Unveiling School Budget Priorities in High-Poverty Schools: An Educator's Perspective

North American Community: Uniting for Equity

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative descriptive case study explored high school principals' and teachers' perceptions of the consequences of unequal federal and state educational funds in low- and high-income schools. The investigation involved two schools in low socioeconomic areas in the Southeastern United States, with data from interviews and focus group discussions revealing three themes. These themes underscored the influence of limited funding on education quality and teachers' creative responses. The findings underscored the importance of equitable funding, professional development, and improved student outcomes, offering recommendations for education leaders.

Keywords: Inequitable Funding, Education Outcomes, Principals, Teachers, Educational Policy, Low-Income Communities.

INTRODUCTION

Students from low socioeconomic status (S.E.S.) encounter significant barriers to academic success, stemming from economic challenges like financial instability, limited resource access, and suboptimal quality of life. These obstacles have adverse effects on both mental and physical well-being. Lower household income correlates with reduced school readiness and overall academic preparedness (Williams et al., 2019). The connection between low S.E.S. and lower high school graduation rates underscores the need for interventions, with increased   education funding identified as a potential strategy to mitigate these challenges.

Federal law mandates financial assistance to underprivileged school districts, requiring enhancements to academic and non-academic programs, including hiring additional educators and counselors (Ferguson et al., 2018). Increasing the number of educators proportionate to the student population is a crucial strategy to improve academic performance and reduce dropout rates (Ching & Roberts, 2022). However, per-pupil expenditures for K-12 public school districts in low-income communities, exemplified by urban Chicago, significantly lag behind more affluent districts, leading to lower enrollment rates (Hanson, 2021). Principals in low S.E.S. districts perceive less discretion in allocating state-provided funds, affecting teacher morale and school effectiveness (Nadelson et al., 2020).

A historical bias favoring resource allocations to higher-income schools raises concerns about the adequacy of additional state funding for low S.E.S. districts to bridge the resource gap (Allegretto et al., 2022). Principals and schools in low-income communities observe inequitable resource allocation, highlighting gaps in funding that impact education, as described in a descriptive case study featuring high school principals

and teachers in low-socioeconomic communities (England et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework on Inequitable Funding of Low-income Schools

The theoretical framework of this study is informed by four key frameworks: reflective theory, motivational theory, resource-dependence theory, and pragmatism. Reflective theory, as proposed by Salancik and Pfeffer (1978), emphasizes the importance of reflection in personal learning. Motivational theory posits that motivation significantly influences individual actions and willingness to engage in learning-related tasks. Resource-dependence theory, also proposed by Salancik and Pfeffer (1978), suggests that institutions, particularly schools in low-income communities, heavily rely on federal and state funding, highlighting the necessity of adequate funding to create environments conducive to learning. Pragmatism, a paradigm for understanding and solving problems (Borges & Revez, 2019), underpins the studies of three foundational theories.

The existing literature review indicated persistent racial inequalities in education, as demonstrated by Weathers and Sosina (2022). Their examination of segregation and school separation between White and historically marginalized students throughout the U.S. reveals widespread racial inequalities in education enrollment and teacher hiring. Pearman (2021) supports these findings, reporting collective racial bias in education since the country's inception, particularly disadvantaging ethnic minority groups such as the Black community. Goldstone et al. (2021) confirmed these results, uncovering historical racial disparities in education and other services that disadvantage ethnic minorities and favor White communities. The cumulative evidence emphasizes the enduring racial inequalities in the American education system.

Economic Inequity Factors

Research on educational inequity in the United States has traditionally employed an agent-centric approach, emphasizing personalized learning opportunities outside the conventional classroom setting (Allouch et al., 2021). The widening academic achievement gaps in the U.S., particularly since the 1980s, have been linked to rising income inequality (Boterman et al., 2019). Sengönül (2022) found that students from low socioeconomic families in low-income communities tend to exhibit weaker educational outcomes, while Azevedo et al. (2022) identified a positive relationship between a student's socioeconomic status and self-regulated learning skills, ultimately influencing academic performance.

