

**Closing the Out-of-School Opportunity Gap:
Practical Methods for the Classroom Teacher**

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Abstract

American students go home after school to a variety of circumstances – some are met by a caring parent, others are “latch-key” kids, while others face circumstances where their basic needs are not met. New research refers to this reality as the “opportunity gap,” the different experiences students face in time spent outside of school hours. According to the Boston Afterschool & Beyond program (2014), higher-income families outspend lower-income families on enrichment activities and other academic supports such as trips to museums or extra tutoring that allow children to build reading skills, mathematics skills, and background knowledge necessary for success in school. However, we expect children from low-income families to have the same levels of high academic achievement as their peers, without addressing the underlying reasons for their poor performance. Although the opportunity gap creates clear problems for student learning, specific and practical methods of how classroom teachers can respond are missing. My research both investigates the issues behind the opportunity gap and provides educators with a tiered response method to address these underlying reasons of poor academic performance.

Introduction

In the past few years, I had the privilege of working as an afterschool program director with a very special group of students. These students, most from families of poverty, faced some of the difficult situations my thesis discusses: homes lacking indoor plumbing, disconnected utilities, living environments covered in human and animal filth and feces, bare pantries, abusive family members – the list could continue indeterminately. Unfortunately, these students who most needed extra support in their education so often presented themselves as challenges to the afterschool program staff. These students chose not to engage with carefully planned activities, were often defiant in word and action, were violent in their interactions with other students and sometimes with staff members, and even destroyed church property. I would work so hard to plan out the details of the program, creating curriculum, training staff, creating schedules, contacting parents, and at the end of the day I would find myself driving away from the church with tears rolling down my face.

All of my planning just wasn't enough: I was not meeting the needs of my students, and fixing their "problems" seemed impossible. Eventually, I was able to develop a meaningful relationship with several of the kids, and I now have some great memories of "lightbulb" moments – when Joshua turned himself in for stealing KidsQuest cash and wrote me an apology note; finding out that Amy passed all her multiplication tables we had been working on in the Education Room; or the time I was able to have a face-to-face conversation with Garrett instead of him running away when he was in trouble (the names of the students have been changed for confidentiality). Now fast forward a year: I am no longer directing the afterschool program, but instead am spending more time in elementary classrooms. I see teachers facing the exact

struggles I faced as I attempted to help hurting students. It makes me wonder, “What can I do as a classroom teacher to help these students?”

My thesis uses technical terms such as the “out-of-school opportunity gap” and “low-socioeconomic status,” but essentially it is my quest as an educator to find the best research-based tools and strategies to help hurting kids. I understand that I will not solve the problems these students face, but I believe that understanding what educational researchers say about the problem and looking at how other teachers have successfully helped students will make me a more effective teacher who is better able to reach all of my students.

Student school performance is a complex issue, dictated by a plethora of internal and external variables. I focused my research on one of these external variables: out-of-school opportunity gaps. Although not a widely used educational term, it was coined in response to the infamous “achievement gaps” lamented by politicians and education reformists throughout our nation. In order to best understand opportunity gaps, one must first understand achievement gaps.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Educational Reform and Dissent* (2010), the achievement gap is defined as academic differences seen between advantaged and disadvantaged groups of students. Of particular interest to our nation has always been the differences seen between black and white students in America. In 1966, in response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the U.S. Commissioner of Education James Coleman compiled a large amount of data with the goal of quantitatively expressing the effects of discrimination within American schools. In his report “Equality of Educational Opportunity,” Coleman compared the degree of segregation with students’ achievement tests and the type of schools they attended. The results of his study were surprising, even to Coleman. The findings revealed that traditional measures of school quality, such as the facilities, curriculum materials, and teachers, were not largely unequal

between majority and minority groups (specifically black and white students), and so there needed to be another explanation for the significant achievement gap between these groups. He found that when he looked at student enrollment and test scores in specific family income brackets, the differences disappeared altogether – the achievement gap was not due to color but rather the student’s family income. In fact, Coleman concludes “This suggests that Negro-white differences in nonenrollment may be attributed more to socioeconomic and cultural differences in nonenrollment than to other factors” (p. 454-455). Coleman’s study was the first to specifically note the importance of student socioeconomic differences and, incidentally, Coleman was among the first to quantitatively document the relationship between achievement and opportunity.

With such clear findings, one might think immediate action was taken to remedy the socioeconomic differences causing the achievement gap between students. However, this is not the case. Deficit theorists provided the original response to the achievement gap, as explained in *Poverty and Psychology: From Global Perspective to Local Practice* (Carr, 2003). In the 1960s and 70s, the widely accepted approach to the differences in socioeconomic classes was assuming the poor had not developed the “Need for Achievement” character trait. Essentially, people believed the poor were poor because of their own shortcomings and failures, thus other key outside influences that contributed to poverty were ignored.

