

Outlier leadership in Alabama: resource challenged schools and principal practices

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Principals in
Alabama's
outlier schools

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Abstract

Purpose – Schools in resource challenged communities require principal approaches that break patterns of low expectations and low student achievement. This study identifies Alabama's "outlier" schools that have been consistently successful in attaining higher student outcomes than their neighboring schools despite their similar community conditions. Then, it describes the perspectives and practices of principals leading these outlier schools. The purpose of this paper is to discuss findings on principal leadership in five of Alabama's outlier schools.

Design/methodology/approach – In a sequential, explanatory mixed-methods design, the authors first use state administrative data to identify which Alabama schools had better results than their peers as evidenced by standardized testing between 2016 and 2020. Then, through semi-structured interviews, they examine the beliefs and approaches of five principals who are currently leading an outlier school. The frame of contextual leadership provides a deeper understanding of how these principals navigate successful schools in the midst of challenging community influences.

Findings – The evidence demonstrated that (1) community factors of low education, high unemployment, single-parent households and generational poverty are associated with considerably lower levels of student growth and achievement; (2) measured school and community factors do not explain student growth and achievement in these outlier schools; (3) outlier principals have a realistic view of their community's challenges but focus on supporting students through a context sensitive, relational approach that emphasizes assets over limitations.

Originality/value – While research has attended to leadership in turnaround schools and effective schools, there is little literature on principals leading in positive outlier schools. This study contributes to the literature on school leadership in resource challenged contexts by identifying high performing, resource challenged schools and then showing the perspectives and practices of principals who lead in schools that have consistently achieved better than expected student outcomes. It extends the construct of "outlier leadership" in education and connects it to contextual leadership in schools.

Keywords Principal leadership, Principals' beliefs and perspectives, Resource challenged schools, Contextual school leadership, Schools and poverty, School leaders and community

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Principals serving in communities marked by poverty must adapt their practices in ways that account for the multilayered challenges their students face. It is well documented that growing up in a low-income household has a negative influence on a student's cognitive development (Olszewski-Kubilius and Corwith, 2018), academic performance (Alexander and Jang, 2020) and future aspirations (Trinidad, 2020). However, there is also a correlation between growing up in high-poverty environments and lowered student achievement (Berkowitz *et al.*, 2017). Beyond individual family resources, community factors such as unemployment, generational poverty, single-parent households and low-property values greatly impact student outcomes (Barton and Coley, 2010; Duncan and Murnane, 2011). Schools faced with high levels of poverty – financial, material, historical and social – have often been deemed "high-needs" (Klar and Brewer, 2014). In these high-needs contexts, principals must find ways to lead for optimal student outcomes while also navigating an array of complicated community issues.



High-needs environments bring considerable material and community challenges, yet certain schools overcome such obstacles to create environments where learners thrive. We term these “outlier schools” – schools where students continue to attain higher outcomes than their peers despite living in similarly challenging community contexts (Allbright *et al.*, 2019) [1]. This research identified positive outlier schools in Alabama, a state characterized by severe and widespread poverty, and studied the leadership approaches of their principals.

Using a sequential, explanatory mixed-methods design, this paper aimed to gain insight into how school principals lead in schools that outperform their peers by examining the leadership of successful Alabama schools in high-needs environments. To do so, we asked the following research questions (RQs): (1) *What school and community factors are associated with student achievement in Alabama?* (2) *Which schools are academically outperforming their expected achievement levels?* (3) *How do principals in Alabama’s outlier schools address challenges and promote student assets?* Utilizing a combination of state administrative data combined with multiple economic and environmental indicators, we first developed an indicator of outlier schools as schools in the most high-needs contexts that have continued to significantly outperform their expected levels of student achievement and growth. Next, we contacted the current principals in these schools and interviewed five of these leaders. We also interviewed five Alabama principals in non-outlier schools to further contextualize and differentiate our findings. Our results suggest that (1) principals in outlier schools were attuned to the local culture; (2) principals in outlier schools prioritized developing teachers and building a supportive web of interconnecting relationships outside of the school building; and (3) principals in outlier schools had a realistic view of their community’s challenges but focused on supporting students through a context sensitive, relational approach that emphasized assets.

Effective schools and turnaround schools

One approach to studying effective schools is through the positive outlier framework, where a school is identified by its higher-than-expected achievement scores and then examined for attributes that contribute to its effectiveness (Purkey and Smith, 1983). Defining a positive outlier, Allbright *et al.* (2019) described “schools that, despite similar demographics and resource limitations to those of peer institutions, exhibit behaviors or strategies that have yielded better solutions and results” (p. 39). This study draws on this understanding of the positive outlier; however, we added additional requirements to qualify as an outlier in this study. First, we tightened the definition of an outlier to require consistency in higher-than-expected achievement. The schools in the study had to be positive outliers for each of the four years the data covered. Additionally, we consider outliers different from effective schools because we added in environmental variables (college, poverty, unemployment, etc.); they are not only internally, consistently effective, but they are also outliers in their environmental context. Therefore, these schools are a type of effective school and a type of positive outlier, but because they also have consistency and an environmental component, our definition of an outlier for this study is more nuanced and tightly defined.

