

How California School Principals and Teachers Engage Academic Optimism to Maximize Equity in Student Learning Within Low Socio-Economic Status (SES) Schools

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This mixed-method phenomenological study reports findings of 144 urban California educational leaders' and teachers' views about the identified effects Academic Optimism has on supporting equitable growth in student learning within ten low SES schools. Hoy, Tartar and Woolfolk-Hoy (2006) examined how Academic Optimism was a general demonstrable second order construct of successful urban schools. This study seeks to compare the findings of Hoy et al. to that of 144 California TK-8 school leaders' and teachers' perceptions regarding both the presence of Academic Optimism at ten low SES school sites, and its effects on equitable growth in student learning across student groups.

Keywords: Academic Optimism; urban school leadership; equitable growth in student learning; positive school culture; successful urban schools

While the literature focuses on narrowing the achievement gap as vitally important to educational equity, especially with regard to high-poverty schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010), educational leaders in California were not prepared for the additional challenges and barriers to closing the gap evidenced during COVID-19. The global pandemic that closed California schools in March 2020 created mounting challenges for teaching and learning particularly as empirical evidence notes those factors that affect student performance in schools with low SES populations (Hough et al. 2020). Fischer et al. (2018), in a study of urban low-SES schools, found significant relationships between per-student funding, days of instruction, teachers' knowledge and experience, some aspects of teachers' professional development, and student performance on a high-stakes examination. These were found insignificant as California schools moved to remote learning during COVID-19 (Hough et al. 2020).

Another broad area of study focuses on the school's culture. Trust (Adams & Forsyth, 2009; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Forsyth, 2008; Goddard, Salloum & Berebitsky, 2009; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007), collective efficacy (Hoy, Sweetland, & Smith, 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004), academic emphasis (Goddard, Sweetland & Hoy, 2000), and organizational health (Hoy & Hannum, 1997) have all been investigated. Academic Optimism, a construct that encompasses the aforementioned cultural topics, has been specifically examined by researchers with encouraging findings (Akhavan, 2011; Bevel & Mitchell, 2012; Hong, 2017; Hoy, Tarter & Woolfolk, 2004, 2006; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006; Smith & Hoy, 2007; Woolfolk, Hoy & Kurz, 2008). It is to this area of research that this study is directed.

Does the research of Hoy et al. (2006) have any significance for examining the collective efficacy and cultural property 144 California school leaders and teachers envision for their sites? In a state such as California, given the vast diversity of students and families, how do educators remain hopeful and optimistic that they can maximize student learning toward future work and schooling? Participants were invited to describe their lived experiences through a phenomenological lens as they both interviewed with the researchers, and engaged in follow-up surveys, responding to the four following research questions:

1. How do California school leaders and staff at high performing low SES schools support a collaborative attitude for the benefit of all students?
2. What specific practice(s) has/have contributed most to growth in student learning within California's high performing low SES schools?
3. How do California's high performing low SES schools ensure equity in learning for all students?
4. What recommendations do California school leaders and staff make for other low SES schools as they consider engaging Academic Optimism and collective efficacy at their sites?

Background of the Study

While educational reforms mandate a full spectrum of local accountability in California, to include planning for and resourcing supports toward the growth of student learning, large populations of students continue to repeatedly perform below their peers (CDE, 2016).

Fischer et al. (2018) addresses the preparation of teachers, noting, "In the advent of the innovation age, teacher education requires reinvention around the emerging knowledge base about learning and the key role teachers play in addressing issues of equity and student success in this

rapidly changing and complex world” (p. 267). Fischer and his team of renowned international researchers at the Global Learning Equity Network (GLEN) focus their equity mission to, “Provide learning environments and quality teachers that enable the potential of all children while challenging the preparation of a new kind of teacher for a new kind of school, one built on a learning center rather than a testing center model” (p. 267).

