
The Study of High-minority and High-poverty Schools and the Role of Educational Leader

This study is aimed at looking at high-minority and high-poverty schools and whether an educational leader can improve that school with a culture change and what tactics can be used to improve the school through competent leadership.

During my time as an educator, I have mostly had the pleasures (and occasional pains) of teaching mostly students who were either members of a minority group or lived at or below the poverty line. I have counted myself fortunate as I have taught in schools that were very high performing, so those students, who would be considered highly at-risk in other environments, generally performed well in the classroom and on state-sponsored standardized tests. I noticed this and I have always been curious as to why some schools perform better than others when they have a similar student population. So, I began to ask myself some questions:

- What causes minority and high-poverty students to be less engaged in school overall?
- What can a principal or any other educational leader do to increase engagement in minority and high-poverty students from a school-wide perspective?
- What sort of culture would be most successful in building student engagement amongst minority and high-poverty students?
- What results could be reasonably expected from a high-engagement culture change for said students?

With those questions in mind, I decided to look into the literature covered by these topics and to come my own conclusions based on the research and evidence produced so far. To locate my literature, I used the databases ESBCO, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and ERIC. I used the keywords and searches poverty and school performance, race and school performance, educational leadership, educational leadership and poverty, educational leadership and race, and leadership. This research was found with the idea that I would try to find the links between a school's leadership and whether that had an effect over the student's and their scholastic performance.

To look at each question, I have decided to break down into four categories.

- The causes of less engagement amongst minority and impoverished students.
- Mechanisms and culture used by leadership to engage the students.
- Impact of school leadership overall.

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The causes of minority and impoverished students having less success in the classroom are numerous and varied. First, to state the obvious, you must acknowledge a commonality of the two groups. “The poverty rate in the United States is highest for African Americans with 40% officially poor and Latinos, with 38% officially poor.” (Lyman, p. 247) In short, the two groups are often, but not always connected. But, as Lyman later states, 13% of white children are also officially poor. (Lyman, p.247). Lyman, et al. also notes that “children who live in poverty score lower on standardized tests are more likely to be retained or to drop out of school.” (Lyman, pp. 259-50) This will affect a very large portion of the student population, especially in areas where the majority of the students have a minority background or would be considered living in poverty. Lyman, et al. also notes that poverty affects a child’s development by affecting their daily nutrition, having the children deal with possible abandonment, and anxiety caused by the sometimes-traumatic living situations that these children will find themselves in. You will also see that children in poverty will be more at-risk for substance abuse, abuse, and a lack of quality care. (Lyman p. 250)

Poverty is not just a problem at schools in the United States. It also affects the students of other countries as well. But while the education systems may differ, the factors that we use to compare the education levels of different countries still apply. One of these key factors is literacy. As noted in the study by Pretorius, et al., Africa is a continent where poverty is widespread and that poverty does not “create enabling contexts for literacy development.” (Pretorius, p. 40) Of course, the schools that are in impoverished regions also have “inadequate physical resources, overcrowded classrooms and inadequate materials and books.” (Pretorius, p. 40) This also seems to be an issue in low-income regions in the United States as well.

As the students in poverty get older, they will also be expected to take on responsibilities around their homes. This means that many of them will have jobs to cover their expenses. In fact, the Bachman, et al. study is based around the idea that students who spend “long hours in paid employment in the school year are at increased risk of lower grades.” (Bachman, p. 2125) Of course, this is not only for students in poverty, but students who have parents with more education typically worked fewer hours than students whose parents had less education. (Bachman, p. 2131)

Li, et al., through their study of high-poverty middle school students, came to the conclusion that there is “a significant association between academic commitment, emotional control, family involvement, school climate, and academic performance over time.” (Li, p. 187) Their idea is that there are many factors that lead to success in the classroom for students in high-poverty backgrounds.

Results from a study in Mexico led to the idea that there is multiple factors that affect can lead to success in the classroom for impoverished students. These factors include “cognitive

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abilities, positive attitudes toward schools, subjective well-being, and parental practices that provide structure.” (Palomar-Lever, pp. 687-88) With the issues that students who live in poverty, it should not be surprising that they have issues that would lead to less engagement in scholastic activities.

But race is also a major factor, at least in schools in the United States. According Lewis's study of race and education in New Orleans, “nearly 60 percent of black fourth-grade students read below basic literacy levels in comparison with only 25 percent of white fourth grade students. (Lewis, p. 158) These numbers also hold for students in higher grades as well, except for white students having an increase in literacy levels. As Lewis notes, most schools with predominately black students have inferior facilities, weaker curricula, outdated materials, and teachers that are either less-experienced or qualified, as well as high teacher turnover. (Lewis, p. 159)

However, as the Griffin, et al. study notes, there is not much study into the causes of how a school's racial climate affects the nations primary and secondary schools (Griffin, p. 674). The Griffin, et al. study also suggests that it was not a school's racial makeup that was the issue, but rather the way in which those children were treated that actually made the difference between lower and higher academic achievement. The Clayton, et al. study on diversity found that schools where the students were diverse and not racially segregated performed as well as schools that were predominately white. They also noted that racial composition had a larger effect on history and science than with mathematics and reading. (Clayton, p. 675)

Another study by Sims suggests that there is another factor that is not-related to the poverty or race itself, but rather towards how schools with high-minority and poverty students that begin seeing a drop in standardized tests will see a continual drop because of the nature of accountability programs. (Sims, p. 273) So, his idea is that years of test scores, not necessarily poverty or race, are more instrumental in determining a school's performance. (Sims, p. 273)

So, it seems that both of these factors will affect the achievement of students in an academic setting, but what can be done about it at a school level?

