

# Case Studies of School Community and Climate: Success Narratives of Schools in Challenging Circumstances

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## Abstract

This paper reports on a Canadian qualitative case study project funded by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. The paper describes success stories of students and communities affected by poverty from a diverse sample of eleven elementary schools throughout the province of Ontario. Over the period of one school year (2007-2008) and through school visits, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, researchers developed narratives that describe the ways that adult members (teachers, parents, administrators, and community groups/partners) in the sample schools thought about and shaped their work with students living in challenging socioeconomic circumstances. The paper illustrates examples from the project that draw on themes related to: commitment to high-quality collaboration, teacher mentorship, and community building; parent and community partnerships; and administrative leadership and the culture of leading.

**Key Words:** poverty, education, case study, teacher mentorship, collaboration, community partnerships, parental engagement, administrative leadership

## Introduction

Poverty is a complex issue that needs more attention from government officials, researchers, and those in partnerships with schools. This research is a

collaborative partnership between a teachers' federation, two universities, and eleven elementary schools. In Ontario, one out of every six children lives in poverty, amounting to over 478,000 children under the age of 18 below the poverty line (Campaign 2000, 2007). Community organizations such as Campaign 2000, a non-partisan, Canada-wide coalition of community organizations, are working together with schools to end child and family poverty in Ontario and across Canada. This project contributes to the research literature and to the practical understanding of how schools can best work with students and communities affected by poverty.

Our purpose as researchers of this poverty project was not only to understand and explore success in challenging circumstances, but also "to examine the school in terms of the community and climate as perceived not only by the researcher but also by students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members at large" (AERA, n.d.). At the heart of an excellent school is a school climate that is defined by excellent teaching, high-quality leadership, motivated staff and students, and a sense of community (see Alliance for the Study of School Climate, <http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/>). In our work across Ontario schools, our respondents repeatedly indicated that school success had at its foundation teaching excellence, high-quality collaboration, and effective leadership. These findings are the markers that help build and secure school climates that are safe, inviting, and caring for students, teachers, parents, and the community at large. In this paper, we highlight the significant themes vital to creating the kind of communities and climates which we discovered in the schools that we visited. In particular, we explore common and independent themes from our case studies, namely: commitment to high-quality collaboration, teacher mentorship, and community building; parent engagement and community partnerships; and administrative leadership and the culture of leading.

### **Context and Theoretical Framework**

In Ontario, approximately 478,000 children live in poverty. The "working poor" and the percentage of children living in poor families in Ontario has more than doubled in recent years and is close to 40% (Campaign 2000, 2007). With the recent deterioration of social assistance benefits and lack of inflation protection, these alarming statistics will remain and likely continue to grow. The average two-parent, low-income family lives \$11,000 below the poverty line (Campaign 2000, 2007).

Three groups that are especially vulnerable to such statistics are new immigrants, single parents, and people with disabilities. Among new immigrants to Canada, poverty has risen 60% over the last 20 years (Colour of Poverty,

2007). In Ontario, 47% of children in new immigrant families are considered poor (Campaign 2000, 2007). Likewise, 32% of children in non-dominant-culture families also are considered poor.

A majority (54.6%) of children living in low-income households live with their single-parent mother. These single-parent families live, on average, \$9,500 below the poverty line. The realities are harsh; most women are forced into poverty because of such issues as illness, abuse, divorce, or the high cost of living. In rural areas, women have little access to support systems or communities. Many single-parent women are humiliated and discriminated against because they are poor. This situation plays itself out as a catch-22; no way out and no way in—to any support system.

For children with disabilities (learning or physical), the poverty rate is 26% (Campaign 2000, 2007). Parents with disabilities experience many work interruptions and then have little saved or coverage for medical benefits or necessities. Women with disabilities earn much less than men with disabilities (Fawcett, 2000). These groups, and the statistics associated with them, tell but a small part of the picture of the stark realities of children and their families living in challenging circumstances.

Our funded research project serves as a call to action, and it has resulted in reports on successful programs and/or supported improvement in schools with challenging circumstances. The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario and its mandate to alleviate the impact of poverty on student learning helped advance public education and social justice goals through this research project.

In our project, we came to understand the issues and impact of poverty on children and families by speaking directly to parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. Our project report is a narrative, written in the form of cases, which describes distinct ways schools can support each other and tell a varied story of hope and success.