While equity of learning for all students is in the hands of teachers it is, as well, the concern of state education officers. The *Council of Chief State School Officers* (2017) identified the following 10 commitments, described as actions, that they and their state education agencies (SEAs) can take to improve educational equity:

- (1) Prioritize Equity: Set and Communicate an Equity Vision and Measurable Targets;
- (2) Start from Within: Focus on the State Education Agency;
- (3) Measure What Matters: Create Accountability for Equity;
- (4) Go Local: Engage Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and Provide Tailored and Differentiated Support;
- (5) Follow the Money: Allocate Resources to Achieve Fiscal Equity;
- (6) Start Early: Invest in the Youngest Learners;
- (7) Engage More Deeply: Monitor Equitable Implementation of Standards and Assessments;
- (8) Value People: Focus on Teachers and Leaders;
- (9) Improve Conditions for Learning: Focus on School Culture, Climate, and Social-emotional Development; and
- (10) Empower Student Options: Ensure Families Have Access to High-quality Educational Options That Align to Community Needs.

An academically optimistic school culture, in which the collective efficacy and organizational citizenship of staff and school leaders is pivotal to student learning, critically impacts academic growth (Akin-Kösterelioglu, 2017; Kulophas et al. 2018; Hong, 2017; Wu & Lin, 2018).

Academic growth and active learning teaching practices are recurring foci of much of the current literature. Two studies investigating school climate and culture continue to surface current findings on their impact in the area of growth in student learning. While Tang et al. (2017) explored ways in which active learning teaching practices can focus on inquiry while supporting equity in the classroom, Jain et al. (2015) investigated inequalities in school climate, or the physical and social conditions of the learning environment, and implications for academic achievement in California. The researchers examined how school climate varies by school-level characteristics in California using administrative data and the California School Climate Survey. They found, “Teachers at secondary schools, schools in large cities, schools that serve low-income populations, Hispanic- and black-majority schools, and/or low-performing schools reported less positive school climates, including staff/student relationships, norms and standards, student facilitative behaviors, and perceived safety, than their counterparts, paralleling other education inequity trends” (p. 237).

Academic Optimism and School Culture in the US and World

A school’s cultural property may particularly affect growth in student learning. A 2018 study of award-winning high school principals was designed to distill lessons from highly effective school leaders. Luby (2018) explored how personal motivation and professional core values

influence the practice, priorities and decisions of exemplary principals. Participants included school leaders across a 10-state region who won their "State Principal of the Year" award from 2007 to 2017. The first phase of data collection utilized a survey, while the second phase was comprised of semi-structured interviews. Luby notes, "Principals indicated they were motivated to become educators because of their desire to have a positive impact on children, the influence of others, and their passion for a subject area or co-curricular activity. Key reasons they became principals were to help others, to positively influence student achievement, and to impact school culture. Additional motivators included encouragement they received and modeling they observed from school leaders. Dispositional traits they shared—specifically optimism, a belief that all students can achieve, a growth mindset, and a passion for helping others—impacted their career choice" (p. 4).

From the seminal conversation of Academic Optimism by Hoy et al. (2006, 2007, 2012) other researchers have also developed an interest in the topic and the effect and affect Academic Optimism has on schools. This research interest is not limited to just the United States, and in fact, has become part of the research agenda of many international scholars who are researching Academic Optimism. (Beard et al. 2010; Cheraghikhah et al. 2015; Wu & Lin, 2018)

One of the most recent international research projects regarding Academic Optimism is reported in the March 2018 Asia Pacific Education Review. In a study by Wu and Lin, a multilevel analysis of teacher and school Academic Optimism was conducted in Taiwan Elementary schools. These researchers sought to build on the original research regarding Academic Optimism and its positive effects on student achievement. In their view, this previous research had looked at individual and collective levels of Academic Optimism, but no study as of their research had considered how the two perceptions (individual and collective) of Academic Optimism interact across these two different levels. In Wu and Lin's view, because both perceptions have similar theoretical roots and conceptual structure, individual teacher and school Academic Optimism were potentially interrelated. Their belief was that there was an overlooked research question about the nested relationship between the teacher and the school's Academic Optimism. In summation, these researchers were looking to find what relationship there might be between the individual teacher and the school in their views regarding Academic Optimism.

Wu and Lin used hierarchical linear modeling to empirically test the relationship between individual teacher Academic Optimism and collective school Academic Optimism. By using the data from 1073 teachers in 102 schools in Taiwan, the results showed that approximately 10% of variance in teacher Academic Optimism came from the school level. School Academic Optimism explained nearly all of the between-school variance as it overpowered a number of school contextual variables, such as percentage of minority students and student achievement, in predicting variation in teacher Academic Optimism.