In recent years, the proposed method for closing achievement gaps has been the national initiative “No Child Left Behind,” an educational reform act issued by George W. Bush in 2001. In fact, in a book written specifically to address the achievement gap, Belinda Williams (2003) begins her arguments by stating, “In order to close the achievement gap, schools [...] must implement the reforms referred to by President Bush and delineated in the No Child Left behind

Act of 2001” (p. 8). However, schools and students are finding the NCLBA to be inadequate in meeting the needs of disadvantaged students. In *Closing the Opportunity Gap*, Prudence L. Carter (2013) encourages Americans to turn from a no excuse, high standard policy that does not address the real issues behind the achievement gap. Instead, Americans are urged to focus their attention on the opportunity gap.

As with many educational terms, the phrase “opportunity gap” represents a wide amount of data and grand ideas difficult to combine into a single definition. The National Opportunity to Learn Campaign defines the opportunity gap as “the disparity in access to quality schools and the resources needed for all children to be academically successful” (Opportunity Gap Toolkit, 2011, p. 1). In essence, the opportunity gap is the underlying cause of the achievement gap, and without addressing the basic cause, the achievement gap will never decrease.

As noted above, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, James Coleman, was among the first to document the connection between achievement and opportunity. The nation’s response to this discovery was underwhelming. Little was done to remedy the deep social problems, and as a result the achievement gap has continued to grow at an increasing pace. In Sean Reardon’s research, he compares the increasing income gap in the last fifty years to the achievement gap between high- and low-income families. Reardon has found the income gap has grown 30 to 40 percent among children born in 2001 compared with those born 25 years earlier. Interestingly, he notes that while the white-black achievement gap has declined, the income gap between high and low- income families has widened over the past several decades (“Income Inequality”, 2012). In response to this ever-widening gap, the nation has demanded compliance with No Child Left Behind, requiring schools to increase student performance on state-mandated high stakes testing.

Essentially, we are asking students for high achievement without addressing the underlying reasons for their poor performance.

The problem is simply overwhelming. Students from families of a low socioeconomic status (SES) face significant challenges beyond what most educators have personally experienced. How can educators ever begin to address these issues within their classroom in a meaningful and lifelong way?

The answer to this multi-faceted problem is not simple and will not be solved quickly. My research does not seek to solve the underlying problems of the out-of-school opportunity gap. However, through extensive research and personal experience, I have synthesized a tiered response method, providing educators with practical ways to address the reasons for the opportunity gap and to increase student achievement within their classrooms.

In order to synthesize a response method relevant to today's classroom teachers and their students, I needed to understand what students were experiencing outside of school hours that affected their academic performance. In my preliminary stages of research, I studied two areas: first, the unique needs of students from low SES backgrounds and second, different methods currently being used or suggested to address these needs.

I first wanted to increase my understanding of students in poverty. My research revealed a wide variety of reasons for students to be in poverty. In Eric Jensen's book *Teaching with Poverty in Mind* (2009), he identifies six types of poverty. These include situational poverty, caused by a sudden crisis and often temporary in nature; generational poverty, where at least two generations have been born into poverty; absolute poverty, involving a scarcity of necessities and causing families to focus on day-to-day survival; relative poverty, referring to families whose income is insufficient to meet society's average standard of living; urban poverty, occurring in

populations of at least 50,000 people; and rural poverty, occurring in nonmetropolitan areas with less support systems available (p. 6-7). It is clear that poverty is complex and creates different problems for different families.

When I began to research the needs of students coming from families of poverty, I began to realize these students face an extremely wide variety of challenges that negatively impact their academic performance. In some research, these challenges are referred to as “out-of-school” factors. In “Poverty and Potential: Out-of-School Factors and School Success,” David Berliner (2009) lists six out-of-school factors that significantly impact student learning: “low birth-weight and non-genetic prenatal influences on children; inadequate medical, dental, and vision care; food insecurity; environmental pollutants; family relations and family stress; and neighborhood characteristics” (p. 8-41). Students facing these situations will be unable to focus on higher learning of any kind because their physiological needs as described in Abraham Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs” are not being met. According to Maslow’s theory (1943), a person’s physiological needs (such as food, clothes, safety, and shelter) must first be met before one can focus on the next tier of the pyramid. Only after a student’s basic needs and psychological needs (confidence, self-esteem, friendship, etc.) are met can he or she begin to focus on learning (in the self-actualization tier of the pyramid).



Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. (McLeod, 2014).

Applying this theory, it becomes logical that students who come from families where their basic physiological needs are not being met are unable to focus on higher learning activities. Teachers must therefore help meet students' basic physical and emotional needs in order for students to have academic success.

I next wanted to understand the specific physical and emotional needs students from low-income families would bring to the classroom. I looked at how poverty affects both behavior and academic performance from a neurological perspective. According to Jensen (2003), children need the following in order to grow up emotionally healthy: a reliable primary giver providing consistent love and support; a stable and safe environment; attunement, or harmonious, reciprocal interactions; and enrichment through personalized, complex activities (p. 15). Jensen states, "Deficits in these areas inhibit the production of new brain cells, alter the path of maturation, and rework the healthy neural circuitry in children's brains, thereby undermining emotional and social development and predisposing them to emotional dysfunction" (p. 16).

