Complex Poverty and Education Systems: 
An Inquiry into the Work of Superintendents Informed by Critical Theory
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Description of the Study

Complex Indigenous and racialized poverty exists in Canada. Child poverty obviously has a negative impact on our youth who are served by school systems. As Silver (2013) and others have demonstrated, poverty can lead to poor educational outcomes. The purpose of this study is to examine the understandings and actions of four school division superintendents, who have been either identified for their work related to complex Indigenous and racialized poverty, or have expressed a growing interest in this area. Using a qualitative approach informed by critical theory, this study explores how the superintendents understood issues related complex, racialized poverty in particular; and how these understandings influenced their work in highly complex, political, and contextual work environments.

In the first stage of the research, an inquiry into the geographic, demographic, and economic dimensions of each of the communities was completed, along with a critical analysis of key documents from each of the school systems. In the second part of the research, each of the superintendents participated in a series of individual interviews and a group dialogue.

The study attempts to ascertain (i) what the participants believe about complex poverty and how they have come to these understandings (ii) how do they describe the socio-political and organizational environments that inform and influence their work as superintendents, and what they can/cannot do to mitigate the effects of poverty upon students and their communities, and (iii) what actions have they undertaken to attempt to address issues of racialized poverty and what else should be done.

Analysis

The analysis in this study attempts to develop a number of arguments drawn from the literature.

1. It locates the participants’ understandings of poverty within a conceptual framework that links Silver’s (2013) discussion of “complex, racialized poverty,” its impact on school experiences/success (Gaskell & Levin, 2012), and critical perspectives on schooling and the superintendency in light of the notion of dominant narratives of poverty and of schooling (Foster, 2004, Larson and Murthada, 2002, Grogan, 2000).

2. It assumes that knowledge is socially constructed on an ongoing basis (Young, 2008). This is important to note as superintendents reflect upon how they have come to their understandings.

3. Drawing on the work of Leithwood (2005; 2013) who identifies as a central dimension of educational leadership the (co-) construction and nurturing of an organizational vision, and of Grogan’s (2000) work on critical leadership, both a well-developed understanding of complex, racialized poverty by the superintendent and an activist commitment to engage with the dominant narratives of poverty and of schooling are necessary aspects of divisional leadership for improved educational outcomes for students living in poverty.

4. The concept of leader has been under considerable debate in educational administration (Grogan, 2000; Heck & Hallinger; Leithwood, 2013; Rottman, 2007). A narrative that continues to have potency in North America is that leadership is synonymous with a powerful individual, however, Leithwood (2010) concluded that there is little evidence that individual systems level administrators – superintendents, can affect change on their own, they do not command all decision making on their own, rather they navigate within highly contextual environments in which power is exerted by them and upon them by government, publically elected boards, as well as varied community influences (Foster, 1989;
Grogan, Heck & Hallinger, 1999; Rottman, 2007). What superintendents can do to differing degrees, based upon their abilities, and the context within which they operate, is to be influential, and inform vision, policy, and practices within an organization (Grogan, 2000; Leithwood, 2013; Rottman, 2007).

5. Leithwood (2005, 2013) argued that the work of systems leaders, including superintendents (influentials) comprises the (co-) construction and nurturing of an organizational vision, developing people, and redesigning the organization. These are not matters that superintendents can do by command. Within highly contextual environments, the participants have had opportunities to shape and position themselves with/within organizational and socio-political structures (Grogan, 2000; Leithwood, 2013; Rottman, 2007). The work of critically informed leadership, within the context of specific organizational environments, should be "to raise ambitions, desires, and real hope for those who wish to take seriously the issue of educational struggle and social justice" (Giroux, 1988, p. 177).

6. Larson and Murtadha (2004) stated that if issues of inequity are to be addressed in school systems, role-based leadership must be abandoned for outward facing work with underprivileged communities. What Starratt (1997) calls an ethic of care challenges the traditional discourse of the managerial, “above the fray” superintendency.

7. Critical approaches surface a number of blind spots in the work of superintendents. Grogan (2000) suggests that a set of contradictory mindsets and practices that can facilitate this work include comfort with contradiction, work through others, an appreciation of dissent, the development of a critical awareness of how children are being served, and the adoption of an ethic of care (Starratt, 1997).

Significance of the Study

The superintendency is incredibly complex, extremely political, and there cannot be a recipe book from which superintendents can help advance the cause of greater equity for all our students. That said, we can learn from the stories of those who have made a difference, no matter how small or contextualized. We can advance our knowledge to inform how superintendents can contribute to the creation of educational environments in which people challenge, develop, and in the words of Foster (1986), “liberate human souls” (p. 18).

Findings

1. The challenges of racism and poverty are large, and demand different thinking and different work. Different thinking requires (i) a sophisticated understanding of complex poverty and racism (ii) focus upon how schools can make a difference for communities impacted by complex poverty and (iii) an activist commitment to and the political skills associated with moving vision to practice.

2. As influentials, superintendents (i) operate within a larger context in which an overriding narrative is that society is a meritocracy, (ii) there was a growing awareness that schools do reproduce inequalities but can be sites of struggle in which poverty, and the consequences of poverty can be mitigated, and (iii) practices that can help superintendents to influence progress in this area include learning about the causes and effects of complex poverty, building trust, and framing the nature of organizational learning and subsequent focus in this area.

3. A number of promising practices were shared that include (i) the importance the nurturing of an ethic of care, an ethic of critique, and an ethic of justice (Starratt, 1997) (ii) the development of professional and community environments characterized by trust, critically informed professional learning, and coalition building, and (iii) a relentless focus on providing quality learning opportunities for students.
I am open to using a traditional format or alternate format such as participating in a round table presentation.