



# Successful principalship of high-performance schools in high-poverty communities

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this article is to review literature in certain areas and report on related results from a study of successful school principalship in the Australian state of Tasmania.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Surveys on successful school principalship were distributed to a population of 195 government schools (excluding colleges and special schools) in Tasmania with a return rate of 67 per cent. Surveys sought responses in areas such as demographic characteristics (including a measure of school poverty), leadership characteristics, values and beliefs, tensions and dilemmas, learning and development, school capacity building, decision making, evaluation and accountability, and perceptions of school success. In addition, details of actual student performance on literacy and numeracy tests were supplied by the Department of Education.

**Findings** – The literature reviewed in this article indicated that world-wide poverty is a major issue and that there is a nexus between poverty and education. While questions may be raised about the effectiveness of schools as institutions in serving those in high-poverty communities, as well as problems in labelling a school as high-poverty, evidence has emerged of high-performing schools in high-poverty communities. A common characteristic of these schools is successful, high-performing leadership.

**Practical implications** – Evidence is provided on the nature of successful principalship of high-performance schools in high-poverty communities.

**Originality/value** – World-wide poverty is a major and growing social and economic issue. Yet, material available in the area, including research reported here, leads one to conclude that the research on successful principalship in high-performance schools in high-poverty communities needs to be given greater priority.

**Keywords** Poverty, Schools, Performance management, Principals, Australia

**Paper type** Literature review

## Introduction

Worldwide poverty is a major and growing social and economic issue (The Equalities Review, 2007). Some see schools as one way to ameliorate poverty and evidence is emerging of high-performance schools in high-poverty communities. A common characteristic of these schools is successful principalship. The purpose of this article is to review literature in these areas and report on related results from a study of successful school principalship in the Australian state of Tasmania. The literature review develops through the situation of growing poverty, the nexus between poverty and education, evidence of high-performance schools in high-poverty communities, and evidence of successful principalship of high-performance schools in high-poverty communities.



**Growing poverty**

The consequences of growing up poor affects millions worldwide (Rainwater and Smeeding, 2003). In Australia, poverty is said to be increasing (Healey, 2002) and, as greater numbers of Australian adults live in poverty clearly so do more children (The Smith Family and NATSEM, 2002). This should be of great concern given the connections between family backgrounds, personal and social skills, and success later in life. For example, research by Margo *et al.* (2006, p. viii) employing two large surveys that followed young people born in UK in 1958 and 1970 into later life, found that “in just over a decade, personal and social skills became 33 times more important in determining relative life chances” and increasingly, “social immobility – the passing of disadvantage through families – was clearly due to the connection between family background and personal and social skills.”

There are differences of opinion about what can be done about growing poverty. The United Nations Development Programme has recently argued that greater involvement of local populations in decision-making may contribute to significant poverty reduction (UNDP, 2004). In contrast, Cleaver (2003) questions that building social capital through institutions can overcome poverty. A cluster of interlocking disadvantage of those in high-poverty makes it unlikely that they can draw on social capital to ameliorate their poverty. Disadvantage includes family size and weak family networks, lack of assets which constrain their ability to engage in reciprocal collective activities, poor health, an inability to articulate in public fora, the derogatory perceptions of other community members towards them, and fewer embedded expectations of co-operation and reciprocity.

Schools serving low SES families can find themselves in an “iron circle” that begins with the family’s impoverished economic conditions that may involve unemployment, cultural, racial and/or linguistic factors, immigration, high mobility, family break-ups, malnutrition and other health problems, substance abuse, and low expectations including performance at school (Leithwood and Steinbach, 2002). One of the distinguishing features of schools in high-poverty communities (compared with others) is the number of distressed students who require support in multiple ways.

School education may be, in fact, one of the few ways a society has available to do something about improving the situation of people living in areas of growing poverty. Scheerens and Bosker (1997, p. 96), for example, note that “Schools matter most for underprivileged and/or initially low achieving students. Effective or ineffective schools are especially effective or ineffective for these students”.

**Nexus between poverty and education**

Sorting, categorising and labelling of schools in high-poverty communities may factor out the inherent variation that exists within this diverse group of schools (Thomson and Harris, 2004). There are major differences among schools in old or new suburbs, rural and isolated areas and with migrant and indigenous populations. Despite these differences, socio-economic status (SES) is accepted as a relatively useful proxy for a set of family conditions and interactions that may be considerably more powerful than SES in accounting for student learning (Thomson and Harris, 2004). Beginning with the Coleman Report (Coleman, 1966), study after study has suggested that the SES of families explains more than half the variation in student achievement (for example, Rutter *et al.*, 1979). Also, while the attainment levels of poor children have increased

over time, the gap between the majority of children from low-income families and their more affluent peers persists (Feinstein, 2000; Teese, 2000), if not increases (Borman *et al.*, 1998), throughout schooling. In Britain, Stoll *et al.* (2003, pp. 7-8) note that “20 per cent of young people live in families below the poverty line ... Children in poor households attend school less often, have fewer educational opportunities, have poorer health and significantly lower achievement than their middle-class counterparts”. Feinstein (2000) takes this analysis further by showing that non-academic aspects of schooling, such as student self-esteem, antisocial behaviour, attentiveness, and peer relations (all areas of particular focus in schools in high-poverty communities) have an important impact on later life chances in terms of employment and salary level.

