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A Critical Exploration of the Enactment of Successful Leadership Practices Used to Achieve Increasing Academic Achievement in a High Poverty Urban School With High Percentages of Students of Color

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A Critical Exploration of Successful Leadership Practices Used to Achieve Increasing Academic

Achievement in a High Poverty Urban School With High Percentages of Students of Color

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction
with a concentration in Educational Leadership
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DEDICATION

To my mom, Mahalia: You have been my biggest supporter throughout life, and this journey has been no different. Your unconditional love, unwavering support, prayers for my endurance and success, and your belief in me inspired me to persevere no matter what. You instilled in me that there is nothing too hard for God and that I could achieve my greatest dreams if I keep God first in my life. You convinced me that every obstacle on this journey was just a stepping stone to the next level. As a little girl, you told me that I could achieve the impossible if I just put my mind to it, and as a woman, you continue to cheer me on with the same words of inspiration. I know that I can never repay you for the love you have shown to me as my mother, but I hope that I have made you proud as your baby girl. I believe that God blessed me with the best Mom in the world! I LOVE YOU!

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"I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds."
Psalms 9:1 (NIV)

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ABSTRACT

For decades, America's K-12 public schools have struggled with closing the achievement gap between Black and brown students and their White counterparts. High-poverty schools with high percentages of students of color are often low-performing schools. These marginalized populations of students lack equitable access to the rigorous academic curricula and instruction accessible to their White peers (Goings & Ford, 2018; Lewis et al., 2012; Nadelson et al., 2020).

The educational policy landscape has made numerous shifts between national reform models designed to increase opportunities and provide equitable education for underrepresented and disenfranchised groups of students. The national attempts to transform education for students of color have failed to close the pervasive achievement gap. The hope that education can be the great equalizer continues to diminish as most high-poverty schools that are tasked with educating majority Black and brown students are designated as low-performing.

The purpose of this intrinsic case study is to understand how an elementary school with high poverty levels and high percentages of students of color improved and sustained the academic achievement of students. The overarching research question that will guide the study is: How does an urban elementary school with high poverty and a high percentage of students of color increase and sustain student academic achievement?

Achievement Elementary School had made its highest academic performance gains in the school's history, closing gaps between poor Black and brown students and their White counterparts. The school's principal is an African American female, and the study found that she was the impetus for the school's improvement. The principal used a multifaceted leadership

style, including incorporating spirituality and religious practices to lead the school on an unprecedented academic achievement journey. Seven significant themes emerged throughout the process of analyzing and coding the data. Every theme was meaningful, important, and necessary as they related to the academic success at Achievement Elementary School. As noted by the principal, it was not one particular elixir but a combination of factors working in tandem with each other. The major themes identified were: Principal leadership as the catalyst for systemic improvement; shared leadership; shift in school culture; building teacher professional capacity; accountability; a student-centered environment where students are loved; and spirituality.

This research supported the prevailing view that school leadership had an undeniable impact on student achievement; however, the school's ultimate success had been shaped by a comprehensive model that simultaneously impacted the students' academic achievement. The study suggested that the school's success resulted from an academic infrastructure that included four core elements: School Leadership; School Culture Shift; Investment in Professional Capacity Building; and Supportive Practice. Within these four core elements are seven themes that emerged during the study.

This study provided compelling evidence that high-poverty schools with high percentages of students of color could become high-performing. We must continue to explore models that will close the achievement gap. The study suggested further research on African American school leaders, a comparison study of schools with similar demographics, and spiritual school leadership. This study indicated that education can still become a great equalizer.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In an era of national education reform focused on closing the pervasive achievement gap, schools are confronted with increased accountability demands to improve school performance and student outcomes. Relative to their white counterparts, students of color and students with low socioeconomic statuses underperform academically, and this academic achievement gap has long existed in the United States public educational system. For decades, educational inequities have driven the United States to enact such federal education reform initiatives as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and the implementation of the Common Core Standards with little progress in closing the achievement gap. Unfortunately, the focus on education reform has failed to deliver the intended promise of advancing equitable opportunities for all students. Most recently, another federal education reform initiative, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), was passed in 2015 and enacted to hold schools accountable for student achievement while affording states the flexibility to decide how they will account for student achievement within a particular framework outlined by ESSA.

While the achievement gap practically exists in every school district across America (Moore III & Lewis, 2012), there is a deliberate focus on urban schools because these schools perform considerably lower than non-urban schools (Boske et al, 2019; Morgan, 2018). Urban schools are characterized by high rates of poverty, high populations of students of color, high populations of linguistically diverse students and high rates of low academic achievement. The purpose of ESSA is to promote the achievement of these same groups of traditionally

underrepresented students: (a) students in poverty, (b) students of color, (c) students who receive special education services, and (d) students with limited English language skills.

Students of color and students from low-income families not only lack exposure to rigorous content, but they are often subjected to the hidden curriculum (Apple, 2012) that advances the existing distribution of power and societal norms. Darling-Hammond (2004) asserts that there is a need for educational leaders to ambitiously and intentionally change the quality and frequency of learning opportunities for students if the academic outcomes for black and brown students from low-income communities are to change. Likewise, some scholars have argued that it is the principal leader who must actualize a culture of accountability and collaboration to advance increased student achievement (Gallagher, 2012; Stosich, 2016). Other scholars contend that an equitable distribution of quality teachers to all schools and quality teacher education programs are critical to the students' educational achievement in urban schools (Eckert, 2013; Ingersoll, 2004). Additionally, several researchers have recognized and suggested that "culturally inclusive practices" be used as the cornerstone for this change (Fraise & Brooks, 2015; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). Cooper (2009) states the importance of leaders to move beyond advocating for culturally responsive practices in schools to implementing and executing these practices. Some scholars assert that the lack of educational achievement of students of color and the low poverty status reflect society's socioeconomic inequalities (Caldas & Bankston, 1997; Howard, 2010; Sirin, 2005).

Background and Historical Context

Education after Desegregation

While segregated schools encompassed a school culture that included community involvement, appreciation and celebration of students' cultures, academic successes, public

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intellectuals as leaders, and other highly regarded characteristics, undeniably, students of color were being educated in schools that were considered inequitable (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision (1896) promoted racial segregation under the "separate but equal" doctrine. The African American community advocated for desegregation in search of equitable institutions of learning for all students. It was not until 1954 that the Supreme Court ruled against the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision because "separate but equal" was a false reality that could never be actualized.

Brown v. Board of Education 1954

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) was arguably one of the most significant judicial rulings in American History. The United States Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* was the first legalized step towards subverting the Jim Crow Laws which mandated racial segregation in public schools. The ubiquitous theme of "equal opportunity" formed the school's nucleus and was at the core of civil rights legal battles during this era (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declared separate public schools for Black and white students as unconstitutional and "inherently unequal". This groundbreaking ruling called for desegregation whereby public schools would begin integrating students in public schools. Although the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was considered a victory, research reveals that the "culture" of the predominately Black segregated schools and communities was abandoned. Green (2004) argues that

> Most importantly, resistance to school desegregation resulted in the removal of Black teachers and administrators from predominately Black public schools and their communities. Desegregation also meant that African American teachers and administrators lost significant positions of authority to White teachers and administrators

who maintained control over curriculum as well as the social and cultural milieu of the

educational process in America's public schools. (p. 268)

In America's public schools today, it is highly likely that students will matriculate through

elementary, middle, and high school with minimal, limited contact with African American,

Latino, or Asian teachers (Green, 1994; Hudson & Holmes, 1994). This argument is supported

with Hudson and Holmes' (1994, p. 389) Table 1 below which details the loss of African

American teachers following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision:

Table 1. The Loss of African American Teachers following Brown v. Board of Education: A
Snapshot

Pre 1954	Approximately 82,000 African American teachers were responsible for the education of 2 million African American children.
1954	The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was handed down.
1954 -1965	More than 38,000 African American teachers in southern and border states lost their jobs.
1975 -1985	The number of African American students majoring in education declined by 66%.
1984 -1989	An estimated 37,700 minority candidates and teachers, including 21,515 African Americans, were eliminated due to newly installed teacher certification and teacher education program admissions requirements.
By 2000	Only 5% of the teaching force will be of minority background, while 35% of the student population will be people of color.

The information relayed in Table 1 presents a loss not only to students of color, but to all

students. The disproportionate representation of teachers of color in an increasingly diverse

society perpetuates the existing inequalities of power and misconstrues the social reality of a

"democratic" society for students. Dilworth (1990) exerts that teachers of color possess an

inherent acumen of ethnically and culturally diverse experiences that is beneficial to the teaching

profession. Many teachers of color have the capacity to support their white colleagues in

bridging the ethnic and cultural gap that disconnects them from the racially, culturally and

diverse population of students of color (Dilworth, 1990; Hudson & Holmes, 1994).

Notwithstanding the improved facilities, updated textbooks and technology, and adequate educational resources, the desegregation process neglected to integrate the "culturally relevant" curriculum that existed in the students of color' segregated schools. Hudson and Holmes (1994) argue that highly functioning facilities do not necessarily equate to highly successful academic institutions. The exemplary teaching skills of African American teachers and their ability to make education relevant are compelling elements that cannot continue to go unnoticed (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). King's (1993) "research suggests that African American teachers bring a special teaching philosophy and pedagogy to the classroom which may build upon cultural preferences related to teaching and learning" (Hudson & Holmes, 1994, p. 389). La Salle, Wang, Wu, and Neves (2020) likewise assert that the absence of teachers of color, especially in schools with majority students of color, have a negative impact on the engagement and academic achievement of the students of color. Scholars have argued that teachers from black and brown communities have a distinct ability to meet the particular learning needs of students of color (Atkins, Fertig, & Wilkins, 2014; Banerjee, 2018; Rasheed, Brown, Doyle, & Jennings, 2020; Redding, 2019).

Post Brown v. Board of Education

The intermutual connectedness that was once shared between communities and schools for ethnically and racially diverse students has been forfeited by way of school integration. Morris (1999) contends that in today's schools there is a need to strengthen the communal bonds among schools, communities, and families (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993; Edwards, 1996; Epstein, 1992; Khalifa, 2019; Leake & Faltz, 1993; Siddle-Walker, 1993, 1996). Morris (1999) further describes the disconnect as a "fragile connection" between schools, families, and communities.

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Today, many urban schools are characterized by lack of community and parent involvement, student disengagement, academically-challenged, and unfavorable negative descriptions; a contradicting picture to schools in the Black community during segregation. Segregated, African American schools represented an "embeddedness" in the community wherein schools were interconnected with the community (Morris, 1999). "Black schools during the segregation era 'took on uniquely stylized characteristics reflective of their members. . . These schools functioned to solidify the community they served . . . and by serving as the core focus for individual and collective aspiration" (Irvine & Irvine, 1984, p. 416)" (as cited in Morris, 1999, p. 585). The appreciation for and the incorporation of the cultures of students of color have been dismantled and racially integrated schools employ instructional practices and curriculum based on dominant cultural norms. Bell (1990) argues that "despite the recorded history of the fight for school desegregation, Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars argue that rather than serving as a solution to social inequity, school desegregation has been promoted only in ways that advantage Whites (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 21).

Irvine and Irvine (1983) associated the desegregation process to the medical term "iatrogenisis", which means that the procedure used to prevent or cure the disease, inadvertently evoked an increased detriment than the existing problem (Milner & Howard, 2004). Conversely, the highly celebrated decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* to integrate schools, may have generated more problems for students of color than existed during segregation. While it was imperative, as it is today, that all students were afforded equal educational opportunities, the integration process ultimately neglected to implement equitable systems. "It was during this period (post-1954) that the problems of low self-esteem, decreasing aspirations, ability grouping

and tracking, assignments to educable mentally retarded classes and other systematic victimizations of Black youngsters developed" (Hudson & Holmes, 1994, p. 390).

There are documented historical accounts of educational institutions that have successfully educated students of color and students in poverty, pre-segregation. These institutions incorporated practices designed to value students of color and maintain high academic standards. Contrastingly, following desegregation, which was designed to eliminate the inequities in education, inequities have continued to persist with students of color beginning school academically behind their European and Asian counterparts, and the gap widens as these students progress through years of schooling (Moore III & Lewis, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

America's public K-12 schools have been charged with educating *all* students; however, data indicate there is greater success educating middle to upper income white students as opposed to educating students of color from low socioeconomic communities (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). Gaps exist in student outcomes at American schools for students of color from economically disadvantaged homes and especially African American students in poverty. Often these disadvantaged groups are deprived of the social or political power to address the systemic structures essential to reversing these trends (Gorski, 2012). According to the *Condition of Education 2019* report, only 38% of 12th grade students performed at or above *proficient* in reading in 2017, only 1% higher than in 2015. The statistics are very similar for fourth and eighth graders with only 37% and 36% respectively reaching the reading *proficient* level in 2017. The report notes that closing the achievement gap continues to be a concern at both national and state levels. Despite numerous attempts to create standards and policies that will close the gap, there is insignificant progress as evident in the *Condition of Education 2019* report. The trend of

students of color averaging significantly lower scores than white students across America's public K-12 schools persists.

Student populations in schools across the United States are becoming increasingly culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse, which indicates a growing need for the school leadership to move away from marginalizing these diverse groups and to begin embracing inclusiveness by educating and leading with diversity in mind (Agosto et al., 2013). "The increasing diversity in schools calls for new approaches to educational leadership in which leaders exhibit culturally responsive organizational practices, behaviors, and competencies" (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012, p. 177). Researchers who have conducted studies on high-achieving/high-poverty schools have recognized the importance of collaboration, accountability, and principal leadership to the success of the schools (Gallager, 2012; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Parker et al., 2011; Stosich, 2016). Parrett and Budge (2012) in their study of high-poverty/high-performing schools acknowledges the importance of "social justice leadership" where students who had been traditionally marginalized became the focus. The leadership in these schools "confronted structures, policies, practices, and mind-sets that perpetuated inequities and thus created more equitable schools where expectations were high, academic achievement improved overall, and achievement gaps were closing" (Parrett & Budge, 2012, p. 15). There is an extensive history of inequities in public education whereby, there is a disproportionate representation of black and brown students in special education programs and a lack of black and brown student representation in gifted programs. Schools with high concentrations of black and brown students from high poverty communities are susceptible to being educated by inexperienced teachers with limited training. America's most vulnerable student populations are not receiving adequate support for high academic achievement.