Furthermore, an outlier school is differentiated from a turnaround school in that an outlier did not undergo rehabilitation. In the turnaround context, a declining or failing school must change its path and make positive progress (Reyes and Garcia, 2014), typically demonstrated by “rapid and dramatic improvement on test scores” (Meyers and Hitt, 2017, p. 39). In contrast to the turnaround school, where a drastic and urgent need to improve exists, the outlier schools in this study were neither declining or failing nor did they exhibit rapid improvement.

Principals in resource challenged schools

Our interest in principals in high performing, resource challenged schools acknowledges that school leadership does not rest on the efforts of any singular individual. Yet, the current structure of the American school places the principal in the lead position (Ni *et al.*, 2018), and principals are uniquely positioned to guide schools in ways that improve student outcomes and narrow opportunity gaps (Flores, 2018). Considering the positional influence of the role, this study found reason to explore the perspectives and practices of principal leaders who were embedded in Alabama's outlier schools.

Effective principal approaches have been documented in research (e.g. Day *et al.*, 2016; Leithwood *et al.*, 2008) as have the ways in which school leaders learn and develop their skill (Rushing, 2022). While successful principals have learned to draw upon similar approaches, their leadership priorities are likely to differ depending on their school's context and demographics. Hallinger (2018) explained that schools are embedded in a community context that "emerges out of features such as the socio-economic status of parents, parent and community involvement in the school, and the geographic location (e.g. urban/suburban/rural)", and principals will encounter some contextual factors that "might enable" and some that "may impede" school success (p. 7). Because contextual factors require different responses, research on school leadership should study principals in connection to their school's context, not separated from it (Hallinger, 2018). Essentially, because "school context drives principals' activities" (May *et al.*, 2012, p. 433) and "leadership absent context is meaningless" (Bredeson *et al.*, 2011, p. 18), it is valuable to study principals in connection to their environment.

While literature addresses the critical role of principal practices in turnaround contexts (Meyers and Hitt, 2017) and specific leadership actions suited for the challenges of school rehabilitation (Hitt *et al.*, 2018), less is known about principals in school that have *consistently* supported students toward successful outcomes despite a high-needs environment. Furthermore, we have literature on school leadership styles and practices that can address within-school challenges and trends (Leithwood *et al.*, 2010; Meyers and Hitt, 2017), but fewer studies have attended to how school leaders can successfully navigate broader issues of a resource challenged community. This study used the construct of outlier leadership to fill a gap in the literature by identifying high performing, resource challenged schools in Alabama and by describing the perspectives of principals who function as leaders within them.

Contextual leadership framework

Contextual leadership can be understood as leadership responses to situational factors both inside and outside of a school (Noman and Gurr, 2020). Based on this, we understood principals to express contextual leadership as they navigate through community and school factors to promote positive student outcomes. We used the frame of contextual leadership to consider the extent to which principals were context sensitive. In Gurr's (2015) discussion of *The International Successful School Principalship Project* (ISSPP) which began in 2001 and has contributed case studies of principal practices from around the world, the investigator noted that principals' responses to their contexts were relevant to their success. Notably, the ISSPP project affirmed that school administrators were successful in part because they were "context sensitive, but not context driven" (p. 140). The author explained that effective principals understood their local cultures but were not limited to them or bound to conform to environmental expectations or norms. Instead, these leaders recognized how to balance their practices and navigate contextual factors (Gurr, 2015). Referencing the ISSPP, Day (2007) concluded that when successful principals are sensitive to their context, it means "they do not comply, subvert, or overtly oppose [it]. Rather, they actively mediate and moderate within a set of core values and practices which transcend narrowly conceived improvement agendas"

(p. 68). This understanding enabled us to look for evidence that principals were mediating and moderating the context surrounding their schools in ways that balanced accommodation and disruption.

Method

We approached the RQs with a sequential, explanatory mixed-methods design (Creamer, 2017; Ivankova *et al.*, 2006) and have two stages of data and analysis. To develop a holistic picture of the data, we gave equal priority to quantitative and qualitative methods and used the results and discussion narratives as points of data interface (Morse, 2010). The first stage was a quantitative analysis used to identify outlier schools and answer our first two RQs. Then, based on the schools identified in the first stage, we employed a qualitative analysis of principal perceptions to answer our third RQ. Below, we detail the context of Alabama and the procedures utilized for each stage and RQ.

Study context

Outlier cases in Alabama were sought because Alabama has both significantly low student achievement scores and predominance of communities characterized by resource deficiency and generational poverty. Alabama ranks among the lowest performing states in the USA in regard to student achievement (US Department of Education, 2019). Additionally, “more than one in five of the state’s school-aged rural children lives in poverty, and its rural communities are among the poorest in the nation” (Showalter *et al.*, 2019, p. 4). Overall, Alabama is the seventh poorest state in the nation and has 24% of children under 18 years living in household poverty (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). Portions of Alabama are so structurally and historically impoverished that a United Nations representative declared areas to have the “worst poverty in the developed world” (Ballesteros, 2017).

Stage 1: quantitative

Data. To address the first two quantitative RQs, we used school-level demographic and achievement data from the Alabama State Department of Education, cross walked with district-level factors from the Common Core of Data, Stanford Education Data Archive, Bureau of Labor Statistics and Economic Research Service. This combined data contain school-level observations of student achievement, growth, proficiency and demographic composition, along with district-level observations of environmental conditions including levels of household poverty, unemployment, low education and generational poverty. The data cover every public school in Alabama for four years, from 2015–2016 to 2019–2020. Table 1 presents the characteristics of schools and communities in Alabama during these four years.