Recognition of the challenges of poverty should not obscure the variability between schools serving low-income communities (e.g., Frempong & Willms, 2002; Johnson, 2005; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979) or multiple ways of defining success (Cuban, 2000). While test scores may provide some information, it is crucial to look beyond standardized indicators to issues of school community, climate, and culture and to the nature of relationships for shared meanings and practices (e.g., Fullan, 2007). Shared practices and programs need to be acknowledged and evidenced between teachers and school leaders (e.g., Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) and beyond the school into children's families (parents) and communities at large.

There is a broad literature establishing the potential benefits of parent and community involvement for schools (Epstein, 1998), both for children's

learning (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001) and for their communities (Noguera, 2008). Some have questioned the way existing parent involvement practices reinforce inequality and disadvantage for poor parents (Lareau & Shumar, 1996). Still, other popular “how-to” strategy approaches to addressing the challenges of working with children affected by poverty (Payne, 1996, 2003) have been widely critiqued (e.g., Gorski, 2008). Admittedly, teachers’ and administrators’ accounts of their work and success with children affected by poverty were rather more complex; so, too, were the narratives of families and communities that have been impacted by poverty.

## Objectives

This project was designed to provide a close-to-the-ground description of the attitudes, beliefs, practices, and policies of schools that are successfully working with students and communities affected by poverty. Our research examined the context-specific ways that schools have become “success stories,” and we describe generally what these stories have in common.

In this paper, we explore how this project contributes to the research literature and to the practical understanding of how schools can best work with challenging circumstances such as poverty by examining the school in terms of the community, climate, and culture as it is perceived by parents, teaching staff, administrators, and community partners. Thus, our project sheds much-needed light on the ways that Canadian schools have sought to address and better serve students and communities affected by poverty.

## Methodology

Our project used a qualitative methodology to explore success stories in schools affected by poverty. This included the case study method (Yin, 2002), use of narrative telling (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006), and the appreciative inquiry method (Cooperrider & Sorenson, 2005).

Case studies have several strengths, including their flexibility in addressing a wide variety of viewpoints (Merriam, 1998). We asked participants *what* the school did to build positive schooling experiences for children and communities affected by poverty, *how* those programs or policies came to be and how they were implemented, and *why* the programmatic direction was chosen for the specific school. We extensively prepared for data collection before each visit, including the use of multiple sources of data, open-ended protocol questions, systematic routine by researchers to triangulate themes and categories, theoretical propositions via follow-up researcher meetings, and organization for the framework for cases (Yin, 2003a; 2003b). The development of case

studies provided context-rich descriptions of the diverse set of schools we visited across Ontario. We interpreted and were reflective in our role as researchers so as to represent uniquely each case (Stake, 1995) since “the utility of case research to practitioners and policymakers is in its extension of experience” (Stake, 1994, p. 245). We held tightly to the notion of the personal experiences and viewpoints of all who we interviewed for this project. Thus, the narratives that our participants shared were pivotal to the development of the cases.

Narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) relies on stories as powerful tools for understanding experience in education (Dewey, 1938), teacher knowledge, and practice. We understand educators’ practice and knowledge over time by studying their experiences as narratives or stories. We discovered that the places, people, and things in the context of schools are complex forces (Craig, 2003) that attribute to the narrative or story of success. This was viewed as an important phenomenon during our project. In other words, in our work with schools, the method we used is the case study and the phenomenon was the telling of narratives of education stakeholders in schools affected by poverty across Ontario. There was difficulty arriving at a single definition of poverty; this reflects, in part, the diverse goals of education for every school site. Observing the goals of each school, however, provided better understanding of how schools attempted to define and meet goals they judged to be most important to them. Our research identified and analyzed the narratives of success of those who were closest to the school, with a particular point of view which provided rich contextual information about meanings, beliefs, and processes. From the narratives we learned that success had multiple meanings for participants. We use this emergent approach to let the front-line participants identify their goals. Thus, in our view, working definitions of success-in-practice can serve various purposes for various contexts.

