The Rising Tide of Child Poverty

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Abstract

Poverty is not a new struggle for families and students. Urban school districts have been plagued with high poverty rates for years, but now poverty is growing at substantial rates in suburban schools. Chronic absenteeism is one recurring problem that high poverty schools, of every typology, face on a regular basis. The case study presented here highlights the work of one urban principal in combating chronic absenteeism in her school. The purpose of this paper is to explore attendance problems in a high-poverty school. While this case study depicts a principal in a high-poverty school in an urban area, the lessons learned from combating chronic absenteeism in this setting will be examined to determine what techniques can be transferred when working with disadvantaged students and their families in suburban schools.

Introduction

In 2013, the US reached a milestone when the percentage of disadvantaged students reached 51%, and, for the first time, children in poverty were considered the *new majority* (Southern Education Foundation, 2015, p. 1). Poverty often imposes barriers to access to quality learning opportunities and thereby limits children's potential to succeed academically (Martin & Beese, 2015). The American Psychological Association (2009) reported that "chronic stress associated with living in poverty has been shown to affect children's concentration and memory which impacts their ability to learn" (p. 1). The achievement gap between high poverty students and low poverty students is substantial (APA, 2009).

Children without the resources necessary to grow, develop, and learn at a young age begin school already behind their more affluent peers and struggle to reach comparable academic achievement (Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Medlock, 2020). When children in poverty enter kindergarten substantially trailing their more affluent peers, the gap often never closes (Engle & Black, 2008). Schools are now faced with meeting the learning needs of more and more disadvantaged students with the goal of helping them to fulfill their academic potential.

Historically, high rates of poverty have been associated with urban and rural school districts. However, there is a growing trend in the United States that shows a shift in the geographic location of families in poverty. Suburban poverty has grown more quickly than in any other area in the United States (Gill et al., 2016; Maher, 2018; Wilson, 2012). According to a 2011 report, suburban poverty grew by 53% from 2000 to 2010 (Wilson, 2012). This shift in demographics in suburban schools necessitates a change in how these schools educate their students.

Unfortunately, many teachers in these suburban areas have not shifted their methods as

the population has changed. Many teachers and administrators in suburban schools still teach and lead their students and families as if they all come from middle-class backgrounds (Wilson, 2012). In reality, these suburban schools trail their urban counterparts in familiarity with students in poverty and the struggles these families face (Gill et al., 2016). Chronic absenteeism is one recurring problem that high poverty schools face on a regular basis.

Attendance problems are common in schools, but many schools fail to systematically address the issues that lie at the heart of chronic absenteeism (Sprick et al., 2015; Sugrue et al., 2016). Researchers have found strong relationships between student absenteeism and dropping out of school (Allensworth & Easton, 2013; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Dropping out of school has been associated with the increased likelihood of facing unemployment, earning a lower income, and being incarcerated as an adult (Center on Education Policy & American Youth Policy Forum, 2001; Harlow, 2003; Robertson, 2018; Sum et al., 2009).

Oftentimes children and parents are blamed for students' non-attendance, but, in reality, the causes of absenteeism vary greatly and may include reasons related to chronic illness, academic failure (Balfanz et al., 2007; Henry, 2007), social issues, coping deficits (Finn, 1989; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Nittle, 2019), or conflict with staff or students (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Lim et al., 2019; Sprick et al., 2015). Parents may be ignorant of attendance laws (Meader, 2017), face transportation issues, or fail to provide sufficient parental supervision (Baker et al., 2001; Henry, 2007). Children may live in unstable or unsafe living conditions (Baker et al., 2001; Bethke & Sandfeur, 1998; Lim et al., 2019). More importantly, deepening poverty has adverse effects on school attendance and the academic performance of our children.

The authors of this article make the case that it is time for educators to work together to meet the needs of all students. Rather than suburban educators spending years learning about

how to work with students and families in poverty, why not utilize the expertise of colleagues that have worked with poor students and families for years in urban settings? The time is now to employ the phrase *work smarter, not harder* in order to facilitate the learning curve in suburban schools Wasted time only negatively impacts students and families. The case study presented here highlights the work of one urban principal in combating chronic absenteeism in her school. Following the case study, there are discussion topics and reflection questions for teachers and administrators to contemplate in their journey to meet the needs of poor students in suburban settings.

Oftentimes, poverty is seen as an urban or rural affliction. An affliction that is extreme in localized areas. However, in the past few years, America is seeing an emerging trend in its suburban districts: the rise of suburban poverty. Although urban districts see an overall higher number of students receiving Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL), the number of students who qualify for FRL in suburban schools is rising faster than in urban districts (Gill et al., 2016). According to The Institute on Research and Poverty (University of Wisconsin-Madison), between 2000 and 2015, the number of Americans who fell below the poverty line grew by 11.5 million people. Suburbia accounted for approximately 48% of that growth (Maher, 2018). While the percentage of people who fall below the poverty threshold remains higher in large cities, the rate of suburban poverty has grown, on average, by 50% since 1990 (Allard & Paisner, 2016). Interestingly, the rise in suburban poverty has not resulted in a decrease in the number of families in poverty in urban areas (Allard & Paisner, 2016). This shift in demographics warrants a hard look at how we support students and families in poverty in all geographic areas.

