

Understanding and improving urban secondary schools: the role of individual and collective agency

Introduction

Urban education has deteriorated badly over the last twenty years. Facilities are decaying, dropout rates have increased, achievement is down, and student employment and further education are at a lower level. (Louis and Miles, 1990, p. 3)

If predictions about the deterioration of US urban schools were bleak in the 1990s, research was optimistic. Practitioners and scholars “discovered” that some urban schools could be very effective working with less advantaged children (Edmonds, 1979, Hallinger and Murphy, 1986), and developers were busy turning the research into programs to support improvement in underperforming schools. In the 1990s, philanthropic foundations and the federal government invested heavily in comprehensive school reform models to radically change high schools, particularly those served less advantaged youth (Tirozzi and Uro, 1997; Wang *et al.*, 1997) and there was accumulating evidence that these models worked (Borman *et al.*, 2003). Weak results in secondary schools were attributed to issues of school organization and curriculum (Lee and Smith, 1995, Lee *et al.*, 1991; Marzano and Arredondo, 1986), which resulted in programs to support college and career readiness through more rigorous curriculum and teaching in urban secondary schools (Roderick *et al.*, 2009). Advocates for smaller and more personalized high schools and schools-within-schools provided impetus and funding to develop individualized student support (Raywid, 1998; Vander Ark, 2002), and some states augmented basic graduation standards with more authentic project-based requirements (Avery *et al.*, 2003). Effective leadership and modest resources were, it was assumed, essential – but the task seemed within reach (Corcoran and Goertz, 1995; Louis and Miles, 1990).

Researcher optimism was not well founded. Over the last decade, federal and state governments have provided pressure and resources to “close the gap” but by 2014, the disparity between the performance of African-American and white students increased (Heitin, 2014). Others pointed to increases in hyper-segregated schools, where students of color are increasingly concentrated in low-performing settings (Balfanz and Legters, 2004; Orfield and Frankenberg, 2014). The problems facing secondary schools seem intractable: academic performance of elementary students from less advantaged families has improved since the 1970s, but the US secondary school system has not made the same progress. As younger students’ performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress increased in all tested subjects, the results for students who enrolled in Grade 12 stagnated or declined[1]. Of course, this bleak picture does not include the adolescents who left school before graduating, most of whom are likely to underperform the average[2].

International data confirm that US education continues to be weak in upper secondary schools. The Trends in International Math and Science Study 2007 and 2015 data show that fourth grade US students had above average scores in mathematics and science, but that scores dropped significantly for older students[3]. Recent OECD PISA results confirm that the secondary school performance is below the OECD average (OECD, 2014). Research also suggests that the achievement gap between more and less advantaged students in the USA becomes wider the longer they are in school, although explanations for this finding are unclear (Alexander *et al.*, 2007). The known weaknesses for all US secondary schools understates the issues in the urban core and high poverty inner ring suburbs, where students come to school faced more obstacles to success.



However, the problems are broader than tested achievement, whether on state or international measures: Virtually every US study suggests that high schools fare poorly on other variables, ranging from the quality of instruction and student engagement (Marks, 2000), to teachers' sense of professional community (Leithwood and Louis, 2011; Louis *et al.*, 1996). Secondary schools, particularly those in urban areas, have less effective leadership, less teacher professional community and lower levels of organizational learning, all of which are associated with student learning (Leithwood and Louis, 2011; Louis and Lee, 2016).

Others would argue that the USA is not alone: secondary schools are often dull and uninspiring in other countries as well (Beach and Dovemark, 2011; Bryant and Carless, 2010; Šorgo *et al.*, 2011). OECD results indicate, for example, that students in New Zealand, Spain, Ireland, Finland and Australia (among others) are as bored as US students, and that skipping school (an indicator of disengagement) is higher in other countries than in the USA (OECD, 2002, 2015). This may be particularly true in low-income schools which, in many countries, are staffed with teachers who are less well prepared (Eccles and Roeser, 2011; OECD, 2018). Educational reform initiatives have focused on in the lower grades rather than on the more contentious arena of secondary education (Cothran and Ennis, 2000; Donaldson, 2005; Firestone and Rosenblum, 1988), while recent policy initiatives in European countries reinforce more selective schools or tracked structures that can increase inequitable outcomes (Aasen, 2003; Lundahl *et al.*, 2010; Morris and Perry, 2017).

