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Poverty, Education, and Ruby Payne: How Overlapping Contexts Shape One

Superintendent's Approaches to Equity-Minded Reform

The current educational climate requires school district superintendents to navigate the contested terrain of equity, which they may do with rhetoric, action, or avoidance (Elmore, 2003). This terrain ranges from federal policy mandating that no child, regardless of race, class, or dis/ability, be left behind, to recent books such as Peterkin, Jewell-Sherman, Kelly, and Boozer's (2011) collection of case studies on superintendents' efforts to lead for equity and national advocacy groups such as the Educational Equity Center (2011) and Leadership for Educational Equity (2011). The widespread use and competing meanings of equity thus raise a host of questions: What does it mean when superintendents say they are leading for equity? How do superintendents think about equity, and what strategies do they choose to (not) address these issues? Are there differences in the ways that superintendents approach specific issues of equity? School district superintendents' positional authority affords them the opportunity to influence districts in a variety of ways, including generating will amongst their constituents and building capacity within district staff (Rorrer, Sklra, & Scheurich, 2008). As such, a focus on how superintendents actually understand issues of educational equity, as well as the actions they take based on their understandings is a necessary piece for future policy and practice related to educational administration.

In this paper, we analyze the relationship between the contexts, leadership, and approaches to equity of four current school district superintendents, in order to better understand how superintendents can work as district leaders to create school systems that offer equitable educational experiences for all students. To illustrate this relationship, we provide an in-depth look at one superintendent's understanding of the relationship between poverty and education, a

critical issue of equity in his pre-K-12 rural school district. We begin by outlining our conceptual framework of overlapping contexts for leadership. We then describe our methods. Next, we offer a broad look at the ways that contexts overlap for the four participants, before moving into an in-depth analysis of how three contexts overlap in such a way as to reinforce a particular approach to equity for one superintendent, despite pushback from the district in which he works. In looking at different ways that contexts overlap to influence superintendents' approaches to equity, we conclude with implications for leadership preparation programs and district policy aimed at increasing equity for all students.

Overlapping Contexts for Equity

The literature on school leaders and equity suggest that several elements influence how superintendents approach equity in their districts. Different theories highlight varied explanations for superintendents' approaches to equity. For example, psychological theories emphasize individual character traits and rational decision-making processes based on the leader's knowledge base or personal characteristics (Crowson, 1987; Kowalski, 1995; Root, 2010). On the other hand, an institutional perspective emphasizes external pressures that severely constrain superintendents' abilities to create equitable change (Jennings & Greenwood, 2003; Scott, 2001; Weber & Glynn, 2006). In recognizing the contributions of all of these understandings of how superintendents approach equity, we build on Riehl and Byrd's (1997) understanding of contexts in their analysis of gender differences in school leadership to consider how different contexts overlap to create possibilities and constraints for equity, as demonstrated in Figure 1.This figure offers one way to think about contexts that is particularly useful, as its purpose is to consider how contexts shape opportunities for equity, and was developed from the literature on educational administration. At the same time, it is worthwhile to consider that this is

one of many different approaches to contexts, which are theorized in different ways depending on the discipline and stance of the researcher. Here, this figure is useful in exploring complexities of superintendents' approaches to equity and the ways in which they are situated in multiple contexts.
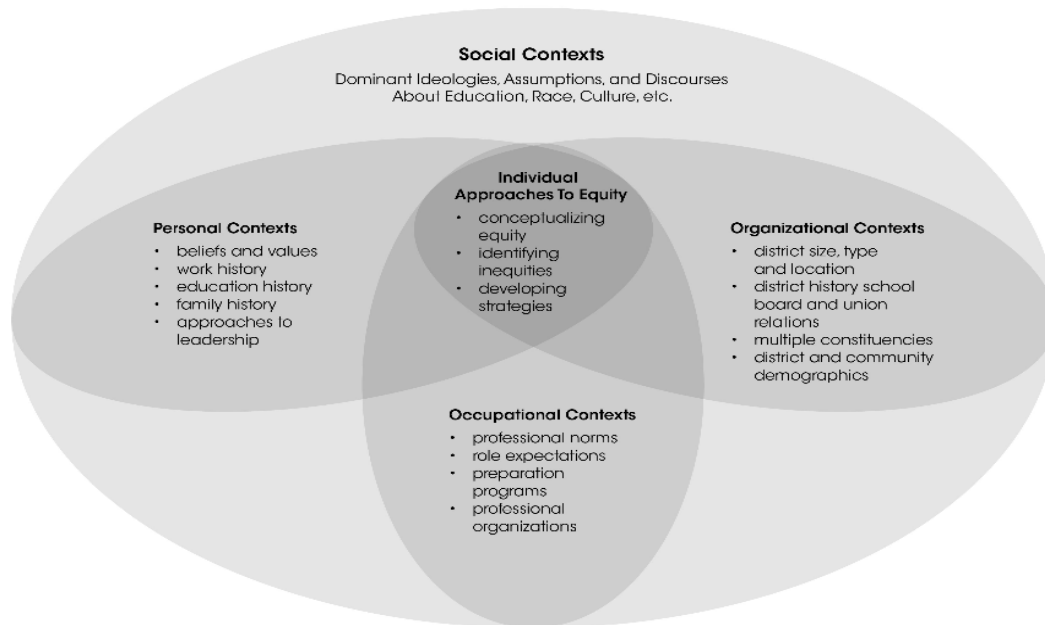

