The Role of a Leader in High-Poverty Schools

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Abstract

The problem of practice that I investigated in this inquiry research paper is that of poverty in the public school system, and the role that those in leadership positions in high-poverty schools play in the success of those schools. The methodology included in this study is twofold: a review of the literature, and an interview that was conducted with a community partner whom had relevant expertise to offer. What was found through these two forms of data collection was that there are certain characteristics of leaders in high-poverty schools that contribute to the success of those schools. The characteristics identified in this research are leaders that have high expectations for their staff and students, leaders that value the development of their staff, and leaders that focus on improving their school environment both physically and relationally. The conclusion drawn from this study is that the role of leadership in high-poverty schools can have a large impact on the success of the school's academic success. The implications drawn from this research is that the role of leadership in high-poverty schools ought to be more highly valued and developed.

Keywords: **high-poverty, school, leadership**

Background

One of the largest and most daunting problems that we face in our communities, our state, our county, and our world is poverty. This issue undoubtedly impacts our public schools and students in an incredibly complex way. This issue is not a new one. In fact, America has declared war on poverty for over 56+ years. "In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared 'unconditional war on poverty in America.' While acknowledging the difficulty of "winning" such a war, Johnson said that the United States "shall not rest until that war is won... We cannot afford to lose it" (ASCD, 2015, P. 8). The result of Johnson's efforts were many acts and programs intended to help snuff out the daunting problem facing our country. Fast forward 56 years, and despite our efforts this problem is still alive and growing. One way we see the pervasiveness of this problem is in the public school system. "For the first time in recent history, the majority of U.S. public school students now live in poverty. According to the Southern Education Foundation (SEF), 51 percent of the students attending the nation's public schools now come from low-income households" (ASCD, 2015, p. 5). Numbers this large are bound to have a negative impact on not only our students, but our nation at large.

> "This affects not just students but our nation's future. 'We've reached the juncture in our public schools where the education of low-income students is not simply a matter of equity and fairness. It's a matter of our national future, because when one group becomes the majority of our students, they define what that future is going to be in education more than any other group'" (ASCD, 2015, p. 5).

The future of our nation is riding on the education of our students. When over half of the population of those students are fighting a life consuming battle such as poverty, education tends to take a back seat.

Statement of the Problem

The issue of poverty is infiltrating the public school system in an incredibly complex and daunting way. " In SY(School Year) 2015-16 more than 55,906 public schools across the country used Title I funds to provide additional academic support and learning opportunities to help low-achieving children" (US Department of Education, 2018). However, there is one glimmer of hope amongst the struggle. There are some high-poverty schools that are showing great academic success. "... there are also striking exceptions to the pattern of low income/low performance. There are enough schools that defy the trend to prove that the background of the student body does not have to determine achievement results" (Kannapel & Clements, 2005, p. 1). The problem lies in a need to understand what these schools are doing right. They very well may be holding the key to change that our public schools so desperately need, but we don't seem to be looking to them for help.

Justification of the Study

The purpose of my project is to identify characteristics of school leaders in high-poverty, high-achieving schools. The issue of poverty in public schools is urgent simply because it affects such a large number of students. Statements like this "...51 percent of the students attending the nation's public schools now come from low-income households…"(ASCD, 2015. p. 5) really puts the mass quantity of students living in poverty into perspective. This data means that in a class of 24 students, at least 13 of them are coming to class with a burden on their backs that will distract them from their education. Due to this number, the issue of poverty in public schools is something that every classroom teacher and faculty member will need to learn how to navigate, as it is an unavoidable issue. This is urgent to the profession because if administration, teachers, and faculty members are uneducated on the issue/how to be successful in spite of this issue, they

will undoubtedly not serve their high poverty students well, causing their unequal chance at a quality education due to the burden of poverty to grow. My hope is to research and identify what it is that those in leadership positions in high-poverty schools are doing to help their high-poverty students succeed. With an issue this large, any bit of success needs to be noted and capitalized on.