Students from low-income families are not just facing a lack of physical resources—their brains have been rewired! Students entering our classrooms who come from a low-SES home may not understand how to have a healthy, emotional response to everyday situations.

It is also important to realize that students in poverty are much more likely to be facing constant stressors. According to Lichter (1997), around 55% of families living in poverty experience home evictions, disconnected utilities or telephones, poorly maintained living areas, overcrowding, or lack of basic appliances (such as a refrigerator or stove). Only 13% of families not living in poverty experienced one of these situations. Stress also has a negative impact on the development of children's brains. Exposure to chronic or acute stress can shrink neurons in the frontal lobe of a child's brain and alter the hippocampus in such a way that learning capacity is reduced (Jensen, 2003, p. 25). Jensen also provides a list of several "symptoms" of stress in the classroom, compiled from several different studies. Student stress is linked to over 50% of absences, causes a decrease in attention and concentration, reduces creativity and memory, impairs students' social abilities, increases depression, and reduces neurogenesis (p. 26). It seems the effect of poverty is cumulative—one negative effect causes another, and the repercussions of poverty continue to occur in a devastating cascade.

As I learned more about the specific challenges low-income students bring with them to the classroom, I wanted to learn more about specific methods currently being used in the education field to address these issues. As research repeatedly reveals, students from low-SES backgrounds face multiple out-of-school factors that often account for deficiencies in academic achievement. However, there are a few noteworthy schools that have both high-poverty levels and high-achievement levels. For clarity's sake, high performing schools are generally defined as those in the top 10% of comparable schools in their state, region, or country, whereas high

poverty schools are defined as having greater than 50% of its students eligible for free or reduced lunch.

In 2002, a research study was conducted through the Hewlett Packard High Achieving Schools Initiative. Researchers looked at nine schools from throughout the United States that served a low-income community and continued to have significantly high achievement scores. The research identified seven characteristics of a highly effective school. First, teaching and learning are prioritized to support high academic expectations for student learning. Second, a strong and well-defined purpose was established among the faculty. Third, the faculty collaborated and supported each other. Fourth, teaching and learning extended beyond focus on test preparation to student learning. Fifth, teaching resources were available and accessible. Sixth, supplemental support was provided for student learning. Seventh, teachers have regular access to professional development opportunities. (Kitchen, et al., 2004) From this list, it is clear all nine schools had intense focus on student learning, as all seven of the characteristics have direct relation to instruction. It is critical that educators remain focused on improving their instruction, even though it is easy to get lost amidst the other “details” of education.

A research review by the Center for Public Education (2005) looks at common factors across a wide array of studies looking at high-performing schools with high-poverty levels. CPE identified 10 factors that are consistently located in an effective school. The first five are building blocks, or basic principles, while the last five are practices. These building blocks include: a culture of high expectations and caring; a safe and disciplined environment; a principal who is a strong instructional leader; hard-working and committed teachers; and a curriculum focused on academic achievement that emphasizes basic skills. In one survey, the most significant finding was the extent to which high-performing schools use standards to guide their

activity. The five practices include: increased instructional time, ongoing assessment, parents as partners in learning, professional development, and collaboration.

Eric Jensen also provides an example of a high-poverty school that is high-achieving (p. 95-96). Esparza Elementary, located in San Antonio, Texas, has the motto, “Because our students have less, we must provide more.” Rather than being upset at the many opportunities its students are lacking, the school chose to provide these opportunities. After school, the staff provides activities such as guitar or violin lessons, archery, chess, ballet, technology, and journalism. The school also provides more field trips and real-life experiences, such as cooking classes or trips to a nature park.

In response to my research, I have compiled a three-tiered response method for the classroom teacher. It addresses three levels: the classroom level, the household level, and the community level. Each tier has several research-based components that are practical for teachers to implement within their classroom. I will explain each component, provide examples, and cite the research upon which the component is based.

TIER ONE: Classroom Level, Student Oriented

The first tier focuses on teacher-student relationships and includes best practices for teaching students with poverty in mind. This is the area a teacher will have the most influence on, and these are methods a teacher can most easily implement in her classroom.

1) Build relationships with your students.

According to Dr. James Comer, “No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship” (Payne, 2008, p. 48). Teachers should not become students’ friends, but they should establish relationships of trust and respect. Often, all that is needed for a student to enter into a respectful relationship with a teacher is for the teacher to demonstrate respect towards the

student. According to an interview of high school students, the following actions were identified as showing that a teacher respected them: the teacher calls me by name; the teacher answers my questions; the teacher talks to me respectfully; the teacher notices me and say “Hi”; the teacher helps me when I need help (Payne, 2008). These actions are not difficult or complex; in reality, teachers simply need to be conscious of what they are communicating (both verbally and nonverbally) to their students. Just as these simple actions build positive relationships with adults, they will provide a foundation for a relationship with students as well.