There is extensive research and literature that emphasize the challenges of educating black and brown students from low-income families; however, there is limited literature and research on the opportunities in America's public schools for these groups of students. It was important to explore and determine the effective policies, consistent procedures, and impactful practices of high-poverty schools with majority students of color that positively impact these students' academic performance. Parrett and Budge (2012) contend that any school, regardless of the student demographics, committed to an intentional shift to a continuous improvement model with high expectations for all students can become a high-performing school.

This study will give prominence to the educational procedures, structures, and practices in one high-poverty urban school with majority students of color that has demonstrated increasing academic performance despite the high concentration of students in underrepresented groups. The urban school selected will have at least 70% students of color, 70% of students living in poverty, and 70% of students demonstrating academic growth. Additionally, based on the lived experiences of teachers, administrators, support personnel, and parents at a school with a traditionally underperforming population of students that is progressing academically, this study will provide recommendations to school leadership with similar populations of students who are challenged with closing the achievement gap at their schools.

Personal Perspective and Experience

My experiences growing up as a student of color in a predominantly white school did not mirror the experiences of many of my black friends who were in the same school. I was in all honors classes, and often, I was the only student of color in the classroom. My friends thought that I was extremely smart because I was one of the few black students in my classes. I was receiving what was considered an "advanced" education with the "smart" students who were all

white except for the three black students. The three of us remained the only black students in the advanced track throughout our 6th-12th grade years in school. I often wondered why my friends who were black never had the opportunity to take advanced classes with me. Instead, they were in classes where the assignments seemed very easy, and they were not being prepared for college. In fact, they never went to the counselor to discuss their college options or taking the ACT or SAT as I did. I did not realize it at the time, but it is now apparent to me that my African American classmates were not afforded the same opportunities provided to me. Both of my parents were educators and they advocated for my seat at the table where I was educated in the most advanced classes offered at the school. The difference was that I had access and my friends who looked like me did not have the same access or opportunities to a high-quality education. I went to college and most of my friends of color stayed home and found a job because that is the path that was suggested for them. This is the problem that continues to exist in schools across America today: black and brown students are tracked in mediocre classes and not afforded the same access to a high-quality education. Hence, the gap between black and brown students and their white peers continues to persist.

As a practitioner and a scholar, I realize that while I had what was considered an "advanced" education, I did not have a culturally relevant education. My education did not include a curriculum that encompassed the rich history of black and brown communities. My culture and my ethnicity were not recognized or celebrated in my textbooks; however, European history was taught explicitly in the curricula. With a twenty-five plus year career in education, I have extensive experience with school turnaround work. My experiences include being a teacher, principal, district administrator and, superintendent in school districts where closing the pervasive achievement gap has been a priority. As a school and district administrator, I have

been successful with turning around low performing schools serving majority students of color from high-poverty communities. I also have over 15 years of experience working with alternative education schools across several states and these schools were disproportionately populated with students of color who were pushed out of their home schools and significantly behind academically. Depending on the location of the alternative education school, there were high concentrations of either African American students or Hispanic students from low- income families. Similarly, this mirrors the statistics from the U.S Bureau of the Census (2016) which reports that in 2014, there were 15.5 million children under eighteen living in poverty. The poverty rate revealed a substantial contrast by race: Black children accounted for 36% and Hispanics accounted for 31.9% as compared to their white counterparts who represented 12.3% of the poverty population.

Initially I was very perplexed when students would often refer to themselves as the "dumb" and "bad" students who no one wanted to teach. I quickly became interested in the students' stories because I wanted to understand why the students had developed a dislike for school and had deemed it as a place of socialization where they were treated unfairly instead of a safe place to learn. I distinctly remember one of the students asking me, "Why should I believe that you care about me?" The student went on to explain that no one at his previous school cared about him. The school administration suspended him several times, and he believed that his current expulsion was unwarranted. His school experiences consisted of interactions with teachers who he felt did not understand him, and many days he was confined to the in-school suspension (ISS) room where his assignments were worksheets without instructions from a teacher. The student described school as boring because he did not understand or relate to the

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assignments, and he was ready to become a high school dropout. Unfortunately, this was only the first of the similar countless stories that I would hear over the next twenty years of my career.

I have continued to witness the disproportionality of the same groups of students being displaced to alternative education schools and juvenile justice programs in several states throughout the United States which has ultimately influenced my research interest. I have also worked with Superintendents and principals to combat the low performance of students in hundreds of schools that serve black and brown students from low-income families. I have engaged in conversations with state, district, and school leadership wherein school leaders have expressed the challenges they encounter and the pressure to improve student outcomes in an age of increasing accountability. From school to school, the discourse is saturated with the same recurring challenges: a) large concentrations of students of color from economically disadvantaged homes not afforded an equitable education; b) retention of high-quality teachers; c) high percentage of students who are two or more years behind academically. My experiences have fueled my passion for social justice and creating equitable and inclusive educational spaces for all students to receive a high-quality education with an emphasis on building culturally responsive school climates.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this intrinsic case study is to understand how an elementary school with high poverty levels and high percentages of students of color of color improved and sustained the academic achievement of students. I will seek to understand what contributes to a public elementary school's increased academic performance of its students despite the adverse assumptions associated with schools with high concentrations of students of color and high poverty rates. In this exploration, I will attempt to find out and understand what contributes to

the students' academic achievement. Additionally, I will explore the role of the school's leadership in the school's academic achievement.

"We have much more to learn from studying high-poverty schools that are on the path to improvement than we do from studying nominally high-performing schools that are producing a significant portion of their performance through social class rather than instruction" (Elmore, 2006, p. 943). For purposes of this study high-poverty refers to a school where at least seventy percent of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch; high population of students of color refers to at least seventy percent of students enrolled are students of color; and increasing academic performance refers to at least seventy percent of the student population have demonstrated academic growth as evidenced by the school's state assessment outcomes.

Research Question

The overarching research question that will guide the study is: How does an urban elementary school with high poverty, high percentage of students of color increase and sustain student academic achievement?

The sub-questions were:

    a.   Who is involved in the processes that enable students to be successful?

    b.   How did the school achieve this level of success and how does it sustain its progress?

    c.   What specific practices and initiatives are implemented in the school?

    d.   What is the role of the school principal in institutionalizing cultural knowledge in a school with high poverty, high percentage of students of color, and a high percentage of students with increasing academic achievement?

Rationale for the Study

One of the most urgent and complex challenges that America's public schools are facing today are the inequities that hinder students of color and economically-disadvantaged students from succeeding both socially and academically. The reasons are plenteous to examine a high-poverty school with high percentages of students of color that has demonstrated notable progress in narrowing the achievement gap. One of the essential reasons is the need to increase the academic achievement levels of traditionally marginalized students. "The consequences of these disproportionally high levels of low achievement are long-term and wide-reaching, personal and civic, individual and collective. They are too devastating to be tolerable" (Gay, 2010, p.1).

For decades, there has been a growing concern for the academic performance of "students of color marginalized by systemic inequalities based on race, ethnicity, and language" (Paris, 2012, p. 93). Historically, marginalized students have been asked to abandon their own cultures in exchange for an education that is rigid and monolithic (Fraise & Brooks, 2015; Gay, 2002; Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011; Yosso, 2002). Paris contends that this abandonment "has and continues to have devastating effects for the access and achievement of students and communities of color in U.S. public schools" (p. 93).

America is experiencing the most diverse population of students in its K-12 public schools (Furman, 2012; Howard, 2003; McKinsey Report, 2009). America's continuous change in demographics includes diversity in cultures, ethnicities, languages, and economic statuses. America's youngest population is comprised of America's future population, and California which is a good representation of the future ethnic population includes a non-white population of 72.5%. Hence, it is critical to identify instructional practices and policies that improves

educational outcomes for historically marginalized groups because these groups will become America's majority.

Another fundamental reason for this exploration of academically successful, high-poverty schools with majority students of color was to understand the factors that contribute to breaking barriers to academic success while providing equitable instructional opportunities. Urban schools are often underfunded and populated with African American and Hispanic students who live in poverty and underperform academically (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Hoffman & Shen, 2008; Holcomb-McCoy & Booker, 2012; Reed & Swaminathan, 2012). The persistent ethnic and racial disparities in academic performance is often attributed to the unequal access that students of color and students from low-income families have to quality educational resources, quality teachers and quality curriculum and instruction (Matthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Identifying sustainable practices to close the achievement gap is key coupled with implications for future research to evaluate the identified practices for evidence of effectiveness.

It is apparent that reducing the breadth of the academic achievement gap between white students and ethnically and linguistically diverse students remains an unconquered quandary for educators, policymakers, community leaders, and researchers. America's public schools have historically been touted as the great equalizer, a vehicle to social mobility and equity; however, many schools are consistently underserving and inadequately educating students of color and economically underprivileged students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Ingersoll, 2001; Yonezawa, Hones, & Robb-Singer, 2011). Whether it is the achievement gap, educational debt, or the opportunity gap, there is a need to shift to the implementation, enactment and sustainability of proven practices to propel all students to academic achievement and change the academic trajectory of historically marginalized students.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this inquiry is based on Parrett and Budge's (2012) research on high-poverty, high-performing schools and culturally relevant leadership (Beachum, 2011; McCray & Beachum, 2014; Horsford et al., 2011). The Framework for Action (Parrett & Budge, 2012) and the Framework Towards Culturally Relevant Leadership (Beachum, 2011; McCray & Beachum, 2014; Horsford et al., 2011) provide an informative approach for closing the achievement gap while meeting the needs of all students and confronting policies, practices, and structures that perpetuate inequities in high-poverty schools with high populations of students of color. The Framework for Action specifically focuses on transforming low-performing, high-poverty schools to high-performing schools, high-poverty schools.

Parrett and Budge's (2012) Framework for Action is based on their study of seven, nationally-recognized, high-performing, high poverty schools. Parrett and Budge (2012) also make a connection to the importance of a school culture that embodies a commitment to equity. More specifically, this commitment to equitable opportunities for students is intentionally focused on students of color because of the apparent connection between poverty and students of color and students from single parent homes (Parrett & Budge, 2012). The school leadership in the seven schools in the study had meaningful connections to the cultures of the students, parents, and the community. Parrett and Budge (2012) contend that "this knowledge allowed them (school leadership) to form relationships of mutual respect, identify needs appropriately, and build on assets to create conditions in which students thrived" (p. 18). To further explore the leadership practices that embraces students' cultures, culturally relevant leadership is used to craft the conceptual framework (Figure 1) for this study.

A Framework for Action

Parrett and Budge (2012), in their quest to understand the practices and policies implemented for building and sustaining high poverty/high performance schools, synthesized intensive research, engaged in an in-depth study, and provided the critical components of success of seven of the nationally recognized high poverty/high performing schools across the U.S. Parrett and Budge (2012) reiterated the notion that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach; however, engaging in a process of refocusing through self-assessment, reflection, and coordinated action, provides the possibility for any school to become high-performing. According to Barr and Parrett (2007), high poverty, high performing schools embody eight characteristics: (a) Ensure effective district and school leadership; (b) Understand and hold high expectations for poor and culturally diverse students; (c) Engage parents, communities, and schools to work as partners; (d) Target low performing students and schools starting with reading skills; (e) Align, monitor, and manage the curriculum; (f) Create a culture of data and assessment literacy; (g) Build and sustain instructional capacity; and (h) Reorganize time, space, and transitions.

The framework is based on the notion that leaders in high poverty/high performing schools take *action* in three areas: (a) Leadership capacity; (b) Learning environment; and (b) Learning itself. Hence, the Actions gear is the most emphasized gear in the framework (Figure 1), and the other two components of the framework are represented by the School Culture gear and the Spheres of Influence gear. The success of the high-poverty/high-performance schools in the study are a result of the intentional, effective collaboration of all essential components of the framework with a calculated focus on "all students learning to high standards".
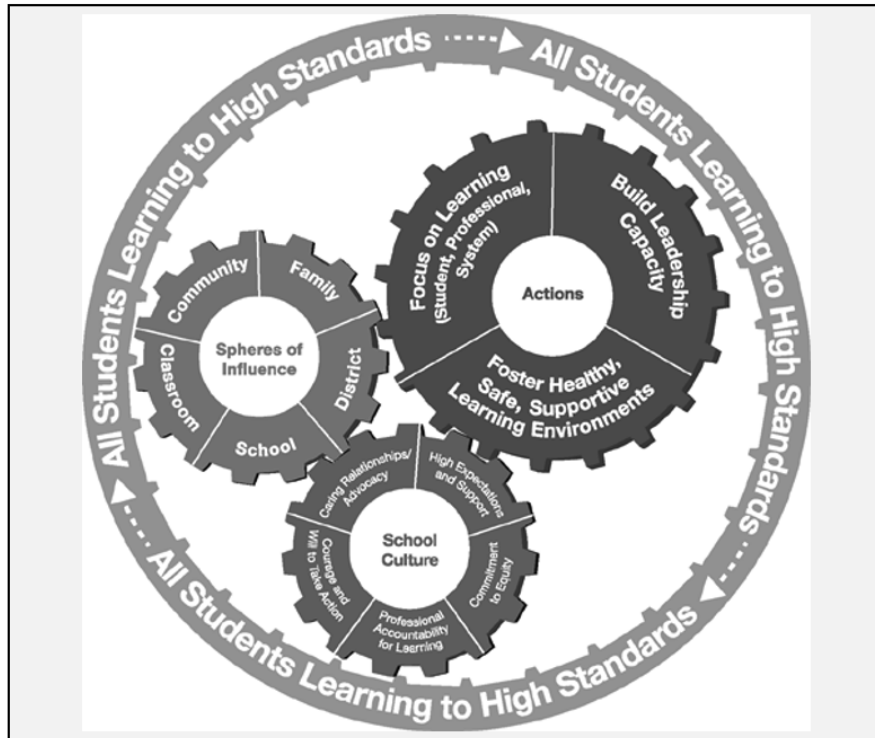
Figure 1. A Framework of Action (Parrett & Budge, 2012)

Action Gear: Leadership Capacity, Learning Environment, and Learning

The Action gear is the most critical gear of the Framework because it takes movement to begin the process of transforming high-poverty/low-performing schools. The movement, or action, must be strategic in nature focused on creating the norms, values, and beliefs that comprise the high-poverty/high-performing school's culture (one of three gears) which ultimately affects the five spheres of influence (one of three gears). How does this "action" show up in high-poverty/high-performance schools, and what does it look like? Building leadership capacity is one of the necessary components of the Action gear. Building leadership capacity means that a school has the essential foundation that undergirds the framework designed to yield high performance for all students. Linda Lambert (2003) is an advocate for shared leadership in schools and describes leadership capacity in the following manner:

When we learn together as a community toward a shared purpose, we are creating an

environment in which we feel congruence and worth. Inherent to this view is the belief

that all humans are capable of leadership, which complements our conviction that all

children can learn. (p. 4)

Lambert (2003) further explicated leadership capacity by emphasizing that leadership

emerges from the principal and other school administrators, a clear majority of the teachers, and

large numbers of parents and students with intentional, purposeful, meaningful, focused, and

productive collaboration of this community of leaders. Lambert contends that developing

leadership capacity increases the chances of the sustainability of school improvement milestones

when members of the community leave the school.