Figure 1. Overlapping contexts to leading for equity.

Social contexts include dominant ideologies and beliefs, including those related to race, gender, and other subjectivities, as well as those related to education. They also include large scale social and historical events. Cuban's (1976) early work on the superintendents of San Francisco, Washington, DC, and Chicago illustrates many of these macro factors at play, including the social issues of *de facto* segregation and the Civil Rights Movement and educational issues of the Sputnik aftermath and federally funded professional reformers. All three superintendents faced great amounts of external pressure to change, and in line with their view of the profession, these superintendents acted in ways so as to protect certain elements within their districts from these pressures. While protecting certain elements, they likewise acted

in ways to disadvantage other groups, especially students of color. As a whole, studies that look at social contexts depict leadership possibilities as constrained as leaders are expected to maintain existing systems (Cuban, 1976; Johnson, 1996; Lugg & Tooms, 2010; Skrla, 2000).

Personal contexts refer to superintendents' experiences and beliefs, often drawn from childhood, families, or past experiences. Studies focused on superintendents of color and/or female superintendents offer particular insight (Alston, 2005; B. L. Jackson, 1996; Murtadha-Watts, 2000; Ortiz & Ortiz, 1995). Jackson (1996), for example, considers how Black superintendents view themselves as leaders. Some identify as Black leaders advocating for children of color. Others forefront their identity as superintendent and do not publicly assert their race, in an attempt to avoid conflict with the White establishment. Participants across this body of literature drew on their backgrounds in framing their approaches to equity or social justice and in prioritizing issues to address.

Much of the research on the superintendency focuses on the organizational contexts in which superintendents work, including the many roles that they take on. For example, Petersen (2002) identifies a superintendent's role as setting goals and standards, working as a visionary leader, and building an organization that supports this vision. In contrast, Wolf (1988) identifies roles connected to management, board relations, funding, facilities, community relations, and personnel, as well as improving educational opportunities for all children. Despite differences in roles, all of the literature agrees on the existence of multiple roles and the need for the superintendent to understand the importance of district contexts in determining their roles (Crowson, 1987; B. L. Jackson, 1996; Kowalski, 1995, 2005; Wolf, 1988). Regulations, school board turnover, and community expectations (Jackson, 1996), as well as enrollment size, geography, and demographics (Ornstein, 1991) are all part of the organizational contexts that

influence leadership. Organizational contexts, including structures, norms, and powerful constituents, present important constraints to how superintendents can approach equity. However, these constraints do not predict only one possibility for (in)action: a small number of studies consider how school leaders work in the face of community resistance, demonstrating how organizational contexts are embedded within social contexts (Peterkin et al., 2011; Theoharis, 2010). These studies identify places for action within organizational contexts that may be opposed to equity. For example, external pressures or supports, such as federal policy or judicial decisions, can create possibilities for superintendents to overcome organizational constraints that might otherwise lead them to ignore issues of equity.

Graduate schools, professional development organizations, and colleagues are part of the occupational contexts in which superintendents work. Graduate school programs emphasizing instructional leadership may influence superintendents to identify as an instructional leader and focus the majority of their time and efforts directly on teaching and learning, as opposed to focusing on budget management or community relations (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). Professional identities and norms also create a context for approaching equity. Some school leaders attend leadership preparation programs that do not consider what it means to lead for social justice (Theoharis, 2004), while others attend programs that include a strong emphasis on meeting the needs of all students (Peterkin, et al., 2011). The overlapping nature of contexts is evident here, as superintendents come to the position with their own idea of what the superintendency is from their professional experience in school districts and from their professional preparation programs, while also facing the role expectations of their districts.

