

Exploring Traits of High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools

Aubrey Womack

Graduate Student

University of Mississippi

School of Education

University, MS 38677 USA

(863)444-0185

ajwomack@go.olemiss.edu

Jerilou J. Moore, Ph.D.

Professor

University of Mississippi

School of Education

University, MS 38677 USA

(662)915-7622

jjmoore@olemiss.edu

P. Renee Hill-Cunningham, Ed.D.

Assistant Professor

University of Mississippi

School of Education

University, Mississippi 38677 USA

(662)687-1942

reneec@olemiss.edu

Abstract

Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in pressure placed on schools across the nation due to high-stakes accountability policies (Klar, 2014). It comes as no surprise that low performing schools feel constant pressure to raise the measured academic performance of all students. Rarely, do low-performing schools who have overcome challenging circumstances in order to increase academic achievement, get spotlighted. Educators need to identify the common factors attributed to increased student achievement. This can be achieved by examining the lessons and examples of high-performing schools so that all schools can succeed regardless of circumstances.

Keywords: High-Poverty, High Performing, school traits

Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in pressure placed on schools across the nation due to high-stakes accountability policies (Klar, 2014). It comes as no surprise that low performing schools feel constant pressure to raise the measured academic performance of all students. Rarely, do low-performing schools who have overcome challenging circumstances in order to increase academic achievement, get spotlighted. Educators need to identify the common factors attributed to increased student achievement. This can be achieved by examining the lessons and examples of high-performing schools so that all schools can succeed regardless of circumstances.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to discover common characteristics among high-performing, high-poverty. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “High-poverty schools are defined as public schools where more than 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL, and mid-high poverty schools as those where 50.1 to 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL” (Nation Center for Education Statistics, 2017, n.p.). It is important to note that poverty can be experienced by anyone regardless of gender or race (Parrett and Budge, 2012).

Up until the new millennium, strategies focusing on improving low-performing schools with high populations of students living in poverty were little to nonexistent (Parrett and Budge, 2012). Improvements in technology in the 1990s made identifying schools who were at the low end of the spectrum much easier for educators to find (Parrett and Budge, 2012). Due to the increased availability of comparative data, researchers began to verify that there were in fact schools that were both high-poverty and high performing (Parrett and Budge, 2012). The Education Trust took an initial look at achievement data from high-poverty schools and they were able to verify that there were in fact schools where students of poverty were significantly outperforming schools containing more advantaged students (Parrett and Budge, 2012). This analysis by the Education Trust lead to numerous efforts geared towards learning about high-performing, high-poverty (HP/HP) schools and how other schools with high-poverty could improve.

According to the research of Parrett and Budge, there are hundreds of public schools across the United States who enroll large numbers of underachieving students who live in poverty and these schools have successfully reversed the long-standing traditions of low achievement and high dropout rates (Parrett and Budge, 2012). High-poverty schools do not become high performing by chance. Chenoweth and Theokas state that “These schools do, however, have something that helps explain their success: They all have excellent school leaders.” (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013, pg.57). Although this is not the only trait found among HP/HP schools, it is by far the most common trait that contributed to the overall success of the school by researchers. In fact, one study conducted by Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) concluded that up to one-quarter of all school effects on achievement can be contributed to leadership (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013).

In exploring the characteristics of high performing, high-poverty schools, these questions need answering: What factors contribute to the effectiveness of high performing, high-poverty schools? Why are unique high-poverty schools high performing while so many others with similar demographics are not?

What can be learned from high-performing, high-poverty schools that can help students who live in poverty, regardless of where they attend school?

There is a strong research base on high-performing, high-poverty schools and it is continuously growing due to high interest. It is important to identify the common characteristics seen among high performing, high-poverty schools by examining existing research. By exploring a multitude of studies and highlighting the major findings, schools gain insight into how to achieve at high levels regardless of their circumstances.

Research concluded that any school regardless of its' condition can become high performing (Parrett and Budge, 2012). Although researchers have been able to identify several elements that attribute to the increase in student achievement in high-poverty schools, there is no simple solution. There are several elements vital to school improvement, but it is important to note that it is complex and elements will play out differently in every school depending on the specific context of the individual school.