Similar results have been documented in the USA (Payne and Biddle, 1999), particularly at the middle level where schools face the additional developmental issues associated with young adolescents (Linn *et al.*, 2000). In Australia, reporting of the results of the OECD’s PISA 2003 with 15-year-old students indicates that the “relationship between socioeconomic background and performance followed a similar trend ... as in other countries ... [with] a moderately strong association between socioeconomic background and performance in mathematical, reading and scientific literacy, as well as problem solving” (Thomson *et al.*, 2004, p. 173). In addition, across all PISA countries there is a low sense of belonging at school among an average of one in four 15-year-old students, with one on five admitting to being regularly absent, and that these figures are higher among low SES students (Willms, 2003).

As schools face increased public and political demands for improved performance, meeting these demands becomes particularly problematic for schools in high-poverty communities. For example, Bishop (2004) identified the intensification of work and fast pace of life over all four years as principal in a Tasmanian primary school in a high-poverty community. In addition to the external pressures, bullying and abuse of students and staff by parents could be common, but so too could be the verbal labelling of students and/or parents by teachers in ways that ignored their sovereignty. Working under extreme stress was common. As a result of her experience, Bishop (2004, p. 9) believed that expert, dedicated hardworking teachers and principals were required who operated “in the face of a work setting which was intense and often ‘punctured’ by the outpourings of distressed students, colleagues and/or parents”.

### **Evidence of high-performance schools in high poverty communities**

Research on Canadian high-performance secondary schools in high-poverty communities (Henchey, 2001), and disadvantaged Welsh primary schools (James *et al.*’s (2006) points to the importance of a positive school culture, such as clear expectations, supportive structures and services, and positive leadership. A number of studies from the USA on high-performance schools in high-poverty communities have come to a similar conclusion. Carter (2000) found five features to be common to 21 such schools: principals who were free to act, who used measurable goals and who elicited parental support; master teachers who set the tone for improved teacher quality; rigorous and regular testing that enforced school goals; achievement that acted as the framework for self-control, self-reliance and self-esteem; and, time on task that resulted in students’ demonstration of mastery. Cawelti (1999) identified similar characteristics among six schools, including the principal as a strong educational leader, a focus on standards and on improving results, teamwork, and committed teachers. Trimble’s

(2002) longitudinal study of five middle schools found that student test score success was more likely when the school acquired grants and managed money well, used a variety of team configurations to do its work, and concentrated efforts on data-based goals and programs that affected student performance.

Research in England (Maden, 2001) has shown that, in order to sustain success against the odds in schools in high poverty communities, teachers must exceed “normal” efforts. They have to work much harder and be more committed than their peers in more favourable circumstances. Detailed case study research following up on 11 effective schools in disadvantaged areas some five years after the initial investigation found that the levers of change and improvement included distributive leadership, organisational learning and pupil participation and engagement.

Finally, an extensive literature review in the area (Muijs *et al.*, 2004) focussed on teaching and learning, leadership, creating an information-rich environment, creating a positive school culture, building a learning community, continuous professional development, involving parents, and external support and pressures. A common element in these research studies and literature review is successful school principalship.

### **Evidence of successful principalship of high-performance schools in high-poverty communities**

Since the mid-1970s, research into school effectiveness and school improvement has identified strong leadership as one of the most significant correlates of effective and improving schools (Bishop, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Mortimore, 1993; Townsend, 2007). In fact, strong, successful school leadership has been found to reduce the depressing effects of some of the antecedent conditions of poverty dramatically, by acting both directly and indirectly to change them (Leithwood and Steinbach, 2002). Particular practices by principals are apt in both “privileged” and high poverty settings. Transformational practices from principals, for example, are likely to have appeal to teachers irrespective of their work locality because they promote collegial co-construction of vision, structures, problem-solving, learning requirements, and culture (for a fuller account see Leithwood, 2000; Silins and Mulford, 2002).

Thomson and Harris (2004) suggest three major strands of research that focus upon issues of leadership in schools in high-poverty communities: “what works?”, “I did it my way” and “what is going on here?”. “What works?” uses data largely drawn from interviews with successful leaders. “I did it my way” comprises stories of individual leaders in an attempt to tell an exemplary theory-building narrative from which others might learn (Stubbs, 2003). “What is going on here?” employs an ethnographic approach to study leadership (Thomson, 2003), the life of a school (O’Connor *et al.*, 1999) or a community (Thomson, 2002).

Thomson and Harris (2004) argue that two overarching themes cross all three of these research strands: the principals themselves and the work involved. In terms of the principals themselves, those who work in schools in high-poverty communities often originate from similar SES backgrounds, have deliberately chosen to work in such schools and have a strong commitment to making a difference to the life chances of the young people who live there:

They have a strong moral purpose but often wrestle with idealism/pessimism about how much this is possible in practice. Very often they spend long hours at work to the detriment of

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their health and family life (Blackmore, 1999) . . . [thus] negatively affecting recruitment and retention . . . Principals who work in this context are often prepared to buck the system when necessary, and are willing to resist external interference where they feel it is detrimental to students and staff (Harris *et al.*, 2003, p. 3). They do however also attend to those systemic issues which are potentially threatening and which can be mobilised to the school's advantage. Their prime accountability is first and foremost to the students and their families.

