Disrupting Inequities in Diverse Schools: A Participatory Performance of School and District Leader Discourses

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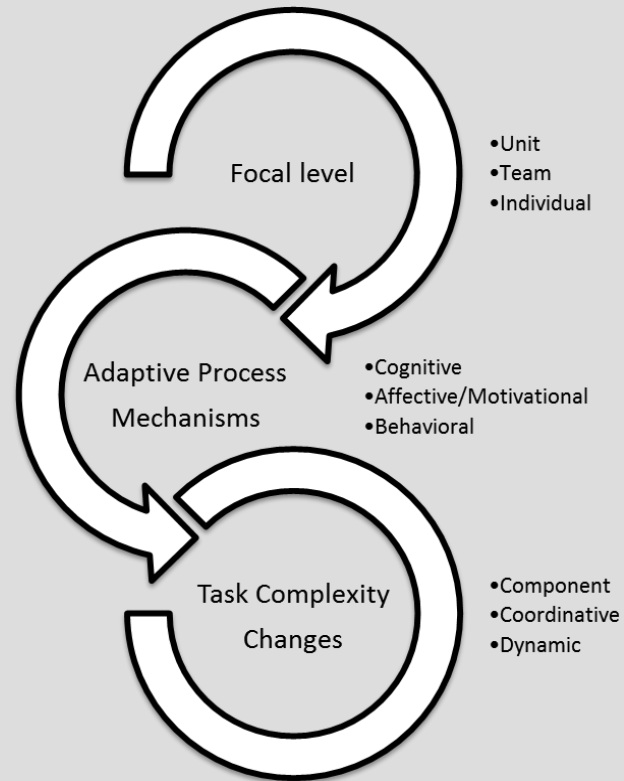Authors: Francesca Durand, PhD Russell Sage College, NY

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STUDY BACKGROUND

To better understand how equity aims for college and career readiness are framed, addressed, and achieved in school settings with diverse student populations, it is critical to explore how district and school leaders frame priorities and challenges and what discourses they use and promote.

This study is grounded in Framing Theory.

Goffman (1974) explains framing as an individual's ability to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences (21).

Framing is a way of making sense out of events, processes, and functions, which in turn helps guide actions (Benford & Snow 2000).

FRAMING DISCOURSES

Diagnostic Frame
- Purpose: to identify the cause of a problem; questions asked and answered: What is the problem? How is it defined?

Motivational Frame
- Purpose: to compel people to improve and stay the course; questions asked and answered: Why do we do what we do? Why does it matter?

Normative Frame
- Purpose: to set expectations for behavior; questions asked and answered: What are expected behaviors and sensibilities? How are these expected to be expressed?

Prognostic Frame
- Purpose: to predict potential outcomes of actions; questions asked and answered: How do we solve the problem? What do we do to get the outcome we seek?

Regulatory Frame
- Purpose: to detail how outcomes will be monitored; questions asked and answered: What do we need to do to be in compliance? How are we assessed?

SAMPLING

- **Sample Selection**
  - Regression analysis of 30 graduation indicators for critical needs students (i.e. black/African, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged and English Language Learners).
  - Selection of seven odd-beating and three typically performing schools geographically distributed across NYS (except NYC).

