Influence of Sustained Scholarship Opportunities on School Culture and Social Acceptance

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigated the influence of a scholarship program that intentionally brings children together from different socio-economic and racial backgrounds. The scholarship is provided to students who attended a private preschool and were awarded a scholarship to attend the target school. The study explored the influence that this scholarship had on the stakeholders and the broader school culture. Findings revealed that diversification of the school's population can help students become more accepting of diverse cultures. Participants shared that the enriched curriculum and smaller student/teacher ratio at the target school were beneficial to the recipients. Data highlighted that even though the scholarship covered the tuition, there were additional expenses that were prohibitive for the scholarship recipients. Conclusions support the belief that a positive school culture enables all studentsto feels a sense of belonging, participate actively in the educational community, and develop meaningful social relationships.

Keywords: Diversity, Equity, School Culture, Social Acceptance, Scholarship Opportunities

1. Introduction

Researchers from a regional university, administrators from a non-profit preschool accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and stakeholders from a private Christian school collaborated to investigate the influence of sustained scholarship support for a targeted group of children from low-income families in the local community. From previous research conducted at the non-profit preschool, the researchers became aware of a special scholarship fund that was established at a local private Christian school for recommended preschool students. Each year, beginning in 1990, one or two students from the specific preschool are recommended to receive scholarship funding to attend the targeted local private Christian school that serves students from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. The scholarship is currently "awarded to two students who have demonstrated academic potential and whose families actively engage in their child's education" (School website, 2019). Due to the researchers' ongoing professional connections to the preschool, they were interested in learning how this scholarship opportunity has affected the various stakeholders. Therefore, this research study was designed to investigate the influence of sustained scholarship on the recipients, their families, the faculty and staff, and the overall culture of the private Christian school.

The school in this study, which will be referred to as the 'target school' hereafter, is a private preparatory institution for pre-kindergarten to eighth grade. The school, founded in 1951, opened with one kindergarten class at the local

Episcopal Church and expanded over the years until 1990 when the first eighth grade class graduated (School website, 2019). The institution is a member of the National Association of Independent Schools and the National Association of Episcopal Schools. The school enrolls approximately 300 students (PK-8th grades) each year with an average class size of 13 students per teacher. The yearly tuition ranges from $4,500 to $8,873 (School website, 2019).

The study focused on the recipients of the scholarship who come from a lower socioeconomic status (SES) than many students at the target school and who attended the nonprofit preschool. The preschool has served predominantly at-risk young children in the local community for the past 50 years. The ongoing mission of the preschool is to serve minority children and low-income families. The scholarship funds are awarded to one or two preschool students, selected by the preschool faculty, who demonstrate academic potential and whose families are actively engaged in their child's education (School website, 2019). The scholarship covers the tuition at the target school until the student graduates from eighth grade or chooses to attend a different school. Historically, the former headmistress of the target school initiated the scholarship in1990-1991 to diversify the student body. Interestingly, this local initiative was implemented around the same time as re-segregation of public schools in response to Supreme Court decisions (Orfield & Lee, 2007). This re-segregation continues to take place across the country, even though many parents say they want their children to attend racially diverse schools in an effort to prepare them to function in a more global society (Farkas et al., 1998; Orfield,1995; Wells et al. 2009). Additionally, while public schools are becoming increasingly more racially segregated, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports that the number of high-poverty public schools more than doubled between 2000 and 2014 (USGAO, 2016). With this knowledge, the research team was curious to learn more about the school's efforts to provide intentional scholarship opportunities to diversify the school population by race, background, and socio-economic status, as well as to discover the influence on not only the scholarship recipients, but also on their families and the culture of the target school.

As a result of finding out about this scholarship opportunity, researching the literature on the subject, having discussions with stakeholders from both schools, and informal interactions with some current and former students and parents, the research team became intrigued to explore the influence of this unique scholarship opportunity in more depth. Therefore, the study was designed to investigate the outcomes of this sustained economic support. Current and former school administrators and teachers who interacted with this group of students were included as participants to gain additional insight into the phenomenon and discover the scholarship's influence on the broader school culture.