Another component of the Action gear is fostering healthy, safe, and supportive learning

environments. High poverty/high performing schools create these types of environments by

pinpointing and analyzing the mindsets, policies, structures, and practices that are contradictory

to this environment and that perpetuate low performance (Parrett & Budge, 2012). Students

deserve to have a stimulating learning environment that allows them to concentrate on academics

instead of surviving. Parrett and Budge (2012) assert that it is necessary for high poverty/high

performing schools to accommodate the student body with the following *protective factors*:

Fostering caring relationships between adults and children, as well as among peers; setting high

expectations and providing the support needed to meet those expectations; providing opportunity

for meaningful involvement in school; providing a safe and orderly environment in which the

rules are clear; and ensuring academic success (Benard, 1991, p. 59).

Nolan (2015) describes this type of environment as "care-based resistance" where

teachers resist the reform as usual mentality of "one size fits all" and embrace a culturally

responsive approach to protecting all students by fostering genuine caring relationships. Creating this type of environment for students in high-poverty/high-performing schools takes a collaborative effort between administrators, teachers, and all support staff to provide an environment conducive to learning.

The third component of the Action gear is taking action to focus on student, professional and system learning. Student learning is self-explanatory and is the ultimate goal for high-performing schools. Professional learning refers to the learning that occurs with the principals, teachers, and staff to ensure that the policies, practices, instruction, and philosophies are "what works" for each student. System learning is impacted by the professional learning because as professional learning ensues, it determines how the school as a whole learns to be more effective (Parrett & Budge, 2012). In other words, the sum of the parts (professional learning) equals the whole (system learning). Parrett and Budge (2012) uses the following questions to guide the three learning agendas:

1. Does our instructional framework guide curricula, teaching, assessment, and the learning environment?

2. Do we provide targeted interventions for students who need them?

3. Are all students proficient in reading?

4. Are we using research-based models for professional learning and encouraging reflective practice?

5. Are we engaging in continuous data-based inquiry as a school?

The principal must be engaged in ensuring that all three learning agendas are visible and remain at the forefront while making certain that all students are learning to high standards. While the Action gear is the most important and is critical to the success of the Framework, both

the School Culture gear and the Spheres of Influence gear are important to the success of the Framework of Action's success.

School Culture Gear

Establishing a school culture in a traditionally underperforming, high-poverty school with a high concentration of ethnically diverse students that promises a learning environment that mitigates past struggles and ensures that all students learn to high standards has been an arduous and, often times, an unsuccessful task. For decades, high-poverty schools with high black and brown student populations have been characterized as low-performing schools. Parrett and Budge (2012) describe this phenomenon in this manner:

> Low-performing, high-poverty schools are often distinguished by a toxic culture of low expectations, excuse making, blame, and resignation. In these schools, the degree of change needed to foster a culture conducive to high levels of learning for all—students, professionals, and the system—presents a formidable challenge. (p. 63)

Changing a school culture is a collaborative effort that must be embraced by the administrators, teachers, and staff who agree to become mutually accountable and responsible for implementing and sustaining change. Parrett and Budge (2012) suggest that the culture of a high-poverty/high-achieving school can be described by five distinguishing characteristics (see figure 1): (a) caring relationships and advocacy, (b) high expectations and support, (c) an unwavering commitment to equity, (d) a sense of professional accountability for learning, and (e) the courage and will needed to take action. Developing a plan to actualize this type of culture, called for a school leadership that had the capacity to ascertain the depth of organizational or systematic change that must take place which will dictate the level of action needed (Parrett & Budge, 2012). Transforming the school culture has proven to be challenging work because it requires

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extensive systemic change where administrators, teachers, support staff, and community partners must question their implicit assumptions and perspectives about certain groups (Parrett & Budge, 2012).

Spheres of Influence Gear

The Spheres of Influence gear simply represents the age-old adage that "it takes a village to educate (raise) a child". The school's leadership must be committed to building relationships and partnerships in classrooms, the school, the district, with the community, and with families (Parrett & Budge, 2012). Both the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000) embraces the importance of incorporating the communities and families of students of color to affirm their cultural identities and resist deficit thinking (Beachum, 2011; Milner, 2010; Nolan, 2015; Scheurich & Young, 1997; Weiner, 2006). Paris (2012) contends that, in addition to incorporating ethnically diverse, marginalized students' cultures, schools must be able to sustain the students' cultures within the school's policies, pedagogies, practices, philosophies, and programs. The leadership must be able to work in many *spheres of influence* while accessing and providing the resources that the school and community need to create schools and communities where all students are learning based on ambitious standards of academic excellence.

Culturally Relevant Leadership

McCray and Beachum (2014) assert that because the notion of culturally relevant leadership is in its infancy, the framework for this concept must be constructed by borrowing and building from existing similar and relevant frameworks. McCray and Beachum (2014) developed a culturally relevant leadership framework derived from Villegas and Lucas (2002) framework for pre-service teachers. The leadership framework includes three frames: liberatory

consciousness, pluralistic insight, and reflexive practice (McCray & Beachum, 2014). Liberatory consciousness is derived from critical consciousness and endeavors to develop educational leaders to reject systems of oppression and inequalities in education as well as increase awareness and knowledge. The pluralistic insight frame involves disdaining deficit thinking which causes leaders to implicitly or explicitly accept the idea of the superiority of the dominant culture to marginalized groups. The third frame, reflexive practice, is leadership where the school leader is viewed as the "agent of change" by adopting and implementing culturally relevant practices.

Horsford et al. (2011) developed a framework for culturally relevant leadership based on four concepts: (a) political context wherein school leaders must understand policy and its impact on creating equitable school practices; (b) pedagogical approach which entails adopting the elements of culturally relevant pedagogy and antiracist instructional practices; (c) personal journey which embodies the concepts of cultural proficiency where leaders assess their own cultural competency; (d) professional duty wherein leaders acknowledge their obligation to students by providing school environments that promote educational equity, engagement, and excellence. The scholarship on culturally relevant leadership found in the literature for this study included the following reoccurring concepts: self-evaluation, evaluation of the school, rejecting systems of oppression, and obligation of the culturally relevant leader to enact these practices.

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework*

* Based on Parrett and Budge (2012) Framework for Action and Culturally Relevant Leadership Concepts.

Research Design/Methodology

I will utilize qualitative methods to conduct this intrinsic case study focused on a

particular school as the primary interest while exploring the uniqueness of the factors that

contribute to the increase in student achievement. Qualitative research focuses on studying

things/people in their natural setting and the sense-making that people bring to the phenomena of

interest (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As an interpretive researcher, I will use

interviews, observations, and artifacts to collect data from several sources in one elementary school (Keedy, 1992).

Delimitations

The qualitative case study is being conducted in only one school in North Carolina.

Definition of Relevant Terms

The following terms and major concepts were of both relevance and importance to the study:

Culture- "Culture is the set of practices and beliefs shared by members of a particular group that distinguish that group from other groups. Culture includes all characteristics of human description including age, gender, socioeconomic status, geography, ancestry, religion, language, history, sexual orientation, physical and mental level of ableness, occupation, and other affiliations" (Terrell & Lindsey, 2018, p. 16).

Culturally Relevant Leadership- Leadership that creates a culturally inclusive and equitable school environment where the school leaders are knowledgeable about the diverse cultures of the students, aware of personal biases, reject practices that perpetuate the systemic oppression of marginalized students; thereby creating school wide cultural competence.

Implicit Bias- refers to relatively unconscious and relatively automatic features of prejudiced judgement and social behavior (Zalta, 2015). Implicit bias can develop over time with the accumulation of personal and social learning experiences (National Center for State Courts NCSC).

Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge- "making learning about cultural groups and their experiences and perspectives an integral part of the staff's professional development.

Establishing norms for a culturally proficient educational environment. (Terrell & Lindsey, 2018, p. 34).

Achievement Gap- The term refers to the disparities in standardized test scores between ethnically diverse students and their white counterparts.

Equitable Education-providing all students with what they need in order to be academically successful.

Transformative Leadership- Leadership that begins with questions of justice, democracy, and the dialectic between individual accountability and social responsibility beyond paradigms of oppression, domination, repression, and suppression an exercise of power and authority (Weiner, 2003).

Social Justice Leadership- School leaders who make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership, practice, and vision (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223).

Unexpected Schools-schools where low-income students and students of color are learning at unexpectedly high levels (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2012).

Urban schools- For the purposes of this study, urban schools refer to what Milner (2012) terms as *urban emergent schools.* These schools are located in cities of less than one million people, and while they do not experience the magnitude of the challenges in large metropolitan cities (*urban intensive schools*), they encounter many of the same issues surrounding educating students in urban school settings.

Summary

Although urban schools are traditionally associated with issues of poverty and poor academic performance, there are certain urban schools that are making academic gains. These

schools are demonstrating academic growth despite the characteristics that undermine the marginalized students' likelihood to advance academically. This study will identify a high-poverty school that has a high percentage of students of color and a high percentage of students making academic growth. The results of this study will add to the limited yet growing empirical research on the development, enactment, and sustainability of school practices in urban schools that contribute to the increased academic performance of students in schools that have high percentages of students of color and high poverty rates. The shift in the school-age population and the dire need to eliminate the vast ethnic and racial disparities prevalent in educational institutions today serve as the major premises for examining an urban school with a high-poverty, high black and brown student population, and a high percentage of students making academic gains.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this review of related literature is to examine the extant body of literature on high-poverty, high-performing, and high black and brown populated schools, and to identify gaps in the literature as it relates to the actualization of this concept.

The purpose of this intrinsic case study is to understand how an elementary school with high poverty levels and high percentages of students of color improved and sustained the academic achievement of students. I will seek to understand what contributes to a public elementary school's increased academic performance of its students despite the adverse assumptions associated with schools with high concentrations of students of color and high poverty rates. In this exploration, I will attempt to find out the specific actors, programs, or initiatives that contribute to the students' academic achievement. Additionally, I will explore the role of the school's leadership in the school's academic achievement. The research question guiding this study is: How does an urban elementary school with high poverty, high percentage of students of color increase and sustain student academic achievement? As a result, the literature employed for this study has been selected based on its relevance to the study.

This literature review encompasses a methodical identification of scholarship related to the problem of this study. Considering the centrality of *relevance* for a doctoral dissertation (Matthew, 2006), my literature review is not a comprehensive review of all literature found in my search, but inclusive specifically of the literature most relevant to the primary focus of this study. Through the University of South Florida's (USF) library resources, I utilized Find It!, Google Scholar, and JSTOR search engines using the following key words collectively and

individually: high performing, high achieving, high poverty, students of color, urban schools, education reform, school turnaround, culturally relevant leadership, culture,, and culturally relevant pedagogy. Primarily, I chose articles from peer reviewed journals. Then, I perused the reference list of each peer reviewed article in order to include any publications that did not surface from my search but were relevant for this literature review. In addition to the articles selected for this literature review, four books were selected to inform the study.

In this chapter, I will give an overview of the literature review conducted for this inquiry. I will then expound upon the literature on high poverty schools and academic achievement by examining several studies related to these school types. To explore and understand the connection of culture and education and its impact on consistently marginalized students, I will explicate the complexities of the term culture and provide a historical perspective of culturally relevant leadership practices. Additionally, I will explore culturally relevant pedagogy, the derivative of culturally relevant leadership to take a deeper dive into the concept of the intersectionality of culture and education.

Overview of Literature

Stosich (2016) stated that "standards are intended to foster excellence and equity in student learning by institutionalizing high expectations for all students while allowing educators to have professional discretion in determining how to meet these goals" (p. 539). There are schools that have embraced this challenge by overcoming obstacles of educating students of color who are poverty-stricken and demonstrating the ability to defy the odds of underperformance.

While the achievement gap persists in many schools across the U.S., there are schools that are defying (not beating) the odds and countering the narrative of high poverty schools with

majority students of color ending up as low-achieving schools. There are schools that are successfully educating students by increasing student achievement, and this study focuses on those schools whose student body is representative of commonly marginalized students. The goal of this literature review is to present a review of the findings of research conducted on those strategies, structures, practices, and processes that have been deemed as effective for schools serving persistently underserved, underrepresented, and underachieved students.

Many scholars have asserted that the marriage of the students' cultures and education is a means to improve the academic achievement of students of color (Beachum, 2011; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billing, 1995; Nolan, 2015; Parrett & Budge, 2012). The review of literature will focus on the educational attainment of students in poverty, the academic advancement of students of color with a focus on infusing students' cultures with their educational experience, and strategies, policies, practices, and processes of high poverty schools with high concentrations of students of color who are either high performing students or students who are demonstrating academic growth.

Some scholars have argued that it is the principal leader who must actualize a culture of accountability and collaboration to advance increased student achievement (Gallagher, 2012; Stosich, 2016) Other scholars contend that an equitable distribution of quality teachers to all schools and quality teacher education programs are critical to the educational achievement of students in urban schools (Eckert, 2013; Ingersoll, 2004). Additionally, several researchers have recognized and suggested utilizing "culturally inclusive practices" as the cornerstone for this change (Fraise & Brooks, 2015; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). Cooper (2009) states the importance of leaders to move beyond advocating for culturally responsive practices in schools to implementing and executing these practices.

The Problem: Inequities/Disparities Educating Ethnically and Culturally Diverse Students

The preeminence of education reform continues to serve as a headliner in the struggle to correct decades of inequitable educational practices imposed on students of color (Reed, 2015). Cooper (2009) contends that while America's K-12 public school system advocates for equal access to high quality education for all students, the prevalence of academic and social inequities are conspicuous. According to Ladson-Billings (2009),

> No challenge has been more daunting than that of improving the academic achievement of African American students. Burdened with a history that includes the denial of education, separate and unequal education, and relegation to unsafe, substandard inner-city schools, the quest for quality education remains an elusive dream for the African American community. However, it does remain a dream—perhaps the most powerful for the people of African descent in this nation. (p. xv)

Educational attainment has been promoted as the vehicle to social mobility; nevertheless, the academic achievement disparities between ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse students and their white counterparts remain evident (Hammond, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Furthermore, these marginalized students most often attend urban schools rather than suburban schools (Hoffman & Shen, 2008). From a historical perspective, students in urban school settings perform below the basic achievement levels on state standardized tests in comparison to students in rural and suburban school settings (IES National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). Blanchett, Mumford, and Beachum (2005) contend that students in urban schools are largely affected by failed urban school districts that perpetuate systemic structures of privilege and oppression similar to structures in the larger society. Students in the urban schools are frequently characterized by "highs and lows" and urban schools are often associated with the term "deficit"

(Reed & Swaminathan, 2014). The "highs" of urban schools include high concentrations of students who are culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse, high poverty, high numbers of students with special needs, high rates of suspensions and expulsions, and high teacher turnover rates (Reed & Swaminathan, 2014). The lows of urban schools are also comparable to the term "deficit": student achievement is low as compared to their white counterparts, parent involvement is low, staff morale is low, and teachers are often less effective and less qualified than are teachers in suburban schools (Reed & Swaminathan, 2014).