Many of the afflictions that plague urban students and families that face poverty are similar to those of students and families in poverty in the suburbs. Increased crime rates,

decreased physical health, and mental health struggles are all issues that face students and

families in suburban poverty, similar to their counterparts in urban areas (Maher, 2018).

However, some issues are exacerbated by the geographical location of families in poverty. For

example, families who live in the suburbs may need to travel farther to buy groceries. They may

need to commute further to find good-paying employment. And, to compound both of these

issues, public transportation may not be an option, necessitating reliable personal transportation

(Allard & Paisrner, 2016). Any of these issues can impact a student's ability or desire to attend

school on a regular basis.

Finally, the cultural landscape of suburbia is changing and, consequently, affecting the

demographics of the area. New immigration patterns have shown that many immigrant families

are settling in the suburban areas of large cities, rather than in the metropolitan areas, as was

once the norm (Wilson, 2012). A recent study showed that the rural and suburban school systems

are showing the highest rates of growth with English Language Learners (Gill et al., 2016).

While an increase in the number of ELL students is not in and of itself an issue, a large number

of these students come from families that face economic struggles. A recent study shows that

over 50% of English language learners come from families that have an income level that falls

below 185% of the federal poverty line (Gill et al., 2016). Parents with low levels of education,

as well as language barriers, often present additional challenges for ELL students and their

school achievement.

The purpose of this paper is to explore attendance problems in a high-poverty school.

While this case study depicts a principal in a high-poverty school in an urban area, the lessons

learned from combating chronic absenteeism in this setting will be examined to determine what

techniques can be transferred when working with disadvantaged students and their families in

suburban schools.

Theoretical Framework

As schools in the United States become increasingly diverse, districts once serving homogenous populations are now confronted with the challenge of teaching students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Teachers often hold a limited concept of poverty or fail to recognize how poverty impacts the academic achievement of their students. The theoretical framework for this paper as it relates to poverty is based on the works of Ruby Payne, Helen Ladd, Eric Jensen, and Paul Gorski. Additionally, because educators' preconceptions, beliefs, and stereotypes affect student learning; implicit bias and deficit theory are also considered.

Poverty

Payne's (2005) *Framework for Understanding Poverty* identified differences in the cultures and values of socioeconomic classes. Payne defines poverty as "the extent to which an individual does without resources" (Payne, 2005, p. 7). Poverty has less to do with money and more to do with the availability of resources for an individual. Payne identified eight resources which include financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships or role models, and the knowledge of the hidden rules among classes (Ocken, 2012; Payne, 2005). An individual's socioeconomic class can be defined by the stability of those resources. Schools serve as the primary safety net and major distributor of resources for children in poverty.

Present in the social classes are hidden rules or the "unspoken cues and habits of a group to let you know whether or you belong or not" (Payne, 2005, p. 36). The motivations that affect decision making in each of the social classes differ; for lower class the driver is survival and relationships, for the middle class the driver is career and achievement, and for the wealthy, it is

social and financial status. Schools operate on middle-class standards and customs. Students in poverty often learn rules on how to speak, behave, and acquire knowledge that is in conflict with what takes place in school (Payne, 2005). Knowledge of the *hidden rules* of poverty will help educators see beyond their own social class and aid in understanding and supporting disadvantaged children (Payne, 2005).

Recognizing the challenges children in poverty face can support strategies to overcome those hardships. Based on the research of Ladd (2012), students living in poverty face multiple challenges and most often come from one parent homes where the parents' educational levels are significantly less than families of higher socioeconomic status. Disadvantaged children often attend school with less background knowledge and fewer supports (Payne, 2005). Economically disadvantaged students often experience many issues that may impact student learning and achievement including poor health and inadequate nutrition, limited access to medical, vision, and dental care, possible drug abuse and neglect in the home, and fewer early educational and preschool opportunities. Often due to unstable home environments, children may also be hampered by mental health issues caused by domestic abuse, divorce, and depressed family members living in the home, problems that often require the assistance of social service agencies (Howley et al., 2015). Although some children do receive needed help, many others are left to suffer in silence. Ladd further argued economically disadvantaged students are often transient, moving in and out of schools as families struggle to acquire permanent housing, leading to disruption of the learning process and reduced academic achievement. Children in economically disadvantaged families may also experience greater loss of learning during school recesses compared to children from more affluent backgrounds (Ladd, 2012).

Jensen (2013) focused on the effects of poverty on brain development and learning. The risk factors connected to poverty include chronic stressors, health and safety concerns, cognitive development lags, and social and emotional issues (Jensen, 2009). All of these risk factors affect how the brain develops and negatively impact student learning. Jensen asks teachers to get to know each student individually and not to make assumptions but to ask questions and find out what the stressors or concerns are that the student is facing.

Many educational researchers are critical of Payne's work stating that her premises are misguided, built on stereotypes, and do not address systems that perpetuate poverty (Bromer et al., 2008; Gorski, 2008, 2016; van der Valk, 2016). Gorski is one such critic. Gorski (2008) stated that "there is no such thing as a generalizable mindset or culture of poverty" (p. 135). Differences in values, views, and culture do not exist between the poor, middle class, or wealthy. What does exist are systems that prevent equal access and opportunity for the disadvantaged to quality basic needs such as healthcare, education, and nourishment (Gorski, 2008). Gorski's (2008) research on poverty concluded that there are systems that prevent equal access and opportunity for the disadvantaged. To become truly informed educators must understand the ways students experience school and map out paths for success.