In terms of the work involved, successful leadership of schools in high-poverty communities is a shared entity (Carter, 2002), although not all high-poverty schools have the internal capacity to support leadership in this form (Harris and Chapman, 2004). Successful principals of schools in high-poverty communities invest primarily in relationship building despite the fact that systemic pressures are for individual rather than collective performance (Thomson and Harris, 2004, p. 3):

They find resources (time and money) to allow teachers to take up the vital work of professional knowledge production. They work to build up a staff of like-minded teachers and they often develop strong out of school friendships with them . . . The work of leading/managing relies heavily on trust and reciprocity. The principals however are often caught in a double bind where systemic emphasis is placed on individual performance of schools and the individual leadership of the principal rather than collective performance or collective leadership.

Issues common to the work of these schools include being under scrutiny from policy makers and school systems, suffering from increasing school marketisation, needing to have close connections with other public services such as health and welfare, difficulty in attracting and retaining well qualified and experienced staff, and often being involved in multiple projects which steer what they do. Thomson and Harris (2004, pp. 4-5) found that when first appointed, "principals in these schools generally look for some quick but important changes". These changes often mean:

[. . .] improvements to the physical environment (painting and carpeting the plant, attending to amenities such as toilets and staff rooms, and purchasing equipment and new furniture), changes to the school's symbolic systems (e.g. assemblies, logo, uniforms) and intervention in basic management practices (ranging from communication and decision making to administrative procedures related to money, records, etc).

Other immediate strategies often involve "strengthening relationships with families and introducing systematic CPD [Continuing Professional Development] allied to understanding the local area and families, and also planning for change". Stoll and Myers (1998), Tyack and Cuban (1995) and Gewirtz *et al.* (2002). have all found that change in these schools is slow and principals are often frustrated by the continual policy churn of governments concerned with media headlines and re-election than with their ongoing commitments to social justice.

Common features of successful leadership in schools facing "challenging circumstances", including schools in high-poverty communities, have been found to include the co-operation and alignment of others to shared vision and values, distributive leadership, a core belief that all children can learn and achieve irrespective of context or background, staff development, and community building (Bishop, 2006; Harris and Chapman, 2002, 2004). Harris and Chapman (2004, p. 9) point out that the core message about successful leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances

“is one of building capacity through empowering, involving and developing others and by providing systems of learning support, guidance and assistance”.

At best, Thomson and Harris (2004, p. 4) argue that the work of leading schools in high-poverty communities is “marked by high degrees of innovation, strong staff cultures of support and enquiry-based collaboration, with opportunities for students, teachers and parents to develop strong leadership roles”. Case studies of six high needs New York State schools, that had demonstrated standardised test score improvement during the tenure of the current principal (Jacobson *et al.*, 2005), found that while the principals formed a diverse group, varying in gender, race, experience and education, they shared common characteristics in direction setting, developing people and redesigning the organisation. They were particularly adept at building a sense of caring into their practice and ensuring that learning was the school’s central purpose. Nevertheless, Reynolds *et al.* (2004) found, that an unintended consequence of developing teachers is that they are likely to be attractive to other schools and/or to the system, thus causing staff turnover and destabilising progress.

The evidence on successful leadership of high-performance schools in high-poverty communities is summarised in Table I, along with the corresponding elements from the literature on high-performing schools in high-poverty communities (the column on the far right).

### **The Successful School Principalship Study (Tasmania)**

Recent Tasmanian research on successful school principalship permits us to put to the test a number of these evolving features of successful leadership of high performance schools in high-poverty communities.

#### *The study*

In late 2005 and early 2006, surveys on successful school principalship were distributed to all 195 government schools (excluding colleges and special schools) in Tasmania. A total of 131 survey responses were received from secondary, composite and primary school principals. This represents a return rate of 67 per cent. Surveys sought responses in areas such as demographic characteristics (including a measure of school poverty), leadership characteristics, values and beliefs, tensions and dilemmas, learning and development, school capacity building, decision-making, evaluation and accountability, and perceptions of school success. In addition, actual student performance on literacy and numeracy tests were supplied by the Department of Education (DoE).

Tasmanian schools are classified according to a poverty or economic needs index (ENI) ranging from 1 (low needs) to in excess of 100 (high needs)[1]. The index for each school is derived using socio-economic data from the Australian Census, size of centre (town, locality), distance from DoE district administration office and the number of students receiving government financial student assistance. The ENI is used to determine the numbers of teachers and the level of funding received by schools. Schools with higher needs receive additional staff and finance to enable them to make better provision for students requiring additional learning support. Many of the high needs schools in Tasmania are located in suburban government funded broad-acre welfare housing areas and in more isolated communities. Whilst

