

INTERPLAY BETWEEN DEFICIT
IDEOLOGIES AND LEADERS'
SELF-EFFICACY IN DROPOUT
PREVENTION: A CASE STUDY OF U.S.
URBAN HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

AUTOEFICACIA Y PENSAMIENTO
DEFICITARIO EN LA PREVENCIÓN DEL
ABANDONO ESCOLAR: ESTUDIO DE CASO
CON TRES DIRECTORES DE BACHILLERATO
EN EL SUROESTE DE ESTADOS UNIDOS

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ABSTRACT

Researchers examined principals' perceptions of their abilities and efforts to prevent dropouts in their diverse high schools. Two concepts, self-efficacy and deficit thinking, were used to frame principals' beliefs. A large urban school district in the southwest region of the country served as the backdrop. The student population was exceptionally diverse. Three high school principals having diverse backgrounds participated. However, in general, the principals interpreted the problem through the lens of their personal background. A sense of empathy was noted throughout their commentaries. A sense of empathy emerged throughout their commentary. Implications for school leaders are discussed

Keywords: dropouts, underrepresented groups, equity, efficacy, school leadership, secondary schooling.

RESUMEN

En este trabajo se analizan las percepciones de tres directores de bachillerato sobre sus habilidades para prevenir que los alumnos abandonen sus estudios; es decir, su auto-eficacia para prevenir el abandono escolar. Otro concepto guía el estudio: el pensamiento deficitario como la creencia que asumen alumnos de contextos desfavorecidos de que «van a fallar» y dejarán los estudios, y en consecuencia, el director cree que aun con sus acciones, no podrá prevenir ese abandono. La investigación se llevó a cabo en una región urbana de suroeste de Texas, con una población estudiantil muy diversa. En este estudio de caso se encontró que los directivos tienden a explicar el abandono escolar a través de su propia historia personal, de la que emerge una gran empatía que puede apreciarse en sus comentarios. Se discuten las implicaciones de los resultados para directores escolares, quienes detentan un rol definitivo en la prevención del abandono escolar.

Palabras clave: abandono escolar, bachillerato, juicios de valor, estereotipos, liderazgo escolar, grupos vulnerables, Estados Unidos.

INTRODUCTION

While overall dropout averages in U.S. schools are steadily declining (Stark & Noel, 2015), students from underrepresented groups still remain the largest share of these students. To address this issue, we examined those individuals known to have a strong influence on students' decisions to leave school prematurely. The role of the school principal in mitigating dropouts has captured more attention in recent years (Brock & Grady, 2011; Wallace Foundation, 2013). A trained and prepared principal plays a pivotal role in promoting and realizing school success (Valencia, 2015). The school leader's responsibility in curbing dropout rates is oftentimes conveyed in boilerplate language such as: «The principal is ultimately responsible for having procedures in place at the campus level to work towards dropout prevention [...]» (confidential source, 2014, p. 5). Without question, school principals play a pivotal role in mitigating the

dropout problem. Consequently, this study examined urban high school principals' perceptions about their ability to retain students and increase graduation rates for secondary students.

OVERVIEW OF THE DROP OUT PROBLEM

The dropout phenomenon persists and is difficult to assess. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, high school dropout rates trended downward through the 1970s and 1980s. After an increase of 5.7% between 1990 and 1995, the trend reversed to 3.4% in 2009 (Stark & Noel, 2015). Yet, an estimated 2.6 million children did not earn a high school diploma or an equivalency certificate in 2012 (Stark & Noel, 2015). Graduation and retention rates of high school students thus continue to be of concern.

Not only do drop outs suffer, society as a whole also feels the effects. Forty percent of 16- to 24-year-old dropouts received some form of government assistance in 2001. High school dropouts earn \$9,200 less per year on average than those who graduate. Over the course of their lifetimes, they will earn an average of \$375,000 less than high school graduates and roughly \$1 million less than college graduates (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2007). This income gap has increased over recent years: median earnings of families of high school dropouts were nearly 30% lower in 2004 than they were in 1974 (Achieve, 2006). Furthermore, high school dropouts are three times more likely to be unemployed than college graduates (Burris & Roberts, 2012).

