

Towards an Understanding of Excellence in Urban Pedagogy: A Portrait of a High School

Renu Ahuja

Morgan State University, Baltimore, Maryland

This case study describes processes in an urban high school, which contribute to excellence in urban pedagogy, and investigates teachers' and educational leaders' perceptions of the factors influencing their commitment to school success. Six themes related to excellence in urban pedagogy were identified. Data in the form of semi-structured interviews, observations, and document review describe a school in which the leadership strives to develop human capability at all levels through empowerment and shared decision-making. The study indicates that students' achievement is a collective responsibility and strong instructional leadership is a key for success in urban schools. More studies may be needed to show how contextual experience of teachers and teacher's self-efficacy are related. Key Words: Case Study, Leadership, Collective Efficacy, Excellence, School Effectiveness, and Urban

Background Information

"This school is cool. Teachers here make you really work hard. They do care. I have learned more in the past three months than I learned in probably in the last three years of schooling."

This case study of New Horizons School was born out of my interest in what goes on in successful urban schools. The study is based partly on my own experience of working in a school serving urban communities and partly from my perspective as a mathematics teacher in a local urban school, which recognizes that raising students' achievement has to be the main priority of the teachers and the leadership in the school. It is worth mentioning here that I was born and raised in India. I taught mathematics courses from Algebra I through Calculus to urban high school students for about twelve years before moving to the United States (US). After moving to the US, I took a number of graduate courses from the local universities in Maryland. Having been educated in two different countries has made me strive towards understanding the importance of cultural and educational background of students and their impact on students' achievement. Since my goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of the processes and practices that make New Horizons School (pseudonym) an excellent school, I used the naturalistic paradigm to guide the study. Within naturalistic inquiry, one seeks to understand the meaning constructed from the reality of the participants' framework rather than from the experiences of the investigator (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003). Eisner (1998) noted that "qualitative studies of classrooms, teachers, and schools are usually expressed in stories."

(p.189) Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) called such studies “portraits.” In this study, I present the findings in the form of a social science portrait, “a genre of inquiry and representation that seeks to join science and art” (Lightfoot-Lawrence & Hoffman Davis, p. 15).

Teachers are the foundation of our educational system. We must take a closer look at the relationship between the school as an organization and the attitudes and the behaviors of the teachers. For many students in urban settings, schools provide the strongest, stable, and most organized part of their educational world. Given that urban schools educate 40% of this country’s minority children, and 35% of its poor children (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2003; Zakariya, 1998), important lessons can be learned from a few urban schools that are beating the odds. In the era of high-stakes accountability and the increasing pressure on school leaders to create schools that assist all students to learn and succeed, this study is very valuable.

One hopes that one’s case will touch others. But how to connect? Not by calculation, I think, not by assumption that... I have discovered a "universal condition of consciousness." One may merely know that no one is alone and hope that a singular story, as every true story is singular, will in the magic way of some things apply, connect, resonate, touch a major cord. (Wolfe, 1985, p.72)

I hope that educational leaders and teachers in similar settings will gain some insight into the processes that guide the common goal of school success. The results from this study add to the literature on effective “focus-based” or “theme-based” schools.

Conceptual Framework and Review of the Literature

This study is based on two assumptions: (a) Strong leadership guides the instructional program and (b) teachers’ and principals’ beliefs are predictors of effective teaching. For example, a teacher who believes that only students with natural ability and aptitude will succeed in mathematics classes, compared with a teacher who believes that with effective teaching and diligence on the part of the student and teacher a non-talented student can succeed in mathematics, would teach in line with his/her beliefs using different approaches. According to Nespor (1987),

In spite of arguments that people's beliefs are important influences on the ways they conceptualize tasks and learn from experience, relatively little attention has been accorded to the structures and functions of teachers' beliefs about their roles, their students, the subject matter areas they teach, and the schools they work in. (p. 317)

According to Kruger and Parish (1982), a principal controls access, resources, and decision-making and a teacher controls what is actually going to be implemented in the class. Fink and Resnik (2001) contend that the essence of instructional leadership is the solid knowledge of the processes that govern teaching and learning, supplemented by leadership skills such as recruiting the right teachers for the post, creating a culture of

learning, which includes all members of the school community. Levine (1991) notes that the success of an effective program depends on a “directed autonomy” defined as the mixture of autonomy for participating faculties and control from the central office (p. 392). A high degree of autonomy is more likely to generate a unique culture and an inspired commitment to the success of the program (Duke & Trautvetter, 2001). In addition to strong administrative staff, a quality teaching staff is vital to an “effective school.”

According to Ofstead (2000), leadership strategies found in effective urban schools focus on “what works” rather than “how to do it.” This implies that most of the research on excellence in urban schools is descriptive rather than inferential. In this regard, Goddard and Goddard’s study (2001) done in an elementary urban school provides initial evidence that collective efficacy is an important school contextual feature that is systematically related to teacher efficacy. The current era of high-stakes accountability calls for the development of the leadership that creates belief in the possibility of success in urban schools and the realization of the goal of improved student achievement.

