



Citation for published version:

Arar, K & Mifsud, D 2023, 'The *where, who, and what* of poverty in schools: Re-framing the concept from a leadership perspective', *Power and Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17577438231218377>

DOI:

[10.1177/17577438231218377](https://doi.org/10.1177/17577438231218377)

Publication date:

2023

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

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The *where, who, and what* of poverty in schools: Re-framing the concept from a leadership perspective

Power and Education
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–15
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DOI: 10.1177/17577438231218377
journals.sagepub.com/home/pae



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Abstract

It is widely agreed that the relationship between poverty and education is bi-directional: poor people lack access to a decent education, and without the latter people are often constrained to a life of poverty (Van der Berg, 2008). Poverty as a “lifetime, and life-wide status” thus develops into a self-fulfilling prophecy that is difficult to emerge from. We acknowledge the interplay between the notions of “poverty,” and “disadvantage,” especially in the wide context of education, and school leadership more specifically, as the focus of this conceptual paper, and thus use them interchangeably in order to advocate for full, and equal opportunities in life as a matter of equity, and fairness. Moreover, we firmly regard education as a direct social justice contributor both in the provision of equal life opportunities, and in imparting students with the responsibility for the perpetration of such opportunities (Waite and Arar, 2020). In this conceptual commentary, we stretch this scholarship of social justice further by troubling the notion of poverty from a social justice lens, and redefining it as a type of “under-privilege” in order to engage scholars, policy-makers, and stakeholders in meaning-making, and action. We seek to provide our contextual, inclusive, and problematized re-definition of poverty in relation to schooling, and education by portraying students to be considered at risk at any point in time. We ultimately ask ourselves, and our readers to reflect upon this quintessential question: “What is the purpose of education epitomized by?”

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Keywords

Poverty, disadvantage, educational leadership, purpose of education, social justice

Introduction

What seems to be forgotten in all this—and some might say: what is *conveniently* forgotten in all this—is that pupils, and students are not simply objects of educational “*interventions*,” effective or otherwise, but that they are subjects in their own right. What seems to be forgotten, in other words, is that the whole point of education can never be that of subjecting students to ongoing external control, but that education should always be aimed at enhancing the ability of pupils, and students to “enact” their own “*subjectness*” ... This is perhaps the main problem with the language of learning, because as soon as we claim that education is “*all about learning*,” we quickly forget that what really matters is what pupils, and students will do with everything they have learned. We are too quickly drawn into monitoring, and measuring the learning itself, looking for the interventions that produce the desired learning outcomes, trying to control the whole machinery, and thus easily lose sight of the fact that children, and young people are human beings who face the challenge of living their own life, and of trying to live it well (Biesta, 2022: 2-3, original emphasis).

Do all students have access to the “language of learning”? It is widely agreed that the relationship between poverty and education is bi-directional: poor people lack access to a decent education, and without the latter people are often constrained to a life of poverty (Van der Berg, 2008). Poverty as a “lifetime, and life-wide status” thus develops into a self-fulfilling prophecy that is difficult to emerge from. Poverty is multi-faceted, and is hereby regarded as an abuse of the freedom of choice as a result of the lack of capability to perform successfully in society (Sen, 1992, 2001). Growing up in disadvantage has a holistic, and long-lasting impact on children’s lives (Clarke and Thevenon, 2022). Children hailing from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds often lag behind in education (Blanden et al., 2022), are more likely to suffer from poor physical, and mental health (Clark et al., 2020), and develop emotional, and behavioral difficulties (Donkin, 2014), among other disparities. This “transmission of disadvantage” carries on into adulthood (Vera-Toscano and Wilkins, 2020), thus “scarring” or “shaping” them for life.

We acknowledge the interplay between the notions of “poverty,” and “disadvantage,” especially in the wide context of education, and school leadership more specifically, as the focus of this conceptual paper, and thus use them interchangeably in order to advocate for full, and equal opportunities in life as a matter of equity, and fairness. Notwithstanding, schools are cornerstone institutions in our society. They are charged with preparing our children to be thoughtful, productive, and successful citizens in our increasingly diverse societies (Biesta, 2016; Apple et al., 2016). Schools are also a microcosm of their local communities—and reflect the local demographic, cultural, and economic conditions (Glass, 2008). We acknowledge the fact that childhood poverty, and disadvantage, have disparate meanings, as well as implications in the Global North, and the Global South. Moreover, we firmly regard education as a direct social justice contributor both in the provision of equal life opportunities, and in imparting students with the responsibility for the perpetration of such opportunities (Waite and Arar, 2020). In a similar vein, Oplatka and Arar (2016) problematize the notion of leadership for social justice as constructed in dominant Western ideologies, stating that

traditional societies, and a particular conceptualization of leadership for social justice that is based on entrenched social norms giving unique meanings to issues of justice, respect, interpersonal relations, equality and equity in education ... [that cannot be] too normatively remote from local interpretations of life, and the “correct” structure of the society (p. 366).