Analysis

RQ1. To identify which school and community factors are associated with student achievement, we ran a series of Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions estimating school performance (reading achievement, growth and proficiency) based on school and community factors specifically identified in the literature (see: Barton and Coley, 2010). We utilized the following general model:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Performance} = & \alpha + \beta_1 - 5 \text{ Student Demographics} + \beta_6 \text{ Low Income} \\ & + \beta_7 \text{ Low Education} + \beta_8 \text{ Single Parent HH} + \beta_9 \text{ Unemployment} \\ & + \beta_{10} \text{ Generational Poverty} + \beta_{11} \text{ Food Desert} + \gamma \end{aligned}$$

	Average	SD		Average	SD
<i>Accountability</i>			<i>Title 1 Status</i>		
Student achievement	65.2	17.48	School-wide	98%	14%
Student growth	92.02	7.71	Targeted	2%	14%
Student proficiency rate	81.91	9.31	<i>Locale</i>		
<i>School characteristics</i>			Urban	29%	45%
Enrollment	531.01	276.52	Suburban	19%	39%
Black	34%	33%	Town	13%	33%
Latinx	8%	10%	Rural	40%	49%
Other	0%	0%	<i>Community</i>		
White	52%	31%	No. college	77%	12%
LEP	3%	7%	Poverty	18%	6%
ECD	63%	24%	Unemployed	7%	3%
<i>Level</i>			Single parent HH	22%	8%
Elementary	55%	50%	Food desert	43%	50%
Middle	22%	42%	Generational poverty	11%	31%
High	15%	35%	Generational child poverty	46%	50%
Combined	8%	27%	# Schools	1,310	

Note(s): Achievement represents average school performance on grade level end-of-year reading assessments out of 100. Proficiency represents the proportion of the school meeting benchmark proficiency levels. Growth is the average % of students demonstrating growth, based on difference between students' prior year, by school

Table 1.
Characteristics of
schools and
communities in
Alabama, 2016–2020

whereby *Performance* represents either student achievement, proficiency or growth and β_{1-5} represents school characteristics in including % Black, % Latinx, % Other, % White, % economically disadvantaged ((ECD), operationalized as being eligible for free and/or reduced meals) and the % of students categorized as limited English proficient (LEP). γ represents districts that are included to control for unobserved district factors may systematically affect district achievement.

RQ2. To identify which schools were “beating the odds,” we utilized results from the above RQ to inform a model for determining which schools were academically outperforming their expected levels. We derived point estimates for each school’s performance to develop an “outlier score.” This score was calculated as the residual distance between a given school’s actual and estimated performance based on the above fixed-effects regression model. This model follows the basic approach of the effective schools’ research (Purkey and Smith, 1983), adjusted for the addition of longitudinal data (Bowers and Monroe, 2021), community predictors (Hallinger and Murphy, 1986) and school fixed effects (Raudenbush and Willms, 1995) to provide a more accurate and holistic measure of a statistical outlier.

To further narrow toward schools specifically in resource challenged contexts, we created a “community challenge” index score, as the sum of the proportion of the community that was unemployed, was low-income, in single-parent homes, without a college education, in a food desert and in an area of generational child poverty. We identified schools in the top quintile of this index. Next, we used k means cluster analysis to identify “outlier” as those schools in a high-challenge, high-performance cluster that were also in the top 5% of the “outlier score” (Hattie, 2002; Martínez-Abad et al., 2020; Raudenbush and Willms, 1995) [2]. Cluster analyses were run based on residuals of achievement, proficiency, and growth estimates, and identified schools were those that met the criteria of all three metrics. Out of the total number of public schools in Alabama, we identified 16 outlier schools through this method.

Stage 2: qualitative

RQ3. To learn how principals in outlier schools understand challenges and promote student assets, we sought the perspectives of these school leaders. We invited each outlier school's principal to participate in the study, and five principals consented to be interviewed. We also interviewed five Alabama principals who were not leading an outlier school to look for possible similarities and contrasts in perspectives and approaches. However, the goal of study was to highlight the principals in outlier schools, and so we focused on the statements of these leaders and only contrasted them with other principals where appropriate. We believed it to be important to explore the perspectives of principals in non-outlier schools, but we deemed it essential to avoid oversimplifying leadership approaches into groups of outlier and nonoutlier.

An individual, semi-structured interview with each participant was conducted over Zoom during the summer and fall of 2021, lasting roughly 1 h each. For each transcript, researchers independently used open coding to identify emerging ideas drawn from the participants' responses to interview questions (Saldaña, 2013). Next, we developed a code book of themes and conducted another round of coding that connected participant responses to the theoretical frame and review of literature. Reliability of codes was established by inter-coder agreement (Creswell and Poth, 2018). For validity and trustworthiness, we triangulated our qualitative data across outlier and non-outlier participants and sought disconfirming evidence in the data (Creswell and Miller, 2000). Peer debriefing was employed throughout the study (Creswell and Miller, 2000).

Participants and school contexts

Table 2 summarizes principal and school characteristics. To provide confidentiality and anonymity, an initial is used to represent a pseudonym.

Limitations

We note that this study has limitations. The small qualitative sample size may not fully represent the approaches and/or beliefs of other principals in outlier schools. Second, while we sought participation from each outlier school principal, those who agreed to participate were predominantly highly educated, women principals of elementary and middle schools. This may not be a typical representation of principals in other outlier schools. Third, we are not able to say these principals caused their schools to be outliers. Some participants were relatively new to their school, and our focus was on how principals who were embedded in outlier schools led and prioritized. Given these considerations, our goal in this research was exploratory and not comprehensive.

