

# **Principals Learning from Veteran Teachers Serving Impoverished Students: Social Justice Implications for Professors of Educational Administration**

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*This qualitative study of ten elementary veteran teachers used Hargrove's single, double, and triple-loop thinking to understand their perceptions regarding knowledge new principals need to be social justice leaders working in impoverished schools. Findings in three categories revealed the importance of principals learning to identify their self-perceptions so as to work for equitable schools. Implications from the study are outlined to support professors of educational administration with the learning needed to transform the entire education system.*

Learning can occur at different levels. The deepest learning involves a transformation of learners. Administrators who are new principals working in schools serving impoverished and highly diverse students find that their perceptions often are not in alignment with the realities encountered (Shoho & Barnett, 2010).

For the shift in perceptions to occur as people make sense of things, they have to have an adequate amount of relevant experience. . . .Experience is important because it is only through a substantial range of relevant experience that the entire system can be adequately engaged (Caine & Caine, 2006, p. 54).

Attaining the goal of transformative learning is not easy for educational leaders. It requires an understanding of learning as the embodiment of identity and engaging in the work of transforming one's identity to be in alignment with new learning, especially in terms of being social justice leaders. Cranton (2006) wrote about people's unquestioned mental models of the world.

The way we see the world is a product of our knowledge about the world, our cultural background and language, our psychological nature, our moral and ethical views, the religious doctrine or world-view we subscribe to, and the way we see beauty. Each perspective is made up of interwoven beliefs, values, feelings, and assumptions that together create the lens through which we see the world and form the basis for our actions in the world (p. 28).

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Principals can engage in deep learning by interacting with veteran teachers and reading of their experiences working in schools serving impoverished and highly diverse students. Such learning may enable them to challenge their tendencies toward egocentrism and sociocentrism. Paul and Elder (2006) defined each of these terms to reveal the need to reflect critically on ones' perceptions.

**Egocentricity:** A tendency to view everything in relationship to oneself, to confuse immediate perceptions (how things seem) with reality; the tendency to be self-centered to consider only oneself and one's own interests. One's desires, values, and beliefs (seemingly to be self-evidently correct or superior to those of others) are often used uncritically as the norm of all judgment and experience. Egocentricity is one of the impediments to critical thinking . . . (p. 483).

**Sociocentricity:** The assumption that one's own social group is inherently and self-evidently superior to all others. When a group or society sees itself as superior, and so considers its views as correct or as the only reasonable or justifiable views, and all its actions as justified, it has a tendency to presuppose this superiority in all of its thinking and, thus, to think closed-mindedly (p. 498).

The voices of veteran teachers working in schools serving impoverished and highly diverse students are sources of knowledge that may promote critical reflection for new principals working in such schools. Learning is transactional in that interactions with veteran teachers can provide learning opportunities for new principals. This necessitates on the part of principals that they possess (a) empathy so as to be able to place themselves in life contexts that may differ from their own; (b) humility so that they enter and work in the school acknowledging that their understandings are limited and they have much to learn; (c) perseverance in striving to monitor their egocentricity and sociocentricity so authentically treat the stakeholders in these schools as social equals deserving respect such that principals convey through words, attitudes, behavior, and actions that they uphold the dignity of everyone; and (d) courage so that they embody being social justice leaders committed to equity and ending all forms of oppression (Elder & Paul, 2006).

Disparity within the education system has revealed a critical social justice issue. Rectifying injustice means fostering reflective practitioners who possess a commitment to examining their own beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions related to traditionally underserved students. Thus, principals need the competence and confidence to create inclusive and equitable schools:

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s led to the end of legal segregation. . . However, racial discrimination, prejudice, and inequality continue to be significant aspects of the U. S. experience. An important lesson learned in the last few decades has been that these problems are too deeply embedded in the history and culture of the United States to be eliminated by changing a law (Zúñiga & Castañeda, 2000, p. 61).

There have existed different visions of school systems. As far back as 1910, John Dewey emphasized a transactional paradigm that involved questioning unexamined assumptions through actions of thinking. Education needed to be experiential and

personalized “to cultivate deep-seated and effective habits of discriminating tested beliefs from mere assertions, guesses, and opinions” (pp. 27-28). Cubberley (1916) described the contrasting transmissive paradigm. “Our schools are, in a sense, factories in which the raw products (children) are to be shared and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life” (p. 338). This meant “teachers were expected to teach through the use of scientifically designed manuals of instruction for each subject area. Teachers were to be supervised by administrators to ensure they were teaching according to [the] directions and instructions in the textbooks” (Pietrolungo, 2011, p. 36). In 1916, Louis Terman perpetuated eugenics by developing standardized tests that “proved” his unexamined assumption that Indians, Mexicans, and Negroes were intellectually inferior races, a menace to society, immoral, and “prolific breeders” (pp. 91-92). He asserted that these students needed to be placed in “special classes” (p. 92).