During some of our visits to schools, we incorporated a third qualitative method known as the appreciative inquiry approach (Cooperrider & Sorenson, 2005). We focused on what participants valued about their school community and climate, what they valued about themselves as educational stakeholders and community members, and ultimately we probed them to inquire further about future positive possibilities in their school communities. We sought to use narratives that explored participants’ core values as a way to more deeply understand the narrative, or core value, of the school community. Values literature and schooling is not new, especially in areas of educational leadership (Starratt, 2004; Begley & Stefkovich, 2007; Ciuffetelli Parker, 2008). We found this methodology in itself to be productive as a prompt for teacher learning and for shared goals with community members. As researchers, the principles of appreciative inquiry allowed us, too, to learn more about *how* to

conduct research in such communities. Our presence as researchers garnered more teacher inquiry; participants felt their voices were heard, that what they said mattered in the context of their school community, and that what they contributed to the success story of the school was significant to the reform initiatives, not only within and immediately for the school community, but also as it informed wider policy reforms of education. In this manner, appreciative inquiry became a bridge and a way to inform the debate between the macro (outside the school) and the micro (inside the school) levels of schooling (Flessa, 2006). It was a means to how we could best begin to answer the question of what successful schools can do to address the challenges of poverty and how these are linked to wider community and policy reforms.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Our sample included six small schools from urban areas (i.e., approximately 140 students per school), three large schools from the same urban area (i.e., about 650 students per school), one suburban school, and one rural school. Our schools' student populations ranged demographically from those that were all White and English-speaking to a school that was 50% new immigrant and English Language Learners to a school that was majority Aboriginal. In Canada, there is no standard measure for student poverty. The schools selected by the Federation for participation in their project were identified from a list provided by the Ministry of Education, which used Statistics Canada data about schools' neighborhoods to determine high incidence of poverty. Further recommendation of schools using successful strategies and developing community partnerships were provided by district superintendents.

Two lead researchers, with the assistance of two graduate students, visited 11 school sites, two times each, during the 2007-2008 school year. Schools were nominated to participate based on a reputational sample of success as well as collaboration with veteran educators from various school districts. During these visits key teachers, administrators, parents, and community groups were interviewed and different programmatic policies and practices were described. Specifically, data from research participants was collected through:

- 22 full days of focus groups with over 100 teachers, administrators, parents, and community partners
- Publicly available school profiles
- Over 35 unstructured interviews and conversations
- Over 35 audio-taped sessions of focus groups and interview/conversation sessions
- Detailed field notes from school visits

We asked the general question: How are success stories possible in schools with challenging circumstances such as poverty? Other examples of focus group questions/discussions that generated narratives of success were:

1. What counts as success for you for the students in this school, which is affected by poverty?
2. How do you recognize that success?
3. How widely shared are your goals with other staff, parents, or community members?
4. What programs in your school support your definition of success?
5. What are the biggest challenges you face in this school?

A bottom-up approach allowed us to analyze the data by culling all sources, reading and coding the issues, coding the issue-relevant meanings as patterns, and then collapsing the codes into themes. Finally, the collective cases were compared to provide further insight to issues. This study was a qualitative study, not a comparative study. Thus, the researchers acknowledge that the practices used in these case studies may or may not be different from those elsewhere in schools with similar challenging circumstances, or in those schools with fewer challenging circumstances. Still, it is important to consider that the narratives presented in this paper both represent the phenomenon of success in the schools studied and gives storied practice to those termed successes by our participants.

## Findings

For the purpose of this paper, we provide data samples that generated a number of common themes from our case studies, including: commitment to high-quality collaboration, teacher mentorship, and community building; parent and community partnerships; and administrative leadership and the culture of leading. Please note: All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

### **Commitment to High-Quality Collaboration, Teacher Mentorship, and Community Building**

Teacher participants attributed school success and a positive school climate to a focus on instruction, describing teaching excellence and high-quality collaboration as key indicators. Although all schools struggled with balancing students' social/emotional needs with academic skills, teachers responded to this issue by collaborating on strategies to improve instruction. Angelica, a lead teacher in one school, revealed her experiences as a Professional Learning Centre Lead Teacher, when teachers from other schools would come to watch her teach:



I think in my personal experience with having a Professional Learning Centre in previous years when the focus was literacy, we would invite teachers from the board to come in and see us teachers in action. And, the one line that I will never forget is when one teacher from another school said to me, “Wow, you’re teaching.” [That teacher] did not believe that we as a school in this community could teach these kids. She was in awe to see a perfect lesson happening. We need to model for each other, and other teachers need to see our ways of dealing with things. (Teacher Interview, 11/20/2007)

For several teachers, collective responsibility was not only about helping students manage and learn according to a code of ethics, which the school had set in action with such programs as character education, the “gotcha-doing-something-good” school program, and so on. Collective responsibility was very much about the academic achievement of all students. Another educator explained:

Staff collaboration: I see it, it is the thing. There is collective responsibility for kids. Not just for behavior, but for their academic success. Collective responsibility is the idea that these are all our kids that are walking down the hall. Collective teacher efficacy is a refinement of that. With the divisional meetings, the idea that looking at data is not just about satisfying someone with talk, but if it informs their practice, and if they go with one another to do moderated marking or rubrics or that sort of thing. There is belief among teachers that when we work together, we become better teachers, and our students will become better. That sounds like flowery talk, but when you see it in action, it is there. (Principal Interview, 05/16/2008)

Many schools embedded directly into their School Learning Plans fresh new curriculum initiatives that translated into curriculum implementation by all teachers. One such innovation we evidenced was peer modeling and in-class coaching that was done by teachers within the school for each other. Simone, a junior teacher, revealed:

We’ve always done a lot of mentoring at this school, where teachers have had an opportunity to go into other teachers’ classrooms to see good modeling of teaching. We have good, dedicated teachers who understand and try to make things better. We continue to seek professional development, not only seek professional development but come back and share with others. Sharing. It’s always been that our doors are open, it’s never been that we come to work and close our door, that’s it. (Teacher Interview, 11/20/2007)



For another teacher, Jane, when asked what had made an impact over the years, she referred back to the tremendous effect that mentoring by other teachers has had on her career:

Going back to my story of when I first came here, I just think “thank goodness” for the mentoring that goes on in this place. At the end of school you feel the mentoring, and as a new teacher I really relied on teachers to come in who would take the time to do a guided, or do a whole week’s worth of guided reading with me. Hands down, a teacher offered. I didn’t even have to ask. I accepted because I wanted to excel in it; I wanted to improve. I wanted to see how it was done. (Teacher Interview, 05/16/2008)

It was evident by the teachers’ narrative vignettes that they reasoned their school’s success not only from curriculum implementation and innovations, but also from the close-knit familiarity and collegiality that transcended into both personal and professional development for each member. One teacher claimed:

I’m dedicated to becoming the best teacher I can be. I can’t expect my children to do their best work unless I’m doing my best work. For me, in all areas of my life, it’s a journey, and I’m not there yet, and it’s probably never going to be there that I can do my best work, but that’s my goal. I value the opportunities for professional development. (Teacher Interview, 06/18/2008)

Teachers in successful school climates not only cared about the students in their charge, they cared also about themselves as a community of colleagues, learning together in order to improve their students’ emotional and academic success. They also worked to improve their own teaching practices through site-based inquiry methods such as professional learning communities and research-embedded knowledge about teaching strategies.

### **Parent and Community Partnerships**

Successful partnerships are built on trust. Ava, a Grade 3 teacher, described the school she works at:

When we see a child come into the school, and I think it happens often, a child who’s very troubled, sad, withdrawn, violent, aggressive, and then you see the progress over the months. You see that development, and they become, I guess they start to trust. They start to trust us as adults, they start to trust the school, and the parents, too [trust us]. And the parents are very open with us about their personal struggles, personal struggles that they had in their country. (Teacher Interview, 01/15/2008)

A teacher at another school admitted,

...90% of parents say they do trust us. When we call home, they're on board with whatever we want to try with their child. It's like ok, go ahead if you think it's going to work, do it. They're very supportive of us. (Teacher Interview, 11/20/2007)

Parents want to work with teachers and help their child be successful. We observed character education programs in use at many schools to reinforce character traits many parents teach and model at home. These types of programs help teachers to model behaviors and characteristics they would like the students to emulate. A sense of community develops within the school when each child feels valued and values himself or herself. A parent shared:

What I sense, and what I see is accepting everybody for who he is or who she is. That's the most important, that a young child can be loved. And every morning the announcements say "I like myself." Which is very good. (Parent Interview, 01/15/2008)

Another parent described the success of a mentoring program for her son at one school site:

Parents who have children who come here, love it. They love the teachers, they love the staff, it's a very supportive environment....One of the things that really impressed me when I came to sign [my son] up was the mentoring program. They have the older kids taking care of the younger ones. Thinking of [another parent's son], my son fell in the yard and one of [the older students] came to help him. (Parent Interview, 11/20/2007)

During our school visits, the focus groups with parents often proved to be most interesting. Parents were quick to share how influential the school was for their children, and, in some cases, their own lives. A parent told her narrative of how volunteering at her son's school led to a career for herself and a better life for both of them:

The thing is I am a single mother, and I love the school. I love all the principals who are here, and when my son started, I was going through a lot of problems with my ex-husband, and my son was diagnosed with ADHD, so I came here, and I volunteered a lot, I tried to be involved in my son's life. I'm here to see how I can work with the school, for the teachers and be close to them. And they saw the potential that I had, and then this principal, they always call me just about any vacancy they have for volunteers. It's motivated me to go to school, and I went to school, and I'm still in school—finishing in June to be a social worker. So in the process, I'm looking to give more of my time here as a social worker so I can go out in the field. (Parent Interview, 05/15/2008)

At a different school, a parent described how a “Mom’s Group” at the school, led by the Public Health Nurse, had helped her through a dark time in her life. She confided:

This is the mom’s group...I know for me it’s really good because I was stuck at home for months in a dark space. I’ve only been in this program for two weeks, you know, coming to the program and helping out. I’ve learned a lot, and I’ve seen a lot of people giving back, and that’s what’s making the difference. So for me I’m just very thankful that these programs are here, and that the people who have started them and that have continued to run them, for me it’s been a blessing, because it’s just something that I’ve been able to hold on to, and I look forward to.

The school can’t help you if you don’t also help the school. I don’t know if that makes sense. My mind was closed for a long time. I’ve had to open up and accept some of the policies, while at the same time work with the policies for a better understanding for what’s going on. A lot has happened for me. (Parent Interview, 06/09/2008)

Teachers can provide guidance while they are at school, but supporting parents so they feel they are part of the school community can lead to vast improvements in all aspects of a child’s life. Exhibiting compassion and understanding is a two-way street. Schools need to understand the families and their community. Communities, in turn, need to be given opportunities to interact with the school. Several of the schools we visited recognized the importance of involving the outside community and held events to bring the neighborhood into the school. Successful schools opened their doors and held barbeques, multicultural nights, movie showings, and so on. The overarching goal of these types of activities was to bring families into the school and for members of the school community to reach out and work with families as equal partners in their children’s education.

Successful schools we visited often contained unconventional leaders, such as support staff and parents. Sometimes all it took was one dynamic person to make a difference. At one inner-city school, a single, teenage mother was the driving force behind many school-based initiatives and school improvement plans. She organized school-wide trips, she planned fundraisers, and she recommended that the school newsletter be translated into multiple languages. Great things were possible because the administration recognized a natural leader that the community identified with and assisted her in any way possible. In another school, the head custodian was an ever-present force who was respected by all staff and students. He was often observed in the main office, speaking to parents, handing out bandaids, and supporting anyone and everyone he could. He embodied the attitude of the school by stating:

For people to come in here—they're in poverty, and they're coming to old, old buildings all their lives. I have a hard enough time keeping the building going. Roofs leak, electrical problems....So along with that, take all the problems the teachers are dealing with, and the poverty and everything else, and translate it into an old building, it comes out to compassion, because it's really not about the brick and the mortar and everything, it's about the people in the building. (Support Staff Interview, 04/10/2008)

In communities affected by poverty, schools can be available to entire families, not only the students who attend. One of the urban schools we visited called itself the "Community Hub." Their goal was to be *the* place in the neighborhood where families could find the resources they needed to be successful. On site, the school provided half-day free preschool and had an office for a SWIS (Settlement Worker In Schools) to help recently immigrated families adjust to life in a new country. Additionally, the school came up with strategies to involve the neighborhood in the students' everyday life.

Perhaps the most influential example of the "Community Hub" at this school came from an "Executive Council" that was formed by the school principal, a nurse, a recreation centre coordinator, and the president of a local chapter of a national service club. The Council had worked together since the school was built 5 years previously to bring the community together and provide the students with as many opportunities as possible. The coordinator of the recreation centre explained how she felt when she started her position three years prior:

When I got [to the community centre], my sense was that no kids were really in the facility. It was all rentals. Kids weren't allowed in there because of the cost factor. All there was were all these people who weren't allowed in there. It was dead. I sat there for the first four months watching the environment and watching people coming in, and I could see how un-serviced, and nobody really cared, and it was really an unfortunate feeling. It was a no-brainer, but for some reason there were too many barriers that didn't allow the kids to come in, and you could see why. [The principal] said we're going to get these kids in if we have to drag them in ourselves. We just started to find different ways to offer programs and to make it work. (Community Partner Interview, 04/15/2008)