Ethnically and culturally diverse students have often experienced exclusionary practices in schools (Shabazian, 2015; Skiba, Chung, Trachok, Baker, Sheya & Hughes, 2014). Deficit thinking associated with students of color contributes to the exclusionary practices that intentionally or inadvertently impact students of color' experiences in schools (Beachum, 2011; Milner, 2010; Scheurich & Young, 1997; Weiner, 2006).The social and cultural capital of these students is often invalidated because of its lack of resemblance to the dominant culture (Khalifa, 2010) even though, research shows the culture of the school should reflect and encompass characteristics of the communities' cultures (Fraise & Brooks, 2015; Johnson, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). The characteristics of all students' cultures should be embraced and celebrated instead of feared and rejected. If schools are to become spaces of inclusion for all students regardless of their culture, ethnicity, or language, the school's leadership must play a pivotal role in the school's transformation (Riehl, 2000). The problem addressed in this study emanates from the prolonged concern that America's schools enact policies, procedures and practices that advance the marginalization of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Zoch, 2017).

The "Achievement Gap", which mainly influences students of color and linguistically diverse students, has dominated the educational reform discourse for the past fifty years (Khalifa

et. al, 2016). A disproportionate percentage of students of color are not achieving academic success as compared to their white counterparts (Gay, 2002; Gustein, Lipman, Hernandez & Reyes, 2014; Jackson, 2011; & Ladson-Billings, 1995). There is an emerging body of literature focused on narrowing the "academic achievement gap" that exists between various subgroups of students; mainly between ethnically diverse students and white American students.

The term "Achievement Gap" has been used to describe the significant disparities between the academic performance of students of color and white students with issues of race remaining a salient factor regarding the inequitable practices and policies in schools. The achievement gap has fluctuated over the last thirty years, and there has been relatively no change in the reading score gap between ethnically diverse students and white students for the last four years as illustrated in the Condition of Education Reports (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Billings (2006) has asserted that to close this pervasive "achievement gap", we must reduce the education debt. The education debt refers to those resources that should have been allocated to high poverty schools with majority students of color which has resulted in an educational gap between students of color and their white counterparts. Billings (2006) contends that "the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt" (p. 5).

Scholars (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Gay, 2010; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998; Terrell & Lindsey, 2018) have asserted that educational leadership coupled with culturally relevant practices is a viable framework towards creating equitable learning environments for all students and bridging the achievement divide that exists between students of color and their Caucasian counterparts. Terrell and Lindsey (2018) further assert that it is essential that school leaders ask themselves and provide a substantive answer to this question: "How do we meet the academic

and social needs of young people who enter our schools with a different set of values, beliefs, socioeconomic experiences, behaviors, worldview, home languages, and degrees of ableness?" (p. 18). Paris (2012) questions if being culturally relevant or responsive is enough by suggesting the concept of culturally sustaining practices as a means to maintain, value, and support "the linguistic and cultural dexterity and plurality (Paris, 2009 2011) necessary for success and access in our demographically changing U.S. and global schools and communities" (p. 95). Blackmore (2009) draws attention to how "increased accountability has focused system and media attention on social inequality" and this shift in the discourse makes it difficult to "ignore issues of educational inequality" (p. 8).

The prevalence of inadequate academic achievement of students of color (Flessa, 2009; Ford & Moore, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006) coupled with the increasing shift in America's population consequently calls for educational leaders to be agents of change and address social and cultural challenges presented in their schools (Bustamante, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Horseford, Grosland & Gunn, 2011; Lumby & Foskett, 2011). There is a strong need for educational leaders to provide inclusive school environments that meet the academic, cultural, and social needs of students of color (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Khalifa, 2013; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 201;). Teachers as change agents have the platform to make a remarkable difference in the academic achievement of students (Cooper et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond & Young, 2002;). Teachers spend the most time with students during the school day and are responsible for developing lesson plans and delivering a curriculum that will propel students to meet or exceed expected grade level standards. However, Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) contend that "the principalship is the most recognizable leadership position in a school, and the position most empowered by districts, and even state policy. Likewise, the principal is

also the one held most accountable for progress or lack thereof" (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 3). The school leader is situated in a position to impact change (Theoharis, 2010) and therefore, bears the onus to dismantle the disconnect that minoritized students experience and renounce the perpetuation of inequitable practices (Theoharis, 2007).

Several scholars have asserted that collaboration or shared leadership is one of the essential elements to improving the academic performance in schools with high poverty rates and high concentrations of students of color (Gallagher, 2012; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Parker et al., 2011). While there is overwhelming evidence that urban schools are more likely to be characterized as low achievement or failing schools, there are urban schools that are showing increased academic achievement. According to Reeves (2003), one of the associations made regarding students in high poverty schools with majority students of color who are academically successful is the school-wide "laser focus" on academic achievement and high expectations for all students. Reeves (2003) coined the term 90/90/90 based on a study he conducted in schools in Milwaukee and Wisconsin where ninety percent or more of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch, ninety percent or more of the students were students of color, and ninety percent or more of the students met the district or state academic standards. The results of the 90/90/90 study revealed "consistent application of the 90/90/90 techniques holds promise for improving student achievement and closing the equity gap in schools of any demographic description" (Reeves, 2003, p. 1).

Scholars such as Dantley (2005), Theoharis (2004), Ladson-Billings (2006) and Dillard (2006) are proponents of "linking schooling and culture" as a means to eliminate the "achievement gap" which signifies the astounding disparities between the academic achievement of marginalized students and white students. Dantley (2005) contends that "Leadership in

schools of urban, African American children cannot afford a learning environment where academic achievement is depoliticized or where they find themselves in school sites that ignore the political cultural environment in which they are positioned" (p. 653). Educating Students of color and students from poor families not only lack exposure to rigorous content but they are often subjected to the hidden curriculum (Apple 2012) that advances the existing distribution of power and societal norms. Essentially, the lack of educational achievement and low poverty status of students of color in schools is a reflection of the socioeconomic inequalities in society (Caldas & Bankston, 1997; Hammond, 2010; Sirin, 2005).

Educating Students of Color

Educational scholars and researchers have poignantly documented the academic disparities evident by the existing, pervasive achievement gap wherein students of color have underperformed academically as compared to their white counterparts. Smith (2005) asserts that primarily, African American, Hispanic, and economically-disadvantaged students are victims of inadequate public education which ultimately impacts the social stability of the United States.

While closing the achievement gap has been an overwhelming undertaking in America's K-12 public education system, there are researchers who have illustrated factors that have positively impacted the educational outcomes for students of color and unmasked their inequitable school experiences, specifically in urban schools (Gay 2000, Ladson-Billings, 1995; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Smith, 2005). Students of color are more likely to achieve if teachers hold high expectations for them instead of tracking them in lower level classes (Bazron, Osher, & Fleischman, 2005; Brown, 2007; Carlton-Parsons, 2005; Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott, & Garrison-Wade, 2008; Parrett & Budge, 2012). Students of color in high-poverty schools benefit from access to honors, advanced placement (AP), and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs.

Often students who are low-performing are on a continuous cycle of enrolling in courses that lack rigor and students of color are often underrepresented in gifted and talented programs (Holcomb-McCoy & Booker, 2012; Parrett & Budge, 2012).

Urban schools are most at-risk of a transient teacher population and least likely to maintain highly qualified teachers (Lewis, Chambers, & Butler, 2012). Students of color are often placed at an unfair disadvantage because they are not afforded the opportunity to receive quality instruction from highly skilled and competent teachers. Quality instruction has been documented by educational researchers as an essential ingredient to the academic success of students of color (Lewis et al., 2012). Unfortunately, urban schools are subject to alarming teacher turnover rates with forty to fifty-five percent turnover rate within five years of beginning teaching (Ingersoll, 2003; Papay, Hicks, Page, & Marinell, 2017). Establishing teacher stability in urban schools for students of color and economically-disadvantaged students is critical to the students' academic success.

Ladson-Billings (2006) asserts that urban students of color are empowered when they experience culturally relevant classrooms. Creating culturally relevant classrooms is an issue of social justice and not simply employing specific practices. "In urgent times such as these, teachers must work to develop classroom contexts that validate who students are—classrooms that allow students to build knowledge skills, and attitudes necessary for academic success, social success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness" (Milner, 2012). There are several documented academic successes of urban schools highly populated with students of color and economically disadvantaged students (Milner, 2011; Moore & Lewis, 2012; Parrett & Budge, 2012).

Poverty and Academic Achievement

"The condition of poverty; however, may be the most important of all student differences in relation to high achievement" (Burne & Beilke, 2008, p.295).

Poverty should not be used as an excuse for low academic performance; however, research documents the negative influence it has on the learning process (Parker et al., 2011; Tienken, 2012). According to a study conducted by Cooper et al. (2000), wealthier students can gain a month to three months of academic progress during the summer while students from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds can lose two to three months of learning (Tienken, 2012). Students living in poverty often do not have access to the academically stimulating enrichment activities offered during the summer placing the students at a disadvantage to middle to upper class students who are exposed to a vastness and variety of information during the summer.

Berliner (2009) believes that teachers and administrators are not responsible for students in poverty who fail academically. Berliner (2009) contends that the majority of these students are contributing to the education gap based on factors beyond the schools' control. For example, Berliner (2009) contends that:

- Students living in poverty are more likely to have low birth weights and most low birth children are affected cognitively with IQs approximately 11 points lower than babies at or above normal birth weights.

- Students living in poverty do not receive adequate nutrition which impacts the students' ability to function and learn.

- Students living in poverty in inner cities and rural farms are most likely to be affected by air pollution which may cause asthma symptoms. This affects school attendance and ultimately lower levels of academic achievement.

- Students living in poverty in urban communities are more likely to experience violence such as the 27 public school students who were murdered in Chicago in 2007, and schools experience far greater challenges nurturing academic achievement for these students.

- Students living in poverty are more transient than their peers and thirty percent of the nation's poorest children have attended at least three different schools by third grade which makes these students 20% less likely to graduate high school.

Based on these points, Berliner (2009) challenges legislation to improve America's systems to allow more children to enter school healthy and able to learn, and cease blaming educators for these systemic problems uncontrollable by teachers and administrators.

On the contrary, there are researchers and scholars who contend that schools do have the influence and power to disrupt the cycle of poverty by creating school cultures with high expectations of students in poverty (Burney & Beilke, 2008, Gallagher, 2012, Kannapel & Clements, 2005, Reeves, 2009). Researcher have also found that the effectiveness of the principal's leadership and their ability to create learning environments of high expectation correlates with the academic achievement of students (Dolph, 2016; Edmonds, 1979; Williams & Welsh, 2017). While students in poverty have been stigmatized with a dismal academic future, there is evidence that "effective schools" can change these students' trajectory.

High Performing/High Poverty Schools/High Percentages of Students of Color

Several studies have been conducted that suggest practices, policies, structures, and processes to improve the academic achievement of students of color in high-poverty schools. Traditionally marginalized students attending the schools in the following studies have met unprecedented levels of academic success. The apparent supposition with national education

reform efforts is that there is a silver bullet within policies that will close the achievement gap; however, history shows that after decades of national reform the achievement gap persists.

After reviewing the selected empirical studies for this literature review (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Edmonds, 1979; Gallager, 2012; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Parker et al., 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Reeves, 1995), five common reoccurring themes of the successful schools were identified: (a) the principal provided strong leadership and direction, (b) there was a culture of accountability to teach all students and high expectations that all students would meet minimum, yet most efficacious levels of achievement, (c) the principal was committed to a "shared" leadership style that promoted collaboration, (d) the teachers were empowered as professionals and coached to teacher effectiveness, and (e) the environment was conducive to learning and non-oppressive. Additionally, two of the four studies included parental engagement and community involvement as critical factors to the overall success of the school. Based on theoretical deduction, these themes will be used as part of the a priori coding process for the study.

Principal Leadership

"Leadership matters…and it matters immensely in high-poverty schools."
(Parrett & Budge, p. 190, 2012)

Scholars (Khalifa, 2013; Lumby & Foskett, 2011; Parket et al., 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012) have argued that while superintendents, principals, teachers, students and their families can all exert leadership, arguably, it is the leadership of the school principal that holds the greatest power and can therefore advance the implementation of equitable educational practices that will lead to positive academic outcomes. Principals serve as the visionary and the catalyst for change by clearly articulating a vision that catapults the staff and students into high performance. In the Parker et al. (2011) study of eleven high-poverty schools throughout the

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province of Canada, strong leadership by administrators was identified as key to the success of the school. One of the principals named himself a "Leader of Leaders" because while he had strong leadership in the teachers and other staff, his role was to continuously coach his team to excellence. Similarly, Parrett and Budge (2012) assert that although shared leadership is an essential component in the success of high poverty, high performance schools, the principal's position creates a vantage point to provide opportunities for a transformational shift.

Parrett and Budge (2012) found that leaders in high poverty/high-performing schools are committed to three ideals: excellence, equality, and equity and understand the distinct difference between them. Based on the Parrett and Budge (2012) study, the schools' principal leadership is essential to the sustainability of schools' high-performance statuses.