A positive school culture has been found to be associated with higher student motivation and achievement, improved teacher collaboration, and improved attitudes of teachers toward their job (Stolp & Smith, 1995). The impact of school culture on teachers and students is further substantiated by the observation that schools differ one from the other in the way they work as well as in the “effects” that they have on the lives of children (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Sashkin & Walberg, 1993). At the same time, the research in goal theory and on motivation and achievement suggests that teaching and learning occur in different forms, when guided by two different goals: “task-focused” and “performance- focused.” (Ames, 1992; Ames & Ames, 1989; Nicholls, 1989) Furthermore, the policies and practices in classrooms and schools influence students’ goal orientations (Maehr & Midgley, 1991).

Site Setting: The New Horizons School

The setting for this study is a four-year public high school in the northeastern part of Maryland. The school provides intensive, pre-professional training in the arts within the context of a comprehensive, college preparatory academic curriculum. In 1990, this school was named by the National Endowment for the Arts as one of the top five arts schools in the country, and was recognized as a Blue Ribbon School by the United States Department of Education. Since 1996, the New Horizon School (NHS) has the highest verbal Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores in the local school district and the second highest mathematics SAT averages in the local school district. Beginning in 2002, the federal government’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation required states receiving federal educational funds to test tenth graders in reading and mathematics. The state of Maryland chose Geometry as the mathematics test. In 2004 and 2005, the school’s Reading and Geometry scores were in the top ten compared with more than 200 high schools in the state of Maryland. Thus, the school offers excellent instruction by teachers who know their fields, and are convinced that their students can and must learn at high levels.

The school has a committed teaching staff with little turnover. By contrast, the instability of teachers in urban schools presents a problem for program continuity (Pink, 1990). The faculty at the school consists mostly of highly qualified veteran teachers, who tend to remain once placed at this school. The school has seventeen full time academic teachers and two part time academic teachers, in addition to various art teachers and department heads for each of the art areas. The school has only one academic department head. The current school enrollment is 325. Approximately 45% are Caucasian, 47% are African-American, and 8% are Asian or Hispanic. Ten percent of the students get free lunch. On average, 98% of the school graduates are annually accepted into leading colleges all over the nation.

I have used the student achievement data from 2002-2005 of High School Assessment (HSA), the SAT, and the opinion of some community members to come to the conclusion that NHS is an effective school. The New Horizons School is a role model for other schools in the district because of its demonstrated success in increasing student achievement in an urban setting. Though I teach geometry at this school, and it is my third year at the school, there were some areas of its operation about which I knew little. I wanted to learn from the experiences of veteran teachers in the school and the academic dean who has taught in the school district before taking the position of academic dean. My daily schedule never allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of processes that guide the vision of the school. In attempting to gain an in-depth understanding of the processes and practices that make the New Horizons an excellent school, I sought to discount my prior knowledge and my prejudices about the school.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe processes in the New Horizons School which contribute to excellence in urban pedagogy (classroom practices in urban schools) and to determine teachers' and educational leaders' perceptions of the factors influencing their commitment to school success. The following questions guided the study: (a) What practices at the New Horizons School support overall success of the school? (b) How does the school climate and organizational structure function to encourage pedagogical excellence in this school? (c) How do teachers experience organizational control and how do they perceive such controls to be influencing their own efficacy?

Method

Rationale for Using the Case Study Design

Urban pedagogy is a complex subject. Due to its complexity, the research plan was to use a descriptive case study design. A case study is an appropriate research design to identify and explain specific issues (Merriam, 2001), especially when studying a complex concept. It allows for the emergence of data from a variety of perspectives, methods, and paradigms. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) suggest that case studies are done for one of the three purposes: to describe, explain, or evaluate. This case study sought to

describe and identify processes at New Horizons School (NHS) which contribute to excellence in urban pedagogy.

Data Collection

The sample for this study included five teachers, one administrator, and three students. These students were selected because they shared a common lunch period with the researcher and represented three of the four art majors being offered at the school. A formal approval to conduct the study was obtained from the principal of the school. Following the approval from the administration to conduct the study at NHS, sample inclusion criteria were set and an informed consent was obtained from the participants. It was made clear that the participation was voluntary. The participants may refuse to answer any question, and confidentiality will be maintained at every step. My goal was to identify information rich cases that met my research purpose. Thus, I did purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2001) and criterion-based selection (Le Compte & Preissle, 1993) to illuminate the research questions. "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). The criteria used were total teaching experience (>2), teaching experience at NHS, and ethnicity. This facilitated selection of veteran teachers as well as the new teacher to get their perceptions of the processes that guide the vision of the school. The data collection period spanned from March 27, 2005 through April 15, 2005. The data collection tools used for this study were the computer, field notes, tape recorder, and the audiotapes.

Participants

T1 has been teaching English at NHS for the last thirteen years and considers this school as a heaven for teachers. He worked as a journalist for the local newspaper before taking up teaching as a career, and taught English in two of the districts' schools for twelve years before moving to NHS. T2, who worked as a chemist for twelve years, switched careers and has been teaching biology and earth science at NHS for the past ten years. T3 has worked for the school district for about 35 years, and has been teaching American Government and World History at NHS for the past 15 years. T4 taught in middle schools for three years before joining NHS as a high school teacher in 2004. She worked in a few movies and TV shows before switching career as a middle school English teacher. T5 has worked for the school district for 30 years and has been teaching English at the school for the past twenty years. John has been working as an administrator at NHS since 1989. S1 and S2 are sophomores with majors of visual arts and music respectively. S3 is a senior with dance as her major.