Positionality

This problem of poverty is personal to me, which is why I feel passionate about helping find a solution to the way it affects education. When I was a junior in high school my parents got a divorce, causing our household income to basically be cut in half, putting us under the poverty line. I had to get a job to pay for my gas and personal things, and to help pay the utility bills when things were tight. However, the public school I attended was in an affluent town and continued to provide me with a quality education, despite my family's struggle. I would say that I was definitely in the minority group at that school as far as SES goes. My teachers were well trained, we had programs to help students that were struggling, great afterschool programs, and I still had plenty of opportunity to succeed there. However, I have many family members that live in towns and attend schools that have a much higher percentage of low-income students. The time and effort poured into their education and well-being in high school was nowhere near what I received, because their school had a much bigger issue on their hands. It doesn't feel fair to me that I received a better education simply because the school I attended was made up of upper-class students. I want to know what these high-poverty schools can be doing, despite their SES, to provide their students with a quality education. In my review of the literature, I explore many texts that have led me to believe that quality school leadership can play a mighty role in high-poverty schools being able to serve their students well.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

One of the largest issues facing our public schools in the United States is income inequality and poverty. There is no doubt that an issue so large would affect our public schools, and many of them. High-poverty schools are characterized as having 75% or more of their students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. In 2017, the percentage of students attending high-poverty schools (25%) surpassed those attending low-poverty schools (21%) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). When more students are attending high-poverty schools than low-poverty schools, the issue becomes urgent, especially for those in the field of education that will be facing this issue head-on. Chenoweth and Theokas (2013) note that "...it is depressing to look at one of those graphs that show schools by percentage of low-income students on the *x* axis and academic achievement on the *y* axis. The steep slope down and to the right seems to demonstrate an iron law of probability: High-income schools have high achievement; low-income schools have low achievement" (p. 56). While this is often the case, there are some schools that are defying this "iron law" that high-poverty schools have low achievement. "These schools offer hope that all is not lost in the essential bargain that the United States offers its citizens: a fair start for all children"(Chenoweth, 2010, p. 16), and it seems the common denominator in these schools is that "They all have excellent school leaders"(Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013, p. 57). I would like to know more about the role leadership plays in the success of high-poverty schools.

This paper is designed to investigate what literature is saying about the role of leadership in high-poverty school's success. The focus of this review of literature is on high-poverty, high achieving schools, and the actions their leaders are taking to help them be successful. If there are

some high-poverty schools that have found the secret to success despite their barrier of poverty, it is of the utmost importance that the tactics and actions they are taking are researched and shared. This review of literature will be divided into three sections, each presenting a set of literature supporting a common theme surrounding the topic of leadership tactics in high-poverty schools that lead to success. The sections include leaders holding high expectations for their students, taking actions to continuously develop their staff, and striving to improve the school environment.

Summary of the Literature

Leadership and High Expectations

While searching the literature and reading articles about the effect leadership has on high-poverty school success, a common theme kept appearing within the high-poverty, high achieving school's leadership actions. The leaders of these high-poverty, high achieving schools all held high expectations for their students and their teachers, regardless of their SES or the poverty level of the school. They did not lower the academic bar, but rather held it high and expected their students to reach it and their teachers to help get them there.

A case study conducted by Woods and Martin (2016) was done because these researchers felt as though the steps taken in the past toward educating poor students have not made a big enough impact, and that we need to be studying the actions of those that are succeeding in this area to learn from them. They wanted to explore potential connections between the leadership behavior of the principal and continued high achievement by their students, no matter their student's class (Woods & Martin, 2016, p. 2). They studied a PK-5 elementary school in Missouri that had around 250 students, with over 70% of their students qualifying for free or

reduced meals, and within that group, over 65% excelling within the top two levels of achievement (Woods & Martin, 2016, p. 4). Because of these numbers, the researchers decided that the leadership actions within this school were worth looking at. The study consisted of 12 participants: the principle, the superintendent, 5 teachers, and 5 parents. They gathered data regarding the leadership practices of the principal that have led to student achievement by using interviews and observations with the superintendent and the principal, focus groups and observation with the teachers and parents, audio recordings of the interviews, 4 full day visits to view how the school operates, as well as data collection of documents such as student achievement data, school improvement plans, and more (Woods & Martin, 2016, pp.5-6). Their findings were two-fold, one of which I am concerned about, which was their high expectations of stakeholders. "The students must be willing to live up to the consistent expectations placed upon them by the teachers, the staff must be willing to implement the high expectations expected of them..." (Woods & Martin, 2016, p. 8). This principal holds a high standard for their teachers to hold a high standard for their students, and according to the stats, it is working. Regarding the students, "The teachers and principals do not treat students of poverty differently in regards to academics... Even though we push, the kids still want to be here" (Woods & Martin, 2016, p. 9). Regarding the teachers, the principal stated that "I want them to show up each morning and be ready to teach. I want them to work as hard as they can for the kids. I want them to go home tired, but I want them to go home feeling like they have been successful" (Woods and Martin, 2016, p. 9). The claims being made here about high expectations playing a part in high-poverty school success are reliable and noteworthy because of the research done, data collected and analyzed, and the numbers of high-poverty students succeeding under this leader. What this tells