Another international research project regarding Academic Optimism was recently conducted in Persia (Iran) (Cheraghikhah et al. 2015). The objective of this study was to explain the role of Academic Optimism, academic emotions, and school well-being on the mathematical performance of students. The research method was descriptive, and correlation focused on gender (boy and girl students). A sample of 440 (109 boys and 331 girls) students were selected by cluster random sampling. The research instruments utilized were the Student Academic Optimism Scale (Tschannen-Moran, Bankole, Mitchell & Moore, 2013), Academic Emotions Questionnaire (Pekrun, Goetz, Frenzel & Perry, 2011), and School Well-Being Questionnaire (Konu, Alanen, Lintonen, & Rimpela, 2011). A teacher-made questionnaire was also used to evaluate math scores. The data collected were then analyzed by using descriptive statistics that included, Pearson

correlation, stepwise multiple regression analysis, and independent t- test. These researchers' findings demonstrated that Academic Optimism, academic emotions and school well-being had a significant positive correlation with math performance (0.20, 0.23, 0.16). Further, the results showed academic well-being had a significant positive relationship with mathematic performance of girls and boys and is a predictor of mathematic academic performance. The data results also showed academic emotions had a significant positive relationship regarding the students' mathematic performance. In the girls, the academic emotions in combination with academic well-being accounted for 16% of the mathematic academic performance. In the data for the boys, the researchers found these two concepts could account for 17% of their academic mathematic performance.

What then is the relationship between school culture and Academic Optimism? Culture is a set of deep patterns of thinking and ways of acting that give meaning to human experience—it is a collection of unwritten rules and traditions people learn as they fit into a group (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Hellriegel & Slocum, 2011; Peterson, 1999; Schein, 2017). School cultures are influential, they shape and re-shape what people do, think, and feel and provide a framework that a group can use to solve problems (Deal & Peterson, 1999, 2009; Frumin et al. 2016; Rosenholtz, 1991; Schein, 2017).

Research tells us that some kinds of school cultures support students' learning much more strongly than others (Fleming & Kleinhenz, 2007). A school culture that embodies Academic Optimism supports student learning and encompasses three constructs: the academic emphasis of the school, the collective efficacy of the faculty, and the faculty trust in the parents and students (Hoy et al. 2006; Wu, 2013). This collective property of schools has been linked to school achievement in a number of studies (Cheraghikhah et al. 2015; Hoy & Smith, 2007; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2004; and 2006; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006; Wu & Lin, 2018).

Extending the discussion of the impact of a school culture of Academic Optimism to the students' perspective, Tschannen-Moran et al. also found that Student Academic Optimism, consisting of student trust in teachers, students' perceptions of academic press and student identification with school, had a direct positive effect on student achievement (Tschannen-Moran et al. 2013).

Influences that create a positive school culture have been the focus of much research. While teachers' workplace factors of collaboration, shared decision-making and structured time to work together were brought to the discussion of teaching quality in the eighties and 1990s by Hord (1986), Rosenholtz (1991), McLaughlin and Talbert (1993), and Darling-Hammond (1994), it was via the work of Richard DuFour that the term 'professional learning community' became a focus of attention among educators (DuFour & Ecker, 1998). Professional learning communities (PLCs) were viewed as a way to build shared ownership of support among educators to ensure the success of each learner within structures that support a collaborative culture (DuFour, 2004). While over time this structure and implementation of PLCs became somewhat ambiguous, studies have shown that higher functioning PLCs predict higher levels of teacher efficacy, which can contribute to improved student achievement (Olivier & Hipp, 2006, Strahan, 2003; Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017).

Legislated Educational Reform and Positive School Climate

Federal mandates have also recognized the importance of an optimistic school culture that focuses on educators' ability to work collaboratively to create a positive school climate that

supports the academic and behavioral needs of all students. A 1997 amendment to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) included the language ‘Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports’(PBIS) and remains in the version of the law amended in 2004 (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2017). PBIS requires a school wide commitment to implement positive behavioral supports in order to create a positive school climate. Studies of schools that have implemented PBIS with fidelity have documented improvement in teachers’ overall perception of organizational health and indicated stronger perceptions of trust among teachers, and some indicators of higher student achievement (Houchens et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2018).