Deficit Theory and Implicit Bias

The deficit theory of education considers students who differ from the norm as deficient or lacking and approach education from the students' weaknesses rather than their strengths (Delpit, 2012). Deficit ideology is a mindset where society completely ignores or dismisses social conditions such as poverty (Gorski, 2016).

Gorski argued that Payne's work is a deficit-based theory that perpetuates the stereotypes of different social classes (Gorski, 2008, 2016). Gorski outlined four common myths surrounding

poverty that we are socially conditioned to accept. The myths include that poor people are lazy and unmotivated, do not value education, are linguistically flawed, and have a higher tendency to be alcoholics and substance abusers (Gorski, 2008). The misconception that low-income families do not value education may lead to educators' belief that poor students do not do as well in school as their peers, and it is the parents' fault. Contrary to this belief, Gorski's (2008) research demonstrated that poor people hold the same attitudes and values about education as other parents but may have less opportunity for school involvement. Deficit ideology justifies social conditions and inequity. In order to eliminate stereotypes associated with class and social systems that prohibit students from learning, educators must provide a more equitable learning environment where all students can learn (Gorski, 2008).

Stereotype threat and deficit-based mindset often leads teachers to lower their expectations, to "teach less, teach down, teach for remediation" (Delpit, 2012, p. 6). Teachers' assumptions about students' learning and ability to learn reside at an unconscious level. This unconscious level of thinking is implicit bias. Implicit bias takes place when people unconsciously process information or make judgments based on unconscious feelings or stereotypes (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). If teachers do not believe that all students can learn, regardless of socioeconomic status, then those teachers may unconsciously have lower expectations for the disadvantaged students they teach (Eller, 1989; Gorski, 2008, 2016; Saphier, 2017; Staats, 2013).

Implicit biases are more easily identified when dealing with widespread poverty, as in high poverty schools, they become more difficult to uncover when small pockets of disadvantaged students exist. Take the example of a teacher in a suburban district that assigned the task of sleeping in the car to her students to help them understand the struggles of

homelessness. Unfortunately, unbeknownst to her, one of the students in the class was homeless and had already spent the night in a car out of necessity (Wilson, 2012). Suburban teachers may have less familiarity with the challenges that these students face (Gill et al., 2016). This lack of familiarity, and, consequently, lack of knowledge, may perpetuate implicit bias to influence the actions and decisions of classroom teachers. Given the increasing student poverty, teachers possessing knowledge about the effects of poverty as well as their own implicit biases about students in poverty is crucial.

Review of Literature

President Lyndon Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, which was part of Johnson's declaration of the War on Poverty (Kilty, 2014). ESEA legislation was created to level the playing field by preventing external influences that affect the ability of students to achieve their education (Hewitt, 2011). Federal dollars, appropriated for funding, fall under the Title I programs and were a provision of ESEA legislation. Title 1 funding is distributed to states based on their percentage of economically disadvantaged students.

For more than 55 years, the government has budgeted billions of dollars in aid to support disadvantaged youth in educational programs. Despite federal government policy and aid to states to help reduce the gap between economically underprivileged students and students who are not, poverty continues to be the driving force of poor educational outcomes in America (Jacob & Ludwig, 2008; NAEP, 2018; Robinson, 2007). Inequality and poverty have a direct effect on student achievement.

Student Achievement

Even with federal policy and funding to states intended to close achievement gaps for disadvantaged children, no progress has been attained. The most recent results of the National

Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in reading and mathematics for students in fourth and eighth grades reveal significant achievement gaps between students who are economically disadvantaged and students that are not disadvantaged (NAEP, 2018). Children raised in poverty often start school at a deficit lacking the resources, opportunities, and support to develop school readiness skills which has a lasting effect on their educational attainment (Engle & Black, 2008). These are well-established understandings. What is starting to emerge is research on how economically disadvantaged suburban students fare differently in their achievement as compared to their socioeconomic peers in urban settings.

Research shows that the suburban poor face some different challenges. Based on geographical location, suburban families have less opportunity to expose their children to rich educational experiences that stimulate cognitive development (Miller et al., 2019). In addition, access to green spaces and nature has been shown to impact students' developing attention spans (Miller et al., 2019). While local parks and recreation areas are frequently built into neighborhoods in urban areas, these areas may be more inaccessible due to location or scarcity in suburban areas (Miller et al., 2019). Finally, access to addressing basic needs, such as adequate food and clothing, affordable housing, and healthcare services, may be limited in suburban locations (Gill et al., 2016; Wilson, 2012). The lack of social services and non-profit organizations that seek to support families in poverty in suburban settings contributes to struggles that economically disadvantaged families face in this geographic location (Allard & Paisner, 2016; Maher, 2018; Wilson, 2016). These family and community stressors impact students' academic development and, in turn, their achievement (Miller & Martin, 2015).