According to Eric Jensen (2009), students growing up in poverty are more likely to lack a caring, dependable adult in their lives. Often, teachers are the only available adults to fill this gap. However, many students believe their teachers do not care about them or don’t believe in them. When students face this feeling of helplessness, they often give up on academics (Jensen, 2009). Understanding Jensen’s research underscores the importance of reaching out to all students to show them they are cared about. A quotation by Nel Noddings states, “Kids learn in communion. They listen to people who matter to them and to whom they matter” (Hart & Hodson, 2004). If your students do not believe you care about them, they may not be willing to learn from you.

I listed building relationships with students first in the classroom tier because it is the foundation upon which my personal philosophy of teaching is built. After working for several years as a director of a high-poverty after-school program, I learned that without a significant relationship with the students, I could not have much impact. If they did not believe I cared about them, they were not willing to listen to me. However, as I formed relationships of trust and compassion with the students, I found that even the most unruly student was willing to stop what he was doing to come and talk to me about his choices. Having positive relationships with your

students does not solve all problems in the classroom; however, it does provide an essential starting point from which to build. *A Compassionate Teacher* provides some reflective questions to help teachers become aware of their interactions with students.

First, teachers should focus on their intentions. Ask, “Do you want to connect with the students or get things done your way.” Next, focus on the perception of the students. Ask, “Do you see them as whole human beings with their own thoughts, feelings, needs, talents, interests, and gifts to share?” and “Do you see each child’s gifts?” The next several questions focus on the actions of the teacher. Reflect on the following: “What is your body language?”; “How often do you listen? How often do you speak?”; “What are you listening for?” and “What do you do when a student says ‘No’?” (Hart & Hodson, 2004). Reflecting on these questions will increase your awareness of areas you can strengthen as you develop healthy relationships with your students.

2) Make teaching relevant to student’s daily life.

The educational environment of the classroom often differs from the cultural environment a student experiences at home. However, educational research points to the fact that students have greater success in school when their classroom environment incorporates elements from their home environment. Gloria Ladson-Billings coined the term “culturally relevant pedagogy” and defines it as “a pedagogy of opposition not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). She suggests that culturally relevant teaching focuses on three aspects: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. In order for students to have academic success, teachers must address students’ academic needs rather than focusing on making them “feel good.” Cultural competence refers to the idea that students should be able to learn in a familiar context. Ladson-Billings states, “Culturally relevant teachers utilize students’ culture as

a vehicle for learning” (p. 161). For example, teachers can use popular music lyrics as a method of teaching poetry techniques or vocabulary. And finally, critical consciousness requires students to evaluate the world around them using critical thinking skills.

In order for the classroom environment to be culturally relevant, teachers must be aware of the cultures represented by their students. It may require teachers to research the cultural practices and beliefs of families in their communities. Authors Scherff and Spector (2010) suggest teachers use the following questions to reflect on their teaching practices, “Do all students feel accepted and valued in my classroom? Will my students find what we are doing together today relevant and worthwhile? Am I being as accepting and open to my students as I possibly can be? Are the experiences I am providing helping students find a useful, hopeful role within an unjust society?” (Scherff & Spector, 2010, p. vii). Reflecting on these questions while striving to incorporate the three areas of culturally relevant pedagogy is a great place to begin making teaching more relevant.

3) Encourage the development of intrinsic motivation within your students.

According to Kusurkar, Croiset, and Cate (2011), intrinsic motivation “is observed when one engages in an activity out of genuine interest and is truly self-determined. Intrinsic motivation is the desired type of motivation for study as it is associated with deep learning, better performance and positive well-being in comparison to extrinsic motivation” (p. 298). Kusurkar et al. recommend 12 tips to help develop intrinsic motivation in medical students. While not all 12 tips are applicable to elementary students, several remain relevant to all fields of education: encourage active participation; encourage students to accept more responsibility for their learning; provide optimal challenges; give positive and constructive feedback; give emotional support; acknowledge students’ expressions of negative effect; communicate value in

uninteresting activities; give choices; and direct with ‘can, may, could’ instead of ‘must, need, should.’

One of the key factors in developing intrinsic motivation is communication with your students. Often, simply explaining the reasoning behind an activity (“When we practice reading out loud it improves our accuracy” or “Learning your multiplication facts will help you next year in middle school math class” or “We are walking quietly in the halls so we don’t disturb other students’ learning”) can help involve students in their own education. It is important to remember that students coming from low-SES backgrounds often have little say over their home environment. Providing them with choices during the school day will help increase their engagement and desire to learn.

4) Create a safe learning environment.

Over the past several years, the discussion of safety in schools has become more prevalent. School shootings and bomb threats have made the school environment hostile rather than caring. Other issues plague the classrooms and hallways of the school, such as bullying or cyber-bullying. In fact, according to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 75% of all students report having been bullied at school. With so many external factors affecting the learning environment, what can teachers do to encourage the safety of their students?

