

From Negative Expectations to Positive School Improvement in Urban Schools:
Bridging the Gap

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Introduction

In today's educational society, public and private schools have varying perceptions to go along with them in terms of student achievement. Under the umbrella of private schools, the most popular school types include Catholic schools, Montessori schools, Lutheran schools, and boarding schools. Public schools, on the other hand, consist of charter schools, magnet schools, and urban schools. Private schools have the label of producing the best academic scholars when compared to public schools. Catholic schools are praised for their strong religious teachings and strict discipline. Montessori schools are known for its' premise of self-directed learning in early education. Lutheran schools are praised for their small class sizes and strong teacher qualifications and boarding schools are highly recognized for giving students a "college life experience" while in elementary and secondary grade levels. Charter schools are the latest trends in global education and are becoming more popular everyday. Magnet schools are recognized for the challenging and fully enriched styles of teachings that are exposed to their students. And then there are urban schools! What are they known for? When people hear the term "urban", they immediately associate it with negative attributes such as poverty stricken students and families, ill-prepared students, run down facilities, and an inconsistency in teachers. When compared to any kind of school whether its' private or public, urban school districts have the worst label of all. Why is there a consistent negative perception when it comes to urban school districts? Can these perceptions be transformed to meet the varying needs of our students? Yes they can....one school at a time! School leaders, principals and superintendents have the power to make the transformation needed to change the negative perception of our urban schools and the

students. In many cases, these negatively perceived urban schools have reached success levels that were totally unexpected. So where's the magic? It all lies in the hands, minds, and hearts of school leaders. What makes a successful urban school leader? Urban school leaders have so many responsibilities that are not as prevalent in non-urban school schools. Students in urban schools tend to have low self esteem and often portray self-hatred. Who taught the black child self-hatred? The purpose of this article is to explore the successful strategies that have been used by school administrators to efficiently enhance and empower the school climate internally while producing positive results externally. Answering the following questions, the researcher will provide a clear and concise solution to this ever-growing issue in education:

- What precisely constitutes an “urban school”?
- Who taught the black child self-hatred?
- What determines “success” in urban schools?
- What intrinsic qualities must a school leader possess in order to turn negative perceptions into positive results in urban schools?
- Does prior experiences really matter or play a role in the capabilities of an urban school leader?

Urban Schools and Communities Defined

When we speak in terms of “urban schools”, there are many variations of meanings or characteristics of them. Some may refer to urban schools as low performing schools while others might view it as a school that has a high level of poverty stricken students in the school and in the community. While both of these are true characteristics of urban schools, most researchers tend to uniformly agree that there is no one definition of urban schools. Nonetheless, there are many factors that contribute to the many characteristics of urban schools. A definition of an urban area encompasses the city and its surrounding suburban areas (Kopetz, Lease, and Warren-Kring, 2006). Urban schools reflect the issues found in urban areas (Kopetz, Lease, and Warren-Kring). Urban schools find themselves in a position of being central in the struggle to educate children and bring them out of poverty (Kopetz, Lease, and Warren-Kring). This struggle has persisted and today remains unresolved (Kopetz, Lease, and Warren-Kring). The schools unfortunately have not been able to accomplish the goal of equal education for all (Kopetz, Lease, and Warren-Kring).

Schools in large urban settings are places where teachers are faced with a plethora of challenges that range from poverty, violence, cultural diversity and a multitude of languages (Erskine-Cullen and Sinclair, 1996). The results of a survey conducted by Erskine-Cullen and Sinclair revealed that the most prominent characteristics of an urban school are cultural diversity, low socio-economic status of students, high immigrants, high population of students whose primary language is not English, high incidence of poverty, social problems, high turnover rate of students, and lack of parental involvement. With all of these issues against teachers in urban schools, one could

easily understand the complexities that our teacher's face as well as students faces when in an urban like climate.