us is that "...regardless of the poverty level of students within a school setting, high achievement can happen for all students" (Woods & Martin, 2016, p. 12).

Chenoweth and Theokas (2013) conducted a short study focused on the leadership of high-poverty schools that have prominent levels of achievement, specifically 33 principals from 19 different states representing elementary, middle, and high schools. These schools were selected because 75% of their students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches, yet each of these school's achievement rates were comparable to the middle-class schools in their states (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013, p. 57). The Education of Trust has been visiting schools such as these for 8 years, but once they concluded that leadership was indeed a factor in these schools' success, they went back and "collected detailed data on the leader's work" (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013, p. 57). One of the prominent findings from their study of principals was that "Their beliefs about student potential drive their work" (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013, p. 57). This belief causes them to push both their students and their teachers to their fullest potential. "The principal's belief in the capacity of all students pushes them to set a rigorous performance standard and honestly discriminate between excellence and mediocrity" (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013, p. 57). However, with this recognition that all students can learn at high levels, they recognize that it is up to the school to help them do so. It was found that these principals always required their teachers to be teaching to these standards, never slipping into a lazy or apathetic teaching style. They believed that if students were to meet the lofty standards that were set, those standards needed to always be present in the classroom. (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013, pp. 57-58). The findings of this study are necessary to consider because they covered a vast number of schools from many different states and concluded that what those school leaders

are doing right is holding their students and teachers to high expectations, and believing that they can meet those expectations.

A case study done by Horst and Martin (2007) focused on an elementary school, also in Missouri, that was classified as high-poverty and had consistently high scores on their state assessment. The researchers for this study used multiple methods to gather their data that lead them to the conclusion that holding high expectations is a quality of a successful leader in high-poverty schools. First, they visited the school multiple times gathering perceptual data such as audiotapes of interviews or focus groups, which they then organized into field notes. Then they used coding to discover and organize overarching categories within their research. They also studied school documents and artifacts, which allowed triangulation between data and interviews/field notes (Horst and Martin, 2007, pp. 35-36). What was found through all this data gathering, was that the principal of this school focused on achievement and high expectations for herself, her teachers, and her students. "The board member, faculty, staff and parents agreed that Mrs. Hudson focused on the school's vision of continuous student achievement. To accomplish this goal, she held high expectations for herself, her staff, and the students. Such expectations were needed to effectively work with students, especially those from poverty" (Horst and Martin, 2007, p. 36). The overarching goal of this principal was to improve teaching and learning, which should be the goal of anyone working in education, and she found that creating an environment of high expectations was one way of doing so. "...the superintendent/principle encourages a culture of high expectation and aligned those factors to point at the same target: improved teaching and learning" (Horst and Martin, 2007, p. 39).

Staff Development

Another theme that was consistent in my research was the correlation between leadership practices in high-poverty schools and leaders who were constantly finding ways to improve and grow their staff knowledge and abilities. "Although teacher quality has the greatest influence on student motivation and achievement, the quality of leadership matters in determining the motivation of teachers and the quality of their teaching, which subsequently affects student performance" (Jacobson 2011, p. 35). The leaders affect the quality of the teachers, which affect the quality of the students. This means that it is vitally important that school leaders value the development of their teachers.