Elements	Research studies										Elements from literature on high-performance schools in high-poverty communities	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Commitment to making a difference and a shared vision	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Strong clear shared leadership
Long hours								X	X	X		Put in effort of time
Empowering, shared relationship building and communication, distributed leadership	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Collegiality and participation – learning community development distributive leadership, strong communication
Trust and reciprocity								X	X	X	X	Positive staff attitudes, trust, commitment
Close connections with other public services								X	X	X	X	Partnerships
Core belief that all children can learn and achieve, commitment to equity and social justice						X						High expectations
Capacity building						X						Building learning community
Community building	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Parent, community support, involvement
Continuing professional development												Investment in staff development
Courageous and determined, prepared to “buck” the system and resist external influences							X	X	X	X	X	
Enhance the physical environment								X	X	X	X	
High innovation									X	X	X	

**Note:** Research Studies (Key): 1. Mortimore (1993); 2. Leithwood (2000); 3. Silins and Mulford (2002); 4. Leithwood and Steinbach (2002); 5. Carter (2002); 6. Harris and Chapman (2002); 7. Harris *et al.* (2003); 8. Thomson and Harris (2004); 9. Harris and Chapman (2004); 10. Bishop (2006)

**Table I.**  
Summary of results from research studies of successful leadership of high-performing schools in high-poverty communities

all government schools in Tasmania have an ENI rating, for the purpose of this study and on advice from the DoE, schools with an ENI rating of 7 and above have been classified as schools in high-poverty communities. A total of 25 high needs schools were identified in the responses to the study (20 primary, one composite primary and secondary and four secondary) representing 19 per cent of all schools in the sample.

### *Results*

The results are organised in two parts; first around the demographic responses, tensions and dilemmas, school improvement, use of time, ability to apply new ideas, support from employers, fairness, communication, student empowerment, school environment, professional development, principal characteristics, school capacity building; second, perception of and actual student success measures.

Demographic data responses indicate that:

- The proportion of male principals in high needs schools (68 per cent) was greater than in the remainder of schools (58 per cent).
- The high needs schools were significantly smaller than low needs schools (see Table II) – 56 per cent of the high needs schools in the study had an enrolment between 201 and 300 students, 20 per cent could be categorised as small schools (enrolment below 200) and 24 per cent had an enrolment in excess of 300 students. (This distribution is consistent with the highly rural nature of Tasmania.)
- 80 per cent of high needs schools in the sample were located in urban/suburban areas. This proportion was consistent with the fact that government welfare housing was built in purpose created broad-acre subdivisions on the outskirts of Tasmania's major centres in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Such suburbs were removed from major shopping centres, had limited services (including transport) and did not represent a cross section of society.
- 20 per cent of low needs schools in the sample were located in rural schools.
- Principals in high needs schools had significantly less experience than their low needs counterparts with 52 per cent being in their first five years as principals compared with 35 per cent of principals in low needs schools. 23 per cent of principals of low needs schools had 16 or more years experience as a principal compared with 8 per cent of principals in high ENI schools.

A feature of working in schools is dealing with a variety of dilemmas and tensions. Principals were asked to indicate how often they experience nine different dilemmas (see Table III). It was found that many more principals in high needs schools (69 per cent) than their low needs counterparts (46 per cent) counterparts indicated they "always" experience tensions between loyalty to their employers and the need to take part, and participate critically, in public discourse about schooling. On the other hand, 33 per cent of principals in low needs schools who never experienced similar tensions compared with none in high needs schools. 62 per cent of principals of high need schools compared with 38 per cent of low needs "always" experienced tensions between their loyalty to the expectations of employers and the priorities made at school. On the same item, 30 per cent of principals in low needs schools compared with



Survey section and items	Mean scores		Sig.
	Low needs (1-6)	High needs (7-11)	
<i>A. Number of students</i>			
4.	324	241	0.01
<i>B. Years in current position</i>			
8.	4.62	3.28	0.02
<i>C. Principal hours of work</i>			
5. With students at school	5.55	8.21	0.05 <sup>a</sup>
15. Total away from school	14.57	9.12	0.00
<i>D. Principal learning and development</i>			
2. Apply learnings	4.27	3.96	0.04
3. Encourage school	4.25	3.76	0.04
4. Staff expect changes	4.08	3.40	0.01
8. Employer's support	2.93	2.48	0.04
<i>E. Leadership characteristics (importance)</i>			
24. Manage tensions	4.54	4.76	0.04 <sup>a</sup>
26. Good relations with Board	4.54	4.24	0.03
34. Fair	4.84	4.96	0.03 <sup>a</sup>
<i>E. Leadership characteristics (practice)</i>			
15. Encourage staff to improve	4.08	3.68	0.04
<i>H. Capacity building (evident)</i>			
3. Safe environment	4.21	3.80	0.02
27. Results communicated to staff	4.31	4.64	0.04 <sup>a</sup>
<i>H. Capacity building (principal contributes)</i>			
2. Students empowered	4.03	3.52	0.01
3. Safe environment	4.58	4.16	0.00
10. PD relevant to staff needs	4.39	3.92	0.00
<i>H. Capacity building (improvement)</i>			
2. Students empowered	3.66	3.12	0.01

Note: <sup>a</sup> reverse scored

**Table II.**  
Statistically significant  
differences between low  
and high needs schools  
on other items

15 per cent in high need schools never experienced such tensions. Interestingly 20 per cent of principals in low needs compared with 4 per cent in high needs schools found it difficult determining what constitutes success. While all principals experienced tensions between the need to be present at school and the need to participate outside school, it is evident that more principals in high needs (86 per cent) compared with low needs (71 per cent) “always” experienced this tensions.