Inattention to the culture of urban or minoritized secondary schools has been limited as other topical areas that have burgeoned in the last decade. For example, scholars increasingly investigated adult relationships in "typical" secondary schools and their impact on student experiences, including how distributed leadership or teacher empowerment creates effective support for student learning and development (Hulpia and Devos, 2010; Scribner and Bradley-Levine, 2010). Others have centered on teacher collaboration/professional learning communities (Horn and Little, 2010; Lomos *et al.*, 2011; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001), which contribute to high-quality instruction. However, the particular nature of urban settings is addressed less often.

Overview of the special issue

The above observations led to a small invitational conference on urban secondary schools, held in May 2017 at the University of Minnesota. The papers included in this special issue grew out of that meeting, which broadly addressed perspectives on a single question: What are the social contexts within and out of schools that affect achievement and humanization of urban secondary students? The authors' contributions reflect a common conviction that it is time to move schools (and school leadership) away from a singular focus on improving instruction in order to increase tested student achievement. While instruction and cognitive outcomes and skills are important, the participants concluded that we need a broader perspective that recognizes the role of all stakeholders in shaping the forces within and outside schools that affect student development and learning.

As is usual, the lively dynamics of an empirically based conference shifted our expectations from the vain hope that we would unearth a new model for effective urban schools to the more realistic focus on identifying underutilized levers for improvement. We have grouped the papers into those that focus primarily on the dynamics of change inside urban secondary schools, and another group that attend to some of the dynamics outside of a school that enhance or constrain improvement.

Community and difference inside schools

Introducing agency while maintaining a keen eye on equitable schooling represents a core dilemma that underpins much of the work in this special issue. National reforms in the past few decades have emphasized system change, often driven from a central government. Many of

these are well intentioned, holding the promise of latitude for school autonomy or site-based innovation in return for working within a state or national framework that specifies curriculum and expected cognitive outcomes. In other words, the policy intent in many countries was (at least initially) to increase agency for families and teachers, and promote innovation within schools (Bryk, 2018; Sahlberg, 2011). However, when coupled with increasingly high stakes accountability both for students and schools, these initiatives have, in many cases, increased pressures that overload and restrict school professionals, narrow the curriculum available to students, and limit community engagement (Bulkley and Fisler, 2003; Ravitch, 2016). This has been acutely problematic in high poverty urban settings.

Starting our examination of member agency with students grounds the volume in secondary education's primary purpose: to prepare adolescents for taking on adult roles and responsibilities. A particularly salient issue for secondary schools is how they can take advantage of the increased maturity of their students to engage them as genuine contributors to their own development. Dana Mitra takes this question seriously in "Student Voice in Secondary Schools: The Possibility for Deeper Change." While Mitra takes up youth development outcomes, she concentrates primarily on how student voice, and student-adult relationships, can influence that ways in which schooling and school reform happens. Mitra writes, "Through active engagement in change, students see that they can be knowledge creators, not just receivers." Thus, Mitra's powerful argument suggests that student voice can truly have lasting impact on student experiences and academic achievement.

Other papers in this special issue expand on the role of agency both directly and indirectly demonstrate how this comes into play in urban school reform. Peter Demerath, in "The emotional ecology of school improvement culture," examines this by shifting the emphasis away from what teachers do to how they talk about their emotions. He suggests that one way that teachers sustain their performance under uncertain circumstances is to compile their "sentiment vocabulary" or "sentiment discourses" and then map the local "emotional ecology" or "emotion culture." Drawing on a multi-year ethnographic study of an urban high school whose student population is composed primarily of first- or second-generation immigrant students, he argues that a set of interlocking feedback loops generated specific emotionally charged meanings that powered the improvement efforts. These loops explain how staff members and leaders generated and sustained empathy for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, optimism in their capabilities and motivation to help them learn and flourish.

"Talk it out: Race talk and organizational learning" by Decoteau J. Irby and Shannon Clark presents another finely grained examination of the power of teacher discourse. By interrogating racial conversations that occurred in the context of a school's examination of discipline policies and practices, they demonstrate how administrators' ability and/or willingness to tackle teacher's conversations can have a lasting impact on school improvement. Irby and Clark do not argue that "talk" can fix the manifest gaps in how teachers and students increase their ownership of equity work in schools. Instead, they point to the importance of increasingly personal and specific discussions of racial equity issues in high schools as a strategy for increasing school leaders' influence over teachers' ownership of their role in perpetuating inequality.