The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA also called for the need for early intervention and support for students with learning and behavioral needs. Response to Intervention (RtI), became a new way to think about both early intervention and disability identification (Fuchs & Deschler, 2007). A three-tiered system of differentiated student support RtI is being widely implemented in schools across the country in order to increase effective teaching and remove barriers to student learning (Mundschenk & Fuchs, 2016). Currently, more comprehensive than RtI, Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is being used as an umbrella term that includes academic, behavioral, social, and emotional supports for students.

While none of these mandates alone develop a culture of Academic Optimism, they provide tools for teachers and administrators to use to support a culture of high academic expectations and ownership of the learning for all students. Supported by high functioning Professional Learning Communities, research provides evidence that capacity building and collective efficacy can be enhanced through success as a professional learning community (Olivier & Hipp, 2006). These factors contribute to the development of school culture of Academic Optimism, where an effective leader builds a culture that positively influences teachers, who in turn positively influences students (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005).

The Power of Collective Efficacy

A March 2018 article, *The Power of Collective Efficacy* (Donohoo, Hattie, & Eells) points to the relationship between a school leader’s role and the collective efficacy attributes enabled in a school staff. This is especially important in that a meta-analysis conducted by Eells (2017) revealed that collective efficacy and achievement in education demonstrates that the beliefs teachers hold about the ability of the school as a whole are “strongly and positively associated with student achievement across subject areas and in multiple locations” (p. 110).

As a result of Eells’ research, Hattie (2016) positioned collective efficacy at the top of the list of factors that influence student achievement. Other previous researchers also documented the very strong and positive outcomes achieved within an educational environment that strengthens collective efficacy. For example, the seminal research of Bandura (1977) is the keystone foundation for collective efficacy as he defined and described collective efficacy as “a group’s shared belief in its conjoint capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment” (p. 197).

In terms of school leaders’ relationship to growing collective efficacy, a consistent theme noted by administrators, teachers, staff, parents and students is the trusting relationships each group and individual have for other members of the school groups (Bryk, 2003; Kochanek, 2005). Trust has been described by many, in various ways, as the firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability or strength of someone or something. This feeling tone of interpersonal relationships across

all concerned takes some time to develop in a strong manner and yet it is built each day by each individual (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Tschannen-Moran (2014) describes the importance of school leadership to set the tone for a high trust level at the school, modeling the behaviors of regard, caring and respect for everyone in the organization and being exceedingly competent in dispatching their responsibilities.

The actions a school leader can undertake to help foster and develop collective efficacy is seen in the many themes of the research conducted in the school districts and schools of this current study. These steps, as implemented in these schools, have indeed captured the spirit, heart, and power achieved through a collectively efficacious culture and environment.

Research Methods

This study reveals findings of the constructs of Academic Optimism demonstrated by 144 urban school leaders and teachers within 10 California socioeconomically disadvantaged schools as they both framed learning expectations and assisted their students to meet them over 2017-18. Participants consisted of 144 purposively selected urban California school administrators and their staff at low SES schools. The sample was delimited to K-8 public, non-charter, non-academy schools identified from the California School Dashboard which demonstrated high performance/growth, while designated high poverty. “Purposive sampling is most often used in qualitative research to select individuals or behaviors that inform the researcher regarding the current focus of the investigation” (Krathwohl, 1998, p. 172).

Schools were initially identified through the Educational Results Partnership at edresults.org, a reporting portal, which engages a national alliance of business and academia dedicated to improving educational productivity from kindergarten through employment. It uses the nation’s largest database on student achievement (National Center for Education Statistics) while identifying successful schools particularly within economically disadvantaged districts with the goal to promote their best practices. Identification of schools was subsequently corroborated through two additional websites, The California School Data Dashboard, and EdSource.org. Purposive sample selection of participants met the following criteria:

- Fifty percent or greater student population receiving Free/Reduced Lunch (Title I)
- *Blue or green progress for English Language Learners (EL)
- *Blue or green progress for Mathematics
- *Blue or green progress for English Language Arts

**Blue or green progress on the California School Data Dashboard denotes 1st or 2nd quintile.*

As schools were identified, school leaders were contacted to determine their interest to participate in the study along with their teachers. Participants were invited to describe their lived experiences through a phenomenological lens as they both interviewed with the researchers, and engaged follow-up surveys, responding to four research questions of:

1. How do California school leaders and staff at high performing low SES schools support a collaborative attitude for the benefit of all students?
2. What specific practice(s) has/have contributed most to growth in student learning within

California's high performing low SES schools?