Researchers have found performance indicators that with a high degree of certainty, can identify students who are at risk as early as eighth grade. Furthermore, most students who drop out tend to do so relatively early in their high school careers. Overall, 80% of eighth and ninth grade students who were categorized as «at risk» eventually dropped out of high school. Other studies have found similar results. Other predictors of dropping out of high school may be characterized as psychosocial factors, or factors related to personality and motivation. Engagement is multifaceted and includes the level of students' identification with the school and the

development of positive relationships with peers and teachers (Burrus and Roberts, 2012). Many students doubted their teachers' interest in school or student learning and felt that they were more concerned with completing their workday, than teaching class. This study examined how principals' perceive their ability in affecting students' desire to remain in school.

PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS: SELF-EFFICACY AND DEFICIT THINKING

The principal's role is critical to high school student retention and graduation rates. Examining principals' perceptions about their ability to prevent dropouts adds a critical layer to the discussion of student retention and dropout prevention. Self-efficacy and deficit thinking factors have been used to examine principals' perceptions about student dropouts. Yet, despite unequivocal policy aims, there are few studies that examine school leaders' perceptions of their own ability and capacity to influence dropouts in their schools. Leaders' self-efficacy is critical as this determines the leader's belief in his or her ability to exert meaningful influence on dropouts. These types of studies are frequently overlooked amid the critiques of interventions, policy, and leadership preparation programs. Clearly, more information on the interplay between deficit ideologies and leaders' self-efficacy is needed.

Perceived self-efficacy, a construct developed by Bandura (1977), is an important dimension because it acknowledges an individual's belief in his or her own ability to produce certain desired outcomes (Bandura, 1994). While Bandura's definition of self-efficacy is representative of an individual personality trait in general, other applications of self-efficacy have been employed which have broadened the applicability and use of the construct in education. For instance, efficacy has been used to examine the following:

- a) «Teachers' confidence in their ability to promote students' learning» (Hoy, 2000, p. 1).
- b) Student self-efficacy, which refers to students' confidence in their ability to learn (Corkett, Hatt, & Benevides, 2011).

- c) Academic self-efficacy, a measure of students' belief in their abilities to attain academic goals (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996).

Principal self-efficacy denotes principals' beliefs in using their power to influence the behavior of teachers and students in their schools (Lyons & Murphy, 1994). That is, do principals feel personally capable of impacting the dropout rates for their respective schools? As Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2007) explained: «A principal's self-efficacy is a judgment of his or her capabilities to structure a particular course of action to produce desired outcomes in the school that he or she leads» (p. 90). Randhawa (2004) surmised «self-efficacy has immense effects on an individual's motivation, effort, persistence, and performance» (p. 337).

Self-efficacy Theory derives from Social Cognitive Theory, a construct developed by Albert Bandura (1977). According to Social Cognitive Theory, «people are capable of human agency, or intentional pursuit of courses of action, and such agency operates in a process called triadic reciprocal causation» (Henson, 2001, p. 3). According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is defined as «beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments» (p. 3). Bandura's (1977) main assertion regarding self-efficacy is that an individual's perceived self-efficacy beliefs were «powerful predictors of behavior» (cited in Henson, 2001, p. 3). Further, Bandura (1977) has supported the understanding of self-efficacy beliefs as «the major mediators for our behavior, and importantly, behavioral change» and «our beliefs in our abilities powerfully affect our behavior, motivation, and ultimately our success or failure» (cited in Henson, 2001, p. 3).

Researchers suggest efficacy beliefs are linked directly to the motivation of individuals (Maehr & Pintrich, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Bandura (1986) explained: «People regulate their level and distribution of effort in accordance with the effects they expect their actions to have. As a result, their behavior is better predicted from their beliefs than from the actual consequences of their actions» (p. 129). Although self-efficacy theory has been widely studied using

teachers, it holds «predictive power and application for practically any behavioral task» (Henson, 2001, p. 4). Thus, it is reasonable to believe that self-efficacy theory can be applied to a study of principals' perceived self-efficacy with the understanding that levels of efficacy directly affect the outcomes of behavioral tasks. For the present study, the behavioral task examined was the principals' implementation and operation of high school dropout intervention programs.