- **Case Studies & Cross-Case Analysis**
  - 2-day site visits (interviews/focus groups with district & school leaders, educators and student support professionals & school tour), document review & school culture survey.
  - 30 participants per site/63 interviews/68 focus groups/77 documents
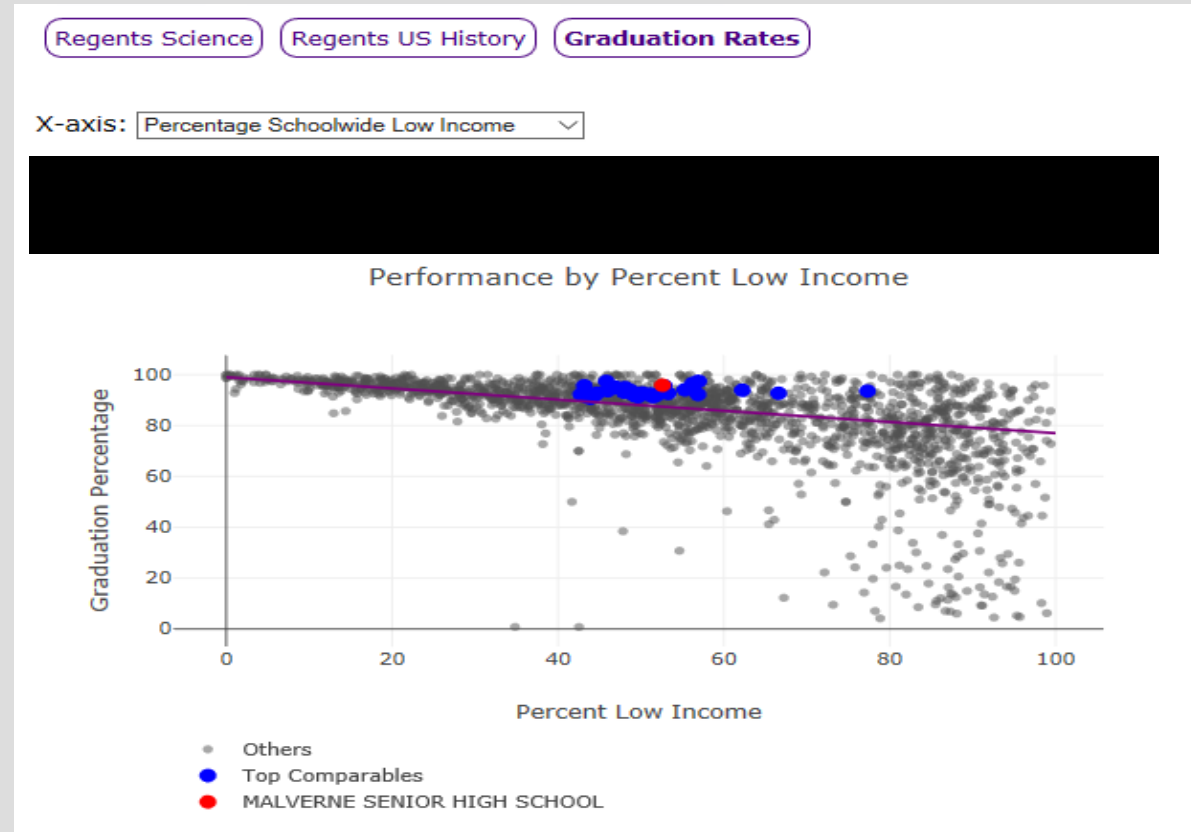

Image from NYKids' Performance Tracker – see http://knowyourschoolsny.org/site/schoollist.php
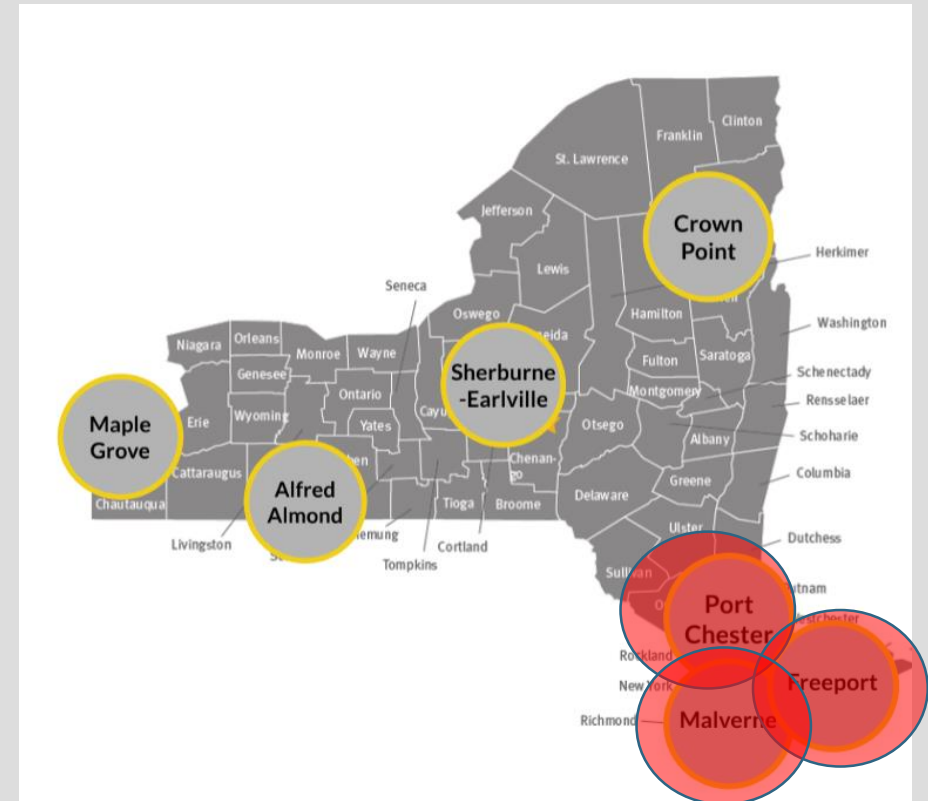
SAMPLING

