**Point/Counterpoint**

*Leadership In and Beyond Poverty*

The issue of poverty continues to challenge school leaders nationwide. In the midst of the “great recession” and as a result of the stalemate in Washington D.C., evident in the continued sequestration and calls for austerity, schools are assuming greater responsibilities for keeping children fed and ready to learn. The increasing levels of poverty in suburban America have only highlighted what urban and rural schools have known for decades: poverty hurts the most vulnerable in the community first.

But poverty exists in many forms: financial, intellectual, emotional, spiritual. Schools often focus on the “financial” poverty of students without recognizing the “intellectual” poverty of teachers and leaders. This gap between what children and communities believe they can do and what schools and educators think children can do results in poverty of the heart and soul of all those involved in the learning enterprise. School leaders must therefore understand the situation of poverty, but not be limited by it or by their own worldview, which assumes middle-class norms. We have long known that schools do not need saviors. Schools do need leaders who role up their sleeves, understand that they don’t know what they don’t know, and commit to finding the *wealths* in the community.

This Point /Counterpoint focuses on the perspectives of those preparing leaders for urban and rural communities in the context of poverty. The team from Lehigh University, led by faculty members, Drs. Beachum and White, highlight the need to problematize our definitions of poverty and our subsequent inability to see the potential of “poor” schools and children. Drs. Militello and Fusarelli from North Carolina State share how their program listens to and privileges the voices of communities marginalized by poverty. In both essays, it is clear that leaders must see poverty, not as an individual circumstance, but as a system rooted in historical, economic, and racial terms that limits opportunities for entire communities. Getting current and aspiring leaders to this level of awareness and then helping them acquire the necessary skills, is the challenge that these contributors lay at the feet of program faculty. We must be critical of our own assumptions about and experiences with poverty even as we engage aspiring leaders in this exploration. We must be ready to recognize and challenge the deficit models embedded in our pedagogy and programs, in order to discover the many potentials that exist in urban and rural communities.

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**Urban Schools: Poverty, Plight, and Potential**

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On a recent trip to San Francisco for the AERA Annual Meeting, one of our team members was crossing a street in normal fashion heading back to the hotel. While waiting for the traffic signal to change, there was a gentleman sitting on the ground asking for money. He did not have a sign, or a speech, he just kept repeating the same words: “Can you give a little help?” This experience unearthed some major contradictions. He was asking for help, yet surrounded by upscale hotels and shopping. Many of us were at an international conference with poverty as the theme, yet to what extent does our work reach those most in need? And for those of us who do research on urban schools or in urban communities, to what extent do we reciprocate. Many researchers get studies, grants, and notoriety from the urban plight, yet have we really improved the urban predicament? The purpose of this essay is to better understand the notion of poverty, make connections to the plight of urban schools, and to illuminate the potential in urban communities.

**Understanding Poverty**

In the U.S., while no formal caste system exists, socioeconomic class navigation can be difficult (moving upwards of course). While everyone knows that class issues exist, these issues are almost never discussed, debated, or deconstructed. “Class is rarely talked about in the United States; nowhere is there more intense silence about the reality of class differences than in educational settings” (hooks, 2003, p. 142). Ironically, this silence is consent and in a strange way we all play our roles in a comprehensive, covert, class-based game of chess.

Ruby Payne (2001), for all of the criticism and critique she received, was insightful when she stated that poverty had to do with a lack of resources (for an alternative perspective see Kunjufu, 2007). We see that children’s vulnerability is not because they have a moral failing or some connection to their race/ethnicity, but a lack of resources, which could place any of us at-risk. At the same time the issue of poverty is complex and can be linked to factors like the employment status of parents, family dynamics, family earnings, and the educational attainment of the parents (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005). As many of us are aware, there is a huge connection between poverty level and academic achievement. Epps (2005) stated that “Wealth affects achievement in several ways; through its effect on the amount of cultural capital to which a child is exposed, the ability of families to live in communities with good public schools or to choose private schools, and the provision of an ethos of high academic and career expectations, students’ achievements are maximized” (p. 222). This largely confirms what many of us already know, that the quality of a child’s education is largely based on family income, educational status, social and cultural capital, and/or wealth (McCray & Beachum, 2011; Milner, 2010). Similarly, by using our broader definition of resources we understand that higher class status gives access to the language of the middle class, travel opportunities, values, ethos, culture, and even humor. Not that these are bad things, but when we as educators and leaders believe that they are the norm and then we judge everyone else by these standards, then it becomes a problem. The mechanisms of class separation can quickly lead to classism. This almost always negatively impacts those at the lower levels of the class hierarchy. We must keep these things in mind as we work with urban schools and communities.

