Summer 2014

Tackling Urban Poverty in the Secondary Learning Environment

Nina Marie Sacco

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TACKLING URBAN POVERTY IN THE
SECONDARY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

A Dissertation
Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education

By
Nina Marie Sacco

August, 2014
ABSTRACT

TACKLING URBAN POVERTY IN THE SECONDARY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

By
Nina Marie Sacco

July 8, 2014

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Rick McCown

The problem of practice examined in this dissertation in practice is that many urban schools that serve low socioeconomic communities fail to engage and, therefore, empower students to succeed. The purpose of this dissertation is to identify how urban poverty presents in secondary learning environments (i.e. high schools), to report findings on how urban poverty presents in one urban high school, and to report on an emerging model for engaging stakeholders across the boundaries of school, academy, and community to improve student success for those who attend such schools. Urban students of low socioeconomic status who attend secondary schools with high concentrations of poverty do not succeed academically because, in part, the school system alone is unable to effectively empower, motivate or engage them. Outlined within is a detailed design for action that may be employed to produce systemic change in urban learning environments.
with high concentrations of poverty. This dissertation begins with historical context explaining the relationship between poverty and education. It introduces a connection between Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and learning environments with high concentrations of poverty. Analyses of current research studies support the connection between the stress of poverty and the affects on one’s person. The research specifically details the biological, physiological, neurological and psychological affects that the stress of poverty has on one’s person and how said affects present in the learning environment. A design for action that calls for school, local government and community to work collaboratively is presented. Suggestions for systemic improvement goals are outlined and the progress-monitoring tools by which such goals can be measured in the course of an improvement effort are shared. The overall goal is to find a beginning: a starting point for contextually situated improvement efforts aimed at ending a pernicious and damaging cycle that is fueled by urban poverty; a cycle that robs communities and, ultimately the parents and children in those communities, of an identity that subsumes a sense of value and a sense of efficacy so that they may move toward academic, social, and economic success.
DEDICATION

For Roman, Rocco and Lucia, the three loves of my life, may you each soar!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

“Follow your passion. It will lead you to your purpose”

~ Oprah Winfrey (Ophrah.com, n. d.)

To my parents, Christina Mariani and Daniel Sacco, for whom I have immense love and gratitude, you each in your own way paved the road for this very passionate and very personal journey. With immeasurable love and admiration for my great-grandmother, Joan Felicia Hindman, whose beautiful hands consoled my heart at least a thousand times and for my great-grandfather, John W. Hindman, where would I be without the two of you? With sincere love to my grandparents, Oreste Mariani, Ruth Mariani and Sara Sacco, and to all members of the Mariani and Sacco families, your influences have been profound and I am eternally grateful. To Brian Schrecengost, with much love and appreciation for the support, love and complete understanding shown to me. To my dear, life-long friends, especially April Weitzel, with whom I share so many similar experiences, and in acknowledgement of our Bloomfield community, the “Bloomfield” in me has always served me well. To the amazing students of Perry Traditional Academy, you have been my true teachers. You inspire me to be the best educator possible. To the staff of Perry Traditional Academy, you allowed me to grow as an educational leader by showing me what true pedagogy is. Thank you for always being dedicated, collaborative, honest and open to creative ideas. My fellow ProDEL cohort members, I am honored to have shared this journey with each of you. To my committee chair, Dr. Rick McCown, my committee members, Dr. Franny Jo Serenka, Dr. Jennifer Murphy and Mr. Phil DiLucente, Esquire and my editors, Misty Doy and Christine Travaglino, thank you for your support, your honesty and your belief in my work. To my
personal and professional mentors, I thank each of you for taking me under your wing and introducing me to the idea of what is possible.
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INTRODUCTION

“There must exist a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures.” ~ bell hooks (Brewing Change, n. d.)

All students have the ability and the desire to learn. As educators it is our responsibility to create environments where all students feel safe to experience the learning process. Not just physically safe, but emotionally safe to learn and grow academically. It is our responsibility to forge beyond stereotypes and social stigmas connected to race, socio-economic status, and/or gender to create cultures of learning that allow all students to achieve academically, socially and emotionally. It is the responsibility of educators to both expose and break barriers that perpetuate stereotypes preventing students from experiencing growth. It is a humanitarian call to consciousness. It is from these tenets that I have drawn my problem of practice: schools are unable to serve–effectively or efficiently–urban students who live in low socioeconomic conditions. Urban students of low socioeconomic status, who attend secondary schools with high concentrations of poverty, do not succeed academically because, in part, the school system is unable to effectively empower, motivate or engage them. At Urban High School, a pseudonym, the 2011-2012 state level data revealed that 80% of the overall student population was identified as low socioeconomic status (SES). The eleventh grade class participated in state mandated standardized testing. Of the grade level tested: 74% were low SES, within that subgroup 32% were proficient in reading and 20% were proficient in math.
This is a disturbing reality. It is a reality that is all too common in our nation’s schools. Efforts to address this problem have the potential to leverage considerable change within and across urban school systems. Understanding this problem and engaging stakeholders in efforts to address it, holds considerable promise for educational improvement. Increased discourse will force educational organizations to examine the root cause analysis and begin developing methodologies that address the real issues. Part of my leadership agenda is to engage all stakeholders in the conversation. After all, low SES is prevalent in many urban communities and the schools that serve the children and youth in those communities. The stereotypes and the realities of poverty may be formed outside of the schoolhouse, but they enter the schoolhouse door and discriminate against students who lack socioeconomic resources and are labeled by that lack. The problem that drives the leadership agenda that follows is academic, economic, political, social, and psychological: it is complex. As such, it requires the engagement of a diverse combination of stakeholders who bring different experiences and expertise. That diversity of perspectives—it will be argued—will contribute to a collaboration focused on (a) understanding the problem(s) and (b) creating avenues of change that may be tested in pursuit of improvement for our schools.

The roadmap that follows illustrates my proposed agenda for action. The reader will encounter these action steps in Chapter four. Chapters one through three will name the problem of practice, review the literature that supports the problem of practice and provide real life school and community narratives that inform these proposed actions.
Local Government Actions:

1. Identify the demographic of the community from which the school receives its students;
2. Invite the community members to engage in conversation that identifies the problems that poverty presents;
3. Invite the community to participate in conversation that identifies their needs from the public school;
4. Invite the community and school to participate in solutions-oriented conversation and allows the creation of a sustainable plan;
5. Identify financial resources that will be used in the community to support mental health, wellness, nutrition and physical safety, child care, and employment resources;
6. Identify financial resources and human capacity that will be used in the school to support mental health, wellness, nutrition, physical safety, academic success, after school programming, child care, and post-secondary plans;
7. Evaluate the role of standardized testing and teacher evaluations in schools overrepresented by poverty;
8. Ensure that all voices are truly heard and truly valued

School Actions:

1. Identify the demographic of students;
2. Create systems for staff to examine the academic, social and emotional data of all students on an individual basis;

3. Implement a teaming approach amongst staff;

4. Invite the community and the academy to participate in on-going solutions oriented dialogue that address the identified student/community needs;

5. Implement best practices within the school that are specific to students of poverty;

6. Create professional development opportunities that afford the teams the opportunity to work together on a common identified goal and that afford opportunities for the staff to address challenges;

7. Implement personalized student plans that are goal oriented and evaluated weekly through a mentoring process;

8. Ensure that all voices are truly heard and truly valued.

**Community Actions:**

1. The community must make every effort to work collaboratively and in tandem with all parties;

2. Ensure that their voices are truly heard and truly valued;

3. Engage in grass roots initiatives that promote the need for systemic change within the communities.

Embedded is the theoretical framework, illustrating the design for action. This design for action interrupts the current status quo of current educational practices. This design encompasses educating the whole child: academic, social and emotional foci, so that...
internal motivation might allow each student to grow. The illustration that follows defines all participants, defines their respective roles and introduces the philosophies that will ultimately lead to sustainable generative impacts.

Figure 1: Empower, Engage, Educate Graphic
Chapter 1 - The Problem of Practice

“Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor.” ~ James A. Baldwin (James Baldwin, n. d.).

This problem of practice focuses on the idea that too many schools serving low socioeconomic communities fail to empower students for success. Urban students of low socioeconomic status who attend secondary schools with high concentrations of poverty do not succeed academically because, in part, the school system alone is unable to effectively empower, motivate or engage them.

A basic human desire is to feel good about oneself and to have a positive impact on society. It has been my experience that individuals want to live a meaningful life and make a positive contribution. Sometimes the roadblock between the individual and the attainment of these factors is the lifestyle or the circumstances into which one is born. Many times those circumstances overpower the dream(s) of becoming successful because society creates social dichotomies and stereotypes based upon economic status. “Every 32 seconds a baby is born into poverty.” (childrensdefense.org, 2010, para. 1) In fact, in 2008 over 14.1 million children in the US lived in poverty. One in 12 children was found to be living in extreme poverty at half of the federal poverty level. Poverty breeds social stigmas that are drenched in negative, stereotypical, cyclical dynamics. Forging past the low-socioeconomic label is a feat in and of itself. Poverty has the power to beat a person down leaving little room for motivation, engagement or recognition of a path that will lead to the fulfillment of a dream and of a successful way of life. Drowning out one’s dream(s) by keeping individuals in a caste way of life means that empowerment and motivation never have the opportunity to push the individual forward. Negative self-
images are cast and educational opportunities become goals that are unattainable and only for those who are engaged in their learning and engaged ultimately in their lives.

Yet, there are those individuals who overcome their poverty and become the greatest contributors to our global society. Examples are numerous and include notable personalities such as Oprah Winfrey, David Geffen and Stephen King. These individuals seem to have a special talent or gift. They are able to maneuver and navigate through life in ways that many could only imagine. They learn to draw upon their poverty-ridden experiences and generate strength from them. It’s a strength that opens doors and elevates minds. It is a strength that creates solutions while admonishing all of the excuses that stand in the way. It is a strength that reflects the type of empowerment and engagement that keeps one focused and driven.

It could be argued, however, that Winfrey, Geffen and King are not representative of the “majority”- that instead they represent the extreme. Consider that many do attempt to move from low SES via educational avenues yet become mired in their personal comfort zone, that to which they have become accustomed. These individuals become unable to overcome their environmental living space. They are the people to whom the educational system has said, quite simply, “good luck.” The system has failed to provide these students with the tools necessary to navigate their way out of their current level of decreased engagement and investment. These students lack the motivation and/or the know how to move past their circumstances, much as it appears that the educational community (and in fact society as a whole) has, to date, lacked the necessary motivation to address this issue. It is, however, this very issue that perpetuates the cyclical nature of those caught up in the low SES whirlpool that continues to spin generations of poverty.
So where does motivational strength originate and why do we see some able to harness this strength while others languish? One might assume that it originates in the home; or, perhaps it is born out of the influence of a mentor. It could be, in part, personal will and determination. One would hope, however, that our educational system would have a role in increasing motivation. After all, is it not true that the American educational system was developed so that all children would have access to safe learning environments and quality curriculum that affords the opportunity for all to achieve at high levels? Does our federal government, in educational mandates, not include words and phrases that pontificate equity for our children? Does our federal government not closely monitor our sub group (i.e. race, socioeconomic, and special education) achievement data to ensure that all students are performing at high levels? Since May, 2001, through the *No Child Left Behind Act*, our government claims to concern itself with the achievement of all; however, it is rare that programs are maintained and/or sustained to allow all to move forward or overcome the social roadblocks both in and out of the educational arena. *NCLB* has not lead to transformation among our nation’s low-socioeconomic status population. Since 1965, Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was the most significant government initiated program created to produce equity in education among economic groups. The program’s foci sought to expand and improve educational opportunities in high poverty schools.