Without question, efficacy is shaped by numerous factors such as personal experience, training and education, and ideology. The latter is especially troubling knowing a leader's ideological beliefs in children's abilities to overcome circumstances may constrain or discourage leadership decisions and actions. Deficit thinking theory suggests the possibility that people may perceive less potential from certain students because of particular characteristics. For instance, «the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies» including «limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior» (Valencia, 1997, p. 2). This concept originated during a time when «historically, the confluence of ideology and science made a volatile union in understanding the educational problems and needs of economically disadvantaged and socially segregated groups» (Valencia, 1997, p. 4). Deficit thinking is often invoked as a frame to explain why some schools fail at providing underrepresented populations sufficient support to achieve academic goals (Valencia, 1997).

According to deficit thinking theory, deficiencies are inherent in students of color and of low socioeconomic status (SES) and stem from genetic, culture, class, and familial socialization (Valencia, 1997). As a result of attributing school failure to the students themselves rather than to external structural and institutional attributes like local district politics, oppressive policies, ineffective teaching practices, high levels of school segregation, inequitable program funding, and poor school culture, schools and their leaders escape the blame for persistently poor academic performance of lower SES minority students (Valencia, 1997).

METHODS

Data Collection

A qualitative case study approach was used to investigate principals' perceptions of their self-efficacy and their ability to influence dropout rates at the secondary level. A qualitative methodology was selected for the study as such «methods are appropriate for an exploration of factors that mediate efficacy development» (Shaughnessy, 2004, p. 155). The researchers conducted individual interviews, observations, and quasi-focus groups at each of the schools that involved both the principal and the school dropout prevention coach for each school. Using the exact same protocol for each group, researchers encouraged participants to share examples, anecdotes, and stories, all of which provided researchers a more complete picture of the level of effort the principal was expending to prevent the dropout of African American and Hispanic students on the high school campus. Additionally, the researcher kept field notes after his observations, interviews and focus group meetings.

The researcher contacted each principal via email to schedule observations for each school. The researcher conducted observations for approximately 3-4 hours in schools- observing faculty members, administrative staff and the principal. The researcher conducted additional observations of the school, the faculty and staff, and the students, making notes in the researcher's journal about the observations. After each visit, researchers made final notations and reviewed notes taken during the interview.

Researchers utilized a focus group protocol to guide the discussion involving principals and their dropout prevention coaches. Focus group interviews were taped and later transcribed for recurring themes. The focus group protocol (Morgan, 1997) was essential to gaining insight into the actions the principal was taking on a programmatic level to prevent dropouts. The input gathered from the dropout prevention coaches provided more information as to the extent principals were engaged and committed to dealing with the challenge of dropouts.

Approximately two weeks following the completion of the observation phase of data collection, researchers conducted the principal interviews. Data collected included two intensive open-ended and follow-up interviews. Interviews took place at the respondents' schools. These interviews each lasted approximately two hours and were conducted over a six-month period. These interviews were taped and later transcribed for recurring themes. The focus of the questions was on the principals' experiences in responding to their schools' dropouts and their ability to prevent students from leaving school. Principals were encouraged to elaborate with examples, anecdotes, stories, and other information and thus provide a broader basis to assess the presence of deficit thinking and perceptions of self-efficacy (Creswell, 2013).

Data Sources and the School Context

Principals from three high schools within a large urban school district were selected for the study. These schools served predominantly African-American and Hispanic students within a largely lower socioeconomic context. For each high school, the demographic composition was similar, as were the courses and programs offered at each school. Each high school was also in school improvement status, which fell within one of the state's lowest accountability rating categories. The principals at the three high schools also reported higher dropout rates compared to the district's 10% average among African-American and Hispanic students (confidential, 2015).

Among the seven dropout-prevention administrators participating in the focus group interviews, all were people of color including the female caseworker working on campus for a university-sponsored research project designed to pilot a new dropout prevention program. School A's dropout prevention team comprised of an African-American female who served as the Assistant Principal in charge of attendance and dropout prevention. School B's dropout prevention team was made up of three African-American females: a dropout prevention caseworker, the student data coordinator, and the registrar. School C's dropout prevention administration consisted of one Hispanic male, who served as the at-risk and mentorship coordinator.