It is critical for teachers to understand the relationship between emotional safety and the ability to learn. Brain-based research shows that negative emotions (fear, hostility, anger, anxiety) cause the brain to “downshift” into basic, survival thinking. In this mode, the neo-cortex or reasoning center of the brain ceases to function (Hart & Hodson, 2004). As Jensen pointed out, many students from low-SES backgrounds come to school under high amounts of stress. If

teachers or other students continue to interact with them in a hostile manner, the student remains in an almost constant “fight or flight” or “downshifted” state of mind (p. 17). Maslow states, “In general, only a child who feels safe dares to grow forward healthily. His safety needs must be gratified. He can’t be pushed ahead, because the ungratified safety needs will remain forever underground, always calling for satisfaction” (Hart & Hodson, 2004). Therefore, teachers should strive to create a safe learning environment within their classroom.

According to Shonta Smith (2011), “In order to create safe learning environments, urban high schools need to implement effective instructional programming. Positive behavioral intervention and support (PBIS) is a decision-making framework that guides the selection, integration, and implementation of the best evidence-based academic and behavioral practices for improving important academic and behavior outcomes.” Many of the surrounding school districts implement PBIS or another form of character education within the curriculum. However, it is ultimately up to the teacher to model the desired behaviors for her students and to give them safe opportunities with which to practice. Smith goes on to provide ten recommendations to enhance safe learning environments. I am including only the recommendations specifically relevant to classroom teachers: set high expectations; model what is expected; conduct quarterly grade-level meetings to review student discipline guidelines, and have students engage in small-group activities where they discuss and act out scenarios; have students problem solve and create behavioral action plans; make classroom activities meaningful and relevant to students’ lives, culture, and future; create a positive school climate by fostering school pride and academic excellence and making safety the number one priority; and implement an instructional program such as PBIS or character education to teach students expected behavioral norms.

As Smith emphasizes, it is important for teachers to instruct students in proper ways of interacting with each other rather than simply telling them not to bully. Often, students are simply replicating behaviors they have seen modeled at home, and until a caring adult intervenes with other options on how to deal with frustration or anger, students will continue lashing out at each other. Students may lack even basic social skills and need to be taught how to shake hands, smile, take turns, thank each other, work out conflicts, and other important skills. Jensen explains that teachers need to embody respect. His process for teaching respect includes several facets. Instead of demanding respect from their students, teachers can be the first to show respect to their students. Other recommendations Jensen makes include sharing the decision making as a whole class (for example, would you all like to review the directions again or are you ready to get started?) and avoiding harsh commands or directives. Teachers should avoid sarcasm in their interactions with students, and they should model their thinking process about decisions and directions when possible. It is crucial that teachers discipline through positive relationships rather than in an authoritative way (Jensen, 2003, p. 21-22).

Teachers need to teach their students relational intelligence—how to communicate with others, how to express and read others' feelings, how to take responsibility for one's thoughts and needs, etc. Doing so will create a classroom community where students are able to interact in a safe and meaningful way.

5) Uphold high expectations for all students.

Students who enter the classroom with little family support may come from situations where learning is the least of their priorities. Teachers can be tempted to let their compassion for these students lead to lowered expectations. However, Bonnie Bernard states, "At the core of caring relationships are high expectations that reflect the teacher's deep belief in the student's

innate resilience and capacity to learn” (Bernard, 2003, para. 15). Even though the student may face difficult circumstances, his teacher is uniquely equipped to help students think differently about their lives.

Jensen discusses how school staff can strive to change the school culture from pity to empathy. According to Jensen (2003), a common sentiment among teachers toward students raised in poverty is, “Bless their hearts, they come from such terrible circumstances” (p. 46). However, this belief often leads to lowered expectations for students. Jensen says teachers should feel empathy rather than pity. Within your classroom, work on establishing a culture of caring, not of giving up. An important characteristic to help develop in your students is that of grit or rigor. Frederick Douglass reflected, “If there is no struggle there is no progress” (Douglass, Kaufman, & McKivigan, 2012, p. 186). Teach your students to persevere, even through difficult situations.

Bernard provided an extensive list of items for teachers to implement in a high-expectations classroom. A few of the highlights include: a “no-excuses/never-give-up” philosophy; belief in innate capacity of all to learn; challenges with supports (“you can do it; I’ll be there to help”); articulates clear expectations, boundaries, and structure; holds students accountable; helps to reframe problems to opportunities; helps family members see students’ strengths, interests, and goals.

What a teacher believes about her students is critical to the success of her students. In 1965, a Harvard professor named Robert Rosenthal conducted an experiment to prove this point. Rosenthal wanted to know what would happen if teachers were told that certain students in their classroom had the most potential to succeed. He went into classrooms and gave each student a standardized IQ test. However, he put a different cover on the test that said “Harvard Test of

Acquisition” and told teachers this test would be able to predict the kids who were going to experience a dramatic increase in their IQ levels. After the students took the test, Rosenthal randomly chose several kids out of each classroom (not basing his selections on scores or numbers whatsoever) and told their teachers the test predicted these kids were “on the verge of an intense intellectual bloom.” He then followed the students over a period of two years and found a direct correlation between teachers’ expectations and students’ performance. If teachers believed students were going to gain IQ, those students really did gain more IQ points. Rosenthal wanted to know what caused this, and he found that a teachers’ expectation of a student affected her moment-to-moment interactions with that student. For example, teachers tended to take more time answering questions, gave more specific feedback, and offered more approval to the students they expected to succeed (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Maintaining high expectations of all students may be a challenge and will require self-reflection. Ask, “How do my students describe me? Do they see me as an encouraging adult who believes in them?” As teachers, our words and actions are extremely powerful to our students’ lives. We must use them carefully!