Selection Criteria:

- Regents Graduation Rates
- Advanced Regents Graduation Rates

Populations:

- African-American/Black
- Hispanic/Latino
- English language leaners
- Economically disadvantaged

Table 2: Demographics of the Sample

School	z-score	Enrollment[12]	Grade Span	Urbanicity	% Economically Disadvantaged[13]	% ELL	% Hispanic Latino	% Black/ African-American	PPE[14]
Alfred-Almond	1.28	198	7-12	Rural	42	0	1	0	$18,497
Crown Point	1.53	77	K-12	Rural	62	0	0	0	$21,644
Freeport	0.82	2,229	9-12	Suburban/ Urban	66	16	64	29	$22,314
Malverne	1.30	548	9-12	Suburban/ Urban	51	3	22	57	$30,539
Maple Grove	0.86	239	6-12	Rural	30	0	1	1	$17,922
Port Chester	0.83	1.436	9-12	Suburban/ Urban	69	18	77	6	$19,941
Sherburne-Earlville	0.85	374	9-12	Rural	51	0	1	1	$22,507
Average of the Three Typically Performing Schools[15]	-0.18	357	N/A	Rural (1) Suburban/ Urban (2)	61	4	8	15	$22,260
NYS	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	55	9	26	17	$23,361

[12] Grades 9-12 only

[13] See definition at https://data.nysed.gov/glossary.php?report=reportcards.

[14] Total per pupil expenditures as reported in the 2016-17 fiscal supplement

[15] An average of the demographic characteristics for the group of typical performing high schools is presented instead of the characteristics of each school in order to conceal their identities.

DATA SOURCES

	School Tours with Principals	Interviews with Superintendents or Deputy Superintendents	Interviews and Focus Groups with Other District Leaders	Interviews with Principals	Focus Groups with Assistant Principals
Freeport (OB)	1	1	4	1	5
Malverne (OB)	1	1	2	1	2
Port Chester (OB)	1	0	5	1	3
Chamblay (TP)	1	1	3	1	2
Total	4	3	14	4	12

THE PERFORMANCE

- This participatory performance re-enacts interviews and focus groups from a multiple case study that identifies and contrasts leaders' discourses in two types of schools: one type achieved a trend of typical graduation outcomes among youth of color and those living in poverty and the second type achieved a trend of above-predicted graduation outcomes for these same populations of children (i.e. "positive outliers" [POs]).

- Facilitated by frame theory, we analyzed salient characteristics of leaders' discourses as they explained how they approach preparing young people for college or career.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do district and school leaders in positive outlier schools frame priorities and challenges?

- How does their framing of priorities and challenges differ from district and school leaders in a typically performing school?

INTRODUCTIONS OF CHARACTERS

- Freeport Leader
- Malverne Leader
- Port Chester Leader
- Chamblay Leader

ACT ONE

"Well, half of the kids were considered "the bad kids":

Diagnostic and prognostic discourses framed by equity aims

Guiding Questions:

- What are your research-related experiences with equity aims, framing mechanisms, and discourses?