Suber (2012) conducted a study that goes into further detail on this topic. The study consisted of 2 schools that had both been awarded for their academic excellence, and that both had 60% or more of their student body receiving free or reduced-price lunch. The quantitative research method used for this study was a teacher questionnaire that collected data on how the teachers felt about professional staff development effectiveness, alignment of instruction/assessment, and school culture (Suber, 2012, p. 5). "The qualitative method of observation was used to document the occurrence of the process and interactions that created a culture of student achievement" (Suber, 2012, p. 5). Through these methods of data collection, it was found that "The responses of the teachers indicated that effective professional development almost always occurred within their schools" (Suber, 2012, p. 9). This being a consistency amongst these succeeding schools calls attention to this action taken by the school's leaders. Through his findings, Suber states that "Professional development is vital to high performing, high-poverty schools because it targets specific areas of needs for teachers to tailor instruction to the specific needs of their students", and that "Principal leadership is instrumental to the success of an effective professional development program... Effective principals provide school structure

and conditions that encourage teacher learning, which in turn improves instructional quality"
(Suber, 2012, p. 10). These principals specifically worked on educating themselves further in
areas such as reading initiatives and research based strategies that help students with their
reading skills for example, and then they taught what they learned to their teachers through
workshops and projects. They educate themselves, which leads to the education of their teachers,
which trickles down to benefitting the education of the students. The goal of educators should
always be to be improving instructional quality, no matter the poverty level of the school, which
Suber suggests results from professional development, which is provided by effective leaders.

Chenoweth (2010), also speaks to this concept that leaders in high-poverty schools help
their students succeed by implementing staff development. Chenoweth has spent the last 6 years
visiting and observing many high-poverty, high-performing schools trying to discover their
secret to success. She chose 2 schools specifically for her study that were both high-poverty and
high achieving (Chenoweth, 2010, pp. 16-17). Chenoweth's research method was to conduct
"extensive interviews" with the leaders of these 2 schools (2010, p. 17). What she found through
her research is right in line with what Saber found through his, a characteristic of the leaders of
these schools is that they highly value staff development and growth. She found that these
principals correlated their staff's ability to teach their students well with their students having a
chance at getting out of poverty someday. "They understand that if their students do not have a
good education, they may face lives of poverty and dependence. They know that school leaders
must be guardians of their students' futures, not of their staff member's happiness. It's the job of
the principal to make a marginal teacher uncomfortable" (Chenoweth, 2010, p. 20). The form of
staff development that Chenoweth found was the principal individually challenging her staff
members to be more than marginal, to be exceptional. However, it is recognized that sometimes

the staff at these schools needed further training, not just uncomfortable encouragement. "If teachers pool their knowledge and still come up short, it's up to the principal to know what training would help the teachers better do their jobs..." (Chenoweth, 2010, p. 19). Through trainings and encouragement, these principals of high-poverty schools are constantly working on developing their staff into teachers that will help give their high-poverty students a chance at an equal education.

Jacobson (2008) also expands on this topic through his study of three elementary schools that are all high-poverty schools, with 74%, 82%, and 90% of their students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. These schools were "chosen based on student performance on standardized tests that exceeded expectations after a principal's arrival" (Jacobson, 2008, p. 7). Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with the principals themselves, teachers, support staff, parents, and students, as well as state documents and field notes that triangulated their findings (Jacobson, 2008, p. 7). What was found through his study was that the development of people was something that all three of these principals valued.

> "All three principals understood that if people were expected to improve their
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> performance, they needed opportunities to build the intellectual and practical skill sets
>
> necessary to succeed. Using whatever fiscal or material resources they had available,
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> these principals worked diligently to provide professional development and individual
>
> and collective support for their staff" (Jacobson, 2008, p. 9).

Recognizing that they wanted their staff to be continuously learning and improving, these principals prioritized professional development through whatever means possible. They did this

by being role models of best instructional strategies, and by helping their teachers improve organizational structures including creating common planning times. These developments benefit their staff's ability to perform in the classroom, which directly impacts the students. Knowing that the development and improvement of the staff equates to a more well-rounded education for the students, staff development seems to be of the utmost importance for these high poverty schools.