Although the answers are complex and challenging to distill, one feature stands out from the understandings gained from the hundreds of HP/HP schools studied: significant student gains will not be sustained without effective leaders who serve as catalysts for the specific actions that in turn drive the success of these schools—actions that build further leadership capacity; focus on student, professional, and system learning; and foster safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments. (Parrett & Budge, 2012, p. 33)

The evolving body of research on transformational leadership (Giles, Johnson & Brooks, 2005; Kwan, 2020; Mulford, Silins, & Leathwood, 2004; Shields, 2010) advances this notion of transformative principal leaders as the key to *successful* schools. Giles, Johnson, and Brooks (2005) conducted an empirical study on a failing urban school that became a successful school by meeting three criteria: (a) positive school review with regard to leadership of school principal, (b) statewide test results show improving performance over time at an exceptional rate, and (c) principal was widely acknowledged by her professional peers as being a successful leader. The

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student population of the school was 98% African American and 83.5% were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The principal of the school was appointed to transform this failing school where reportedly students had low self-esteem, teachers held a deficit thinking and defeated mentality, and parents were disengaged. While the experienced principal who held democracy, equity, and social justice in high esteem recognized the importance of a collaborative leadership approach, she recognized that before a shared vision could be accomplished, it was her inherent responsibility as the principal leader to create an environment of safety and discipline while simultaneously focusing on five transformative principles: caring, organization, accountability, learning, and scaling-up of success.

Chenoweth and Theokas studied twenty-four high-performing, high-poverty schools with high percentages of students of color across the United States over a period of eight years (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013). Chenoweth and Theokas called the schools "unexpected schools" because schools with these characteristics were not expected to achieve high academic performance. The study included a sample of thirty-three principals and assistant principals. The principals are referred to as "It's Being Done" principals based on the principals' demonstration of success in unexpected schools. One of the qualities that all of the schools shared was that principals defined themselves as instructional leaders responsible for being the visionary for high academic performance. Some of these high poverty schools with high percentages of students of color had academic performance that ranked them at the top of their states. Similarly, Gallagher's (2012) study of two of California's highest performing high poverty schools, found that the teachers credited their principals for actualizing environments of accountability and collaboration.

Strong principal leadership has been touted in several studies (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Edmond, 1979; Gallagher, 2012; Giles, Johnson & Brooks, 2005; Parker et al., 2011, Parrett & Budge, 2012), as the medium through which high-poverty, high percentages of students of color, low-achieving schools reified as high-performing schools. However, strong principal leadership included the ability to create a culture of shared leadership where all staff are empowered to lead from all positions throughout the schools.

Collaboration/Shared Leadership

The 90/90/90 study (Reeves, 2003) negates the widely held assumption that students living in poverty cannot succeed academically. Scholars have noted that the negative effects from being a student of low socioeconomic status does not automatically dictate the educational outcomes of the student (Reeves, 2003; Tienken, 2012) no more than race, culture ethnicity, gender, or language unquestionably dictate educational outcomes (Burney & Beilke, 2008).

While poverty does have an impact on student achievement, the 90/90/90 study provides evidence that challenges the commonly adopted hypothesis that "there is an inextricable relationship between poverty, ethnicity, and academic achievement" (Reeves, 2003, p. 2). Reeves (2003) does not claim the 90/90/90 concept as a silver bullet; however, he does argue that "consistent application of the 90/90/90 techniques holds promise for improving students' achievement and closing the equity gap in schools of any demographic description" (p. 1). One of the techniques is collaboration and shared leadership, between administrators and teachers.

Principals at many of these schools did not use faculty meetings for announcements but as a place for collaboration. Leadership of principals was not distinguished from teacher leadership. Principals and teachers evaluated students' work together on a consistent basis. The school administrators and teachers administered monthly common assessments. Reeves (2003)

contends that although there was principal and teacher turnover, the schools continued to display academic achievement because the culture of accountability of the school was not predicated on a particular administrator or teacher, and the shared leadership prevailed.

Shared leadership that leads to collaboration in schools appears to be one of the factors associated with high achievement in other studies. Kannapel and Clements (2005) conducted a study on eight schools in Kentucky where at least fifty percent of the students were on free or reduced school lunch, students were making progress on the state test over time and the achievement gap of fewer than 15 points between African American students and their white counterparts and between low- and middle-income students. One of the factors of the Kannapel and Clements (2005) study that was instrumental in the high poverty, high achievement schools' transition to academic success for all students was that the leadership style of the principal included a collaborative decision-making process. Shared leadership was noted by principals as an effective process because if the principal empowers teachers to become leaders, then the school will have more leadership (Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Parrett & Budge, 2012). The school leadership focused on inclusive practices for their students who often experience exclusionary practices based on poverty and socioeconomic status. Consistently in these schools the leadership practiced affirming all members of the learning community—teachers, staff, parents, and students. Likewise, the teachers in Gallagher's (2012) study credited their effectiveness to the school's leadership affirming them as leaders and trusting them to make professional judgements. Additionally, collaboration in these high performing, high poverty, schools with high concentrations of students of color in the state of California refers to the collaborative relationship between the teachers and support staff as well as the coaching that teachers receive from their school leadership.

The teachers at both schools in Gallagher's (2012) study credited collaboration for the high teacher retention rate and the lessening of the teacher workloads. Furthermore, this culture of collaboration emerged from their principals who treated the teachers as professionals capable of making decisions and responsible for raising the achievement levels of the students. This collaborative approach of shared and distributed leadership (Gallagher, 2012; Parrett & Budge, 2012) strategically executed by their principals catapulted the teachers and students into the realm of high academic achievement with state and local recognition as high performing schools.

Accountability/High Expectations

"High expectations hold incredible power, often single-handedly determining the fine line of enormous chasm between success and failure" (Parrett & Budge, 2012, p. 73). Every empirical study (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Edmonds, 1979; Gallager, 2012; Giles, Johnson, & Brooks, 2005; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Parker et al., 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Reeves, 1995), referenced in this review of literature expressed high expectations for all students as a critically important factor in the success of schools with a high population of students of color from low socioeconomic backgrounds that are high-performing. Miscalculating the capacity of students to reach academic proficiency and lowering expectations of students is a direct correlation to educational malpractice. Deficit thinking is intolerable in high-poverty, high-performing schools (Edmonds, 1979; Giles, Johnson, & Brooks, 2005; Parker et al., 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012). While holding high expectations for all students is both critical and necessary, in isolation, it is not adequate.

High expectations must be coupled with accountability which means that for every expectation, there must be a strategic, action-based approach to meet the expectation. At one of the schools in the Gallagher (2012) study, accountability refers to the standards, assessment and

data that make up the data and accountability systems at the schools and the teachers view the accountability systems as "supports to their effectiveness". The teachers in the research study "embrace accountability because it measures and documents their effectiveness" (Gallagher, 2012, p. 33). Within four years the school moved from one of the lowest performing schools in the state to the second highest performing school in the state, while increasing 208 points on their state performance score. A philosophy held by teachers and administrators at the 90/90/90 schools (Reeves, 1995) and the "unexpected schools" (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013) is that all students have the potential to perform at high levels and will attain high academic performance. Students are not allowed to accept a poor grade. Instead, they are given multiple opportunities through academic coaching to learn the content and improve their grade which is a requirement in these schools. One of the three ideals, leaders in high poverty/high-performing schools are committed to is excellence (Parrett & Budge, 2012). Excellence refers to all students receiving high quality education without any excuses, and this expectation of excellence cannot be substituted for any other ideal. Equality means that there are outcomes that all students will achieve such as meeting or exceeding the standards required at each grade level. Excellence in education remains the forefront ideal in the schools. The school leadership holds the teachers accountable and the teachers hold each other accountable to reach the agreed upon standard of excellence.

Accountability is one of the prevailing principles in the Edmond (1979) study in which some of the teachers equated it to pressure but also felt that the leadership was supportive and the resource that they needed. This pressure was not isolated to the principal-teacher relationship but included peer pressure wherein teachers held each other accountable. The complexity of the accountability system for the schools in the Edmond study was key to the success of the schools.

One principal reported to a board of directors and to five decentralized site-based committees with parent representation on each committee. The teachers were held to high standards by the principal who required each teacher to provide an extensive 10-week plan linked to the state standards and detailed lesson plans on a weekly basis. The "pressure" of accountability in many of the schools in the study also informally pushed out mediocre teachers resulting in schools with high quality teachers who were committed to the academic achievement of all students.

Professional Development/Highly Qualified Teachers

Urban schools experience significant challenges attracting, hiring, and retaining highly qualified teachers (Jacob, 2007; Lewis et al., 2012; Papay et al., 2017). A discouraging implication of underachievement that spans from generational poverty to poor academic performance is often associated with urban schools. If highly qualified teachers begin at an urban school, the attrition rates are high (Jacob, 2007; Papay et al., 2017). A high percentage of these beginning teachers either leave the teaching profession or seek opportunities at suburban schools. Murname and Steel (2007) argue that the disproportionate dissemination of highly qualified teachers is conceivably the most crucial problem facing American education.

In their study of eight schools, Kannapel and Clemens (2005) found each of these schools had a systematic process to recruit, hire, and retain quality teachers. Some schools practiced group interviews that included the principal, teachers, and support personnel. The interview questions were developed to intentionally identify teachers with the competencies needed to meet the students' needs at the schools. One practice that worked well at one of the schools was requiring the applicants to do a demonstration lesson. Many of the schools assigned current teachers to upcoming vacancies based on aligning the teacher's strength with the needs of the students who were going to be served in the classroom with the anticipated opening. Another

practice to recruit the best talent of new teachers was to partner with a local college for student teachers whom they would train and recommend that they apply for a position at the school upon graduation.

Successful schools from the Chenoweth and Theokas (2012) study of high performing, high-poverty, high population of students of color schools implemented several processes that led to highly effective teachers at the schools. The first-year lesson plans, and possibly the second year, were provided to all of the novice teachers. The lesson plans were created by teachers who had been mentored and coached for at least a year by highly qualified and highly effective teachers. This was a common practice in the schools of the Parker et al. (2011) study where there was ongoing mentoring, peer modeling, in-class coaching, out-of-class collaboration through professional learning communities. The principals strategically assigned the most experienced and effective teachers to the students who were most challenged academically (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2012; Parker et al., 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012). Parrett and Budge (2012) assert that teachers' accessibility to effective professional development with an intentional focus could possibly be the difference between success and failure of their students and their school.

Culture of Equity

Several decades ago, Edmond (1979) declared that "inequity in American education derives first and foremost from our failure to educate the children of the poor", and "progress requires public policy that begins by making the poor less poor and ends by making them not poor at all" (p. 15). Equitable education for the poor in America's K-12 schools has yet to become actualized; however, the successful schools referenced in these studies renounce the notion that a school is exempt from instructional accountability when educating students from

poverty-stricken backgrounds (Edmonds, 2012; Kearney & Herrington, 2012; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Reeves, 1995).

The Parrett and Budge (2012) study on seven nationally recognized high-poverty, high-performing schools found that an "effective" school can: (a) rescue a child from a future of illiteracy, (b) save hundreds of students from the grim reality awaiting those who exit school unprepared, and (c) directly impact and improve our society (p. 15). These outcomes are contingent upon the mindset of the school's leaders which must be a mindset that is focused on social justice for all students. Parrett and Budge (2012) conducted a synthesis of research concerning high-poverty, low-performing schools becoming high-poverty, high-performing schools and found eight common strategies of transformed high-poverty; high-performing schools. Parrett and Budge (2012) developed a framework based on their research and conducted a member-check on seven schools with the following characteristics: "demonstrated significant and sustained gains in academic achievement for at least three years; enrolled forty percent of more students who qualified for the free and reduced-priced meals program; reflected racial, ethnic, organizational, and geographic diversity; and were willing to work with us [the researchers]" (p. 14). All seven of the schools have been recognized by the Education Trust, the U.S. Department of Education, and their individual state departments of education for significantly closing the achievement gaps at their schools. Parrett and Budge (2012) found that "although the administrators, teachers, school trustees, and other leaders whom we [they] interviewed did not use the words "social justice" to describe their mission or purpose, their professional practice was consistent with what others have identified as "social justice leadership" (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Theoharis, 2009)" (p. 15).

All schools in the Parrett and Budge (2012) study are high-poverty schools and four of the seven schools in this study were also schools with majority students of color populations with eighty-three percent (83%) to ninety-seven (97%) of the population being students of color. The leadership in these schools elevated inclusive practices and resisted deficit-thinking (Kailin 2002; McCray and Beachum 2011; Milner 2010) practices that advanced inequities by confronting these unfair policies, practices, and philosophies. Students who were ethnically and culturally diverse were not forced to assimilate within or adopt the dominant culture (Gay, 2002; Trueba, Guthrie, & Au, 1981). Instead, the focus was on high academic achievement for all students, regardless of their social status or cultural and racial differences, and closing the perpetual achievement gap (Dantley, 2005, Ford & Moore, 2013; Theoharis, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006). One of the three ideals that the school leaders in the high-performing/high-poverty schools in the Parrett and Budge (2012) study are committed to is equity wherein the schools are dedicated to ensuring that all students receive what they need to achieve instead of all students receiving the same thing.

One of the elements of culturally relevant education is promoting critical consciousness by providing students with the tools to critique and challenge institutions that perpetuate inequality (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings; Laing & Villavicencio, 2016). If education is going to be the vehicle for upward social and economic mobility, the school leadership must be emphatically dedicated to equity beginning with an increased awareness of the culture of students and their families who have been commonly marginalized (Parrett & Budge, 2012; Terrell & Lindsey, 2018).

The Role of Culture in Education-Culture and Education

The notion of culture in education has gained prominence in the literature on academically advancing students of color in America's public schools. The marriage of culture and education is not a new concept but has been a part of the educational discourse for many years. *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (1954) heightened the awareness of the inequalities prevalent in the education system by deeming racial segregation of students in public schools as unconstitutional. The decision acknowledged that racial segregation results in an inferiority complex that could ultimately affect the academic achievement of students of color.

Despite numerous attempts, over several decades, to create equitable educational spaces for all students, students of color have continued to underperform in comparison to their counterparts. The introduction of culturally relevant pedagogy by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992, 1995a, 1995b) ignited this pedagogical concept with an emphasis on effectively teaching students of color. Beachum (2011) suggests culturally relevant leadership that includes both principals and teacher leaders, is an auspicious framework for educational leaders preparing to lead socially-just, inclusive schools.

According to Bustamante, Nelson, and Onwuegbuzie (2009), there is "mounting research suggesting that culturally responsive educational leadership positively influences academic achievement and students' engagement with the school environment" (p.794). The interrelationship between school leadership and culture continues to be explored by researchers as an achievable means to bring equity to schools wherein marginalized students are underserved.

Culturally relevant leadership has emerged in research involving educational reform, equitable educational practices and social justice in America's public schools. The notion of

culturally relevant leadership emanated from the research on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 1994). Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) contend that since the evolution of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies, these concepts have, arguably, "come to dominate discourses on education and reform" (p. 1). Likewise, scholarship and discourse around educational leadership and culture have accentuated the importance of not only understanding culture, but infusing culture as a means of promoting educational attainment and equitable schools for all students (Bustamante et. al, 2009; Khalifa, 2013; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012).