3. How do California's high performing low SES schools ensure equity in learning for all students?

4. What recommendations do California school leaders and staff make for other low SES schools as they consider engaging Academic Optimism and collective efficacy at their sites?

The primary data analyzed for this study were: 1) responses to open-ended focus group interviews comprised of superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, assistant principals and teaching staff of ten urban California school districts; and 2) survey responses from 144 superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, assistant principals and teachers on an eight question Likert scale survey.

Qualitative: The results of the survey were utilized to develop follow up questions that were used in focus groups and interviews at each school. Inductive analyses were utilized to examine participants' responses to the interviews. Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and reviewed several times to ensure completeness of data. As categories emerged they were coded through the constant comparative method of data analysis which captured recurring patterns that cut across "the preponderance" of data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 139). The coding and labeling of text according to content provided a means for theory building (Richards & Richards, 1994). This was repeated using the grounded theory approach until saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin 1990). This method of analysis involved the identification of interpretive themes and categories that emerged from the data (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990). The inductive analysis process began with the research team's thorough reading of each interview transcript to gain a sense of the range of the responses and identify any reoccurring themes. Tentative themes were then refined after the research team collaboratively reread, reflected on, and discussed participants' responses. Validity and reliability were achieved through participation of others in the coding process (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Quantitative: Survey questions were drawn from the review of literature on Academic Optimism and then reduced to just those questions deemed most closely focused on the factors related to the study. The survey was piloted to a small group and final adjustments were made resulting in eight questions. Surveys were sent electronically to principals to share with their staff members. The responses were disaggregated by school site including analysis of means and variance by question.

Findings

The following data reveal findings for six of the eight questions surveyed. Questions 7 and 8 of the survey sought demographic information regarding level of school (elementary, middle) and length of service of the respondent. Responses were disaggregated by the demographic categories, but no significant differences were found between categories. In essence, there was close to universal agreement on the responses from all respondents.

Quantitative data from the survey illustrated that responding schools scoring high on the characteristics chosen on the California School Dashboard also scored high on the survey questions. There was variation between schools, but it was not significant. There was also little variation between administrator and teacher ratings. While no correlational analyses were

performed due to limited sample size of the number of schools (10), there was evidence of a relationship to schools scoring in a higher quintile having higher overall survey ratings.

Research Question 1: How do California school leaders and staff at high performing low SES schools support a collaborative attitude for the benefit of all students? was most related to survey Question 1: School administrators and staff support collective efficacy at my school in the following ways. The results are found in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Collaborative Attitude

Question	Percent of responses Always or Sometimes
Engagement of shared planning time for grade level curricula	98.3
Provide current and relevant resources toward optimal student learning	97.5
Belief in promoting the development of understanding	97.9
Exploration of perceptions, assumptions, and beliefs	93.2
Engage current research findings	96.6
Ongoing professional development	99.2
Teachers own learning and application of best practices	97.5
Serving the larger community	98.3

Overall percentages were approximately 98%. Of note is that the lowest rating was over 90% indicating a very high degree of agreement by staff.

Research Question 2: What specific practice(s) has/have contributed most to growth in student learning within California’s high performing low SES schools? was taken from responses to several questions on the survey. The results are found in Table 2 and 3:

Table 2

Schoolwide Initiatives Contributing to Optimal Student Learning

Contributing Schoolwide Initiative	Percent of responses
Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)	97.4
Collaborative Professional Learning Groups	95.7
Response to Intervention (RtI)	92.3
Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS)	75.2
Instructional Rounds	47.9
AVID Program	7.7
Other Initiatives	25.6

Note. Some respondents indicated that they did not have some of the initiatives in place in their school (e.g., AVID).