Self-Hatred in the Black Community

In today's urban society, because of the many negative crimes that take place within the urban community, black children seem to have a negative self-perception that was more obvious in the previous years than they are today. Nonetheless, something needs to be done about the self-hatred of minority children. During the 1940s, psychologists Kenneth Bancroft Clark and his wife, Mamie Phipps Clark designed a test to study the psychological effects of segregation on black children (Library of Congress, 2004). The doll test included 4 baby dolls with diapers who were completely identical except for color. They showed the dolls to black children between the ages of three and seven and asked them questions to determine racial perception and preference (Library of Congress). When asked which they preferred, the majority selected the white doll and attributed positive characteristics to it (Library of Congress). The Clarks also gave the children outline drawings of a boy and girl and asked them to color the figures the same color as themselves (Library of Congress). Many of the children with dark complexions colored the figures with a white or yellow crayon (Library of Congress). The Clarks concluded that "prejudice, discrimination, and segregation" caused black children to develop a sense of inferiority and self-hatred (Library of Congress). Though this experiment was done over 50 years ago, research still prominently suggests that self-hatred still exists in the black communities of today. In 2006, a high school student, Kiri Davis, decided to reconduct this same test to see how much progress was made or not made in terms of self-hatred in the black community. Davis asked 4- and 5-year-old kids

at a Harlem school the same questions in 2005 (ABC News, 2006). In Davis' test, 15 of the 21 children said that the white doll was good and pretty, and that the black doll was bad. Her test results revealed that though many things in our society have changed dramatically, some things still have not. A more recent study, conducted in 2009 by ABC, reported that today the negative self-perception that black children had in earlier years has change dramatically and for the better. Their study revealed that of the 16 African American girls that were tested, 80% chose the black doll as the 'good doll' and the "pretty doll". The researcher finds it rather ironic that the results have shifted from negative to positive in such a short time frame. Locality and parental involvement are key attributes to the self-perception and self-esteem of our children in urban school settings.

The "Turnaround"

Usually in urban school settings, these same negative self-perceptions are more prevalent than they are in non-urban school settings. Nonetheless, school leaders hold the key in changing these negative self-perceptions into positive self-perceptions. So where's the catch? How can school leaders successfully transform the negative climate of their school and what exactly constitutes "success" in urban school settings? Above anything else, school leaders must use professional development along with fostering school relationships to bridge the gap between the success and failure in urban schools. In their article, A Leadership Journey, Hancock and Lamendola told the horror story of the physical condition of John Williams Elementary School No. 5 and the disconnect that was obviously seen among the faculty and staff. From the filthy cafeteria walls with

peeling paint to the 13 percent passing rate on the New York State English Language Arts Exams, a positive change was definitely needed. In addition to this, students in the school spoke approximately 23 languages, and 91 percent were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (Hancock and Lamendola). Traveling toward excellence, this school leader had transformed the negative aspects surrounding the school and experienced a significant increase in student achievement. The school was cited by the New York State Business Council as one of the 24 most improved schools in the state and received the National School Change Award from the U.S. Department of Education (Hancock and Lamendola). Using professional development as a main tool, these great achievements were made and the staff of this high-poverty urban school transformed from isolation to collaboration.

In urban schools, consistency in authority and instruction is the single most important aspect that is needed by the school administrator (Silverman, 2005). This factor is something that is not always controlled by school administrators (Silverman). Just as students better respond to and respect teachers who are consistent in their daily routine, school faculty and staff better responds to and respect school leaders who are consistent in their instruction and authority. Another way to help principals be better leaders is to make them understand exactly what constitutes good instructional methods (Silverman). They also have to take care of themselves as well as their staff. Establishing honest relationships within their building is key to how the school will perform (Silverman). Additionally, being open to making changes, understanding the impact of decisions, communicating well and aligning curriculum with instruction are pivotal internalized characteristics and capabilities needed by school leaders

(Silverman). These entities are beneficial when effectively utilized and demonstrated; however, without the incorporation of professional development, these aspects alone cannot solve the problems facing our urban schools.

Professional Development in Action

Professional Development, an inclusive, highly collaborative adventure in which a variety of site-based and central office personnel provides the leadership, imagination, support, and mechanisms to help school personnel grow, is job-embedded where the work of teaching and learning how to teach, to improve, and to meet the needs of student coalesce into opportunities to see live the impact of efforts on student learning (Zepeda, 2008). School leaders should incorporate effective professional development in urban school settings that should include creating a shared vision, involving staff in the leadership process, improving the curriculum, learning and teaching quality, raising achievement and improving pupils' attitudes and behavior, involving others, and external support for improving schools in urban and challenging contexts (Keys, Sharp, Greene, and Grayson, 2003). Vision refers to the capacity to create and communicate a view of the desired state of affairs that induces commitment among those working in the organization (Sergiovanni, 2009). Sergiovanni further contends that leaders are concerned with a vision of what is possible and desirable for them and others to achieve and a vision of the significance of what they are presently doing. When we speak in terms of "innate capabilities", we are referring to the internalized beliefs, dispositions, and passionate facets that are rooted in one's mind and heart. As an administrator of any school or institution, it is imperative for them to possess several intrinsic beliefs,