Perhaps this apparent disconnect between the socio-cultural experiences of marginalized students and the dominant culture contributes to the inequitable practices in schools which ultimately yields an academic achievement imbalance between these two groups of students. Regardless of the overwhelming evidence, that stems back before *Brown v. Board of Education*, of inequities in America's K-12 public school systems, the alarming disparities between students of color and their white counterparts remain an unresolved point of contention that has echoed throughout decades of K-12 public education. Superintendent Meria Carstarphen (Grady et al., 2014) profoundly expressed the need for educational leaders to provide an education environment that empowers and develops all students both academically and socially, and she stated that anything less is simply "educational malpractice". Educational malpractice is a term used to describe the practice of educational institutions and their employees who demonstrate negligence regarding their responsibility to adequately educate students (Fossey, 2016). Although, the legal claim of educational malpractice is almost impossible to prove, educational malpractice in its simplest form of not providing adequate education to all students has been well-documented in the literature. Scholars and researchers alike have asserted that educational

leadership coupled with culturally relevant practices is a viable means to adequately educating students and creating equitable learning environments for all students while addressing the achievement divide between groups of students (Cooper, 2009; Gay, 2000; & Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

Lumby and Foskett (2011) contend that although leadership can evolve from different levels within the school, it is the leadership of the school principal that holds the greatest power and can therefore use culture to advance equitable educational practices. Consequently, it is essential for the school principal to possess an intentional focus on understanding culture and infuse this knowledge throughout the school environment to propel all students to become academically and socially adept; an evolving concept known as Culturally Relevant Leadership. Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) deemed culture as the "missing variable in leadership theory" (p. 100). In a case study of six urban school principals and their leadership from a multicultural perspective, Gardiner and Enomoto (2006) concluded that urban school principals who are "aware of themselves and the social-cultural milieu in which they live and work will be more effective in reaching their students" (p. 580). Horsford, Grosland and Gunn (2011) assert that "the increasing significance of culturally relevant, responsive, and competent leadership in schools is made clear given the sheer increases in the numbers and percentages of schoolchildren representing a diversity of racial, ethnic, and linguistic populations in the United States" (p. 586). Khalifa (2013) in his study on urban school leaders concluded that the school leader has the most influence on contributing to an inclusive school culture because of their position to confront exclusionary practices present in the school. Research studies reviewed in this study support that this charge must be catapulted by the educational leader.

While scholarly research related to educational leadership and culture emphasizes the responsibility of the educational leaders to build school climates that are inclusive of marginalized students, Bustamante et. al. (2009) in their work with school leaders, discovered that school leaders lacked the knowledge to adequately assess the cultural competence in their schools. Assessing the school culture represents the inception of this complex process; however, America's schools are in need of educational leaders who are capable of assessing, implementing, enacting, and sustaining practices in school environments that confront educational inequities and promote culturally relevant practices.

Understanding the Complexities of the Term Culture

While the issue of race seems to be the genesis of the national discourse pertaining to educational inequalities and receives attention in the literature related to cultural competence and social justice, culture encompasses several pertinent elements such as gender, sexual preference, language, student disability, and other marginalized groups who have been subject to exclusion. Saifer, Edwards, Ellis, Ko and Stuczynski (2011) define culture as "the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communication, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group" (p. 218). Culture has often been used interchangeably with the terms race and ethnicity; however, the meanings of these terms are not synonymous. Culture is used extensively in the literature; however, the definition is often ambiguous. For purposes of this study, Terrell and Lindsey's (2018) definition of culture is used:

"Culture is the set of practices and beliefs shared by members of a particular group that distinguish that group from other groups. Culture includes all characteristics of human description including age, gender, socioeconomic status, geography, ancestry, religion, language,

history, sexual orientation, physical and mental level of ableness, occupation, and other affiliations" (p. 21).

Howard (2010) contends that schools misunderstand the significance of "culture" and therefore forgo the opportunity to strengthen instructional practices and student learning by incorporating the culture of the students in daily activities. School leadership has the responsibility to respond propitiously to the education demands of highly heterogeneous schools by understanding the term culture and recognizing and embracing the culture of the students and teachers. Howard (2010) placed particular emphasis on the importance for teachers and students to recognize and acknowledge the differences between race, ethnicity and culture. Fraise and Brooks (2015) contend that there are five wrongly conceived presumptions about culture in schools that has precluded significant and substantial advances in understanding culture and school leadership:

1. School culture and society's culture are independent of each other. This assumption creates an apparent disconnect between school and community.

2. Terms such as race, class, gender and sexual orientation are excluded from the characterization of culture (Capper, 1993; Larson & Murtadha, 2002).

3. "Cultural diversity is detrimental to the work of a school, since success is often defined as a normative construct framed through male whiteness (Scheurich & Young, 1997; Young & Laible, 2000)" (p. 7).

4. School culture encompasses a uniformity that is interpreted by all participants in the same manner.

5. "Culturally relevant leadership is a general disposition rather than a paradigm of practice that also demands certain non-traditional out-of-school behaviors that include building

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bridges and crossing borders between school and community (Brooks, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Merchant & Shoho, 2006)." (p. 7).

Furthermore, Howard (2010) argues that notwithstanding the notion that culture is closely related to race and ethnicity, culture is distinguished by the significant impact it has on student learning. The criticality of understanding the abstruse combination of values, norms, and beliefs that culture embodies could possibly impact educators' pursuit of cultural acuity.

Banks and Banks (1989) add complexity to the traditional definitions of culture and assert that most social scientists today view culture as consisting primarily of the symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of human societies. The essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies" (p. 13 as cited in Howard, 2010, p. 52).

Based on definitions of culture from various scholars, it is evident that recognizing the diversity of students is not merely celebrating a particular holiday of a culture by exposure to foods from a certain culture or dancing to music from the culture. Thomas and Inkson (2009) define culture as "something that a group has in common that is not normally available to people outside the group. It is mental programming held in common that enables insiders to interact with each other with a special intimacy denied to outsiders" (p.25). According to Fraise and Brooks (2015), the precariousness of school culture has created a conflicting view wherein schools have been characterized as both spaces of *cultural conflict* and *cultural cohesion*. Ideally, schools with culturally relevant practices are places of *cultural cohesion* where the cultures and values of students are embraced and valued by all staff and students. It is important that culturally relevant educational leaders are equipped to recognize school culture as a

conglomerate of the students', families', and communities' cultures that recognizes, embraces, celebrates, and incorporates these cultures.

Culture and Education from a Historical Perspective

Historically, there have been numerous educational leaders who have raised the concern of the great divide between European White American students and students who are ethnically and culturally diverse (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Although these concepts, practices, and philosophies of both culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally relevant leadership have recently become prevalent in scholarly educational literature during the 21st century, the discussion of the elements of these concepts (and practices) have been in existence for decades. Lumby and Foskett (2011) stated that schools and colleges have been engaged in the aspects of culture at least since the 1950's; however, the inclusiveness of culture in the discourse of some of the well-known intellectuals predates even this timeframe. Dewey (1938), a well-known philosopher and contributor to educational reform recognized the importance of a curriculum that is both relevant and meaningful to students. Dewey asserted that the communities in which the teachers work are essential to creating meaning experiences in the classroom, and he believed that incorporating the cultural, physical and socio-political aspects of the school's communities would begin to transform classrooms to provide inclusive learning experiences for students.

Carter G. Woodson, known as the "Father of Black History", also stressed the importance of designing curricula that represents the race and culture of the student. Woodson (1933) in his most notable work, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, postulated that African American students have been deprived of learning about their own history and cultural practices within their communities. He contends that African American students are denied access to their history and exposed to European culture which depreciates the value of African American history. Woodson

(1933) believed that the assumption that European history is synonymous to African American History would essentially equate to the demise of the African American population. Carter G. Woodson challenged the curricula that had historically excluded African Americans, and called for a curriculum that incorporated African America history into American History.

Although Carter G. Woodson was an influential educator and philosopher, over 70 years later, the educational discourse regarding curriculum that excludes people of color has not changed.

Yosso (2002) points out the following:

U.S. history textbooks often distort, omit, and stereotype the histories of communities of color (Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1977). Teachers may not be able or willing to incorporate a challenge to the traditional, Eurocentric versions of history conveyed by textbooks into their class lectures or discussions. Barring textbooks or teachers who bring a multifaceted version of U.S. history to the curriculum, students have little access to academic discourses that decenter white upper/middle class experiences as the norm. (p. 94)

Contrastingly, not all African American students during the early twentieth century had to succumb to such educational inequalities. Segregated schools were not regarded by all as totally negative (Walker, 2000; Walker, 2001; Murtadha & Watts, 2005). In fact, some African American scholars would argue that segregated schools produced some of the greatest African American scholars.

Walker (2000) notes that *The Dunbar Story* (Hundley, 1965), was the beginning of documenting the positive aspects of segregated schools. Dunbar High School in Washington, DC was the first all-black, public high school in the United States. Walker (2000) contends that

"many African Americans valued the cultural form of teaching and learning that developed in the segregated schools" (p. 254). According to Stewart (2013), Anna J. Cooper was known as the first principal of Dunbar High School to "amp up" the curriculum. She was known as a leading feminist intellectual, community leader, and a radical educational leader (Stewart, 2013). She was also the first and only woman ever elected to the American Negro Academy, a prominent think tank where she joined the ranks of men such as W.E.B. Dubois and Arturo Schomburg (Stewart, 2013). It was under Cooper's leadership that students at Dunbar High School began taking courses that any student would need in order to be considered for entrance into colleges and universities. Cooper was also sensitive to those students in the school who were behind academically. Although her expectations remained high for all students, she was considerate of the academic (dis)abilities of all students. Cooper used the arts as part of her curriculum, and encouraged students to utilize music and dramatics as a vehicle to turn dreams into reality. Cooper researched her students' homes and communities. She discovered that her students' parents were "laborers, farmers, book binders, porters, nurses, coal dealers, clerks, watchmen, and bricklayers" (p. 43). Although she strongly believed in academia, her educational philosophy was a hybrid of the Tuskegee sensibility (Booker T. Washington), and the Intellectual aspirations of W.E.B. Dubois (Stewart, 2013). Based on this description of Anna J. Cooper, she was a culturally relevant teacher and principal. She embodied the characteristics of how cultural relevance is defined in recent literature.

The narratives of educational leaders which denote the obstacles that African American educational leaders have overcome to successfully educate African American students during the segregation era have been excluded from educational literature (Johnson, 2006; Murtadha &

Watts, 2005; Walker, 2000). Walker (2000) asserts that this scholarship "remains unsynthesized and largely unknown" (p. 254). Murtadha and Watts (2005) state it in this manner: "Unfortunately, the omission of Black leadership narratives, along with an adequate analysis of the contexts in which leadership has worked, limits our ability to develop ways to improve schools and communities for children who live in poverty and children of color who are becoming the majority in this nation's schools" (p. 591).

Johnson (2006) researched the leadership of another African American educational leader, Gertrude Ayer, who was the first African American woman principal in New York City. Similar to Cooper, Ayer also was committed to educating all students and addressed social injustices in education during the first half of the twentieth century. Johnson (2006) situates Ayer as a "culturally responsive leader" with a concentration on three central concepts: urban school leader as a (1) public intellectual, (2) curriculum innovator, and (3) social activist. Ayer was an educator who utilized various forums to raise awareness to sociopolitical problems, both in communities and schools. Gertrude Ayer was an author of journal publications and newspapers, a public speaker, an active voice for school reform, and a community leader (Johnson, 2006).

Although there are limited empirical studies on the impact of African American school leadership, the awakening of culturally relevant concepts has opened the door to explore and conduct studies designed to understand the impact of infusing culturally relevant practices in schools.

The Emergence of Cultural Relevancy in Schools

Culturally appropriate (Au & Jordan, 1981), culturally congruent (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981), culturally responsive (Cazden & Leggett, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982) and culturally

compatible (Jordan, 1985; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987) are all terms that have been utilized over the last two decades to describe practices focused on infusing culture in classroom practices (Billings, 1995a, p. 467). The commonality between these concepts is their connectivity to creating educational environments inculcated with the cultures of all students in each individual classroom based on the notion that students will identify with and glean from the instructional and social practices within their academic settings.

Jordan and Au's "underlying assumption was that interaction in reading comprehension lessons directed by an adult teacher would promote the academic achievement of young students of color, if the contexts in the lessons were structured in a manner consistent with the children's culture" (Au, 1980, p. 112). These lessons would also have to meet the following criteria: accommodating to students, comfortable to teachers, and advance achievement of basic academic skills.

Mohatt and Erickson (1981) found that models developed to incorporate bilingual language have proven to elicit impressive positive differences in learning among students of color. Mohatt and Erickson (1981) contend that there is a belief in the "universal child" model that is shared by teachers, counselors, psychologists, and administrators" and schools "ignore culture as the critical factor in native children's learning (p. 106). The findings of this study suggest that culture is of substantial importance to Indian students' educational experience and Mohatt and Erickson (1981) contend "that there are culturally congruent ways of accomplishing intellectual focus and classroom control" (p. 118).

According to Vogt, Jordan, and Tharp (1987) a functional model that will improve academic achievement for students of color is one that encompasses cultural compatibility. Cultural compatibility is the intentional match between instructional practices and students'

cultures. However, Marshall (2004) exerts that the mismatch between education administration professionals and their teachers as well as their students is expanding rather than narrowing. The 2011 National Center for Education Information (Feistritzer, 2011) reports that approximately 84% of the teaching population is comprised of white females while urban schools are highly populated with students of color from low-income households.

The Intersectionality of Culture and School Leadership

The Premise: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

The term culturally relevant pedagogy was popularized in the early 1990s by Gloria Ladson-Billings. While Ladson-Billings (1995a) acknowledged the importance of the historical scholarship regarding the connectedness between culture and teaching, she deemed it necessary to transcend to developing a theory addressing instructional practices and culture. "A next step for positing effective pedagogical practice is a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate. I term this pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy" (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 469). Ladson-Billings' (1995a) commitment to developing this theory stemmed from her ambition for equitable education for African American students and her eagerness to challenge deficit paradigms (Bloom, Davis, & Hess, 1965, cited in Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (1995b) advanced the need for a theoretical perspective based on the perpetual disparity between the racial, ethnic, and cultural characteristics of students and teachers coupled with the ongoing academic deficiency of African American, Native American and Latino students. Ladson-Billings' (1995a) three essential criteria of culturally relevant teaching are: (1) the ability to develop students academically, (2) a willingness to nurture and

support cultural competence, and (3) the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness by challenging the status quo.