Mechanisms and Culture

School principals are expected to lead their schools in an ethical and competent manner while also educating and influencing the students under their leadership. Many times they are put into situations where the school has been either in a state of decline or the failure for years. In many cases, this can be a daunting task for even the most exceptional leaders. But, it can be done.

The Shapira-Lishchinsky, et al. study looked at a school's ethical climate as a predictor of the behaviors of the school's teaching staff. In their study, they focused on different leadership

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styles (transactional, transformational, and authentic) and how those styles affected the teachers at a school. They discovered that there was a high correlation between principals that exhibited high moral character and utilized the three styles of leadership and the positive affect that it had on the faculty of their schools. (Shapira-Lishchinsky, pp. 505-6) As pointed out earlier, one of the major factors affecting minority and impoverished students is that of high teacher turnover. The Shapira-Lishchinsky, et al. study seems to imply that a positive work environment and ethical leadership are critical for schools with minority and poverty level students.

Gomez-Hurtado et al. believe that principals should also be more actively involved with the management of cultural diversity in their schools. "Diversity management by principals must therefore encourage an inclusive culture that approaches the differences of all pupils through the promotion of professional development, networking between professionals and schools, the involvement of families, and the celebration of diversity as a positive and intrinsic aspect of human nature." (Gomez-Hurtado, p. 454) In short, they believe that a principal who embraces diversity will have a better school atmosphere and culture.

In a study comparing Chile's educational leadership practices to those of other countries, Marfan, et al. suggest that the relationship between student learning and leadership is complicated and is usually affected by the principal's attitudes towards the students. In other words, principals will adapt to their surroundings and probably implement a system that is appropriate for the school where they work.

Young, et al. believe that the proper training of educational leaders is a huge factor in the success of the nation's schools. In fact, their report is essentially a cheerleader for the Every Student Succeeds Act, which is a law built around the idea of strengthening the training of educational leaders. The idea is simple: because so much of a school's success is determined by its leadership, then better training for educational leaders is critical for the improvement and success of our schools. (Young, p. 723)

Drysdale and Gurr wrote that educators are always leading in uncertain and changing times. They believe that educational leadership is based in seven key categories: understanding the context, setting the direction, developing the organization, developing people, improving teaching and learning, influencing, and leading the self. By doing each of these things, an educator will be better able to lead their schools to academic success in both the short-term and into an uncertain and changing future. (Drysdale, pp. 133-151)

Darius Prier believe that leaders should find ways to engage the communities around their schools to help spur positive educational outcomes, especially in minority communities. He argues that because of the issues of systemic racism and marginalization, minority communities

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are critical in school development. He believes that leaders should bring these communities in, work with them, and use them to establish the culture of the school. In fact, in his mind, the culture should be based around the community. This means that a leader has to be more of a transformational and authentic leader because they must be humble and in solidarity with the people of the community and school. While this is certainly true in almost any context, he believes that is essential in black communities. (Prier, pp. 46-47) Mimi Chapman advocates for better usage of communities as well, but her work was more based around school counselors and social workers. However, when mixed with the ideas of Prier, you can see that the idea of community clearly looms large in dealing with minority schools.

In fact, community involvement is a major player in social justice leadership, which is an idea that educational leaders be trained in leading through social justice. By preparing principals to be better engaged in social justice concepts and causes, you can see more transformative leadership and a viable change in a schools performance and success. (Bertrand, p. 25-26) Of course, you must have both the students, parents, and community involved in this initiative. Melanie Bertrand also suggests doing this through youth participatory action research or YPAR. In short, this means that she supports schools getting student input in the process of making new policies and creating a better environment for the students. This also helped the students become better leaders on their campuses as well and contributed to a better culture around the school. (Bertrand, p. 387)

According to Capper, et al, suggests that there should be more collaborative leadership, especially when a principal is trying to practice social justice leadership. They also feel that the environment should be inclusive for all students and backgrounds, making “increased student learning and achievement the primary goal of their work” (Capper, p. 163), attune themselves to the students’ differences and where they intersect. (Capper, p. 163) In her case study on social justice leadership on schools in Ontario, Canada, Fei Wang believed that principals set the tone for the school and this would lead to better efforts to solve social justice issues at the school level, which would also increase academic achievement and bridge any achievement gaps that might exist. (Wang, pp. 490-494)

Hirn, et al. adds another wrinkle in that better economic and social policies are needed to see success in schools. However, teachers who utilize active instruction and take advantage of empirically proven techniques will find that their school’s achievement gaps will shrink. Of course, a principal can make this a vital part of the school’s educational plans and they may see a rise in achievement throughout the entire school and not just in individual teachers’ classrooms. (Hirn. p. 45)

It seems like most of the literature in this review seemed to suggest that a leader who pushes collaborative leadership, fairness, strong academic focuses in the classroom, teacher

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proficiency, community outreach, and ethically just leadership will see an improvement in schools of all backgrounds, but most especially, those schools with students who come from minority and impoverished backgrounds.

Impact

While most of the literature did not give specific examples (or numbers for that matter) of cases where the mechanisms and culture of a transformative and collaborative leader could change a failing school into a successful school, nearly all of the articles agreed that this sort of leadership would show more positive outcomes in the attitudes of the teachers and students, which would lead to academic growth. It especially makes sense that leaders who set high expectations on staff, provide support for both teacher and students, give a voice to the students and the community, and practice ethical leadership will see transformative effect on the overall culture of the school and lead to better success at both an academic level, but also in reputational level. Strong leadership is critical for any school, but is most needed in schools where the achievement gaps are pronounced and the students have distinct challenges that hinder them in their efforts to become academically successful.

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