The study by Parrett and Budge identified and visited seven diverse HP/HP schools who were recognized by the Education Trust, the U.S. Department of Education, and their individual state departments of education for having significant gap-closing improvements (Parrett and Budge, 2012). The researchers conducted both formal and informal interviews with leaders (administrators, teachers, school trustees, and other personnel) in order to hear what they believed contributed to schools; successes (Parrett and Budge, 2012).

This study along with previous research in the field, allowed researchers to develop a framework of elements that contribute to the success of HP/HP (Parrett and Budge, 2012). Parrett and Budge (2012) claim that leadership is at the heart of improvement of such schools, and “significant student gains will not be sustained without effective leaders who serve as a catalyst for the specific actions that in turn drive the success of these schools” (pg.33). Effective school leaders in HP/HP schools are not only great leaders, but most importantly, they gained an understanding of the unique needs of their students who live in poverty (Parrett and Budge, 2012). Similarly, Karin Chenoweth (2009) states that, “Schools that successfully teach students of poverty and students of color do not begin with the assumption that there are things they do not have to explain.” (pg. 40). Leaders in high-performing, high-poverty schools note that it is not about fixing the students, it is about fixing the school so that all students feel that they belong and that they can succeed (Parrett and Budge, 2012).

In order to understand what an exceptional leader looks like specifically in high-performing, high-poverty schools, Chenoweth and Theokas (2013) examined the work of four principals and they were able to discover four qualities that successful leaders tend to share. The qualities encompass the common characteristics found in the literature used in the classroom.

The first quality found in successful school leaders is that “Their beliefs about student potential drive their work.” (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013, pg. 57). One of the principals in a low-performing schools said, “I learned through my teaching experiences that my students were capable of learning just about anything I was capable of teaching.” (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013, pg. 57). When the principal left five years later it was one of the highest performing schools in the state (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013). The leaders in successful HP/HP schools do not lower standards, water down the curriculum, or

slow down the instruction. (Parrett and Budge, 2012) Instead, these schools strive for excellence, equality, and equity. A major study exploring HP/HP schools in California states that, “Most principals said that the standards were attainable for their students and that if high expectations are set, students rise to those expectations” (Izumi, 2002, pg. 48).

The second common quality was that principals “put instruction at the center of their managerial duties” (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013, pg. 58). These principals ensured that school schedules maximized both instructional time for students as well as collaboration time for teachers. The principals in the study made time to attend these meeting regularly so that teachers saw the importance of collaborating (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013). When there is not a sufficient amount of collaboration among teachers and school leaders students rely on the knowledge of their individual teachers and that can potentially become problematic, particularly in regards to students of poverty. The education of students living in poverty is often left up to the school because parents of these children often do not have the knowledge or resources to help their children themselves (Chenoweth, 2009).

Effective leaders commonly “focus on building the capacity of all adults in the building” in HP/HP schools (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013, pg. 58). It is important for principals to recognize that teachers are responsible for their students’ success in the classroom, but at the same time understand that not all teachers are fully, prepared (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013). Chenoweth (2009) states that, “No teacher can be an expert in all aspects of the curriculum, all the possible ways to teach it, and every child who sits in his or her class” (pg. 42). When faculty and staff work as a team, all of the energy and expertise is concentrated with a much larger effect, than working in isolation (Chenoweth, 2009). There is a need for frequent testing to discover the strengths and weaknesses of both students and teachers in order to improve (Izumi, 2002). Having systems put in place by principals in order to develop teachers’ knowledge and their ability to problem solve leads to success in the classroom (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013).

The last common quality found among successful leaders in HP/HP schools is that “They monitor and evaluate what leads to success and what can be learned from failure.” (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013, pg. 58). When principals use evidence to guide decisions and know whether something is working or not then, that is when progress is made. Helping teachers use evidence-based methods in their classrooms is crucial to the success of the students. A major part of being a successful leader is looking for solutions to problems and ways to, continually, improve (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013). When there is a school-wide commitment to continuous improvement, much progress can be made (Hayes, 2009).

The Vermont State Department of Education conducted a study in which they identified three of their highest-performing, high-poverty schools and explored effective practices. The study was able to identify eight specific characteristics of HP/HP schools. At the top of the list is high expectations. Hays says in successful HP/HP schools observed, “Every child, regardless of socioeconomic background, was held to high expectations and poverty was never used as an excuse for low performance.” (Hayes, 2009, pg. 15). While communicating and holding students to high expectations is primarily the job of the teacher in the classroom, in order for it to be highly effective everyone in the school must hold the students to a high standard from the teacher to the librarian (Hayes, 2009). The idea of all students being capable of learning and growing is something that has to be embedded within the school culture (Chenoweth, 2015).