Researchers interested in cultural relevance in education have continued to contribute to the culturally relevant teaching concept contending with the same concern as Ladson Billings which is the inadequate academic achievement of students of color (Gay, 2002; Howard, 2003; Jackson, 2011). Geneva Gay (2002) established the criticality of improving the educational advancement of ethnically diverse students and teacher preparation programs designed to equip teachers for this undertaking. Howard (2003) and Jackson (2011) highlighted the necessity for teachers to develop their sociopolitical consciousness to embrace a culturally responsive approach to teaching. In her study of the Freedom Schools summer intern teacher preparation program, Jackson (2011) describes the significance of teachers developing sociopolitical consciousness. The Freedom School describes six (6) characteristics of culturally responsive schooling: validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory (Jackson, 2011). The six characteristics were derived from Gay (2000) and supports Gay's contention of a two-dimensional transformative purpose of culturally responsive pedagogy:

One direction deals with confronting and transcending the cultural hegemony nested in much of the curriculum content and classroom instruction of traditional education. The other develops social consciousness, intellectual critique, and political and personal efficacy in students so that they can combat prejudices, racism, and other forms of oppression and exploitation (Gay, 2000, p.34; as cited by Jackson, 2011, p. 281)

Furthermore, Gay (2002) asserts that teachers must move beyond competence in subject matter and should possess the capacity to embrace and incorporate the diverse cultures of their

students. Learning the cultures of all ethnic groups could be a daunting task for some teachers; however, Gay (2002) outlined three significant cultural factors that teachers must focus on which have explicit implications for instruction and students' acquisition of knowledge:

(a) which ethnic groups give priority to communal living and cooperative problem solving and how these preferences affect educational motivation, aspiration, and task performance; (b) how different ethnic groups' protocols of appropriate ways for children to interact with adults are exhibited in instructional settings; and (c) the implications of gender role socialization in different ethnic groups for implementing equity initiatives in classroom instruction.

(p. 107)

Additionally, Gay (2002) also provided three types of curricula that afford teachers the opportunities to teach cultural diversity: formal, symbolic and societal curriculum. The delivery of instruction must be guided by the cultural responsiveness of the teacher; a concept which Gay (2002) refers to as *cultural congruity*. Cultural congruity is simply pairing the correlating the instructional methods with the learning styles of the diverse students (Gay, 2002).

Banks (2004) advances that teachers should be cognizant and compelled to cultivate, acknowledge, and celebrate the individual cultures of their students and especially students from marginalized cultural, ethnic, and language groups. Banks (2004) asserts that there are six stages of cultural development: (1) Cultural Psychology Captivity, (2) Cultural Encapsulation, (3) Cultural Identity Clarification, (4) Biculturalism, (5) Multiculturalism and Reflective Nationalism (Cultural National Identity), and (6) Globalism and Global Competency (Cosmopolitanism). "Teachers should be aware of and sensitive to the stages of cultural development that all of their students—including mainstream students, students of color, and

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other marginalized groups of students—may be experiencing and facilitate their identity development" (Banks, 2004, p. 304). Banks (2004) recognizes the uniqueness of cultural development for each student; therefore, he does not purport that these stages are sequential. However, Banks (2004) does contend that there must be an internal appreciation and value for one's own culture in order for students to become ambassadors locally, nationally, and globally; thus, creating a more socially just and humane world. Teachers embodying a culturally relevant pedagogical approach in their classrooms create the platform to embrace all cultures. Banks (2004) calls for a "delicate balance of diversity and unity" in the teaching and learning environment which should be essential in a democratic society.

Paris (2012) proposes a comparable concept, *culturally sustaining pedagogy,* which supports a *delicate balance* requiring the sustainability of a student's own cultural and linguistic competence and concurrently acquiring dominant cultural competence. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) funds of knowledge concept takes a similar stance wherein all cultures are incorporated in the curriculum by building upon the knowledge of the students' families and communities. Moll et al. (1992) assert that this concept contains the foundation to potentially negate the insularity prevalent in classroom environments and supports the ideals of an inclusive school culture. Teachers who embrace culturally relevant instruction policies and practices must acknowledge the value of the knowledge that each student brings to the classroom (Moll et al., 1992). The popularized concept and theory of culturally relevant pedagogy has created space in educational research and has provided the groundwork and foundation for the central concept of this review of literature: culturally relevant leadership.

Culturally Relevant Leadership

In response to the national discourse addressing the need to increase and sustain adequate academic attainment for all students in public schools nationwide, the concept of educational leadership coupled with cultural competence has emanated. The emergence of educational leadership infiltrated with an intentional focus on the inclusion of culturally relevant practices in school environments is known as *Culturally Relevant Leadership.* The extended history of inequitable practices in schools has compelled some scholars to doubt the ability of school leaders to dismantle the inequitable practices found in U.S. schools. Riehl (2000) questioned the ability of educational leaders to conquer this daunting task as a result of the socially constructed systems which restricts administrators from dismantling inequitable practices and strongly influences educational leaders to embrace the fallacy of meritocracy. Riehl (2000) asserts that "given the historically poor record of American public schools in meeting the educational needs of low-income students and students of color and improving their life chances (Tyack, 1974), one might inquire whether the formal leaders of schools can possibly have an affirmative role in creating schools that are more inclusive and that serve diverse students more effectively" (p. 58). Dantley (2005) suggests that the educational leadership practices represented in U.S. schools have advanced notions of bureaucracy, hierarchy, and asymmetric relations of power. These power structures entrenched within America's school systems have marginalized culturally and linguistically diverse students. Schools populated with "urban, African American, and Latino children need a leadership that not only stresses academic achievement but also does so within the purposeful context of inevitable social change and critical democratic citizenry (Parker et al., 1999; Valenzuela, 1999)" (Dantley, 2005, p. 652). Terrell and Lindsey (2018) identified three barriers to becoming culturally proficient: resistance to change, systems of oppression and a

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sense of privilege and entitlement. The stagnant process to impactful education reform could be attributed to these barriers. Beachum (2011) challenges both classroom teachers and educational leaders to reevaluate their commitment to ensuring that all students experience academic achievement. The need for culturally relevant leadership is inextricably connected to the "deficit" perspective of schools populated with culturally diverse students (Beachum, 2011).

Trueba, Guthrie, and Au, (1981) introduced a concept known as cultural pluralism which refers to the coexistence of cultures where everyone is afforded the same opportunities and where marginalized ethnicities and cultures are not forced to assimilate within the dominant culture at the expense of abandoning their own culture. Trueba et al. (1981) suggest that "equality of educational opportunity in our racially stratified society (Ogbu, 1979) will be achieved only through the promotion of cultural pluralism" (p. 7). Gay (2002) also argues that presumably, ethnically and culturally diverse students must detach themselves from their cultures and adopt European American cultural norms. The synchronicity of cultures in the educational environment requires educational leaders (and teachers) to know and understand ethnically diverse cultures in order to include these cultures on an equal basis in comparison to the existing dominant culture. Baptist (1999) clearly explains the idea of including all cultures in a school environment in this manner:

> Multiculturalism is a comprehensive philosophical reform of the school environment essentially focused on the principles of equity, success, and social justice for all students. Equity is the result of changing the school environment especially the curriculum and instruction component, through restructuring and reorganizing so that students from diverse racial, ethnic and social classes experience educational equality and cultural empowerment. Success is demonstrated through parity representation of achievement of

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the school or district's students across racial, ethnic, cultural, and social classes. Social justice in schools is accomplished by the process of judicious pedagogy as its cornerstone and focus on unabridged knowledge, reflection, and social action as the foundation for social change.

(p. 107)

The restructuring and reorganizing of the school environment that culturally relevant leaders are called to engage in creates opportunities for these leaders to become change agents towards socially-just and equitable schools.

Schein (1992) stresses that "cultural understanding is desirable for all of us, but it is essential to leaders if they are to lead" (p. 15). Culturally relevant leadership advocates for cultural understanding, and Beachum (2011) deems culturally relevant leadership as "a promising framework for educators (p. 31). There are other leadership concepts found in the literature that embody similar characteristics of Culturally Relevant Leadership: Culturally Proficient Leadership (Terrell & Lindsey, 2018; Franco & Robles, 2011), Culturally Responsive Leadership (Johnson, 2006), and Social Justice Leadership (Theoharis, 2007). Likewise, these leadership concepts have been designed to confront the seemingly incessant problematic landscape of schools with high concentrations of ethnically diverse students.

Culturally Responsive Leadership

According to the Taliaferro (2011), the culturally responsive leadership framework is based on elements from Gay's (2000) concept of a culturally responsive teaching pedagogy which was centered around pedagogical practices that are validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative and emancipatory. Gay's (2000) work coupled with Sergiovanni's (2007) principle of "management to self" ultimately was applied to

leadership to develop a framework for defining culturally responsive leadership (Taliaferro, 2011).

Madhlangobe and Gordon's (2012) study of a culturally responsive school leader revealed six themes that defined the school leader's characteristics: caring, building relationship, being persistent and persuasive, being present and communicating, modeling cultural responsiveness, and fostering cultural responsiveness among others. Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) contend that the model of culturally responsive leadership exhibited by the school leader can help school leaders and teachers to make learning more relevant, increase student engagement, reduce discipline problems, and improve student achievement.

Culturally Proficient Leadership

Cross et al. (1989) designate cultural proficiency as an "inside-out process of personal and organizational change" (Terrell & Lindsey, 2018, p. 20). Terrell and Lindsey (2009) have advanced this notion by stating that educational leaders must possess the aptitude and the willingness to go through a process of self-examination wherein assumptions contrary to cultural proficiency are eradicated. This initial process leads to evaluating and invoking change within schools in order to achieve academic excellence by "knowing, valuing, and using the students' cultural backgrounds (p. 22). Terrell and Lindsey (2018) developed a cultural proficient toolkit and a continuum to assist educational leaders with their journey of becoming self-reflective and a culturally proficient leader. The first three points of the continuum indicate that the leader perpetuates the inequitable practices found in schools nationwide, and the last three points represent the leader's capacity to examine personal assumptions and create equitable educational environments. Franco, Ott, and Robles (2011) inspired by the work of Lindsey and Graham, developed a rubric for educators to navigate across the continuum and provide a "bridge" for

personal reflection and growth towards transforming schools into educational venues of equity and excellence.

The essential elements for culturally proficient leadership are consistent with many of the elements identified in the proposed frameworks found in the literature for culturally relevant leadership. Terrell and Lindsey (2018) posited that leaders proficient in culture must be able to: assess cultural knowledge, value diversity, manage the dynamics of difference, adapt to diversity, and institutionalize cultural knowledge.

Cultural Intelligence

Additionally, Thomas and Inkson (2009) contend that as the nation becomes increasingly diverse, there is an undeniable need to increase effectiveness when working with other individuals from different cultures. Thomas and Inkson (2009), in their book, *Cultural Intelligence: Living and Working Globally,* explore the relationship of understanding various cultures and success in today's global environment. These authors propagate the fundamental necessity for everyone to acquire "Cultural Intelligence"; especially those who operate in a leadership capacity. Cultural Intelligence means "being skilled and flexible about understanding a culture, learning more about it from your ongoing interactions with it, and gradually reshaping your thinking to be more sympathetic to the culture and developing your behavior to be more skilled and appropriate when interacting with others from the culture" (Thomas & Inkson, 2009, p.16). Although culturally relevant leadership and pedagogical practices extend beyond the definition of cultural intelligence, it includes steps towards becoming a culturally relevant leader. Cultural intelligence is comprised of three integral elements:

- First, the culturally intelligent person requires *knowledge* of culture and of the fundamental principles of cross-cultural interactions. This means knowing what culture is, how cultures vary, and how culture affects behavior.

- Second, the culturally intelligent person needs to practice *mindfulness*, the ability to pay attention in a reflective and creative way to cues in the cross-cultural situations encountered and to one's own knowledge and feelings.

- Third, based on knowledge and mindfulness, the culturally intelligent person develops *cross-cultural skills* and becomes competent across a wide range of situations. These skills involve choosing the appropriate behavior from a well-developed repertoire of behaviors that are correct for different intercultural.

(Thomas & Inkson, 2009, p.16)

The interconnected relationship of these three components makes up what Thomas and Inkson (2009) refer to as cultural intelligence.

The Implementation and Enactment of Culture in School Leadership

As a result of this exploration of scholarship on the intersectionality of culture and school leadership, three reoccurring behaviors were identified: self-assessment, schoolwide assessment, and systematization of culturally relevant leadership practices.

Self-Assessment

Several scholars studying influences of culture on educational leadership have continuously pointed out the need for the educational leaders to take an introspective look and determine their own biases (McCray & Beachum, 2014; Terrell & Lindsey, 2009; Thomas & Inkson, 2009 and Villegas & Lucas, 2003). A recurring concern is that many educational leaders and teachers are not aware that they embody deficit thinking characteristics. Scheurich and

Young (1997) believes that "one of the worst racisms for any generation or group is the one that we do not see, that is invisible to our lens—the one we participate in without consciously knowing or intending it" (p. 12). If educational leaders are not aware, then they will not have the capacity to address the issue. As a result, an unaddressed issue could equate to the perpetuation of the issue which could be the reason that inequitable education has been a force to contend with for decades. School leaders with internalized deficit perspectives can easily result in lowered expectations for students of colour (Kailin 2002; McCray and Beachum 2011; Milner 2010). Consequently, racial inequalities may be reproduced in our schools by culturally insensitive educational administrators, both knowingly and unknowingly.

McCray and Beachum (2014) refers to this self-assessment as developing liberatory consciousness wherein the culturally relevant leader must engage in a process to analyze their own beliefs, values, and unrealized biases. Liberatory consciousness is a self-investigation which requires the culturally relevant leader to question their unrealized biases. These biases are often referred to as implicit biases which are "relatively unconscious and relatively automatic features of prejudiced judgement and social behavior" (Zalta, 2015). Blair (2002) refers to the implicit biases as "automatic process" and contends that implicit biases are not entirely inflexible. The malleability of these prejudices manifest in ways that are consistent with the perceiver's experiences and socialization. In other words, the process of liberatory consciousness is necessary to identify biases and the prejudices; however, the critical step in the process is committing to inhibiting negative assumptions about others and embracing positive images of others. Paolo Friere (1973) calls this critical consciousness and Villegas and Lucas (2002) refers to this as socio-cultural consciousness which entails "an understanding that people's ways of thinking, behaving, and being are deeply influenced by such factors such as race/ethnicity, social

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class, and language" (p. 22). Gay and Kirkland (2003) argue that self-reflection and critical consciousness are imperative to improving the educational opportunities and outcomes for students of color. Villegas and Lucas (2002) contend that most teachers lack an awareness of who they are socially and culture and need to undergo an autobiographical exploration, reflection and critical self-analysis. Likewise, McCray and Beachum (2014) assert that culturally relevant leaders must engage in the same process. Completion of an appropriate self-interrogation is the stepping stone to the leader facing any and all misconceptions, stereotypes and negative images, thereby resulting in the development of an affirming and supportive attitude towards all students.