Results

RQ1. We began by examining the trends of school performance as it is associated with community factors. Table 3 presents results of our fixed-effect regression models aimed at identifying which school and community factors are associated with student outcomes. Overall, both school composition and each community characteristics matter. Except for generational poverty, each community characteristic was associated with a significant change in school outcomes,

Leader	Total Principal experience	Years at an outlier school	Degree	Ethnicity/ Race	Gender	School enrollment	Minority enrollment	Economically disadvantaged	School locale	Connection to school community
Principal C	15 years	15 years	M.A.	White	Woman	440 students	34%	53%	Distant town	A lifelong resident in school community
Principal N	3 years	1 year	Ph.D.	White	Woman	530 students	82%	56%	Suburban	Resides near community
Principal M	8 years	1 year	B.A.	Black	Woman	540 students	55%	69%	Suburban	Resides near community
Principal D	3 years	3 years	Ph.D.	Black	Man	410 students	38%	73%	Rural	Resides 25 min from community
Principal R	6 years	1 year	Ph.D.	Black	Woman	475 students	99%	95%	Urban	A lifelong resident in a school district

Table 2.
Principal and school characteristics

	(1) Achievement	(2) Proficiency	(3) Growth
<i>Community characteristics</i>			
% without a college degree	-9.168** (2.324)	-22.695** (3.598)	-4.833 (2.568)
% poverty	14.250* (6.626)	16.325 (10.258)	22.508** (7.321)
% unemployed	-29.372* (13.029)	-36.994 (20.170)	-32.822* (14.395)
% Single parent HH	-11.084* (5.529)	-12.507 (8.559)	0.018 (6.108)
Generational poverty	0.599 (0.811)	2.336 (1.256)	0.003 (0.896)
Food desert	-0.776 (0.454)	-1.011 (0.703)	-1.414** (0.502)
<i>Student characteristics</i>			
% Black	-13.832** (0.987)	-30.864** (1.528)	-8.562** (1.090)
% Latinx	-13.729** (3.321)	-35.599** (5.142)	-7.174 (3.669)
% ECD	-13.414** (1.108)	-20.256** (1.715)	-3.652** (1.224)
% LEP	-3.244 (5.129)	-1.515 (7.939)	2.980 (5.666)
District FE	X	X	X
School controls	X	X	X
Observations	1,137	1,137	1,137
R squared	0.587	0.719	0.265
BIC	7,423	8,417	7,650

Note(s): ** $p < 0.01$ and * $p < 0.05$. Standard errors in are parentheses. School controls include enrollment, level (elementary, middle and high) and locale (rural, suburban, town and urban). % White omitted due to high Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and the interdependent nature of school racial composition. All covariates are standardized. Achievement represents average school performance on grade level end-of-year reading assessments out of 100. Proficiency represents the proportion of the school meeting benchmark proficiency levels. Growth is the average reading growth score, based on difference between students' prior year, by school. Community characteristics are set at the Local Education Agency (LEA) level

Table 3. School and community factors on school outcomes

over and above school and district characteristics. For example, a one standard deviation increase (12%) in the proportion of the community without a college degree was associated with a nine-point reduction in average schools reading achievement (out of 100), and a 23% reduction in the proportion of students attaining reading proficiency. These factors seemed to explain more variation in student proficiency (72%) and achievement (59%) than growth (27%). Moreover, we see that student composition matters, as standard deviation increases in Black (33%), Latinx (10%) and ECD (24%) students are associated with reductions in performance outcomes. While these results are not unexpected or particularly unique, they provide the basis to inform our next model to identify “outlier schools.”

RQ2. Next, we identified outlier schools. Using our “outlier” score from the distance between predicted and actual performance based on the above regression models, we identified 16 outlier schools with high outlier scores clustered at the top 5% of

our community challenge index. In other words, these are the top 16 high performing schools within the most challenging environments. We present their characteristics in Table 4, noting that these schools tended to have higher than average school achievement and proficiency, as well as higher proportions of Black students and fewer White students than the state average. Although not statistically different, outlier schools tend to be elementary and rural schools. Otherwise, they are statistically similar to other schools of Alabama, including the proportion of economically disadvantaged students, Title 1 Status, and urban, suburban or rural locale. Figure 1 presents those 16 schools identified in the k means cluster analysis in terms of their average achievement and community characteristics during the sample window. Here, we see that they tend to cluster above the average trend on achievement, while having higher average levels of community challenges, but placement does vary depending on the community factor.

RQ3. After analyzing data from principals interviews, we developed three assertions to describe how these leaders viewed challenges and promoted assets: Principals in outlier schools (1) were attuned to the local culture, (2) prioritized developing teachers and building a supportive web of interconnecting relationships outside of the school building and (3) had a realistic view of their community's challenges but focused on supporting students through a context sensitive, relational approach that emphasized assets.