Unfortunately, many teachers who are faced with students who achieve at low levels feel a sense of powerlessness due to the challenges resulting from poverty (Chenoweth, 2009). While teachers of HP/HP schools are not naive about the challenges that are presented by poverty, they refuse to blame these challenges on poor performance (Hayes, 2009). Instead, these teachers and staff continue to hold standards high and keep pushing students to be the best that they can be (Hayes, 2009). In rural Delaware, poverty rates are high but so are the expectations (Chenoweth, 2015). The superintendent claims that monitoring students' progress is key (Chenoweth, 2015). She looks at teacher evaluations to ensure that principals are holding teachers to a high standard in which all students will succeed (Chenoweth, 2015). Principals in the district are expected to review samples of student work to be sure that teachers are holding students to a high standard (Chenoweth, 2015).

Sometimes, "success is measured by how much attitudes and perceptions shift from negative to positive," according to Rutherford, Hilmer, and Parker, (2011, pg. 42). Research commonly found that many school leaders accredited their school's overall success to the positive, supportive climate of the school. Many researchers noticed a difference in the school climate as well, "The successful high-poverty and high-minority schools I've visited have very different atmospheres." (Chenoweth, 2009, pg. 42). Hays (2009) found that effective HP/HP schools "create a supportive climate that makes all students, as well as adults, feel valued and safe." (pg. 47"). A safe and supportive school climate is particularly important for students who live in poverty because they do not always feel secure outside school (Hayes, 2009). When students feel safe they are able to relax and focus on learning (Hayes, 2009).

Relationships play a large role in creating a safe and supportive school climate in high-performing, high-poverty schools. Students of poverty may not have had a consistent relationship with an adult or someone who believed in them before they came to school (Hayes, 2009). One of the local school board members commented, "With the poverty level here there's also a level of low self-esteem. But, when students walk into this building, one of the tasks that is met head-on is building self-esteem and I think that's one of the reasons that we are successful. No child (feels) that they are less than they should be and the hope is that they build self-esteem and look forward to bigger and better things in the future" (Hayes, 2009, pg.48).

While leadership is at the heart of improvement, it is important to note that it is second to classroom instruction (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom, 2004). Unfortunately, oftentimes, quality teachers leave high-poverty schools because of unsatisfactory working conditions (Duncan and Murnane, 2014). These schools often lack the components needed for success: strong leadership, a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility, and resources (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012). While strong leadership cannot guarantee that high-poverty schools will succeed in creating the conditions required to retain strong teachers, they are a necessary element (Duncan and Murnane, 2014). Effective school leaders in HP/HP schools are able to help "ordinary teachers become excellent and create schools where excellent teachers want to work" (Chenoweth and Theokas, 2013, pg. 59)

Why are certain high-poverty schools high performing while so many others with similar demographics are not? Chenoweth (2009) who has conducted several studies on high-performing, high-poverty schools and says "I've come to the conclusion that they succeed where other schools fail because

they ruthlessly organize themselves around one thing: helping students learn a great deal.” (pg. 39). When the main goal of a school centers on helping students learn, it seems that everything else falls into place.

There are many lessons that can be learned from high performing, high-poverty schools. The research suggests that if all schools learned from HP/HP schools there would be a significant increase in achievement. Some suspect that many schools are coasting on the advantages of their students rather than through instruction (Parrett and Budge, 2012). Based on the findings of research, there are three common characteristics seen among high-performing, high poverty schools; exceptional leadership, high expectations, and a supportive school climate (see figure 1). Although there are a number of characteristics seen in high-performing, high-poverty schools the research shows that these three specific characteristics were the most commonly found and that they were the most effective in the schools observed. Research concludes that any school has the potential to become high performing, regardless of circumstances. Figure 2 provides websites with suggestions for helping students in high poverty schools.