2. Literature Review

Research studies indicate that safe, caring, and responsive school environments positively influence student perceptions of school climate and learning outcomes (Parris, Neves, & La Salle, 2018). A study by Juvonen, Nishina, and Graham, (2006) found that higher school diversity was associated with increased feelings of safety and social satisfaction. Parris et al. (2018) also investigated relationships among student ethnicity, school climate, and school diversity in a sample of schools in the Southeast United States and reported that school diversity and student ethnicity were closely associated with perceptions of school climate. They further reported that as schools continue to diversify, their school culture should be considered. Parris et al. (2018) concluded that to create safe and supportive school environments, positive relationships with peers and adults must be established and maintained.

DiFranza (2019) presented four practical ideas to promote equity in the classroom and to create a positive learning environment that fully embraces the diversity among students: 1) promote the act of identifying moments of bias, 2) communicate classroom standards such as respecting everyone's voice, 3) set the tone for learning by building a classroom learning community, and 4) analyze the unique makeup of each class (DiFranza, 2019, p. 3). DiFranza (2019) further presented useful strategies for teachers which included listening to and learning from one another and reaching for new understanding when challenged.

Experts in the field report that there is strong evidence to support the positive impact of scholarships provided tolow SES students who want to attend college (Jackson, 2016; Richburg-Hayes, Patel, Brock, de la Campa, Rudd, & Valenzuela, 2015; Scholarship America, 2019). According to Scholarship America (2019), the impact of scholarships for low-income students often goes beyond the financial support. With assistance from scholarships, students with educational aspirations are given the opportunity to reach their personal goals. Jackson (2016) points out that scholarships may open the door to opportunities that can promote a passion for higher education among low-income students, who may not have considered college as an option. Subsequently, the creation of more scholarship programs may encourage individuals to pursue their long-term career goals, making a significant difference in their lives.

When a small number of diverse students join a larger mainstream group at school, social inclusion is an important factor to academic success (Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003). Collins (2019) defines social inclusion as the act of making all individuals feel valued.

It is critical for students to feel that they genuinely belong to the learning community, not simply by being physically present, but feeling socially included in the classroom. For students from different backgrounds to feel socially valued, they need to experience a sense of belonging and to develop close social relationships (New Brunswick Association for Community Living, 2019). If students do not feel socially accepted, they may experience isolation and poor self-esteem. Encountering a positive school culture is essential for students because this can contribute to their overall success (Brault, Janosz, & Archambault, 2014).

Raudys (2018) explained the school culture as "the underlying influences and attitudes within the school"(p. 11) and presented some authentic ways to build a positive school culture through meaningful parental involvement and by celebrating personal achievements. He further reported that continuing professional development and making adjustments when needed were essential to maintaining a positive school culture. Gunn (2018)also shared effective ways of cultivating a vibrant school culture by "embracing social-emotional learning for all and fostering a culture of resilience" (pp. 2-3).

Much of the literature review focused on the influence of scholarships for university students or reported on the influences of school voucher programs. We found limited reference to the impact of private school scholarships targeting preschool or elementary/middle school students.

3. Methodology

This research used a mixed-methods study design to examine the influence of sustained scholarship support for high-quality education at the targeted private school for the specific group of preschool scholarship recipients, their families, and on the broader culture of the target school. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were employed to inform the conclusions drawn from this investigation. Online survey responses were collected from the faculty/staff members of the target school, parents, and adult former students who previously received the scholarship. Survey questions asked adult participants about their perceptions of the scholarship's impact. Data from current minor scholarship recipients was collected through face-to-face interviews at the school.