Now, more than a hundred years later, the achievement gap has continued to exist between the racial groups identified by Terman as being inferior to their more advantaged peers. These peers are those whose White monoculturalism advantages them because the schools reflect this context (Blanchett, 2010; Bonner, Lewis, Bowman-Perrott, Hill-Jackson, & James, 2009). There has remained a disproportionate number of African-American male students segregated into special education classes as well as a lack of traditionally underserved students in Advanced Placement and Honors classes (Blanchett, 2010; Bonner, Lewis, Bowman-Perrott, Hill-Jackson, & James, 2009).

Principals dealing with poverty and diversity must embrace an unwavering belief in the ability of all students to be successful learners. As Ron Edmonds stated,

We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far (in Lezotte, 1985, p. 301).

Principals must become self-directed learners prepared for the possibility of an actual shift in the system of education given technology, E-commerce, and other societal and global changes. They “must model emancipatory learning and social action” for their staffs as “integral parts of self-directed learning” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 107).

The realization that the achievement gap has continued for more than a hundred years prompted this study. New principals can learn from veteran teachers, and such learning can serve as implications for professors of educational administration.

### **Overarching Research Question**

How might perceptions of experiences of veteran teachers who teach in schools serving impoverished and diverse students contribute to the learning of new principals such that the mission of promoting equitable schools through social justice is attained?

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Social Justice**

Social justice has necessitated courageous thinking. This has required recognizing one's egocentrism and then challenging that egocentrism through reflective judgment. Such judgment involves serious consideration of multiple perspectives beyond one's own. If one

chooses to be a social justice leader, then one takes on the additional goal of attaining proficiency in social justice discourse. This involves a commitment to embrace and promote respect for the dignity and worth of people marginalized in society. Such adult development necessitates facing one's prejudices rather than trying to justify the righteousness of their existence. While people may not totally overcome prejudices and the emotional reactivity they evoke, a social justice leader monitors his or her own thinking to distinguish whether critical thinking or prejudicial thinking is taking place. Furthermore, within the context of social justice, a primary intention is universal love as the highest state of human development (Mirci, 2010, p. 11).

Social justice has required the pursuit of equity, and this has necessitated overcoming oppression. Social injustices are a systemic problem, not only within a society but also globally. Because the education system has existed within society, social injustices can be perpetuated by it. For the purposes of this study, the following served as a definition of oppression that has given rise to the need for social justice:

Briefly, a group is oppressed when one or more of the following conditions occurs to all or a portion of its members: (1) the benefits of their work or energy go to others without those others reciprocally benefiting them (exploitation); (2) they are excluded from participation in major social activities, which in our society means primarily a workplace (marginalization); (3) they live and work under the authority of others, and have little work autonomy and authority over others themselves (powerlessness); (4) as a group they are stereotyped at the same time that their experience and situation is invisible in the society in general, and they have little opportunity and little audience for the expression of their experience and perspective on social events (cultural imperialism); and (5) group members suffer random violence and harassment motivated by hatred or fear. In the United States today at least the following groups are oppressed in one or more of these ways: women, Blacks, Native Americans . . . Spanish-speaking Americans, Asian Americans, gay men, lesbians, working-class people, poor people, old people, and mentally and physically disabled people (Young, 1997, p. 262).

Public schools have existed and been impacted by societal views such that people have been reluctant to admit the extent to which this institution has served to indoctrinate students (Paul, 1992). The history of segregation has been but one example. Shannon (1992) recognized this in distinguishing between dominating and liberating education.

Literacy is both liberating and dominating. Through it, we can learn to read and write the world to meet our needs and interests, taking from and making of the world what we will. Text is but one way in which we express our literacy. We not only read and write . . . the alphabet in connected passages, but we also read other types of symbols embedded in social practice and institutions and write other types of symbols through our social action to define ourselves and affirm our cultural and social histories. Through literacy, we can also learn to read and write the world others prepare for us, taking from it correct thoughts, correct behaviors, and correct lives. In this way, skills to decode, encode, and translate text are all there is to literacy (p.1).