Principal responses to open-ended questions about school improvement suggested that during the past five years all schools had focused on curriculum and pedagogical reform, which had been the priority of DoE during that time. There was also an emphasis in high needs schools on creating a safe and supportive environment and improving the quality of buildings and facilities. In the next five years principals from high needs schools planned to increase their attention to curriculum and community issues, give decreased attention to creating a safe, supportive environment and strengthen the community. In the next five years high needs schools have, to quote two principals, planned for a “Decrease in the number of students/families who show a disinterest in their learning” and “Increased community involvement in diverse programs to suit student needs”. They also planned to increase their focus on the

Item	ENI	1/2 (Never)(%)	Frequency 3(%)	4/5(Always)(%)
J_Q1. & 3. Loyalty to employers & public discourse about schooling	1-6	33	21	46
	7-11	12	28	60
J_Q2. Loyalty to employer expectations and school priorities	1-6	30	31	38
	7-11	16	28	56
J_Q4. Experienced ethical dilemmas that made one consider resigning as leader	1-6	78	16	20
	7-11	72	12	16
J_Q5. I find it difficult to determine what constitutes success	1-6	59	20	20
	7-11	52	44	4
J_Q6. Tensions in choosing between competing values	1-6	50	32	18
	7-11	40	40	20
J_Q7. Tensions between <i>ad hoc</i> problem solving and strategic planning	1-6	32	31	36
	7-11	28	20	52
J_Q8. Tensions between need to be present at and outside school	1-6	14	18	71
	7-11	12	20	86
J_Q9. Tensions between being decisive and participatory decisions	1-6	35	26	38
	7-11	32	32	36

**Table III.**  
Tensions and dilemmas

system in a bid to gain greater resources to meet the needs of students in schools in high-poverty communities.

When asked to consider “what conditions principals know about in their schools that they do not talk about but, if they did, might lead to school improvement”, issues relating to quality staffing, community and relationships with the system were the three most important issues for all schools. Principals in high needs schools compared to all schools gave community issues the greatest importance for improvement both in terms of “the future” and “desirable but not talked about”.

Further examination of the individual items found that principals in high need schools when compared with those in low needs schools (see Table II) report at a statistically significant level that they:

- Spend more time working with students.
- Spend less time away from school.
- Have a slower extent of agreement that they can apply new understandings, knowledge and skills they have learned and actively encourage their school to apply new ideas that they have acquired. They also perceive that staff have significantly lower expectations that they will make changes in their work based on new learnings or that they can encourage staff to evaluate, refine and improve their practice as needed.

- Have a lower extent of agreement that they experience support from their employers when making changes in their work, based on new learnings (it is worth noting that both groups scored below the mid-point on this item).
- Consider it to be of greater importance to manage tensions, including with their school board, and to be seen to be fair.
- Indicate that it is more important to communicate results to staff.
- Believe that they can make a lower contribution to student empowerment, a school environment that is physically and psychologically safe and a professional development program that is relevant to the needs of staff.

From factor analytic procedures, based on the principals' responses, the research developed a five-factor model of principal leadership characteristics and a four factor model of school capacity building. Examining the high (7–11) and low (1–3) needs schools it was found that differences were not statistically significant on the principal characteristics (Figure 1) of Professional, Principled, Promotional, Persistent or Planner (all scores were in a very narrow and high range). Equivalent analyses with the teacher responses were similar except for the principal characteristic of being Promotional (that is celebrate success, promote the school in the local community, build trust in the community and proud of the school), where teachers in high needs schools scored significantly below low needs schools. Similarly, there were no statistically significant differences on school capacity building factors (Figure 2) of Trust and Respect, Empowerment and a Shared and Monitored Vision, but there was a statistically significant difference on Supported Experimentation. Items in the Supported Experimentation factor included values and structures supporting teacher experimentation and relevant, challenging professional dialogue and development. However, equivalent analysis with the teacher responses found statistically significant differences on Trust and Respect, Empowerment and Supported Experimentation. The scoring of these items by both principals and teachers in high needs schools was statistically significantly lower than those in low needs schools.

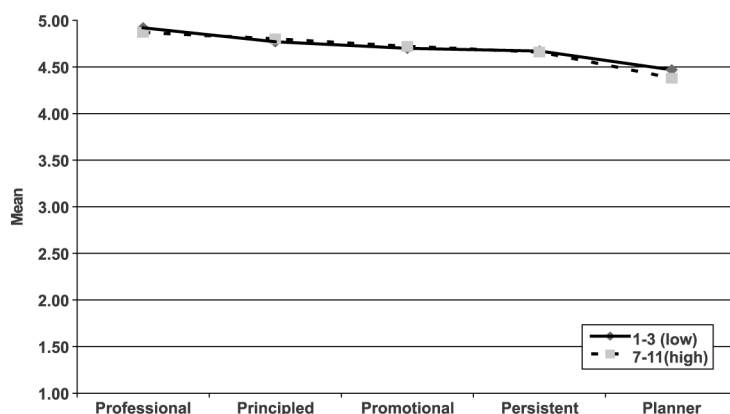
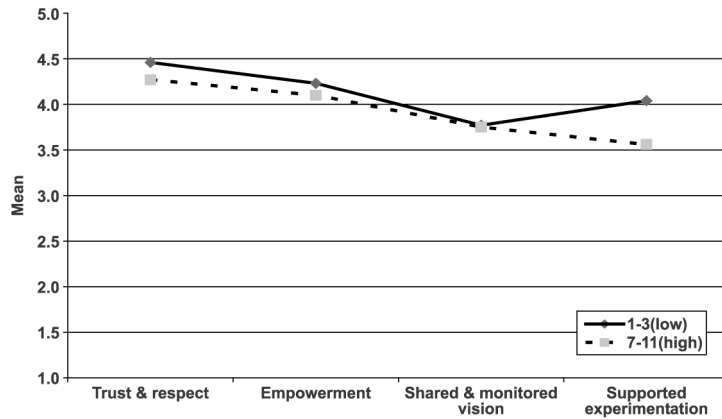