6) Provide virtual experiences to help close the opportunity gap.

Students from low-SES families may not have the opportunity to travel to museums, historic sites, or to visit natural parks. Visiting these places provides children with visual and auditory context that can be difficult to duplicate with a simple description. For example, a student who has never been to the beach will have a more difficult time relating to a text about the beach than a student who has traveled there before. While school budgets often prevent field trips from taking place, teachers can provide virtual experiences to their students that give them a

greater opportunity to experience the world around us. The following is a list of sources teachers can use to provide virtual experiences to their students.

The **National Portrait Gallery** provides online exhibitions and lesson plans such as “Americans Now”, “The Struggle for Justice”, and “Faces of the Frontier.” The online exhibitions each contain several photographs and art pieces, along with descriptions for each. The education section can be found at <http://www.npg.si.edu/education/resource2.html>.

In the **Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History**, students are able to take a self-guided tour throughout the entire museum. Certain hotspots allow students to get a close-up of a specific area or to read an informative panel on that exhibit. This resource is excellent, and it gives the impression of actually being in the museum! Check out http://www.mnh.si.edu/panoramas/#_ for the virtual tour.

The **Moon Tour** sponsored by Google Earth allows students to take tours of the landing sites with astronaut narration. Video footage is also provided, and students can even zoom in to see astronauts’ footprints on the moon. Google Earth does have to be downloaded in order for this tour to work, but the download is free. <http://www.google.com/earth/explore/showcase/moon.html> provides takes you to the instructions on how to download Google Earth and use Moon Tour.

Similar in design with the Moon Tour, **Planet in Action** allows students to take a guided tour of the Grand Canyon, Mount St. Helens, Port of Rotterdam, Manhattan, or Disneyland Paris. They can also do some exploring on their own. As you take the virtual tour, a Google Map shows you exactly where you are. You do need the Google Earth plugin for this as well (because of the 3D interaction), but it is free. Explore <http://planetinaction.com/places/> for more information.

TIER TWO: Household Level, Family-Oriented

The second tier reaches one step further into a teacher's sphere of influence and focuses on the teacher-parent relationship. Much research has been conducted over the importance of family influence on student learning. I have focused on practical ways for teachers to foster parental participation in their classrooms.

1) Create useful and meaningful ways for parents to get involved.

The research concerning parental involvement and student achievement is clear: the more parents are involved, the better students perform in school. In fact, according to "A New Wave of Evidence" students with involved parents are more likely to perform better on tests and assignments, pass their classes, have regular school attendance, show increased social skills, and pursue postsecondary degrees (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

With such apparent benefits, how can teachers foster parental involvement in their classrooms? "A New Wave of Evidence" suggests the following practices are effective at supporting families to guide their children's education: interactive homework that involves parents with their children's learning; workshops on topics that parents suggest, like building their children's vocabulary, developing positive discipline strategies, and supporting children through crisis; regular calls from teachers, not just when there are problems, about how their children are doing in class. Lead with something positive; learning packets in reading, science, and math, as well as training in how to use them; and meetings with teachers to talk about their children's progress and what they're learning.

Teachers should strive to involve parents in an authentic manner. Parents do not want to help their children complete "busywork" or feel their help is only needed when the next fundraiser rolls around. It is important to remember that parents may hold negative views of education because of their experience in school. According to Freiberg (1993), student

attendance problems often point towards negative parent attitudes toward school. In fact, parents may even discourage their children from participating in school in an effort to protect them from hurt they experienced during their school career. These parents might be unwilling to participate in school activities or even attend parent-teacher conferences.

Parents may also feel alienated from the learning process or unqualified to help their children. They may be uncertain about teacher expectations or homework procedures. One idea that can be helpful to both teachers and parents is conducting a monthly parent workshop on classroom topics. For example, a 2nd grade teacher from Ohio hosts monthly workshops based on topics she feels would benefit parents (Haynes, 2012). The following table is the workshops she uses in her classroom:

What's the BUZZ?

| | |
|------------------|--|
| September | " Word Their Way " - How does it work? What does homework look like? |
| October | " Report Card Overview " - What does a standards based report card look like? How do I read it for understanding? |
| December | " Reading Comprehension " - A strong reader thinks while reading. How to encourage metacognition! |
| January | " Math Strategies " - What do we do if the first one doesn't work? |
| February | " Writing Workshop " - What is a teaching point? How can I help my child at home? |
| March | " Test Preparation " - How to interpret questions and practice. |
| April | " Regrouping and Algorithms " - This isn't how I was taught! |

Figure 2. Parent workshops hosted in an Ohio classroom. (Haynes, 2012).