Physical School Environment

One theme that I found incredibly consistent in my study was the topic of successful leaders of high-poverty schools taking care to create a positive, safe school environment. Michele Hancock, principal of William Elementary in Rochester, New York, has a wonderful success story that speaks to this topic. When she was hired in 1999 the school had a 13% passing rate on their state English Language Arts exam, and 24% passing rate on the state math exam. The school also was made up of 91% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (Hancock and Lamendola, 2005, p. 74). She realized that what needed to first take place before any other change was that the school needed to change physically, it needed to become a safer and more welcoming environment. Her first focus was on "creating a physical environment in which all stakeholders could feel comfortable" (Hancock and Lamendola, 2005, p. 74). She cleaned, painted, and decorated the school with community building posters. Students cannot be expected to thrive if they are in an environment that feels dangerous and uncomfortable. For this reason, amongst others, Williams Elementary has been rated as one of New York's 24 most improved schools in the state (Hancock and Lamendola, 2005, p. 78).

Jacobson (2011) has also studied the importance of the school environment. His study is based out of a larger study called the International Successful School Principalship Project

(ISSPP). The ISSPP is an "ongoing examination of principals who have led successful school improvement initiatives in over a dozen nations" (Jacobson, 2011, p. 33). Jacobson's article explains what the ISSPP is, and then narrows this down to successful leadership in challenging, high poverty schools in the United States. Data for this study was gathered "Using a common, semi-structured interview protocol... data were collected from interviews with principals, teachers, support staff, parents and students, asking these participants if they believed the principal had played a key role in their school's success, and if so, how?" (Jacobson, 2011, p. 37). What was discovered was that the leaders of these high-poverty schools "...recognized that improving the learning environment, especially in terms of creating a physically safe and nurturing space for both children and adults, was an absolute prerequisite for leading a successful school improvement initiative in a challenging school" (Jacobson, 2011, p. 38). One way these principals tackled this task was by physically securing the school, and screening who came onto campus. Similar to Hancock's experience, these leaders recognize and claim that getting a handle on the physical environment of the school, creating a safe place for students, is a necessary first step in turning a high-poverty school into a high achieving school.

School Environment through Teacher-Student Relationships

Another way that I have been finding that high-poverty schools serve their students well is through improving the school environment by building positive student-teacher relationships. To open our lense and look out on a larger horizon, Kamper's (2008) research on high-poverty school success in South Africa leads me to think that certain leadership tactics in high-poverty schools are improving these schools worldwide. Poverty is a large issue in this region, as 5.3 million learners in 17,000 public schools were receiving free meals from the Department of Education (Kamper, 2008. p. 2). This study focuses on 6 schools that are qualified as high-

poverty, and that are noticed for their academic excellence, with their secondary schools sustaining a pass rate of 90% (Kamper, 2008, p. 5). Data was collected for this study by using in-depth interviews with the principals of each school, which were tape recorded, then were combined with field notes and turned into summaries. These summaries were sent to the principals for verification (Kamper, 2008, p. 6). What was found was that the principals of these schools needed their teachers to play a larger role than just a teacher, "...the true test of teacher excellence in the high-poverty school was the extent to which the learners experienced that the teachers truly cared for them" (Kamper, 2008, p. 10). Part of creating an inviting and positive environment in these schools meant that the students had to know that their teachers were there for them. This seems like it is part of the capability profile listed at the end of the article, claiming that leaders of these schools must be able to "establish an inviting and safe school environment" (Kamper, 2008, p. 15). Even though a safe and inviting environment might look different from school to school and country to country, it is of the utmost importance for leaders to establish when working with high-poverty schools.

Along the same line, it was found in a study done in China that student achievement, in schools made up of students coming from low SES backgrounds, was largely impacted by the leadership of their teachers in creating positive relationships with their students. The study was made up of 10,784 students between grades 7-9, and took into account family SES, academic achievement, and teacher-student relationship. Teacher-student relationship was determined through a survey asking students to rate certain things about their relationship with their teachers. It was found that teachers who had positive relationships with their students and made their students feel competent by focusing on their abilities rather than their struggles were putting out better academic scores from their classes than those who were not.

"...students who believe they can master their schoolwork typically have positive

expectations for success; their expectations and value of the academic task contributes to

their achievement… teachers, as important socializers in school, can significantly impact

students' expectancies and values…Students who have a positive relationship with teach-

ers are more likely to have positive expectancies and values for success, further

stimulating students' study engagement and academic achievement" (Xuan, et al., 2019,

p. 3).

When teachers focus on creating a school environment that is based on positive relationships

with their students, in which they are instilling confidence in their students' abilities by having

high expectations and by placing value on their work, their students perform better academically.