One way students have experienced a dominating education is through the persistent use of the “banking model” of education (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2009). This has resulted in teachers being trained to transmit information to students or, metaphorically, to “make deposits of information” into the empty minds of students. Conversely, students have experienced a liberating education when teachers have employed a problem-posing (i.e. critical pedagogy) model of education. This has resulted in students engaging in real world issues, especially those that hinder human rights for all people. The emphasis is on critical thinking.

Sadly, children’s passion for thinking often ends when they encounter a world that seeks to educate them for conformity and obedience only. Most children are taught early on that thinking is dangerous. Sadly, these children stop enjoying the process of thinking and start fearing the thinking mind. . . .[they are socialized to believe that] it is better to choose obedience over self-awareness and self-determination (hooks, 2010, p. 8).

The whole language movement was an attempt to infuse a socially just curriculum within the existing system and move towards the more liberating side of literacy. There was an emphasis on teaching skills in the context of writing, to immerse students in real children’s literature, provide for student choice of books and topics for writing within clearly set boundaries by the teacher, and ensure that reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing were reciprocal processes to develop fluency. There was a strong emphasis on teaching reading to ensure proficiency in using the four cuing systems (a) phonics (i.e., focusing on the sounds of individual letters and their variations; (b) semantics (i.e., understanding the background knowledge students bring to comprehending text and the meaning in the text); (c) syntax (i.e., knowing the structure of language to aid in comprehension); and (d) context (i.e. deriving meaning from the surrounding text. Before teachers were immersed in professional development to strengthen their proficiency in being competent and confident in teaching in this way, the “phonics war” broke out, and whole language faced a rapid demise.

This has illustrated the liberating and dominating effects of schooling. Shannon (1992) wrote:

Schooling can focus our attention on discussion of how we wish to live together in and out of the classroom. But schooling can be an arena for indoctrination, acculturation, and standardization, an institution designed to reproduce the social and economic status quo (pp. 1-2).

### **Preparing New Principals**

Professors of educational administration currently have faced the challenge of preparing aspiring administrators to effectively lead an increasingly diverse and impoverished population. According to Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004), different administrative competencies have been needed to lead different types of schools. Murphy, Moorman, and McCarthy (2008) stated, “A new set of assumptions must guide the conceptualization of preparation programs; and program structure, process, and content must be retooled in a fashion consistent with those assumptions” (p. 2189).

With the increasing numbers of students who come from poverty (Sullivan, 2012) and the work place demands of the emerging 21<sup>st</sup> Century, professors must be able to prepare principals to seek out “solutions that lie outside the current way of operating” (Fullan, 2005, p. 14). Fullan (2005) stated that short-term strategies will not be sufficient for emerging leaders.

The new [reform] breakthroughs are complex and sophisticated, and will require leaders who have more comprehensive conceptualization than most leaders of the present” (p. xii) . . . Adaptive challenges require the deep participation of the people with the problem; that is why it is more complex and why it requires more sophisticated leadership (Fullan, 2005, p. 53).

### **Connections to the Community: The Need for Cultural Proficiency**

Successful principals in impoverished areas have recognized the importance of understanding cultural cues in their communication with the surrounding community (Jacobson, 2008). This recognition has often occurred as principals have moved along the continuum of cultural awareness. The continuum has ranged from cultural destructiveness, which has involved eliminating from the school program all aspects of the cultures found in the community, to cultural proficiency, which has resulted in the development of empathy and humility to advocate for equity and representation for all students in order to promote a socially just society. Attainment of cultural proficiency has resulted in effective leadership within a diverse community (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003). This included community involvement such as enlisting the help of a community liaison, including community members on site-based management committees, and increasing communication between the school and home. Reconnecting to the community and involving the parents has been crucial to the improvements in student achievement (Barbour, Clifford, Corrigan-Halpern, Garcia, Maday-Karageorge, & Meyer et al, 2010; Jacobson, 2008; Leone, Warnimont, & Zimmerman, 2009; Rosenberg, 2012).

### **The Principal as Change Agent**

Ignaz Semmelweis, a Hungarian physician in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, strove to be a change agent because women were dying from unsanitary conditions when having their babies. In spite of offering facts to the medical community, he was ridiculed and ended up in an insane asylum where he was beaten and died from the very unsanitary conditions he was striving to prevent. From his experience there emerged a concept called the Semmelweis Reflex. It was defined as the tendency of people to automatically dismiss a new way of approaching a problem because it contradicts their current values, beliefs, and practices (Leary, 1991). This has continued to be the challenge faced by change agents.

Central to the work of a principal becoming a change agent has been developing the capacity to transform schools that have been curriculum-centered to schools that have a “student-centered learning climate” (Sharma, 2011, p. 99).