Principals in outlier schools were attuned to local culture

Each outlier school principal placed his/her school in relationship with the larger community and discussed examples of how the school connected to its local culture. While only two of the

	Outlier schools Average	All schools Average	Diff.		Outlier schools Average	All schools Average	Diff.
<i>Accountability</i>				<i>Title 1 status</i>			
Achievement	97.98	91.93	-6.06**	School-wide	100%	98%	-0.02
Growth	72.32	65.09	-7.23	Targeted	0%	2%	0.02
Proficiency	87.41	81.83	-5.58*	<i>Locale</i>			
<i>School characteristics</i>				Urban	24%	29%	0.06
Enrollment	475.82	531.84	56.01	Suburban	12%	19%	0.07
Black	70%	34%	-0.36***	Town	18%	13%	-0.05
Latinx	3%	8%	0.04	Rural	47%	40%	-0.07
Other	0%	0%	0.00	<i>Community</i>			
White	22%	53%	0.30***	No college	84%	77%	-0.06*
LEP	1%	3%	0.02	Poverty	27%	18%	-0.09***
ECD	72%	63%	-0.09	Unemployed	9%	7%	-0.02***
<i>Level</i>				Single parent	32%	22%	-0.10***
Elementary	76%	55%	-0.22	HH			
Middle	6%	22%	0.17	Food desert	41%	43%	0.02
				Generational	59%	11%	-0.48***
				poverty			
High	6%	15%	0.09	Generational	88%	46%	-0.42***
				child poverty			
Combined	12%	8%	-0.04	# Schools	16	1,293	

Table 4.
Descriptive characteristics of outlier and all districts in Alabama

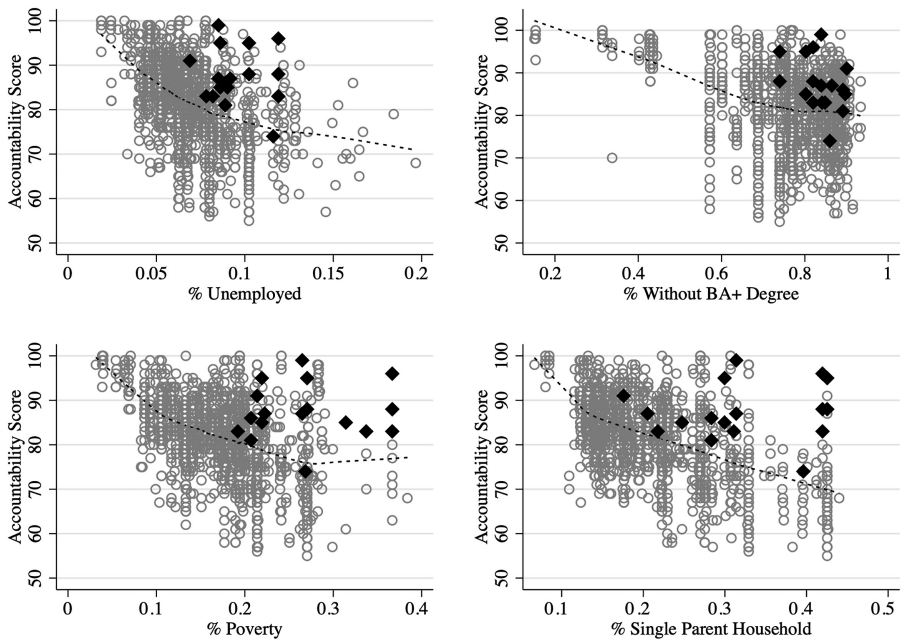


Figure 1.
Outlier identification
and community
characteristics

five principals were lifelong residents of their school’s community, each one held extensive knowledge of its local history and presented social issues. They clearly articulated the local values in the area, the priorities of community business supporters and the behavior patterns of parents. Principal N explained the following:

Context influences everything. It influences day to day business because you have to reflect, you have to be constantly mindful of the culture that you’re dealing with—the biases, the expectations, the unwritten rules. Principal N

Each principal identified parent participation as the dominant school challenge, and each connected a lack of parental involvement with their school’s context.

[It’s a] Title I poverty school so parent participation is never a whole lot. They don’t have transportation there. They did not have anybody to keep their children or they just didn’t want to come because they had something else to do. Principal M

75% just, you know, they think of this like a daycare. And they value what we do and will support you, but they don’t have any time. They’re struggling. They’re struggling with their basic needs so they’re not super involved. Then, we have 25% that can be all over the map. But mostly just completely uninvolved where we can’t get them on the phone and their emails change constantly. Principal N

Principal R mentioned that she continued to seek out ways to get parents involved and commented that she considered parental involvement one of her “low areas.” Principal M identified the concerns of her students’ parents and explained that parents in a resource challenged community were focused on their basic needs and left education to the school.

[Parents] will call about snack. They will say my child didn’t get snack today, you know, that type of thing. It wasn’t about academics, and one of the issues . . . you may have good low-income families

and they're not necessarily thinking about the education aspect. They're thinking about, how can I survive? How can I provide for my child? They're not necessarily thinking about the education aspect. They're going to leave that to the teachers. Principal M

Because Principal M recognized that parents were generally thinking about survival, she ensured that the school set high expectations for students' academic success. She invested in growth mindset training for teachers to promote a vision for learning and growth throughout the school. She focused on setting goals with staff and noted that teacher and every student had a goal and knew their goal.

My expectation is that all students can learn and move on if they're given that in the environment . . . I always talk about, you cannot go back, and you have to move forward. Principal M

Principal D discussed the challenge of introducing new initiatives at his school and concluded that disrupting routines and mindsets required connection with the community.