Table 2 indicates that the schools responding to the survey had a number of initiatives in place that supported student growth. Almost all of the schools reported PBIS, RtI, and some form of collaborative learning. A multi-tier system of supports (a more complex approach than RtI) was found in many of the schools. Instructional rounds were also reported in approximately half of the schools.

Research Question 3: How do California’s high performing low SES schools ensure equity in learning for all students? was taken from responses to several questions on the survey. The results are found in Table 3 below:

Table 3

Ensure Equity

Question	Percent of responses Always or Sometimes
School promotes a culture of equity in learning for all students	96.63
Explore and examine all views	96.64
Willingness to have crucial conversations	96.64
Willingness of school admin and teachers to challenge assumptions	94.96
Establish practices that ensure equity in learning for all students	95.80

There was nearly unanimous agreement in the survey data related to questions ensuring equity in learning for all students with the lowest percent being almost 95% of responses that were Always or Sometimes.

Qualitative data from survey questions and focus groups provided specific data in response to research question 4.

Research Question 4: What recommendations do California school leaders and staff make for other low SES schools as they consider engaging academic optimism and collective efficacy at their sites?

The following quotes represent the most common recommendations by participants:

- “Have your systems in place!”
- “Organization and implementation of those systems will perpetuate growth and academic progress.”
- “Establish a schoolwide culture of high expectations and high support for all students.”
- “Allow teachers to "fail"... Allow them to be innovative. Let the students drive their needs, their goals.”

- “One teacher cannot account for the individual growth of more than 60 students in a day, but one student can track his progress on an everyday level.”
- “Academic success and academic optimism come from a culture of family and safety.”
- “The kids see us try... sometimes fail... but try again. When they see this, they learn that it is okay for them also.”
- “The constant finding of ways to become innovative to challenge students to grow beyond expectations and showcase knowledge.”

Qualitative data from survey questions and focus groups were coded and emerged into four thematic phenomena that supported the quantitative findings and providing details of the way with which California school leaders and teachers together engaged collective efficacy and willingness to support community and organizational citizenship. The organizational lens of academic optimism both assisted school leaders and teachers to frame learning expectations for low socioeconomic status students while mitigating the traditional challenges inherent in their schooling.

THEME 1 (High Trust to Mitigate Problems)

A cultural shift from micro-management with 5-7 students performing below grade level in every class to a culture of innovation, choice, students setting their own goals with nearly all either at, or nearly at, grade level. There is great reciprocal trust in and great respect for each other. The principal is seen as a coach by all the staff. There is comfort with mistakes that ultimately improve practice.

THEME 2 (Anticipating Barriers with Outreach and Development)

Clear learning targets are in place. Instruction is differentiated with strong Tier 2 and 3 intervention supports. Teachers participate in the hiring of teachers. Site principals and teachers adopt processes of ongoing continuous improvement; don't do the same thing every year. A culture of agile-ness is encouraged. Labels have been eliminated (i.e. EL, SpEd) and teachers are encouraged to discover what students need and ensure they receive it.

THEME 3 (Collaboration is Teacher Owned)

While data are the primary source for collaboration the design of universal or designated time is a weekly priority. Planning days over the year are calendared. Common assessments are teacher created at each grade level. Teachers are released to visit other teachers' classrooms, through instructional rounds, or #watchmeteach.

THEME 4 (Equity in Learning is a Partnership)

Every adult believes every child can learn. The socioemotional needs of students come from the home. Systems are in place to ensure learning. Teachers reflect on their own practices to ensure student growth in learning for all students so that students get what they need at their level. All teachers meet the needs of all children, make school exciting. While participants noted, “other low SES schools have 2nd and 3rd graders who can't read,” this was not the case with this sample.

Respondents most attributed equitable growth in student learning to universally high-

expectations and positive school leadership, small group instruction and engagement during direct instruction, and opportunities for creative teaching and support from administration to meet every student's needs. Respondents identified shared planning time for developing grade-level curricula, and promoting the development of understanding while exploring perceptions, assumptions, and beliefs, as critical to serving the larger community.