Longstanding . . . highly problematic policies in education often go unexamined. . . . Behind the contradictions of people inside schools who want to relate, speak of values, end racism, teach in new ways, create safe, productive and hopeful environments, lie a

myriad of policies and practices perpetuated outside and inside schools which inhibit these best intentions (Poplin & Weeres, 1992, p. 40).

Teachers who have worked in highly diverse and impoverished areas have faced significant challenges involving students and stakeholders (Rosine, 2010). This has necessitated focusing on how students learn and how to best teach them (Jacobson, 2008; Rosenberg, 2012). Effective principals have created a culture of support and trust between the administration and the staff (Jacobson, 2008; Leone, Warnimont, & Zimmerman, 2009; Rosenberg, 2012).

Transformative principals, as change agents, have faced resistant staff members. Despite the principals' multiple efforts at redirection and collaboration, some staff members entrenched in curriculum-centered didactic teaching have been unwilling to change. These principals have encouraged such staff members to find another school in which to teach (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Jacobson, 2008, Rosenberg, 2012).

### **Experiences of New Principals**

Principal's experiences in the first year have appeared to have no consistent pattern. Many new principals felt unprepared for the breadth of the job. Three areas in which they have often felt most challenged have been in being an instructional leader; being an effective manager (i.e. budget, personnel, and workload); and being an effective liaison with the community (Quong, 2006; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). Another area in which principals have felt challenged has been in living up to the expectations of the staff and community based on their predecessor's practices (Cheung & Walker, 2006; Weindling & Dimmock, 2006). Some principals reported experiences of powerlessness to be change agents given staff resistance (Cheung & Walker, 2006; Quong, 2006).

### **Poverty**

According to anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1959), a culture of poverty has existed in which the poor have experienced marginality, helplessness, dependency, and lack of belonging as well as a feeling of inferiority and personal unworthiness. They have perceived no similarities between the circumstances and culture of their own lives and those of other socioeconomic classes (D'Silva, 2009); as Kozol (1991) stated, they have been "cut off and disconnected from the outside world" (p. 70). The government has measured poverty only in terms of income level, but many other factors such as access to health care, food, clothing, and shelter have significantly affected the ability of children in impoverished areas to learn (D'Silva, 2009; Noguera, 2004).

Children from impoverished families have exhibited a higher incidence of developmental delays and communication problems than their more advantaged peers (D'Silva, 2009). This has resulted from many factors including lack of interaction with parents, lack of affection, and parents who have substandard educations (Jensen, 2009). These factors have contributed to an academic gap (D'Silva, 2009) and technological gap (Apple, 1995), as well as a dearth of resources including a facilities gap (Kozol, 1991), and instructional gap (Noguera, 2004). Thus, improving education for students attending schools in impoverished areas has become a serious educational justice issue facing principals in the twenty-first century (Rodriguez & Rolle, 2007).

## METHODOLOGY

This was a phenomenological study (Green, Camilli, & Elmore, 2006; Yin, 2009). “[This addressed] methodologically . . . how people experience some phenomenon . . . To gather such data, one must undertake in-depth interviews with people who have *directly* experienced the phenomenon of interest...they have ‘lived experience’ as opposed to secondhand experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 105). A phenomenological design was appropriate for this study because such inquiry attempted “to understand the meaning of events and interaction of ordinary people in particular situations” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 25).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The work of Hargrove (2008) was chosen as the framework for this study because, in his view, learning has remained situated on a continuum from perpetuating the status quo of a system to a paradigmatic shift of that system. Single-loop learning was defined as “tips and techniques” such that there has not occurred a shift in one’s thinking as a result of questioning personally held unexamined assumptions and uninformed beliefs (Hargrove, 2008, p. 115). The banking model is an example of employing single-loop learning. Double-loop learning involved changing one’s mental model from being “blindsided” by institutional “orthodoxies” to understanding the need for a paradigmatic change (Hargrove, 2008, pp. 120-121). An example of possible orthodoxies has included concepts such as the single use of high stakes standardized testing to comprise school accountability with sanctions for underperforming schools. While questioning the values of such orthodoxies, principals have worked to incrementally improve the conditions at the school for stakeholders. This has included leadership; working with students, parents, and communities; and dealing with race and impoverishment. Reframed mental models may include these questions: (a) What might education look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century to meet the needs of all students in an increasingly technological world? (b) How must society deal with inequities in the availability and use of technology and other resources for all students? Triple-loop learning has necessitated thinkers who not only revise their mental models but act on those revisions with the intention of bringing about a different education system, one appropriate for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **Participant Sampling, Recruitment Criteria, and Participant Characteristics**

Snowball sampling was used to identify teachers who met the criteria of (a) having worked at least ten years in a school serving impoverished and traditionally underserved students, and (b) having worked with at least two different principals at their school site. Pseudonyms were assigned to the ten participants to ensure anonymity and confidentiality: Maria was Latina; Kiku was Japanese; Mona, Beth, Mark, Carl, Ben, Helen, Cari, and Diane were White. All were elementary school teachers.