Family Factors

Educational inequity, often linked to family income, is attributed to differences in available resources affecting academic support (Goldstone et al., 2021; Cooper & Stewart, 2020). Non-White students in low-income families are willing to incur financial debt for education, but this debt poses challenges to achieving a higher standard of living (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). Family-related causes of absenteeism, affecting educational attainment, are not solely income-related, with family problems impacting low-income students disproportionately (Seward & Gentry, 2022). Caring responsibilities, predominant in low-income environments, suggest potential financial impacts on families. Absenteeism, influenced by stress, anxiety, truancy, illness, or family needs, affects academic success, highlighting the importance of addressing underlying reasons for missing school (Yell, 2022; Hancock et al., 2018).

STUDY DESIGN

The study was guided by a qualitative method because of its emphasis on subjective meanings and interpretations of personal experiences, phenomena, and cultural

symbols. The descriptive case study design was used because the unit of analysis for the study was the individual, not an organization or institution. The research questions addressed phenomena outside the boundaries of the organizations on which the study was focused. The theoretical framework that contributed to the development of the study's design included reflective theory, motivational theory, resource-dependence theory, and pragmatism.

Purpose of the Study

The study focused on investigating the perceptions of high school principals and teachers regarding the impact of inequitable distribution of federal and state educational funds on educational outcomes in two high schools with low socioeconomic statuses in the Southeastern United States. The research had four main objectives, which involved polling principals and teachers to gather information on a) personal perceptions of the adequacy of federal and state educational funding, b) instructional challenges and educational outcomes associated with the current funding levels, c) strategies implemented to improve instruction and address learning gaps, and d) potential solutions to foster successful educational outcomes. The research questions guiding the study were not explicitly provided in the interview questions.

Research Questions

R1: How do high school teachers describe inequities in distributing federal and state educational funds in two low-income high schools in the Southeastern United States?

R2: How do high school principals describe inequities in distributing federal and state educational funds in two low-income high schools in the Southeastern United States?

Problem

The inequitable distribution of federal and state educational funds, particularly in low-income schools, is a critical issue impacting educational outcomes (Weather & Sosina, 2022). Despite efforts in national educational policies (Skerritt, 2023; Schofer et al., 2021), access to quality education remains challenging in low-income communities, contributing to educational

disparities (McFarland et al., 2019). Allegretto et al. (2022) emphasize that federal policies aimed at equitable funding allocation have not effectively addressed the problem, resulting in continued funding disparities for low-income communities. The persisting issue of inadequate funding underscores the urgent need for policy changes and increased funding to ensure educational equity and equal opportunities for all students, regardless of socioeconomic background.

Methods

The qualitative descriptive case study focused on principals and teachers in two high schools in a low-income community in the Southeastern United States. The target population is aged 25-55, with a minimum of two years of teaching or administrative experience in low-income schools, representing diverse ethnic backgrounds. Ethical approvals were obtained from the institution and two high schools. Informed consent was secured from principals and teachers before interviews were conducted on the Zoom platform. A purposive sampling strategy was employed, selecting four principals and 18 teachers with the requisite knowledge and experience for the study. Participants were asked for their consent at the beginning of the interviews. The collected data from semi-structured interviews and a focus group underwent inductive and deductive analysis to identify patterns and themes. The study design acknowledged the complexity of environmental factors, such as educational funding and resource availability, as Volmar and Eisenhardt (2020) discussed.

Data Analysis

Analyzing individual interviews and a focus group discussion systematically identified themes, patterns, and participant opinions. The data analysis involved transcription verification, reflexivity coding, constant comparison analysis, category construction, theme generation, and achieving data saturation. The study employed an

inductive process aligned with its methodology and design to evaluate research questions by uncovering patterns and themes in the data.

Following the interviews and focus group discussion, the coding phase began, starting with open coding to categorize repeated words, sentences, thoughts, or concepts expressed by participants. The transcripts were thoroughly reviewed to produce initial codes and then recorded on hard copies. Excerpts from participants' responses, describing single ideas relevant to the research questions, were identified, resulting in 127 relevant data excerpts across 11 transcripts. These were assigned to 18 open codes, with Table 1 summarizing the frequencies of these codes in participant responses.

