don't know what to do [at these events]. I am embarrassed to come up here on a big event night."

Although most parents voiced their belief in the importance that school has for their children's future, one parent suggested that the impact of the school is limited.

It don't matter who he gets or who gets him. It's not gonna change who I am or who he is. It's not gonna make him do his homework any faster or better. It's not gonna make me make him. It's your job to teach, so yeah, a good teacher is important, but only 'til he's done with school.

This observation is reinforced by the parents' perceptions of how some low-income parents lack the capacity and resources to support their children's achievement.

Theme 4- American societal and governmental systems. Parents unanimously felt that the way in which governmental systems are organized is unfair to low-income families or implied that American societal systems perpetuate the cycle of being poor. Specifically, parents felt that the government system works against the poor, imposes unrealistic testing requirements that make it difficult for their children to obtain higher education, and that the generational poor are relegated to their socioeconomic class. Opinions, almost unanimously, were that the government is contributing to the discrepancy by not ensuring that their children have what they need to be successful in schools, and more generally, in life. The consensus was that through its inability to provide adequate financial assistance for or the lack of interest in the needs of the low-income families, the government perpetuates social stratification. Additionally participants seemed to feel that if the government would afford assistance for needs outside of providing food stamps, for example, the families may be able to improve their socioeconomic status, which in turn will improve student performance. One parent stated:

The state needs to step in and say 'enough'. They give us food stamps, but that don't put gas in my tank to go to work or put clothes on the kids' backs. It don't make [students] do any better at school. How is it these other countries don't have people making millions and others making pennies?

Parents also implied that high-stakes testing contributes to social stratification in the school system. A parent said, "The government set us up to be poor. Why do they think a huge test is going to tell them which of our kids can go to college?" Another noted, "Our kids can't go to college without money or help, but they can't go to college without getting good grades, but they can't get good grades if they can't pass the test." This suggested that parents perceived the current meritocratic system is flawed by giving advantages to more affluent children.

Parents made specific references to the phenomenon of generational poor and the system that they felt is designed in such a way that makes it difficult for their children to succeed. Parents felt that they are stuck where they are socioeconomically and that they are powerless to do anything about it, which alludes to a perception that American societal systems allow this to happen. For example, participants made statements such as, "I just want her to have it better than I did," or "What it is, is he is stuck where he is because I'm stuck where I am and my dad was stuck where he was unless something changes." One of the six low-income parents interviewed, who it was important to note was the one male in the study and one of the two interviewees of Hispanic descent, believed that social status and the amount of money made in a family is impacted by race and that social class stratification is inevitable because poor people of color are especially vulnerable to being held within socioeconomic confines. He stated:

The lighter your skin, the better jobs you get. The darker your skin, the worse jobs you get. And there's a difference with every shade darker- light people and medium people and dark people. We are stuck where we are, with no money and there ain't no point trying to change that. How much money we make and what jobs we get depends on the shade of your skin. The darker you are, the lower your money. Simple.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which there is an income-related achievement gap at the study school and to explore low-income, rural parents' perceptions of that gap and the factors contributing to it. In this section, we address each question in terms of the findings and their implications for educational leaders.

Quantitative Findings

Low-income students perform poorly when compared to higher-income peers. The students in the comparative group sample performed higher academically, attended more school days, and had fewer discipline incidents than the FRL group.

First, students in the FRL sample group performed below peers of higher-income as evidenced on standardized achievement tests. These tests were nationally normed, state-normed, and locally normed. This supports research showing that low-income students do not perform as well on standardized achievement assessments as higher-income students (Allington et al., 2010; Gordon, 1996; Lareau, 2000, 2011; OECD, 2011; Rothstein, 2008; West, 2007).

Secondly, students in the low-SES group missed over 177 more days during the school year than the comparative sample group. This also supports research which has shown that students from low-income homes have higher levels of absenteeism (Lareau, 2000, 2011; OECD, 2011; Rothstein, 2008; West, 2007). The data did not clearly indicate whether the absenteeism was due to health problems or to other pervasive reasons, and determining what the reasons were would be helpful because if students are missing instruction, it follows that levels of achievement could be lower.

Finally, if students missed instruction due to disciplinary dispositions, levels of achievement could be lower. It was important for the lead author to consider that the discipline rate for the FRL group was more than twice that of the comparative group. Do these children lack persistence in the face of academic challenges as Brown (2009) and others (OECD, 2011) postulated? Or are there different expectations of these children as Lareau (2000) asserted and could student frustration be leading to misbehavior? Could lack of cultural awareness be leading the school leaders to misinterpret different behavior as misbehavior?

Therefore, a longitudinal examination of the issue of discipline in this school would be useful to discover if and how behavior or response to behavior impacts student achievement. This could be obtained through avenues such as tracking reasons for absences (illness, transportation, appointments, and suspensions) and discipline referrals (by incident type to isolate specific behaviors) via the school management data system. This would provide an opportunity to coordinate services with outside resources if necessary through support staff. Tracking the attendance and discipline incidents in a more personal way would allow patterns to emerge or isolate areas that could be addressed through appropriate interventions. Attention should be given to finding ways to ensure programs, actions, and consequences are culturally-

responsive so as to avoid unnecessary discipline incidents that may contribute to lower levels of achievement by removing students from instruction or alienating students from the school community.

Qualitative Findings

The explanations, causes, and barriers that parents perceived to affect student performance were intricately intertwined, and at times, difficult to separate from one another. Parents pointed towards limited parental capacity and resources as key factors they believed most affected their children's performance. Furthermore, while they did not explicitly refer to cultural cues or values as an explanation for the gap, they did note that social and institutional forces and policies contribute to it.