Some schools attributed much of their success to the assistance they received from the community. During one of our schools visits, it was evident that a conscious effort was being made to have an open door policy and to welcome people into the school as much as possible. The school had an adult

volunteer program through which people could come in and read to students. They were involved with a “Roots of Empathy” value program. They had developed a partnership with a local university, bringing undergraduate students in for regular volunteer hours each week. They had even lent their school to a production company, which used the site in a popular screen movie. In addition to welcoming the community into the school, a staff member at one school regularly went into the community, to churches, service clubs, and city-wide organizations, and explained the challenging circumstances of their school. Many of the more affluent parts of the city had no idea of the magnitude of poverty experienced by their fellow citizens. One principal shared the process of “schmoozing:”

I call it “schmoozing.” I’ve taught [my staff] how to schmooze and make connections and build partnerships, talk about stories of the kids from your school. For example, [a teacher] did it at our church. They came in and organized a massive clothing drive for the PA day in December, provided refreshments, cookies, and the people could all shop for Christmas, get clothes, toys, all kinds of things. I talked at Christmas concerts with my roommate for quite a long time about the challenges at my school. And now [another school] has adopted us as a sister school. So it’s just that it grows. (Principal Interview, 04/10/2008)

Many schools which experience poverty rely on the community for support, but interviewees expressed that it was equally important for the school to give back to the community too. At one site, outside organizations provided extra-curricular programs for the students at a fraction of the cost, or in some cases, at no cost at all. One school had a music program in which each student in a specific grade is given free tin whistle instruction for an entire school year. In the following years, students can continue with the program for a nominal cost of \$1.50 per week. The students often hold concerts at community locations to raise money for more instruments and to supplement the cost of instruction. One educator explained how influential this program has been:

I remember I was riding my bike through the park one day, [and] I heard a tin whistle; it was [one of our students] up in her balcony. She was playing, I could hear this polka. I thought, ok, this is a good program because these kids feel good about themselves. Sometimes in the schoolyard, they’re playing the tin whistle. So they’re influencing the whole neighborhood. There’s music in the neighborhood, [it] is alive with music, so the whole metaphor is a lovely one. (Principal Interview, 11/20/2007)

## Administrative Leadership and the Culture of Leading

Strong leadership by administrators, as well as teachers, was a key finding relating to successful climate and school community in our poverty project. One principal maintained that his role was to facilitate leadership by all members on his staff. He explained:

I have a fabulous staff, I can trust them completely, and you can see there's leadership in this school. So if you power down to leadership amongst themselves, it leads to more leadership. (Principal Interview, 11/20/2007)

This type of leadership style translated to shared leadership within the schools we visited and helped to build a culture of communal leadership in and of itself. This further led to a culture of care and collaboration among teachers, principals, and students. One principal referred to this kind of climate as "the hope and dignity that every child deserves." Another principal's warm and welcoming personality made all people feel comfortable at the school and even in the surrounding community. Having a deep understanding of the community and an intrinsic knowledge about the school's needs, she set in motion a plan, describing,

Most of our population comes three years delayed in learning, so we have a family literacy centre, which I fought for several years for. So there was an opportunity to get the kids in before that, to bridge that gap. We bring in [university] tutors, we bring in all kinds of volunteers to help support that. (Principal Interview, 04/10/2008)

This principal ensured that the school was a welcoming and inviting place, one that offered a sense of being part of the school life for all families. Rather than feeling excluded because of poverty and socioeconomic status, the way to address poverty for many leaders in these school systems was to foster a sense of care and belonging. Bonnie, a parent, shared how the principal understood the difficulties she was having as a working-poor single parent. Bonnie told her story:

[My daughter] and I ended up in a women's shelter, and it's just down the street, and we were there for two months, and this is the closest school, and she went through some difficult times. Then I ended up getting my apartment and getting situated, but it's out of catchment. So before Christmas, [the principal] came to me and asked me if I'd like to keep [my daughter] here. And she was doing so well. And they brought me down to a room, and had me pick out Christmas gifts for [my daughter], and then she ended up coming home with a Christmas gift for me. [The school] is awesome. (Parent Interview, 04/10/2008)

Principals who lead successfully in challenging communities do so because, as one principal proclaimed, “I can relate. I can hear them.” A principal explained,

It is a culture of leaders. I am a leader of leaders, and [the teachers and staff] are all stepping up to the plate, and coming on board on their own time. I see my role as bringing out the best in people. There were no volunteers before I came here, which is interesting. And they were very gun-shy. I can't have a council, they won't come for an election night, but if I just pick up the phone, they'll be there. (Principal Interview, 04/10/2008)