Methodology

This study is situated within a longitudinal study of the development of a superintendents' network in a northeast state. This network began in the fall of 2008 with a focus on developing district leaders' instructional leadership through engaging in instructional rounds and evolved to work around systemic leadership for equity. Since its inception, about 25 superintendents have participated in the network, including nine who have been in the network for at least four years. We identified four superintendents as participants in this multiple case study. As demonstrated in Table 1, they were selected because their districts have varied demographics and because each superintendent has a unique set of individual characteristics that are likely to reveal different personal and occupational contexts, based on their race and gender for the former, and their tenure as a superintendent and their education for the latter.

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants and Districts

	Valerie	Mark	Jennifer	Chris
Race	White	White	Black	White
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Male
Tenure in current position	6 years	11 years	23 years	2 years
Prior superintendencies	0	1	0	1

	Suburban, high property wealth	Rural, low property wealth	n/a—students are assigned to this district by their "home" districts	Suburban, mid-high property wealth
Socioeconomics				
Percent of students receiving free- or reduced-price lunch	4%	43%	74%	6%
Enrollment	9500 students 10 schools	5200 students 11 schools	350 students 4 schools	11,700 students 6 schools
Superintendent-identified inequities	Mobility & Teacher expectations	Class & classified students	Teacher expectations	Tracked classes
Race				
Hispanic	5%	11%	13%	6%
Black	6%	30%	87%	4%
White	40%	56%	-	82%
Asian	49%	2%	-	7%

Data collection for the multiple case study included four interviews across seven months, and documents drawn from district website, such as strategic plans, demographics, and test score

trends, and related web searches, including local newspapers. We also looked at data collected related to the superintendents' participation in the superintendent network, which includes five years of meetings, which were transcribed, as well as annual interviews and documents related to network events, such as data presentations.

We analyzed data inductively, moving between analysis, questions, and transcripts in an iterative process (Charmaz, 2006). Throughout, we wrote memos based on emerging themes as well as on related literature and our own "reflective remarks" about the data, participant responses, our own feelings, and questions to pursue (Miles & Huberman, 1984). While we engaged in inductive coding, we are not proceeding from a neutral or objective place. Our work with the larger study, the literature review, and our positionalities shaped the way that we code the data. Thus, our first step was to code to the first two interview transcripts with *in vivo* codes; we used the participant's words to code meaningful units of data (Bodgan & Biklen, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). By doing so, we focused on his experiences and perspectives.

Coding in this manner generated a large list of codes, which we categorized and analyzed after the second interview. We identified patterns and asked questions of the data to create "pattern codes" (Miles & Huberman, 1984). These codes are based on *in vivo* codes that appeared across the interviews, as well as those that created possible contradictions and places where we identify gaps between the literature and data. Pattern codes enabled us to group *in vivo* codes into themes or clusters, not only making the data more manageable but also encouraging early analysis. After conducting the third interview, we coded all three interviews according to the four primary contexts from the conceptual framework: personal, occupational, organizational, and social, looking for ways that contexts overlapped or created tension between each other,

specifically in relation to strategies that participants are pursuing in their districts. In the final level of analysis, we identified points of similarity and points of contrast across the four cases.

Findings

To illustrate the overlapping nature of contexts, we begin by looking across the four cases for the strategies that superintendents are pursuing and the overlapping nature of contexts that come together to shape action. We then provide an in-depth look at one of the four cases, Mark, superintendent of a small rural district, and how three of the contexts overlap to reinforce his approach to equity despite organizational pushback.

Across the Cases: Overlapping Contexts and Strategies for Equity

Different contexts overlap in different ways for the four superintendents in this study, shaping their current strategies for addressing issues of equity in their districts. These different approaches to leading for equity, based on different personal experiences with in/equity, different experiences with professional organizations, and different district contexts. For some, the personal context is most salient, while for others, the professional learning or district culture set the stage for what the superintendent believes should (and could) be accomplished in schooling in general and within their current districts. Overlapping contexts may result in reframing, crystallizing, reinforcing, challenging, or negotiating what it means to lead for equity, in terms of the strategies that superintendents initially pursued, in terms of the way they approached implementing these strategies, and/or in terms of their personal beliefs around what equity is and what equitable school systems should look like. At the same time, it is important to note that these contexts are not static but constantly moving, with equity a potentially fluid concept as district demographics, federal policy, or personal experiences or realities change. Superintendents negotiate different contexts by tempering, rebranding, or adhering to their

strategies, which reflects their understanding of how the contexts are coming together in their superintendency. Further, how they negotiate contexts may also reflect their own commitment to creating equitable change.