As the study and the data analysis progressed, the following sub-questions emerged: (a) How do attitudes and decisions of school administrators and faculty shape the school success? (b) How do administrators and teachers communicate the school vision to the new and continuing students? (c) How is commitment to school vision developed? (d) What are the expectations of principals for teachers in this school? (e) How do school leaders successfully bring about change in schools that improves schooling for at risk students? (f) What are the administrator's perceptions of the

characteristics of teachers that contribute most to teachers' effectiveness? (g) What is the key to effective pedagogy? (h) What are the perceptions, beliefs, and values of students, teachers, and administrators of this high school?

An interview guide was prepared based on the research questions. The open-ended semi-structured interviews with three of the teacher participants were of 20 minute duration each. The interviews with the other two teachers lasted for 45 and 30 minutes respectively. The teachers' interviews were audio taped, then transcribed verbatim, and filed in different folders. John decided to type the answers to the questions I had, and handed over the answers to me after a week. I also observed the class proceedings of T4, the new English teacher. I talked to T4 during her lunch period and took notes during the informal discussion. The student participants gave me essays about their feelings and experiences about the school. One of the students answered the questions I had after reading her essay. Specifically, I chose the participant-as-observer role because it allowed me to become a complete insider. The participant-as-observer role was the appropriate method to follow, since it provided me with a way to work closely with the participants, while still gathering rich and detailed data. In addition to interviews and observations, this research plan also included a review of documents. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) describe the benefits of examining written texts and artifacts as, "Such evidence, unlike the spoken word, endures physically and thus can be separated across space and time from its author, producer, or user" (p. 703). Documents included mission statement, teachers' handbook, students' planner, newspaper articles, school report card, school newsletters, and social event flyers. I carefully documented each step of the data collection phase.

Data Analysis

The approach to analyzing the data was through interpretational analysis. Interpretational analysis is the process of examining case study data closely in order to find constructs, themes, and patterns that can be used to describe and explain phenomena (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Research questions were used as the focus for forming the categories. The validation process involved having the interviewees review their transcripts prior to being entered into the atlas.ti software. Once the interviewees concluded with their review, an approval was obtained and the transcripts became a part of the qualitative software review process. The transcripts from the interviews were coded, and used to analyze and generate themes as well as conclusions. I used open coding followed by axial coding.

The data from the first interview was analyzed coarsely after collection, to get a feel of the data. I developed some of the sub-questions during this first interview. The rest of the data was analyzed after collection, by critically looking at the field notes and reviewing the interview transcripts line-by-line to look for patterns and trends in the information. The atlas.ti software was used to reduce the data collected into codes and categories for the three teachers' interviews. The field notes from other two teachers, students, notes from class observations, and notes from the administrator were reduced to codes and categories by reading and re-reading line by line. I initially coded the data serially using *in-vivo* codes or paraphrasing, using my interpretation of the section of the data. However, later, I used "cut and paste" (selecting sections of data on related themes

and putting them together) to list responses to the common questions from all the teacher participants to compare the categories, and then I grouped those categories into themes. I used these themes and sub-questions as focus while reviewing documents to ensure triangulation. I separated segments of data and codes relevant to the research questions. Based on the analytical induction, emerging patterns were identified and related information was placed into categories and themes.

Trustworthiness

Researcher as the Instrument

In this study it was critical to have the researcher become a part of the team and actively participate in the study. The perceptions of the researcher were an important part of the study. It would have influenced the outcome because data was filtered through the researcher's mind and interpreted by her. In this study, the researcher was intimately connected with the school studied and hoped to learn more from the experience than expected.

An important characteristic of this study is the thick description provided by the researcher. In order to provide the reader with the contextual aspects of the study, I planned to document every detail, which included visual images and detailed background information of the classes observed. Providing thick description adds credibility to the study. To ensure validity, I have used direct quotations from the interviewees to provide a "true description of a given reality" (Janesick, 1998, p. 119).

Triangulation

In order to minimize the threat to trustworthiness of the data, the research utilized the triangulation methods to ensure that multiple perspectives were reflected in the findings (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2001). The patterns of findings, from multiple data sources, resulted in triangulation. These included observation, interviews, document review, and informal conversations with the participants. For example, triangulation occurred when codes articulated during teacher interviews also became evident in her actions or actions of her students during observations. These actions were in tandem with expectations of administrators from teachers and students as explained in the teachers' handbook and students' academic planner. Probably the major threat to trustworthiness was my own bias. In order to control for this, I have done verbatim transcription and member checking. I have also kept audit trail. Peer debriefing by T2 validated the themes identified. John read the final draft of the article before giving permission for publication.

Findings and Interpretations

To gain an in depth understanding of the target issue, "excellence in urban pedagogy", I attempted to portray the climate and organizational structure at the New Horizons School. Data was organized into one or more of the following categories on the basis of the research questions: (a) Mission - characterized by the goals and shared vision (b) Empowerment, (c) Teamwork and Capability Development, (d) Flexibility and

Student-centered Differentiated Teaching (e) Organizational Learning - teachers learning from each other; facilitation of peer level friendships, and (f) Fostering Competency and Relatedness. The organization of the data into these categories gave rise to six themes related to excellence in urban pedagogy at NHS. These themes are listed below.