## Discussion of Findings

The project provided a rich description of attitudes, beliefs, practices, and policies of schools that are successfully working with students affected by poverty. Exchange of practice revealed potential for collegial critical discourse and reflective foundation for various programs and interventions. But, beyond the breakfast and nutrition programs, beyond the character education programs, beyond the positive behavioral strategies such as empathy and anti-bullying programs, what stood out most in successful schools we visited was an atmosphere of authentic care and inclusion for all students, families, teaching staff, and community members. Although this study focused on schools affected by challenging circumstances such as poverty, this is not to say these findings are limited to such schools. We will not learn how to improve student outcomes broadly by looking only at places that are already exceptional (Levin, 2006). Through the study of stories of schools in poverty, we explored possibilities. Our belief is that it is important for all schools to be using best professional practices and to strive towards excellence through a teacher inquiry lens that is site-based and contextual to the particular school community. Doing otherwise may, indeed, develop deficit models of thinking about practice. We want to avoid such deficit models; our study provides a framework as seen through narratives of practice by teachers, administrators, and parents, which help add to the literature by creating case studies of community and climate in successful schools.

Following, we discuss our findings from our case study schools that we found had created positive school climate, community, and a culture of leadership through: (a) teaching excellence and high-quality collaboration amongst teachers; (b) parental engagement along with community partnership; and (c) shared leadership amongst administrators and teachers.



## Teaching Excellence and High-Quality Collaboration

Teacher participants attributed school success and a positive school climate to teaching excellence and high-quality collaboration. Balancing social/emotional needs with academic needs was a common struggle amongst all schools, but as one teacher put it:

[When] I came here I had this image of how kids learn and I realized after my first day that I had to go back and change my teaching strategies and techniques. So, those of us who have been able to change and adapt look at who the kids are and do something about that in our class. (Teacher Interview, 11/20/2007)

This evidence is in contrast to a growing professional literature that recommends generalized and off-the-shelf remedies to address poverty and schooling issues (Payne, 1996, 2003). Rather, in our school sites, we discovered teaching staffs that learned by and for each other and used site-based inquiry to create caring and authentic learning communities and high-quality teaching strategies that were specific to the needs of their students and within their communities. There was teacher leadership both inside and outside the classroom to facilitate the success of collective responsibility and teaching excellence. An in-school policy of shared leadership, with each teacher doing their own part to make success and learning optimal, was common in schools that were deemed to have a successful school climate. In one school, teachers were committed to shared leadership by both coaching and being coached via a curriculum mentoring initiative. Reporting back successes of students' learning during divisional meetings as well as recognizing areas for growth both sustained the school learning plan and provided ongoing personal professional development for staff. Teachers were involved and both coached and were coached by other teachers in the school in order to maintain a high level of hands-on reflective practice about their teaching and to allow for continuous professional development at a grass roots level. From this experience, teachers gained confidence in their own teaching and began to see the benefit to ongoing professional learning for themselves. To this end, many teachers began to network with one another during school hours and to participate themselves in viewing their colleagues' teaching as well as having their own teaching strategies observed by same-school peers. This site-based plan embodied an ethic of care (Noddings, 1992) that immediately benefitted the school climate and the parental community, too. According to Levin (2007):

Socioeconomic status remains the most powerful single influence on students' educational and other life outcomes....For educators working in high-poverty communities, finding an appropriate stance toward

poverty and the achievement gap can be difficult. Educators see the daily challenges in the lives of their students, including poor housing, inadequate income, and the effects of discrimination. Schools did not create these problems, and on their own they cannot solve them (p. 75).

Levin's (2007) work recognizes the impact parents and the community can have on the academic and social success of a child. Communities affected by poverty often face additional challenges, including stereotypes and discrimination.

