Building Bridges from High Poverty Communities,

to Schools,

A Holistic Approach to Addressing Poverty through Exceptional Educational Leadership

to Productive Citizenship

Lisa Bass & Susan C. Faircloth

WITH JUANITA G. VARGAS, ROBBIE WAHNEE, & WENDELL WAUKAU

More than 20% of all children in the United States live in poverty. This is particularly troubling given the associated risks of poverty to children's social, emotional, and behavioral well-being; risks that have the potential to negatively impact children's lives in and out of school. This book considers the impact of poverty on education, the unique needs of students from high poverty backgrounds, and strategies that hold promise in successfully educating students from high poverty backgrounds. There is a tremendous need for a practical model of school leadership aimed at bridging the gap between high poverty schools and communities, in order to lessen the effects of poverty on children and youth's educational and life experiences. The authors call this "exceptional educational leadership," an approach that centers on the moral and ethical imperative to act in the best interests of children, youth, and their families.

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Building Bridges from
High Poverty Communities,
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We would like to dedicate this book
to children striving to attain an education
despite difficult economic circumstances,
and to the educators, families, and communities
who make their dreams a reality.

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Acknowledgments

This book was motivated by our desire to see education work in the best interests of all children, especially those who live in high poverty communities and/or attend high poverty schools. As we bring this project to a close, we are reminded that the work of minimizing the effects of poverty on schools and communities is a lifelong endeavor, thus the work is never completely done. We hope that the information offered in this book will encourage educators and community members to continue this most important work. Although we believe strongly in the power of education to effect change, we also believe that real change cannot be sustained without the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders. This book is dedicated to those who continue to fight the good fight on behalf of our children, schools, families, and communities.

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As noted, the publication of this book by no means marks completion of our work to improve learning conditions for those living in poverty—rather it is a beginning. As we mark this momentous event, I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to acknowledge those who have so freely contributed to my personal and professional development. I recognize that without their support, my work would not be possible. I would like to acknowledge those who have inspired me to continue to produce work that promotes the educational interests of disenfranchised children. Before I acknowledge friends and family, I must first acknowledge God who gives me the strength and inspiration to continue—even when I

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Introduction

Lisa Bass

We must remember that in almost every conceivable way, the very structure of the U.S. education system denies students in poverty the opportunities and access it affords most other students. We must recognize, too, that people living in poverty are fully aware of these discrepancies. So when we see hopelessness in some of our students' eyes, when we sense a reluctance to engage, a distrust of our intentions, we must recognize that these reactions arise, if they arise at all, from lifetimes of oppression and not from a failure to value education or from an inherent moral deficiency. In fact, we should recognize the resilience of a community that overcomes such insurmountable odds, such savage inequalities, and, despite its maltreatment by schools and society, continues to push, to strive, to learn and achieve. (Gorski, 2007, paras. 10–11)

Poverty is viewed as one of the most formidable barriers to quality education in the United States (Bourdieu, 1977; Breen & Johnson, 2005; Hannon, 2003; Mortenson, 2000; Sullivan, 2001). Failure to provide quality education results in a lack of productive educated citizenry, thereby threatening the nation's potential ability to make and sustain progress. Education holds the key to improving the economic vitality of this nation and its citizens. However, for education to make a positive and lasting impact, it must be restructured to meet the needs of children, youth, and communities who are most at risk for social and economic disasters (e.g., Ladd, 2012). While conversations regarding school reform address issues of poverty and the lack of appropriate funding for schools (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003), in the United States, these discussions also tend to involve the quality and purpose of education, as well as issues of equity (e.g., Lubienski, 2002; Rodriguez, 2001). One of the points raised in these discussions

is that those living in poverty often do not receive a quality education due to differences in the distribution of resources in schools, which is closely linked to the socioeconomic status of children's families and communities. For this reason, there is a sense of urgency toward dismantling the conditions that help to reinforce vast differences in socioeconomic status and perpetuate cycles of poverty in communities across the United States. Socioeconomially "disadvantaged children should not be punished for the circumstances into which they are born, and improved education policy is one of the best ways to prevent this from happening" (Jacob & Ludwig, 2009, p. 61).

In this book, we consider the impact of poverty on education; the unique needs of students from high poverty backgrounds; and strategies that hold promise in successfully educating students from high poverty backgrounds. In writing this book, we grappled with the use of the term "culture of poverty" (e.g., Lewis, 1966, as cited in Harding, Lamont, & Small, 2010; Payne, 2005), which has been used to refer to behavioral and attitudinal variables that contribute to and help to perpetuate the existence of poverty. In doing so, we acknowledge the controversial nature of this term, while simultaneously acknowledging the need to address head-on the potential for social, attitudinal, and institutional structures to influence one's thinking about, and in turn reaction to or coping with, the lack of access to financial and other resources and opportunities. In this way, the term "culture of poverty" may be used more accurately to describe the ways in which many of those in power, including those at the school level, think about and respond to those who live in poverty. For educational leaders, the goal is to think deeply about poverty and the ways in which schools and education at large help either to promote or to diminish the conditions that sustain poverty (see Chapter One, figure 1.1). In many cases, this thinking and reflecting should lead to revised ways of doing and leading in schools serving students from high poverty backgrounds.

