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Patterns of Failure in Texas Urban Improvement Required Schools: An Equity Audit Expansion

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The achievement gap is a concept that has long been explored in education; students of color, low socioeconomic status, those who speak languages other than English, and students labeled as special education perform lower on student achievement tests and often receive less in terms of funding and resources (Harris & Hopson, 2008). Brown (2010) stated, “As a result, these students, without realizing it, often fall into a predetermined mold designed for school failure and social inequity” (p. 2).

In the state of Texas, schools are graded on a system of accountability based on four performance indexes. Based on the scores for these indexes, schools are rated as Met Standard, Met Alternative Standard, Improvement Required, or Not Rated (Texas Education Agency, 2015a). There are a number of reasons why a campus may not be rated; however, the criteria for Improvement Required was the focus of the original program equity audit completed by Branch and Leigh (in press).

Through the Texas Education Code, TEC §39.023, (2011) the state of Texas has outlined five domains or indexes which are used to determine the accountability ratings of districts and campuses. Index One focuses on student achievement on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness or STAAR test. Index Two addresses student progress where points are awarded based on growth expectations per student. The third index is designed to address the need to close performance gaps between certain populations of students. Index four measures post-secondary readiness across student groups combined over all subject areas. Index five allows school districts to determine three local programs or categories related to community and student engagement (Texas Education Agency, 2014c).

The purpose of the original equity audit was to evaluate what common factors, if any, were present in schools classified as Improvement Required in a large urban district within the state of Texas. For the purposes of the original equity audit, data were collected on non-charter, non-alternative high school campuses, and the identity of the district was changed to Urban ISD. The results of the original study encouraged Branch and Leigh (in press) to examine other urban districts within the state to see if similar patterns emerged.

The Texas Education Agency (2015b) defines a school district as urban if:

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(a) it is located in a county with a population of at least 870,000; (b) its enrollment is the largest in the county or at least 75 percent of the largest district enrollment in the county; and (c) at least 35 percent of enrolled students are economically disadvantaged. A student is reported as economically disadvantaged if he or she is eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program. (para. 1)

For the purposes of this equity audit, all 11 schools district in Texas that met the urban designation criteria were included in this analysis.

In the original equity audit that guided this study, Branch and Leigh (in press) asserted that Urban ISD high schools similar to those in that study needed to pay special attention to their percentage of high mobility students. A student is considered high mobility if they have not been in the specific school for a substantial majority of school year (Texas Education Agency, 2015b). If the percentage of students considered mobile exceeds 25% of the total student population, the school should monitor disciplinary placements and dropout rates, as these are strong predictors of IR status, or schools that are classified by the state of Texas as being classified as improvement required (IR). If either of these two exceeds the state averages, which are 1.6% and 2.2% respectively, they have met sufficient cause for IR status.

Branch and Leigh (in press) also found that the high schools in the original study that had at least 11% of the student population designated as Special Education were also likely to be in IR status, and that this formed a necessary condition for IR. The current study aims to determine whether these same patterns emerge for multiple urban school districts in the state of Texas.

Research Questions

In the initial study conducted by Branch and Leigh (in press), three major relationships were observed within the specific district studied:

- (1) having a Special Education enrollment in excess of 11% of the total student population was common to all of the IR schools in the study, therefore it was a necessary condition;
- (2) that the vast majority of the IR schools in the study had at least 25% of the student body identified as having mobility issues; and
- (3) a combination of either disciplinary placements higher than the state average or a dropout rate higher than the state average plus the aforementioned high mobility was sufficient to indicate designation as an IR school (p. 13)

The research question for the current study asked if those same three relationships were present in statewide data from similar urban school districts. Upon data collection, it was observed that some urban school districts in Texas contained no public, non-charter, non-magnet high schools that received Improvement Required ratings; this prompted slight refinement to the wording of the research question: Do urban school districts with IR high schools follow the same patterns of relationships as the district in the original study?

Review of Literature

The state of Texas was one of the first states to adopt accountability standards in the early 1980s. As the accountability standards and versions of the state assessments have changed and evolved over the years, many critics distinguish Texas as leading the nation in the drive for high stakes accountability, testing, and by proxy, driving education policy (Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008).

Kosar (2005, as cited in Ellison, 2012) stated that the purpose of standards-based learning is the following:

Children will not learn to high levels unless they are taught challenging curricula... To raise achievement, the level of skills and knowledge students are taught must be raised, and this can be done through establishing challenging education standards. Doing this will maximize the probability of good teaching or worthwhile content to all students.

And the children will respond. (p. 22)

It is this line of thinking that has driven high-stakes accountability. Proponents of standards-based accountability systems believe that school personnel, administrators at the district and campus levels and teachers will be encouraged to enact changes in their school to meet standardized assessments based on “the explicit threat of dismissal of administration or the possibility of a complete re-structuring of schools either by quasi-privatization (e.g., charter schools) or re-constitution of school staff” (Ellison, 2012, p. 23).