As Table 2 demonstrates, each of the four superintendents has identified specific issues of equity within their districts. Their understandings of the organizational context in which they work provide the basis for the issues of equity that they identify in terms of concerns raised by various stakeholders and through different types of data analysis. At the same time, their understanding of the organizational context is influenced by multiple overlapping contexts. For example, the social context of the United States, with its emphasis on the "achievement gap" and the accompanying policy focus on subgroup performance may point superintendents' attention to specific issues of equity related to academic performance on standardized tests. Similarly, a superintendent's personal experience as a student in a lower academic track may draw his/her attention to the experiences of students in the district's lower tracks. Further, how issues of equity, such as race or ability, are talked about in professional organizations, as part of the occupational context, may support superintendents in a view of equity that highlights a specific concern, such as the performance of students identified as special needs.

Table 2: Superintendents' Current Strategies for Achieving Equity in their Districts

	Primary Equity Concerns	Primary Strategies
Chris	Students entering the high school district with varied academic backgrounds, and teachers' low expectations for those with lower skills	• De-leveling 9th grade English and social studies

Jennifer	Faculty and students' low expectations around academic abilities	• Eliminating exemptions through IEP meetings • Introducing PD around academic rigor and relevance
Mark	Academic performance of students in poverty, in part as result of teachers' low expectations	• Introducing [and rebranding] Ruby Payne's framework (schema, vocabulary, and relationships) • Changing teachers' beliefs about students in poverty
Valerie	Teachers' low expectations for certain groups of students, including African American and special needs	• Developing common structures (assessment, evaluation, curricula, etc.) across all schools and within all classrooms

Across the four superintendents, contexts come together in different ways to influence how they approach equity. For two of the superintendents, Jennifer and Chris, personal childhood experiences, of support and protection or a lack thereof are reflected in their approaches to equity in their districts. Jennifer's primary strategies center on reducing the number of exemptions for classified students and creating more rigorous, engaging, and relevant curricula for all of the students in her district, which primarily serves students with behavior disorders and/or with involvement in the judicial system. These strategies grow out of her childhood and adult experiences of support and mentorship from family, peers, and teachers, which lead her to see her work in education as a calling, similar to the notion of servant leadership often taken on by African American female superintendents (Alston, 2005). Whereas Jennifer aims to provide her students with the support similar to the support that she received, Chris's primary strategy of de-leveling is based on the support that he did not receive. Chris has eliminated the lower levels in freshman English and social studies courses across the six schools in his high school-only regional district as part of his mission to reduce the mechanisms that sort students, creating an unlevel playing field, especially as a result of students' diverse K-8 experiences, depending on which sending district that attended. This de-leveling strategy grows out of his experiences as a

high school student placed in a low-level math class and denied the opportunity to transfer to a more rigorous class. Both Jennifer and Chris have a strong belief in their strategies and aim to implement them as best as they can regardless of the potential or actual resistance in their districts.

While much of the literature on the superintendency considers the strong influence of the community and district in relation to a superintendent's work (Crowson, 1987; B. L. Jackson, 1996; Kowalski, 2005), only one superintendent in this study, Valerie, developed her strategies around equity in response to organizational realities, and she is the only one who felt a need to temper her message. Superintendent of a diverse, high-performing, affluent district, Valerie faced several challenges in her district, including differing values around education and schooling from different racial and ethnic parent groups, powerful constituents with interests in maintaining the status quo, and a history of high performance that masks patterns of low performance. Whereas Chris worked to change structures around course assignment, Valerie's primary strategy involved creating common structures across the district that she hoped would ensure all students have access to the same curriculum and assessment, which, if differentiated as intended, would enable teachers to see that all children can be successful, thus changing their beliefs. Valerie's focus on common structures is less likely to create the types of resistance that often accompanies de-leveling and de-tracking initiatives. She must constantly negotiate her district's investment in notions of global competitiveness and performance on standardized assessments with her own beliefs in multiple types of genius and all children's potential. Where the other three superintendents approach their equity initiatives from the outset as doing what is right regardless of people's reactions, Valerie's approach, in part as a result of the powerful forces in her district, involves tempering her public message in a more muted way.

The occupational context also shapes superintendents' approaches to equity in different ways. Mark draws on professional development and trainings around Ruby Payne's work on poverty as the foundation of his approach to equity in his rural, low property wealth district, and his involvement in other professional organizations primarily offers him collegial support and relationships. The other three superintendents, Valerie, Jennifer, and Chris search out and value professional organizations that support their work around equity and district improvement. In other words, they look for occupational contexts, including organizations, networks, and conferences that provided support to their work around issues of equity they are facing. Jennifer, for example, looked for professional readings, conferences, and conversations that offered demonstrations of successful academic performance for students similar to those in her district. Valerie has been involved in a number of professional learning opportunities that support her belief in all children's potential for genius, such as Reuven Feuerstein's work around instrumental enrichment and the idea of intelligence as modifiable as life-changing and Joe Renzulli's work around applying strategies for gifted education to all students. For these three superintendents, the occupational context was a place for reinforcement and support.