Figure 1.  
ENI principal  
characteristics

Figure 2.  
ENI and social capacity



*School success measures*

The Tasmania Successful School Principals Project gathered two measures of school success. First, there were the principals' perceptions of the importance of, current level of student achievement in, and improvement over the last five years, in areas such as literacy, numeracy, technology, communication, and citizenship. A social success index was also constructed based on principals' perceptions that a range of social goals were being reflected in school practice. Second, actual student performance on literacy and numeracy tests were supplied by the DoE.

A review of principals' perceptions of success shows that the lower the needs of students in the school the higher the principals' perception of the success of students. As the needs of students increases, the perceptions of school success by principals decreases with the highest need index schools (8 to 11) being dramatically lower than the others. The evidence in Figure 3 and Table IV suggests that, when means are compared, this perception holds true for both academic and social success.

The mean scores of all items on social success for all schools was 3.61. The correlation between social success and the ENI was -0.42, which was significant at the 0.01 level (Pearson Correlation sig. 2-tailed). The range of responses to items on the social success of schools is widespread. This may be indicative of the complexities involved and may provide an insight to an area in which, with appropriate attention,

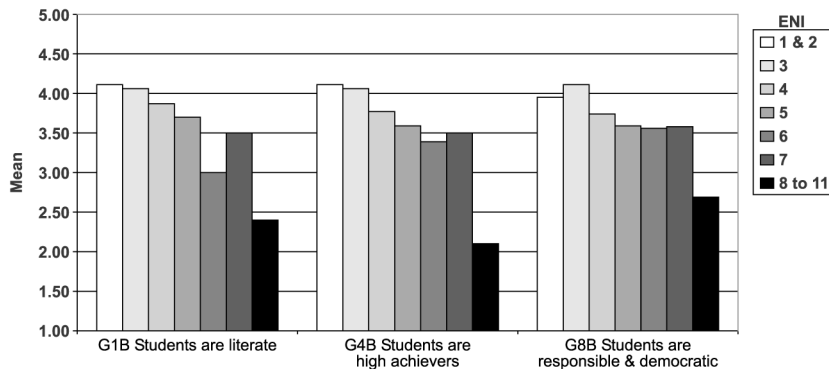


Figure 3.  
Principal perceptions of  
student outcomes and ENI

Survey section and items	Mean scores		Sig
	Low needs (1-6)	High needs (7-11)	
<i>G. Perceptions of success (importance)</i>			
4. High achievers	4.60	4.28	0.03
5. Effective communicators	4.71	4.40	0.02
7. Inquiring/reflective thinkers	4.73	4.44	0.05
<i>G. Perceptions of success (achievement)</i>			
1. Literate	3.82	2.96	0.00
2. Numerate	3.80	3.00	0.00
3. Technology competent	3.81	3.40	0.02
4. High achievers at their work	3.75	3.76	0.00
5. Effective communication	3.71	2.84	0.00
6. Self-directed	3.58	2.80	0.00
7. Inquiring and reflective thinkers	3.43	2.76	0.00
8. Responsible and democratic citizens	3.75	3.12	0.00
9. In a safe environment	3.99	3.52	0.00
<i>G. Perceptions of success (improvement)</i>			
4. High achievers	3.56	3.16	0.04
5. Effective communicators	3.53	3.08	0.02
6. Self-directed	3.59	2.88	0.00
7. Inquiring/reflective thinkers	3.63	3.16	0.02
<i>L. Social goals (practice)</i>			
1. Adapt demographic values	3.52	3.24	0.14
2. Influence	3.32	2.92	0.03
3. Listening and expressing selves	3.79	3.32	0.01
4. Solving conflicts	3.58	3.12	0.02
5. Do not accept discrimination	3.73	3.28	0.03
6. Have increased self-knowledge	3.80	3.48	0.06
7. Dare to try new things	3.75	3.16	0.00
8. Have developed self-confidence	3.97	3.44	0.00
9. Can work by themselves	3.92	3.52	0.02
10. Are responsible for decisions	3.59	3.08	0.00
11. Have a critical approach	3.47	3.04	0.02
12. Use many ways to express themselves	3.71	3.44	0.12
13. Understand that bullying is unacceptable	3.92	3.36	0.00

