

Inequality, the Achievement Gap and Overcoming Institutionalized Humiliation: A Tale of Four Middle Schools

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This paper is based on a year long study in four middle schools in the same urban school district. The purpose of the original study was to examine factors influencing students' transition to middle school as well as factors affecting students' attendance. Middle school transitions and their impact of student achievement, along with absenteeism have been found to be predictive of early school leaving (before high school graduation). The schools were selected for their demographic diversity as well as their differences in terms of achievement measures important to the school district (which requested the study). These included school "grades" on state report cards and whether they had met attendance targets.

In addition to student surveys at the beginning and end of the school year, we conducted focus groups with students within the first ten days of school to get an understanding of their transition experiences. We also assigned two researchers who conducted a year long ethnographic study in the four schools. As part of this, the students who participated in focus groups also agreed to participate in a photo-ethnography project entitled "Let me show you my world." Since the data suggest absenteeism rarely has to do with school factors per se, we believed such a photo project was developmentally appropriate and would create a non-threatening environment for students to be experts in their own lives. Researchers built rapport with these students over the fall of 2011 and then conducted a series of group sessions in February and March 2012 where students shared their pictures with one another. Researchers subsequently did follow up individual interviews with students about their experiences with the project and to discuss anything in the pictures they might not have wanted to share with the group.

This close engagement with such diverse schools, students, teachers and families within the same school district rendered salient the difference that extreme poverty made in the lives of students, their families and teachers. These differences often get rendered invisible in school data that only take into account the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch. But we found there were very important differences between two school communities that "on paper" looked very similar, one a working class community where parents were employed and students experienced relatively stable housing and another where parents were largely unemployed and dealing with precarious housing situations where they were forced to move often. We even found significant difference in mortality rates, which would explain why teachers in the poorest school felt their students dealt with death of relatively young family members rather often. This study explores the ways in which humiliation not only manifested itself and undermined efforts to close the achievement gap, but how school district policies often institutionalized humiliation thereby exacerbating these effects. Specifically I will explore (1) how parents in very high poverty communities responded to humiliating messages about how school would "get their kids out of the neighborhood" with ambivalence toward school success. Their sense of marginalization from the city political sphere tended to cultivate a sense of "circling the wagons" around family

networks in times of need, even if it meant taking children out of school for weeks at a time to travel in order to the care of sick kin. Punitive attendance policies only confirmed these families' worst suspicions about the districts' lack of respect for their families. (2) Teachers working diligently to support a majority of their students who arrived to middle schools reading at first grade reading level after often having attended an average of 2-3 schools the previous year were routinely punished by school district and building leadership who began threatening to replace them entirely and begin with new teachers. The failure to address and support teachers chronically stressed by their efforts to support children and their families only exacerbated their sense of isolation and humiliation, which in turn became an additional stressor with which they had to cope.

I end by offering recommendations for a more dignified approach to educational policy that addresses the circumstances of teachers, students and families in high poverty school.