Part of the current system of accountability in Texas rates schools and districts as Met Standard, Met Alternative Standard, Improvement Required, or Not Rated (Texas Education Agency, 2015a). In order for a public Texas school to receive a rating of Met Standard, the school must meet the target for all indexes for performance data in the 2014 year. Schools that do not meet one or more targets are classified as Improvement Required (Texas Education Agency, 2014a). Once a campus or district receives a rating of Improvement Required (IR), the campus and/or district is then subjected to the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS) in order to target interventions to remedy the mitigating factors (Texas Education Agency, 2014b).

Campuses and districts that fail to meet standards and are classified as Improvement Required (IR) for two consecutive years are subject to reconstitution according to the Texas Education Code.

Schools undergoing reconstitution are charged by the Texas Commissioner of Education of the state of Texas to create, implement, and maintain a campus intervention team dedicated to improving instructional practices. Part of this charge includes making decisions concerning the suitability of current administrative and teaching teams, and whether the personnel on those teams should retain their positions (Texas Education Agency, 2014a). If not, the campus intervention team has the authority to make personnel changes.

Tucker (2011) classified Texas schools as “data-rich,” but “information-poor” (p. 86). Citing a 2008 study by TEA, Tucker illustrated that although schools receive and submit a great deal of data to and from TEA each year, the information has little to do with actual school improvements. “Much of the information the state collects... governs the flow of dollars, but it is not on its own useful for improving school operations or performance” (Tucker, 2011, p. 86).

In other words, the variables being measured have little to do with either student performance or academic improvement. Brown (2010) similarly posed the question, “What variables actually influence student achievement, and how can schools capitalize on these to narrow the gaps?” (p. 3). As certain populations within public schools, such as minorities and students in special education programs, continue to experience inequality, school leaders must seek additional sources of information and data in order to better serve these marginalized students (Harris & Hopson, 2008).

Discussion of the Audit

This study used a qualitative design methodology, even though it may appear to have been quantitative. The Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) approach described by Ragin (2008) was used to convert ordinal data to binary data, representing crisp group membership. Crisp group membership requires that each subject be classified as either in the group or out of the group; there can be no partial membership, which would qualify as fuzzy group membership (Ragin, 2008). This procedure is explained more fully in the following sections.

Methodology. As indicated previously, this study relied upon the original equity audit performed by Branch and Leigh (in press). That study examined one large urban school district with which the researchers were familiar, and sought commonalities among the public, non-charter, non-magnet high schools which received Improvement Required ratings within that district. School status as a public, non-charter, non-magnet high school was based on researcher knowledge and both district and school websites.

Participants. For this study, all 11 school districts deemed urban by the Texas Education Agency were included. This brought the total number of high schools analyzed to 108. Of these schools, 25 received a status of IR (23%). The original study only included 21 schools, all in one district, of which 11 received a status of IR (52%). Status as a public, non-charter, non-magnet high school was determined using examination of school name and school websites. Likewise, district alternative education programs were excluded from this study.

Procedures. Since this study was searching for the presence of previously identified trends, there was no need to undergo the entire analysis of the original study. Pertinent data from the same categories as were deemed important in the first study were collected from the Texas Education Agency’s publicly available on-line database and tabulated. These included the special education enrollment as a percentage of the student population, the mobility rate, dropout rate, and the percentage of disciplinary actions that resulted in alternative placements.

These data were then coded for crisp set membership (Ragin, 2008) using the same criteria as in the original study, as shown in Table 1. In keeping with Ragin’s (2008) definition of crisp data sets, only binary status could be obtained. If the data indicated that the school met the criteria for group membership, as shown in Table 1, the data were recoded as ones; if the criteria were not met, and the school therefore did not meet the criteria for crisp group membership, the data were recoded as zeros.

Table 1
Criteria for Crisp Set Membership

Condition	Membership Criteria
STATUS	Improvement Required = 1, Met Standard = 0
SPED	Special Education Enrollment greater than or equal to 11% of student population
HM	Mobility greater than 25
HD	Disciplinary Placements greater than State average of 1.8
DO	Dropout Rate greater than state average of 1.2%

Following conversion of the data into crisp sets, analysis was performed using fuzzy-set/Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fs/QCA) version 2.5 (Ragin & Davey, 2014). A crisp set truth table analysis was performed first.

A necessary cause analysis was then performed on the data once again using fs/QCA 2.5, specifically testing the same data categories as found in the original study. The results of this analysis were then compared with the results of the original study.

Data Analysis

The crisp set truth table analysis showed two combinations of causal components that met Ragin's (2008) criteria of at least 0.75 consistency and 0.5 coverage as shown in Table 2. These results indicate a causal relationship between the combinations of conditions and IR status.