4. Participants

The purposive sample consisted of faculty/staff from the target school, parents of the scholarship recipients, adult former scholarship recipients, and minor students currently receiving the scholarship funds.The student and parent participants were selected from a list of 30 current or former students who received or are currently receiving scholarship funds from the target school from 1990-present. The faculty/staff sample came from a list of current professional school employees and available contact information for some former faculty and staff. The study participants included 16 faculty/staff members, five parents, and five student recipients—including three current minor recipients and two former adult recipients.

5. Data Collection

In collaboration with administrators from the target school, the research team initially recruited potential participants through email messages based on the list of faculty/staff, and scholarship recipients and their parents provided by the school. Response to the first recruitment email was very limited with only two faculty/staff participants responding to the survey. To increase survey responses, the research team submitted a revised proposal for IRB approval. The revised proposal included hiring a research assistant (RA) to help with recruitment and data collection tasks, and the addition of a $10 gift card incentive to motivate potential participants to complete the online survey. Also, the revised proposal included approval to send a follow-up recruitment email to announce the opportunity for participants to receive the gift card incentive for completion of the online survey, and the addition of a follow-up text message and phone call (completed by RA) after the second recruitment email. At the end of each survey form, the research team added a request for the participants to provide their mailing address in order to send the gift card to them.

 With these changes approved, a second recruitment attempt was launched. The research team recruited faculty/staff members and parents of the current student recipients by sending a second email message notifying potential participants that they could receive a $10 gift card for participating in the study. The school also posted information about the research study in their school's newsletter. School administrators provided information to faculty/staff and

parents through email messages and announcements. Potential adult participants received the survey link in the recruitment email so they could immediately click on the link. When participants opened the survey link, they were given the opportunity to consent to participate in the study and submit their survey responses electronically.

Parents were also provided with information about how their minor child could participate and were asked to give permission for their child to participate through the online survey link. The research team and the faculty at the target school worked collaboratively to schedule interviews for three minor children who are currently receiving scholarship funds. A research team member visited the school to collect data from the minor students using a face-to-face interview protocol. The researcher asked the young students if they were willing to answer a few questions. Two of them eagerly answered the questions and were very engaged in the conversation about their experiences at school. The other minor participant tended not to speak much but provided answers to all the questions. The student responses were recorded, transcribed, and entered into the Qualtrics online software system to be analyzed.

Finally, the research team continued recruitment efforts by contacting potential adult participants, including former recipients and parents of the former scholarship recipients, with one text message and one phone call. When there was no response to the one text message, the researcher followed up with a phone call. If there was no answer, the researcher left a message providing ways they might share their email addresses with the researchers if they were interested in responding to the survey. If potential participants chose not to provide their email address or did not provide their email address, the research team made no further attempts to contact them. During the phone call recruitments, there was an exception. One of the parents did not have an email address. Therefore, the researcher asked for consent to complete the interview on the phone. After obtaining verbal consent, the questions were posed to the participant and their answers were transcribed and entered into the Qualtrics online software system. Throughout the recruitment process, the research team gathered three adult former recipients' email addresses. Two of the former recipients completed the survey. Data collection took over two semesters to complete and yielded 26 completed responses.