In January 2002, with the reauthorization of Title 1 as the *No Child Left Behind Act*, the Comprehensive School Reform Program (CSRP) and Title 1 came together under the same legislation. As Title 1, Part F, CSRP has become a significant component of the growing federal movement to support scientifically
based efforts to reform low-performing high-poverty schools across the nation” (Borman, Hewes, Overman, Brown, 2002, p. 2). Upon the marriage of these two programs, “the expectation is that local educators will reinvent the process of educational reform school by school. The top-down direction is not in the form of distant legislative mandates, but is in theory tangible, accessible support for school change rooted in research and literally packaged and delivered to each school. (Borman et al., 2002, p. 39)

Although the federal government continues to create acts and programs, they seem to continue to sidestep the main components critical to student achievement: student empowerment and motivation. Current programs, including those under the umbrella of NCLB and Race to the Top, are not successfully meeting social needs within the low socioeconomic demographic. Specifically, these programs lack vision in addressing the connection between personal drive (motivation) and academia. Not equitably meeting the needs for all becomes a matter of social justice within our society.

Let’s consider the example of Title 1 Supplemental Educational Services, better known as SES tutoring for low-income students. This very specific program, set forth by the federal government provides the following description on the US Department of Education (2012):

Low-income families can enroll their child in supplemental educational services if their child attends a Title I school that has been designated by the State to be in need of improvement for more than one year. The term "supplemental educational services" refers to free extra academic help, such as tutoring or remedial help, that is provided to students in subjects such as reading, language arts, and math. This
extra help can be provided before or after school, on weekends, or in the summer. Each State educational agency (SEA) is required to identify organizations that qualify to provide these services. Districts must make available to parents a list of State-approved supplemental educational services providers in the area and must let parents choose the provider that will best meet the educational needs of the child.

Providers of supplemental educational services may include nonprofit entities, for-profit entities, local educational agencies, public schools, including public charter schools, or private schools. Entities that would like to be included on the list of eligible providers must contact the SEA and meet the criteria established by the SEA to be approved to be an eligible provider. (para. 1)

The definition appears to be straightforward and focused on addressing the academic needs of the students; however, the quality of tutoring and the commitment of the SES providers is questionable, as is the design of the described programming. At the high school level, the timing of the services is not congruent with the availability of most students who are in need. Many students who live in poverty must work in order to contribute to the household. These students begin working as soon as the school day is complete. The issue of enrollment into these programs is exacerbated by the need for parental input. Parental involvement in most poverty ridden urban high schools is not reflective of the number of students in attendance. In fact, a very small percentage of parents become involved. At Urban High School the number of parents involved is less than 5%. With such a small percentage of participation, it is almost impossible to ensure that students in need of academic assistance will have parents making the decision to
place them in the SES program. Again, at Urban High School, the number of students enrolled was less than 5% of the students in need.

Remember, according to the US Department of Education, these providers are from outside the schools; therefore, so are the instructors. The instructors do not know the students. They have not established relationships with them, nor are they familiar with the issues, outside of the academic realm, that the students face. This is a critically important fact. The educators in the school have already established relationships with students. They are familiar with all needs; academic, social and emotional needs and they are committed to the school and the students. Most notable though is that monies are made available to these providers by the federal government. It is ultimately a way for independent companies to make money. The federal government would better spend its monies by focusing on supporting classroom teachers and student needs than funding SES programming.

On October 31, 2013 the US Department of Education issued a Draft Management Information Report that addressed the idea of, “fraud and corruption involving Title 1-Funded Supplemental Educational Services tutoring programs over the past five years.” The memo preceding the report states:

**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**
**OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL Investigation Services**
**FINAL MANAGEMENT INFORMATION REPORT**

DATE: October 31, 2013

TO: Deborah Delisle
Assistant Secretary
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education

FROM: William D. Hamel /s/
Assistant Inspector General for Investigations
Office of Inspector General

SUBJECT: Final Management Information Report
Fraud in Title I-Funded Tutoring Programs
Control No. ED-OIG/ X42N0001

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) has conducted numerous investigations of fraud and corruption involving Title I-funded Supplemental Educational Services tutoring programs over the past five years. The OIG’s inventory of these investigations has risen significantly.

On September 26, 2013, OIG issued a Draft Management Information Report (MIR) to alert the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education about our findings from these investigations, and to make recommendations which, if implemented, would mitigate future additional risks of fraud and corruption in these and other similar programs involving the provision of services by third parties who bill on a per-child basis.

On October 30, 2013, the U.S. Department of Education’s (Department) Office of Elementary and Secondary Education responded to the Draft MIR and concurred with our concern about fraud in this program and will convene a working group to consider potential regulations and other measures to strengthen protections against the types of fraud described in this report. Given the findings we reported, the Department also plans to take immediate steps to mitigate the fraud as described in their response, which is attached.

Below is the Final MIR which includes the findings from these investigations and the recommendations. We are including the Department’s response as an attachment to this report.

We conducted our work in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency’s Quality Standards for Investigations and the Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation.

This Management Information Report issued by the Office of Inspector General will be made available to members of the press and general public to the extent information contained in the memorandum is not subject to exemptions in the Freedom of Information Act (5 U.S.C. § 552) or protection under the Privacy Act (5 U.S.C. § 522a).

The Department of Education’s mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.

Articulated in the report is the admission that, “audit work over the last decade has identified a lack of oversight and monitoring of SES providers by State Educational Agencies that leaves programs vulnerable to waste, fraud, and abuse.” The report goes on to identify weaknesses with evaluations and data back to 2003. Interesting that the US Department of Education has this mission on the bottom of their letterhead:
The Department of Education's mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.

The report dates problems back to 2003, three presidential terms earlier than today. Surely those issues were identifiable closer to the 2003 mark. Waiting ten years to complete an audit when the mission is inclusive of “ensuring equal rights” is criminal, and it speaks to the cyclical nature of top down bureaucracy that plagues and threatens public education for poverty stricken students.

This is one small example, of many, which illustrates how the federal government fails to address poverty within the public education system. The reference guide below defines programs and their foci. The chart below identifies the last ten US Presidential Administrations (spanning 53 years) and their continued attempts to address poverty within the realm of public education. It provides a historical context of the how each administration maintained foci connecting poverty and education.

**Table 1. US Presidential Administration: Connecting Poverty and Education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>President</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Program/Title</th>
<th>Sec. of Ed.</th>
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<td>Kennedy</td>
<td>January 20, 1961 - November 22, 1963</td>
<td>Great Cities Program for School Improvement (later known as the Council of Great City Schools)</td>
<td>Abraham Goldberg, 1961</td>
<td>Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement</td>
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<td>Nixon</td>
<td>January 20, 1969 – August 9, 1974</td>
<td>Challenging ESEA and Title 1, National Institute of Education - Need for</td>
<td>Robert Hutchinson Finch &amp; Elliot Lee Richardson, 1969-1969</td>
<td>Socioeconomic Status as related to Academic Achievement</td>
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After fifty-three successive years of presidential administrations focusing on education as related to poverty one must inquire: Where is America now? No closer to a successful system than we were fifty-three years earlier. In fact, our urban public school systems are currently under attack as emphasis is placed solely on the role of the school system without recognition of how social arenas (i.e. the federal government, communities, universities, etc.) affect it. An interesting dichotomy given that each national leader for the past 53 consecutive years has made the connection between

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<th>President</th>
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<th>End Date</th>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Education Topic</th>
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<td>Ford</td>
<td>August 9, 1974- January 20, 1977</td>
<td>Special Education Laws</td>
<td>Casper Willard Weinberger, 1974</td>
<td>Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clinton</td>
<td>January 20, 1993 – January 20, 2001</td>
<td>Improving America’s Schools 1994</td>
<td>Richard W. Riley</td>
<td>Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama</td>
<td>January 20, 2009-Present</td>
<td>Race to the Top</td>
<td>Arne Duncan</td>
<td>Socioeconomic Status as related to Academic Achievement</td>
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socioeconomic status and academic achievement. Clearly this approach is not working. Our nation as a whole has not made strides when we examine urban poverty and education. Each presidential administration attempts to address this issue; however, none of these administrations has examined the biological or physiological affects that poverty presents. Nor have these administrations made connections between said affects and student performance. Isolating education is not the answer. It is a much more comprehensive problem that is plaguing our society as a whole. A holistic approach is necessitated, one that nurtures the needs of the whole child: academic, social and emotional.

In summary, this chapter suggests that although the federal government has recognized a connection between poverty and education. However, the policies that were generated and implemented to disrupt that connection have not proven effective. The brief historical examination of federal policy initiates one to go back over half a century, at the very least, to identify that failure. As a consequence, and in the words of James Baldwin that opened this chapter, those in poverty continue to find themselves living in the expensive space that prevents them from finding success.

The next chapter develops this theme and seeks to situate the problem of practice as a matter of social justice.
Chapter 2 - A Matter of Social Justice

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of
destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

~ Martin Luther King, Jr. (King, Jr., n. d.)

According to the American Psychological Association (2011), Socioeconomic status (SES) is often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation. It is commonly conceptualized as a social standing or class of an individual group. When viewed through a social class lens, privilege, power and control are emphasized. Furthermore, an examination of SES as a gradient or continuous variable reveals inequities in access to and distribution of resources. SES is relevant to all realms of behavioral and social science, including research, practice, education, and advocacy. (para. 1)

In essence, the socioeconomic status has an immediate effect on the perception of the people grouped within each demographic. It is safe to say that individuals grouped in a privileged status have access to superior resources while the members grouped in a subordinate status have little or no access to any resources. We must, as an educational community, begin to deviate from what has become common practice, sorting students into high and low quality programs, based on low SES. This practice may not be a conscience decision; however, the end result is that many students of poverty are being placed in classrooms/programs that are not challenging. Low funding exists and opportunities to exit these classrooms/programs are minimal. It is cyclical, and it reinforces the social stigma that poverty equals low academic achievement and little personal drive to succeed. In reality, little to no access to the high quality perpetuates this
cycle; rigorous programs that challenge students’ minds and create learning environments that thrive off of growth and enhance opportunities for student motivation. The idea of access is a matter of social justice. Without access one cannot grow to the educational level that is necessary in order to gain achievement. An instance of resources is access to literacy materials. Parents from low SES areas do not have the means to purchase these materials (books owned, computers, tutors, etc.) for their children; therefore, reading in the home is not prevalent. It is clear; however, when adult supports are enacted and participation occurs, low SES children’s literacy rates are higher. (American Psychological Association, 2011).

Peter Cookson describes it best in Sacred Trust: A Children’s Educational Bill Of Rights (2011). His Bill of Rights identifies the principles by which we treat one another in public life. Cookson (2011) believes that these rights act as the framework by which the social and political structure is rooted in a fundamental understanding of nature and civil society. Cookson’s ten identified Bill of Rights illustrate that all students have the right to high quality education irrespective of race, gender, religious beliefs or socioeconomic status. He calls upon federal, state and local government agencies to support the educational arena so that all students have access to said high quality education. Schools are microcosms of society. The issues that exist in terms of socioeconomic status outside of the school building also exist inside. Although this existence may not come from the school culture itself, it does infiltrate the school system. Schools are public systems. The same values that we recognize in public systems are recognized in our public school. In The Flat World And Education (2010), Linda Darling-Hammond notes that children of low SES status are often placed in classrooms
where the academic and behavioral expectations are low, discipline is inconsistent and the focus remains being quiet and following directions. Comparing low SES students to other students lead Darling-Hammond (2010) to the observation that students identified as higher SES are placed into gifted classrooms, had the smaller class sizes, participated in field trips and had few disciplinary actions. Students identified as low SES were not provided enrichment to the curriculum, were placed larger class sizes, did not participate in field trips, and were at the center of much disciplinary action. This speaks to the notion that equity does not exist between low SES classrooms and other classrooms. Additionally, stereotypical stigmas related to low SES that plague society also plague the classroom, leaving little room for a break in the cycle.