As shown in Figure 2, this teacher picks strategic topics to discuss with parents at appropriate times. For example, report cards are typically issued in October and this teacher has chosen this month to discuss with parents what standard-based grading will look like on the report cards. The teacher also explains some of the areas that may be unfamiliar to parents, such as “Words Their Way”, new math strategies, and test preparation. Many things in education have changed in the past several years; parents may be unfamiliar with how teachers are grading,

teaching spelling, or even the general expectations for their students. Rather than excluding parents from this crucial information, teachers should take time to explain what learning looks like in his or her classroom. Inviting the parents into the learning process as an equal partner is an important first step to increasing their involvement with their child's learning.

2) Communicate with families using multiple methods.

Communication is vital to a healthy parent-teacher relationship. Communicating with families helps parents feel connected to the school and understand the importance of their role in the education process. However, just as teachers are expected to differentiate their instruction towards students, it is also important to differentiate their communication with parents. *Literacy Assessment & Intervention for Classroom Teachers* recommends several different methods of communication (Devries, 2011).

A popular form of introductory communication is a letter. An introductory letter provides parents with information about the teacher's interests and education. It can also include goals for the class, any new school standards, and a brief statement of the teacher's personal teaching philosophy. This letter can also give an invitation to parents to become involved in classroom activities. A secondary form of introduction is a Parent-Teacher Conference. Rather than a conference based on discussing a child's academics and behavior, this conference's purpose is to listen to the parents and students and begin forming a relationship. A conference will allow for a more authentic introduction; however, it may be too time-consuming to be realistic for both parents and teachers.

Teachers need to communicate not only at the beginning of a new term but throughout the year as well. Newsletters are one of the most common methods to accomplish this. Teachers should strive to get past newsletters that communicate only one-way. Instead, teachers should

include not only topics being studied in school and classroom announcements, but also suggestions to parents on home activities for their children. Another method is to communicate with bulletin boards. Bulletin boards can provide information about school events, school policies, and even pictures of classroom activities. Teachers can also use telephone calls or e-mails for more specific communication. Telephone calls are especially helpful in communicating positive student decisions.

Teachers also need practical methods to communicate about student performance, both academic and behavioral. One solution is to create portfolios with personal notes. Teachers can send home weekly portfolios with personal notes attached to student work samples as a way to show parents what students are doing in class. Teachers can require parents to sign and return this portfolio if they wish. Some teachers send out “Happy Grams,” when a student demonstrates good behavior.

Other methods often employed include family-teacher conferences, where teachers and families can collaborate on specific goals and needs of the student; the daily welcome where teachers welcome parents and children as they enter the school; or sending home a daily agenda explaining what was accomplished at school with the student.

A method not discussed by the text but commonly used in the classroom is a class website. However, if teachers use their website as a communication tool they should also provide an alternate method of communication (such as a hand-written note or letter) as not all families will have Internet access.

Another idea discussed by Jane Baskwill is creating a “communication station” (Baskwill, 2012). A communication station would be a great way to incorporate several of these recommended communication methods. Baskwill recommends including a featured curriculum

focus, a “try this at home” activity, book recommendations, copy of the classroom newsletter, recent notices/notes sent home to parents, volunteer request and material requests, along with a monthly calendar. In addition to displaying this information, a table can also be provided that includes community pamphlets, safety and health information, and other community-related resources. Putting all communication materials in a central location is helpful to parents and also invites them into the classroom community.

3) Connect families to community resources.

Low SES families may be struggling to meet their everyday needs. Oftentimes, the resources to meet their needs are available, but parents may be unaware of how to access these resources. In Appendix A, I have compiled a list of community resources for the Joplin area. These resources include healthcare clinics, crisis homes and refuges, drug interventions, along with several others. As a teacher, you will not be able to meet the large variety of needs families may have. However, you can direct them to resources that are already available in the community. According to Jensen (2003), “Many of the factors of low socioeconomic status that negatively affect student academic success could be overcome by better educating parents about these essential needs” (p. 39). Giving parents knowledge of community resources that will meet their child’s needs is a critical step in closing the out-of-school opportunity gap.

TIER THREE: City Level, Community-Oriented

The last tier focuses on the teacher’s next sphere of influence, the community. This is the tier the teacher has the least control over and most would need to be done in collaboration with school administration. However, I still chose to include this component because it is the next step in closing the opportunity gap. According to the report “A New Wave of Evidence,” “When

schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more” (p. 7).

1) Partner with area organizations to provide your students with unique opportunities.

Just as teachers can strive to partner parents with already existing resources, teachers can also partner students with existing resources. For example, teachers can work with already existing after-school programs to help make the programs more effective. Some suggestions for linking school-day content with local after-school programs include: form a partnership between after-school program staff and teachers; encourage staff to share ideas and knowledge about the students, observe each other at work, and attend staff development sessions to update and build their teaching skills; inform after-school program about the school’s curriculum and learning programs (especially math and reading); share textbooks and other learning materials; and give program staff information about students’ progress and academic needs (Henderson, 1994).

