

Research Note

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Poverty and Education: New Research in Ontario Schools

Introduction

Poverty is a complex issue that needs attention from governments, research, and partnerships with schools. In this article we discuss an ongoing project on poverty and education in Ontario schools. The research is a collaborative partnership between a teachers' federation, two universities, and 11 elementary schools. We address a range of issues related to poverty and education and the role that research can play in influencing professional development, school reform, and policy. 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.

Context

International studies draw attention to significant differences between jurisdictions in terms of educational achievement, children's well-being, and policy contexts (*Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries*, 2007; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007). Our project sheds much-needed light on how urban, suburban, and rural schools in Ontario have sought to address and better serve students affected by poverty. Over 2,000,000 children attend Ontario's public schools; the province is geographically vast, with large urban areas, rapidly expanding suburbs, and rural and remote locations. There is considerable diversity: 27% of the population was born outside Canada; 20% are visible minorities, a number that is far higher in Toronto and the surrounding areas. The province faces serious problems of child poverty: Campaign (2000, 2007), a respected advocacy group, calculates that one in six children in the province lives in poverty.

Ontario represents a model of system-wide school change (Levin, 2008); achievement monitored by testing in grades 3, 6, and 9 has been coupled with increased per-student resources. Although the Ministry of Education has shown some interest in studies of schools in challenging circumstances (McDougall et al., 2006), less explored have been local school-based experiences that use measures other than test scores as their selection criteria. In this project, researchers gained insight into the dynamics of school narratives with

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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 describes what generally these stories have in common. Story is a fundamental way for capturing meaning behind the complex issues of education (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Craig, 2003) and how we can best understand poverty and schooling.

Method

In this project we adopted a case study method in which extensive interviews, focus groups, observations, and documents were incorporated into one or more narratives about each school (Yin, 2002). A grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1994) governed our inquiry. Transcripts were coded, and themes emerged through constant comparison. We visited 11 elementary schools in school districts across Ontario—northern, urban, suburban, and rural—for up to two full days during the 2007-2008 school year. One set of schools was chosen for their positive reputation for success. Another set received significant funding from the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario to create a site-based plan to address poverty. School focus groups were held with at least four teachers, with at least two parents, and in some schools we held focus groups with community partners. We interviewed separately the principal(s) of each school. We collected publicly available documents such as school Web site profiles. Overall, we interviewed 103 adult stakeholders.

Analysis and Discussion

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim to facilitate analysis and development of emergent themes. Data analysis was completed by a team of four researchers. Draft case studies were written and distributed back to each school for member-checking and for correction of any factual errors. The findings describe successful schools that were involved in and had at their core: (a) site-based teacher inquiry, (b) strong leadership by teachers and administrators, (c) a focus on quality instruction and collaboration, and (d) engagement of parents and community partners.

The project provided a rich description of schools that are successfully working with students affected by poverty. First, our participants reported that poverty is a complicated issue that needs site-based teacher inquiry to focus on context-specific issues. This finding stands in contrast to a growing professional literature that recommends off-the-shelf remedies to address poverty and schooling issues (Payne, 1996, 2003). In our case study schools, the research approach was seen as a useful first-step intervention itself. Second, our participants reported that strong leadership by teachers and administrators on issues of poverty is fundamental. This finding is consistent with a growing research literature that emphasizes multiple paths of leadership (Leithwood, Mascall, & Stauss, 2009; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). As one principal 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.

Third, participants attributed school success to a focus on instruction, describing teaching excellence and 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. Fourth, participants acknowledged the significance of parental engagement and community partnerships. Schools took a variety of approaches to engage parents and involve community partners. Many respondents wanted concrete advice on how to make better connections.

Implications

Sustaining site-based inquiry is not free, and additional resources are needed. Inquiry assists both in recognizing local challenges and proposing responses. An investment in research helps schools articulate their stories of success and embed better these practices into their school programs.

This collaborative project is a contribution to the ongoing literature (Leader & Stern, 2008; Shultz, 2008) and provides a useful counterpoint to discussions of effective schooling that narrowly emphasize test scores. The project highlights the role of a teacher union in promoting site-based research. We intend our project to provoke discussion about how educators and policymakers concerned with ameliorating the effects of poverty on schooling can contribute to the benefits of building such collaborations.

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