In this conceptual commentary, we stretch this scholarship of social justice further by troubling the notion of poverty from a social justice lens, and redefining it as a type of “under-privilege” in order to engage scholars, policymakers, and stakeholders in meaning-making, and action. We seek to provide our contextual, inclusive, and problematized re-definition of poverty in relation to schooling, and education by portraying students to be considered at risk at any point in time. We feel that this redress is more urgent, given the recent COVID-19 crisis, and the various ways it has exposed, and accentuated inequalities (OECD, 2021). In visiting refugees in camps, in the integration of refugees in different spaces, and also the education of his nation under a colonial regime, Arar (2020) witnessed first-hand the educational experiences of the vulnerable, and the under-privileged, which brought to the fore some of the following questions: In the current neoliberal education discourse and policy, are we up to the task of closing economic or education debt gaps? Are we aware of the underlying elements, and current trends of the two-parent household decline, and the middle-income household failing, and the consequences of poverty? How can we reframe, and moreover restructure our public education to tend to the underprivileged? What is the role of educational leaders in tending to vulnerable, and underprivileged students’ digital needs in times of crisis, such as the pandemic? Can we address poverty without discussing race?

In the following section, we present the “conceptual synthesis” approach adopted as a methodological stance. We then problematize the notion of poverty as presented in policy definitions, and the notion of poverty and education, with a particular focus on the recent phenomenon of digital poverty. This is followed by a problematization of school leadership and poverty. “Re-definitions” of poverty in relation to schooling, and education lead to critical questions for educational leadership, policy, pedagogy, and theory, as well as recommendations for future research. We ultimately ask ourselves, and our readers to reflect upon this quintessential question raised by several scholars before us (e.g., Dewey, 1916; Biesta, 2022): “What is the purpose of education epitomized by?”

Inquiry: Our stance to problematizing “the” poverty concept

Despite this being a conceptual paper problematizing the poverty concept as presented in the literature, we would like to make a few clarifications to the reader about the source of the conceptual definitions under scrutiny, and critique. This is not a systematic review of the literature [similar to, e.g., Oplatka and Arar (2017); Gumus et al. (2021); Mifsud (2023)] exploring poverty, and its portraiture in relation to education more generally, and educational leadership more specifically (This will be the next step in the co-authors’ social justice scholarship project as detailed in the concluding section). We distinctly adopt Raffo et al.’s (2007) approach of “conceptual synthesis” that is concerned not merely with synthesizing “the substantive findings from research, but also to identify the conceptual bases out of which they have emerged” (p. 83). This, in turn, originally follows Nutley et al.’s (2002) form of a “conceptual synthesis” of research evidence, the aim of which is “to identify the key ideas, models and debates, and review the significance of these for developing a better understanding of research utilization, and evidence-based policy, and practice implementation” (p. 2)—an approach that resonates fully with the scope of our commentary. Our problematization of the “poverty” concept in relation to education is based on key exemplary items

revolving around policy definitions of poverty; as well as literature on poverty and education; digital poverty; and school leadership and poverty. What does the global stage of poverty and education look like in contrasting heterotopias of rich spaces, and those that are more wanting? More importantly, how do WE (academics, policy makers, practitioners, and all stakeholders) want to look into this landscape?

What is poverty?

Policy representations in global spaces and their problematization

There is no single or purely objective definition of poverty. Bradshaw (2007) explains this conceptual plurality as poverty theories being “deeply rooted in strongly held research traditions, and political values, reinforced by encompassing social, political, and economic institutions that have a stake in the issue” (p. 8). Notwithstanding, no one theory of poverty has developed that either incorporates or abrogates preceding concepts (Black, 1997). We thus argue that poverty is very much contingent, situational, and contextual.