Irby and Clark's analysis of teacher talk aligns with Roozbeh Shirazi's contribution, "Socio-political belonging and the identity of transnational students." By looking closely at the micro-politics associated with a school-sponsored group for immigrant students from North Africa and the Middle East, he shows how Muslim students are positioned discursively in a large secondary school. Shirazi examines the fragility of inclusion, but demonstrates that students can act collectively to develop identity and a claim to social and physical space. However, Shirazi's article goes further to consider societal factors that bear on the education of minoritized students and examines the way that one school's regulation of Muslim students is

an extension a larger political discourse. In the end, student activism positions them to become fully engaged citizens of a country where many still regard them as outsiders.

Stefanie Marshall and Muhammad Khalifa extend the discussion of agency and community inside urban high schools by analyzing the role of mid-level leaders. “Humanizing school communities of practice: Culturally responsive leaders in the shaping curriculum and instruction” examines how teachers appointed as instructional coaches can foster culturally responsive teaching. The analysis makes an argument for active mid-level teacher leader agency from a perspective that challenges well-accepted leadership paradigms. Marshall and Khalifa’s case study challenges the notion that it is enough for school leaders to be instructional leaders or transformational leaders, suggesting that culturally responsive leadership practices must imbue traditional forms of school leadership at multiple levels. The authors suggest that refocusing on community epistemology and perceptions is one of a school leader’s most powerful tools to enhance student learning.

These papers contribute to a number of revelatory practices around urban secondary schools. One notable crosscutting theme is the implicit or explicit tension around authority. Each paper suggests that increasing agency within a school can create a more dynamic environment that is prepared to engage adolescents in their efforts to become effective, educated and engaged adults. What is expressed as student or community voice in some papers is captured as inclusion or leadership behaviors in others – but at essence is the relationship to the sharing of well-entrenched power that links language, voice and authority. A second theme is that of using insider and community-based knowledge to inform the practice of secondary schooling. This does not negate the role of “evidence based reform,” but supports a perspective that promotes agency for all members as an essential component of the next waves of reform (Sahlberg, 2011).

Politics and policy that bear on the capacity of secondary schools

Our conference also engaged with the effects of the “outside world” on urban secondary schools and the way in which they either increase or decrease agency of schools and communities. In particular, we note that most current research on improving low-performing schools (which are often although not always located in less affluent urban settings) focuses on policy instruments. Much of this work emphasizes the role of neo-liberal policy initiatives and the unanticipated consequence of current policies based on the transnational trends and policy borrowing (Auld and Morris, 2014; Gunter *et al.*, 2016; Louis and van Velzen, 2012; Moos, 2012). In addition, current writing points to the ways in which social change and recent policies affect urban secondary schools by reinforcing broader social inequities, whether in Spain, Sweden, Scotland or the USA (Calero, 2007; Jonsson and Rudolphi, 2010). The emphasis in our conference was, in contrast, on policies and politics in a narrower setting, centering on how schools and stakeholders manage relationships among various actors in the urban educational and community system (Chapman, 2013; Jackson *et al.*, 2012).

What happens within any individual school, no matter how far along in its efforts to maximize opportunities for all members, is invariably influenced by what happens in the immediate context outside the school and in other proximate schools. This is particularly true in countries where schools are organized and managed within districts, municipalities or formalized networks. There is some research that examines contagion (the tendency of colocated schools to resemble each other over time), spillover (unanticipated events in one school or district that affect others) and the effects of deliberately designed school networks (Böhlmark and Lindahl, 2015; Cordes, 2018; Katz and Earl, 2010; Walker *et al.*, 2011). This line of work highlights the need to understand a bounded local system. We argue that there is also a need for more attention to policies and politics within a local context, with a focus on implications for managing implicit and explicit power relationships among various actors in the urban educational system is essential.

In “Re-imagining Turnaround: Family and Community Leadership in School Improvement for Educational Justice,” Ann Ishimaru places parent and community agency at the center of equity-based reforms. Ishimaru examines how parent and community members of one school leveraged their own capital and knowledge to influence a school “turnaround” process, and in so doing, placed parents “not as individual consumers or beneficiaries, but as educational and community leaders working collectively to transform their schools.” This case study is pivotal in helping educational leaders and local policy makers understand the central role parents must play in general school reform efforts and in equity work. This all contributes to the process of decolonizing schools and making them more humanizing for students of color.