Table 2
Crisp Set Truth Table Analysis

Combination	Consistency	Coverage
HD*DO*HM	0.89	0.64
SPED*HM	0.86	0.72

If a school had high disciplinary incidents resulting in alternative placements, a high dropout rate, and a high mobility, all in comparison to state averages, the results reflected in Table 2 indicate that 89% of the time the school would be IR status. Similarly, if a school had high special education enrollment and high mobility, 86% of the time the school would be classified as IR. By Ragin's (2008) standards, both of these combinations of conditions would have a strong causal relationship to IR status.

The Necessary Conditions analysis results that met Ragin's (2008) minimum requirements are shown in Table 3. Row one of this table, for example, shows that in order for an urban public, non-charter, non-magnet high school in Texas to receive a status of Improvement Required, having more than 11% of the total student population enrolled in special education is a necessary factor 92% of the time. When the special education and high mobility crisp groups are examined

together, it was found that 96% of IR schools in this study were members of at least one of the two crisp groups.

Table 3
Necessary Conditions Analysis

Condition/Combination	Consistency	Coverage
SPED	0.92	0.58
HM	0.76	0.83
HM + SPED	0.96	0.57

As these results were compared to the findings in the original study, a truth table was created to determine if the same factors were present, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Comparison of Findings

Condition	Original Study	Expanded Study
SPED was a necessary condition for IR status	True (0.92)	True (0.92)
Majority of IR schools had HM	True (0.91)	True (0.86)
DO or HD, plus HM, was sufficient for IR status	True (1.00)	True (0.96)

The evidence presented in Table 4 establishes that the patterns found in the original study do indeed apply to urban districts statewide, although it should be noted that the set theoretic consistency is slightly less when applied statewide than in the original study. In particular, the third criterion, in which a combination of either dropout rate or high disciplinary placements and high mobility was sufficient to cause Improvement Required status, had four counterfactual cases in the statewide study. This dropped the set theoretic consistency for that criterion to 86%, still above Ragin's (2008) threshold.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study call into question the methods, either direct or indirect, used to determine Improvement Required status for public urban non-charter non-magnet high schools in Texas. The educational impact of IR status upon special education and high mobility students within these districts is of particular concern; are the educational needs of these students being met?

Pinar (2011) defined curriculum as heavily influenced by the past and by one's view of the future. Both concepts work together in the present moment to create the conditions under which curriculum is practiced through analysis and synthesis (Pinar, 2011). For students in high mobility and/or high special education urban districts, a primary question arises as to student

interpretation of the school's curriculum and its efficacy. In the case of high mobility students, they would not have sense of the past associated with the particular school; their life experiences would, by definition, have occurred elsewhere. Their current school would have limited input into their historical context, their pasts; and with a status of IR, one could argue their schools could not offer much hope for the future either.

Giroux (2011) decried the disposability of students in today's educational systems. Some of the districts and campuses in this study had disciplinary placement rates of over 10%. In such environments, how could students be expected to make adequate yearly progress? Instead of investing in the social needs of students who, as described above, have negative educational historical contexts and limited hope for the future, schools have rendered students who do not meet standards as invisible and disposable (Giroux, 2011).

Jenlink (2006) described school leaders as *bricoleurs* who utilize all of the tools at their disposal to address issues. With concerns such as those introduced within this paper, school leaders seem to be in need of new tools. The tools provided by the State of Texas, such as reconstitution (Texas Education Agency, 2014a), do little to help with the underlying problems of high mobility and special education enrollment rates, and give little hope for any authentic improvement. This study clearly shows that at least two of the causal factors tied to IR status are not under the control of the schools or the students. As Booher-Jennings noted,

While our knowledge of the impact of high-stakes testing and accountability systems has burgeoned in the past decade, researchers have focused their attention on the effects of these systems rather than the mechanisms that account for districts' and teachers' willingness to change (2005, p.232).

When compared with national assessments, the data showed conflicting arguments as to whether or not the Texas Accountability system provided any significant results in terms of student achievement and reducing the achievement gap between populations of students (Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). While some point to the motivational aspects of high stakes testing and accountability systems, both in terms of internal and external motivation, others direct their attention to more negative aspects, such as administrative pressure and "teaching to the test." As stated in the original equity audit by Branch and Leigh (in press), it is important to note that the presences of external factors that contribute to IR status cannot be perceived as reasons or excuses for accepting the status quo. It is the responsibility of school personnel to evolve and adapt instructional strategies in order to meet the needs of all students.

Through the research findings, this study aimed to assist schools and school personnel in identifying common factors of campuses that are classified as IR in order to serve as a source of possible prediction so that campuses and districts can take preventative measures before meeting the state's requirements for IR status. Most importantly, this study raises additional questions of meeting the needs of special education and high mobility students enrolled in IR schools. The fact that membership in these crisp groups could be linked directly to IR status calls into question the validity of the entire IR process in Texas. It is hoped that this study will assist in the critical evaluation of the Texas school accountability system in order to provide a more equitable system for all students within the State.

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