Why is it not a priority to adjust class size for our most vulnerable population? As an educator, I am unable to wrap my mind around the rationale that portends class size doesn’t matter. Then why should it matter for gifted students whose cognitive levels far surpass the average child? Children of poverty arrive to school in varying conditions. If one references any of the narratives described here then one could deduce that these high school children arrive without the essential personal tools necessary to begin a productive school day. If one is familiar with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs then one knows that a child living in poverty in a violent, drug-ridden community is likely to arrive without having several of the five identified needs met.

In 1943 Abraham Maslow introduced what he coined as the hierarchy of needs. The expectation is that caregivers (parents, guardians, etc.) provide the basic biological needs for children (food, water, shelter, etc.). Built upon that, the environment (home, community, school) should be secure and safe; ultimately, a stress free environment. If
these two foundational needs are met then learning is able to occur. If these basic needs are not met then students enter into survival mode. Entering into survival mode does not allow the next three phases of Maslow’s Hierarch of Needs to properly develop or thrive. Eric Jensen further illustrates this thought in *Teaching with Poverty in Mind* (1998). He argues that children who are persistently exposed to threats in their environments, experience changes in their brains’ receptors and adapt a survival-oriented behavior. This is detrimental to the academic, social and emotional aspect of the school’s learning environment. Not only must the environments be free of physical threats, they must be void of emotional threats too. An environment that is physically and emotionally safe provides exceptional learning space, which leads experiences of the top three levels, social, needs (belongingness and love), Esteem needs (achievement, recognition) and self-actualization (realizing potential, personal growth).

**Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs**

1. Biological and Physiological needs - air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sleep.

2. Safety needs - protection from elements, security, order, law, limits, stability.


4. Esteem needs - self-esteem, achievement, mastery, independence, status, dominance, prestige, managerial responsibility.

5. Self-Actualization needs - realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences.
Maslow’s needs outline basic care that allows a person to function. It would be difficult for anyone to participate in their daily routines with 100% success if one of these items were missing. Imagine if several items were missing. The effects on cognition, self-control and mental health would begin to surface. The most basic unmet needs, biological and physiological, present chemical imbalances, which affect ability to focus. The other unmet needs, social, esteem and self-actualization, present emotional challenges, which are identified in student behavior.
Let’s consider the notion that the school or the teacher provides low expectations. Urban High School serves a community of extreme high urban poverty. Urban poverty is defined as occurring in metropolitan areas with populations having a minimum of 50,000 people. Those classified as urban poor deal with multiple chronic and acute stressors inclusive of crowding, violence, and noise. The classified urban poor must depend on inadequate city services. The effects of this classification lead to four identifiable risk factors: 1. emotional and social challenges; 2. acute and chronic stressors; 3. cognitive lags; and 4. health and safety issues (Jensen, 2009, p. 7).

The Urban High School school’s lunch program has been deemed Provision 2 status; meaning that the school’s population qualifies for 100% free lunch. Urban High School houses two on-site, full time probation officers; however, some students have probation officers that are not on-site. The on-site probation officers carry full caseloads; each probation officer has approximately 20 students on active probation. Approximately thirty-five percent of the student population is being treated for mental health related issues. Urban High School serves the district’s largest percentage of students living in group-homes. The school also has the highest homeless rate in the school district. The housing project community and another community are notorious rivals. There is intense, on-going, gang-related activity between the two; however, the area is riddled with 17 identifiable gangs. Drug activity is rampant as are home invasions, gun activity and gang related shootings/fatalities. Many of the high school students are involved in the actual gang activity or in gang-like activity. Those who are not are neighbors to violent offenders, who readily practice violence within the community. This is a way of life. It is the only recognizable form of social interaction that is experienced in the
community, which the school serves. Students translate these social norms into the school. Challenges related to student behavior and student engagement (focus) occur daily and in most classrooms. Certainly the teacher and the school must be accountable to create academic and behavioral norms; however, a commitment from the student must exist. If the students do not know how to commit themselves due to not having the tools necessary then challenges arise and schools and classrooms become perceived as places of low expectations.

Let’s also consider the cognitive affects of trauma and stress. Research tells us that frequent trauma and stress will cause chemicals to be released for the brain. These chemicals alter responses to stress. In the 1990’s The Center for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente’s Health Appraisal Clinic of San Diego worked with Vincent Felitti and Robert Anda to conduct the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study. They surveyed 17,000 adults asking questions about their childhood. The survey focused on two distinct themes. Adverse childhood experiences based on: 1. maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, physiological abuse) and 2. child neglect, acts of omission (failure to provide, failure to supervise, physical neglect, emotional neglect, medical/dental neglect educational neglect, inadequate supervision, exposure to a violent environment) (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014, para. 1-3). Most notable from this study over the past decade is the scientific conclusion that early adversity causes damage to developing bodies and, ultimately, brain stress. These damages are recognized in both physical and psychological manifestations throughout said person’s lifetime. Furthermore, scientists have confirmed that the prefrontal cortex
is the part of the brain most affected by early stress. According to Paul Tough’s research this portion of the brain,

Is critical in self-regulatory activities of all kinds, both emotional and cognitive. As a result, children who grow up in stressful environments generally find it harder to concentrate, harder to sit still, harder to rebound from disappointments and harder to follow directions. These factors have a direct effect on their performance in school. When overwhelmed by uncontrollable impulses and distracted by negative feelings, it’s hard to learn the alphabet. And, in fact, when kindergarten teachers are surveyed about their students, they say the biggest problem they face is not children who don’t know their letters and numbers; it is kids who don’t know how to manage their tempers or calm themselves down. (Tough, 2012, p. 17)

Recently, in 2009, Gary Evans and Michelle Schamberg of Cornell University conducted a study detailing how childhood poverty affects executive function. They tested the working memory of 195 seventeen-year-olds in rural upstate New York. These teenagers are a part of a group that Evans has been following since their birth. One half of the children are below the poverty line while the other half are from working and middle-class families. What they found was that time spent in poverty directly correlated to how well the teenagers performed. Teenagers who spent 10 years in poverty performed worse than those who spent five years in poverty; hence, the connection between poverty and working memory. However, the researchers did not end their work there. They also studied the physiological readings from each child at various ages (i.e. blood pressure, body mass index, levels of stress hormones inclusive of cortisol). They
compared the physiological data with the poverty history, executive function study, and
an allostatic-load reading and determined that the three measures were in fact related.
The conclusion was that, “It wasn’t poverty itself that was compromising executive
function abilities in poor kids. It was the stress that went along with it” (Tough, 2011, p.
20).

Most recently, Jeff Madrick authored the article Inequality Begins at Birth (2014).
In this article Madrick discusses two recent 2013 studies that directly linked neural
deterioration and poverty. There is biological evidence that children exposed to high-
stress environments experience diminished neurological functioning and quality of brain
matter. Madrick references Dr. Jack P. Shonkoff’s work. Dr. Shonkoff, who runs
Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child, defines “toxic-stress” as excessive hormonal
activity. This activity damages neural connections, undermines immune responses, and
changes the parts of the brain that directly affect memory, learning, and emotional
control.

Furthermore, according to Darling-Kuria, Children who come from homes
filled with stress caused by violence or poverty can create defense mechanisms to
protect themselves. Sadly, what they think is protecting them really leads to a
disruptive learning environment, failure to develop personal relationships, and an
inability to solve complex problems. (2012, p. 26)

Both Paul Tough and Linda Darling-Hammond provide a snapshot into reality
that supports the following research: the ACE study, Evans and Shamberg study on the
affects of poverty on executive function, Madrick’s article that details Shonkoff’s recent
work regarding toxic brain stress. Having knowledge of these studies one must again
consider the notion of low expectations. Current variables identified as contributing factors to the educational environment include outcomes of concentrated poverty and the stress related to said poverty. Whether one references Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Presidential foci connecting poverty and academia, the ACE study, teacher narratives or Urban High School’s story, one is reminded over and over again that poverty is stressful. The implications create physiological and emotional reactions that make it much more of a challenge for students to remain focused in the classroom. Again, schools are microcosms of society. More precisely, they are microcosms of the neighborhoods of which they are a part.

To summarize this chapter, multiple studies have found that the stressful effects of poverty manifest in biological, physiological, neurological and psychological ways. In short, when basic needs are not met it is difficult to focus on elements outside of meeting said needs. PTSD-like symptoms may surface and education may not be immediately attainable. More precisely, the stress related to poverty prevents students from being able to focus on education. This becomes a problem beyond the scope of the school alone. It becomes a part of a networked problem affecting the community and the government agencies. The chapter opened with the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly” (King, Jr., n. d.). In this instance we see that the stress and circumstances of poverty affects the person’s ability to function. The inability to successfully function directly affects contributions to society as a whole.
In the next chapter we will examine what the effects of the stress of poverty looks like in Urban High School. It is a chapter that connects the research with the daily realities of schools serving students in areas experiencing high concentrations of urban poverty.
Chapter 3 - Understanding Roles

“If we mean to conquer educational inequity, we must recognize that the root causes of poor academic performance are segregation and poverty, along with inequitably resourced schools. We must act decisively to reduce the causes of inequity.”

~Diane Ravitch (2013, p. 9)

Without the notion of inquiry this problem will not begin to generate solutions. Within the educational realm systemic and intentional inquiry are essential elements that grow educators’ minds and practices. This type of inquiry is essential if we are to move forward with the development of research-based solutions. What might that look like?

Central office within the Urban High School district dictates that analysis of student academic data informs areas where growth is needed. It is recognized that the low SES subgroup performs below the achievement levels of the other subgroups in the areas of reading and math. Upon recognition, the staff collaborates to identify the contributing factors or root causes for lower achievement levels among the low SES subgroup. It is during these conversations that students’ personal living situations are recognized to be connected to low SES, (i.e., a student must work to assist the parent(s) with the economics in the household; students are made to be responsible for the daily care of siblings; students are participating in delinquent and illegal activities, etc. These very real life factors take time away from education). For these reasons it is critical that we acknowledge the students’ individual personal narratives as well as their individual data. Beyond acknowledgement, we must address the need to create a plan that will provide educational equity of academic access for students of poverty.
“The only thing that keeps us from floating off with the wind is our stories. They give us a name and put us in a place, allow us to keep touching” (Spanbauer, 1991, p. 190). Educators must begin to embrace this concept; that a child’s story is an important contributing factor in his/her academic data set. So, what is the child’s story in Urban High School setting where the community served is identified as the most violent area of the city? Where, during the school day, students talk about hearing gunshots while lying in bed, participating in criminal activity or witnessing violence and crime on a regular basis. Where students believe that it is okay to wear assault rifle bullets as charms on necklaces to school. What is their collective story? What is their neighborhood story that becomes a part of the school’s story? I would argue that although their current realities are laced with poverty stricken circumstances, the students’ daily interactions are riddled with elements of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to the Mayo-Clinic (2014), PTSD is categorized in three different groups with each group having its own set of symptoms. They are as follows:

**Intrusive Memories**

- Flashbacks, reliving
- Reliving the traumatic event for minutes or days
- Upsetting dreams of traumatic event

**Avoidance and Numbing**

- Avoid thinking about the traumatic event
- Emotionally numb
- Avoiding actions that you once enjoyed
- Hopelessness about the future
• Memory problems
• Trouble concentrating
• Difficulty maintaining close relationships

**Hyper arousal (increased anxiety or emotional arousal)**

• Irritability or anger
• Overwhelming guilt or shame
• Self-destructive behavior
• Trouble sleeping (insomnia)
• Being easily startled or frightened (anxiety)
• Hearing or seeing things that aren’t there

Let us consider the events that cause PTSD. According to the Mayo-Clinic (2014),

Virtually any trauma, defined as an event that is life-threatening or that severely compromises the physical or emotional well-being of an individual or causes intense fear, may cause PTSD. Such events often include either experiencing or witnessing a severe accident or physical injury, receiving a life-threatening medical diagnosis, being the victim of kidnapping or torture, exposure to war combat or to a natural disaster, exposure to other disaster (for example, plane crash) or terrorist attack, being the victim of rape, mugging, robbery, or assault, enduring physical, sexual, emotional, or other forms of abuse, as well as involvement in civil conflict.