The present study is comprised of three high school principals from a large urban school district in Texas. Study participants ranged in age from 35 to 60. Among the school principals was a Hispanic male (School A), an African-American male (School B), and a white female (School C). On average, the three principals had nearly seventeen years experience in education. Principals B and C had been in their current roles for less than one year at the time of the interview. Principal A had been serving at School A for a year during the same period. Principal A had 100 dropouts among a population of 1,861 students. Principal B had 68 dropouts among a student population of 1028 students. School C had 101 dropouts among a student population of 2,100 students.

Limitations

Despite a small participant group size, researchers strived for capturing depth and nuance in leaders' perceptions within a context where the dropout problem is of greater magnitude. The striking similarities that arose in personal experience and background among the principals may not be reflective of every setting, to be sure, but we believe should be acknowledged in the interpretation of perceptions. To this point, a more diverse sample of principals could have potentially produced varying levels of efficacy than those reported in this study. The final limitation of this research study was the nature of the study, which called for self-reporting in face-to-face interviews and focus groups. Self-reporting on constructs like self-efficacy and efforts undertaken to accomplish professional goals might be selective, resulting in subjectivity and less-than-transparent reporting in the data.

Data Analysis

A qualitative thematic strategy of data analysis was used to categorize and make judgments about the interpretation of the data. Using a constant comparative method, data retrieved from sources were coupled with the theoretical frames selected for the study. It further permitted matching between the interview data and intergroup theory

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967). During the data analysis the researcher analyzed and coded data responses to assure a consistency of responses (Boyatzis, 1998). Using self-efficacy and deficit thinking as the theoretical frame, researchers generated a data analysis code that could be applied to these participants' data (Boyatzis, 1998).

Results

The results suggest principals had high levels of self-efficacy to impact dropout rates. Principals identified various factors that validated their own sense of self efficacy. Many expressed high levels of job satisfaction in working with their students. Principals also noted the importance of being creative in problem solving and rethinking how to retain students. They also exhibited high levels of determination and commitment and internal motivation among other behaviors. Overall, there were multiple themes that principals' described in how they were able to graduate students and retain their other students.

Doubling Degrees of Self-Efficacy

For the primary research question (i.e., what perception of self-efficacy do principals have regarding the dropout rates in schools?), Principals A and B, both declared a strong sense of efficacy: «Absolutely». However, data interpreted about the principals' sense of power suggests a lower sense of efficacy. Thus, while seemingly strong, there were indicators throughout the interview implying principals' sense of efficacy was, in reality, slightly lower than was stated.

This was unique, because when initially asked, principal A stated with confidence he could significantly make a difference and help students stay in school. However, after discussing various deterrents transpiring within and outside of the school setting, principal A's responses at times seemed to lack hope or a definite solution to correct the concern. Principal A still remained optimistic about improving dropouts despite expressing challenges.

Principal B's response similarly revealed a strong sense of self, followed by statements throughout the interview like:

«But again, I can't... I know my limits, right? So... there are some factors that I can't control, and absolutely, I feel helpless about some of those things», and «So... I do have limitations. I would love to say that I don't, but I have a lot of limitations on what I can do to help kids».

Principal B was quick to state a very high level of self-efficacy. However, he expressed his limitations and the effect it could potentially have on his ability to prevent dropouts. Principal C on the other hand shared comments reflecting what seemed to be both high and moderate levels of self-efficacy. Her response of: «So that's a battle that we fight every day. We try to keep them in school, we try to encourage them...», seemed to demonstrate she felt only a moderate level of efficacy, because she declared she was «fighting» and «trying» to make an impact.

It seemed apparent Principal C expressed greater doubt and uncertainty in terms of her capabilities. However, Principal C suggested a stronger sense of self-efficacy. Principal C maintained high levels of expectation throughout her tenure as the leader of the school even as she had to contend with the dropout crisis on a daily basis. She explained:

[...] when we're looking up prior leavers, I'm like «100 percent! I want 100%!». They're like, «We had 350 kids we couldn't find! Are you kidding me?». I'm like, «No! I want 100%! I want 100% of the kids. I want to know where they are if they're not in school. I want to know what we can do to get 'em back!
»[...] it's difficult, but it's not impossible, and if they'll work with us, we'll find ways around it» and «...you have to get super creative and come up with ways to keep these kids from dropping out. And, and just, you know... you have to work with them».