### **Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

Seven initial questions were used to delve into the phenomenon of teachers advising new principals in schools serving impoverished and highly diverse students, (a) What advice would you give regarding such schools? (b) What would you say about the school’s students? (c) What would say about working with students’ parents or guardians? (d) What advice would you give regarding the communities in which these students live? (e) What advice would you give regarding differing beliefs teachers may have about students? (f) What would



you identify as possible needs of teachers? (g) What makes principals in such schools effective leaders? (h) What makes principals effective change agents? The following additional question was formulated and used in the second follow-up interview: What changes would you make regarding the education system?

### **Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

Initial interviews were conducted and transcribed. Two additional interviews occurred to seek further clarification and to probe based on initial responses. This researcher and a colleague coded the transcribed interviews independently - one manually and the other using NVivo 9 analysis software - and compared emergent categories. Final categories were established jointly. Findings were based on categories that emerged. To increase credibility, the results of the study were shared with each participant to confirm accuracy

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings fell into three categories: (a) Compliance with the curriculum-centered and assessment-driven reform based on single-loop learning; (b) Leadership regarding students and parents or guardians within the schools based on double-loop learning; and (c) The need for a new system of education based on triple-loop learning.

### **Category 1: Compliance with the Curriculum-Centered and Assessment-Driven Reform Based on Single-Loop Learning**

Single-loop learning has perpetuated the status quo (Hargrove, 2008). According to Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003), leaders have functioned “with existing knowledge and resources, and where agreement for improvement” has existed on implementation of changes (p. 7). An example of single-loop learning was compliance to the current education system itself because of an inability “to move beyond existing values (often implicit), processes, norms, structures, and systems. These conditions relegate improvement efforts to changes on the margin” (Murphy, Moorman, & McCarthy, 2008, pp. 2186-2187). All participants spoke about how they have complied with mandates regarding the current reform. Ben reported,

In the past, the California Department of Education published a document to help “at-risk” students. It identified four sources of curriculum: the interests of the students, the interests of the teacher, the official curriculum, and extraordinary daily events. The only one tolerated now is the official curriculum. How does that relate to the lives of all students, spark their interest, or create relevance and a love for learning?

Cari stated, “If we want high test scores on the state test we have to spend time teaching test-taking skills instead of promoting student learning.” Diane offered a reason new principals may conform to such thinking, “Penalties have taken the form of job loss.”

Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus (2003) and Rosine (2010) found that teachers across the nation dealt with the stress of high stakes tests by concentrating on test preparation and increased content coverage. This decreased morale and motivation for both students and teachers. Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus (2003) concluded,

Not only are teachers’ views regarding the state test’s negative impact on the quality

of education and the emphasis on specific test preparation disconcerting, the perceived human impact of the state test is also worrisome. The results suggest . . . both students and teachers experienced test-related pressures (p. 27).

The pressures included teachers wanting to transfer to relieve the stress and students escaping the stress by dropping out of school (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003).

Diane Ravitch, 2010), once a proponent of the current reform wrote, Not everything that matters can be quantified. What is tested may ultimately be less important than what is untested, such as a student's ability to seek alternative explanations, to raise questions, to pursue knowledge on his own, and to think differently. If we do not treasure our individualists, we will lose the spirit of innovation, inquiry, imagination, and dissent that has contributed powerfully to the success of our society in many different fields of endeavor (p. 226).

### **Category 2: Leadership Regarding Students, Parents or Guardians, and Teachers Based on Double-Loop Learning**

All participants indicated they would advise new principals to examine their own mental models. This meant evaluating egocentric and sociocentric beliefs about self in relationship to students, parents or guardians, and teachers at the schools. They shared about these stakeholder groups as well as about poverty and racism. Their thick descriptions for thinking about each of these areas were rich, but their presentation had to be limited in this article.