Poverty, in the most holistic sense, generally refers to the lack of basic necessities required for human dignity, that can be summed up as “relative deprivation” (Bradshaw, 2007: 9). This leads to the distinction between the components of absolute, and relative poverty (Van der Berg, 2008). Absolute poverty is the absence of financial resources necessary for maintaining a basic standard of living, while relative poverty is determined by the society in which a person lives. In relation to education provision and access, the absence of adequate resources in situations of absolute poverty (especially in developing countries) hinders learning due to poor nutrition, and resultant ill health, home circumstances, and parental education levels. The relative poverty perspective in rich countries leads to the exclusion of “disadvantaged” students from the mainstream. In the context of the United States both the following dynamics contribute to widening the economic gap: the waves of undocumented immigrants, the decline of two-parent households, the falling middle-income households, and the close connection between race, and poverty (Payne, 2019). Consequently, within the United States, one in every six youths live in poverty (Cohn and Cohen, 2001). Leaders within schools need to recognize, and understand the causes of poverty as well as poverty’s impact on families, children, and learning. The poverty rate for three different ethnicities was as follows: African Americans, 40%, Latinos, 38%, and White 13% (Nguyen et al., 2020).

In 1983, the number of people identified as poor by the government’s official poverty line, “increased from around 11% of the population in 1979 to more than 15%” (Patterson, 2000: 205). This percentage was recorded as the highest since 1966-67. In 1984, the number of poor people was 14.4%. Patterson (2000) stated, “The result was a poverty population of between 33.7 and 35.5 million Americans at any given time, which was 9 to 10 million more people than in 1979.” The given data was determined by the government’s official definition of the poverty line. In 1985, it was recorded as more than 10,600 based on a family of four. Historically underrepresented groups continued to live in poverty: 33.8% of Blacks, 28.4% of Hispanics, and 11.5% of Whites were living in poor conditions (Patterson, 2000: p. 205).

Poverty can encompass other areas besides income earned, such as access to nutrition, shelter, health care, education, and empowerment (White et al., 2003). Factors such as teenage pregnancy rates, drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse rates, and child mental health are more well-known in developed countries due to the following: accessibility of statistics, applicability opinions, and political priority (White et al., 2003). However, childhood poverty within developing nations highlights starvation, malnutrition, illiteracy, chronic illness, and premature death (White et al., 2003).

A few northern European nations focus on intergenerational mobility, income inequality, and social exclusion (Smeeding, 2005). Valuing education creates economic growth and realigns resources in poor places of developing countries (Besley and Burgess, 2003). According to Duflo (2001), every formal year of education raises the household earnings in developing countries between 6 and 10% (Besley and Burgess, 2003). In the 2006–2007 school year, it was estimated that 7.7 million students attended high-poverty schools. There were 4.5 million students who attended urban public schools (Planty et al., 2009). Two components of segregation and poverty within the racial ghetto have created an environmentally unfriendly space that many White Americans are not aware of. White society is deeply embedded within the ghetto, and it is important to recognize that, “white institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it” (Massey and Denton, 1993: 155). Toward the end of the 1970’s, poor minority families were viewed by the following characteristics: unemployed, unwed childbearing, illiteracy, and dependency, that had categorized them as the “urban underclass” (Massey and Denton, 1993: 156). Racial segregation, and the black ghetto are the two main elements that are responsible for the continuation of black poverty in the United States. It is evident that when the poverty rate increases within a residentially segregated group, this creates a quick, and automatic pathway to an increase in the geographic concentration of poverty. Additionally, a small number of neighborhoods are affected when minority poverty is increased by high segregation. In regard to an integrated group, when poverty increases, the poverty is balanced throughout the urban area, and the neighborhood environment (Massey and Denton, 1993: 159).