1. Well-crafted mission is the lifeblood of the school and a tenacious belief that the vision and mission of the school are more important than anything else.

The documents review and conversations with the participants revealed that there were certain landmark decisions that were made at the founding of the school such as the following. (a) The school board at the time of the school's founding issued a resolution, laying out the mission of the school and its responsibility for supporting that mission. (b) Students were admitted based solely on audition. This decision was extremely important to the integrity of the school's mission of finding students with the potential for the school's program without regard to the students' past educational history. (c) Teaching of art classes were solely conducted by part time professionals and a board of overseers was set up whose main responsibility was to assure that the school carried out its mission. (d) In addition, a private foundation was established to raise money to support the various programs at NHS. (e) Another important decision was that the director of the school should be an artist-administrator. The emphasis on artistic training and experience ensured that the person responsible for the school would have an understanding of what it means to be an artist. (f) Every student would be enrolled in a college preparatory program. John emphasized that this decision proved to be extremely important for it assured the parents of the school's understanding that young artists must also be educated academically as well as artistically.

During the interview, John explained that because of the nature of the school's program, artist-teachers assumed that they would work in a professional environment. This meant that the integrity of their work and their professional judgment would be respected. This atmosphere, culture, and organizational framework carried over into the academic department. What was good for artist-teachers was equally good for academic teachers. John remarked during the interview,

The school's mission is communicated to students by word and by deed, hour by hour, day by day, year by year. A clear focus on mission becomes paramount. This mission-focus vents the institution of negative energy. What one does is what one is supposed to be doing, and this reinforces the mission because one sees others doing the same. Synergy produces more from less. *Excellence*, which is rarely mentioned at the school, becomes less a goal and more given.

John remarked that institutions must see what "good" is long before they can seriously entertain any thoughts of excellence, and that is exactly what the school did. T2 provided some insight into the processes guiding the vision of the school.

As an inner city school, the school's vision is to give students opportunities that they would not otherwise have to develop their talents

at the same time that they complete their high school academic education. There may be gaps in the basic skills that students have when they enter the school. It is part of the school vision to help students fill in these gaps and develop the confidence to succeed.

The conversations with the participants and their comments about the views of parents about the school revealed that students, faculty, parents, and the external community share the school vision of preparing students for excellence in arts as well as academics.

2. Instructional leadership strives to develop human capability at all levels through empowerment and shared decision-making.

Data in the form of semi-structured interviews, observations, and document review describe a school in which leadership strives to develop human capability at all levels through empowerment and shared decision-making. All the teachers interviewed report that they feel freedom in their work life because the administrators have confidence in their expertise in content area and teaching skills.

A new teacher at the school, T4, remarked teachers are content with their life at this school.

I like the way they run the school. It is very important for me. If you don't like the people who run the school, you don't feel like working there. You are not happy. Earlier I taught at a middle school. It's not rewarding to teach students who can't remain in their seats.

All teachers remarked that the school has a structure and they get a lot of support for discipline. They are free from some of the duties that teachers in other school have. They are just asked to give full attention to instruction and improve achievement. T5 explained it further as, "I think when people are treated as professionals and respected for their work, they try to show commitment and try their best."

The participants in this study described the effects of school size on their feelings of autonomy. All the teachers interviewed, reported that the supervisors at this school are demanding, but also appreciative of the efforts of the teachers. They acknowledge the hard work through letters for their file, personal and public praise, and recognition. This implies that feedback, especially about the positive results of one's efforts, is a large factor in teachers' commitment to change. When asked to sum up experiences of working at the School, T1 responded as,

I think I have been given (little loud) the kind of support here, which is so conducive to teaching that it's, as I almost feel spoiled. In most teaching environments, the interference from the administration and department heads is such that we do our teaching despite their input, indeed not enhanced by their input. At this school, I find that any needs I have, I communicate to them, whether its curriculum material, support for discipline, I feel very well supported. At the same time, they do not tend to impose structure on me that may limit my teaching or any sitting judgment

on what I am doing. I love teaching here because of that. I think the administration here is a model for what I would set up administration anywhere for teaching supervision.

3. Sharing a set of values that create a sense of individuality and a clear set of expectations through open communication and close collaboration.

NHS creates opportunities for all students to develop a “sense of community” (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997) in school; a sense of bond to adults and peers; and a sense that they contribute to, and influence, the daily life of the school. S3 reported about her life at the school in her essay.

NHS isn't the best school in the world, but is one that helps to build one's individuality. The personality that I have can easily be separated from other artists in the school. This school has also opened my eyes to the real world. For a long time I have stayed trapped in my own dimension. It is as if life was a myth to me. As my journey continues I realize that, the world is not a beautiful place to live in. This realization can also be compared to many aspects at this school. I was always treated as a professional.

The teachers have reported that the administrators have developed a culture of support, high standards, and mutual respect. They supervise closely, in a non-threatening manner, offering suggestions as and when needed. At the same time, they give teachers the liberty to experiment in their classes. Thus, administrators maintain a policy of open communication. The following statement given by John clearly articulates expectations from everyone in the school. “...that acting professionally and allowing others to be professional is essential.”