**Leadership.** Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom (2004) reported that only classroom instruction has had greater impact on student learning than the leadership of the principal. Participants were united in cautioning new principals regarding preconceived unexamined assumptions because “we all respond to power relationships . . . in different ways” (Cranton, 2006, p. 131). Schools in impoverished areas have faced challenges not common to schools in more affluent areas. They have required the leadership of administrators who are informed about current systemic issues and have experiential knowledge and understanding of the life circumstances of students, parents or guardians, and the community itself. Murphy, Moorman, and McCarthy (2008) reported concern over some leadership preparation programs: “[They have] narrow or inaccurate conceptions of leadership and professional practice, schooling and students performance” (p. 2187).

Carl cautioned, “Divorce yourself from all thoughts of where these students and families come from, and treat them with the same dignity, respect, and care that you would give your own children.” Ben stressed, “Too many principals I’ve experienced come into a school in an impoverished area with a set of blinders. They are filled with unexamined assumptions and base their decisions on these assumptions. Such blindness alienates people.”

While all participants emphasized the importance of principals being caring, Diane stated,

Be empathetic, and convey this to the staff because the likelihood exists that neither the staff nor the principal really understand the life circumstances of our families. Parents may be working several jobs without health benefits. Most of their children come to school and strive to succeed.

Kiku shared, “Ineffective leaders are governed by their egos. They seemed to be driven unknowingly by uncritical beliefs about students and stakeholders and wanted to look good to superiors often at the expense of students and teachers.”

The consensus of participants was that principals as leaders needed to be a presence to students, parents, and the community. They encouraged principals to seek ways to interact positively with all stakeholders and to be proactive in going out to them. Kiku said, “Be kind to the children.” Mona, Beth, Helen, Cari, and Ben emphasized playing or interacting with children on the playground. Carl said, “Walk through the neighborhood, visit the stores, and introduce yourself to stakeholders you meet on the streets or parents at the homes of students.”

**Students.** The following excerpts exposed the realities with which principals who hope to improve the education of students in impoverished areas must contend. They also revealed that the common assumptions of family support, stability, and health care upon which policy makers and stakeholders outside of impoverished areas operate were not readily evident in the lives of students in impoverished areas.

Mark revealed the scope of issues facing teachers educating students in impoverished areas.

Anticipate the broadest range of issues – they are going to deal with students who are dealing with all kinds of things at home. I don’t think I have had a student who hasn’t had someone in jail. If you didn’t know the background of the student, you wouldn’t know. . . . Often they are very good students. I have had homeless students. Don’t assume that their home life is going to dictate their behavior and academic performance – some are highly academic and successful. Don’t make assumptions about the students. . . . There are many functional families; probably the majority is like that. . . . Other more advantaged schools sometimes have the same kinds of issues, but at poor schools it will be more intense.

Participants reported that impoverished students encountered emotional and social challenges. Kiku shared,

This little child shared with me that every one of his absences from school was because the person who was supposed to help his grandma work with the elderly at her in-home care business didn’t show up to work. This child would change diapers, dress, and wheel the elderly to appointments, and this was needed to help the family survive. He was eight years old. It broke my heart.

One of the most destabilizing aspects of students’ lives in impoverished areas was the high incidence of death with which they must contend. Cari said:

In the last two weeks there have been two murders in less than a three-mile radius of the school where I teach. . . . The principal has to have counselors who can deal with a child or his/her family who has lost a family member to violence.

Cari reported:

A stepfather beat to death one of my third grade students. Talking about how it affected the other students and me is extremely difficult. The only ones I talked with were the police. They were doing an investigation. I hate to think of the way some of my students live.

Carl shared:

I once had to make a report to Child Protection Services because I had a student who couldn't sit in his chair. I found out that his parent disciplined him by putting the child's naked butt on the hot stove. It resulted in blisters.

Maria indicated, "Last year there were two lockdowns at campus, and police helicopters flying overhead was a frequent occurrence."

Diane reported, "Although schools in more affluent areas are not free from problems, the frequency of problems educators face in impoverished areas has continued being more intense."

**Parents.** All participants indicated parents valued their children. Maria shared,

Underneath the rough exterior some parents present, they still love and want the best for their children just like any other parents, and their behavior may be because they feel intimidated by school personnel and were not successful in school themselves.

Mark represented the thoughts of many of the participants in stating the following:

Parents come from diverse backgrounds . . . . Many parents are shy about coming to school to help out and ask questions, but that doesn't mean they don't want the best for their children. Parents have the expectation that their children will be helped by the school and teachers because they don't feel that they can help them at home because of language and education barriers. Work with parents to make sure they feel welcome on the campus. Some of the parents or guardians don't come to school because they feel as if their own children are ashamed or embarrassed because of them.