Table 1

Open Code Frequencies

Open Code	n of Data Excerpts Assigned from Interviews	n of Data Excerpts Assigned from Focus Group
Alternative resources were brought in by teachers	3	2
Challenge of using personal resources	9	6
Collaborating with other teachers	6	2
Finding creative ways to engage students in critical thinking	7	–
Impediment to differentiated instruction	–	4
Lack of hands-on learning	8	1
Lack of student engagement	6	–
Lack of technology can result in low student engagement	8	–
Making real-world connections is a challenge	6	1
Professional development and learning communities served as a resource	4	4
Resources may not align with state standards	–	3
Seminars served as a resource	9	7
Success and challenges in creating resources	4	2
Success in relating to students	3	–
Success is associated with access to resources	1	6
Teacher training served as a resource	4	3
Teachers using personal funds to buy supplies	5	–
Using audio-visuals to increase student engagement	3	–
	86	41

RESULTS

Theme 1: Lack of Funds Associated with a Lower Quality of Educational Experience

Theme 1, derived from research question one, encompasses how high school teachers in two low-income high schools in the Southeastern United States describe inequities in the distribution of federal and state educational funds. All participants in individual interviews and the focus group discussion contributed to this theme. The findings revealed that inadequate educational funding was linked to lower-quality education, hindering differentiated instruction tailored to address individual learners' needs. This limitation led to reduced student engagement due to the inability to afford activities and resources, a lack of hands-on learning to make abstract concepts concrete, challenges in establishing real-world connections with the curriculum, and restricted access to resources necessary for academic success.

Impediment to Differentiated Instruction

Three individual interview participants and one focus group discussion participant expressed that insufficient funding hinders the implementation of differentiated instruction. Participant 4 emphasized that limited resources affect teaching skills and students' learning experiences, describing differentiated instruction as crucial for reaching learners at specific times. Participant 5 noted a more significant negative impact on students below grade level, stating that limited resources widen the educational gap for these students. Participant 10 commented that the lack of resources makes differentiated instruction more challenging, saying that it hampers teaching skills by limiting the variety of instructional approaches available to address diverse learning needs.

Lack of Hands-on Learning

Four individual interview participants and two focus group discussion participants expressed the belief that a lack of funds results in a lower quality of education precisely

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due to the absence of hands-on learning experiences. Participant 7 noted how the shortage of funds led to a lack of manipulatives for teaching geometric principles, negatively impacting students' understanding. Participant 13 echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that the lack of funds deprived math and science students of crucial hands-on learning experiences to help make abstract concepts concrete. Participant 19 concurred, underscoring the importance of hands-on learning for better comprehension. To illustrate, Participant 19 highlighted the financial challenges in acquiring a full-size skeleton for teaching anatomy and physiology, emphasizing the impediment to facilitating hands-on learning experiences due to limited funds.

Making Real-World Connections is a Challenge

One individual interview participant and three focus group discussion participants highlighted that insufficient funding harms the quality of education by presenting challenges in integrating real-world applications into classroom instruction. Participant 3 explained in an interview that the lack of resources led to a teaching style overly reliant on textbooks, limiting the inclusion of real-world examples and activities. Participant 20 cited examples illustrating how funding limitations hinder teachers from exposing students to real-world applications, including field trips and professional interactions. Participant 18 emphasized the importance of real-world applications for developing problem-solving skills and expressed frustration over the constraints imposed by a lack of resources. Participant 15 voiced concern that the lack of funding deprives low-income students of real-world applications, potentially resulting in a disconnect between their education and the real world.

Success is Associated with Access to Resources

Six individual interview participants and one focus group discussion participant argued that a lack of funding is associated with a lower quality of education because data and student performance indicators consistently pointed to unmet resource needs. Participant 1 highlighted that data analysis often revealed resource deficiencies for low-performing and higher-performing

students. Participant 2 actively sought external resources, demonstrating a proactive approach to address resource gaps, particularly for struggling students. Participant 6 discussed using online supplemental resources, explicitly mentioning the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company program, underscoring the need for additional materials to supplement existing resources.