It's hard to get people to buy into things. They have been, doing the same thing for a long time. It's hard to introduce a new program to them. Why do we need to do it like this, differently? We've been, doing this the other way. And so, you have to, you know, provide validation for them, and that's done in a relationship. Principal D

A connection to the community, both inside and outside of the school, came through a sensitivity to the community's culture. Principal D recognized why some stakeholders did not want to support improvement efforts, and he understood the importance of addressing it through relationship. This is consistent with the research of [Klar and Brewer \(2014\)](#) whose case study of a high-poverty middle school found "successful leaders use cultural norms, policies, and the community's relationship to the wider culture to attempt to contribute to the well-being of the students" (p. 423).

Similarly, Principal N discussed how her community influenced her actions as a principal. As an example, she described a procedural change that she attempted after seeing it work in other locations and shared this reflection:

It just flopped culturally because we can't always expect parents to perform in a certain way the same across the board so because we're high poverty, and you know, and these parents are not going to behave the same as those down the street where they are like 25% free and reduced, so it's just the nature of people. It's a different set of expectations so that's why that failed. Now we are, doing it like we used to. I'm sure at some level I could have really pushed it. But it wasn't worth dying on the sword for. Principal N

The complexity of remaining sensitive to the school community culture was highlighted in Principal N's statement. While it may have shown a deficit mindset toward parents in high poverty, it also illustrated a willingness to reprioritize and adjust practices to cultural norms when appropriate.

Principal R discussed how she navigated contextual norms with sensitivity.

You don't come in and make a major change. You have to come in and observe first because what you want to change may be worse off than what they have. Principal R

This community awareness approach to change contrasted with some of the comments by principals in non-outlier schools. Principal 8 (a non-outlier) knew how to implement school improvements in challenging situations, but he did not reveal a sensitivity to how changes were received by his community. In describing a recent change initiative, he commented the following:

Most of my people have gotten on board with it. And the few that haven't, they're not getting on board with anything. So, you kind of, you look at them, and you recognize where they are, and you leave them in their box, and you keep going. Principal 8 (non-outlier)

Among non-outlier principals, there appeared to be a more of an isolationist view of the school. Community members and faculty who did not see a need to change were simply left “in their box.” In contrast, principals in outlier schools spoke of how they both accommodated and disrupted local expectations.

Similar to Principal M, Principal C understood the focus of parents and sought to introduce new possibilities.

I try to show students what is available for them, show parents opportunities that they have. You know . . . space camp—I’m going to put that out there for them so that they can know the all the opportunities that their kids could have. Principal C

The ability to assess and respect local expectations and also introduce other options appeared to be one way that principals in outlier schools helped their students break barriers and maintain higher than anticipated learning outcomes.

The data showed that responding to community challenges with empathy was another way principals in outlier schools may be promoting positive student outcomes. Principal M responded to the barriers parents faced with lack of transportation and childcare by moving school events and meetings to a community center that was logistically accessible by the poorest families. She explained the following:

We had a community center, so we held events there. And so, people that live in the projects—all they have to do is walk to the community center. And so that was a big turnout. We had ice cream and games. Principal M

Principal M spoke of her district’s efforts to disrupt poverty, and she detailed how the superintendent and school principals worked to give parents information on topics of interest to them.

So, for families, [we presented] to the parents like various jobs . . . Hey, this is a job that you might like to do. And you could probably make more than I’m making right now. One was just passing the surgical tools to a doctor . . . a surgical technician. [People in these jobs are] making more money than the administrators out here. They really get into that. They were like, ‘Hey, how can I get that?’ ‘Well, here is a website, right? Here’s a link right here’. Principal M

Principals in outlier schools prioritized the development of teachers and relationships

Principals in outlier schools focused on developing their instructional staff. These principals recognized the value of their teachers and sought to maintain student success by making strategic staffing decisions.

The best thing that you can do for your students, of course, is to hire great people and improve the ones you have, and we truly believe in that philosophy, and it’s just amazing to see what the teachers are able to do. Principal C

Grissom and Bartanen (2018) affirmed that retaining highly effective teachers was an important way in which principals influence student outcomes. Although several participants spoke of the difficulty of attracting high quality teachers to their schools, these principals sought ways to support their teachers. They dedicated available funds to hiring additional instructional staff and to building capacity in their teachers through what they considered to be a lot of professional development.

You really need to put the money towards the instructional piece . . . Principal N

I think the programs we chose to really pour into our teachers with professional development has really pushed our rating, and so I attribute a lot of our success to what we’ve put our focus on. Principal C

You got to build that capacity in the building. But understand, you got to focus on their positive. You can't always focus on their negative. Principal R

Principal D considered the growth needs of his teachers and recognized that his district was not going to provide all the training his people needed, and so he decided he would help his staff and learn what they needed to know. Principal D concluded that he had to be "proactive" with faculty development and believed this made a difference in the high-needs context. Likewise, Principal M discussed what she considered to be an "abundance of professional development" for her teachers and how she worked to remind them that "they are the ones that make teaching and learning happen." Overall, outlier principals were deliberately people-centered and appeared to approach student success by extending influence and resources toward developing teachers.

Non-outlier principals also recognized the importance of their teaching staff and spoke of teacher needs. However, instead of focusing on the professional development of teachers, the emphasis among principals in non-outlier schools was on changing instruction and their "low" test scores. Principal 9 (a nonoutlier) commented that "of course" his school was "data driven," but he made no contention to what he saw as undesirable test scores and opportunities for teacher development.