Additionally, In Responding to Students with PTSD in Schools, Sheryl Kataoka et al. (2012) confirm that,

Studies have documented the broad range of negative sequelae of trauma
exposure for youth, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), other anxiety problems, depressive symptoms, and dissociation. In addition, decreased IQ and reading ability, lower grade-point average (GPA), more days of school absence, and decreased rates of high school graduation have been associated with exposure to traumatic events. Evidence suggests that youth exposed to trauma have decreased social competence and increased rates of peer rejection. Therefore, students who have experienced a traumatic event are at increased risk for academic, social, and emotional problems as a result of these experiences. (p. 119)

Evidence of daily interactions at Urban High School will support these statements. Although the school staff attempts to maintain a culture that is conducive to education, elements related to traumatic events surface daily. Once these elements surface they not only interfere with the learning of the students directly involved, they also interfere with the establishment and maintenance of a learning environment that is void of trauma and stress. The list that follows is data detailing one week’s worth of events within Urban High School. For the purpose of this dissertation, it is intended as evidence to support the absence of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, the ACE study, Evan’s and Shamberg’s study regarding the effects of childhood poverty on executive function, and the most recent information out of Harvard’s Center for the Developmental Child regarding toxic brain stress. In addition, I will argue that there are elements of PTSD embedded within the school that arrive via the community and the individual students’ homes. The evidentiary data is embedded within a comprehensive matrix. The purpose of the matrix is to provide an illustration that connects the referenced studies, PTSD and
the evidenced data. The matrix also identifies where each event originated and if the local government and community could provide support.

It is important to note that while this data details the major school events in a five-day period, it does not detail the minor, everyday teenage behavioral issues that must also be addressed. Nor does it, in any way, detail any area of truly educating a child academically.

What this data does reveal is how elements of PTSD reveal themselves. Connecting this to the deprivation of Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs the ACE study, Evan’s and Shamberg’s study regarding the effects of childhood poverty on executive function, and the most recent information out of Harvard’s Center for the Developmental Child regarding toxic brain stress it is easy to discern that the opportunity gap thrives in poverty-ridden spaces. When basic biological and safety needs are not effectively met, victims, actors and bystanders are immersed into unwanted chaos that feeds the cycle.

This data was collected with the intent of understanding how the data affects the school and where the data originated. This data clearly has an impact on the school’s culture. This matrix serves as a means to share data, in a non-threatening way, with the local government and community in hopes of gaining support. This Urban Poverty Connections to School Matrix will promote conversations among school, local government and community that will allow the data to be analyzed and used to inform school, local government and community action.
### Table 2. Urban Poverty Connections to School Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidentiary Data of One Week of Events in Urban High School:</th>
<th>Is there a connection to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs?</th>
<th>Is the ACE, Executive Function and/or Toxic Brain Stress Idea Embedded?</th>
<th>Is there a PTSD Connection?</th>
<th>Where did event originate and is there a direct affect on the school?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A child brings a knife to school.</td>
<td>Yes. Safety.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes. A threat is posed to the environment.</td>
<td>Community, the school’s learning environment is threatened. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A student is caught with several dime bags of marijuana</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes. A threat is posed to the environment.</td>
<td>Community. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two students (who are first cousins) have a physical</td>
<td>Yes. Safety, Belonging, Self-Esteem</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes. Assault and emotional abuse occurred.</td>
<td>Community. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alteration because one cousin posted a picture of the other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cousin’s STD infected private area on Twitter.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A student who lives in a group home is in need of clothing.</td>
<td>Yes. Physiological, Safety, Belonging</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes. Emotional well-being is compromised</td>
<td>Community. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school supplies the clothing.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A student’s mother dies of a drug overdose. The family has</td>
<td>Yes. Physiological, Safety, Belonging</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes. Emotional well-being is compromised</td>
<td>Community. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no means to pay for funeral costs and is in need of food.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff members work together to raise money and donate items.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A student assaults a teacher.</td>
<td>Yes. Safety</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes. A threat is posed to the environment.</td>
<td>School. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The assistant principal is assaulted while breaking up a</td>
<td>Yes. Safety</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes. A threat is posed to the environment.</td>
<td>School. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fight.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The long-standing feud between two neighborhoods flares up.</td>
<td>Yes. Safety, Belonging</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes. A threat is posed to the environment.</td>
<td>Community. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang signs are</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
flashed in the halls, gang vernacular is spoken throughout the school, terroristic threats are made, physical altercations occur. Parents are brought in; however, they are not able to provide support.  

A student threatens suicide in a text message to her mother, who is at the school in the counselor’s office. The student states that she is on a bridge and about to jump off. 

An anonymous caller states that there is a plan to shoot at one of the buses. The bus already left. City police are notified, meet the bus along its route and escort it the remainder of the way. 

A teacher hears students discussing a man who may come to the school to shoot someone. Investigation of the threat reveals that the man has been present and on school property at dismissal. In fact, he was in the principal’s office the previous day to pick up a student who was in a physical altercation with students of a rival neighborhood. All precautions are taken to ensure safety. All parents are notified of the situation via the home calling.
system. Both school and city police are present. The gun-sniffing dog is brought in. It is verified that this man is incredibly dangerous and believed to be connected to several homicides in which the victims were siblings of current students. Simultaneously, the probation officer notifies her superiors of the threat. They send an alert message to all of their employees. One employee decides to write a personal commentary about it on her private Facebook page. The cheerleading coach sees it and alerts the school.

City detectives come to the school to view yearbooks in an attempt to identify students involved in neighborhood crimes inclusive of arson, attempted homicide and robbery by gunpoint. Children Youth Services visits the school to check on multiple students. This is a daily occurrence.

School Police Officers provide the assistant principals with bulletproof vests to wear during dismissal. This is due to the city police having alerted the principal of gun threats.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes. Safety</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes. A threat occurred.</th>
<th>Community. Yes.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes. Safety, Belonging, Self-Esteem</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes. This is due to neglect and/or abuse.</td>
<td>Community. Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes. Safety.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes. A threat is posed to the environment.</td>
<td>Community. Yes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
So, how do the PTSD-like symptoms surface, what do they look like in schools like Urban High School? It is apparent that students who experience environments (filled with trauma) are likely to develop PTSD-like symptoms. (Kataoka, et al. 2012). Furthermore, the ACE factors will also surface. Students display irritability, anger and bouts of attention deficit. Some students sleep or appear to be exhausted. A lack of motivation persists. Elements of depression, anxiety and hyperactivity present themselves. Mental health referrals rise, there is an increase in the number of teachers referring students to the student assistance program.

While the primary purpose of this dissertation is to address students in high concentrations of poverty, it is important to note that educators who work in said environments also experience elements of PTSD. Educators working in these spaces are responsible for developing cognitive domains while simultaneously responsible for developing the social and emotional domains. It is incredibly stressful work and requires all educators in these spaces to possess an enormous amount of resiliency.

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital is a critical social theory that informs this identified problem of practice. Cultural capital expounds that personal traits born out of education are linked to the caste system. He continues to theorize that parents provide children with cultural capital through the transmission of attitudes as related to the social caste system. Connecting this to the epistemological framework, one would deduce that socialist cultural capital theory supports the implementation of low SES social stigmas within the educational arena.
Similarly, Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory emphasizes that, “schools are not institutions of equal opportunities but mechanisms for perpetuating social inequalities” (Collins, 2009, p.1). This theory delves further into inquiries surrounding classroom implications where the terms of equity and efficacy are raised. Additionally, his cultural reproduction term is directly linked in that it is defined as transmission of existing cultural values and norms from generation to generation.

Interconnected to all three of these is the implicitly inferred notion that reproducing inequalities, as defined through social class system, promote the cultural capital of the dominant class. This promotion is evident when one recognizes that teachers’ pedagogical practices reward students who possess such capital and penalize those who do not. It is at this stage that the school becomes exclusionary to the student of low SES and a defined system of theoretical capital reproduction.

When the whole school is of low SES and is sitting in the most vulnerable, violent, drug-ridden neighborhood that largely navigates within a framework fear of what others might do, then an entire new set of complications occurs. If one references the weekly school events then one must recognize that the symptoms of PTSD emerge and prevent education from taking place. These symptoms do not only affect the students. They also affect the adults in the building who are attempting to create an environment conducive to education. Hence, cycles of poverty turn into the reality of the opportunity gap. The definition of the opportunity gap is quite different than the achievement gap. The opportunity gap is a means to the achievement gap. In their book, *Closing the Opportunity Gap*, Carter and Welner clearly illustrate how our achievement gaps arise
out of our opportunity gaps. They claim that opportunity gaps continue to increase and encompass more than just formal schooling (2013).

Eric Jensen, author of *Teaching with Poverty in Mind* (2009), offers a further perspective that may help to explain the often-ineffective pedagogy currently feeding capital reproduction. Part of any teachers learned practice is based upon the presentation of student behaviors that quickly become internally classified as the norm. These norms, however, are based in large part on socioeconomic status. Says Jensen, “Children raised in poverty rarely chose to behave differently but they are faced daily with overwhelming challenges that affluent children never have to confront, and their brains have adapted to suboptimal conditions in ways that undermine good school performance” (p. 14). Jensen goes on to list four factors that, “present an extraordinary challenge to academic and social success” (p. 15). These are emotional and social challenges; acute and chronic stressors; cognitive lags; and health and safety issues (Jensen, 2009). Jensen concludes with the belief that, “a better understanding of these challenges points to actions educators can take to help their less advantaged students succeed” (p. 15). In essence, it is a re-learned pedagogy that will assist in breaking the rampant capital reproduction. When one references the weekly norms at Urban High School, which are outlined in this paper, it is clear that the “suboptimal conditions” are infiltrating our learning environments. It becomes more than a case of poverty, more than a case of teacher perception, more than a case of stakeholder bias. What it becomes is the essence of the opportunity gap at work. It is every element of the gap collaborating so nicely, so eloquently, in an effort to continue the cycle that viciously rapes communities and,
ultimately parents and children, from recognizing that they have value and that they can move forward.

We, as a society, need to acknowledge that, “one of the by-products of racism and oppression can be a sense of intellectual and social isolation, of second-guessing what we believe and feel to be valid; constantly worrying about our relationships and how to do the work we care about so deeply” (Hicks and Gennerett, 2011 p. 687). Students of middle-class and affluent neighborhoods do not experience the same social issues that students of marginalized, poverty stricken neighborhoods do. The aura of intense and immediate survival is simply not an everyday thought in social arenas that are not poverty ridden. High schools serving students identified in other socioeconomic strata do not experience weeks, which turn into months and years, like the low SES urban high school does. The reason is clear, obvious, historical and consistent. We have systems in place that allow the opportunity gap to plague our poorest communities and infiltrate our poorest schools. The opportunity gap is cyclical in every aspect and with every step that it takes. We, as a nation, will continue to feed this cycle unless we begin to examine current social and governmental systems in place. As educators, we must initiate reform that challenges the opportunity gap and addresses elements of PTSD so that we may educate the whole child. Academic, social and emotional well being fostered within the walls of the school house will lead to generative impacts that will begin to diminish the opportunity gap; therefore, providing hope for future generations.