Poverty imposes barriers to learning that educators must overcome. These challenges include children who have housing and food insecurities or are homeless, family instability,

chronic stressors, social and emotional struggles, lack of attachment or positive relationships, and lack school readiness skills. Teachers often lack adequate knowledge about economically disadvantaged students that results in erroneous stereotyping and implicit biases (Gorski, 2012). Teachers who hold inaccurate beliefs of their students can unconsciously hold lower learning expectations and underestimate their students' abilities (Gorski, 2012).

In many urban, low-income schools, teachers are well versed in the characteristics of students in poverty. Professional development is typically provided, funding is available for programming, and teachers have first-hand knowledge of working with students and families in poverty. However, in suburban schools, teachers may not have the background knowledge or strategies to support students who are experiencing poverty (Gill et al., 2016). The changing landscape of suburbia has left many teachers with deficit skills to work with students and families in poverty. Many of these suburban teachers are teaching as if suburban students and families are unaffected by poverty and view the suburbs as collectively middle class (Wilson, 2012). It is this inability, or unwillingness, to see the reality of poverty in the suburbs that potentially creates additional barriers for suburban students in poverty.

Educating Students in Poverty with Cultural Competence

Poverty is not a new struggle for families and students. Urban school districts have been dealing with high rates of poverty for decades (Gill et al., 2016). Teachers and administrators continually work to employ new strategies and techniques to engage students and families in learning and increase student achievement. However, there is a growing crisis across America: increasing suburban poverty (Gill et al., 2016; Maher 2018; Wilson, 2012). Research shows that economically disadvantaged students are falling behind in their achievement (NAEP, 2018). The current reality is that these economically disadvantaged students are no longer overwhelmingly

associated with urban schools. Suburban schools must examine their current policies and practices to address the growing needs of students and families experiencing poverty (Gill et al, 2016; Maher, 2018; Wilson, 2012).

Teachers need to understand and value their students in order to maximize student achievement. Cultural competence provides the framework to begin developing inclusive classroom practices (Lindsey & Lindsey, 2014). Teachers and school leaders can work to increase their cultural competence as a means to create a more inclusive learning environment for students (Lindsey & Lindsey, 2014). Understanding and recognizing their own implicit biases will allow them to set high expectations for all students, especially those historically marginalized (Eller, 1989; Gorski, 2008; Saphier, 2017; Staats, 2013). In addition, increasing cultural competence will allow school personnel to build more trusting relationships with students and families in poverty (Goldenberg, 2014; Howard, 2013). As teachers move away from a deficit theory approach to instruction towards a more strengths-based approach to learning, a mindset shift will occur (Zhao, 2016. This mindset shift will provide the environment for all students to thrive.

Methodology

Chronic absenteeism is an ongoing issue for low-performing schools. In addition, chronic absenteeism can be a symptom of more serious underlying problems, including poverty (Wilson, 2012). While school officials may not be able to solve the problem of poverty for students and families, they can create an environment that helps to mitigate some of the outcomes associated with poverty. Suburban teachers who are facing this growing trend can learn strategies from their urban counterparts to address changing student needs. The authors put forth a case study that examines one principal's approach to solving the problem of chronic absenteeism in her school.

Case studies provide context specific situations for complex problems. Fisher (1978) defines a case as a "factual account of human experience, centered on a problem or issue faced by a person, a group of persons, or an organization" (p. 262). The qualitative approach is most effective when in-depth lived-experiences are shared. This case is based on the author's lived experiences which are shared with the intent of bringing understanding to the issue of child poverty and the effect of chronic absenteeism.

The following questions are provided to examine the practices of the urban administrator and analyze the implications for suburban personnel who are experiencing the same issues. All of the names and places have been changed to maintain confidentiality and specific details have been generalized so that identification of individuals are protected.

Questions

1. What is your staff's understanding of poverty? Examine the teachers' response to Ms. Parker's opening day statements. Do teachers invoke the *blame game* or *type of student* arguments when discussing student behaviors? Does this happen in your school?

2. How can you build a background understanding of deficit theory or implicit bias within your school? What do you think it takes for change to occur in relation to deficit thinking and implicit bias? What can be done on a personal level? The school level?

3. Like the uniform policy at Ella Baker Elementary, does your school or district have rules that put students at a disadvantage before they even step into the building?

4. Is there a divide in social classes with participation in extra-curricular activities in your school? What barriers or challenges might disadvantaged students and families face that limit participation? What can be done to overcome these barriers?

The Case

Ms. Parker is the principal at Ella Baker Elementary School. Ella Baker houses grades K-5 with a student body of 400 students and 100% free and reduced lunch. The student body consists of 52% females and 48% males and 15% special needs students. Racial demographics constitute 97% African American, 1% mixed race, 1% white, 0.5% Hispanic/Latina/o, and 0.5% Asian. The school demographics are representative of the community, which was hard hit when the local manufacturing plant closed down and most of the blue-collar workers lost their jobs.

Ella Baker Elementary School was designated as a *School of Notability*. The State Department of Education developed the Schools of Notability program to identify, recognize, and highlight schools that have made substantial gains in ensuring high achievement for all students. Schools of Notability are eligible if they serve 40% or more socio-economically disadvantaged students, earn a letter grade of A or B for two consecutive years, and reach 80% proficiency or higher for every group and subgroup in every subject area on the state assessments.