In writing this book, we also acknowledge that the complexities surrounding the persistence of poverty in the United States have even confounded economists for decades (Hickey & Bracking, 2005; Karelis, 2009; Venkatesh, 2006). Unfortunately, economic studies have failed to adequately explain why intergenerational poverty continues to exist in a country where economic, educational, and community resources are thought to be abundant (Hulme & McKay, 2005; Karelis, 2009; Seccombe, 2000). The irony lies in the fact that a nation often dubbed "the land of opportunity," a destination to which large numbers of immigrants flock in search of safe harbor and the opportunity to pursue their personal and professional aspirations (Wilson, 2009), struggles with its own issues of social and economic disparity and inequality.

Poverty and Schools

What makes this issue even more difficult is the fact that children and youth are among those most affected by poverty. According to Child Trends (Moore, Redd,

Burkhauser, Mbwana, & Collins, 2009), more than 13 million of this nation's children live in poverty. This is particularly troubling given reported links between poverty, low academic achievement, increased risk of dropping out of school, and high incidences of health, behavioral, and emotional problems (Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, & McLloyd, 2002). These issues are significant, as they impact children's overall well-being. If children's sense of well-being is compromised it is highly likely that their physical, social, and emotional well-being will also be compromised, leading to a negatively impacted quality of life. Although schools alone do not have the power or capability of eradicating poverty, they do have the potential to impact the individual lives of children and their families. Empowering even one child to transcend the bonds of poverty is an accomplishment that should not be minimized, but the goal should be for this impact to be felt by all students within a school.

To focus our efforts only on the school is to negate the complex nature of poverty whose impact is not limited to the external boundaries of the school but which tends to permeate these boundaries. Not only are children affected by poverty within their homes and communities, in fact, the effects of poverty are often also felt within the confines of schools and other educational institutions designed to serve children and youth (e.g., Engle & Black, 2008). More than 16,000 (17%) public schools are identified as high poverty, meaning that at least 75% of the students in these schools are eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch. Approximately 20% of elementary and 6% of secondary students attend these schools. The concentration of high poverty schools is even greater in urban areas, as many districts qualify as Title I districts, or districts in which all schools are composed of 75% or more students who are eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch. Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native students are more likely to attend these schools than are white or Asian/Pacific Islander students. These schools also serve a significant number of students who speak a language other than English at home (Aud et al., 2010).

One of the interesting facets of these schools is the characteristics of those who teach and lead in these schools. Recent data indicate 21% of all elementary and 12% of all secondary school principals are assigned to high poverty schools. Further, high poverty secondary schools[*] tend to attract higher numbers of Black and Hispanic principals than do lower poverty schools and the principals in high poverty secondary schools also tend to have completed lower levels of education than their peers who work in lower poverty schools (Aud et al., 2010). Teachers in these higher poverty schools also tend to have fewer years of teaching experience

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[*] The school poverty measure used is the percentage of a school's enrollment that is eligible for free and reduced price lunch (FRPL) through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). High poverty schools are those where 76% to 100% of students are eligible for FRPL; low poverty schools are those where 0% to 25% of students are eligible for FRPL (Aud et al., 2010).

than do their peers in lower poverty schools (Aud et al., 2010; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007; Sass, Hannaway, Xu, Figlio, & Feng, 2010).

Location of high poverty schools
Although the largest percentage (40%) of high poverty elementary schools is located in urban areas, high poverty schools are not confined to cities. Fifteen percent of high poverty elementary schools are located in towns, 13% are located in suburban areas, and 10% are located in rural areas. Similar percentages are found among secondary schools, with 20% of all high poverty secondary schools located in cities, and 5% to 8% located in towns and suburban and rural areas (Aud et al., 2010). Across the nation, 24% of elementary schools in the South and West, 16% in the Northeast, and 12% in the Midwest are identified as high poverty. Among secondary schools, 12% in the West, 11% in the Northeast and South, and 5% in the Midwest are designated as high poverty (Aud et al., 2010).

Failure to Provide Educational Equity and Equality for All Students
According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Aud et al., 2010), students attending high poverty schools tend to score lower on the 4th and 8th grade reading and math assessments included in the National Assessment of Educational Progress. These students are also less likely to graduate than those in lower poverty schools, and those who do graduate are less likely to go on to college than their peers (Boyd, Loeb, Wyckoff, Lankford, & Rockoff, 2008; Coleman, 1966; Mistry et al., 2002). Failure to meet the needs of high poverty schools is likely to result in a continual cycle of low academic achievement among students living in high poverty contexts.