Yi-Hwa Liou and Alan Daly fill an important gap in research about how school reform happens across schools. In “Broken bridges: A social network perspective on urban school leadership,” they examine how informal social structures among principals and between principals and a district office can contribute to a positive “eco-system of relationships” that allows the transmission of positive influences among members. In contrast to the elementary and middle schools, however, high school and their leaders had diminished access to dense information exchange networks over time, becoming more isolated. The degree to which network isolation and the relative loss of positional influence within the district’s system may contribute to the weaker performance of secondary schools, including their capacity to serve the needs of less advantaged students, raises critical questions for leaders at all levels.

Finally, the two extended commentaries included in this special issue, provided by Moosung Lee (University of Canberra) and Kathryn Riley (UCL, Institute of Education, London), provide an important perspective on the need for more comparative research on innovation in urban secondary school settings. As we organized our conference, we initially aspired for wider participation from non-US scholars whose work focused on what high schools were doing or from US scholars who had collaborated with colleagues from other countries. We found that there has been relatively little comparative work. Thus, we begin with a plea that the largely ignored area of upper secondary school education reform be placed front-and-center in the coming years. Lee and Riley’s contributions both contain insights that go beyond, pointing to additional arenas for scholarly cooperation.

Both authors draw on their own research to focus on the importance of both the microcontext of an urban school in its community, a larger cultural context that is reflected in different professional cultures (Lee and Kim, 2016), assumptions about school ownership (Riley, 2003), and about the varied role that school leaders play in different settings (Lee, 2016). Their remarks remind us of the many layers of culture that we need to examine when designing research and improvement initiatives in urban schools, as well as the limitations of the transnational global educational reform movement. Each of these affect the policy instruments that are available to move reform forward.

New directions for research on secondary schools

Collectively the papers in this issue have significant implications for scholarship centered on the development of more effective and equitable secondary schools. Several foci cut across many of the papers – school reform, national contexts, discursive practices in school and racial justice to name a few. But what is perhaps most palpable about these collective articles is the shifting and protean context within, around and above urban secondary schools.

Second, each of the papers suggests implications for “what’s next? what’s important?” and we urge readers to pick up the authors’ implicit and explicit challenges. Perhaps the most obvious one is the need for more research that pays attention to secondary schools, and particularly to secondary schools in urban or “urban-like” contexts. Our conclusions about the larger theme uniting the papers – the role of agency in creating schools that stimulate In addition, we suggest that the papers overall suggest the need for new lenses, both epistemological and in the objects of inquiry.

Third, the papers assume – even in those contributions that use a critical theory framework – the need to examine how increasing agency becomes an institutional as well as an individual asset. How to distinguish between a broader perspective on agency and related ideas, like collective efficacy, may be essential to reducing theoretical cacophony in research on urban secondary school reform. An emergent theme that deserves increasing empirical attention is how expanding agency among members and stakeholders at all levels can foster social justice in ways that support both groups, institutions and individuals. Social justice, in this issue, is not viewed as a separate force for change but as integral to change initiatives. The papers point to the need for new research to explore the implications of these commonalities further.

Finally, the perspectives taken by the authors also raise questions that have not been well-examined in the context of urban secondary schools. In particular, the importance of language and its use as a lever for change is explicit or implicit in many of the papers that focus on the internal dynamics of diverse, high poverty schools. At the same time, we note that the role of leadership and structural arrangements also appear (often implicitly) in most of the papers, and the intersection between agency, belonging, language and structure provides a large research agenda on its own. Each of these is also clearly linked to implications for the design and implementation of initiatives to reform urban secondary schools that are based in the assumption that local conditions matter.

In sum, our aspirations for our conference on Improving the Urban High School included suggesting agendas that could guide inquiry. We believe that we succeeded, and hope that each reader will find an important investigation suggested by the issue.

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Notes

1. See www.nationsreportcard.gov
2. There are no precise figure for non-completion in the USA, but a recent report estimated it at over 6 percent, with rates as high as 21 percent for young people born outside the USA (<https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018117.pdf>).
3. See <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/>

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