The teachers as well as the students feel free to approach the administration to seek help, advice, and raise their concerns. This is seen clearly from what T5 said, “I can walk into John's office anytime I feel, I need their help.” Students also get the opportunity to meet the principal once a month for a lunch where they can raise any special concerns they have. Just as the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and values of teachers influence change efforts, student beliefs and attitudes influence school improvement. Students must believe that they are respected as individuals and that they are tied to the school. As is evident from S3's statement, “I was treated like an adult in this building, stripped away from my childhood to be offered professionalism. The teachers at the school made me realize that there is more to me than just beauty and talent.” This suggests that students identify their true potentials, and develop a positive sense of self-concept at this school.

Multiple communication strategies are used to disseminate information to all the stakeholders. These include parent newsletters in the fall and spring, emails, frequent phone calls to the parents, letters, one-on-one counseling, social event flyers about performances, special mentoring programs at the school, and students' and faculty's achievements. T5 remarked that, “everyone needs to be on the same page and so open communication is very important.” The teachers also reported that they kept parents informed of students' progress, and asked for help to provide an environment at home

conducive to learning. Other participants also expressed the same sentiments about the solid support they receive at NHS, and what this support looks like is clear from the quote taken from the school website. “I had never been in a place, let alone a high school, where everyone is like a big group of friends that support each other day by day, as they expand their artistic and academic capabilities” (David, a pseudonym).

4. Teacher and Collective Efficacy

The teachers at NHS believe that they have the ability to effect a change in students’ lives. This sense of self-efficacy fosters their commitment to the school. As explained by T3,

Well! Unlike other schools, you are treated like a professional; they trust you... that you can do your job. They are not at your neck every 5 minutes. You don’t have to worry about noise in other classes. That takes off stress off you.

As is also clear from what T2 said,

This is my ninth year at this school. I have grown as a teacher during these nine years because I am able to interact with experienced master teachers everyday. We share experiences and discuss problems. My lessons have changed over the 9 years to reflect changes in the state guidelines for biology. I had worked with other teachers to find creative ways to teach my students analytical skills in my science classes.

T4, a first year English teacher, reported that she spent two hours everyday, and again 3-4 hours over the weekend, to prepare her lessons. Her class observation revealed that her blackboard work was very structured with homework due for the day and the next home assignment posted for every class. She enthusiastically tried to ensure maximum participation about discussions of various cultures across the globe, after briefly going over the main themes from their entire week’s discussion of the book, “Siddhartha”. She reported that she got a lot of help from the academic department head and other teachers in the English department.

At New Horizons School, teachers have a strong work ethic. By work ethic, I mean the values they believe in and work by. Teachers are flexible, energetic, and hard working. They set their standards high, follow through, and do not give up easily. They share a sense of responsibility for their school and students. Teachers at NHS extend their efforts to the students by means of tutoring, project based learning, and interdisciplinary instruction. When teachers are interested in students and demonstrate respect for them, a community of caring is nurtured. The teachers reported that they try to provide tools for academic success. It is up to the students as to whether they want to take advantage of that or not. Most of the teachers reported that the school serves to take students who audition here to determine that they have the potential to succeed in arts no matter where they stand academically at the time of admission. Their job is to work with the students

for four years, along with other teachers in the building, as partners to make them college ready or professional school ready, not only in the arts but also in academics.

The school is able to run programs such as “Summer Bridge” and “Saturday Tutoring” to help students acclimatize to the challenging environment at NHS. During the summer program, the instruction is not provided in content, although they use content on how to be a student. As explained by T1,

At the end of summer, we hope that they can enter on a level playing field with those students who have these skills like how to be a student, how to be on time for class, to be responsible for their school work and learning.

The administration targets ninth graders who have a middle school history of lateness, discipline, or frequent absence problems. T1 and T3 reported, during the interview, usually 30% of the accepted freshmen have these problems. Many teachers reported that most of these students lack necessary skills in order to sustain the rigorous program at the school. The teachers reported, during the interview, some students come from single parents or from homes where education is not a desirable value in comparison to say money, entertainment, athletics, or any other diversions from the course of academics. Also, the environment at home may not be conducive to learning or there may be irresponsible supervision at home. Then, the school has to take the role of the parent as remarked by T1. “Our administrator says sometimes this, “the school becomes the parent and at that point we have difficult decisions to make.” How much commitment are we willing to do?” T1 further explained,

We call students and have one on one conversation, try to schedule a time at their convenience whenever possible, provide in school time and space to get the work done, take them to library during lunch for instance. At least we have a communication set up with a student, where it should be with the parent... But at least we are having the same expectations from the students who have a quiet home environment. I also try to make sure that I give them realistic and achievable targets.

This suggests that these teachers make an emotional investment in the children by taking on parental roles, caring for students, and preparing them for life. When asked about the reasons for success of the school, T4 highlighted the personalized approach of the programs.

Students are given opportunity to sit down with individual teacher and go through their schedules, talk about organization, discuss strategies to help them. All of these things are instituted in this program. These are the things, that I feel have made our school a successful school. The staff overall is able to communicate. We try to create a community that is more as a family. That I feel, also contributes to overall success.