dispositions, and passionate facets to sufficiently produce a school climate that exhibits overall success. Sergiovanni purports that once a vision has been established, an administrator should base that vision on relevant knowledge and theories, including but not limited to, an understanding of learning goals in a pluralistic society, the diversity of learners and learners' needs, school as interactive social and cultural systems, and social and organizational change. Is it logical for administrators to be wrongfully moral and still be held with the responsibility of overseeing the education of thousands of students? No, not at all. So what must these administrators have instilled in them to ensure the encompassing of the moral values needed in our schools today?

Effective school leaders must have patience, perseverance, sensitivity, empowerment, and the intellectual capacity needed to carry out the success of an institution. As times change in education, it is imperative that administrators exhibit a patient mindset regardless of situations that may arise. If an administrator shows nervousness, the faculty, staff, and students will respond to that nervousness and the end result will be negative. Perseverance shows that an administrator would be able to stick with a task regardless of difficulties encountered. As many times as hardships will arrive in a school building, an effective leader would have to have some level of sensitivity to their staff because it shows compassion for the needs and concerns of others. Empowerment is also necessary in an administrator's role. Teachers are sometimes negative about their job and have low motivation levels to perform as expected. It is imperative for any administrator to hold the capacity to move people to action while communicating persuasively. Lastly, how effective would school leaders be if they didn't have the intellectual capacity needed to run a school successfully? This

intellectual capacity refers to the cultural, practical, realistic, and educational knowledge that one possesses. If all of these factors are rooted in an administrator and in their vision, overall school success will be intact.

While creating a school vision is pivotal in the success of any school, school administrators cannot do it alone. It is imperative that school leaders involve their staff in creating the vision and in the leadership process. In order to maximize teacher involvement in the improvement process, it is essential to provide the necessary professional development and support needed while enhancing shared leadership and distributed leadership (Keys, Sharp, Greene, and Grayson). Principals should be willing to include and incorporate the opinions, suggestions, and experiences of their faculty and staff members in an attempt to create this school vision. With the high level of underachievement seen in urban school settings today, the need to improve the curriculum is very much needed. Therefore it is imperative for school leadership to adopt various strategies that improve teaching including setting high standards, providing time for professional development and monitoring teaching. While improving the curriculum, effective leaders should spend at least 70% of their day observing classroom teachers to recognize strengths and weaknesses and then use these evaluations to choose professional development activities (Johnson, 2009). The use of external support for improving schools in urban and challenging contexts including mentoring, external consultants, LEA support, and access to resource and funding are ways to bring outside experts into the school building with innovative strategies and techniques (Keys, Sharp, Greene, and Grayson). Our urban schools are in a crisis like state and have been for years. Are the educational leaders of these schools

incorporating all of the aforementioned strategies offered in this article? With a sheer determination and a passionate heart for education, beneficial change can take place.

Prior Experiences...do they really matter?

How important is it for school leaders to have a prior background that would better enable them to successfully run an urban school? One of the biggest problems in education today is that there are too many individuals that are “running the educational arena” with no prior background in education. That’s definitely a problem. How can we expect an urban school leader with no true understanding of the hardships placed on the students, faculty, and staff of these institutions to be able to produce positive outcomes in such a negative atmosphere? For the handful of “successful urban leaders”, one can bet that they were probably products of an urban community or at least had some association with it. This prior experience allows school leaders to relate to the students better while empowering teachers at the same time. Nevertheless, a “learned urban leader” can accomplish great things after months or even years of practice. Prior experiences really do matter and can be more beneficial than detrimental to an institution. While this holds true for school leaders, urban school teachers also tend to perform better when they have prior experiences of an urban school setting. As a product of an urban elementary school and urban community, the researcher is sensitive and passionate about the hardships of urban education. Nonetheless, the researcher can attest to the positive outcomes that can occur when attending an urban school. Great things can happen in urban schools. It’s just a matter of endurance, leadership, confidence, and commitment.

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