Ms. Parker had always aspired to be a principal. She knew she wanted to influence the lives of students more positively, and she wanted to accomplish this goal by serving as a principal of a school. As such, she saw teaching as a means to her end goal, and thus, she taught for three years primarily in an urban school in the mid-west.

Ms. Parker, herself an African American woman educated in a high-poverty urban school district, benefitted from the magnet school programs of the 1970s. Aimed at desegregating urban centers, magnet schools drew students from surrounding areas by offering high-quality and non-traditional programming (Betts et al., 2006; Gamoran, 1996; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999; Williams, 2010). Magnet schools are largely a remnant of an idealized past that promoted racial

justice and educational equity, they have since been replaced by market-based for-profit schools (Nicholas, 2011; Scott & Quinn, 2014; Sigal, 2012).

Ms. Parker believes strongly that all children have the right to equal access to a high-quality education. Because of her experiences in various high-poverty urban settings, she had witnessed inequities: families who felt disenfranchised and students who felt disconnected from school. Thus, she felt compelled and called to serve students who were at-risk. She continued to see her role in education in high-need urban settings, whereby she could influence policy and advocate for equity-based practices and resources that would ensure improved education, stellar student achievement, and positive learning outcomes for children.

The Prior Year

Despite all of her good intentions, Ms. Parker knew she had an attendance problem at Ella Baker Elementary School. In the previous academic year, 29% of the students were chronically absent (absent 10% or more in one academic year); and only 45% had regular attendance (absent 5% or less in one academic year). In a conversation with district administrators, prior to the start of the academic year, Ms. Parker stated:

> Occasionally, a teacher or attendance clerk would raise a red flag, but as a school, we didn't think we could effectively address what many saw as primarily a home-based problem without involving the parents in the process. But the aha moment came after our teachers roughly tabulated the number of students who were chronically absent in their classrooms. We were blown away by how much school our students were missing.

Missing 10% of the year or more for any reason—including unexcused absences, excused absences, and suspensions—places students at significant risk of academic failure, increased involvement in the juvenile justice system, or dropping out altogether (Allensworth & Easton,

2007; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Sprick et al., 2015; Sum et al., 2009). To reduce these adverse consequences, she knew the school must address attendance issues for all students who exhibited patterns of chronic absenteeism.

In 2015, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* required states to report chronic absenteeism rates to the state. The absenteeism rates are used as an indicator of success on the school report card. The two most common attendance metrics are *average daily attendance* (ADA) and *truancy*. Average daily attendance is the calculated average number of days of attendance for all students during the school year. Even with a relatively good ADA (95% or above), a school may have many individual students with poor attendance. When ADA is the only analyzed metric, chronically absent students can be overlooked. For example, in a school of 500 students, the ADA may be 95% if 475 students have good attendance but 25 students may have chronically absent behaviors. In order to get an accurate account of absenteeism in her school, Ms. Parker needed to analyze attendance data differently.

More recently, the state changed the way schools reported attendance data shifting from days absent to hours absent. This was a pivotal move because, previously, students could be continuously late to school, but not flagged with an attendance issue. Recording and reporting hours absent is a more precise measure of absenteeism. Absent hours are reported to the state as excused, excused medical, unexcused, or unexcused suspension.

The number of students with chronic absences compelled Ms. Parker to examine the reasons for these attendance issues. She often communicated a simple philosophy:

We cannot educate children who are not in attendance. Student attendance may be the most important factor influencing academic performance and academic success, and I

believe it promotes a high work ethic as well. We need to involve everyone in this

problem and find a solution.

As such, she sought to raise awareness, with her families, children, and staff, impressing

upon everyone that attendance was part of educational success. Thus, to maintain a higher

attendance rate, initially, she united the staff and spoke to everyone at a special in-service at the

start of the school year. At this meeting, Ms. Parker announced the school-wide goal of everyone

working together to increase student attendance.

Immediately after the meeting, Ms. Parker was approached by a group of teachers. They

wanted to voice their concerns about the students and families in their school. One teacher stated,

"I don't know how anything we do will make a difference. Parents just don't care about their

children's education." Another added, "I feel the same. I invite parents to come into the class for

special occasions and they just don't want to get involved." Finally, "If the parents don't care, I

really don't see how we can make a difference." Ms. Parker was shocked by the blame the

teachers had placed on parents. She knew these feelings were misdirected and she began to think

there were more than attendance issues at Ella Baker.

During the school year, Ms. Parker convened the staff at regularly scheduled staff

meetings where, among other agenda items, the staff would discuss the issue of attendance. Ms.

Parker told her staff:

Given the magnitude of the attendance problem at Ella Baker, we know that we have to

invest significant support and resources to make truly systemic changes. We also need to

make sure we talk to parents regularly about attendance, listen, and respond to what we

hear.

At an early October meeting, teachers argued that they were responsive to their students –

the problem was the *type of* students and families in the school. Ms. Moore, a fourth-grade

teacher, stated, "The parents are not interested in their children's education. At parent-teacher

conferences, I can count on one hand the parents from my classroom that showed up." Mrs.