Principal C's statements alluded to hope and perseverance despite challenging circumstances. She also acknowledged both a

possible collaboration with students and her optimism for positive results. Although Principal C initially shared doubts, these were balanced by beliefs that positive outcomes were possible.

In the interviews, researchers also paid close attention to whether principals' perceived self-efficacy over dropouts were linked to notions of deficit thinking. Although the presence of deficit thinking was almost negligible, some comments touched upon motivational deficits, parental/ home deficits and dysfunctions, off-campus environment and associations, and economic priorities. The principals readily acknowledged the reality of deficits existing among the student population served and the weight of these deficits on the lives of students.

For example, Principal A spoke to the motivational deficits of his students when he commented: «And so, because it takes so much time, students are not willing to put in those hours». Principal C also referenced a motivational deficit among her students when she explained:

I feel defeated sometimes by the fact that you just try everything you can to keep them from dropping out, and the bottom line is that if they have no heart to even want to say, «I'm willing to try», then, um... you know, or «I want this to happen», or the parent has like, given up on them [...].

Later, Principal A also referred to the deficits in students' external environments and how the deficits increased the likelihood of students dropping out of school:

In my opinion, uh... I do feel that there are some students that will be more likely to drop out. And again, it goes back to what I stated earlier. The outside influences... we don't know... by the time students get to us in high school, you really don't know what the past, you know, 10 years have been like or what level or what their educational or home life has been like.

In spite of this reality there are deficit-prone, high-risk students in school, who graduate and live successful lives. Principals felt that

being at a deficit did not equate with being an inevitable dropout. The principals convinced themselves to combat deficits in the students' lives to keep them enrolled in school through graduation.

DEFICIT THINKING

Comments from the participating principals suggest a minimal presence of deficit thinking with respect to self-efficacy. At no time did any of the principals indicate a shift in focus, energy, and effort to students who were more likely to stay in school and graduate, nor did they mention or allude to any reduction in efforts to curb dropouts. Lastly, rather than decrease efforts to reduce the dropout rate, each of them reported persistence in engaging various new and creative means of approaching the dropout issue. They were hopeful in their ability level to retain students. There were several sub themes for this section: 1) having similar backgrounds and understanding where the students came from, and 2) having empathy for these students.

Similar Backgrounds and Understanding of Students

In the face of deficit thinking threatening principals with a sense of hopelessness, the principals continued to engage in anti-dropout efforts on both a personal and professional level and in new and creative approaches that gave them hope, and consequently helped them maintain levels of efficacy. For example, Principal A «recognized the presence of the deficits in his students' lives», but commented, «[O]ur students in the urban school districts have a lot of baggage. And in doing so, you have to approach that differently...». Similarly, Principal B alluded to having to be creative in addressing the deficits of his student population as he explained:

And so... our kids come with some stuff, I tell you... they come with some issues, and baggage, and some things that I don't think as adults we could probably handle, but we're not doing our jobs effectively if we don't get to know them and their circumstances and then engage them on how do I get your circumstance better...

Consistent with Principals A and B, Principal C also recognized the deficits prevalent amongst her students, but she did not allow them to halt her ability to successfully address them. She noted: «...you have to get super creative and come up with ways to keep these kids from dropping out. And, and just, you know... you have to work with them». She also provided an example demonstrating how she worked to address such deficits, explaining:

[Student:] «I can't be here because I have a baby, I can't be here because of this, I can't...». [Principal C:] «Okay, so how can we make that work? What can we do with your schedule to make it work?».

For these principals there were several mitigating factors affecting their levels of self-efficacy. One factor was the background of each principal. All respondents shared a past similar to the student populations they were serving. Principal A stated:

I am one of those former students. You know, I feel that I know some of the barriers that our students face nowadays... I know what it's like to come from a low-income family because I came from a low-income family, a single-parent home, and so a lot of the struggles that I see... are the same ones that I didn't want to talk about or face...

Similarly, Principal B explained:

I grew up poor, we grew up on welfare... in the projects, all of that. And education was my ticket out of my situation... I just chose to be different. I chose... I wanted something different for me, and I know what these kids are like.