In addition, teachers coordinate and participate in fundraisers and academic and social events. Teachers share lesson plans and behavior management techniques. Teachers' efforts do not end with academic assistance: Teachers have instituted the Academic Achievement Award by contributing from their own pockets.

The policies, procedures, and practices of the administrators and department heads at NHS, as described in this study, were successful at reducing the negative consequences that can result from growing up in a culture that lacks value in academics. The participants reported that the positive shift in attitudes and values were seen among 30% of the students entering the school in ninth grade. These students were initially diagnosed to be in need of remediation. The data reported suggests that to initiate improvement in schooling for at risk students, strong leadership, sustained focus, and long-term commitment and involvement of all the stakeholders are crucial. John remarked,

At risk students tend to lack focus and much of their schooling has been devoted to catching up until catching up becomes a habit, that is until the habit breaks and the student no longer concerns himself with catching up but dropping out. It takes generous amounts of hours, enormous stores of energy, and commitment is too great to sustain.

5. Flexibility and Student-centered differentiated teaching

At NHS, the central focus is student learning. Teachers at this school believe that their students come to school with certain disadvantages, but they do not use that as an excuse for students to fail. They believe that all students can learn and the advancement of their education is of utmost concern. Students are placed into academic classes based on diagnostic testing. Students' profiles are created with schedules adapted to their needs and interests. Most of the classes are heterogeneous with students from grades 9-12 in the same class. Curriculum adaptation is a key factor of the academic program at the school because of the wide range of abilities and readiness levels of students. The teachers reported two challenges being faced by them. First, to bring 30% of the students, who come to school without sufficient academic background for the grade, up to speed and get them ready for state assessments. Second, to tackle heterogeneous classes in terms of age, grade level, and academic backgrounds. As is clear from T5's statement, "Other teachers in the district envy us... they don't understand how difficult it is for us to bring these kids up to speed...they just want scores..." To improve teacher performance, the work environment must enhance teachers' sense of professionalism and decrease their career dissatisfaction.

T5, who has been teaching at the school for the past twenty years, reported that the school strives to ensure the success of students who are at various levels of development when they enter the school. Teachers use a variety of instructional strategies to respond to students' diverse needs. T3 remarked that she uses a variety of teaching strategies such as different activities, group assignments, role-play, and movies followed by discussion to break the monotony in her history classes. She has to update her knowledge of current affairs regularly, as students ask her too many questions at times. During class observation, I noticed T2 adapting questions on state assessments in the

form of evolution jeopardy and puzzle games. Motivational strategies, as reported by the teachers, include inviting guest speakers, members from the community, role-modeling, and facilitating peer level support, with a hope that friendship will translate into a change in behavior. Teachers feel accountable for every lesson taught. As explained by T2,

Another thing, I learned over these 10 years is to cover one topic and use that topic as context, when I teach other topics. Let them revisit the topic learned earlier and review again in the context of the lesson being learned currently. Another thing, I assume is that whatever they need to learn, study and retain is here at school and during class time. Therefore, I try to maximize time on task and model how to study. I assume that, most of them are not going to study at home or over the weekend.

Therefore, teaching and learning occurs when teachers have “task focus goals” and “performance focus goals.” All the teachers interviewed reported that their expectations of the students are communicated to them through organization of their lesson, weekly or monthly schedules, and being a good role model. Students also reported that they find it very difficult at times to meet high expectations of everyone in the building, as the art classes are very demanding and time consuming. The participants’ responses, class observations, and the commitment and dedication shown by teachers in their planning of lessons, delivery of instruction, and peer consultations, about the students, indicate that the instruction provided at this school is a true model of differentiated instruction. As remarked by T5, “you got to love your subject and communicate the passion for your subject to your students. You show enthusiasm to teach your subject.”

6. Key to Effective Pedagogy

Most of the teachers reported that there is no key to effective pedagogy. It depends on personal preferences and inclinations. They try their best, depending on the circumstances. Teachers at NHS are reflective practitioners. They evaluate each lesson to be taught, rewrite the lessons, use lab puzzles, use hands on, and try to be more concrete and less theoretical. Key to their preparation is variety. The data from interviews and discussion with the participants have shown that effective teachers have proficiency in the subject, knowledge of effective teaching practices, flexibility, perseverance, patience, collegial support, and passion for the subject and their profession. The effective teachers make extra efforts, carefully planning to meet individual needs, and are eager to learn to improve one’s own practice. As remarked by John,

For teachers to be successful, like anyone else, must like what they're doing...all teachers make common mistakes in the beginning. Some teachers, some of the finest ones, know all of this intuitively. They shine in the classroom, mixing content with contentment, mixing what with how.

Here, I want to quote an interesting reply from one of the participants about his perception of effective pedagogy.

Here, we have jargon that clouds the mind. A teacher in the oldest sense of the word is a conjurer of signs, signs that lead somewhere. The teacher points the way. Students try to read the sign, internalize the signs. Of course, students must believe in their hearts more than in their heads that the signs are pointing correctly. Students naturally believe that the signs will take them somewhere, a destination that is worthy of their time, their effort. Finding the correct signs for students into the school and out of the school, into the world, is effective pedagogy.