Limited knowledge/capacity. Participants reported that they and other low-income parents wanted their children to do well, but were often unsure of how to go about assisting them achieve at higher levels. It was interesting that while parents stated that a lack of parental support contributed to lower-income students' relatively low levels of achievement, most tended to see this as a problem for other parents, not themselves. This could be an accurate perception: perhaps the parents interviewed were not representative of the low-income population at the school due to selection bias in terms of the volunteers for this study. It also could be that the interviewer's position as an administrator in the research school had a negative effect on their willingness to be completely open.

The notion that parents do not know how to help their children may support the view that a lack of cultural capital contributes to the achievement gap. This calls for perhaps a reconceptualization of cultural capital theory to include academic skills as Lareau and Weininger (2003) asserted in terms of those skills needed to be successful in the very way schools and educational institutions are organized. Humans often interpret by standards set to their own culture, thus an argument could be made that is exactly why school leaders should tap into a more culturally responsive model as Gay (2002) posited. However, specific best practice training to work with economically disadvantaged students is not wide-spread and school leaders should seek professional development that is geared toward understanding this diversity to better formulate instruction.

Limited access to resources. Most parents spoke of their limited access to resources as an obstacle to their children obtaining certain important academic accoutrements. For example, parents noted that they have limited access to technology, yet school systems often utilize emails for communication and expect parents to have online access to view grades. This might be linked with the opinion of many of the participants that educational leaders need to find different ways to include parents and is directly related to Lareau's (2011) theory that parents are invited to be involved in their children's education, but it is not always recognized that some parents find it difficult to do so. Thus, personnel at schools may be unintentionally discriminating against low-income children through the methods by which they encourage involvement and/or communicate with parents. School and district leaders should work to make school policies more sensitive to the realities of lower-income parents.

At the same time, it is worth questioning whether low-income parents lack access to resources or lack knowledge needed to access those resources. To some extent, the data gathered for this study suggests that both are relevant. For example, one participant noted that a lack of money for gas makes it difficult to attend some school events. This certainly reflects a lack of

resources. However, another participant mentioned that it is difficult to access materials at the local library due to its limited hours but was misinformed about the extent to which the library is open in the evenings. A lack of family resources is something that school leaders should be aware of and sensitive to, even if they are not able to address the problem. Additionally, parents' reference to problematic school policies suggests that school personnel could be better informed about families' realities and more responsive to their needs. On the other hand, a lack of knowledge is something the educators can address through the sharing of information. In addition, to the extent that low-income parents lack the educational background to help their children with academic work, educational leaders may help address this through academic support and afterschool programs.

Macro-level factors. Participants recognized a disconnect between what is provided through government programs designed to assist the poor and what actually is needed to improve conditions of the poor. Additionally, most parents felt that the lack of government assistance, involvement, or understanding, in terms of the government's current system of support for the poor and over reliance on "high-stakes testing," may perpetuate the achievement gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students. While the anti-poverty programs have provided basic necessities such as food, they have not been successful in equalizing access to resources. This may reflect an overemphasis on fixing people and their individual conditions as opposed to reforming the system itself. This study supports the notion that poverty cannot be solved at the micro-level, but should continue to be an area of concern and focus for national policy makers.

One parent in particular felt that regardless of what parents do and how well a child does in school, socioeconomic class is predetermined by race. While this study did not focus on issues specific to race, this parent's perceptions were not far removed from other participants' beliefs that there are societal and governmental constraints placed upon the poor. In all cases, participants in this study perceived that shifts toward "standards-based education" favors advantaged socioeconomic groups whose cultural capital are reflected in such standards. While school and district leaders may not have much influence over the content of federal or state-mandated educational standards, they should be aware of the actual and perceived class bias those standards reflect.

Gay's (2002) theory states that some policies and educators oversimplify poverty by presuming that being poor is a reflection of bad choices while overlooking society's and educational institutions' own contributions to the overall issue of poverty. Lareau and Weininger (2003) argue that cultural capital strategies become imperative in terms of examining the system's institutional standards. Both points are applicable here. The parents who participated in this study demonstrated that they felt that the system by which American institutions are governed is unfair and this research supports that we should explore ways to meet the needs of our diverse population at the school level.

Conclusion

The findings of this study, while limited to one particular rural community, have more widespread implications for educational leaders. To some extent, the findings support the notion that gaps in educational achievement are not limited to the urban context. The study also suggests that low-income parents believe that such gaps are brought about by a complex interplay of forces and circumstances. However, from the perspective of the parents who

participated in this study, structural issues are more relevant than individual circumstances. The parents did point to ways in which some low-income parents sometimes fall short. However, for these parents, the impact of the efforts or lack of efforts of low-income parents and their children is lessened by other factors, some of which are exacerbated by education policies and officials.

In the end, this study supports both increasing school and district-level efforts to respond to the realities of low-income families in rural areas and lowering the expectations for what school and district-level policies can achieve on their own. Educators in rural schools have the ability to make changes that would benefit low-income parents and children. Some of these changes, such as contacting parents by phone rather than through email or notes home, are relatively simple. Others, such as supporting low-income parents' efforts to help their children and increasing a school community's cultural competence, are more complicated. These sorts of changes may not address the larger socioeconomic and structural forces that primarily drive the achievement gap. However, they will make rural school leaders more responsive to the needs and circumstances of low-income parents and reduce the extent to which schools add to the burden imposed by those larger forces.

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