If this norm continues then an obligation presents itself at all governmental, social and academic levels to transform it. If students who come from low socioeconomic households are viewed at a lower academic and social ability level, then a major overhaul
is necessary for the advancement of our nation. “Inadequate education and increased dropout rates affect children’s academic achievement, perpetuating the low SES status of the community” (American Psychological Association, 2011, para. 3).

An increased global awareness is the first step. The wealth of money a household gains does not equal the academic ability of the individuals housed within. Unfortunately, the lifestyle cycle, as set forth by the lack of government support due to SES, does not provide a window of opportunity for people to succeed. Stereotypes prevail. Our society defines low SES as lower education rates, poverty and poor health.

As a whole, there is a tremendous and dramatic effect on society. Providing resources and support for these individuals is the only way to transform our society and our schools. As Dr. Martin Luther King so eloquently stated, “If one gets behind in a race, he must eternally remain behind or run faster than the man in front. You’ve got to give him the equipment to catch up.” It is an increased awareness that will allow educators, stakeholders, community members and the government to implement school reform processes specific to low SES populations.

As previously stated these reforms must begin with high-quality, rigorous curriculum for all students. Beyond the curriculum, efforts in providing opportunities to grow student empowerment/motivation must exist.

We must take an experimental approach to educational reform, an approach in which we continue to evaluate new programs designed to cure specific problems, in which we learn whether or not these programs make a difference, and in which we retain, imitate, modify, or discard them on the basis of apparent effectiveness on the multiple imperfect criteria available. (Borman et al., 2002, p. 39)
We must address student resilience as a baseline. It is upon academic resilience that all other elements will be built. Merriam-Webster (n. d.) provides two definitions of resilience:

1. The capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress;

2. An ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.

With those definitions in mind and with the narratives of the Urban High School student in mind, an argument may be made that: resilience is key to empowering and motivating students to take the reins and initiate personal accountability from within. It has been cited that students of low SES with academic resilience have greater engagement in academic activities, an internal locus of control, a more positive outlook toward school and a more positive self-esteem. The school community is the most critical arena to promote said resilience. A supportive school community that fosters resiliency identifies caring and supportive teachers, safe and orderly environments, positive expectations for all children, the school and efforts to improve partnerships between that home and school. All of these elements intertwined lead to student empowerment and motivation. (Borman, 2006) Celebrating student resiliency be it academic, social or emotional will lead to a sense of student empowerment that will nurture student engagement and promote the students’ education.

The community, school and government agencies must create opportunities for collaboration and cohesiveness so that systemic change can be implemented and sustained. Initiating a shift in thinking will open the door to motivational factors that will unearth experiences that generate empowerment for low SES students and other
Implementing a transformational leadership model is a logical next step that could compel a network of stakeholders (the school, local government and the community) to take action; virtually creating capacity among the three.

Transformational leadership is a type of leadership style that leads to positive changes in those who follow. Transformational leaders are generally energetic, enthusiastic and passionate. Not only are these leaders concerned and involved in the process; they are also focused on helping every member of the group succeed as well. (Cherry, n. d. para. 2)

Effective transformational leadership provides an avenue through which schools can begin to academically grow students of low SES, as well as other student demographic groups. In a 2006 Canadian study, School Leadership and Student Achievement: The Mediating Effects of Teacher Beliefs, John A. Ross and Peter Gray found that, “Schools with higher levels of transformational leadership had higher collective teacher efficacy, greater teacher commitment to school mission, school community, and school-community partnerships and higher student achievement” (p. 808). Greater teacher commitment breeds teacher buy-in and teacher ownership; hence, this finding supports the idea that transformational leadership leaves little room for the adults to opt-out of educating all children. Additionally, the transformational model enables those working in a school to elicit support from stakeholders outside of the school building. The model engages and empowers educators to make informed decisions based on a student growth model. These decisions range from allowing student work to inform instruction, to designing lessons that anticipate student
inquiry, to building strong and meaningful relationships with students, and to, ultimately, engaging and seeking support from stakeholders at the levels of academia and government.

While implementation of this model will compel all stakeholders to become involved, invested and begin to address the needs of low socioeconomic status students, I would suggest that coupling transformational leadership with instructional leadership will provide a comprehensive method of addressing student needs beyond empowerment. The marriage of the two models will provide a cognitive step to ensure the ability to empower, engage and educate all. According to e-Lead Leadership for Student Success (n. d.),

A principal who is an instructional leader is charged with redefining his/her role to become the primary learner in a community striving for excellence in education. As such, it becomes the principal’s responsibility to work with teachers to define educational objectives and set school-wide and district goals, provide the necessary resources for learning, and create new opportunities for students and staff.

These two leadership models afford the educational institute an opportunity to create and maintain learning communities; learning communities amongst students and learning communities amongst staff. It is out of these communities that the conversations can occur that recognize and address needs of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. It is out of the combination of these two styles that educational reform will have the ability to occur. Business as usual is impossible when the principal restructures his/her role within the school. As teachers recognize that the principal begins an ongoing
dialogue about student achievement, and the need to grow students at all levels, then the teachers will become part of the solution. Structures in the daily routines of the school will change, expectations and levels of accountability will change and, ultimately, the culture of the learning environment will change. Once a culture shift begins the possibilities become endless. Teachers are able to have professional conversations with their colleagues about the learning space that they create within their classrooms and within the school as a whole. They are able to come out of their departments and talk across contents about student growth both academically and socially. It is in this space that amazing opportunities cultivate for students and staff alike. It is in this space that the educators grow academically and take action to ensure equity for all students, including those of low SES. Recognized is the need for on-going, committed support of the government agencies and the community at large. Empowerment within the school will lead to dialogue inclusive of all stakeholders (school, government and community). Through these conversations actions plans will form and the school will have the ability to sustain an effective educational reform.

In conclusion, these combined leadership styles promote accountability to the learning environment while paving avenues to empower, engage and educate the whole child. It is a venue that promotes teacher and administrator reflection of daily practice through the constant analysis of how student daily performance drives said practices and informs instructional needs. This is; however, only the beginning. Reforming our schools to effectively empower, motivate and engage our children is a larger social project that must include strong relationships between the school, the academy and the community. In order to initiate generative impacts, we must participate in such
relationships. I propose three separate call to action plans that will begin to outline a proposed process leading the path for systemic change and; ultimately, the type of generative impact that has the capacity to change the way we educate our children in low SES neighborhoods. In order to best understand rationale behind these three plans, one must first consider the academic data that is a part of the problem of practice.

Call to Action

Underlying Data

The institution of academia commits a disservice to student empowerment within low-socioeconomic communities. Students of low socio-economic status do not succeed academically because, in part, schools do not effectively empower, motivate or engage them. The data at Urban High School reflects that 80% of the students are identified as low SES. Overall, 32.8% of students are proficient in reading and 20.2% are proficient in math. Of that group, 74% are identified as low SES and of that group 30.2% are proficient in reading and 20.8% are proficient in math. It is evident, when comparing our data to that of a school reflecting a higher socioeconomic status that academic and social disparities continue to exist between our high and low socioeconomic status students. This is a matter of social justice based in large part upon the concept of access. In short, equity does not exist between low SES schools and other schools.

School

If this is the reality in our building then the faculty is presented with an obligation to transform it. We must first increase global awareness in the community and in the school. As a result, collaborative reforms must begin with the community. High quality, rigorous curriculum for all students and honest dialogue with the community about the
issues that infiltrate the school must be the agenda. Additionally, quality academic and social mentoring programs are a critical attribute if we are to close the gap. Without these, students will not be afforded the opportunity to reflect upon and engage with their individual levels of resiliency. The ability to fine-tune their respective levels of resiliency must continue to grow if the low SES students are to become engaged, empowered and motivated. Finally, we together with local government agencies must create opportunities for collaboration, cohesiveness and continued support so that systemic change can be implemented and sustained.

**Local Government**

It is safe to say that individuals grouped in a more privileged economic status have access to resources (both inside and outside of the school house), while the members grouped in a subordinate economic status have little or no access to any resources. The idea of access is a matter of social justice. In short, equity does not exist among neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty and neighborhoods with different socioeconomic demographics. This directly impacts the schools within each community.

Inquiry is essential if student growth is to occur and transcend into the community. It is imperative that the local political community considers the connection between academic data and the community’s personal narrative in an effort to inform areas where support is needed and how support might be achieved and sustained. It is in this space that we, an informed school community, are presented with an obligation to elicit support from local government to transform this injustice. Increasing global awareness and responsibility among local government, community and school is the first
step. As a result of this awareness reforms must begin that create spaces for honest dialogue. Dialogue should begin within the Urban High School by referencing the school’s weekly events (as documented in this work), focusing on the events that began in the community and are within the local governments’ control and discussing how the school, local government and community might work together to create solutions to said events. It is critical that the discourse begin with research-based approaches that assist in identifying the opportunity gap. The conversation that follows must center around bias based on opportunity gap. This will ultimately trigger solutions oriented ideas that lead to the immersion of high quality, rigorous learning environments for all students. Additionally, quality academic and social mentoring programs are a critical attribute if we are to close the gap. Without these, students will not be afforded the opportunity to reflect upon and engage with their individual levels of resiliency. To that end, we look to you to partner with us and focus your support around our vision and mission. We wish to engage you as a critical thinking partner who will contribute with passion and honesty as we develop our daily practices so that we may reform our educational system to effectively meet the needs of our low SES students. We also ask that you assist us in our endeavor to call upon federal government agencies as we elicit awareness in the critical role that they play with a systems change approach.

Community

The institution of academia commits a disservice to student empowerment within low-socioeconomic communities. Students of low socio-economic status do not succeed academically because, in part, schools do not effectively empower, motivate or engage them. Our school data reflects that 80% of the students are identified as low SES.
Drilling down into that data reveals that academic and social disparities continue to exist between our high and low socioeconomic status students.

The issues evident in terms of socioeconomic status in our communities also prevail inside the school walls. Although this existence may not come from the school culture itself, it does infiltrate the school system. It boils down to a matter of social justice.

Inquiry is essential as educators, and the community, collaborate to move forward towards finding solutions. It is imperative for us to consider the research as well as the personal narrative in an effort to inform areas where growth is needed. This personal narrative must include the individual’s view as to his or her standing within the community.

Using the academic data and personal narratives, we must then begin designing educational reforms. These critical reforms need to begin with honest discourse detailing what economic barriers face the community and how those barriers create identity within the community. Exploration of the relationship between said identity and student identity is crucial in determining solutions oriented support system. Ultimately, low SES students must become engaged, empowered and motivated. We look to your group to assist in creating and maintaining opportunities for collaboration and cohesiveness so that systemic change can be implemented and sustained. Collaboration among the school, community and local government agencies will enhance the level of urgency that exists when considering implementing educational reform that will successfully meet the needs of our low SES students. Additionally, the voice of the community will allow the reforms to address cyclical natures and stereotypical elements of low SES demographic
groups that currently prohibit academic growth and elicit a fear of the educational institutions.