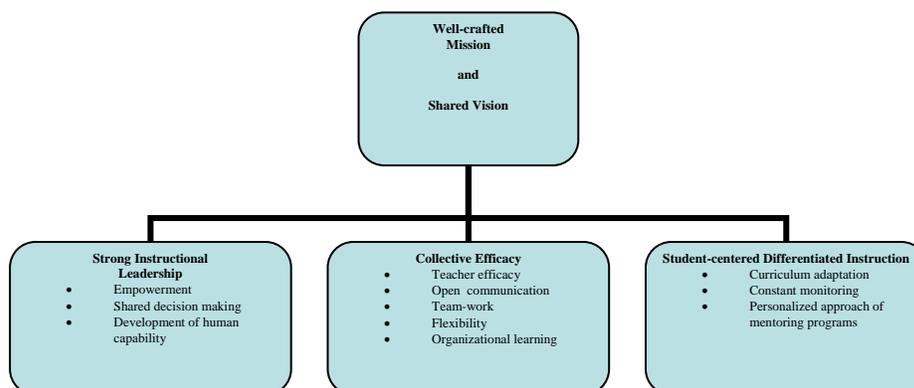
That's exactly how *excellence* in urban pedagogy should look like.

Summary

The power of the NHS lies not just in the matinees and workshops, or in other programs, or even in the high school, but in how these programs work together to open doors for children who might otherwise never have known such doors existed. (Document review)

The school environment creates a starting point for lasting school improvement. Interviews, observations, and document review suggest that excellence in urban pedagogy at NHS relies on well-crafted mission, strong instructional leadership, shared vision, high expectations for all, collective efficacy, student-centered instruction, and the fact that every member of the professional community is willing to go an extra mile (see Figure 1 for a summary of findings).

Figure 1. The portrait of New Horizon School.



This case shows that school context matter. Carter (1999) asserts that when a school clearly models that self-control, self-reliance, and self-esteem, anchored in achievement are a means to success, the school's own success inspires confidence, order,

and discipline in its students. Critical to the success of this school is the use of student level data generated on each student and existence of various mentoring programs along with the personalized approach of these programs. Students interviewed said that the program is rigorous, and it is very difficult to get into this school; you cannot “slack” they will “kick” you out. There is a well-established network between all the department heads, the administrators, and the Board of Overseers at this school. The vision of the school, from teachers’ perspective, has always been to develop the best potential that they can in their students and for them to have a successful future. This development comes through the potential they have for the arts and their potential for academics. In their perception, both must be thoroughly developed in each student in order to ensure success in future.

Limitations

Since the researcher is an integral part of the research under study, her presence might have influenced the participant’s perceptions and influenced the overall results. For this reason, the researcher cannot claim that the findings were not influenced by the researcher’s presence in the setting. This is an unavoidable risk in research of this type, since it is in the interaction between the researcher and the researched that the knowledge is created. It is always the case in qualitative research that the integrity, biases, and sensitivity of the investigator influence the quality of the data. Several strategies (member checking, peer debriefing etc...) outlined in the description of the methodology were employed to counteract this problem.

Discussion and Directions for Future Research

To effect a lasting change in the urban schools, stakeholders in urban education have to go the extra mile. That is what this school is doing, and this is a classic example of Private-Public partnership in education. Findings suggest that students’ achievement is a collective responsibility, and strong instructional leadership is a key for success in urban schools. Several researchers place particular emphasis on one accountability indicator: a teaching staff with an attitude of efficacy, commitment, and collective responsibility for student learning (Lee & Loeb, 2000, Wasley et al., 2000). Wasley et al. argue that students learn substantially more when they experience high levels of academic press and strong social support together, but they learn much less when they experience only one of these conditions.

Six themes related to *excellence* in urban pedagogy were identified:

- (1) Well-crafted mission is the lifeblood of the school and a tenacious belief that the vision and mission of the school are more important than anything else;
- (2) Instructional leadership strives to develop human capability at all levels through empowerment and shared decision-making;
- (3) Sharing a set of values that create a sense of individuality and a clear set of expectations through open communication and close collaboration;
- (4) Teacher and collective efficacy;
- (5) Flexibility and student-centered differentiated teaching; and
- (6) Key to effective pedagogy

The New Horizons School works as a “professional community” (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1997). Within a professional community, communication flourishes throughout the organization and teachers engage in discourse pertaining to instruction and challenges. A number of effective school characteristics have emerged from this study that are consistent with earlier evidence from literature such as: (a) high instructional expectations and expectations from the students based on the assumption that all students can learn, together with the assumption that it is the school and teaching quality, not student background, that is decisive for student results; (b) assertive leadership; (c) an orderly, work oriented atmosphere, ongoing monitoring of students’ achievement, and (d) direction of resources for students’ improvement.