This aligns with the literature by Woods and Martin, as well as Theokas and Chenoweth, that

emphasize school leaders having high expectations for their students, and how that is beneficial

to their students academic outcome. While this is more focused on the teacher as the leader,

rather than the principal, it is still important to note these findings, as the teachers are the ones

having a direct impact on the students.

Jacobson ties these two concepts of school environment, the physical and the relational,

together in his 2008 study mentioned above. After explaining how the principals at the schools

he studied took steps to create physically safe environments, he claims that "Creating safe,

inviting environments required principals to become a visible presence, especially during arrival

and dismissal… in hallways, classrooms, auditoriums, lunchrooms and gyms" with an

overarching goal to "... reassure students that they would be treated with respect and

kindness"(Jacobson, 2008, p. 11). By being an ever present figure throughout these schools, the principals formed trusting relationships with their students that were based on accountability, they were watching the students and the students were watching them. Ultimately, this lead to students feeling respected and cared for by their school leaders. Creating a physically safe school environment is a healthy step toward helping high-poverty schools succeed, but it must be coupled with a healthy relational environment between students and school leaders in order to truly have an impact. As we've seen through the literature, school leaders can create positive relationships with their students by letting them know they care about their well-being, by emphasizing their assets rather than their deficits, and by being a constant presence in their school lives.

Conclusion

In the end, the issue of poverty is far reaching and needs to be acknowledged and tackled by more than a few individual schools. It needs to be handled by our communities, our states, and our country. However, there are a few schools that are defying the odds and are overcoming their blockade of poverty and income inequality that is so prevalent in our country, and are proving it with excelling academics. The actions taken by the leaders in those schools have been the focus of this literature review, with the goal of studying and exposing some of their common methods for success. Three common themes amongst these successful, odds-defying leaders are that they hold high expectations for their students and their staff, they value and constantly work at providing opportunities for staff development, and they prioritize their school environment being safe and comfortable, as well as their relationships with their students being healthy. Studying these leaders' actions is important because there can be much learned from them, and their methods can be shared and applied in other high-poverty schools that are struggling to

succeed. Even though poverty is a massive issue, too big for one school leader to fight on their own, this review has shown that there are actions that can be taken on an individual school level to improve the education of those students.

METHODOLOGY

This section of my research is meant to provide my readers with insight into both my theoretical framework and my data collection. The means of data collection I used was an interview with my community partner.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of research that I am using for my project is self-study. The self-study theoretical framework was established in 1993 as part of the American Educational Research Association. When looking deep into the roots of this framework, we can see that Dewey's philosophy of education played a role in the development of self-study, with his idea that education, experience, and life are all connected (Craig & Curtis, 2020, pp. 1-7). Self-study is in essence exactly what it sounds like, it's a study and focus on how one's identity and one's ideas of teaching affects the classroom. "Self-study emphasizes learning through questioning and investigating in ways designed to enhance the development of understanding... As a consequence, a great focus on one's thinking and acting can help to reframe one's practice" (Loughran, et al., 2007, p. 414). I chose this framework for my project because the issue of poverty can be so large and daunting, that it may feel as though the work of one education professional isn't going to make a difference. However, with self-study the focus is on constantly reflecting inward and outward in regards to yourself and your teaching practices, and how you can be always changing and growing in ways that will make a difference inside your classroom. I

do believe that the intentional efforts of one person can make a difference, which is why self-study is a perfect framework for my research on leaders that make a difference in high-poverty schools.

Community Partner Interview

I had the wonderful privilege of partnering with the current principal of Bidwell Junior High for my capstone community partner project. In order to ensure confidentiality, I will use the pseudonym Dan to refer to my community partner. As stated, Dan is the principal at Bidwell Junior high, and has been for the past 4 years. However, this is his 21st year working for the Chico Unified School District. In those years he has played many different roles, from an English teacher for 7 years at Chico High, to Vice Principal at Fairview High for 4 years, then taking over as principal for 4 years, after which he took a position as the director of secondary education for two years, but claimed he needed to be with the students so he took an opening at his current position once again as principal now at Bidwell Junior High. Dan was recommended to me by my professor, Maris Thompson, because of his passion for working with disadvantaged students and his experience in the field. Through our interview, Dan proved that he was a wonderful choice for my community partner, as he has a strong passion for working with underprivileged students and much experience in the field of leadership. Below in bold are a few of the questions I asked Dan to speak to, and his response follows.