Theme 2: Lack of Funds Associated with Teachers Finding Creative Ways to Improve
Education Quality

Theme 2, stemming from research question one, encapsulates how high school teachers in two low-income high schools in the Southeastern United States describe inequities in the distribution of federal and state educational funds. All individual interview and focus group discussion participants contributed to Theme 2. Teachers commented on the lack of funding, depriving students of resources linked to high-quality education, and required teachers to employ creative strategies to compensate for resource deficiencies. These strategies included collaborative resource sharing among teachers, innovative approaches to engage students in critical thinking, establishing stronger connections with students for increased engagement, using personal funds to purchase classroom supplies, and utilizing cost-effective audio-visual tools to enhance student engagement.

Collaborating with Other Teachers

Three interview participants and two focus group participants highlighted the value of collaborating with other teachers to share resources as a valuable strategy to partially address the adverse effects of funding shortfalls on the quality of education. Participant 7 emphasized the significant collaboration with other teachers pooling resources for students. Participant 10 stressed the effectiveness of technology-enabled

collaborations, allowing teachers to find and share resources online. Participant 19 described reaching out to teachers in other departments to obtain resources for promoting student's critical thinking and extending collaboration beyond their department. Participant 16 reported collaborating with other teachers to share strategies for teaching essential thinking skills, acknowledging the benefits of learning from fellow professionals.

Finding Creative Ways to Engage Students in Critical Thinking

Five focus group participants shared strategies for creatively engaging students in critical thinking. Participant 12 described implementing a "discussion-based curriculum," where students lead the discourse around critical thinking questions. Participant 13 reported employing a strategy focusing on higher-order thinking skills, asking students to explain their answers rather than providing closed-ended questions. Participant 14 engaged students in real-world problem-solving exercises stemming from the practical issue of lacking electronic equipment for an audio-visual class project. The students took the initiative to fundraise for the needed equipment, demonstrating a practical approach to problem-solving and resource acquisition.

Success in Relating to Students

Three focus group participants shared strategies for using audio-visual presentations and activities as a cost-effective means to increase student engagement when faced with a lack of funds for other resources. Participant 11 reported using audio-visual games and interactive activities to enhance engagement, catering to students' preferences. Participant 15 described using personal funds to create audio-visual presentations, employing PDF files and an overhead projector to project visuals onto the classroom wall, demonstrating resourcefulness despite limited financial support. Participant 20 highlighted using YouTube videos as a free resource to support visual learners when additional visual materials were not readily available due to budget constraints.

Teachers Using Personal Funds to Buy Supplies

Four focus group participants discussed using personal funds to purchase classroom supplies. Participant 18 mentioned dipping into personal pockets to fill the gap in resources needed for critical thinking development due to limited school resources. Participant 19 acknowledged receiving donations from friends and still having to spend personal funds on classroom supplies. Participant 20 expressed intense frustration and emotional distress at the perceived detriment to students' education due to a lack of funds. This led to personal spending to address the shortfall in necessary resources.

Using Audio-Visuals to Increase Student Engagement

Three focus group discussion participants discussed using audio-visual presentations and activities as a cost-effective strategy to enhance student engagement in the face of funding limitations. P11 highlighted using audio-visual games, emphasizing their effectiveness in aiding students' understanding. P15 shared the practice of using personal funds to create audio-visual presentations using PDF files and an overhead projector, demonstrating a commitment to overcoming resource constraints. Additionally, P20 mentioned utilizing free resources, such as YouTube videos, to support visual learners and address the challenges posed by funding limitations.

Theme 3: Lack of Funds Associated with Lower Education Outcomes

Theme 3, arising from research question two, encompasses how high school principals perceive disparities in allocating federal and state educational funds in two low-income schools in the Southeastern United States. All participants in individual interviews and focus group discussions contributed to this theme. One participant highlighted the connection between inadequate district funds and diminished educational outcomes, emphasizing that teachers' funds were insufficient to address resource

deficiencies. Participants noted limitations in teachers' ability to generate or access free resources. Additionally, the lack of funding was associated with lower educational outcomes, as teacher-funded, teacher-created, and teacher-sourced resources did not always align with state instructional standards.