6. Findings

The total number of participants included 16 faculty and staff, five parents, and five scholarship recipients, which included three minor students and two adults. Among the faculty and staff participants, 87.5% were female and 12.5% were male. Within the parent subset, 80% were female and 20% were male. Most of the adult participants were between 35 and 44 of age. Figure 1 below graphically depicts the ages of the adult participants. Most participants were Caucasian (81.3% of faculty and staff and 80% of parents), and 62.5% of faculty and staff participants had 4-year college degrees, while 80% of parents had some college experience or 2-year college degrees. Figure2 provides data on the educational attainment of the adult participants.
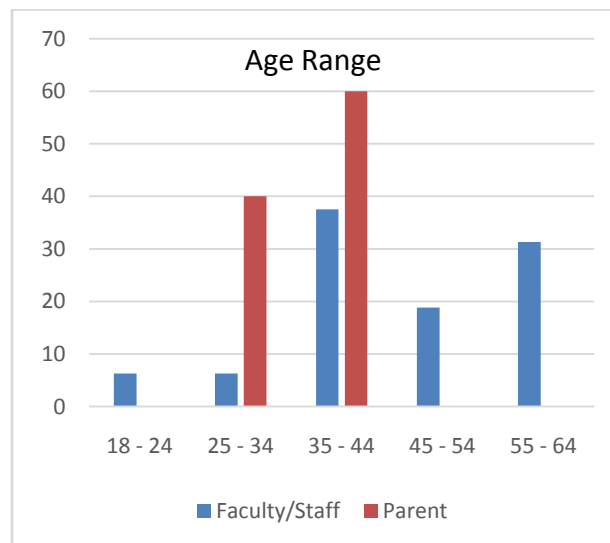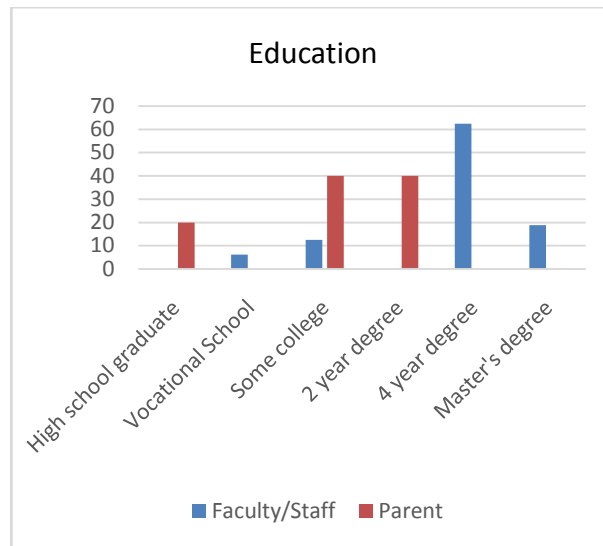
Figure 1: Age Range (%)

Figure 2: Education (%)

6.1 Faculty/Staff

The faculty/staff participants in the study were asked about their perceptions of benefits or challenges from having a more diverse student population at the school. This question was posed to examine their beliefs about acceptance of people from different racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. All of their responses were positive, sharing that a diverse population helps students to identify with the world around them and to accept differences by immersing them in a more diverse school culture. They indicated that the school diligently worked to create a positive school environment that develops understanding and appreciation of individual differences.

The faculty/staff participants were also asked to describe their personal insights regarding how the scholarship recipients from the lower SES preschool influenced the culture of this private, more affluent school. They reported that cultural and economic diversity was the predominant benefit of this scholarship, allowing students to gain understanding for those living in different circumstances and by enriching the school culture. Since scholarship recipients were not overtly identified to the school community, most teachers observed that the scholarship recipients interacted with their peers just like other students. Most of the faculty/staff also mentioned that they did not observe any differences between students who received the scholarship and those who did not.

The faculty/staff participants identified some challenges including students having different sociocultural backgrounds and dissimilar educational expectations from those of the scholarship recipients' parents. Sometimes additional accommodations were necessary to support the scholarship recipients. For example, providing Internet access for Google Classroom homework assignments was needed, or arranging access to printers or computers was necessary because scholarship funding did not provide the recipients with technology devices, athletic dues, class trip fees, costs of classroom projects, school uniforms, and so forth. Other challenges identified by the faculty and staff were awareness of food insecurity issues and psychological concerns such as social inclusion and the impact of increased academic expectations. For instance, when the scholarship recipients attended birthday parties or joined an extracurricular athletic team, they might not be able to afford gifts or additional sports equipment.

Finally, when the faculty/staff participants were asked to offer any suggestions to strengthen the partnership between the two schools involved in this initiative, most responded that good communication was the key in building strong relationships between the two schools. Another common suggestion was to provide additional funds for extra fees and expenses for athletics, field trips, school supplies, and other supplemental needs of the scholarship recipients. Even though the school has diligently worked to apply for grant funding and sought private donations for these items, they may need to develop more permanent and sustainable solutions to address this ongoing need. Some responses suggested that additional endowment funds for college scholarships for these students would be beneficial while others thought that providing an instructional aide or tutor to support the students' academic growth would be helpful. Other recommendations included adding a parent liaison position to the school staff that would be available to give guidance and develop support systems for new families.