Evans proclaimed, "I used to believe all students could learn and held high expectations for their

learning, however, our students struggle, and I have to assign low-level tasks. They just can't do

the work." Mr. Chrisman, the physical education teacher, added, "We know the types of families

our kids come from and we don't hold that against them—everyone is treated equally here at Ella

Baker—but, we have to admit, we do the best with what we are given." Ms. Parker was saddened

by the unhealthy beliefs and behaviors of her faculty. She knew that the decisions,

communications, relations, and exchanges made by teachers regarding their students were

influenced by their knowledge and predispositions.

Teachers must possess knowledge and an understanding of their beliefs about children in

poverty in order to be effective in the classroom. She recognized the lack of cultural competence.

In order for educators to provide optimal learning experiences for students in poverty,

stereotypes and biases must be dispelled. Creating and sustaining equitable learning

environments for poor students is imperative and the myth of a *culture of poverty* and stereotypes

surrounding poor students must be debunked. Ms. Parker established ongoing professional

development on culturally responsive practices (CRP) for the remainder of the school year.

Teachers were unaware of the instructional practices that could help connect the curriculum to

the students. She hoped that this would bring awareness of the challenges students and families

faced and help teachers become more responsive to their students' needs. She knew that

changing the way the staff felt about the students would be an ongoing process and she believed

in CRP and was dedicated to building a culturally responsive school culture and vowed to

support the faculty through this growth process.

Ms. Parker also felt it imperative that teachers were at the front lines of the attendance issues. Knowing pieces of information as to why students were not attending school might help teachers better relate to the students, thus building relationships and decreasing attendance issues.

In terms of tracking student absenteeism, the *Student Information System* maintained the data and alerted school personnel when a threshold was met. A student was considered excessively absent if they missed 38 hours in a month or 65 hours in one school year. These hours were a combination of excused and unexcused absences. The parents of these students were notified by letter and the data was reported to the state. A student was habitually truant if they accrued 42 unexcused hours in a month or 72 unexcused hours in a year. These students were placed on an *Absence Intervention Plan* developed by the district team and the student's attendance continued to be monitored.

Attendance data is usually handled at the building level by an administrative assistant and not by teachers. But Ms. Parker had a different approach, each month, teachers received updated data listing students in their classes by attendance category: regular, at-risk, and chronic absence. Teachers also received absent hour reports for the month and year. These reports provided teachers the opportunity to document the reasons behind unexcused absences. This information helped to identify the reasons why students struggled with chronic absenteeism. Teachers often reported their disbelief as to the reasons why students weren't in school; often documenting issues such as lack of transportation, having to stay home and watch a younger sibling while mom went to work, or because they didn't sleep well because of the fighting or noise in their buildings. Teachers were beginning to recognize the difficult obstacles their students had to

overcome just to come to school.

Additionally, a data team was configured to analyze the school attendance data monthly. This team consisted of Ms. Parker, the school counselor, social worker, and one teacher from each grade level. To determine which students were absent and tardy, Ms. Parker began systematically reviewing reports and instituted practices such as calling parents if children were habitually absent or tardy, arranging carpools if transportation was a factor, and talking with parents to determine underlying reasons that may prevent children from attending school.

The needs of her students might have been surprising to her teachers, but not to Ms. Parker. If Ms. Parker could pinpoint one critical need: it was not the lack of support in the home, which many teachers perceived the reason, but rather the critical needs of families. The community was rife with unemployment and underemployment; adult family members often had to take on multiple jobs in order to make ends meet which left little time to help children with homework or attend school conferences. But Ms. Parker understood that this *absence* of parental involvement, as many of her teachers perceived it, did not mean that the parents did not love their children, nor care about their education.

Realizing this, she was determined to know all of the resources in the area that were available and could support her families. She felt the issues facing the school, and attendance in particular, were more about helping families than assisting individual students.

Parents felt comfortable coming to Ms. Parker and asking her for help. In the spirit of building relationships, on several occasions, Ms. Parker attempted to communicate with the Matthews family, who had three students in the school who were chronically absent. Ms. Parker conferred with the parents, often explaining that truancy from school could be considered educational neglect. Ms. Parker explained that if the nonattendance continued, she would be

obligated to call Child Protective Services (CPS).

After several more phone calls asking the parents if there was anything that Ms. Parker could do to help with getting the children to school, the students continued to be chronically absent. Unfortunately, Ms. Parker was obligated to call CPS, at which time the parent met with her in tears stating, "I do not want my children taken away." Ms. Parker clarified, "That is not my goal, and this is not something I wanted to do, but I have a legal obligation as an administrator." Ms. Parker asked again, "Why aren't the children in school?" The parent replied softly, "My kids do not have uniforms for school." Ms. Parker picked up the phone and dialed the United Way resource for citizens and was able to secure several uniforms for each of the children. From that point on, the Matthews children were in school.