Challenge of Using Personal Resources

Seven individual interview participants and six focus group participants conveyed that personal resources were insufficient to fully address the resource shortfalls linked to the lack of district funds. P5 emphasized the financial and emotional burdens on teachers who spent time and money acquiring student resources, leading to stress and unpreparedness. P4 highlighted the challenges faced by new, lower-paid teachers in compensating for district fund shortages. P12 discussed the limitations imposed on teachers using personal funds, emphasizing the constrained creativity based on personal budgets. P16 mentioned the financial strain on educators, expressing the ineffectiveness of this approach in mitigating the negative impact on low-income students' educational outcomes. Participants questioned the fairness and efficacy of expecting teachers to cover resource gaps with personal funds.

Lack of Technology can Result in Low Student Engagement

Four focus group participants emphasized that the lack of resources is linked to lower educational outcomes as it hinders students' access to technology, thereby reducing teachers' ability to engage students effectively. P11 discussed the impact of not having a one-to-one iPad-to-student ratio, resulting in disengagement and poor learning outcomes. The absence of iPads hindered collaborative research and group work, limiting students' problem-solving abilities. P12 echoed the sentiment, highlighting the challenge of relying on technology for student engagement when lacking sufficient funding for resources like iPads. Both participants emphasized the importance of technology in maintaining student engagement and the negative consequences of funding constraints on learning outcomes.

Resources May Not Align with State Standards

Three individual interview participants emphasized concerns that resources created, found, or purchased by teachers to compensate for district resource shortfalls might not lead to adequate educational outcomes for low-income students and may not align with state academic standards. P2 expressed uncertainty about aligning such resources with state-mandated tests, raising questions about their effectiveness in helping students. P9 discussed the challenge of finding resources that precisely align with the curriculum being taught. Additionally, P8 linked the lack of educational resources to poor performance on standardized tests, drawing on personal experience in different schools with varying resource availability and the subsequent impact on student outcomes. This impact suggests a potential mismatch between teacher-created resources and state standards, posing challenges to achieving desired educational outcomes.

Success and Challenges in Creating Resources

Three individual interview participants and two focus group participants shared their experiences creating student resources, highlighting some success. However, they emphasized that the capacity to develop resources was insufficient to fully compensate for the resource shortfalls associated with the lack of district funding. P15 illustrated the contrast between teachers with necessary resources spending minimal time on lesson preparation and her situation, where the absence of resources required extensive creative efforts and significantly more time. P20 echoed the time-consuming nature of finding appropriate resources online, mentioning specific platforms like Read Works and materials related to math theory. Additionally, P2 described spending a substantial portion of planning periods searching for additional resources to address deficits, reflecting the challenges arising from the lack of readily available educational materials.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study underscores the significance of unequal funding for low-income schools, particularly the disproportionate distribution of federal and state funds, leading to educational disparities. Previous research highlights the detrimental impact of insufficient educational funding on classroom outcomes. The issue has wide-ranging implications for all educational stakeholders. Recognizing the interplay of socioeconomic identity, funding distribution, and their roles in educational inequality, educators and policymakers are urged to collaborate for a more equitable educational system. Addressing the root causes requires systemic changes, emphasizing increased engagement from students, families, and communities in school reform initiatives, ultimately empowering them to access deserved educational opportunities.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A significant limitation of the study relates to generalizing participant perceptions to other contexts. Some participants might lack awareness of the schools' exact federal and state funding levels, potentially affecting the study's comprehensiveness. The study's applicability is primarily confined to the specific school district in the Southeastern United States where participants were recruited. The sample size was limited by eliminating participants who lacked knowledge or belief in using federal and state funding for educational purposes.

CONCLUSIONS

This article reviewed and conducted research on funding disparities in low-income schools, highlighting the challenges principals and teachers face. Findings indicated differences in educational access and outcomes in a portion of the United States, influenced by economic inequality, family dynamics, and academic policies that reaffirmed historical disparities for marginalized groups. The literature suggested adequate policies, such as the Every Student

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Succeeds Act (2015), to address these disparities. Multicultural education is seen as promoting racial tolerance, and recommendations include enhancing teacher-student relationships and addressing curriculum structures. The strategies provide educators with the tools necessary to create this change by combining students' everyday lived culture/context with learning objectives within the classroom (Capper, 2022). This article also discusses the reflective theory, emphasizing the importance of reflection in personal learning.

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