Although the mission of schools in the United States has been touted as one of providing an opportunity for all citizens to become educated to improve their life chances (Wilson, 2009), such opportunities have not yet resulted in widespread social or economic parity for all (Datnow, Borman, Stringfield, Overman, & Castellano, 2003). Comprehensive school reform efforts, including the provision of mandatory public schooling, special education programs and services, remedial reading programs, free tutoring, after-school programs, mentoring, free and reduced price lunch programs, charter schools, year-round schooling, and increased accountability measures driven by federal education policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), have not worked to create equality of opportunity or to stop the cycle of poverty in the United States (Cooper & Jordan, 2003).

This failure to eradicate poverty means that schools continue to struggle against the effects of poverty. Not only are schools tasked with addressing the individual needs of their students, but they also must respond to public cries for schools to do more with less. As poverty persists, it remains a central theme in school reform discussions, not so much because administrators and policy makers are concerned about the plight of the poor (Mantsios, 1998), but because

the issue of poverty continually emerges as an impediment to improving student achievement. This is particularly important at the school and district levels as school administrators are held accountable for all students' achievement (Wilson, 2009). As a result, administrators from high poverty schools and districts are placed in the position of having to advocate for themselves by demonstrating the myriad of difficulties they encounter as they attempt to educate students from high poverty environments (Noguera, 2003). Such difficulties include a lack of parental involvement (Evans, 2004); single-parent homes (Christian & Barbarin, 2001; Evans, 2004; Seccombe, 2000); the fact that parents from high poverty environments are often undereducated, and lack the ability to adequately support their children's learning at home (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Evans, 2004; Guo & Harris, 2000); living conditions that are not conducive to learning (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Mayer, 1997, as cited in Seccombe, 2000); a lack of fiscal, physical, and other resources in both the home and school (National Research Council, 1983, as cited in Eamon, 2001); negative peer pressure (Brody et al., 2001, as cited in Evans, 2004; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000); a lack of so-cial and cultural capital (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Cleaver, 2005; Evans, 2004; Seccombe, 2000); and the list continues. We view these conditions as symptoms of a larger issue that schools can, and must, address holistically if we are to achieve the original purposes of education—to provide all children with an education that serves as the great equalizer, to act as a forum where all children can learn, and to become the place where the foundations of aspirations are built and later realized (e.g., Downey, von Hippel, & Broh, 2004; Mann, 1848, as cited in Scutari, 2009; Oakes, 1985).

Our Purpose

The purpose of this book is not simply to reiterate previous conversations on poverty (Amato & Zuo, 1992; Carlson, 2006; Ravallion, 2007; Sullivan, 2001; Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990), but to prompt readers to move beyond these con-ventional conversations into a dialogue that facilitates a holistic approach to ad-dressing the relationship between poverty and schools, through the practice of "exceptional educational leadership." For the purposes of this discussion, excep-tional educational leadership is defined as leadership that meets the needs of ex-ceptional or challenging contexts (e.g., Goldberg, 2001). Goldberg argues that leadership is situational and that the ability to adapt to unique situations or con-texts, such as those found in high poverty schools, is the mark of an exceptional leader. Exceptional educational leaders recognize the nuances and aspects unique to the contexts in which they work and adjust their leadership styles to accommo-date these aspects in order to promote a positive school climate while maximizing student achievement.

In framing the concept of exceptional educational leadership, we address the multidimensional nature of school leadership (i.e., instructional leader, professional developer, general building manager, human resources manager, public relations manager, school-community-home liaison), and provide recommendations regarding how various aspects of poverty can be addressed by schools and school leaders working collaboratively and intensively with community members, agencies, and organizations. In essence, we seek to demonstrate that combating the effects of poverty on schools goes much deeper than increasing monetary and other forms of tangible resources (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Green & Hulme, 2005); in fact, it goes to the very heart of one's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

We hope this book will motivate readers to recognize the power possessed by school leaders to change conditions for learning and to lead their schools in ways that promote academic achievement and instill a future orientation within students, regardless of their low socioeconomic status. We also aim to introduce and discuss further the concept of "exceptional educational leadership" as a means to address poverty and its effects on student learning. We view this as a proactive and much more productive endeavor than focusing solely on the seemingly insurmountable obstacles associated with poverty. In essence, our goal is to introduce ways to build bridges from the present realities of poverty to future possibilities of increased academic achievement through exceptional educational leadership.

Our hope is that educational leaders will be empowered by the discussions and strategies that emerge from this book and the literature selected for additional reference. A final goal is for school leaders to be reassured that exceptional educational leadership can make a difference in the lives of students by working to improve student achievement and to reduce the cycle of poverty.