In terms of the social context, all of the superintendents at times take on ideas from dominant discourses in describing their work and at other times speak against dominant discourses. This may be evidence of the inherent tension in leading for equity in public school districts: at the same time that superintendents are expected to substantially alter educational outcomes by increasing equity, in some places the majority of district constituents may prefer the maintenance of the status quo. In fact, leading for equity may imply systemic reforms that contradict the more traditional view of superintendents and school systems as leading in order to maintain social stability (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). All of the superintendents declared the

belief that all children can learn and a need to develop structures and change beliefs so that all children do achieve at high levels. While this concept is in line with current rhetoric around school reform in the United States, such as federal law demanding that no child be left behind, it also works against dominant notions of intelligence and a school system developed around sorting students by ability, which are often tied to students' race and class (Y. Jackson, 2011). Mark demonstrates this tension most explicitly in advocating for Payne's framework with a stated belief that all children can learn, alongside his implicit acceptance of the deficit view of children in poverty within some of her work (Ng & Rury, 2006). Valerie also demonstrates this tension in negotiating her personal values and the powerful constituents in her district, as she draws on dominant discourses of global competiveness while at the same time critiquing a single-minded focus that privileges one type of success. While all four superintendents aim to create more equitable educational experiences for all students in their districts, they do so within the social context at large, and their understandings of and experience with dominant discourses, especially around poverty, race, intelligence, and ability, influence their approaches to these issues in their districts. These conflicts may reflect superintendents' ambivalence, and they may also reflect their efforts to manage external demands and expectations, working within these forces when they can and resisting them if they cannot (Hatch, 2009).

Exploring Mark's Case: A Framework for Understanding Ruby Payne

Mark's case illustrates the powerful ways that contexts can reinforce each other, so that strongly reinforcing contexts can lead a superintendent to disregard resistance, as well as how a crystallizing moment between the occupational and the personal can have a profound impact on strategy. The focus of Mark's work has been around poverty. While he is middle class and has been for almost his entire life, his family did experience a brief period of poverty as a child,

which he does not recall as overly negative. However, from the beginning of his career in education, as an English teacher in a high-poverty, urban, all-African American high school, he was aware of academic challenges faced by students living in poverty. As he developed relationships with his students, he discovered that "the dreams of those kids were no different than the dreams of other kids, but theirs were truly dreams. The kids that were living in [an affluent neighborhood], theirs could be considered plans." Mark identified poverty as the reason for his students' struggles in actualizing their dreams, and as he moved from this district to a high-poverty, rural, primarily White district and to Kirkwood, his current district, he continued to see poverty as the prime reason for students' low academic performance. This connection between poverty and education is one that is often raised in the media and in education circles, but Mark did not have any specific framework for understanding why this occurred, nor did he have any solutions. It was only when he encountered Ruby Payne's (2005) book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, that he developed a stronger conception of the links between poverty and low academic performance. While attending various professional conferences and talking with colleagues, Mark shared his frustrations for tackling the issue of poverty.

> I was groping for solutions [and] I bumped into it quite incidentally. Somebody had been doing some reading and we were talking at a superintendents meeting one day and they said, Yeah, you should read this, so I pulled out the Ruby Payne book and bingo, it just spoke to me right away in terms of, "Oh yeah, this is very identifiable."

His experiences with Payne's work resonated with his personal experiences of poverty as a child as well as with images of poverty prevalent in society at large. Despite significant pushback from two different districts that he led, with the reinforcement of the occupational, personal, and social contexts, his is able to disregard the organizational context in which he works to push for

programs and reforms based on Payne's work. In conversation with colleagues and in interviews, Mark draws on ideas from Payne's work, such as her concept of situational versus generational poverty and mental models as well as sharing examples from her work, such as how parents from different social classes talk to their children or how a poor family might respond when given a gift of a coat.

After being introduced to Payne's work by a superintendent colleague and reading *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Payne, 2005), Mark applied Payne's ideas to his personal experiences, differentiating between different types of poverty. In talking about children of poverty, Mark makes several distinctions, including country- versus city-poor, situational versus generational poor, and poor versus military base poor. In drawing on his own personal experiences as a child as well as Payne's language, Mark explains how he sees the difference between situational and generational poverty:

> … there's a difference that has to be drawn between situational poor and generational poor . I was situational poor. When I was kid…we were moving from house to house…I think we were outrunning landlords. But that was just a point in time. We stabilized and moved on…but we're talking about people that are second and third generation of living in poverty and knowing where the food lines are and such that you're dealing with them on a whole different plateau, and survival is far more important than doing geometry.