Although Principal C did not grow up in a minority family, she reminisced growing up poor with a single parent in a small town and having to fight to find a way to get a scholarship to college so she could have a better life. She explained:

And so, people look at me and think: «Oh she came from...». No. I came from a very poor background. Very limited resources, you know. And, um, raised by a single dad, my mother died when I was seven, so, you know, it was like, not the same.

Sense of Empathy

Another factor arising out of the comments that seemed to moderate deficit thinking was that the principals conveyed a sense of empathy, or the ability to relate to or understand the feelings of others. This empathy for students seemed to stem from similar background experiences, yet this was difficult to ascertain. Principal A commented:

[...] you have to have an understanding of some of the issues that are obstacles for our students and at least have a track record of showing them or be able to have a conversation of how you overcame those obstacles as examples so that you can try to get them to stay the course.

In the same fashion, Principal B highlighted his ability to relate to his students, saying:

I mean, I know exactly what it's like when everybody else in your household is drunk or on drugs and... you don't have anybody in your corner. They need somebody in their corner, [because] I had a few teachers that were in my corner that said, '«ou know, you can do this! You can make this!».

While Principal C expressed having empathy for her students, she employed a different tact:

Um... working with low SES, I think it's just about compassion, about empathy, about building relationships and about relating to the situation you are put in, you know? Um, so I... you know, I think, yeah. I understand low SES. I understand, you know, how to stretch a dollar, how to

make resources out of stuff that's not there and, um, I think that the biggest thing is not having too much empathy but having a lot of grit. A lot of grit to say: «You can do this. Don't let anybody tell you you [sic] can't». People think because of where I came from, I didn't understand that.

The presence of empathy among the principals countered the deficit thinking and seemed to strengthen their self-efficacy perceptions. Deficit beliefs did not ultimately discourage their commitment to positive change. Consequently, principals maintained a sense of empathy to relate to what students were going through. They then used this connection to develop more creative ways to help them remain in school.

DISCUSSION

Self-efficacy theory defined as «people's beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over events that affect their lives» (Bandura, 1989, p. 1) provides a highly relevant lens to assess principal feelings of their ability to make a difference. The theory is valuable because it enables a critique of perceived levels of competence to execute given tasks (Bandura, 1986). Accordingly, people's beliefs about personal abilities to accomplish a certain goal directly affect one's motivation to do so. The findings suggest that the principals interviewed demonstrated a moderate to strong general sense of self-efficacy. Commentary shared reflected a commitment to engaging with all students and executing programs, tasks, and behaviors on personal and professional levels necessary to curb dropouts.

The findings were consistent with prior research alluding to principal efficacy amid stressful demands in the workplace. For instance, Federici and Skaalvik's (2011) study on the relationship between principals' self-efficacy, burnout, job satisfaction, and motivation to quit found leaders with higher self-efficacy reported lower burnout and motivation to quit and higher levels of job satisfaction. This research study found principals who had moderate-to-high levels of self-efficacy did not exemplify symptoms of burnout or motivation

to quit. Instead, despite the challenges faced, principals maintained internal motivation. Although only one of the principals made overt statements about her level of job satisfaction (Principal C), the other two principals sent non-verbal cues communicating enjoyment of their work and experienced high levels of job satisfaction in the face of the difficulties of curbing dropout rates.

The findings also link well with past research (Lyons & Murphy, 1994) suggesting that self-efficacy impacts principals' performance in leading high schools. Principals in this study who exhibited a strong sense of self-efficacy were more likely to access internally-based personal power to fulfill roles rather than access external sources of power. This notion is consistent with the findings of this research study showing that principals rely on internally-based personal power rather than relying on external sources of power such as petitioning the school district for more money, asking the school system for better resources, waiting for the parents to become more supportive of children's academic careers, or any other external factor outside of themselves.

They took the responsibility on themselves to bridge the gap between what the external sources of power could provide vs. what students actually needed. Thus, the principals engaged in some very personal efforts to ensure that the needs of students were met. These personal engagement efforts go far beyond the realm of conventional job responsibility. Principals' personal ownership and communicating a sense of commitment was motivating to students. A principal dedicating personal time shows full commitment to exploring all options potentially leading to student success.