6.2 Parents

The parent participants in this study were asked to share the long-term benefits of their child attending the target school. One parent stated that "I feel that [she] will have exceptional character traits to take with her all through her life"(Participant #1, personal communication, August20, 2019). Another parent responded that "smaller class sizes led to more one-on-one attention from teachers and improved the overall educational experience for their child"(Participant #5, personal communication, October2, 2019).Participant #4 stated that she expected her son to be independent, successful, and proactive in his education.

The parent participants also had an opportunity to describe any challenges that they or their child may have experienced while attending the target school. It was interesting to observe that some parent participants responded that they had to face the fact that their child often compared themselves to other classmates, feeling like outsiders at times since these students were aware that they were not as financially privileged as the other students. Other challenges reported by the parents included their child having to comprehend a dense amount of material in a short period of time, abide by more strict routines, and work exponentially harder to make good grades.

Prior to learning of this scholarship opportunity, the parent participants planned to enroll their children in public schools near their home and thought this private school was only for affluent children from wealthy families. They felt that they were fortunate to have this opportunity and found that the target school's curriculum and smaller class sizes were all beneficial for obtaining a high-quality education. Although the parent participants appreciated the school's welcoming atmosphere, one parent expressed that their child still needed more attention and resources to catch up with their peers. However, most of the parents in this study believed that their children received a high-quality education at the school. In general, it was noted that these students were behaving more maturely, planning for college, and considering their future career goals.

Finally, the parent participants suggested some ideas regarding social inclusion and publicity about the scholarship. One parent pointed out that her child sometimes felt lonely and struggled socially. She further suggested that the teachers, parents, and students from the preschool visit the target school in advance. Since the two school environments were very different, parents should learn more about the target school before enrolling their child in the school. Another parent suggested more communication about this scholarship opportunity so families could seek additional informationin order to make informed educational decisions. Another suggestion given by parent participants was to hold a career day with former alumni and scholarship recipients who could speak to the students about their experiences at the target school.

6.3 Scholarship Recipients

Five scholarship recipients, including three minor students and two adult former students responded to this study. Their ethnicities were one Caucasian student, two Hispanic students, and two adult African Americans. The minor students were currently in Kindergarten, first grade, and seventh grade. The two adult former students responded to the online survey questions. Three minor students responded via face-to-face interviews with a research team member. Although the number of participants was small, their responses were highly valuable to this study.

The first question asked student participants to share their perception of the advantages of attending the target school. Younger students stated that the fancy school facilities were the most attractive attribute, including playing on the nice playground; whereas the older student responded that the quality of learning was the best, such as having small class sizes and one-on-one interactions with their teachers. The young respondents thought that the greatest challenge about attending this school was that the school held high expectations for them, and they felt pressure to achieve at a high level. When these scholarship recipients were asked about making friends at school, they confidently stated that they did not have trouble making new friends and went on to describe their friends.

It was interesting to observe the students' perspectives regarding the reasons their parents decided to send them to the target school. Two of the scholarship recipients indicated that they already knew many positive things about the target school and everyone in the community considers it a good school. One participant shared that their parents learned about the scholarship opportunity and by being proactive, was able to obtain the scholarship. The current scholarship recipients expected to complete the scholarship program, graduate from the target school after completing eighth grade, and pursue higher levels of education.

The last question to the scholarship recipients was to share their plans for the future. The younger students mentioned that their plan was to play with their friends forever, while the older recipient planned to run photography business in the future.