In summary, this chapter examined the connection among daily events that occur in Urban High School, Maslow’s Hierarch of needs, specific research regarding the stress of poverty, PTSD–like symptoms and the origin of the daily events within the school. A matrix is suggested as a means of analyzing the events as data. The data may then inform the supports provided by the school, local government, and community. A call to action is stated with specific charges for the school, the local government and the community. This chapter began with a quote from Diane Ravitch, “If we mean to conquer educational inequity, we must recognize that the root causes of poor academic performance are segregation and poverty, along with inequitably resourced schools. We must act decisively to reduce the causes of inequity” (2013, p. 9). This chapter speaks to identifying the root cause and working together to generate systemic change. The next chapter will outline how the suggested design for action may do just that.
Chapter 4 - Design For Action

“Yet the gap is a symptom of larger social, economic and political problems that go far beyond the reach of the school…while schools are part of the solution, they alone cannot solve the problem of educational disparities.”

~Thomas B. Timer, University of California

(Ravitch, 2013 p. 60)

This design for theoretical and empirical antecedents inform action, derived directly from the independent narratives of multiple students. The personal stories of these carefully chosen students draw one to a single conclusion—there must be a complete, comprehensive and quantifiable overhaul of our approach to education in schools with high concentrations of poverty. The following two narratives support the need for the call to action proposals defined in the previous chapter. These narratives are crafted from my direct observations of these students over a three-year period.

NARRATIVE ONE:

Jane is a 16 year-old female student currently maintaining a 3.0 GPA as a junior at Urban High School. She is African American; of low socio-economic status; and often indigent. When Jane was 8, her 16 year-old her brother was murdered in a drug-related street dispute. When Jane was 12, her twin sister was murdered--gunned down while sitting next to Jane on the couch in their urban row house. At that time, Jane’s mother sustained a gunshot as well but was treated and released from a local hospital. Three years later, another brother was shot and killed, again in a drug related dispute, at which time Jane’s mother was, again, shot, treated and released. At this time, Jane moves from place to place, often at the whim of her mother’s current drug addiction. It is not
uncommon for Jane to appear at school after being on the street all night, cold and hungry. In spite of the circumstances, however, Jane displays a 100% attendance rate.

**NARRATIVE TWO:**

Timothy is a 17 year old African-American male of low socio-economic status, often indigent, and living, at any given time, either with other male relatives or on the street. Timothy’s parents are both incarcerated and have been for the past 10-15 years. Timothy is advanced on the state assessment in both math and English; maintains a 3.25 GPA; and was recently arrested with 300 stamp bags of heroin.

The two-shared stories may sound extreme, however, in the low socio-economic strata, these narratives are all too familiar and far too common. They are normal, everyday narratives that are in no way deemed as extreme within the low SES demographic. It has been my observation that the majority of the students have similar narratives. When one considers the causes of PTSD, “Virtually any trauma, defined as an event that is life-threatening or that severely compromises the physical or emotional well-being of an individual or causes intense fear,” (Mayo-Clinic, 2014) and the symptoms as outlined in chapter three, it is clear that the students’ abilities to focus while participating in a given learning environment is minimal. Furthermore, when one adds the affects of the ACE study, it is obvious that students and communities are in need of support. That support is beyond what the school alone can provide. Using the matrix that was introduced in Chapter 2, one may analyze these narratives. Analysis allows the narratives to be used as data. Therefore, a one can then determine what supports from outside arenas, local government and community, must be drawn upon. It is the analysis that will inform goal setting going forward as the school academy and community work
in tandem to address the needs of the students and of the community. In conclusion, these narratives should be treated as evidentiary data illustrating how elements of poverty are affecting the school environment.

**Table 3. Urban Poverty Connections to School Matrix**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban High School Event:</th>
<th>Is there a connection to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs?</th>
<th>Is the ACE, Executive Function and/or Toxic Brain Stress Idea Embedded?</th>
<th>Is there a PTSD Connection?</th>
<th>Where did event originate and is there a direct affect on the school?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narrative One</td>
<td>Physiological, Safety, Belonging, Self-Esteem</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes. This narrative encompasses the definition of PTSD.</td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Two</td>
<td>Physiological, Safety, Belonging, Self-Esteem</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes. This narrative encompasses the definition of PTSD.</td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The narratives of these students, the community and Urban High School are astoundingly parallel to narratives identified on CNN’s 2014 *Chicagoland* Documentary. This documentary is produced by Robert Redford and is filmed in real time. It details the plight of the city’s public school system, the police department and the mayor. Fenger High School is followed. Fenger and Urban High School, detailed in this dissertation, bear a striking resemblance to one another. Evidence that this social justice problem of practice plagues our country and must be tackled with a broad, encompassing approach inclusive of school, government and community.
Based on the commonality of these types of narratives and the narratives identified in previous chapters, it is easily recognized that the identity of the community, in which these students reside, contributes directly to the out of control spiraling of a diminished sense of individual identity. Subconsciously, a communal sense of identity based upon stereotypes and lower expectations is acquired, and children begin the descent into the darkness of the self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. John Dewey stated, “I believe that the school is primarily a social institution…I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for the future” (Canon Design, VS Furniture, Bruce Mau Design, 2010, p. 108). If education is a process of living and if schools are microcosm of the communities in which they sit, then we must recognize the link between community’s identity and the individual students’ identity. In schools where the community is defined as poor, we must connect that to the school’s design for action to the community at large. This is the only way that we will begin to generate systemic change.

Merriam Webster (n. d.) defines identity as, 1. Who one is: the name of a person; 2. The qualities, beliefs, etc. that make a particular person or group different from others.

Once students accept the definition of identity for both themselves and their community the struggle within the school begins. Students and parents hold tight to who they are. Their firm grasp of a low-SES identity creates a personal lack of expectations. The school’s leadership is tasked with creating a safe space where there is structure and consistency, as well as the only place that allows students to move beyond that which they have come to believe about themselves. This is the foundation upon which we must begin to restructure. Educators are first-hand, front row spectators in children’s lives.
These teachers, for the most part, have remained on the sidelines, calling plays that are confusing and often beyond the scope of the child’s ability to recognize their potential. Within the structure that is necessary, educators and local government must get in the game and offer students not only acceptance, but also a safe place to take academic risks without fear of reprisal. Students must feel comfortable exploring intellectual paths that may be foreign to them and to their communities. They must embrace the fact that they each bring value to the educational arena. Their experiences and resiliency provide them a framework to engage in discourse that will lead them down paths where both emotional and educational growth can, and will, occur.

By recognizing that the survival mechanisms that have allowed them to navigate difficult, and often dangerous, situations are the very same mechanisms that can be called upon to propel them to great intellectual heights. This approach, drawing upon already ingrained and developed intrinsic capabilities, includes developing routines and clear and rigorous expectations of success.

The educational environment that must be designed, while focusing on routines and consistency, is complex and multi-faceted. It is inclusive of community needs and governmental support of said needs. It will also address the ever present needs of the students academically, socially and emotionally. It will need to educate the whole child with emphasis on valuing the child’s individuality and identity. The environment that is suggested promotes systems change and reflects the following idea, “Create a movement. Engage in meaningful conversations about changing the education landscape. Parents, teachers, students, principals, community members, and politicians are all important stakeholders in the movement” (Canon Design, VS Furniture & Bruce Mau Design,
What follows is my suggested design for action. This design is inclusive of school, local government and community actions, which will be outlined following this design. This design sets the stage for what the support will look like from each stakeholder.

**Design for Action:**

- Identify which areas of Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs must be addressed. Connect these areas to all aspects of data.
- Define and implement levels of student engagement, local government engagement and community engagement.
- Explore avenues of motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic).
- Design and implement personalized and individualized student-learning plans, inclusive of academic, social and emotional goals (with support from community and local government).
- Design and implement a whole-school mentoring program that includes students in the academic and social growth conversations. Goal setting directly linked to school wide behavior model.
- Design and conduct surveys that directly align to the implementation of the design for action as a whole.
- Institute weekly data review meetings that allow assessment data to drive the design for action as a whole (academic, social and emotional).
- Build community relationships based upon the academic, social and emotional needs of the student.
• Encourage parental involvement where possible, including redefining the parent relationship with the school based on past experience.

• Build capacity for local government to support the needs of the community as identified by the school. The local government must support by allowing the school’s data to identify what is needed in the community so that students may have their needs met. It is here where the local government has the power to support Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs within the community.

Implementation of the above factors will create an educational foundation upon which successes may be built. In the past, the lack of collaboration in favor of curricular and departmental niches has led to a piecemeal approach to education. There was little or no emphasis upon the social and/or emotional needs of the student. When any effort was made to address outside influences, it was done silently by perhaps a single social worker and never connected to the student’s academic persona. This new approach, however, sees the student as a whole—a Gestalt view of education that encompasses the psychological, social and emotional well-being of the student, in addition to the student’s academic and intellectual capabilities. It is a data-driven approach that places value on learners from formerly marginalized communities. These low socio-economic students, our most vulnerable, must be seen as bringing value to the global community at large. Placing value here, and connecting it to the design for action, when coupled with buy-in and support from all stakeholders (staff, students, parents, community, local government and central office) will begin to reverse the cycle of stereotypes, lower expectations, and subsequent failure. Ultimately it will serve as a basis for effective advocacy for
educational equity and excellence in that it is inclusive of all students. Most importantly this plan addresses the needs of our most vulnerable children who then become our most vulnerable adults in society. It is an opportunity for us to begin to break the cycles.

The illustration that follows clearly illustrates all stakeholders in this design process. Each stakeholder has a role that is critical. This design insists that the principal of the school act as both an instructional leader and as a community member. In keeping with the idea of transformational leadership, this must occur. The principal has the academic, social and emotional pulse of the building. All three are connected and feed off of one another. It is the principal who must oversee the accountability and ownership of the district central office administration, the building level administration, the teachers, and support staff. Additionally, the principal must connect the instructional piece to the community piece. Doing so in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty allows a support system to be created that is in tandem with the community’s most critical needs, which display themselves via the students. It is here where the community, local government and the board of school directors are able to provide the support that students require. Students and parents benefit from the accountability and ownership on the school districts side and from the support from the community side. In this model, the principal is able to promote the empowerment, engagement and education of the students by utilizing community and school data to gain accountability, ownership and support. The data will inform the support systems that must be put into place. For example, let’s say that large numbers of students arrive to school complaining of hearing gunshots the previous evening. The principal would take that information to the local government person who is working to support the school. That person would then investigate within
the community to determine what measures need to be implemented to stop the gunfire and promote a safe, secure environment. This action would support long-term goals of removing weapons from the environment and creating a community that feels safe and welcoming so that children may arrive to school feeling secure. This is one of Maslow’s basic needs. It has been determined that without the needs being met, students are not able to function at optimal levels for learning. It has also been determined that areas with high concentrations of poverty experience a void in terms of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. On the social justice scale that connects to the cyclical nature of poverty and that connects us all, this is a true wake-up call to the consciousness of our society as a whole. The goal is to promote growth of the whole child, academic, social and emotional. The whole community must commit to defining, understanding and participating in a solutions-oriented model that is free of individual agendas and free of egos. There is no room for egos in this work. Collaboration and must respect inform all aspects of this agenda.
Figure 1. Empower, Engage, Educate Graphic
In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Paolo Freire (1998) states: I teach because I search, because I question, and because I submit myself to questioning. I research because I notice things, take cognizance of them. And in so doing, I intervene. And intervening, I educate and educate myself. I do research so as to know what I do not yet know and to communicate and proclaim what I discover. (p. 35)

If this is the philosophy to which teachers subscribe, then teachers have a need, a dedication and a passion when it comes to understanding their students. In order to practice this philosophical view, teachers must move beyond the conversations in their classrooms and hallways and begin having the conversations in the community centers and homes within the students’ communities.