Deficit thinking theory is the belief that «students who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies, such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations, or shortcomings socially linked to the youngster – such as familial deficits and dysfunctions» (Valencia, 1997, p. xi). Often used in the same context to refer to students who are at-risk, deficit thinking refers to students who are considered to be at greater risk of realizing negative academic outcomes than the general population of students (Valencia, 2015). Further, research supports the notion

that deficit thinking is present to some extent in the minds of everyone, including principals and other leaders (Valencia, 2015). Each of the principals made comments indicating the presence of deficit thinking. This supports the deficit thinking research of Archambault and Garon (2011), who found that principals might be open to candidly expressing mentalities about low-income minority students without realizing that their thoughts and opinions are actually grounded in a deficit-thinking mindset. However, unlike the findings of Archambault and Garon (2011), the principals in this study did not report lowering expectations for low-SES student populations in their schools.

The results of this research study supported some findings in the literature concerning deficit thinking, but contradicted others. First, the study found that deficit thinking is present to some extent in everyone, including principals. Although two of the principals were minorities (Principal A and Principal B), each made several comments throughout interviews showing evidence of deficit thinking, although only to a limited extent. Principal C, a white female, also made comments showing evidence of deficit thinking, but again only to a limited extent.

Valencia's (2015) research on deficit thinking found deficit thinking fails to take into account the competencies, promise and strengths of low-income minority children and parents. In this study, although the principals held some beliefs characterized as deficit thinking, they were still able to maintain a solid focus on the competencies, promise, and strengths of students, taking all of these factors into account. In fact, they used these considerations to maintain a sense of motivation that inspired students to set academic goals and pursue them. Deficits students faced at home, whether experienced externally or intrinsically, were not allowed to sway the belief in students that they can stay in school, succeed academically, and graduate. Not only were students' abilities taken into account, these abilities were also nurtured, supported, and cultivated in various ways and at every opportunity.

Bieneman (2011) asserts that deficit thinking carries with it educational assumptions (masked by organizational and social issues) that

overshadows the abilities of students. Again, the findings of this research found that it is possible for principals to acknowledge the deficits of students without allowing the identification of these deficits to mask the organizational and social issues contributing to them and even helping to perpetuate the deficits. Principals at all three schools were diligent in overturning the structural, organizational and systemic factors increasing the likelihood of students becoming dropouts. They engaged in every program, initiative, and resource available and made every possible personal and professional effort toward students' academic success. Each principal remained committed to the idea that students could succeed regardless of their circumstances. Based on interview evidence, the principals never gave up on a student.

IMPLICATIONS

As previously stated, research on the role of deficit thinking, self-efficacy, and principal leadership in low-SES schools remains sparse. This study, however, adds to the growing body of literature on the intersection of each of these constructs for the purpose of determining how administrators could more adequately prepare candidates targeted to lead low-income minority school populations with the unique type of self-efficacy necessary to be effective in keeping students enrolled in school.

Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2007) explain the construct of self-efficacy as having «the potential to offer insight into the complex, challenging, and critically important role associated with the principalship in present-day schools...». Despite this potential, «principal self-efficacy is a promising yet largely unexplored construct for understanding principal motivation and behavior» (p. 90). Siwatu and colleagues (2011) recommended developing certain types of efficacy for educators working specifically with low-income minority students. This research study on principals and self-efficacy yielded significant findings regarding the effect that deficit thinking may have on principal motivation and behavior. This carries strong

implications for practice in terms of the selection of principals chosen to lead schools comprised of mostly low-income students and children of color.

The findings suggest that while deficit ideas may be present, the deficit mindset does not invariably result in lower levels of self-efficacy, a reduction of academic expectations for students, or reduced efforts among principals to help students stay in school and graduate. The primary concern thus becomes dealing aggressively with principals who engage in deficit thinking and permit it to influence their approach to policy adherence, effort, and motivation. In the present study, one of the most compelling findings was the moderate-to-high levels of self-efficacy exhibited by the principals. Common personal background and narratives appeared to forge a strong connection between the leaders and students which seemed to foster greater levels of sensitivity and empathy. As such, school leaders need to devote time to reflecting on their own personal experiences to more readily recognize where their lives and student lives converge and diverge in all aspects of the educational process. ■

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