6.4 Adult Recipients

The survey for the adult recipients began with a question about the benefits of attending a private Christian school. Both adult former scholarship recipients pointed out the academic advantages of attending the school, including smaller class sizes, individualized learning environment, and expedited exposure to advanced subjects. They confessed that they had a hard time building strong friendships at the beginning of the school year. One recipient reflected that being able to intermingle with students from different economic and demographic backgrounds allowed him to be more open and impartial.

Regarding their first impressions about this school, the adult recipients recalled feeling that the academic structure of the target school, compared to that of public school at the time, was more college-preparation and that the core curriculum was focused on reading comprehension, literacy, language arts, math, and science. One recipient remembered that it took some time to acclimate to the school, but they were able to overcome the obstacles to ultimately be successful and well-prepared for high school. Another recipient asserted that this school influenced his long-term education and allowed him to plan for a productive and meaningful future.

One of the recipients shared that their family moved to an urban area and he attended a large public high school in the new city. He reported that the transition from the private target school to the new public school was not as challenging as expected because he felt academically prepared to easily acclimate to the new environment. All recipients expressed their appreciation for this scholarship opportunity.

Some suggestions from the adult recipients were to strengthen partnerships between schools by following the progress of students as they pursue higher levels of education, be responsive to student needs so that they can stay focused on their education, allow preschool children to visit this target school on a regular basis, and offer more scholarships for low-income students.

7. Discussion

The scholarship recipients and their parents perceived that they were fortunate to receive a tuition-free high-quality education through eighth grade from this prestigious private Christian school. These findings confirm what other studies have discovered that parents often seek scholarship funding to attend private schools because they believe this will allow their children to receive a better education (Steward, Wolf, & Cornman, 2007).

The original purpose of creating the scholarship was to increase diversity at the target school. The researched scholarship is only provided for one or two students per year. The school offers a couple of additional scholarships based on financial need and has a financial aid application posted on their school website. However, with limited financial support, the overall increase in diverse students is limited. varied school population allows students to celebrate diversity by learning with and from others, which strengthens the overall school culture. To be fully accepted, students from different backgrounds should feel that they genuinely belong to the learning community. Globally, schools are becoming more diverse in terms of races, ethnicities, languages, national origins, and other cultural markers. Jia et al. (2009) reported on the importance of peer relationships across cultures. A culture of acceptance and support is critical for all students and any related efforts must be integrated into the everyday routines (Parris et al., 2018).

The findings revealed that diversification of the school's student population may help all students identify more easily with the world around them and be more accepting of different cultures. Both parents and students responded that the school's curriculum and smaller student/teacher ratios were benefits achieved by receiving the ongoing scholarship funds. Suggestions from participants included more intentional and efficient communication regarding the scholarship among the two schools involved in the study.

For further improvements, this program may benefit from more grant funding to support scholarship recipients, additional funding to offer additional scholarships for diverse or low-income families, and money to provide academic assistance and support for new families. The data also highlighted that even though the scholarship funds covered the students' tuition, there were additional expenses that were sometimes prohibitive for the scholarship recipients such as athletic events, field trips, uniforms, and school supplies. Faculty participants shared that some students were challenged at times with issues involving social inclusion or meeting higher academic expectations.

8. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This scholarship opportunity has provided students from at-risk backgrounds the opportunity for continued high-quality private education for the past 30 year. In addition to allowing specific individuals to thrive academically, this scholarship opportunity has also enriched the culture of the school and benefited the school community. These findings are from a very small sample and so while they give some insight into the individual benefits of sustained scholarship, more could be learned from a broader sampling of scholarship recipients and their peers from this particular school. Additionally, replicating this study with other similar scholarship programs in a wider variety of schools and communities would bolster the knowledge on this topic.

Conclusions drawn from this study support the belief that a positive school culture enables all students to feel a sense of belonging, participate actively in the educational community, and develop meaningful social relationships. This study focused on investigating a locally supported scholarship program that was intentional about bringing children together from different socio-economic and racial backgrounds. The findings are timely as we look at how racial and economic equity are affecting our society today and what can be done to build more equitable educational systems.

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