Other ideas for giving your students unique opportunities from the community might include inviting professionals from the community into your classroom (such as a veterinarian, dentist, or engineer) or scheduling times for students and families to meet at the local library or other community buildings.

2) Partner with area organizations to provide the parents with unique opportunities.

Partnering parents with area organizations may require a school-wide effort but can begin with teacher initiative. Some ideas you can suggest to the school may include: open the school to community groups and agencies that can offer services to families through a family resource center; invite community groups to serve on your school council or school-improvement team; offer job training, career counseling, and other vocational services; provide recreation, arts, and social activities (Henderson, 1994).

Teachers can provide the bridge from family to needs to community resources in a unique way. However, it is important that teachers focus on being the “bridge” rather than just being the solution. It quickly becomes overwhelming and counter-productive if you are expected to solve all of the problems students may face at home.

When looking at the three tiers, one might argue that most of my suggestions focus on everything *but* teaching. It may seem like an impossible list to implement or perhaps appear unrealistic. However, when teachers make an effort to counter the effects of poverty, their teaching becomes much more effective. It does require more effort; however, as research shows, the results are clearly worth it!

Over the past several months, this thesis has evolved and grown several times. It began with an emphasis on after-school programs and community resources, mainly because that was my current focus at the time. However, as I began my research and spent more time in the classroom during the school day, I realized I wanted to address the problems students in poverty face as a classroom teacher rather than as an after-school program director. This was a large shift in my thinking; however, as soon as I made the transfer, my ideas and research began to fall in place.

One frustration of mine as a student studying education is that most research geared towards the classroom is theoretical in nature. I want to know what I can actually do to help my students; not just what researchers think may happen. Therefore, I decided my thesis would be very straightforward and to-the-point. I organized my recommendations into three tiers, wanting to provide teachers with an organized list of best-practice methods.

As a future educator, my research has revealed to me the importance of the family unit within education. Much of my instruction to this point has been focused on teacher-student

interactions with a very small fraction being dedicated to teacher-family interactions. However, I believe the second to be just as valuable as the first. Parents play an important role in helping their children succeed in school.

My research has also underscored the fact that teaching is highly relational. It is critical I establish an environment of compassion and safety in order for my students to be successful. An area I would like to work on is becoming more culturally competent in my teaching as Gloria Ladson-Billings recommends. Incorporating elements of different cultures into everyday lessons would be of great value to my students.

In the future, I would like to continue studying the effects of poverty on education and student learning. Specifically, I would like to study lesson plan adaptations that could be made and look at the lesson's effectiveness in the classroom.

Appendix A:

Community Resources

Community Support Services of Missouri

“Community Support Services of Missouri offers an array of supportive programs for children and adults with developmental disabilities, those with special health and medical needs, and in-home assistive services for individuals of all ages throughout the Southwest Missouri area.”

2312 Annie Baxter Avenue

Joplin, MO 64801

417-624-4515

www.cssmo.org

Children’s Haven of SW MO

Services: temporary home to children ages birth-17 years whose family is experiencing a crisis.

701 Picher

Joplin, MO 64801

(417) 782-4453 or Toll Free: (866) 594- 2836

www.childrenshaven-swmo.org

Access Family Care

Services: Preventive and acute primary care; lab work; pediatrics; OB/ GYN care, including family planning.

530 S. Maiden Lane

Joplin, MO 64801

(417)782-6200

Dental Clinic: (417) 782-0080

Economic Security Corporation

Services: Job training and placement; Energy crisis Intervention; family planning; head start; early head start; Homeless services; housing; outreach; Weatherization; lead reduction services; Earned income credit.

302 S. Joplin Avenue

Joplin, MO 64802

(417) 781-0352

www.escswa.org

The Community Dental Clinic

Services: Dental-tooth extraction, cleanings, and sealants for children ages 4-17years; only for low-income Missouri residents without any type of insurance. Free cleanings from MSSU if individual meets requirement

701 S. Joplin

Joplin, MO 64801

(417) 624-5500

Jasper County Department of Social Services

601 Commercial

Joplin, MO 64802

(417)629-3050

Joplin City Health Department

Services: WIC; immunizations; pregnancy/HIV/STD tests; and birth/death certificates

www.joplinmo.org

321 E. 4th Street

Joplin, MO 64801

(417) 623-6122

Lafayette House

www.lafayettehouse.org

Services: domestic violence and sexual assault crisis intervention; social detox center- women only; counseling; counseling for men ONLY through drug court; safe house for women and children; case management, advocacy; support groups; therapy; residential services; licensed child care; and Spanish translator. Counties: All Southwest Missouri counties for women; drug court only through McDonald and Newton counties

Joplin Shelter: 1809 Connor, Joplin, MO 64804

(417) 782-1772 or (800)416-1772

Neosho Center: 118 W. Spring Street, Neosho, MO 64850

(417) 451- 6106

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