In addition to developing educators, principals in outlier schools also focused on developing relationships and partnerships with leaders in the community. In Principal M's suburban school, she described the community as "close-knit" and believed small business owners and pastors of churches were "invested in education." While a high level of resource poverty exists within the area, both Principal C and Principal M gave examples of the generosity of local leaders toward their school and other schools in their district.

They really do pour into our kids and our schools . . . I could call the man who owns [-] and [-], and I know that if I need something, he's either going to give me a discount or bring it over to me. You know, he's going to help with what we need. Principal C

The superintendent started these meetings about five years ago and had them come in and really get their input like pastors of different churches, different business owners, . . . some of the business leaders they made a contribution to the STEAM Academy . . . [I participated] in all of that as well . . . every one of those forums or those leadership meetings with the community leaders the principals had to be there to describe what the needs were, where they were concerned, or what, you know, what can we do to get better. Principal M

Principal C and Principal N leveraged their relational networks to benefit students, and both leaders described building relationships of trust.

I have a good rapport with the community. I feel like people do truly trust and believe that I'm here for them. Principal C

Just building the trust and knowing that everyone can believe in what I'm, doing so that they'll hop on board. Principal N

While principals in non-outlier schools also mentioned the importance of relationships, overall, their focus was less on relationships with community members and more on their connections within the school district. Principal 7 (a nonoutlier) described only internal relationships, which relationships he relied upon when making important school decisions:

Definitely the relationships with my, you know, district leaders. Because there's many times when we do call upon the different departments at the district level when we need help, you know, making decisions or dealing with certain issues that may come up throughout the year. And just relationships with other principals. Principal 7 (non-outlier)

Principals in outlier schools held asset focused perspectives

Each of the principals in outlier schools mentioned that their schools had, in their judgment, enough financial resources to purchase all the supplies, curriculum and technology that their students needed. Besides mentioning a desire for additional teacher units to further decrease class sizes, no one discussed a need or desire for more material resources in their school.

I think money matters, but at some level, there are diminishing returns. I think at some level it just doesn't matter because once you have enough paper and pencils and curriculum, what else do you really need? Principal N

We're very, very blessed, you know. I think we make really good use of our fiscal resources, just like we are a school-wide Title I school so we have a lot of money, but we use our Title I money for personnel, so again, we're pouring into our people. Principal C

We have everything that we need. Every student has a Chromebook. Every classroom has a smartboard, every class has extra Chromebooks, you'd have a Google TV, camera screens. I mean, it is—it is a lot. We have iPads, Kindles. It's just a lot of technology that we have. Principal M

These principals in outlier schools spoke of what their schools had in terms of resources and how they used their finances, but none connected financial resources for their students' outcomes.

In contrast, among the principals in non-outlier schools there appeared to be a perception that their schools did not have adequate financial resources. There was a concern with raising funds for the school, with meeting material needs, and with how their district distributed funds to schools. Principal 10 (a nonoutlier) discussed the effort she put in to generating money and negotiating to acquire tangible resources for the school:

As a school principal, you have bills, but you have no income. Yeah. That was the biggest shocker . . . you quickly become someone who looks for money at every avenue you can find it . . . If I wanted something, I tried to strike a deal with everybody that I could— I would go to our legislative delegation and I would say, 'I need this for my school'. Principal 10 (non-outlier)

Similarly, Principal 8 (a nonoutlier) spoke of his belief that his district did not provide enough money to support professional development for both teachers and leaders.

And a lot of times districts—they want to give money for teachers to do professional learning, but not necessarily administrators. Yeah, so I fight that battle . . . I'm trying to be the best leader I can be. So, what money I have dedicated to professional development, I will refuse to spend it on myself; I would rather spend it on my teachers. So, I'm giving up all the money here locally to the teachers, but nobody's given me any money to do this. Principal 8 (non-outlier)

Principal 8 (a nonoutlier) saw resource allocation as a "battle" he had to fight and because of the lack of funds and he saw himself sacrificing his opportunities to improve through principal professional development. In contrast to the asset-based mindset found in leaders of outlier schools, nonoutliers emphasized what was lacking in their schools.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the perspectives and priorities of principals in outlier schools – schools that have consistently outperformed their peers despite being in Alabama's most high-needs, resource challenged environments. Rather than looking at the most highly performing, or best "turnaround" principals, we aimed to investigate a different group: principals in schools who have consistently beaten the odds given their community conditions. Using a statewide longitudinal dataset, we first established that community characteristics statistically explain student outcomes over and above student, school and district characteristics, particularly average school achievement and proficiency rates.

Next, we identified the top 16 outlier schools based on their performance in light of a challenging community context, noting that the greatest difference between these schools and other schools was the extent to which they were embedded in low education, low-income and high unemployment areas with generational poverty. Using a statewide longitudinal dataset, we identified principals in schools who were statistical outliers and interviewed them to gain an understanding of how school leaders can help students thrive in resource challenged communities.