How the Findings Relate to the COVID-19 Pandemic

While educational leaders and their staff in California have the challenging task before them to rebuild school culture as students and teachers return to campus from the online virtual learning environment, this study's findings are significant. The academically optimistic staff and administration who have forged together best through the difficult trials of COVID-19 will continue to deeply value and share a "no matter what our challenges are, we can overcome them," position. They will continue to champion the high expectations and high support for all students that they did prior to the arrival of the global pandemic and during it.

Follow-up interviews with these principals during October 2020, provided insights as to how these administrators extend and invite inclusion to help new teachers, staff members, and other administrators gain feelings of belonging to the school as an important part of the school team. They described how they clarify the nature of the work to be done with a no blame attitude, how they address uncertainty through intentional agility and adaptation, particularly with the uncertainty that came with COVID. These leaders create and project consistent messaging with an intensity around instruction. Everyone, from teachers to students to parents, receives consistent messages about the purpose and strength of the school. Failure is destigmatized with staff and leadership in that these are part of the learning process.

The collective efficacy these staff have long cultivated over time was not absent during the extremely challenging season of COVID-19, but perhaps made even more clear as their academically optimistic way of being, knowing, and doing supported every child through the retooled virtual teaching and learning required of every educator and learner during California's stay-at-home orders. One principal noted, "How we influence teachers' behavior is important versus the compliance piece."

Discussion

As California schools closed due to COVID-19 in March 2020, educational leaders and their staff moved to remote learning. "While the academic impact would be felt most acutely by low-income, Black, and Latinx students" (Hough et al. 2020, p. 1), staff in which Academic Optimism prevailed as the dominant disposition within the school's culture prior to COVID marched onward in the belief that all children can learn despite the challenges of the moment. The findings of this study focus our learning in two areas, each related. First, staff who had engendered the constructs of academic optimism and collective efficacy over time had additionally cultivated a way of being, a deep sense of believing, that they could overcome any challenge. This shared belief was paramount to providing equity in student learning prior to, and during COVID-19. And, secondly, they operationalized it.

As an overarching recommendation noted within the findings above, these schools had their systems in place while learning to scale at a level to serve all students, "No matter the challenges." This mantra, deeply held as a conviction of all within these schools, became their new

normal, their new truth during COVID-19 as it knocked and gained entry into the closing of their very school doors. How would, “No matter the challenges,” operationalize itself during this season of global pandemic?

Although there is a preponderance of literature that supports the essential elements of teacher efficacy, academic emphasis, organizational health, and principal trust within schooling, there is a critical need for researchers, school administrators, and teachers, “to go beyond socioeconomic status in the search for school-level characteristics that make a difference in student achievement” (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2006, p. 428).

The research of Hoy, et al. proves significant for examining the collective efficacy and cultural property that 144 California school leaders and teachers envisioned for their sites. The findings of this study corroborate that the collective efficacy of California’s urban school leaders and their teaching staff, while operationalizing high expectations for equitable growth in student learning for all student groups, champion the tenets of Academic Optimism.

Donohoo, Hattie and Eells (2018) in writing to the power of collective efficacy offered a number of recommendations that would help schools to build and sustain a culture of Academic Optimism. A synthesis of those recommendations follows:

- Control the school narrative: Don’t think of small changes, but instead focus on building a culture of collective efficacy among all members of the school community and its overall impact on student learning;
- Nurture an environment of evidence-based improvements: Constantly engage in conversations around the impact that specific practices can bring about and not worrying about failing forward as teachers adapt new techniques and strategies;
- Listen to students: Create opportunities for educators to hear from their students about their learning, their progress, and their struggles;
- Examine student artifacts: Regularly examine assignments, tests, portfolios, and other indicators of student progress and link these actions to teachers’ actions;
- Foster teacher collaboration: Identify student needs and develop formal, frequent and productive teacher collaboration to problem solve and come up with strategies, try them, and refine them;
- Build trust, empathy and effective interaction: These key terms identify teams that work effectively together to support each other, learn together, make mistakes and adjust, and build common understandings.

In a state such as California, given the vast diversity of students and families, the participants in this study remain hopeful and optimistic that they can continue to maximize student learning in an environment of Academic Optimism. The key findings from this study of these successful schools provide lessons for all educators to emulate. In many ways, COVID-19 has been viewed by the schools’ personnel as another impediment that has been successfully addressed through their optimistic team approach to serving students.

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