Bradshaw (2007) thus problematizes power, and politics in the poverty agenda, stressing that the definition of poverty, and policies addressing it are determined by political biases and values, with powerful interests managing how poverty is discussed, and what is being done about it. Consequently, Bradshaw (2007) synthesizes five theories from the poverty literature, identifying both the variables, and mechanisms leading to the state of poverty. (1) Poverty may be caused by individual deficiencies, such as individual laziness, bad choices, incompetence, and inherent disabilities in a system where competition rewards winners, and punishes those who do not work hard, and make bad choices. (2) The second theory of poverty is caused by cultural belief systems that support subcultures of poverty where the subculture adopts values that are non-productive, and are contrary to norms of success. (3) The third theory of poverty is a progressive social one, which regards poverty as caused by economic, political, and social distortions or discrimination where systematic barriers prevent the poor from access, and accomplishment in key social institutions; including jobs, education, housing, health care, safety, and political representation, among others. (4) The fourth theory is a regional or geographic one caused by geographic disparities where social advantages, and disadvantages converge in discreet areas. This is often framed as rural poverty, ghetto poverty, urban disinvestment, Southern poverty, and third world poverty, among others, where notions of cluster, distance, economies of scale, and resource distributions buttress disparities. (5) The final theory, which builds on components of each of the other theories, relates to poverty caused by cumulative, and cyclical interdependencies. Spirals of poverty, and problems for individuals are mutually dependent, and powerfully connected to community shortcomings. How do these theories of poverty impact on education provision in general, and school leadership in particular, in both developed (rich), and developing countries?

Moreover, there has been an increase in income inequality coupled by a stagnation in social mobility in OECD countries, with people becoming more concerned about income disparities, and the ensuing inequality of both outcomes, and opportunities (OECD, 2021). Poverty can encompass other areas besides income earned, such as access to nutrition, shelter, health care, education, and empowerment (White et al., 2003). Factors, such as teenage pregnancy rates, drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse rates, and child mental health are more well-known in developed countries due to

the following: accessibility of statistics, applicability opinions, and political priority (White et al., 2003). However, childhood poverty within developing nations highlights starvation, malnutrition, illiteracy, chronic illness, and premature death (ibid, 2003). A few northern European nations focus on intergenerational mobility, income inequality, and social exclusion (Smeeding, 2005). Valuing education creates economic growth and realigns resources in poor places of developing countries (Besley and Burgess, 2003).

Poverty and education

Despite the highly contested nature of the concepts of poverty and education, the correlations between poverty and education in general, and educational attainment more specifically have been mentioned in the literature (Miller et al., 2014; Fortner et al., 2021; OECD, 2022). Children from disadvantaged families perform poorly at school, and often leave education with a limited range of knowledge, and skills than their more advantaged counterparts. Childhood socio-economic disadvantage spills over in other aspects of children's lives, well-being, and development, besides education, so they often start life on an unequal footing that continues to shape their opportunities, and outcomes into adulthood (Clarke and Thevenon, 2022). Students who reside in poverty demonstrate lower test scores, and are more likely to be held back or drop out of school (Children's Defense Fund, 1994). Students living in poverty are more associated with the risk factors that have an impact on brain development. Some of these factors integrate inadequate nutrition, substance abuse, maternal depression, exposure to environmental toxins, trauma/abuse, and the quality of daily care (Children's Defense Fund, 1994). Thus, students connected to these potential risk factors demonstrate lower academic achievement on standardized tests of reading comprehension, vocabulary, mathematics, and general knowledge. Additionally, malnutrition is connected to delayed motor skills, delayed physical growth, and social withdrawal. As a result, students could feel lower levels of self-esteem, and feelings of isolation (Maeroff, 1998; Polakow, 1993). Furthermore, lower expectations as well as a pedagogy of poverty could be placed on students in the school environment (Brown and Pollitt, 1996; Haberman, 1999; Maeroff, 1998; Polakow, 1993).

The OECD 2018 report on the PISA 2015 survey that was undertaken by 72 countries (including all 36 OECD countries as well as 36 partner countries, and economies), focuses on the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and student achievement, well-being, and social mobility. Its results draw attention to the educational challenges faced by low-income families, given the substantiated relationship between poverty, and low educational performance. Consequently, compensating for students' socio-economic disadvantage is one of the furthestmost ordeals facing teachers, school leaders, and education systems as a whole (Schleicher, 2014).

Raffo et al. (2007) map the terrain of the education and poverty literature by focusing on three levels that are the micro (individual learner), the meso (schools, families, and neighborhoods), and the macro (underlying social structures, such as class, race, and gender), and two perspectives of functionalism and social criticism. The functionalist position assumes education as being essential, and beneficial to society as a whole and its individuals, therefore explanations for the failure of these benefits are attributed to the individual learner, his/her immediate social contexts, and the underlying social structures. On the other hand, the socially critical position regards education and society as mirroring unequal distributions of power and resources, advocating for an education system that is both critical of, and challenges existing power structures.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light how education inequity affects those in society who have the least (Harris and Jones, 2020), with a World Bank report (2020) suggesting that the very recent pandemic is likely to be the major cause of the first increase in global poverty since