What role does leadership play in high poverty schools success/How important is the leadership in those schools to their success?

Dan felt strongly that leadership is absolutely everything. He explained that the higher the stakes are, the more leadership matters, which means that leadership matters in high poverty

schools. He shared one of his favorite quotes which is "everything rises and falls with leadership". As a principal, it is important for him to have a strong stance on how his role as a leader affects the rest of the school. He explained that he feels that his role as a leader is to build up his teaching staff, and enable them to be the best classroom leaders they can be. He explained the importance of educators finding their "spark", or their passion, and then to capitalize on that passion. He had a personal example of this when he was first teaching at Chico High. He had a passion for kids classified as "at risk", which was a high percentage of high poverty students. Himself and a colleague petitioned to start a program called SOLE (Students of Unlimited Leadership), in which they took in the most at risk students and basically advocated for their success all throughout high school, promising that they would graduate. Long story short, SOLE was a huge success because Dan identified his passion and capitalized on it. He encourages his teaching staff to lead out on their areas of passion in similar ways.

What leadership actions can teachers take inside the classroom to serve their high poverty students well?

Dan explained that there are two important aspects to being an impactful leader inside the classroom: relationships and curriculum. He explained how crucial it is to be intentional in the relationship building aspect of classroom leadership. Specifically with high poverty kids, letting them know that you care about them personally can have the biggest influence on them. If they don't feel like you care about them, they don't care what you have to say from the front of the class, so relationship building is of the utmost importance. The second aspect of being an impactful leader inside the classroom is to know your curriculum and to be passionate about it. If you aren't engaged and excited about what you're teaching, you're students won't be either. By showing your students that you care about what you're trying to teach them, you're showing that

you care about their education, which then helps build your relationships with them. Student's that come from high poverty homes need to know that they personally are cared about, and that their education is cared about. By implementing those two ideas into the classroom, teacher's can have a huge amount of impact as leaders.

What role do accountability and expectations from leadership play into high poverty school success?

Dan had some great insight on this topic. He explained that keeping students accountable and having high expectations for them is important, and that it is actually a crucial aspect to relationship building. Dan explained that accountability is in a sense trust, and that relationships are built on trust. Can students trust that their teacher will follow through with what they say? If yes, then teachers are keeping their students accountable to their expectations, while being accountable to their students for being trustworthy and willing to follow through with what they say. He explained that mutual accountability is everything. Teachers need to be genuine with their students and be willing to admit when they make a mistake, or apologize if they do something wrong. We need to teach them how to be accountable by being accountable to them for our actions. By having this mutual accountability between teachers and students, and by expecting great things from them, Dan feels as though we are respecting them.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section of my project is designed to bring together what I've learned about my problem of practice. I will discuss what I learned through my review of the literature and my data

collection. I will also discuss what it is that I am taking away from what I've learned through these methods of research.

Discussion of Findings

My findings from my literature review and my community partner interview were actually very in-line with one another, which confirms my findings in this study. My first section in my literature review was about the role that expectations and accountability plays in high-poverty school success. The literature that I found supported this idea greatly. I found that a characteristic of leaders in high-poverty, high-achieving schools is that they hold high expectations for both their students and their staff. They believe in them and their ability to produce excellent work, which influences the students and staff to believe in themselves. My community partner spoke right to this same topic. He explained that having mutual accountability between leaders and students to each do their job well is what builds trust. That trust then forms meaningful teacher-student relationships, which I'll cover in the next section, but I want to point out to show how my research connects to itself in its different subthemes. I chose to research this topic of accountability and leadership because I had a feeling there would be a connection between the two. However, my findings extended past what I thought I would find about this topic, providing me with much more insight than I originally expected to gain. My take-away from this section of research is that regardless of SES, having high expectations for your students and staff is a quality that all leaders should have in order for their schools to be successful.