### **Parental Engagement Along with Community Partnership**

Our respondents reported that strong parental involvement and community partnerships created positive school climate and community. In the literature on parental involvement, there is a noticeable directionality; middle-class parents are perceived to be resources to the school, and low socioeconomic status parents are perceived to require resources (Freeman, 2004). Teachers know how to teach academics, but are not taught how to effectively engage parents in meaningful ways at school. Most teachers and administrators are educated to think of themselves as individual leaders of classrooms, schools, or districts, with little attention to the importance of teamwork and collaborations with parents, community partners, and others interested in students' success in school (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). As we saw during our site visits, schools can be successful despite challenging circumstances when all facets of the neighborhood work together towards a common goal. Communities—including poor communities—are full of untapped resources that go beyond cohesive social relationships that provide caring support for children (Riley, 2008). Students learn more and succeed at higher levels when home, school, and community work together to support students' learning and development (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Getting parents and the community to work with schools is not easy. Each community has its own set of unique conditions and challenges (Riley, 2008). Parents who have experienced discrimination during their own school experiences or who face ongoing economic stress may feel uncomfortable and fearful when visiting their children's schools (Peterson & Ladky, 2007). Schools must take the first steps towards opening their doors and breaking down the traditional barriers and hierarchies between schools and parents. When parents are involved in schools, it is often as an "audience, spectator, fund raiser, or organiser" (McGlip & Michael, 1994, p. 20). As evidenced in our sites, schools that are successful are able to go beyond these traditional roles and engage parents in meaningful aspects of their child's education. Welcoming parents means more than welcoming them in the school building; it means welcoming them into the processes of schooling in the multiple ways they deem significant (Pushor, 2007). We saw this evidenced by parents who

reshaped their lives, and even their own careers, based on their involvement in their child's school.

All members of a community are responsible for education (Hands, 2008). Sanders defines school–community partnerships as the “connections between schools and community individuals, organizations, and businesses that are forged to promote students’ social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development” (2001, p. 20). Partnering with community members is an avenue through which school personnel may gain access to resources in the community that they do not have within the school (Hands, 2005). We evidenced this in most of our school sites. In almost all cases, it was the principal who initiated contact with the community and attempted to develop partnerships. Congruent with the literature, we noted that partnership opportunities are limited or unavailable for schools if the principals do not see the value of the liaisons (Hands, 2005). Finally, although partnerships can be beneficial to both parties, developing partnerships is not an easy task, given the many contextual influences and the time and energy needed to get them off the ground (Hands, 2005). All schools reported the vast amount of time needed to make partnerships happen, and almost all participants asked for further resources and ideas on how to make better partnerships. However, when the effort is made, a variety of successful outcomes was possible from school–community partnerships, for both parties involved, as our data confirmed.

### **Shared Leadership Amongst Administrators and Teachers**

Our participants reported that strong leadership by both administrators and teachers on issues of poverty was fundamental. This finding is consistent with growing research literature that emphasizes multiple paths of leadership (Leithwood, Mascall, & Stauss, 2009; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). Successful administrative leaders lead by example, trying new things to reach out to the community and staff every day. When asked how accomplishment is met, a principal responded, “You have to check your ego at the door for one thing. That’s the kind of leader that gets in the way of people.” Affirmation of all community members—teachers, staff, parents, and students—is paramount. Strategies for success by administrative leaders and teachers involve the complexity of time and effort that is needed to reach out to the school community and to the outside surrounding communities. One principal discovered that people will do whatever they can to help when they are given an indication of the importance of their gifts and service to the community and school. Consistent with current literature, we found that successful schools interacted with community by building trusting relationships (Riley, 2008), solving issues together (Matthews & Menna, 2003), and creating a process of partnership for

success between leaders within the school and beyond to outside community partners (Hands, 2005).

## Conclusion

Our participants in case studies of successful schools reported that poverty is, indeed, a complex issue and that site-based inquiry is one way to focus on context-specific issues in order to create caring school environments and successful learning for students. If socioeconomic status remains the most powerful influence on students' educational and emotional life outcomes (Levin, 2007), then schools need to look specifically to its children's needs in order to fulfill potential and to begin to reduce the stigma of poverty. However, sustaining site-based inquiry is not free, and additional resources are needed. Because teacher inquiry assists both in recognizing local challenges and proposing responses to those challenges, an investment in research helps schools articulate their stories of success and better embed these practices into their school programs. In almost all school sites, we were provided feedback that our research with teachers, administrators, and parents helped schools to better articulate their issues and solutions for their schools' dilemmas related to challenging circumstances of poverty. In this manner, this collaborative project is a contribution to the ongoing literature (e.g., Leader & Stern, 2008; Schultz, 2008) and provides a useful counterpoint to discussions of effective schooling that narrowly emphasize test scores. Rather, the narratives provoke discussion about how educators and policymakers concerned with ameliorating the effects of poverty on schooling can contribute to the benefits of building collaborations within and outside school walls in order to create positive community, climate, and a culture of shared leadership. Our research found that to build positive community, climate, and a culture of leadership, schools in challenging circumstances had at their core: excellent teaching and high-quality collaboration amongst teachers; parental engagement along with community partnerships; and shared leadership amongst administrators and teachers.

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