In the call to action directed to the teachers, it is stated that we must first increase global awareness in the community and in the school. As a result of this awareness reforms must begin with high quality, rigorous curriculum for all students. Additionally, quality academic and social mentoring programs are a critical attribute if we are to close the gap. Without these, students will not be afforded the opportunity to reflect upon and engage with their individual levels of resiliency. It is essential that crossover opportunities exist between the school and community so that students are supported and so that the parents and the community are engaged in the work of educating our youth. These crossover opportunities allow school staff to understand students’ environments outside of the school culture as well as how said environments affect school culture. The local government is able to make connections and identify where support is best rendered.
This reality and creates a sense of urgency that surrounds the critical nature of meeting the needs of our students; the school staff, the community and the local government must remain focused on a pedagogical framework (inclusive of social and emotional needs) that encompasses the major elements found within social justice education:

**Emotional Needs Pedagogical Framework:**

1. Balance the emotional and cognitive components of the learning process;
2. Acknowledge and support the personal (the individual student’s experience) while illuminating the systemic (the interactions among social groups);
3. Attend to social relations within the classroom;
4. Utilize reflection and experience as tools for student-centered learning; and

As stated in the call to action, we look to the community to assist in creating and maintaining opportunities for collaboration and cohesiveness so that systemic change can be implemented and sustained. Collaboration among the school, community and local government agencies will enhance the level of urgency that exists when considering implementing educational reform that will successfully meet the needs of our low SES students.
At the school we are constantly attempting to determine the root cause of our data. We look to understand, to uncover what we are missing so that we may support our students and guide them toward success. In our vision to unearth the missing link we need your cooperation, your collaboration and your honesty so that we may, together, guide our youth with support systems that enable, encourage and enhance achievement levels. In *Teaching Minds: How Cognitive Science Can Save Our Schools*, Roger Schank outlines a 12 step cognitive process that allows us to conceptualize sustainability. His last four steps, defined as the social processes, provide a path for the school and community to engage in. Following the concepts of influence, teamwork, negotiation and describing, we will be able to understand and support the cultures both in and out of the schoolhouse. Schank describes the four as: “1. Influence: understanding how others respond to your requests and recognizing consciously and unconsciously how to improve the process; 2. Teamwork: learning how to achieve goals by using a team, consciously allocating roles, managing inputs from others, coordinating actors, and handling conflicts; 3. Negotiation: making a deal; negotiations/contracts; and 4. Describing: creating and using conscious descriptions of situations to identify faults to be fixed” (Schank, 2011, pp. 52-54.). Schank’s identified social processes steps directly correlates with these three separate action agendas in that all three parties must participate in levels of influence, teamwork, negotiation and describing.

**School Actions:**

1. Identify the demographic of the students;

2. Create systems for staff to examine the academic, social and emotional data of all students on an individual basis;
3. Implement a teaming approach amongst staff;

4. Invite the community and the academy to participate in on-going solutions oriented dialogue that address the identified student/community needs;

5. Implement best practices within the school that are specific to students of poverty;

6. Create professional development opportunities that afford the teams the opportunity to work together on a common identified goal and that afford opportunities for the staff to address challenges;

7. Implement personalized student plans that are goal oriented and evaluated weekly through a mentoring process;

8. Ensure that all voices are truly heard and truly valued;

9. Design and present daily professional development that is data driven and specific to the academic, social and emotional needs of the student demographic;

10. Develop a cross-content focus based on whole school data;

11. Design and implement a grade-level teaming approach inclusive of grade-level goal setting that is connected to student achievement with behavior, attendance and grades;

12. Connect individual teacher goals to those of grade-level teaming and student individual goals that are monitored in the mentoring program.

**Local Government Actions:**

1. Identify the demographic of the community from which the school receives its students;

2. Invite the community members to engage in conversation that identifies the problems/barriers that poverty presents;
3. Invite the community to participate in conversation that identifies their needs from the public school;

4. Invite the community and school to participate in solutions oriented conversation and allows the creation of a sustainable plan;

5. Identify financial resources that will be used in the community to support mental health, wellness, nutrition and physical safety, child care, employment resources;

6. Identify financial resources and human capacity that will be used in the school to support mental health, wellness, nutrition, physical safety, academic success, after school programming, child care, post-secondary plans;

7. Evaluate the role of standardized testing and teacher evaluations in schools overrepresented by poverty;

8. Ensure that all voices are truly heard and truly valued.

**Community Actions:**

1. The community must commit to working collaboratively and in tandem with all parties;

2. Ensure that their voices are truly heard and truly valued;

3. Engage in grass roots initiatives that promote the need for systemic change within your communities.

Figure 7 depicts how the design, initiated by the school, flows within the school. It is inclusive of the support of local government and community. Depiction of accountability and ownership for the school, the community and the local government are illustrated. Goal setting centered around behavior, attendance and grades for students, individual teachers and grade-level teams supports a data driven system that emphasizes
these three critical areas. A student centered mentoring program, with a positive name/acronym (PRAISE, participation raises awareness increasing student engagement) works as a weekly check in for goal setting with students. The mentoring program is also a place where teachers can gather data on individual and grade-level team goals.

The PRAISE mentoring program, the individual teacher goals and the grade-level team goals comprise the three essential corners that surround the growth of the whole child, which is inclusive of social, emotional and academic growth. Goal-setting in these three areas must be data-driven and closely monitored. This is a daunting task; however, with diligence and commitment, it can be successful by forcing the school community focusing on the possibility of what positive student centered events can happen. The PRAISE mentoring groups meet weekly with their mentors to track their success and create new goals. Grade-level teams will meet daily to discuss how individual student progress informs the team’s work/goals and how each individual teacher’s goals is informed by both student and grade-level team work. The grade-level teams will follow a seven-step protocol for effective teaming, as identified by the *American Educational Research Journal* (2009, p. 1016):

1. Identify and clarify specific and common student needs to work on together.
2. Formulate a clear objective for each common need and analyze student work.
3. Identify and adopt a promising instructional focus to address each common need.
4. Plan and complete necessary preparation to try the instructional focus in the classroom.
5. Try the team’s instructional focus in the classroom
6. Analyze student work to see if the objective is being met and evaluate the instruction.

7. Reassess: Continue and repeat cycle or move on to another area of need.

Following this protocol will provide grade-level teams the opportunity to participate in a structure that promotes maintaining specific foci. This is essential in preventing team meetings from becoming venting sessions. These crucial meetings must remain environments where foci remain on the progress monitoring of the established goals.

The grade-level teams will meet with the principal monthly to present their progress. Individual teachers will meet with the principal quarterly to do the same. The principal will hold weekly meetings with student representatives from various grade levels to ensure that student voices are heard and validated. Goal setting data will be documented in the following way:

**Individual Student Goals**

**Figure 3. Individual Student Goal - PRAISE Mentoring**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week Of:</th>
<th>Goal:</th>
<th>Documentation:</th>
<th>Mentor Feedback:</th>
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Individual student goals will be set weekly during the mentoring period. Documentation will be provided as a means of progress monitoring. The progress monitoring in turn informs the next weeks’ goals.
Grade-Level Team Goals

Figure 4. Grade-Level Team Goal

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week Of:</th>
<th>Goal:</th>
<th>Evidence of Student Need:</th>
<th>Evidence of Student Progress:</th>
<th>Principal Feedback:</th>
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Teachers will meet daily to discuss how student need informs their grade-level team goal setting. Teachers will also determine how the grade-level goals and the individual student goals from the mentoring periods, inform their respective individual teacher goals.

Individual Teacher Goals

Figure 5. Individual Teacher Goals

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<th>Week Of:</th>
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<th>Evidence of Student Need:</th>
<th>Evidence of Student Progress:</th>
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Teachers will reflect upon their grade-level team goals and the mentoring goals when determining their individual goals. These three groups inform one another through the data identified as evidence of student need and evidence of student progress. The
tracking of said evidence is a means of progress monitoring. Progress monitoring is essential. It allows all participants to monitor and adjust their individual practice so that proper support may be rendered and success may be gained.

The information from the in-school goal setting will provide agenda items that will inform the collaborative work with the local government and community. Hence their respective support areas around the circle. However, beyond support, these two groups must partake in accountability and ownership. While the school is accountable and expected to own all aspects of student achievement, it must be an expectation that the local government agencies and the community become accountable and take ownership for the daily events that occur outside of the schoolhouse yet infiltrate it. If we are to work together in a collaborative manner then we must leave the blame of current conditions behind, wipe the slate clean and begin following a collaborative and respectful protocol that initiates real and sustainable change. Change that is rooted in the needs of the school and community as documented by the data, experiences and narratives housed within.

**School, Local Government and Community Goals**

**Figure 6. School, Local Government and Community Goals**

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The graphic that follows provides a visual identifying the stakeholders, levels of support and the goals to be set. The local government and the community are sharing accountability and ownership with the school. The school, local government and community can then function as a goal oriented support system that focuses on evidenced student need. This group informs on-going support through progress monitoring said needs and evidence of said progress.

Figure 7. School, Local Government & Community Graphic
In summary, this chapter discusses the design for action that includes members outside of the school. While the school may act as the epicenter, it takes support from all stakeholders to address the issues that originate outside of the schools prevue. Identified within this chapter are specific actions of engagement for all stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, administrators, community, and local government), suggested use of student data and a detailed system to set goals and to progress monitor.

This chapter truly embodies the idea set forth by Thomas B. Timer at the opening, “Yet the gap is a symptom of larger social, economic and political problems that go far beyond the reach of the school...while schools are part of the solution, they alone cannot solve the problem of educational disparities.” (Ravitch, 2013, p. 60) Schools, local government agencies and communities must work collaboratively if the reality connecting the stress of poverty and education is to be addressed.

The next chapter defines generative impacts and discusses how they may begin to present themselves. This final chapter also articulates a reflection and identifies and agenda moving forward.
Chapter 5 – Generative Impacts

“Systems work is not only an obligation of leadership; it is the most important work that leaders do.” ~ Tony Frontier (Frontier, 2013)

Generative impacts can only be measured when a shift in the learning environment has occurred. School staff, students, parents and other stakeholders must then reflect upon how the shift occurred, whether or not it was effective and how, if relevant, it will continue to evolve. Upon reflection, all participants must recognize and detail how the process afforded students the opportunity to achieve beyond the expected norm as identified for the socioeconomic demographic. It is this level of achievement that is the measurement of the generative impact. Once the measurement has been examined and effective gains are recognized the story can be told; thus, those gains may be used to leverage change in similar groups.

Generative impacts leverage change in that they occur as the result of the creation and implementation of a model of effective tools that work. Once a leader recognizes that impact has occurred within a demographic group, the educational leader is able to reflect upon the practices that brought about that change. Reflection leads to creating a system that works within a similar area with a similar demographic group. Not all schools are the same, and although recognition of effective tools is necessary, it is crucial that the educational leader work with staff to create a system that proves effective for their community. It is here that network communities are formed. Network communities from school to school should mirror one another; however, their strategies must be specific to the communities’ needs.
Generative impacts are sustained by the establishment of network improvement communities that acknowledge the change that occurs both inside and outside the school community. Benefits that reach beyond the schoolhouse doors are the catalysts that motivate community leaders to come together and share narratives that establish the need for change. It is through the sharing of these narratives that students’ experiences come to life. Unique situations that connect us as human beings allow for the expansion of understanding and empathetic recognition that change must occur. It is also through these narratives that educators are able to share how they internalize issues of moral, ethical and political visions for socially just schools. Educators are morally obligated to every student, not just students who are deemed worthy based on their socio economic status at birth.