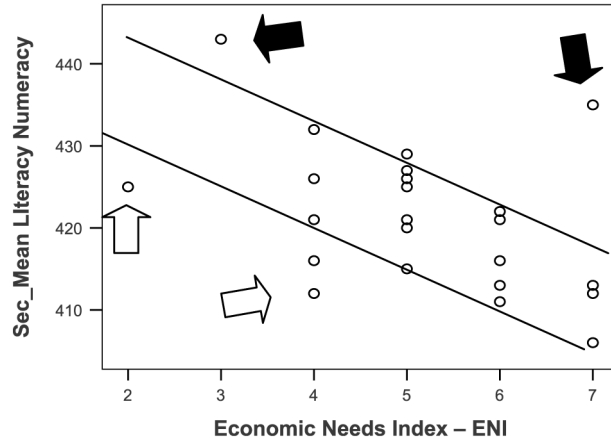
**Table IV.**  
Perceptions of success

schools and their leaders could make a difference irrespective of ENI. Figure 4, shows the range of responses received for secondary schools (mean 3.51).

Primary schools with an ENI of six or greater, or some 33 per cent of primary schools, fall below the mean (see Table V) with the very high needs schools (ENI of 8 + ) being considerably below the perceptions held by principals in low needs schools. Principals in high needs schools perceive their students to be less successful in literacy and numeracy, communicate less effectively with others and have a less supportive environment at home.

Students were also assigned a score for each of literacy and numeracy. School median scores were determined for each year level (3 and 5 for primary and 7 and 9 for secondary) for each of literacy and numeracy. An average of these medians was then determined. In order to avoid over-interpreting small differences in scores and given the expected negative correlation of this score with ENI, an adjusted score was also

**Figure 4.**  
Secondary school mean  
median literacy/numeracy  
scores by each ENI



Item	ENI group (primary only)	Mean	St. Dev.
<i>G_Q1B Perceptions of Success; students are literate – achievement</i>	1 through 3 (23%)	4.15	0.818
	4 (24%)	3.90	0.673
	5 (21%)	3.68	0.894
	6 through 7 (23%)	3.48	0.586
	8 through to 11 (10%)	2.46	0.776
	Total	3.66	0.884
<i>G_Q2B Perceptions of Success; students are numerate – achievement</i>	1 through 3 (22.%)	4.26	0.712
	4 (24%)	3.83	0.759
	5 (21%)	3.68	0.839
	6 through 7 (23%)	3.52	0.653
	8 through to 11 (10%)	2.46	0.776
	Total	3.68	0.891
<i>G_Q5B Perceptions of Success; students are effective communicators – achievement</i>	1 through 3 (23%)	4.00	0.734
	4 (24%)	3.76	0.636
	5 (20.6%)	3.64	0.658
	6 through 7 (23%)	3.36	0.638
	8 through to 11 (10%)	2.38	0.768
	Total	3.55	0.817
<i>N_Q1 Student Background and Attainment; supportive home educational environment – rating</i>	1 through 3 (23%)	4.11	0.751
	4 (24%)	4.00	0.845
	5 (21%)	3.00	0.756
	6 through 7 (23%)	2.52	0.918
	8 through to 11 (10%)	1.77	0.725
	Total	3.27	1.152

**Table V.**  
Perceptions of success  
and ENI

calculated. This adjusted score was based on the number of points above or below the regression line. Schools were given an adjusted score of 3 if they were in the top 17 per cent, 2 in the middle 66 per cent or 1 if in the bottom 17 per cent. This is illustrated in Chart 4 that shows secondary schools by mean/medium literacy/numeracy scores, with the top bolded arrows indicating score 3, between the black lines score 2 and bottom hollow arrows score 1.

As expected, a strong relationship was found between ENI and actual literacy/numeracy scores. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation was  $-0.56$  for primary which was significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed). The Pearson correlation was  $-0.45$  for secondary which was significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed). Despite the correlations, the top arrows in Chart 4 indicate that some schools are achieving at a rate much higher than equivalent schools, whilst the bottom arrows indicate that a few schools are achieving at a rate much lower than one would expect on the basis of ENI, when compared with like schools.

The attributes of successful principals when compared with the unsuccessful principals of schools in high poverty communities, as portrayed in Table VI, would suggest that successful principals are more independent of the system and have a greater sense of purpose than their less successful counterparts. Successful principals appear to be less concerned about the expectations of employers and are better able to manage the tensions between ad hoc problem solving and strategic planning. The inference from the data is that successful principals are more flexible in their approach to systems and people, have higher levels of awareness and self confidence, see themselves as leading learners (including through reading professional journals), willing to change in the light of new understandings, and demonstrate a capacity to work with others to achieve the goals of the organisation. They are more likely to persistently work for high student achievement and establish structures and a culture for teaching across the school.

Comparisons were also made between the attributes of successful principals of low and high needs primary schools. However, as the numbers involved had become very small (high needs  $n = 3$ ) in-depth follow-up analysis was not possible. The only items from Table VI where there were statistically significant differences between these two groups of principals were on items related to student success in literacy, numeracy and communication, and the importance of the leadership characteristic of working for high academic achievement, where principals in low needs schools scored higher than those in high needs schools. Only a small number of other statistically significant differences were found between the two groups of successful principals. In all cases principals in low needs schools scored higher than those in high needs schools. These differences related to the improvement in the school capacity of staff having their values and knowledge challenged, school autonomy in decisions about the management of teaching, and student attendance.

### Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this article indicated that worldwide, as well as in Australia, poverty is a major issue and that there is an important nexus between poverty and education. While there may be questions raised about the effectiveness of schools as institutions in serving those in high-poverty communities as well as problems in labelling a school as high-poverty, evidence has emerged of high-performing schools in

Item	Mean rank scores		Sig Mann-Whitney U
	Successful (n = 8)	Unsuccessful (n = 7)	
<i>Principal learning and development</i>			
D5 My employers expect me to acquire and apply new understandings, knowledge and skills to my work	5.38	11.00	0.01
D9 Source of learning – reading professional journals	10.25	5.43	0.03
<i>Leadership characteristic</i>			
<i>Importance</i>			
E15A Encourage staff to evaluate, refine and improve their practice as needed	9.50	6.29	0.05
E20A Hold high expectations for others	9.50	6.29	0.05
E30A Work towards consensus in establishing priorities for school goals	9.50	6.29	0.05
<i>Practice</i>			
E3B Persistently working for high academic achievement	9.88	5.86	0.05
E6B Show respect to all staff and pupils	9.50	6.29	0.05
E21B Act as a model as the leading learner	10.06	5.43	0.04
E22B Offer ideas about new and different ways of doing things	10.25	5.43	0.03
E31B Willingness to change in the light of new understanding	9.50	6.29	0.05
<i>School decision-making autonomy</i>			
F1 Structures for the organisation of teaching across the school	10.31	5.14	0.02
F3 Establishing cultures for teaching across the school	10.06	5.64	0.04
<i>Leadership tensions and dilemmas</i>			
J7 Tension between <i>ad hoc</i> problem- solving and strategic planning	3.60	8.00	0.02
<i>Perceptions of success</i>			
<i>Achievement</i>			
G1B Literate	10.50	5.14	0.02
G2B Numerate	10.50	5.14	0.02
G4B High achievers	10.38	5.29	0.02
G5B Communicators	10.56	5.09	0.01
L6B Increased self-knowledge	10.00	5.64	0.04
L11B A critical approach which promotes many discussions and exchanges of ideas	10.06	5.71	0.05
<i>Perceptions of student background</i>			
N1 Supportive home educational environment	10.44	5.21	0.02

**Table VI.**  
Schools in high poverty communities: successful and unsuccessful principal comparison (Using ENI Adjusted Literacy/Numeracy Scores as the measure of success)

high-poverty communities. A common characteristic of these schools is successful, high-performing leadership.

The recent Tasmanian research on successful school principalship has confirmed previous research with respect to principals of high performing schools in high-poverty communities who:



- 
- as leading learners, set the tone for improved teacher quality;
  - persistently work for high academic achievement;
  - invest primarily in relationship building and collaboration;
  - provide high levels of support for staff;
  - strengthen community involvement and interest;
  - enhance the physical environment;
  - acquire grants or focus on the system to gain greater resources;
  - work long hours; and
  - receive district/system support.

The recent Tasmanian research on successful school principalship has also provided additional findings with respect to principals of high performing schools in high-poverty communities who, in comparison with principals with in low needs schools, are more likely to:

- spend less time out of their schools;
- spend more time working with students;
- place more importance on managing tensions and dilemmas;
- want to be seen to be fair; and
- communicate results to staff.

In contrast they are less likely to:

- perceive they receive support from their employer when making changes in their work based on new learnings;
- provide safe supportive environments;
- provide PD relevant to staff needs;
- apply new understandings, knowledge and skills they have learnt; and
- perceive their students to be successful in literacy and numeracy, effective communicators, with a supportive environment at home.

The material available in the area, including our own research, leads us to conclude that the research on successful principalship in high-performance schools in high-poverty communities needs to be given greater priority. Despite emerging evidence, research on leadership in the area is limited. For example, Thomson and Harris (2004) outline a number of research gaps in the area as follows: the compositional impact of the everyday reality of principals; the particular curriculum and pedagogical knowledge required of principals; the role of leaders other than the principal; and, leadership in hostile and managerially focussed systemic cultures. The size of the samples employed in research is another concern. Even in our study the small size of the Tasmanian population of schools means that the numbers employed have been very small.

Further, both Keys *et al.* (2003) and Bishop (2004) have called for more studies of high performing schools in high-poverty communities and comparative studies between mainstream and schools in high poverty settings, especially to clarify the

ways and extent to which contexts shape influential leadership practices. To not do so is not sensible, efficient nor defensible on social justice grounds. As The Equalities Review (2007, pp. 1-2) points out:

Even in the most tolerant societies, some things should always remain intolerable ... And despite our successes, some kinds of inequality remain at levels that can only be described as intolerable, particularly in education and employment. These are fundamental to the life chances of every person ... [But] unless the ... people are persuaded that equality is a liberating rather than an oppressive ambition, it will remain an unfulfilled aspiration.

#### Note

1. For ease of presenting the findings we use the terms low and high needs where high need schools equate to schools in high poverty communities.

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