1998). According to UNESCO (2021), even before the pandemic began affecting social, and economic life on a global scale, a significant part of the student population in G20 countries were abandoning education before the compulsory school-leaving age, with wide discrepancies observed within countries, depending on income, location, and ethnicity. This points to the fact that regardless of a country's average income, some marginalized groups are at risk of further exclusion—this was apparent pre-pandemic, but then became more pronounced. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the pandemic-induced school closures further highlighted the issue of digital power, and digital poverty in school education (Ferris et al., 2022). Limited access to digital infrastructure, equipment, education, and training has a direct correlation on life experiences, and opportunities (UNICEF, 2017). On the other hand, there are several factors that determine whether one has access or not to digital capital, mainly finance, training and knowledge, as well as the supporting infrastructure (Donaghy, 2021). Educational technology, and its prominent role in continued schooling provision during the pandemic, and afterward has indeed not only sharpened the attainment gap, but also brought to the fore a new kind of “disadvantaged” student category due to the digital divide.

School leadership and poverty

It is imperative for school leaders, such as principals, to acknowledge that each child who steps into their school brings value in the form of cultural capital, social capital, and funds of knowledge (Yosso and Burciaga, 2016). School leadership needs to embody essential tools within to eliminate the deficit-based views of education. The primary love language of leadership established within schools should encompass inclusion, equity and social justice, especially for students living in poverty. Through the positive influence demonstrated by school leaders, true transformation of care, empathy, listening, and deep learning can evolve within the entire school atmosphere; thus, creating a safe, and welcoming space to learn, and thrive (Love, 2019).

It is crucial for educational leaders to transition their dispositional paradigms to an asset-based mindset for providing the necessary support to youth living in poverty (Fortner et al., 2021). Furthermore, deep and equitable change necessitates reflective educational leaders to know who they are as well as their workspaces, and communities they are involved in (Shields, 2018). Shared leadership among principals is consistent with Fullan's (1998) examination that “healthy neighborhoods, and healthy schools go hand in hand” (p. 8). Additionally, creating external, and internal coherence is an essential element of effective leadership. Leaders within schools act as advocates, and negotiators who network in order to create coalitions to support the underprivileged (Lisle et al., 2019). Equity-minded school leaders are deeply, and courageously committed to dismantling the institutionalized inequitable practices that are prevalent within their schools. They are aware that the cultural, and social capital of all students should be celebrated and honored, especially when empowering students who come from poverty. Additionally, these students should be supported in believing that they are valuable, and worthy of the school culture, and community. Lastly, leaders cultivate an understanding that educational equity is a long journey with the mindset that change is possible along with the courage discovered within the redemption of the struggle (Fortner et al., 2021). Effective school leaders need to recognize unique challenges that are involved with leading a school in a high-poverty area, such as limited resources, and high student needs. For schools to be successful as well as thrive, leaders must be able to develop, and sustain collaborative partnerships and relationships with parents, community members, and other stakeholders. A few key elements, such as motivating, inspiring, and leading need to occur for teachers, and staff to effectively meet the needs of their students. Additionally, school leaders must focus on developing and implementing effective strategies, and procedures to help students become successful in the school environment.

Lastly, school leaders must recognize the unique challenges, and needs of their students to transform the learning spaces to be equitable, and supportive (Leahy and Shore, 2019).

A rural, high-poverty middle school was examined to understand the impact of leadership practices, and beliefs focused on increasing student achievement. The principal's intention of aligning the middle school in a positive direction required confronting a crucial question asked by a student about them being labeled as "the dumb school" (Klar and Brewer, 2014). Supporting students in redirecting their thoughts translated to engaging in high expectations, and supporting students, and staff in developing, and accomplishing new goals (Klar and Brewer, 2014). A positive outcome was also found in rewarding students for displaying good character, and academic achievement; even if they only met the expectation, and did not exceed it. The positive influences that the principal demonstrated were hard work, commitment, understanding a community's needs, culture, norms and values, creating pathways for educators to collaborate as well as share strategies for helping students. The principal, and other teachers also worked together to involve the parents. As a result, there was evidence of increased levels in the social, and moral capital of parents in regard to feeling connected to the school, and supporting students learning in the home environment (Klar and Brewer, 2014). For principal preparation programs, principals should learn both the research-based leadership strategies, and be equipped to demonstrate the strategies, and skills within unique school, and community contexts (Klar and Brewer, 2014). For principals to take positive change within rural school environments, they need to be aware of the barriers encountered within the schools, and understand the concept of placism (Jimerson, 2005). Supportive strategies for students living in rural communities may need to encompass a vision that stakeholders, schools, and communities visualize being possible (Klar and Brewer, 2014). Bradshaw (2007) interestingly argued that Community development programs can build their efforts around three integral components for ending the cycle of poverty:

1. Community programs—encompass various services to connect individual, and community needs.
2. Collaboration—create networking systems with different organizations.
3. Community organizing—local people can understand how they are connected to the community. For people living in poverty, empowerment is crucial to addressing this issue.

As a result of all the barriers, and challenges that students living in poverty encounter, teachers need to learn instructional practices, and approaches to involve parents as well as develop democratic communities. Additionally, leaders within schools need the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes to support teachers in teaching students living in poverty, and the motivation as well as courage to be engaged in policy decisions with the pursuit of creating more equitable schools (Lyman and Villani, 2002). Conrath (2001) argues that the national prejudice against poor people, including poor children, is a cultural ethnic. Teacher stereotypes, and misconceptions about poverty are prevalent, and attributed to schools failing to thrive. The deep recognition of one's own belief system on poverty is essential for educators to work successfully with students living in poor communities. Once teachers cultivate an honest understanding of their own attitudes, judgments and biases on poverty, positive action toward true, and sustainable change can begin within the foundations of schools (Lyman and Villani, 2002). Overall, when teachers are engaged with the human realities of poverty, they can develop the love, and compassion necessary to do the deep work of improving schools. Additionally, three crucial components should be considered in teaching educational leadership preparation programs to educators. The first element is learning the complexity of poverty, especially its causes, the impact of poverty on the developmental, social, and

learning needs of students and families living in poverty, and the influence of poverty intersecting systemically with other social justice topics (Lyman and Villani, 2002).

Concluding remarks: Rethinking educational leadership

School leaders, and role models within school environments, need to focus on pathways that lead to lasting and sustainable leadership in education, specifically with an emphasis on improving schools. School leaders play an integral role in shaping, and influencing the entire school dynamic, such as staff members, teachers, students, and families. The specific roles that school leaders need to engage in for their schools to be successful include promoting and maintaining a positive school culture, developing leadership capacity, engaging in ongoing professional development, and utilizing data to inform decision-making. Lastly, a sustainable leadership model can effectively support continuous school improvement efforts (Lambert, 2007). Therefore, we can begin to process, and pose the following question: What does a clear research-based theory of change in re-imagining schools catering for students from a poverty background look like, within different contexts and ecologies?

“Which view of poverty we ultimately embrace will have a direct bearing on the public policies we pursue” (Schiller, 1989: 4). Defining poverty has been a profitable field for academics, policy makers, book publishers, and ideologues. As a result, the various definitions for poverty have multiplied (Bradshaw, 2007). Reed and Sautter (1990) state that the only common denominator for the children of poverty is that they are brought up under desperate conditions beyond their control, and for them, the rhetoric of equal opportunity seems a cruel hoax, an impossible dream. Communities that place equality as a top priority, and create spaces that reflect values of equality are more likely to not leave any student behind (Duncan, 1999). Additionally, education is the most crucial institution with the power to reverse this dynamic within poor societies.

The confrontation of schools, and education systems with the magnitude of challenges is not a new phenomenon. The complexity of education lies in its arduous link with the contested ideologies, interests, needs, background, economic wealth; entities, desires, structures, and the changing nature of the learner, and learning (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2012; Smith, 2005). Yet, the social, political, and economic impact of this complexity on the nation-states has alleviated the challenges, and issues concerning 21st century schools, and education systems locally, and globally while dealing with poverty, and students from underprivileged backgrounds (Arar and Orucu, 2021). Being at the crossroads of rapid education reforms, schools, students, and educators are dramatically affected by the socio-political problems, immigration, racism, inequity, socio-economic deprivation, accountability measures, school failure, violence, insufficient teacher quality, and recently the COVID-19 pandemic (Arar et al., 2020). School leaders, teachers, students, superintendents, and other relevant stakeholders carry burdensome demands that are oftentimes beyond their power, and control.