Figure 1: Traits of Successful High-Poverty Schools

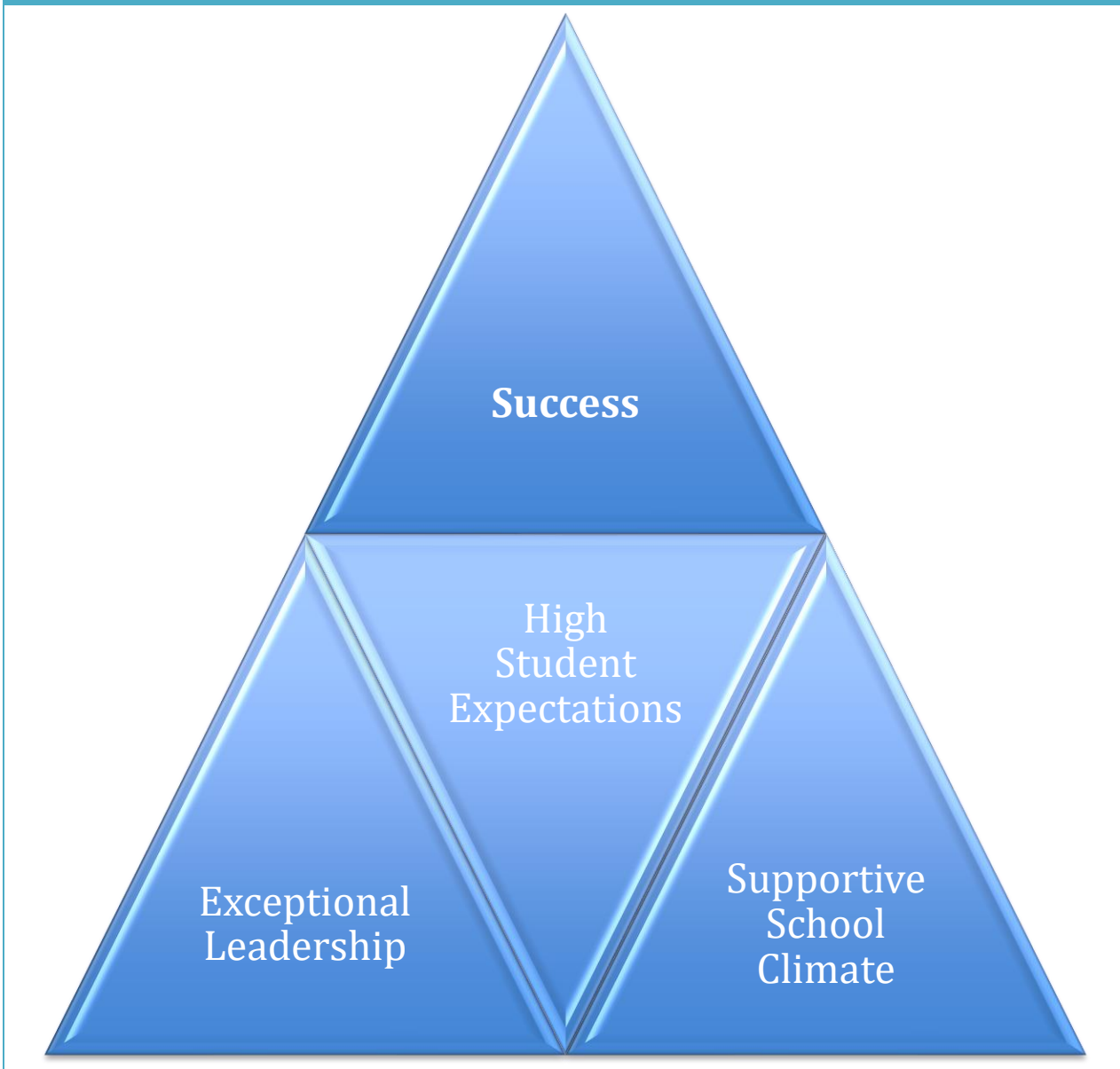


Figure 2: Suggestions for High-Poverty Schools**Websites:**

<https://www.nsba.org/newsroom/high-poverty-schools-can-be-high-achieving-0>

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/12/21/yes-there-are-high-poverty-public-schools-that-operate-at-a-high-level-heres-how-they-succeed/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ba98c5dd48a5

<https://www.edutopia.org/blogs/tag/culturally-responsive-teaching>

<http://educationpost.org/5-tips-for-teaching-ap-in-a-high-poverty-urban-school/>

<http://hechingerreport.org/four-tips-successful-elementary-school/>

<http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol6/603-sanders.aspx>

<https://thecornerstoneforteachers.com/truth-for-teachers-podcast/teachers-high-poverty-classrooms/>

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