Here, Mark is coupling his family's experience of living in poverty with his understanding of Payne's work to explain why children whose families have lived in poverty for their whole life are not focused on academics. He uses her terms, situational and generational, a binary related to the number of generations a family as lived in poverty and draws on her conclusions that survival is the primary focus of people living in poverty (Payne, 2005).

Mark is able to frame his childhood experiences through Payne's concept of situational poverty. At the same time, Payne's depictions of people who live in generational poverty are replete with images of alcoholism, divorce, drug dealing, teenage girls getting pregnant, and unemployment (Ng & Rury, 2006), which resonate with mainstream images of the poor in media. For example, stereotypes of women on welfare are prevalent, including depictions of women as lazy and promiscuous (Bullock, Wyche, & Williams, 2001). Thus, "it is also possible that a good deal of the interest [Payne's] perspective draws from educators is rooted in their own middle-class conceptions about the poor and the causes of poverty" (Ng & Rury, 2006, p. 9). Mark notes that there is a "comfort level" in Payne's work in that it makes sense to him, especially the focus on class, not race. If White, middle class educators already have accepted dominant images of poverty in the media as true, they are more likely to find Payne's analysis to make sense, as her assumptions about the reasons for poor students' academic struggles "echoes commonplace assumptions" (Ng & Rury, 2006, p. 9) about the characteristics of people in poverty. Mark found that in Payne's work he was able to explain educational patterns that he had noticed almost 20 years earlier. Embedded in and across all contexts are stereotypes and problematic assumptions that, when overlapped or reinforced, can lead to inequities being overlooked and therefore perpetuated even as leaders aim to pursue strategies to increase equity.

Responding to Backlash: Reframing Ideas and Changing Beliefs

Mark's personal, social, and occupational contexts overlap, as illustrated in his continued advocacy of Payne's strategies for working with students in poverty in two different school districts with relatively similar racial and socioeconomic demographics. Payne (2008) identified several strategies tor educational leaders to work with their teachers on, including:

- *Building respectful relationships between students and teachers*

- *Teaching students to speak in formal register (Standard English)*

- *Teaching students the hidden rules of (middle class) school*

- *Translating the concrete into the abstract for students*

To his surprise, he encountered resistance in both districts. In his first district, Mark said that the backlash was because district personnel and community members "didn't like us using the word 'poverty.' Nobody wanted to be acknowledged as being needy, and that's a part I still haven't been able to reconcile myself." In reflecting on the negative response to Payne's work in his first district, Mark recognizes his inability to understand while reinforcing his approach:

> I don't comprehend it. It should speak to me. I should know why somebody doesn't want "poverty" to be used in that context, but I haven't been able to digest that and come to a reasonable conclusion … They just didn't like their town as being referred to as having a poverty district, even though they all called the projects "the projects."

Mark notes that the district has "projects"—low-income housing—as evidence of poverty and does not understand how his constituents did not see the reality of "projects" as evidence of poverty. In other words, for Mark, there was clearly poverty in this district, and it was unclear to him why community members would have problems with the label of poverty. Despite the negative reactions, Mark maintained his strong personal commitment to Payne's approach and he introduced her work to his next (current) district:

> When we talk about these things on a broader community level, in Kirkwood we introduced the Understanding Poverty model with Rudy Payne. There was such a backlash on the local level because we used the word "poverty" and "don't call me impoverished, even though I'm below the poverty line." People didn't want to hear it...they took great offense in thinking that poverty was an impedance to success. Many people think they are completely successful in

the world in which they reside, and on their hill, they are. The way we're looking at, they're

not. The way we're looking at it, they've been denied of some significant opportunities.

The organizational context, including district staff and community members, does not provide a

strong influence for how Mark is seeing or understanding socioeconomic issues. In part because

he sees poverty in a clearly defined way, as a set of binaries between situational and generational

and between country-poor and city-poor, and because he sees success as "getting out" of

Kirkwood, while many constituents' understandings of success including staying in the

community, Mark does not understand his constituents' perspectives. Mark's beliefs about

poverty, arising from his personal experiences, predispose him toward certain views of equity

and make it hard for him to understand other views. Instead, Payne's work, supported by his

personal experiences and images of the poor in the media, drive his approaches to addressing the

impact of poverty on his students' education.

Reframing Ideas

One way that Mark navigates between what makes sense to him personally,

occupationally, and socially and what he faces organizationally is to reframe Payne's ideas.

While constituents' perspectives on Payne's work has not changed how Mark understands

poverty, at the same time he has changed the way he enacts his conceptions of poverty. Mark's

primary strategies for addressing poverty in Kirkwood almost all align with Payne's framework.