**Revisiting Urban Schools**

Urban Schools have once again taken center stage with heightened scrutiny on superintendents in big-cities, the public release of standardized test score data, and the great interest in teacher activities and student behaviors. Additional evidence can be found in books (Beachum & McCray, 2011; Morris, 2009; Noguera, 2008; Payzant, 2011), movies like *Waiting for Superman* (2010), and specials on television such as “Heart of the City”: Detroit’s Dropout Factories (2009). The word “urban,” on one hand, signifies a geographical location in, near, or around a major city or it can be linked to population density (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005). On the other hand, it can also signify poverty, crime, and/or people of color. Although the words may vary, we all know who lives there and we usually get a particular image in our minds when these places are mentioned. In reference to schools, “It is common knowledge that students who are poor and of color are overrepresented in urban schools and that suburban schools are attended largely by students who are white and more affluent” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 45). This geographic isolation is further complicated by the fact that far too many teachers and educational leaders are plagued by deficit-based theory and pathology instead of strength-based theory. This ideology overtly or covertly supports a belief in the intellectual inferiority of students of poverty and students of color (Brooks, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This notion further advocates that these deficiencies can be genetic or cultural. It also spawns a viewpoint that narrowly “blames the victim” and privileges middle class, dominant culture. According to Larson and Ovando (2001) “When we use universal standards to judge student competence, without acknowledging disparities in either economic resources or opportunity, we consistently privilege the privileged” (p. 133). This is a major lesson for those of us who are from, live in, work with, and/or are concerned about urban schools and communities. It highlights our agency and ability to interrupt cycles of poverty, violence, underachievement, and stagnation through our interactions and relationships with people in urban areas. We must engage these communities with the kind of liberatory consciousness (Beachum, 2011) that recognizes their situation, respects their humanity, and situates us as learners not only as leaders.

**Urban School Potential**

As faculty members and graduate students, we are learning these lessons in real-time as we work with pre-service and practicing school administrators in Allentown and Philadelphia, PA. During a workshop with a group of these administrators, a Lehigh faculty member wrote the word “urban” on the board and asked them to provide descriptors. They slowly began to list the likely answers: crime, drugs, gangs, violence, etc. Then, the facilitator asked them to do the exercise again noting only positive descriptors. This time the group produced words like: community, diversity, uniqueness, and opportunity. While they are all too familiar with the litany of negative comments, they also recognize the power and potential of urban schools and communities. It is this energy and perspective that we must utilize to improve urban schools.

It will take new ideas, creative programming, and constant reflection. In our work, we have started doing neighborhood walks, with teachers and administrators actually walking and engaging the local community (people, stores, agencies, etc.). Sample questions could include:

* What do you like about living in the neighborhood?
* How would you describe the families in this neighborhood?
* Do you have children in the neighborhood school?
* How would you describe the neighborhood school?
* How does the school connect with families in the neighborhood?
* What would help you feel more connected to the school?

For more on the neighborhood walk, see the following URL: <http://ucea.org/neighborhood-walk-ple/>. We have also engaged urban school administrators by pairing up new urban school leaders with experienced mentors. As we work with urban school teachers and administrators we learned some lessons. First, that people have practice-based needs to address immediate problems. Second, many communities are underserved but people still should get the respect that they do deserve. And finally, that in order to do this work, it takes a commitment to addressing the plight of urban schools. Cornell West (2008) said that you have to love the people in order to lead the people. This takes an authentic understanding of people’s situation while balancing that with our own beliefs and intentions. We must be ever-vigilant of the role that we as outsiders play and see ourselves as leaders, learners, and co-creators. The work we do in urban communities is deserving of our very best.

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**We Make the Road by Walking: How Principal Preparation Can Get Beyond Poverty and to Community**

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Preparing school leaders is a difficult enterprise. The local demands and politics are largely hidden and capricious, state-level bureaucratic burdens of standards are often untenable, and the constant bombardment of hortatory pressures from the national-level further exacerbates preparation. As a result, there has been a steady diet of re-conceptualizing university-based programs and a proliferation of alternative preparation programs.

These constant pressures may have led to what Larry Cuban called “reform[s] again, again, and again.” This tail chasing is a function of the constancy of strategies that address the deficits associated with low-performing schools and community. Few efforts have viewed schools and communities as participants and assets to the improvement efforts. We submit that in order to advance any efforts of school improvement there must be:

1. Knowledge and acceptance of the historical traumas and current dimensions of poverty and social inequities that have damaged communities, and;
2. Commitment to invite and incorporate the marginalized voices and knowledge of community members into the solutions or healing that is needed.

**A New Leadership Preparation in Northeastern North Carolina**

Northeast North Carolina has a clear and present spirit rooted in faith and family. In the NE there is a resiliency and hope that is enacted within families and in churches. In the midst of this there are institutional and systemic deficits. Historical issues have created challenges of abject poverty and racial segregation it the fourteen districts that comprise Northeast North Carolina. North Carolina’s lowest performing schools are disproportionately clustered in this rural area. Taken together as a state, these fourteen counties would rank number one for the highest teen pregnancy, infant mortality, and other deficit metrics.

The Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) was funded from federal Race to the Top funds. The academy is directed by North Carolina State University and is training three cohorts of emerging leaders in NE NC. NELA is tapping into and building on local strengths to bolster both human capital and systemic capacity. In doing so, NELA has re-conceptualized leadership preparation - taking it from the deficits to assets, from "I" to the "we"; from on-campus to on-site; from school leadership to community leadership; from superhero to servant leaders; from “course” focus to “just-in-time, needs-based” topical preparation, and from a lone wolf to a Wolfpack (pun intended). Thus, our cadre of 60 NELA graduates can create a tipping point (a critical mass of similarly educated, highly motivated, and networked leaders) —creating a new narrative of high expectations and performance (for more information, program features, and hundreds of digital artifacts see <http://go.ncsu.edu/nela>).

As we developed NELA, we rejected the notion that consequences of historical traumas and the lack of graciousness to community participation can be viewed solely through the lens of poverty (viz., [Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008](#_ENREF_2); [Gorski, 2008](#_ENREF_5); [Valencia, 2010](#_ENREF_13)). Instead of adapting a deficit model of leadership preparation we dig into the causes of poverty. As such, our preparation is anchored in liberation—first by understanding the root causes of poverty and then by harnessing the community assets to begin a new narrative of healing and hope.

**Signature Pedagogies, Learning, and Artifacts**

To best exemplify this work, we offer three student artifacts. For each of our learning objectives (these are tied to the NC School Executive Standards) we co-construct learning experiences for our students. In turn, students create and publicly post an artifact that demonstrates their understanding or competency of the objective.

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| **Learning Experience** | **Description** | **Link to Artifact** |
| 1. Digital Storytelling | Digital Storytelling is driven by its creators ([Lundby, 2008](#_ENREF_9)). The process engages and empowers the voices of the story tellers “thereby examining and improving their positions as leaders and learners in their communities” ([Freidus & Hlubinka, 2002, p. 26](#_ENREF_4)). We worked closely with the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development (see [www.llanogrande.org](http://www.llanogrande.org)). Llano Grande pioneered the utility of digital storytelling as a pedagogy ([Guajardo, Guajardo, & Casaperalta, 2008](#_ENREF_6)). Llano Grande worked with our Fellows (our students) in multi-day retreat settings to create a series of community stories as well as thematic stories. One link for each is provided. | Halifax Community Digital Story:  <https://vimeo.com/32097737>  Oxford Murder Digital Story:  <http://vimeo.com/52814058> |
| 1. Social Justice Advocacy | We have woven social justice advocacy into our preparation. In fact, social justice is a main tenant of our post-program support. Students investigate group stereotype threat ([Steele, 2011](#_ENREF_11)), the language of equity traps ([McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004](#_ENREF_10)), and school leadership dimensions to ameliorate school injustices ([Theoharis, 2010](#_ENREF_12)). The video artifact highlights some of the feature of this advocacy work. | Social Justice:  <https://vimeo.com/39192804> |
| 1. Community Internship | Each NELA Fellow participates in a full time, six-week summer internship with a community organization. Fellows learn about the vision, mission, and daily operations of the organization; better understand how community organizations can work in conjunction with schools and other institutions to meet critical needs; and gain a deeper appreciation for how the assets in the community that can be leveraged to support students ([Block, 2009](#_ENREF_1)). In addition, Fellows work with other leaders in organizations to design a plan for a community-based, school-affiliated initiative that addresses local needs, and develop a viable grant proposal to support this initiative. To date, more than seven grants have been successfully funded. The video artifact highlights one community internship experience. | Cohort I Community Internship:  <https://vimeo.com/28057478> |

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The 1997 ruling by Judge Howard Manning in the Leandro case found that not all students in Northeast North Carolina were receiving an “equal opportunity to receive a sound basic education.” More than a decade later this problem persists. How can we stem the tide of educational inequalities? The purpose of NELA is to harness the fertile grounds of community awareness to reclaim school and community outcomes. We believe our graduates are well-situated and capable of envisioning, dreaming, and enacting this reclamation process. We believe NELA liberates Fellows to see, reflect, and action plan by harnessing the power of community. By rejecting the myopic notions of poverty as a deficit, we believe a holistic approach that engages leaders, schools, *and* communities will reverse the trend of developing school leader advocates for community to advocates *with* communities.

The Leandro case demonstrates the futility of case law while, more recently, federal statue (No Child Left Behind) equally demonstrates the impotency of high-stakes accountability. Perhaps instead of looking upward and outward we should seek answers from within. Perhaps instead of mandates and sticks, we would be well-served being inclusive and gracious. Perhaps experiences within the communities will provide insights and solutions. Perhaps “we make the road by walking” ([Horton, Freire, Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990](#_ENREF_7)) in the footsteps of community members—for that is where the promises reside and hope endures.

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