In the past, socioeconomic status has been viewed as an indicator of how students might perform in school. In fact, low socioeconomic status is a subgroup identified by the government on state testing. Also, in the past, educational leaders were seen as managers: managers of good kids and bad kids, managers of programs and approaches that worked for rich kids and low socioeconomic kids and managers of behaviors and buildings. Successful generative impacts that defy the managerial laws and subgroups allow for the re-envisioning of the educational leader. Successful generative impacts force the school, academy and community to recognize that educational leadership has evolved into a system where the leader identifies root causes, exposes biases and creates a venue where systemic change may occur. Additionally, generative impacts account for the aims of educational improvement in that they establish a venue for the initial, yet sustainable, conversation, and they create spaces where solutions are examined.
Generative impacts have the capacity to finally break the following long-standing barriers:

1. Student identity and how said identity influences the rate of success in secondary schools (academic, social and emotional).
2. Staff biases and how they influence the level of student support (academic, social and emotional)
3. Community perceptions and how they perpetuate stereotypes based on personal identity (academic, social and emotional).
4. Local government action, or lack thereof, and how it contributes to the perception of societal perpetuation of stereotypical behavior
5. The academy’s role – the idea of theory vs. practice and the dichotomy that can either influence or prohibit student growth. This is based on the academy’s relationship with school central office staff.

In Conclusion: How might generative impacts change this narrative?

Embedded within the following narrative is an illustration of these five very real barriers. It is 1:00 on a busy afternoon at Urban High School. Students and teachers are participating in period seven of an eight period day. One of two assistant principals is in the principal’s office meeting with the consultant from a well-known university. The consultant has been working with the school for one year around addressing student academic needs in the classroom. The two are meeting with a student who is involved in drug activity outside of the school. This school year has been a challenging one in that the school absorbed another high school into its population. That other high school was their rival as long as the two school buildings had been open. Remarkably, the
neighborhoods and rivalry conflicts have not been an issue. This is due to the incredible amount of transition work that leads up to the merging of the two student populations. The principal is in a side office, adjacent to her office. She is having a conversation with a female student who she has been working closely with for three years. The principal is listening as the student tells her story of being arrested after her drunken mother assaulted her, stabbing her repeatedly with a dinner fork. The student shows the principal the still-healing wounds on her neck. She continues to tell the entire ordeal in a very matter of fact manner. She describes the fight, how she had just gotten out of the shower when it started, she repeats the statements that her mother screamed at her, “I wish that you were dead…I should have aborted you…I am going to poison you.” The student repeats every name that her mother called her, all obscene, all degrading, and all incomprehensible as a mother/daughter exchange. Just as she is explaining how she retrieved her personal belongings, after weeks in the detention center and before moving in with her father, the second assistant principal races into the main office screaming, “Call 911, Call 911!” At the same time security can be heard on the radios stating that blood is everywhere, and we need an ambulance. The very pale and shaken assistant principal grabs a blanket draped over the principal’s chair and runs out of the office. The principal goes to the intercom and asks if she needs to call a lockdown. Frantic demands for 911 to be called continue. One security officer states that a student punched a glass window. The principal announces that all students are to remain in their classrooms, that no students are permitted in the hall for any reason. She both prefaces and reiterates that there was no threat.
Unfortunately, the students and staff have become all too familiar with this type of announcement. Within the past three weeks the building has been put on a full lockdown once, when a student alerted a staff member that another student was outside (on school property) with a gun. That resulted in an arrest. One partial lockdown occurred, when a parent called and threatened to come into the building and shoot all of the “white people.” Twice there was no lockdown; however, students were not able to move about the school because seven police German Shepherds were searching the building for drugs and guns. This is just the past three weeks. There have been too many of these situations throughout the school year.

At this point, everyone complies. Everyone knows that there is an urgency to follow the principal’s directive and they do. When the principal walks into the main hall she sees the young man lying on the floor, blood pooling around his right arm. He has collapsed from blood loss. Security officers stand over him. The assistant principal ties the very thick knitted blanket from the principal’s office around his arm. It is quickly soaked through with blood. The principal kneels down at the boy’s head. She keeps talking to him, touching his face, telling him that he will be fine. The boy keeps repeating over and over again, “Please don’t let me die. I don’t want to die.”

The first responders arrive and take all of the information. The paramedics then arrive and proceed to administer all necessary medical treatment; however, one medic’s comments toward the injured student prove to be less than appropriate. As they attempt to move the boy from the floor to the stretcher the boy wants to try to pull himself up. He is scared, he had lost a lot of blood and he wants to prove to himself that he had some strength left. He offers to help hoist himself onto the stretcher by simply saying, “I can
do it, let me try.” His request was met with, “Are you going to listen or do we need to bring police with us?” Then comes the comment that almost sends the principal into a tailspin. The principal relates to the medic that the boy’s mother will be meeting them in the emergency room. The medic responds by asking if the mother has given permission for transport. The principal states again that the mother will meet them there. The medic stops moving the stretcher, looks at the principal and very sternly and boldly attests, “I asked if she gave permission for transport!” At this point the principal turns to the fireman and asks, incredulously, “Is he serious?” She then turns to the medic, not giving the fireman a chance to respond and very firmly says, “Yes!” They then continue to push the stretcher out toward the exit.

It is at this point that the principal is made aware that several students had been taking pictures with their phones from the counselors’ office. The student claims that they want to show how bad the school is. After discipline is administered to those students the administrators walk the stairwell where the boy punched the glass. He punched it on the third floor landing. From three to one it looks like a violent murder scene. The walls are covered with blood that formed arterial spray patterns from floor to ceiling. The three landings are afloat with large pools of blood, the stairs are covered with the reminders that the boy had been on the move, and the remaining glass in the window still has pieces of skin dangling from the shards. The young man is taken into emergency surgery to repair his artery, nerves and tendons. Doctors are not certain if he will regain full use of his hand. The reason he punched the glass? His girlfriend refused to speak to him. He has been troubled with anger management and later the principal discovers, according to his mother, that the child was not taking his medication.
As all of this is taking place, teachers and supervisors are participating in the last portion of the co-teaching model introduced by the consultant. They know only that they have been asked to remain in the rooms where they were when the incident started. They will be shocked to discover the horror that has unfolded around them. Their conversations focus on instruction, the use of individual student data, and ultimately, student growth. While the supervisors are completely immersed in the conversation, without an awareness of what is occurring in the building, the teachers are visibly concerned, shaken and intuitively know that an urgent situation is underway. They each have the pulse of the building and this is where bias kicks in. Their reactions tell the story.

The next morning, as the school continues to reel and react to the events of the day before, new developments spill in from a neighborhood dispute that occurred last evening. The city police have sent word that two female students were involved in a verbal altercation that necessitated a local beauty salon locking the door to keep customers safe. The officer also reports that a student from the building has been arrested for carrying a sawed-off shotgun, balanced across the handlebars of his bicycle, and vaguely concealed by the student’s hoody (the same student that the assistant principal and the consultant had been speaking to in the principal’s office). The implication and ultimate expectation is then made clear—control the students. It isn’t long (a matter of perhaps an hour) before it becomes evident that the neighborhood dispute has spilled into the building. Two young ladies were facing down and headed towards a physical fight. She calls them to her office, and after the revelation from the girls that the dispute originated with the theft of $18,000.00 she decides to involve the
parents. Within the hour, she is sitting at the table between the two mothers, trying to arbitrate and deescalate a confrontation that has obviously been brewing for some time. She makes it clear that she will not involve herself in neighborhood activities except to the extent that they affect the learning environment. She states that the school needs to be a safe place for all students. She states that the some members in the community are perpetuating stereotypes of the students based on rumors and perceived behaviors. She states that learning and growing need to be at the forefront of their respective decision-making. This is where the barriers from the community emerge.

On the same day, the consultant and the learning environment specialist meet with central office staff to discuss the critical role that the learning environment specialist plays in the building. The consultant initiates this meeting. He asks the principal to attend via the phone. She agrees and explains how the role allows for the marriage of academic supports and behavioral supports (encompassing social and emotional). She provides the example on the day prior and how the supervisors and teachers were able to maintain focus during a frightening moment. She discusses the importance of this in order not to allow teachers to become entrenched in excuses as to why they can’t. It is important to empower them to continue to move forward in spite of the issues. This is where the role of the academy comes in. This entire narrative includes multiple examples of the student identity barrier.

It becomes clear to the principal at that moment that the neighborhood, at one time, had hope. They placed a great deal of value on the security afforded their children once behind the school doors—not only a physical security, but also an emotional safe-space and an academic arena where it was ok to be smart. Although the transition that
occurred at the beginning of the year (when one neighborhood school was absorbed by another) went relatively smoothly, what was lost was tremendous--the community’s perception of hope through education; the parents’ perception of the school as a place where it was safe to be engaged in the learning environment without fear of losing face; the students’ perception of what it meant to be a learner in an environment so very different from that of their neighborhood’s streets. This year, the school truly became a microcosm of the community in which it is located. Being academically inclined is not this neighborhood’s identity. Being able to fight one’s way out is. That is the narrative in which the students at Urban High School live, it is the culture in which they grow up, and it is the identity they tend to acquire. But the narrative can change. Culture can change as well, but such change cannot be expected to occur quickly nor can we expect cultural change to happen as a function of a single effort. Part of the cultural change that is advocated in the work reported here is that it requires a sustained, collaborative effort. It requires working across the boundaries of school, academy, and community (Dostilio, Perry, & McCown, 2011.)

Local governments’ role in systemic change is crucial to this neighborhood. Had the proposed design for action been in place the community demographic may have been in a different space. Poverty and all of the elements that connect to it may not have been as pervasive. It is purposeful that this design forces all stakeholders to analyze the system of education as it relates to community as a whole. The local government must honestly analyze, synthesize their role in education and educational reform. Current systems do not meet the needs of our present day communities. The idea that, “it takes a village to raise a child,” never rang more true than it is in communities with high concentrations of
poverty.

**Personal Reflection**

This problem of practice is all-consuming, it is frustrating, it forces one to examine one’s personal bias on a daily basis and it is by far the most rewarding work that those who are passionate about urban education will undertake. It provides opportunities to journey into a world of despair and find hope. It encompasses the true meaning of what education can do for an individual and how it can impact a community.

Examining this problem within the walls of Urban High School was overwhelming, humbling and inspirational. The students of Urban High School have the capacity to inspire educators to do all that they can so that stories of resiliency, perseverance and success may be shared. These students struggle every day to survive yet they embrace the essence of hope. They are true teachers to anyone who has an open mind and an open heart. The parents whose children attended Urban High School shared very personal life stories that illustrated what poverty does to a family. Many of the families live in circumstances of generational poverty. The members of the local government agencies that serve this community display various stages of commitment to the community. Young members are bright, hopeful, articulating their desire to make a difference, members who have ten plus years showed how jaded they had become through failed attempts and the veteran members were simply suffering from burnout.

Leading the staff at Urban High School was a privilege. This group of educators possessed phenomenal dedication towards the student body. Each staff member was willing to go above and beyond the expectations that were set forth. They
each opened their minds, stepped out of the pedagogical box and committed themselves to implementing change that was driven by student needs.

**Agenda Moving Forward**

It is my hope that this work and the narratives described within will promote:

1. School leaders to recognize the realities that are plaguing urban high schools serving student demographics represented by high concentrations of poverty;
2. Local governments agencies to recognize how their role within the community impacts the public school system and ultimately, the welfare and success of our society and future generations;
3. Community members’ realization that their voices, their honesty and their willingness to participate with the school and the local government agencies is crucial if sustainable change is to occur;
4. That narratives of the school, community, and individual students will inspire solutions oriented systemic change within these networked communities;
5. A social realization that the national conversation, regarding schools representing high concentrations of urban poverty, must change. We must stop blaming educators, especially teachers, for the current conditions. Our national community must recognize that we all play a role in the development of our young people our society and our country. The government agencies, the academic institutions and the communities at large must collaborate and support one another to generate sustainable change that tackles our poverty once and for all.
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