Ms. Parker considered the hardship the uniform policy placed on her families. The uniform policy required students to wear white polo shirts, khaki pants, and black, non-athletic shoes, with white socks. At first, Ms. Parker thought this was a positive policy, creating *uniformit*y among the students that would help to reduce bullying based upon status symbols like designer label clothing and shoes. And, as educational reformers would put it, uniforms would reduce gang affiliations through clothing; however, upon reflection, she wondered, "How many suburban public-school children are required to wear uniforms?" "Discipline and punish," she thought. Her position as an administrator was radicalizing her. She soon realized that uniform policies were simply Band-Aids on a larger problem that policymakers often refused to acknowledge; systemic poverty, and the marginalization of children of color and of poverty, or both. She subsequently revoked the uniform requirement of the school.

The Present

Over the summer, Ms. Parker reflected on the strides her school had made in student attendance. The staff had really worked hard to work with the information they had gleaned from the data, but something still troubled her. When Ms. Parker first began her tenure as principal, she still heard claims from her teachers about how parents just did not seem to care about the education of their children. Deep inside she knew that if the students and their parents knew they had a caring adult waiting for them at school, it would make a difference.

Ms. Parker felt that instituting home visits would help her teachers, most of whom were white, middle class, and from the suburbs, get to know the students and their families and to reduce the marginalization felt by the parents. Talking with parents and finding out the barriers they faced was the direction she wanted to go. There were several successful programs built on relationships between families and teachers that helped establish communication with parents such as the North Carolina program that paid elementary teachers to conduct home visits with parents where absences fell by 10% (Yaffe, 2018). She also had the *Attendance Playbook* by Jordan (2019) who lists a series of strategies to reduce absenteeism with home visits being one of the main strategies discussed.

However, she also understood that she would have to sell this idea to her parents. She did not want her parents to think that they were *on trial* or in the position of being judged by teachers, who may not understand the struggles of living in poverty. One way of doing this was to increase the personal contact she had with her students' families. Each morning she greeted parents by name as they dropped their children off at the front door and took a personal interest in what was happening in their lives. She really got to know the families in her school. Ms. Parker felt that building relationships was the key to student success within the school, and she was convinced that home visits were the key to building such relationships.

A town hall meeting was held prior to the start of the school year to discuss ways to increase the connection between home and school and the idea of home visits was put forth by Ms. Parker.

Ms. Parker sent letters to families asking them to attend a parent information session where school policies and procedures, such as school uniforms, and home visits would be explained. This session took place the first week of school. Ms. Price also asked parents enrolled to sign a parent pledge and to set up a time with the office for their home visit. At the parent information session, Ms. Parker explained, "In order for your child to be successful, we really need you to work with the teachers to educate them about your child's needs." While it could not be categorized as enthusiastic, most parents met the idea of home visits with acceptance, probably because of the trust and rapport that Ms. Parker had built with them.

It was after that meeting that some of the teachers came forward with their concerns. Mr. Waterman, a white fifth grade teacher in the district for 14 years, asked:

Are we required to be part of the home visits? It just seems like a waste of time. These parents don't care what we do at school! I already have so much work with standards and assessments that I don't have time for this!

Mrs. Landry, a White second-grade teacher in the district for 23 years, said, "I would rather not be put in the position of going into unsafe locations to visit families who do not want us there in the first place."

Home visits were conducted in late fall, just before Thanksgiving, for all families in the school. Some of the teachers were apprehensive about visiting the homes of their students based upon news reports of crime in the areas and the many housing projects. So, Ms. Parker

developed collaborative teams to carry out the visits consisting of the school counselor, paraprofessionals, teachers, and herself.

In some cases, parents opted to meet on neutral ground, such as a coffee shop, or a diner; Ms. Parker understood that some parents were uncomfortable allowing school personnel into their homes because of their previous negative experiences with school officials, or their own negative experiences as students in high-poverty urban schools. Thus, meeting outside the home was often more convenient and less intrusive.

In an effort to build relationships, and to discuss student academic progress and opportunities, the faculty developed a complimentary new initiative: My Achievement Plan (MAP). Each year, the MAP would serve as a starting point of discussion for the collaborative team of the educator, caregivers, and the student to provide what the student needed to excel. Parents and their children met with teachers to discuss the previous year's academic performance, identify areas for focus, and write academic goals. This was the opening conversation for home visits.

Further, the teams brought school supplies and books and would discuss with the children and families their aspirations and goals for their future beyond middle and high school. Some parents would express academic and employment needs. As such, the team would provide academic and employment guidance and resources. They knew that if the parents had more economic resources, they would be better available to assist their children. These visits helped to create an inclusive and welcoming school environment for the students and families from culturally diverse backgrounds (Johnson, 2014; Jordan, 2019; Nittle, 2019) and built strong relationships between home and school.

Ms. Parker promoted and inspired a responsive and collaborative community within her school. For example, she ensured that all of her teachers and staff, from paraprofessionals to bus drivers, continued their training in culturally responsive practices, which ultimately meant that no employee was permitted to stereotype children, parents, or community members, make disparaging comments, or blame parents and families for academic or behavioral challenges. Additionally, all educators and other staff members were part of conferences with parents regarding their children.

Together, they would discuss the concerns or challenges the student was experiencing, develop an action, academic, or behavioral plan, and follow up with subsequent meetings to ascertain if they were meeting the goals for each student. All conference members became active participants in finding solutions for students. The objective was to ensure that each child was positioned to be successful. Because of these practices and by building genuine relationships, Ms. Parker had a history of remaining in touch with former parents many years after their children graduated. Parents knew Ms. Parker had their children's best interest at heart.