- Have you prioritized and described differences among school and district leaders' framing mechanisms and discourses? If so, what did you learn about salient features of their schools-as-organizations?

FREEPORT DISTRICT LEADER FRAMES NEED TO FILL BILINGUAL/ELL INSTRUCTIONAL GAPS

Diagnostic Framing — *In a district like ours, the bilingual subject area teachers that we've been able to recruit and hire, and recertify – some of our high school teachers were Spanish-speaking, but didn't hold the credential, ...*

Prognostic Framing — *So what Freeport has done...*

Equity Aim — *it shows a commitment to English Language Learners that…*

Prognostic Framing — *over fifty Freeport educators have taken advantage of reduced or subsidized tuition opportunities to add English as a Second Language or a Bilingual extension [a teaching credential] to their own portfolio,*

Equity Aim — *… so that they can serve English Language Learners here as well as General Ed classes.*

MALVERNE DISTRICT LEADER FRAMES NEED TO ADDRESS RACIAL DISPARITIES IN DISCIPLINARY ACTIONS

Diagnostic Framing

Our suspensions were out of control… We said, listen, this crime and punishment attitude, (that even a lot of the administrators have because all of us were trained in the "throw them out and now we are rid of them and the bad kids are out" philosophy)…

Equity Aim

… well, half of the kids were considered the "bad kids..

Prognostic Framing

We had to do some internal think tank on that. The key is we brought in a new high school principal. That is key. I always think there are key elements in when you jump start.…We brought in a new principal who had actually been here before as an interim, … and his persona really changed this school. He had a way with kids. He was highly respected. He knew how to interact with children. He was African American. Many of the kids who were misbehaving really related to him as a father figure I believe and I think he managed to gain [students'] trust and I think from that the high school really started to come back to square one.

PORT CHESTER SCHOOL LEADER FRAMES NEED FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION STAFF DIVERSITY

Diagnostic Framing

I knew the services to special education students was a place where I would need to do some additional hiring

Prognostic Framing

I knew I wanted teachers who looked more like my students.

Equity Aim

I knew that I wanted to hire qualified applicants who were filling niches that didn't exist here. So African American teachers, Hispanic teachers, Spanish-speaking teachers.

Prognostic Framing

Those were something that we certainly looked for very hard when we were filling positions. With always though the idea that merit is what mattered most. Could I find the right people who were also meritorious and had backgrounds that were appropriate?

CHAMBLAY SCHOOL LEADER FRAMES NEED FOR BETTER STUDENT ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Diagnostic Framing

Teachers especially at the high school level have—typically had a mindset of—they [students] should be coming here and they should be wanting to learn and I'm going to teach my content…

Prognostic Framing

But we've made a tremendous shift in that. I've I put a lot of pressure on the teachers to recognize that it's more than just teaching your content. It's about learning. I don't need people that can just teach content. I get resumes all the time with people that have great GPA's and certainly are worthy of coming in and spewing out content that they learned about in school, but I need teachers that can engage kids and establish a culture of learning and caring.

Equity Aim

Not Discussed

ACT ONE: DISCUSSION

- What are your research-related experiences with equity aims, framing mechanisms, and discourses?

- Have you prioritized and described differences among school and district leaders' framing mechanisms and discourses? If so, what did you learn about salient features of their schools-as-organizations?

ACT TWO

"We're an extension of their family":

Hybrid Regulatory and Motivational Discourses go beyond narrow aims to form a Normative Discourse

Guiding Questions:

- Have you noticed or investigated differences in leaders' framing mechanisms and discourses? If so, what have you discovered and learned?

- Our classification of positive outliers and typically performing schools draws in part on the differences we have described today. In your view, is this justifiable?

- What suggestions can you offer for improvement in this line of research?

FREEPORT SCHOOL LEADER FRAMES EXPECTATIONS TO PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT TO STUDENTS

Regulatory Framing

We have, of course, our strategic plan, and the goals from the district that we incorporate within our building goals like student success…

Motivational Framing

Also, creating an environment where faculty, staff, and students feel comfortable and safe to express their ideas, and where they can be in an environment where they are supported. Our community is a little different than most districts. They [students] need us at different capacities than in other places, so we're also like their parents.