This study suggests that teacher leader interactions can affect career aspirations, confidence, creativity, motivation, enthusiasm, security, expectations, sense of belonging, and willingness to excel. Strong leadership and empowerment may indeed be aspects of organizational life that can build collective efficacy (Bandura, 1997). More qualitative studies may be needed to show how contextual experience of teachers and teacher’s self-efficacy are related. The information generated in this study may provide some insight into the complex job of teachers and administrators in urban context. The findings of this study may be combined with similar studies to create a “better image” (Greenfield, 1982) of what constitutes effective practices in the context of the leadership in urban schools. The instructional leadership at NHS has set up a culture of a shared vision that strives for excellence in pedagogy. The findings suggest the need for future research to carefully investigate the relationship of leadership’s vision (including its creation and communication) along with actual changes in teaching and learning practices and school effectiveness. Students as well as teachers at NHS perform to their maximum potential, as they have self-selected the school. The results from this study add to the literature on effective “focus-based” or “theme-based” schools.

References

- Ames, C. (1992). Classrooms: Goals, structures, and student motivation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 84(3), 261-271.
- Ames, C. & Ames, R. (1989). *Research in motivation in education*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company.
- Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Watson, M., & Schaps, E. (1997). Caring school communities. *Educational Psychologist*, 32, 137-151.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Bilken, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bryk, A. S., Camburn, E., & Louis, K. S. (1997). *Professional community in Chicago elementary schools: Facilitating factors and organizational consequences*. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools.
- Carter, S. C. (1999). *No excuses: Seven principals of low-income schools who set the set standards for high achievement*. Washington DC: The Heritage Foundation.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Deal, T., & Peterson, K. (1990). *The principal's role in shaping school culture*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Duke, D., & Trautvetter, S. (2001, March). *Reducing the negative effects of large schools*. National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities: Washington, DC. Retrieved April 25, 2005, from <http://www.edfacilities.org/pubs/size.html>
- Eisner, E. (1998). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. Columbus, OH: Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Fink, E., & Resnik, L. B. (2001). Developing principals as instructional leaders. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(8), 598–606.
- Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. R. (2003). *Educational research: An introduction* (7th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Goddard, R. D., & Goddard, Y. L. (2001). A multilevel analysis of the relationship between teacher and collective efficacy in urban schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17(7), 807-818.
- Greenfield, W. D. (1982). *Research on public school principals: A review and recommendations*. Paper presented at the National Institute of Education conference on principals for educational excellence in the 1980's, Washington, DC.
- Janesick, V. J. (1998). *"Stretching" exercises for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Krueger, J. P., & Parish, R. (1982). We're making the same mistakes: Myth and legend in school improvement. *Planning and Changing*, 13(3), 131-140.
- Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Hoffman Davis, J. (1997). *The art and science of portraiture*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Le Compte, M., & Preissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research*. London: Academic Press.
- Lee, V. E., & Loeb, S. (2000, Spring). School size in Chicago elementary schools: Effects on teachers' attitudes and students' achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(1), 3-31.
- Levine, D. U. (1991). Creating effective schools: Findings and implications from research and practice. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 72(5), 389-393.
- Maehr, M. L., & Midgley, C. (1991). Enhancing student motivation: A schoolwide approach. *Educational Psychologist*, 26(3/4), 399-427.
- Merriam, S. (2001). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- National Commission of Teaching and America's Future. (2003). *No dream denied: A pledge to America's children*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Nespor, J. (1987). The role of beliefs in the practice of teaching. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 19, 317-328.
- Nicholls, J. G. (1989). *The competitive ethos and democratic education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 2000/01: Standards and Quality in Education*. The Stationery Office: London. Retrieved December 22, 2005, from

- <http://www.ncslonline.org/mediastore/image2/keys-successful-leadership-summary.pdf>
- Pink, W. T. (1990). Staff development for urban school improvement: Lessons learned from two case studies. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 1(1), 41-60.
- Sashkin, M., & Walberg, H. J. (1993). *Educational leadership and school culture*. Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Publishing Corporation.
- Stolp, S., & Smith, S. (1995). Transforming school *culture*: Stories, symbols, values, and the leader's role. Oregon: University of Oregon. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 026 696)
- Wasley, P. A., Fine, M., King, S. P., Powell, L. C., Holland, N. E., Gladden, R. M., et al. (2000). *Small schools: Great strides - A study of new small schools in Chicago*. New York: The Bank Street College of Education. Retrieved December 20, 2005 from <http://www.bankstreet.edu/gems/publications/smallschools.pdf>
- Wolfe, G. (1985). Minor lives. In M. Pachter (Ed.), *Telling lives: The biographer's art* (pp. 56-73). PA: University of Philadelphia Press.
- Zakariya, S. B. (1998). Troubles plague nation's urban schools. *The American School Board Journal*, 185, 8-9.

Author Note

Renu Ahuja is a doctoral candidate in mathematics education at Morgan State University, Baltimore, Maryland. Her research interests are: content pedagogy and effective classroom practices, diagnostic assessment, mathematical investigations in the classroom, and role of conceptions in the construction of mathematical knowledge and in the delivery of instruction. She has taught a variety of mathematics courses to pre-college students in India and United States.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Renu Ahuja, Morgan State University; Email: renunoor@yahoo.com

Copyright 2007: Renu Ahuja and Nova Southeastern University

Article Citation

Ahuja, R. (2007). Towards an understanding of excellence in urban pedagogy: A portrait of a high school. *The Qualitative Report*, 12(1), 1-19. Retrieved [Insert date], from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR12-1/ahuja.pdf>