**Teachers.** The principal needs to promote self-awareness and reflection on the part of all staff members regarding students, parents or guardians, and other stakeholders. Beth shared,

People coming from White middle class backgrounds make some judgments, and they haven't a clue as to the life circumstances of either the children they are supposed to help or the families and cultures of these students. Sometimes negative attitudes really are masking racism, and this is something that will destroy a school if the principal is not proactive in creating equity for all.

In the area of culture, Cari's perception of the role of the principal in creating a positive culture captured the thoughts of many of the teachers. She stated, "The principal cannot let negative attitudes go unchallenged when these are related to beliefs about a student's potential to learn or about parents caring for their children."

Eight of the ten participants shared that principals attended professional development as a peer and co-learner with teachers. This demonstrated that she or he wanted to learn and become proficient with the change. This is in contrast to the principal who will not attend professional development because he or she does not define his or her role in this manner.

All participants reported that their collaborative involvement in school decisions resulted in shared understandings that were critical to implementation. Ben shared, “An effective leader works with teachers to create a common vision or shared understandings upon which decisions are then made.”

Kiku, Mark, Helen, Beth, Diane, and Cari felt that principals who are not afraid of modeling new ideas and risking failure also promote collegiality with the faculty, especially when dealing with curriculum and instruction. Denise indicated,

You have to be a lead teacher among teachers. Teachers need to see that you, as principal, also are a teacher at heart. When implementing something new, go into the classrooms and take the risk of failing as you try out the new curriculum so that the teachers see you are holding yourself accountable for learning.

**Poverty and Race.** The education system alone cannot solve the problems of gaps between the “haves” and “have nots” regarding access to technology, enriching experiences that build language and background knowledge necessary for learning, up-to-date school facilities, and other resources. The school system subsists within the larger societal system. For example, Brooks (2004), wrote that poverty is a societal problem in need of reform.

[An educational reform is needed] that would make a difference in the lives of poor children – namely a reform movement driven by a public discourse that owns up to the real consequences of poverty, and by a willingness to eradicate the systemic injustices that reproduce inequalities in social opportunities, including and especially educational opportunities for poor children (p. xi).

All participants spoke about the need to understand poverty. Kiku captured the sentiment of the participants,

I thought because of all the years I taught kids in poverty that I really understood it. My beliefs were challenged when I actually took training that addressed it. I realized that many times, we as teachers bring into classrooms things that are detrimental to poor children because we aren't scaffolding their learning.

Mark expressed participants' awareness that impoverished students come to school often lacking experiences that build background knowledge,

Don't be surprised by students' lack of experience; don't be shocked by their lack of exposure to experiences that more advantaged students already have experienced. You need to realize some of these students haven't experienced many things and neither have their parents. You need to be able to front load prior to teaching the lesson intended.

All participants emphasized the need for respecting all races and the need to eliminate the existence of forms of hatred such as racism and classism. Ben expressed,

A principal has to respond to anyone making racist or classist statements against any child or family. Work to prevent treatment of them in biased ways. You have to be willing to have courageous conversations.

### **Category 3: The Need for a New System of Education based on Triple-Loop Learning**

The need for a shift in the education system seems to be growing. One of the trends Gary Marx (2006) stated would impact education was that education eventually would shift from standards to personalization. Michael Fullan (2005) traced the evolution of education indicating the next movement will be from the current informed prescription to professional judgment. Peter Drucker (2002) wrote,

The psychological impact of the Information Revolution . . . has been enormous. It has perhaps been greatest on the way in which young children learn. Beginning at age four (and often earlier), children now rapidly develop computer skills, soon surpassing their elders; computers are their toys and their learning tools. Fifty years hence we may well conclude that there was no “crisis of American education” in the closing years of the twentieth century – there was only a group incongruence between the way twentieth-century schools taught and the way late-twentieth-century children learned (p. 11).

All three of these writers shared the commonality of triple-loop thinking that has involved transformative learning to

reinvent themselves by helping them to see how their frames of reference, thinking, and behavior produce unintended consequences. . . . to surface and question the way they have framed their points of view about themselves, others, or their circumstances with the idea of creating a fundamental shift (Hargrove, 2008, p. 22).

Participants were able to cite examples of a transformed education system, and four of the ten cited the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (MET) high schools as an actual change. Mona, Beth, Ben, and Cari spoke about how these schools differed from the current system. They reported the schools were (a) based on student interests that led to internships for “real world” learning; (b) designed to broaden student experiences to create an interdisciplinary education that included students being able to take community college classes; (c) created to serve diverse students, most of whom were the first to graduate college in their families, through personalized education; (d) oriented towards the goals of different types of reasoning as well as social development so that the focus was on human development; and (e) inclusive in that parents, students, and the students’ advisor met to set and monitor the learning goals identified.