As you read this book, we encourage you to think deeply about the following questions:

1. What is poverty?

2. Is there a culture of poverty? If so, how does this culture of poverty influence educational attainment? Who is responsible for dismantling this culture of poverty?

3. What is the role of education in decreasing the cycle of poverty?

4. What is exceptional educational leadership within the context of your school or school district?

5. How can educational leaders be more strategic in linking the purpose of schools with the demands of leadership?

6. How can educational leaders use school and community resources to their maximum benefit to reduce the cycle of poverty?

7. What are the most effective strategies/practices for working with diverse student populations in high poverty contexts?

8. To what extent, and in what ways, might ethical frameworks such as the ethics of care, critique, justice, and the best interests of students serve to reduce the cycle of poverty?

9. How can educational leaders bridge the gap between educational policies at the national and state levels and the realities of educating students from high poverty backgrounds at the local level?

We aim to facilitate discussion around these questions with the information provided in the following chapters. In doing so, we divide the book into ten chapters as outlined below:

Chapter One: *Contemporary Issues in High Poverty Schools: Can Schools Make a Difference in Student Outcomes? Implications for Educational Leadership*

Chapter One provides a brief overview of the literature on high poverty schools. This chapter begins by describing poverty as it relates to the context of schools and schooling. Next, we argue that leadership styles and strategies should be predicated upon the needs, abilities, and desires of the group being led, and that when leadership is tailored to the needs of the people being served (in this case, individuals from high poverty backgrounds), goals can be identified and met more effectively.

Chapter Two: *The Role of Educational Leaders in High Poverty Schools: A Framework for a Revised Job Description*

Chapter Two outlines the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and responsibilities of exceptional educational leaders in high poverty contexts. This chapter stresses the need for educational leaders who possess leadership skills and dispositions outside the realm of what has been traditionally discussed in educational leadership literature. This chapter speaks to the importance of ethical and caring behavior, strong instructional leadership, targeted professional development, the need to collaborate with community partners, and the adoption of high standards and goals for all students. Subsequent chapters discuss these attributes in detail.

Chapter Three: *To What Extent Do Schools Have a Moral, Ethical, or Professional Imperative to Serve Students from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds?*

Chapter Three discusses the moral and ethical imperatives for school leaders to lead in the best interests of all students, including those from high poverty contexts. This chapter draws upon the ethical frames of care and best interests as described by Noddings (1984, 2005), Stefkovich (2006), and Stefkovich and Begley (2007).

Chapter Four: *Effective Instructional Leadership for Diverse High Poverty Populations: The Effect of Instructional Supervision on Principal Trust*

Establishing our argument for the need for strong instructional leadership in high poverty schools, Chapter Four presents an in-depth review of the literature on instructional leadership. Strong instructional leadership is particularly important in high poverty contexts where families may be unable to sufficiently support their children's academic needs (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Nadel & Sagawa, 2000) and the teaching force is composed largely of a less seasoned, and potentially more mobile, teaching force than is found in lower poverty schools (Nadel & Sagawa; Wahnee, 2010).

Chapter Five: *Professional Development and Learning in Schools: Teaching Institutions as Learning Institutions*

Chapter Five addresses the importance of tailoring professional development to the needs of individual teachers, as well as the school as a whole. High poverty schools cannot afford ineffective professional development; in fact, they need professional development that trains them how to deal with the unique teaching and learning needs, as well as the physical needs of students from high poverty backgrounds. Unfortunately, many teachers complain that professional development in schools is often not relevant to their needs. Examples of professional development activities that may be successful in the high poverty context can be found in Chapter Five.

Chapter Six: *Bringing Together Schools and Communities to Meet the Needs of Students from High Poverty Contexts*

This chapter outlines the need for coordinated and collaborative relationships between high poverty schools and the communities they serve. In this approach, schools, in collaboration with community members and groups, provide supportive services such as food, clothing, school supplies, after-school programs, tutoring, extended educational opportunities, parent resource rooms, and other necessary supports and services.

Chapter Seven: *Re-visioning the Future of Education for Youth from High Poverty Contexts: Lessons Learned from Working in the Field of American Indian Education*

Chapter Seven expands upon a previously published article written by the second author in response to Michael Corbett's *Learning to Leave: The Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community*. In this book, Dr. Corbett argues that education in rural communities has historically been used as a tool to prepare students for their eventual departure from their rural communities of origin. In responding to this book, the author argues that education must be re-visioned so that students are given the options to remain in their communities and be successful, leave their communities and be successful, or leave their communities and be successful before returning to their home communities where they are better able to contribute in meaningful and practical ways than they would have been had they chosen not to venture outside these communities.