Mark adopted an instructional model, *Blueprints for Student Success,* developed by two external

consultants, to "try and get 'poverty' out of the vocabulary." This model is heavily based on Payne's

work, includes an instructional focus on building mental models, developing vocabulary, building

relationships, and understanding students' worldviews. According to the Kirkwood School District's

2009 annual report, "this endeavor merges learning theory grounded in brain based research with

the nuances of socioeconomics, resulting in balanced approaches to student development" (p.

12). In a recent faculty survey, 62/155 teachers reported that constructing mental models was the most helpful strategy from *Blueprints*; 50/155 reported that building relationships was the most helpful, and 17/155 reported understanding students' worldviews as the most helpful strategy. While one teacher reported that *Blueprints* was too low-level for high school students, the majority who responded to the open-ended survey questions commented positively about the program, critiqued the lack of professional development about the program, or felt like the program's key elements were already part of their teaching pedagogy. The backlash against Payne's work was not reflected in these teachers' survey responses, perhaps evidence of a successful rebranding and the limited interest in the strategy related to understanding students' worldviews—especially if the district's approach to this is framed through Payne's concepts of poverty.

Changing Beliefs

In addition to reframing Payne's ideas in different language so that staff would be more willing to implement a set of instructional strategies, Mark also sees a need to work with staff around their belief systems related to poverty. He would prefer that teachers do not know students' socioeconomic statuses, and part of the reason that he supports having washing machines, showers, and uniforms available in the schools is so that teachers are not able to identify students living in poverty by certain markers. While Mark clearly states that "children of poverty learn differently than children of middle class," he sees this not as a fundamental difference in learning capabilities, but as a result of the way they are treated because of the identifiers of poverty, notably clothing and (lack of) technology. Thus he would prefer to implement strategies "so nobody knows they're kids from poverty." The reason for masking students' socioeconomic status is a result of his belief that teachers in his district hold low expectations for students from certain neighborhoods and class backgrounds.

Mark's view resonates with Anyon's (1980) findings from her study on the connection between social class and school tasks. Teachers at the working class school expected students to complete low-level tasks and demonstrate obedience. The learning differences that Mark notices may be the cumulative result of students facing these expectations across their schooling experiences—especially if low expectations are part of district-wide practice. In terms of teacher beliefs and poverty, Payne (2003) argues that "We can neither excuse [students in poverty] nor scold them for not knowing; we must teach them and provide support, insistence, and expectations" (p. 1), emphasizing the need for positive relationships between teachers and students for successful teaching and learning to occur. However, it is possible that Payne's framework, with a potential, implicit deficit approach to people in poverty, may not be the right basis for working to change teachers' expectations in a district like Kirkwood.

Generating Will for Change

Low expectations for certain student groups are a concern shared by all of the superintendents, demonstrating how dominant social discourse around race, class, and dis/ability are taken up in organizational contexts. In fact, all of the superintendents talked about teachers', administrators', and communities' deficit-based beliefs and low expectations for certain student groups as one of their prime areas of concern around educational equity. When people in their organizational contexts explicitly or implicitly advocate dominant discourses that work against equity, superintendents continue to search for ways to actually influence or change beliefs. In fact, open discussions of potential reforms or issues of equity can lead not only to (perceived) struggles between groups over access to resources, such as providing more funding to schools in certain neighborhoods, and also to ideological struggles over the meaning of culture and

schooling (Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen, 1998). Generating will around equity-minded reform that challenges dominant discourses reinforced by the organizational is a steep challenge.

While Mark and Valerie drawing on discourses from the social context around poverty and globalization to advance equity, respectively, Chris is working with his central office team to create a visual image of inequity as a means of creating a sense of urgency. The district's "opportunity index" (see Figure 2) is a graphic representation of different subgroups' likelihood of being in advanced courses or magnet programs.

Figure 2: Chris's Opportunity Index

While it may not be a surprise to people in his district that Asian students, for example, are over-represented or that classified students are under-represented in honors classes, Chris hopes that the visual will motivate people to act on this knowledge, similar to Jerry Weast's graphic use of red and green zones in his work on distributing resources in Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland (Childress, 2009). Creating a sense of urgency and generating will are key for any reforms or initiatives that challenge a district's status quo (Oakes et al., 1998).

Implications

Overlapping contexts work both to produce and reproduce superintendents' approaches to equity. The way that contexts overlap shape superintendents' views about what it means to lead for equity, and at the same time, contexts come together in ways that enable and constrain specific strategies for equity. It may be that superintendents choose to work in districts that either offer an organizational context that supports their understandings of equity or that offer opportunities for them to enact their understandings of equity. At the same time, while contexts, particularly social and organizational contexts, may appear to be immovable, all of the superintendents believe that change is possible, as they search for allies, reframe issues, and implement structures aligned with their visions.