Ben spoke about accountability in these schools,

In traditional high schools often the primary determiner of evaluation and accountability are standardized tests. If what I read and viewed on videos is accurate,

I think the fact that the first graduating class of 55 students at the first MET had a 98% graduation rate, had a similar college acceptance rate, completed their first two years of college, and earned something like \$500,000 in scholarships says a lot to me about accountability. The fact that this has been sustained in the growing number of MET schools says far more to me about accountability than the traditional system.

Participants talked about such ideas for a system that (a) wasn't based on grouping students by chronological age but allowed for flexibility in working with students; (b) allowed for students having the same teacher for more than one year; (c) recognized that student interests and their experiences were ways of building their background knowledge; and, (d) necessitated highly competent teachers who knew how to teach.

Beth recalled visiting a school that was different from the traditional system. I remember during the whole language era when we visited a school that was so student-oriented. Teaching was individualized to student needs. Math instruction was individualized. I loved the idea of the project-oriented learning. Instead of teaching skills in isolation as frequently happens today in language arts, students in the school I visited were constantly writing, revising, and learning skills in the context of actually writing. Teacher conferences with students, rather than the use of tests, were used to monitor and intervene regarding student progress in writing. Students had opportunities at times for choosing to work in cooperative groups or individually. The learning was experiential. Instead of grouping students chronologically, there were multiple aged students in the class. Students often had the same teacher for multiple years as is a common practice in Sweden. I can't imagine why we are still relying on textbooks and assessments other than these being big business rather than educationally sound. Students were excited about learning, and I was impressed with the rigor of what they were learning.

Participants reflected an understanding of triple-loop learning, and the hope would be that new principals reading this study might think about this type of learning. Responses seemed to align with the statements cited at the beginning of this category by Marx, Fullan, and Drucker.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The voices of veteran teachers working in schools serving impoverished and highly diverse students may be helpful to professors of educational administration in preparing new principals. As the social justice need for equity has become increasingly evident in terms of the educational needs of communities throughout the country, university programs have needed to adjust their course offerings using the lens of social justice to provide their graduates in educational administration with the tools to lead school personnel and serve their communities. However, Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Myerson (2005) called for additional research about how principals "develop the capacities that make a difference in how schools function and what students learn" (p. 4).

Using the theoretical framework of Hargrove's single-loop, double-loop, and triple-loop learning provided a means for emphasizing the different types of thinking new principals

should consider. The emergent categories and statements from respondents indicated what they felt new principals should understand in terms of working in schools serving impoverished and diverse students.

Implications drawn from the experiences of the veteran teachers have suggested avenues that might prove helpful in preparing new administrators for the challenges and responsibilities of leading a school. Evidence from the participants' responses indicated that more preparation in the following areas might prove beneficial to aspiring administrators in order to provide them with the tools to promote systemic change.

1. Professors of educational administration need to immerse themselves in social justice discourse so they avoid the tendency to act on the basis of egocentrism and sociocentrism. Through triple-loop learning, professors can challenge their own assumptions about social justice. Aspiring principals need proficient professors to create learning experiences regarding the effects of poverty on family dynamics and how those dynamics affect both students and parents. This includes addressing commonly accepted stereotypes and unexamined assumptions concerning families living in poverty.
2. Professors of educational administration need to develop deep understandings of cultural proficiency. Aspiring principals need specific training in cultural proficiency and the influences that family belief systems, cultural norms, and community dynamics have on students' learning and parents' involvement in the school. Principals need to understand the importance of developing relationships within the community; they also must be instructed on specific steps that can be taken to encourage such relationships in the community. Professors need field experiences in schools serving impoverished and diverse students in order to help aspiring administrators translate theory into practice.
3. Professors of educational administration need to understand the systemic inequities perpetuated by the existing model of education, the type of single-loop thinking behind it, and the possible ways of employing triple-loop thinking to provide appropriate and diverse educational opportunities and experiences for aspiring administrators.
4. Professors of educational administration should not only be researchers but also practitioners who are experienced in K-12 education so that their knowledge of and experiences in schools serving impoverished and diverse students is credible to the students they teach.

These implications may prove challenging given the tendency to resist change (i.e. Semmelweis Reflex). However, professors committed to their own triple-loop learning can transform programs in administration so they are grounded in social justice. This will in turn support the development of aspiring principals to become social justice leaders in K-12 schools.

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