Our data led us to three main takeaways. First, leaders in outlier schools held a deep and nuanced understanding of their community context and were able to navigate between accommodating and disrupting local expectations and norms. We saw evidence of principals responding to the challenges of environmental poverty by adjusting protocols and making exceptions to school policy when needed to accommodate parents and to encourage involvement. Day (2007) and Gurr (2015) found that successful principals were context sensitive, and in this study, principals in outlier schools believed they were able to both acquiesce to certain community modes of conduct and also stretch parents and teachers to think beyond limitations. Each of the principals in outlier schools provided examples of ways they used their position to link students and families to high expectations, options and opportunities, such as passing along information on learning camps and career paths for parents. Day *et al.* (2016) found that a school's ability to maintain effectiveness came from a principal's understanding of the school's needs, and principals in these outlier schools explained how they gave attention to their school's need to reflect the larger community. Overall, the principals in outlier schools brought an empathetic perspective to their schools through their ability to genuinely understand their community's challenges and to offer their professional knowledge of options for students and families.

Still, there were also instances where some participants expressed what appeared to be a deficit mindset toward parents, particularly regarding family involvement in the school. In Hallinger and Murphey's (1986) study on effective schools at high and low-socio-economic status (SES) levels, they found the following: "In the low-SES communities, parents were minimally involved in the life of the school. Parent-initiated involvement was rare, and there was little overall involvement of parents in the educational program;" the authors explained that, consequently, in these schools the faculty held low expectations of parents (p. 344). We hypothesize that experience with a lack of parent involvement could be a reason why some principals in this study characterized parents, at times, negatively, and we suggest that this is an area for future study.

Second, principals in outlier schools believed they supported students by developing teachers and building supportive relationships with community leaders and local service providers. These principals credited their teaching faculty and their teacher's rigor in instruction with student successes. Teacher professional development was aimed to develop not only teaching capacity but also to enlarge the expectations of the staff. These principals viewed their leadership as interconnected with faculty and staff, decentering hierarchical power relationships within the organization. They discussed collaboration efforts and worked toward coaching their faculty toward leadership. Furthermore, these principals perceived they had reciprocal relationships with community leaders and local governing authorities. Preston *et al.* (2013) found that "to be successful, rural principals must be able to nimbly mediate relations within the local community" (p. 1), and we saw that leaders in rural and suburban locales prioritized community relationships and worked to develop trusting networks of support for their schools.

Third, principals in outlier schools did not view the poverty and community challenges surrounding the school as a barrier to growth and learning inside of the school. While they spoke of resource limitation in the community context, these principals did not see their outlier schools in a condition of lack or need. There was reason to believe that while these

schools served resource limited communities, the schools themselves were not impoverished. Each principal considered his/her school to be well equipped with learning materials and technology because of Title I funds, grants and local business donations. Overall, principals in outlier schools did not fixate on material resources, but instead, they were attended to the complexities of their school context and local culture and focused on building teacher talent and a web of interconnecting relationships outside of the school building.

As an exploratory study, this research sought to investigate the perspectives and approaches of principals leading in Alabama's outlier schools. Future research is needed to examine principal leadership in outlier contexts from the vantage point of faculty and community members as well as outlier schools in other states. This study did not venture into a model of effective practices in the outlier context, but future work should look to do so by identifying patterns of effective practice among leaders in resourced challenged schools that outperform their peers. Furthermore, more attention is needed in the outlier context, and future work should look for ways to study the relationships between an effective outlier school and its community.

Conclusion

Perhaps one of the most interesting takeaways was that principals in outlier schools were not categorically different in their approaches from the principals in nonoutlier schools or from what we would typically expect from a successful school principal. Rather, we found subtle change in the outlook and approach. Leaders in outlier schools leaned toward an asset-based perspective that acknowledged – but did not dwell on – the material limitations surrounding their schools. They focused instead on building a wide base of trusting relationships that began deep in the community. This serves to counter the image of the “heroic” leader as the savior of struggling schools (Bush, 2020), and instead supports the notion that leadership geared toward long-term success should be part of a distributed strategy focused on building school capacity and supportive relationships that reach beyond the building walls (Leithwood and Strauss, 2009).

In addition to emphasizing capacity building practices (e.g. Dimmock, 2011; Mullen and Jones, 2008; Woulfin and Weiner, 2019), training principals to focus on local assets with techniques such as asset mapping (Jakes *et al.*, 2015; Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993), appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider *et al.*, 2008) or the community capitals framework (Flora *et al.*, 2003) may serve as an avenue to build lasting relations with community actors while maintaining constructive focus on local strengths. As a result, successfully leading a school in a challenging environment may not require an overhaul of leadership methods, roles or techniques. Instead, exceeding expectations may be a matter of combining good practices with wide perspectives, deep relationships and steady optimism.

Notes

1. We note that this is similar to the effective schools concept (Leithwood *et al.*, 2010; Purkey and Smith, 1983). While effective schools focused on high performing schools that also had high-needs characteristics (e.g. student demographics, resources), we designate outlier schools as those high performing schools that are also situated in high-needs environments (e.g. high unemployment, generational poverty).
2. Model parameters were set with the goals of (1) identifying the highest-level outlier schools in the most challenging environments, and (2) restricting to a manageable number of these top schools. Robustness checks with relaxed parameters the yielded similar results with reduced statistical difference; the present parameters (top 5% residual outliers, top quintile community challenge score, within-cluster) were used to keep the number of schools identified manageable. STATA's cluster k function was used to select clusters with the optimal separation, resulting in 5 clusters, of which one

met the above criteria. Notably, we pooled all Alabama schools and did not differentiate by school locale (urban/rural), or level (elementary, middle, high) given the goal was to identify basic outlier school characteristics. Differentiating by local or level is out of the scope of the current study but may be an avenue for future research.

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