Ms. Parker worked to meet her challenge and increased student attendance rates and obliterated chronic absenteeism in her school. Through home visits and conversations with parents, she was inspired to do more by building relationships with students, families, and the community and provided connections to much-needed support services. Ella Baker Elementary School was a place where students and families felt valued and respected and, therefore, students demonstrated an interest in school and became self-motivated to learn. The attendance problems were greatly reduced, and academic achievement increased.

But more importantly, it was the comments expressed by students and their families that moved Ms. Parker the most. Mrs. Martinez, a mother of a third-grade girl and a fifth-grade boy,

said this about the change in relationship between teachers and students, "I like the way teachers talk to my children now, and the way that they treat them. They give them a real sense of community and a sense of hope." What had manifested itself outwardly as chronic absenteeism had very little to do with lack of parental support and had more to do with the emotional distress families faced but could overcome with assistance.

Ms. Parker reflected on her time at Ella Baker Elementary School. During her tenure as principal she had instituted many changes; some worked and some did not, but the one constant was the time invested in building a sense of community in and around the school. It was through these relationships that people trusted her to make the best decisions for students, and that was why the focus on building relationships with families through home visits was met with such enthusiasm and acceptance from students, parents, and teachers. She felt this change was the greatest of her career, for it benefitted students the most.

Conclusion

The strategies and techniques employed in this case on chronic absenteeism in an urban setting can be used to support suburban districts by providing opportunities for reflection on current practices as well as alternatives for future efforts. Educators can begin to combat implicit bias and deficit thinking by seeing others as individuals and not groups. Pausing and reflecting or practicing deliberate mindfulness can serve to reduce our assumptions. Confronting assumptions with factual information about the conditions of the children you are working with and increasing your exposure to diverse settings can go a long way to increase your awareness of the implications of poverty on student success. The interaction teachers had with the families they served was one strategy that worked to reduce implicit bias and deficit thinking and enabled them to find the true causes of students' behaviors and performances while also confronting their

own belief systems. Reflection is only effective if there is are clear expectations and direction established.

While all classroom teachers can and should hold some responsibility for establishing an environment of cultural competence, it really does start with the leader. Cultural competence as described by Lindsey et al. (2019), is a "model for shifting the culture of a school or district; it is a model for individual transformation and organizational change" (p. 4). Principals can use Cultural Proficiency to address issues that result from marginalized groups in the school (Lindsey et al., 2019). The core values of an organization are displayed and carried out in their policies and practices. It is important that those policies and practices are examined for barriers imposed on disadvantaged families. Dress code and pay to play are often policies that are overlooked as factors that contribute to exclusive practices.

Culturally proficient leadership is transformative in numerous ways. A culturally proficient leader is one who is constantly examining their own beliefs and actions to ensure they are creating an environment that is welcoming and accepting of all students. "Culturally proficient people may not know all there is to know about others who are different from them, but they know how to take advantage of teachable moments, how to ask questions without offending" (Lindsey et al., 2019). Through this attention to the marginalized and the disadvantaged, they are able to make positive, system-wide changes. Change is in this case was most effective because it was put into motion by the principal with conviction and compassion; thereby minimizing the chance that the initiatives would be cut down by lack of awareness, lack of buy-in from others, or even lack of authority to what was intended. However, the most important lesson is to bring out our humanity and develop understanding and empathy between people.

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Appendix

Reflective Questions

1. Take one of the Implicit Bias Tests at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/ . Examine your results. Consider what it is like for disadvantaged children in your school? What are your beliefs and experiences that may affect your ability to teach with poverty in mind?

2. Because more money is not always a viable option, how can current funding be redirected to accomplish some of the goals that are necessary to combat the growing crisis of suburban poverty?

3. Identify and discuss the lessons learned in the case relating to chronic absenteeism and child poverty. How would these lessons translate to a suburban district? How might they need to be modified?

Additional Activities

1. What does your information system provide in the way of attendance data and information? Are there pre-coded reasons for absences? Are faculty and staff able to add information? Work with your actual attendance data from your school. Does it provide sufficient information? What challenges did you find? How would you address those challenges?

2. Develop a multi-tiered system of support that effectively allocates resources and personnel. Who will collect and analyze attendance data? What does robust and accurate attendance data look like? What data does your current data system provide? You might consider the percentage of students attending school regularly, the percentage of students with chronic absences, individual students who have regular attendance, are at risk of

chronic absenteeism, or are chronically absent, attendance rates by month and day of the week, attendance rates by grade level. Who will be involved in examining the data? What steps will you take to identify and address chronic absenteeism?

3. Educators need to consider the specific needs of the school and community when working to prevent low attendance. Tailored strategies typically require data collection through surveys, focus groups, discussions with students and families, etc. Use the data to identify and then address factors that contribute to large numbers of student absences. What common themes can be found in your data collection efforts, and how will you tailor strategies to meet the specific needs of your students?

4. Examine the income gap amongst families in your school district. What are the differences in student achievement between groups? What programs are in place to facilitate a closing of the gap?