Research on challenging school circumstances, and school-serving communities facing poverty poses a wide array of themes, but they are limited to certain issues, and/or geographies (MacBeath et al., 2007). The growing scholarly interest on the leadership in schools facing extremely challenging circumstances and poverty (Ahumada et al., 2015; Bush et al., 2010; Jacobson, 2008; MacBeath et al., 2007; Smith and Bell, 2014) is evident as educational leadership requires critical, and ethical practice to transform the undesirable features of schools, and societies to desired ones. While global trends, such as neoliberal policies, immigration, and economic crises contour the education systems globally, challenges in local contexts, and at the school level show variations (Arar et al., 2020). This makes us rethink what challenge means for the local education systems, and/or particular school settings in different parts of the world. Chapman (2005) defines schools facing

challenging circumstances as the ones having “a disproportionately large number of negative factors acting on [them]” (p. 23). These negative factors are multiple, and interrelatedly complex. The austerity of challenges are directly related to the cultural, socio-political, and economic state of a country, which also determines the scope of educational research in a given country context. Geographically, while some schools may suffer from deprivation, lack of hygiene, and infrastructure; in other geographies some may struggle with endless inspection, and rigid accountability and testing regimes (Chapman and Gunter, 2009). In developing countries, much of the related research delves into the poverty, and underprivileged schools (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Karhidag-Dennis and Temiz, 2020; Ylimaki et al., 2007), health issues of student population (i.e., HIV in Africa), poor infrastructure, and weak teacher quality (Ng’ondi, 2012). Moreover; terrorism and violence, and their impact on local schools, and education systems are prevalent in research in the conflict-ridden contexts. Furthermore, policy-related issues may cause students with different religions, and cultures to struggle (Arar and Orucu, 2022). Developed nations also encounter adverse challenges (Archambault and Garon, 2011; Ylimaki et al., 2007). For example, those who receive high numbers of immigrants, and refugees encounter socio-cultural, and economic problems in their schools, and education systems (Arar et al., 2020; Bogotch and Kervin, 2019; Norberg and Gross, 2018).

Wars, poverty, violence, and immigration produce multi-layered challenges, and turbulence in school systems. Thus, research indicates that the scope of challenges are related with social injustices (Arar et al., 2019), racism, and equity issues (Brooks and Watson, 2019), challenges of marketization, accountability, and commodification of educational labor (Bogotch et al., 2017; Chapman and Gunter, 2009), low-performing schools (Harris and Chapman, 2004) and turnaround schools (Hansen, 2012; Murphy, 2008); performativity culture (Morris, 2004), as well as recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers (Monk, 2007). Determining such challenges, and fathoming the profound dynamics below the iceberg is a tough task for practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers; whereas such severe situations necessitate agility, and solid emergency responses within the schools in many cases (Arar et al., 2020). We are well aware that the chaotic global ecology perpetuates the inequalities, and produces a myriad of challenges. Yet, challenging school circumstances could be categorized in terms of social, political, cultural, and economic reasons, which turns them into turbulent spaces locally, and globally. Furthermore, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has globally transformed the educational spaces, and added further to the already inherent challenges that schools have (Daniel, 2020). Under emergency conditions in severe cases, the priority of the school predominantly moves to addressing the basic needs of the students, while school improvement (Potter et al., 2002) or academic achievement may not even be considered. Hence, the current literature recognizes that it is more problematic for a school to improve when it encounters challenging circumstances (Gray, 2001). Even across the same country context, schools differ geographically, and so do the challenges they face (Klar and Brewer, 2013), let alone global variations. In this respect, rethinking the relativity of the challenges is inevitable, which urges us to reconsider the contextual variations, and what the key actors within such spaces experience. School leaders and teachers are the key actors to ensure a secure environment within challenging school contexts. The growing diversity, and dramatic social, and political change places schools, school leaders, and teachers in jeopardy. Therefore, as educators, and educational researchers we are urged to cope with the growing diversity, and the dramatic social change while trying to ensure equality, and high academic achievement for students (Arar et al., 2020).

We, therefore, ask readers to reflect, and act upon the following questions when they are dealing with the issue of poverty in education, at the global, national, regional, system, school, or classroom level:

What does poverty mean in your education system or school context? Is there a way to measure the effects of poverty on schooling to mitigate their effects on the student's holistic development? How do policy documents relating to poverty in education translate at system, school, and classroom level? Who are the students you consider to be "at risk"?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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