The second subtheme that I focused on in my research was staff development. My review of the literature provided me with information that I was somewhat expecting to find. I found that the high-poverty, high-achieving schools that were studied all had leaders that valued

developing their staff as teachers and learners in whatever ways they could. However, I ran into some unexpected ideas when I talked about this with my community partner. He does believe that an absolutely necessary quality of a leader is that they value building and developing their team of teachers so that they can be the best classroom teachers they can possibly be. However, he expanded on the topic of leaders encouraging their staff to find their "spark" and to be the best that they can be in that one area. He explained that helping teachers find the subject area that they are passionate about, and then helping them develop and grow in that one area, will create a team of well-equipped, passionate leaders. I hadn't thought about staff development in this way until I spoke with my community partner, and am very interested in learning more about the positive repercussions a mindset like this has on a school.

My final subtheme for my literature review was that leaders in high-poverty, high-achieving schools all focused on improving their school environment, both physically and relationally. These leaders all recognized that their students needed to first feel safe before they could be expected to perform well academically. Actions were taken to secure, clean, and improve the general environment of the school. Along with improving the schools physical environment, these leaders also valued improving the relational environment between the students and the staff. There was a good amount of literature suggesting that students who have positive relationships with their teachers and school leaders perform better academically. My community partner was right in-line with this idea. He felt that relationship building is incredibly important for leaders to be intentional about. He explained that in his experience, children don't care about what you have to say in front of the classroom if they don't feel like you care about them outside of the classroom. He stressed the importance of building those intentional relationships with students by showing them that you truly care about them, and by having that

mutual accountability and trust mentioned above. He believes that can have a huge impact on a student's willingness to learn and performance in the classroom. Prior to my research I would have guessed that teacher-student relationships were important, but after seeing the data I found in my research and talking to Dan, my perspective on the importance of leaders implementing positive student-teacher relationships has grown immensely.

CONCLUSION

This section of my project is designed to refresh the minds of my readers of my problem of practice, theoretical framework, methodology and data collection, and the results of my study. It will also include a section on implications and recommendations.

Conclusion

The problem of practice that I chose to focus on for my inquiry paper was the issue of high-poverty schools and what role their leadership plays in helping them be successful. I used the self-study theoretical framework to inform my study, as its value of effort on behalf of the individual is in-line with my inquiry. The methodology that I used was two-fold, a review of the literature and an interview with a community partner. Through my data collection I found, in short, that the role of a leader in a high-poverty school can have a hugely positive impact on the success of the school. Which in turn means the opposite is also true. Therefore, my final take-away from my research question "what role does leadership play in high-poverty school success?", is that leadership plays an absolutely crucial role in high-poverty school success.

Implications and Recommendations

What can be taken away from this study is that the role of leadership in high-poverty schools is absolutely crucial, and can have a large impact on the success of that school. My

question moving forward is this, if leadership plays such an important role in the success of high-poverty schools, why doesn't this finding hold more weight in our battle for equity in education in these high-poverty schools? It seems like there should be more effort being poured into the leadership at these schools. Perhaps that's not a priority because it would cost more to fund putting these leaders through more training. And thus we can easily open the can of worms into the much larger and more complicated issue of poverty. I realize I have only barely touched the tip of the iceberg of this problem, but I feel as though what I found through my study is still important and can be a step forward in the fight for helping these high-poverty schools succeed.

That leads me to my first recommendation for myself and all other current or future educational researchers. Deciding to do my project on the topic of poverty was daunting, and more than one person told me that it was going to be very difficult because it is such a complex issue. However, I went into my project knowing that I was only focusing on one small solution to one tiny part of the larger problem, and I think I have found some valuable results. My recommendation is to at least engage with the issue, even if in some miniscule form like my inquiry paper. By engaging in some small way, we are opening ourselves up to the larger community that has been fighting this battle for decades, and maybe the small bit of information that you find is what's needed to take the next step forward.

My recommendation for those in the profession of education, and those pursuing such a career, is this, look into the self-study theoretical framework, and utilize it. By focusing on what you have to bring to the table, and maybe also on what you should not bring to the table, and by constantly evaluating the job you're doing in the classroom, you can seriously better your chances of making a difference in the lives of your students and bettering their education. After all, isn't that what we're all about?

It can't go unsaid that there is a huge implication/recommendation for those in school leadership positions, especially those in high-poverty schools. Your job is incredibly important, and you can have hugely positive effects on those that you're leading. Value your job and the difference that you can make. Strive to model characteristics like those found through this research. In doing so, you are playing a huge role in providing underprivileged children with the quality education that they deserve.

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