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“How can we make it equitable?”:
The Critical Role of School-level Business Administrators in Managing School Resources

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Kimberly Sterin
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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explores how high school business administrators (SBAs) navigate issues of equity when managing resources. The data is analyzed through Grubb’s logic of improved school finance, yielding themes aligned with the four resource types: simple, compound, complex, and abstract (Grubb, 2008). Preliminary findings indicate that SBAs influence the extent of equity experienced by a school community. The findings elevate and reframe the role of an SBA beyond its traditional conceptions. Furthermore, the findings can inform professional development and policy aiming to systematize equitable resource management.

Aim

This study problematizes traditional notions of school business administrators by connecting their role to their capacity to influence the equitable distribution of resources in their specific school contexts. By giving voice to SBAs, this study seeks to address the identified gap in the use of qualitative methods to document the perspectives of school-level business administrators, especially regarding resource allocation (Campbell, 2011; McClain & King, 2009; Ray et al., 2005).

Problem

Within the field of education finance, there is an absence of literature focusing specifically on the role of school business administrators. The SBA is largely responsible for management of school resources and for the implementation of financial policy as determined by the local education agency. Much of the literature available on school business administrators comes from a practitioner magazine, *School Business Affairs*, published by the Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO). According to a survey conducted with ASBO members, the majority of participating SBAs reported that they viewed their technical skills as most essential to successful job performance (McClain & King, 2009). A more recent article focused on how school business administrators may influence the equitable distribution of resources. Bubness (2020) noted that “ensuring that those resources are used accordingly is a delicate balance, and it’s one of the key roles that business and finance professionals play in the budget process” (p. 20). As the financial policies and obligations of schools become more complex in the current educational and political climate, the role of the SBA has become increasingly important to the functionality of a school building. Although SBAs work in schools every day, interacting with students, teachers, staff, and school leadership, their voice is conspicuously absent from research literature, specifically in the area of education business management.

This study seeks to answer the following research question:

- 1) How do high school business administrators navigate issues of equity through their role as mediators of school resources?

Theoretical Framework

Educational economist, Dr. Warner Norton Grubb III developed a theory known as “logic of improved school finance” (Grubb et al., 2006; Grubb, 2007; Grubb, 2008). Grubb argues that traditional approaches to evaluating the relationship between financial inputs and outputs in the context of schools do not provide a sufficient understanding of what he contends is a much more complicated interaction (Grubb et al., 2006; Grubb, 2008). Grubb’s logic of “improved” school finance complicates the idea that more money will automatically render better educational outcomes to include the process of how that money is applied (Grubb, 2007).

Grubb’s theory aims to illuminate the nuances of managing resources as the school-level and to show the challenges of equitable distribution in the highly politicized context of schools (Grubb & Allen, 2011). To represent this idea, he developed the “landscape of equity” which includes four types of resources: simple, compound, complex, and abstract (Grubb, 2008). Grubb defines resources “as those practices and programs within schools and classrooms (including the human resources) that improve valued outcomes” (Grubb, 2008, p. 106). With this definition, Grubb’s logic complicates the common view that all resources will influence the same outcomes to include a differentiated view where different resources may render different outcomes depending on the context of the school and its personnel (Grubb et al., 2004). Thus, according to Grubb’s theory, there is no set of “magical resources” that will solve the equity problem in education finance (Grubb, 2008, p. 134). Rather, one must consider how the resources are “constructed” at the school-level between administrators, teacher, and school staff. This aspect of Grubb’s logic lends itself well to critical qualitative research as it seeks to uncover a deeper understanding of the *hows* and *whys* of human interactions (Erickson, 2011).

Research Design

This phenomenological study uses qualitative methods to address the research question. Using purposive and snowball sampling, two SBAs from the same large, densely population suburban school district were selected to participate. There was about a 35% difference in the percentage of students qualified for Free and Reduced priced Meals (FARMS) between the two schools, indicating a disparity of wealth between the two school communities.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via a web-based platform. The researcher performed two rounds of coding in her data analysis. In order “to keep the data rooted in the participant’s own language” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 7), the researcher used in vivo coding technique for the first round. Next, the researcher applied the four resource type codes developed from Grubb’s logic of “improved” finance to the data. These codes included: simple resources, compound resources, complex resources, and abstract resources. Several themes emerged aligning with each resource type.

Preliminary Findings

The school business administrator is in the unique position to facilitate decisions about how school resources will be allocated and then applied to the construction of the simple, compound, complex, and abstract resources. Simple resources include inputs that cost money such as the budget line items that are often stressed in traditional production functions. The simple resource themes that emerged in this study included experiences with funds allocation, accounts management, and additional funds procurement. Compound resources require two or more resources to be included in order for either to work efficiently. Without both resources present in an example of compound resource, sometimes the intended effects of one resource can be negated by the absence of the second resource. The SBAs in this study discussed programs and implementation as a compound resource experienced in their role.

Similar to some compound resources, complex resources recognize the human element involved in how resources are constructed. In this study, SBA self-efficacy and SBA management style emerged as themes for complex resources. Like complex resources, the final type, abstract resources are hard to discern. However, Grubb argues they are often the most effective resources. Abstract resources capture many of the intangible aspects of a school that are hard to observe from the outside but are deeply felt and understood by those within. The abstract resources identified in the data of this study include school climate, socioeconomic capacity of a school community, and organizational structure.

Discussion

Decisions SBAs make every day either increase or decrease the extent of equity experienced by all members of the school community. The way school business administrators navigate resource management impacts teachers, other school administrators, school staff, student's family members, and most importantly, the students themselves. Through the theoretical framework of Grubb's logic of "improved" school finance, the findings reveal how complex the role of a school business administrator can be. The findings also indicate that some SBAs are applying a social justice mindset when navigating issues of equity in school resource management.

Significance and Implications

The preliminary findings of this study indicate that a qualitative inquiry can deepen the understanding of the role of an SBA and is a needed contribution to education finance scholarship. The kinds of equitable practices implemented by the SBAs in this study are the kind of "bottom-up" knowledge that would be useful to inform macro-level policies. Sharing these examples of equitable practices would elevate the status of SBAs while also reframing the role to include this focus on equity. The findings could help inform professional development for other SBAs to better understand how they can approach similar situations through a social justice lens. Lastly, these understandings can illuminate how SBAs are able to increase equity at various levels to policymakers and other stakeholders.

Author Biography

Kimberly Sterin is a second-year Ph.D. student studying Education Policy and Leadership at the School of Education at Drexel University. Before joining Drexel, Sterin spent seven years as an

English teacher in K-12 public schools in Montgomery County, Maryland. Sterin was awarded the Johns Hopkins Dr. Diane Tobin Memorial Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2017. Sterin earned a master's degree in Secondary Education from Johns Hopkins University. She also holds bachelor's degrees in English Language & Literature and Spanish Language & Literature, as well as a minor in Creative Writing with a concentration in Poetry, from the University of Maryland, College Park. Her current research interests focus on education funding policies, resource management, and equity. She has been published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

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