Mark's case illustrates how the reinforcement of multiple contexts (occupational, personal, and social) may lead to a fixed view of equity that he carries from one district to the next. However, it is possible that how other superintendents think about issues of equity may be more fluid. For example, in Chris's previous district, he focused on addressing inequities related to special education because he viewed them as "low-hanging fruit"—relatively easy to name, garner support, and enact reforms. As he has gained experience as a superintendent and transitioned to the high school district, along with the strong support of his wife, he was more comfortable taking on a more controversial issue—de-leveling the entire 9th grade English and social studies program across all of the high schools. At the same time, one could imagine, fifteen years in the future with four college-going children, that instead of fighting for equity regardless of the potential risk of losing one's job, he may revert back to a more "incremental" approach to equity and children's access to rigorous curricula. Valerie recently accepted a new superintendency, also in an affluent, suburban district, and it will be interesting to see how she

understands issues of equity in her new district and whether she sees a need to temper her message in the same way.

Understanding the ways that contexts overlap in relation to superintendents' approaches to equity has implications for leadership preparation and policy. For both preparation and policy, it is clear that a one-sized fits all approach to developing leaders and creating systemic equity-minded reform in districts will not be successful, as superintendents approach equity in very different ways. For example, organizational, occupational, and social contexts may be more influential for leaders who do not have strong personal experiences with inequity and who have not had a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 1991) that might cause them to recognize and reconsider assumptions they may be making related to issues of race, class, and other types of oppressions that impact schooling. Programs that aim to prepare school leaders to engage in equity-minded reform need to explicitly address assumptions, including developing leaders' awareness around racial and other forms of identity that influence how they see the world (Tatum, 1992).

Even as superintendents develop an awareness of issues of equity, it is evident that the strategies that they adopt in the name of equity may not be seen by all as equitable. This is demonstrated in particular by Mark's advocacy of Payne's work, which has been critiqued by his own constituents as well as several scholars for its deficit and racialized depictions of poverty (Bohn, 2006; Ng & Rury, 2006). Similarly, Welner (2001) and Brantlinger (2003) found that parents identify their children as high-achieving rely on equity arguments as a way to advocate for gifted and honors classes for their children, excluding those whom they do not see as deserving this type of education, and thus perpetuating inequitable systems in the name of equity. As superintendents enter districts, it is critical for them to understand competing understandings

of what equity is and what reform should like. While much of the literature on preparing superintendents for a new superintendency emphasizes the need to understand community expectations and the nuances of the district context (Crowson, 1987; B. L. Jackson, 1996; Kowalski, 2005; Petersen, 2002), for superintendents to engage in equity-minded reform this understanding needs to expand to consider their personal experiences with equity as well as the dominant discourses of equity at large (Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011).

Federal and state policies also need to consider the overlapping nature of contexts in what it means to lead for equity. Policies such as *No Child Left Behind* (2011) are useful in drawing attention to inequities, particularly in suburban areas, related to low performance of subgroups masked within high-performing districts with the aim to narrow "achievement gaps" between groups (Fusarelli, 2004). In some instances, policies, including judicial mandates, that support superintendents in addressing specific issues of equity, are necessary to overcome potential resistance from stakeholders interested in maintaining the status quo (Welner, 2001; Welner & Oakes, 2005). While policies can force superintendents and school districts to address inequities, they can also reinforce inequities and have unintended consequences, such as blaming students and families for low performance, perpetuating racism, and lowering standards (Fusarelli, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Further, they do not require superintendents or communities to consider their underlying assumptions and experiences with issues of race, class, and other inequities (Sherman, 2008). While it is difficult to imagine a federal or state policy mandating engagement in cultural competency work or in reflecting on one's privilege, it is possible to imagine policy being developed through greater collaboration of voices, alongside mandates that attempt to ensure that those in power do not take advantage of collaborative processes to maintain their power. Addressing and changing dominant beliefs about race, class, intelligence, and/or ability is

an area of struggle for the superintendents in this study and for society at large. Again, conflicting views and tensions between and within these contexts mean that it should come as no surprise that superintendents' views and strategies may include conflict or tension. Thus a more realistic understanding of what it means to lead for equity is not so much a leader with a strong, unitary, or consistent approach to equity, but one who engages in thinking, both internally and externally, about what equity means for them, for their students, for their districts, and for society as a whole.

Overlapping contexts present a useful framework for thinking about equity-minded leadership. They work to shape superintendents' views, and they work as opportunities and constraints as superintendents try to play out their views. Further, they draw attention not only to district factors or to an individual leader's characteristics, but to ways that multiple contexts are interacting with each other. This impacts where superintendents choose to work and what strategies they choose to implement, presenting a complexity of pathways to equity.

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