Normative Framing

We're an extension of their family. They look to us for more than just the x's and o's of school, and I think we provide our students with the emotional support to let them know that we're there for them, and they can be successful.

MALVERNE SCHOOL LEADER FRAMES CULTURAL NORMS FOR DEVELOPING WHOLE CHILD

Motivational Framing

There is a focus on college. There's a focus on education. There's a focus on critical thinking. There's a focus on being the best you can be. It's not just when you come to the high school, now you are going to take on higher level courses. Now you're going to be the best you can be.

Normative Framing

If I've seen a change, it's been a cultural norm change....I see kids that are coming here and trying to learn. I see kids come in and try to be the best they can be. I have kids that don't want to take lunch periods. They come in here at zero period, at 7:15 in the morning.

Regulatory Framing

Are we looking at trying to get all kids to learn? Yeah. And how do we do that? I think you differentiate instruction. We do heterogeneous grouping through scheduling. We do tremendous support outside of the classroom.

PORT CHESTER DISTRICT LEADER FRAMES USE OF DATA TO IMPROVE STUDENT LITERACY

Normative Framing

I have a whole data team that I could have you sit with and go through everything that they do. There are people at each of the buildings who have data responsibilities.

Regulatory Framing

The supervisors have a data collection and analysis responsibility. The principals have a responsibility. There are data teams in schools that sit and look at data together.

Motivational Framing

But, really if you don't have the focus about what is it about, like what are you really looking at? Why are you looking at this? It's to improve literacy. Why? Because, through literacy we'll be able to improve learning for kids. And, you know, you could agree or disagree with that premise, but at the end of the day, the focus on that kind-of keeps us from... Well - it's like a guardrail.

CHAMBLAY DISTRICT LEADER FRAMES IMPLEMENTATION OF NYS MANDATED MENTAL HEALTH REQUIREMENTS INTO CURRICULUM

Motivational Framing

We did mental health in the beginning of the school year because you have to legally do it by law. I had New York State mental health come in and do a thing about depression, anxiety in the classroom, what things to be looking for. So we did that on opening day for an hour. Then people said there are other things that we need to work on, the testing piece.

Normative Framing

We're sending people up from mental health. There's been a couple of things. ... Some people that are ancillary people, the support staff, social workers, they're going out to that…They're going to get out and then they're going to bring that information back. They're also reading the poverty book.

Regulatory Framing

We're trying to come up with some things that we should be implementing here.

ACT TWO DISCUSSION

- Have you noticed or investigated differences in leaders' framing mechanisms and discourses? If so, what have you discovered and learned?

- Our classification of positive outliers and typically performing schools draws in part on the differences we have described today. In your view, is this justifiable?

- What suggestions can you offer for improvement in this line of research?

CONCLUSIONS

(1) We found that district and school leaders in PO schools (with above-predicted diverse student outcomes) employ distinctive emphases on a) equity of opportunity and b) complementary discourses of diagnosis and prognosis of their challenges to meet equity aims. They do this with close attention to local needs and values, contextual challenges, and how organizational learning might be inspired.

(2) We discovered an important contrast: Typically performing school and district leaders emphasize compliance-oriented, regulatory frames as they strive to make sense of federal and state policies and mandates and provide guidance for the educators in their charge. They do not tend to identify a specific equity aim as they do this.

(3) We found that regulatory and motivational discourses are comingled in all schools, yet in PO schools these hybrid discourses amount to a normative frame: The "way we do things around here." In contrast, the typically performing school and district leaders tended to rely upon compliance-oriented discourses, structured by policy regulations more-so than their positive outlier school leader peers and these acted as the primary motivators for action.

IMPLICATIONS

How can America's school systems achieve better, more equitable outcomes—such as college and career readiness and before it, "no child left behind"?

- Leaders' frames and discourses, as interpretive and communications mechanisms for sense-making and sense-giving, provide an important, insufficiently developed pathway toward solutions.

- All manner of leaders in schools engage in sense-making and sense-giving, as structured by salient framing mechanisms and discourses. Research, educator preparation programs and educational policy can be evaluated and improved accordingly.

Thank you!

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