Terrell and Lindsey (2018) stated that the leadership journey towards cultural proficiency begins from within, and educational leaders must acknowledge their own presumptions and biases about others. This calls for school leaders to recognize and hold onto those assumptions that position them as culturally proficient and abandon those assumptions that disrupt the journey towards cultural proficiency.

Schoolwide-Assessment

It has been established that researchers have contended that the culturally relevant leader must engage in a self-exploration process in order to identify their biases, prejudices, and assumptions concerning others (culture, race, sex, etc.) and abandon them by embracing culturally relevant leadership practices. The same process now has to be completed for the entire school, and Bustamante et al. (2009) refer to the process as "assessing schoolwide cultural competence". In order to rectify the systemic oppression that has impeded equitable school practices in many schools, culturally relevant educational leaders must embody the capacity to evaluate the cultural inclusiveness, or lack thereof, for all students regardless of race, culture, gender, or language. Bustamante et al. conducted a study to determine the reliability and validity

of the Schoolwide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist (SCCOC) instrument, which was designed to guide school leaders in making observations to assess the cultural competence of their schools and evaluate the cultural sensitivity in schools with diverse student populations (Bustamante et al., 2009). The responses of 151 practicing school leaders in two large western states were utilized to inform the study. The qualitative findings of this study validated the fidelity of the SCCOC and informed further instrument revisions. In addition, however, Bustamante et al. "discovered that school leaders' narrative responses also revealed deep-set biases around issues of equity and social justice in schools, as well as a general lack of understanding of the essential indicators of schoolwide cultural competence commonly described in the academic literature on leading multicultural or diverse schools (Bustamante et al., 2009, p. 796).

This statement further validates the need for aspiring culturally relevant leaders to take an inside-out approach and complete the self-evaluation process as the genesis of becoming a culturally relevant leader. Additionally, culturally relevant leaders would need to evaluate their school's cultural competence to avoid exasperating the existing inequitable practices at their schools. An examination of the school's policies, procedures, practices and organizational structures is pivotal in order for schools to begin to eliminate obstacles that impede schoolwide cultural competence (Bustamante et al., 2009). In addition to evaluating the policies and practices within the school, Terrell and Lindsey (2018) suggest that the visible aspects outside of the school impact the privileges or deprivations prevalent in our schools. For instance, the neighborhoods surrounding the school may cause educational leaders and teachers to "judge" the students and their parents. These visibilities outside of the schools have the tendency to translate to invisible forces within the school that lead to inequitable practices towards students. As a

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result, the invisible forces are ignored which equates to a perpetuation of unaddressed equity

issues (Terrell & Lindsey, 2018).

The unaddressed equity issues substantiate the necessity for schoolwide assessments, and

the Terrell and Lindsey (2018) suggest the following questions to begin the schoolwide

assessment:

1. How much do you know about equity issues in your school?

2. To what extent are historical events of inequity present in your school today?

3. Are students in your school well served by the academic and co-curricular programs?

Educational leaders have various experiences from privilege to oppression, and Terrell

and Lindsey suggest that regardless of prior personal experiences "to be a school leader today,

knowledge of the historical context of access and equity issues will provide an important context

on which to build your vision for what our schools can and must be" (Terrell & Lindsey, 2018,

p.11). Additionally, the culturally relevant leader must consider the need for professional

development for the staff which guides them in understanding their own culture and the culture

of others because the staff also has an array of experiences. The self-assessment and the

schoolwide assessment of cultural competence are critical to the understanding the current state

of the school as it relates to culture, and the next process is critical as it is the implementation

and enactment of culturally relevant practices in the school.

Systematization of Culturally Relevant Leadership Practices

Clearly, many of the scholars and thinkers cited here are advocating school leaders to be

culturally relevant and charge them with the responsibility to implement and enact school

policies and practices to meet the diverse needs of the student population. It appears the school

leader is responsible for leading the shift in the school's culture and has the obligation take a

strategic and systematic approach to achieve the ultimate goal of creating a culturally relevant school. However, the question remains: How do we move from theory to the practice of culturally relevant leadership? Beachum (2011) deems culturally relevant leadership as a promising concept that will bridge the gap between rhetoric and reality. Ladson-Billings (2014) posits that "the lived realities of racism compel both theoretical and practical development of research in education that confront—rather than sidestep—the structures of injustice and oppression" (p. 259).

Culturally responsive leadership requires school leaders to be aware of every aspect of the schooling process. Culturally responsive leadership also requires principals to focus on community relations, macro and micro political issues that may impede student learning. This leadership approach also requires school leaders to be uniquely sensitized to the role their school community plays in the lives of these students (Taliaferro, 2011).

The complexity of confronting systemic inequities in education may have served as a deterrent for many educational leaders; however, the culturally relevant leader must contravene the practices and policies that sustain or reproduce unfair and inequitable practices (McCray & Beachum, 2014). The implementation plan to systematize culturally relevant leadership practices in a school must include both the school staff and the community with an intentional focus on providing an educational environment where all students are included and provided with high quality academic opportunities regardless of their cultural backgrounds. The culturally relevant leader embraces the integration of cultures within a school and internalizes that culture is ubiquitous and expands across both the school and the community constructing meaningful models and ways of being for both individuals and groups (Fraise & Brooks, 2015). One of the challenges is the process of "cultural collision" that ensues within classrooms wherein "the

curriculum, school policies, and school culture directly collide with the culture of students"
(Fraise & Brooks, 2015, p. 11).

One of the overriding purposes of implementing culturally relevant practices is to disrupt the dominance of one culture, which has historically been the Western European school culture, in educational practices and policies (Fraise & Brooks, 2015; Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011; Terrell & Lindsey, 2018; Yosso, 2002). The culturally relevant leader disrupts the curriculum established upon mainstream ideals, and empowers teachers to employ their leadership skills to actuate the leader's plan to infuse culturally relevant curriculum, practices, and policies throughout the school (Beachum, 2011; Taliaferro, 2011). Fraise and Brooks (2015) posit teachers as unable to adapt and modify instruction in ways that incorporate the various cultures of all of the students in the classroom if teachers do not recognize their own culture. Teachers of the dominant culture, rather consciously or subconsciously, usually do not recognize the privileges of their culture, thereby perpetuating cultural racism. Fraise and Brooks (2015) further contend that:

> Curricula should be flexible, relevant and adaptable rather than monolithic and static.
> They should constantly change, and they should be responsive to changes in culture, both
> those in the building, as well as those in the community, the nation, and the world.
> (p. 16)

Culturally relevant leaders must ensure that there are professional development opportunities for teachers to learn how to adapt the curriculum to the students' cultures. Beachum (2011) asserts that "there is evidence that collaborative efforts should be undertaken that bring together educational administrators and classroom teachers in the process of cocreation" (p. 31). There must be evidence of evolving teacher leadership where the principal is the lead learner modeling

shared leadership, strategic thinking, executing shared vision, reflective inquiry, and accountability. School leaders engaged in a democratic and collaborative approach with the students, teachers, parents, and community are likely to accomplish the immense desires for successful schooling that responds to the various needs of all students (Beachum & Dentith, 2004, p. 277; Lambert, 2006; Parrett & Budge, 2012).

Although limited, there is a growing body of literature on the development of culturally relevant frameworks. Self-assessment, schoolwide-assessment, and the implementation of culturally relevant practices are repeated; however, the literature is bereft of considerable research on sustaining culturally relevant leadership in schools with marginalized students.

Sustaining Culturally Relevant Leadership Practices in Urban Emergent Schools

While these themes resurfaced in the literature examined for this review, intentional focus on sustaining culturally relevant leadership practices in schools was intermittent and often excluded from the research. This was an apparent gap in the literature as research is both scant and inconclusive on the sustainability of culturally relevant leadership in schools. There is a popular saying that schools can change the lives of students "one child at a time"; however, sustaining culturally relevant practices in schools requires a schoolwide "movement" so that *all* students have access to an equitable and unbiased education.

Beachum (2011) has suggested that educational leadership programs preparing students for educational leader positions in schools must also include programming that prepares them to become culturally relevant leaders. While this approach will impact schools in the future, marginalized students are facing alarming inequities in schools today. School leaders must invest in professional development and training for current educational leaders and especially those educational leaders in schools with marginalized populations impacted by systemic inequalities.

The concept of Culturally Relevant Leadership has been explored by researchers in an effort to move towards a conceptual framework that will empower educational leaders to build school cultures that enrich the educational experiences of students of color and increase their academic performance (Beachum, 2011). The increasingly diverse student population and the academic dissonance between students of color and their white counterparts has ignited a re-emergence of the intersectionality of cultural relevance and educational leadership (Beachum, 2011; Khalifa et al., 2014; Lumby & Foskett, 2011). Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) contend that "few scholars in educational administration have explored culture as a contextual determinant in understanding the exercise of educational leadership" (p. 102). Fraise and Brooks (2015) assert that the misunderstanding of culture and how both cultures and sub-cultures interact in schools has hindered advances in research and practice. Although these concepts have been explored for a long time, there is a gap in the literature as it relates to empirical studies focused on culturally relevant and responsive practices enacted in schools with high poverty, high concentrations of students of color and high performing students. Additionally, the sustainability of this concept is not widely-mentioned in the research reviewed for this inquiry. While there are limited studies that address the enactment of culturally relevant leadership practices, there's an even larger gap in the literature regarding the sustainability of these practices. "Without an effective and sustaining school leadership, the development of strong school culture and vision, the execution and monitoring of reforms, and the training of teachers are unlikely" (Khalifa et al., 2014, p. 235,). Hence, schools who serve ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse students would benefit from a school guided by culturally relevant leadership.

Summary

The academic performance of students from culturally and linguistically diverse groups continues to be a recurring issue. Educational reform has gained national attention, as federal, state, and local school officials and administrators contend with the inequitable education practices prevalent in America's schools. Although there is a history of an inextricable link between poverty, low academic achievement, and students of color, there are studies that have demonstrated that although complex, it is possible for high-poverty schools with high percentages of students of color to beat the odds (Chenoweth, 2009; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Reeves, 1995). Schools in these studies have defied the notion that students of color who are from low socioeconomic status homes are likely to underperform, and they have embraced the idea of expecting the unexpected. The sense of failure that once permeated these schools has transformed to a sense of academic empowerment.

There were several common themes that emerged in the literature on high-poverty, high-achieving schools with high percentages of students of color: (a) the principal was committed to a "shared" leadership style that promoted collaboration, (b) there was a culture of accountability to academic excellence, (c) the principal provided leadership and direction, (d) the teachers were empowered as professionals and were coached to teacher effectiveness, and (e) a focus on inclusive practices for underperforming, underserved students to ensuring equality and equity in policy and practice.

Although the empirical research on infusing students' cultures in education is limited, the body of literature concerning this concept continues to expand. Moreover, Bustamante et al. (2009) contend that there is a growing body of research that suggests that "culturally responsive educational leadership positively influences academic achievement and students' engagement

with the school environment" (p. 794). Research supports the notion that educational leadership is connected to culture; although the definition of culture is vague and unclear. Additionally, there is a connection between culturally relevant leadership and social justice.

The historical continuum is saturated with an extended history of meaningful work as it relates to culturally relevant pedagogical practices and leadership practice that pre-date the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The dilemma is that researchers continue to develop models to address issues of inequity; however, there is a lack of empirical research on schoolwide implementation and sustainability of these models that contributes to creating school environments that embody culturally relevant practices focused on inclusivity. Consequently, the USA has become a nation of continuous education reform at the federal, state, and local levels to address the same prevalent issue: equitable schooling.

School administrators and educational leadership preparation programs should continue to develop and prepare educational leaders for culturally relevant leadership, based on the need for leaders to "possess not only the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively educate and advocate for diverse communities but also the will to use them (Edmonds, 1979; Hilliard, 2003; Theoharis, 2009 as cited in Horsford et al., 2011, p. 582). Although daunting, the task to close the achievement gap, dismantle inequitable practice, and prepare students for productive citizenship must be aggressively pursued. As Lindsey and Terrell (2009) suggested, the process begins with educational leaders performing self-evaluations and embracing diverse cultures as an asset instead of a problem. The research on academically successful high-poverty, high population of students of color schools with high concentrations of students of color provides evidence that creating a culture of shared leadership focused on high expectations of academic excellence for all students, collaboration between staff, engaging families and communities, and

implementing, enacting, and sustaining proven culturally relevant practices will improve the academic performance of students. Chenoweth (2009) asserts that "all schools could learn from the qualities shared by schools that have been successful in educating poor and students of color to high levels" (p. 38).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this intrinsic case study is to understand how an elementary school with high poverty levels and high percentages of students of color of color improved and sustained the academic achievement of students. The researcher sought to understand what contributes to a public elementary school's increased academic performance of its students despite the adverse assumptions associated with schools with high concentrations of students of color and high poverty rates. Additionally, the researcher explored the role of the school's leadership in the increasing academic achievement of the students. The research was guided by the following focal question: How does an urban elementary school with high poverty, high percentage of students of color increase and sustain student academic achievement?

Additionally, this study explored the following sub-questions:

SRQ1: Who is involved in the processes that enable students to be successful?

SRQ2: How did the school achieve this level of success and how does it sustain its progress?

SRQ3: What is the role of the school principal in institutionalizing cultural knowledge in a school with high poverty, high percentage of students of color, and a high percentage of students with increasing academic achievement?

SRQ4: What specific practices and initiatives are implemented in the school?

One of the greatest challenges in America's public school system is conquering the disparities in access to educational opportunities especially in schools that are segregated both racially and economically. The literature reviewed for this study indicates the need for additional

empirical research to understand how to advance school-wide goals for school improvement in high poverty, low achieving schools with a high percentage of students of color (Parker, et al., 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Stosich, 2016). Barr and Parrett's (2007) *Framework for Action* represents a three-prong approach to success for high poverty schools. This approach includes: (1) the actions of the school's leadership; (2) leading change in the school's culture; (3) working with spheres of influence in the community while simultaneously committing to excellence, equality, and equity (Parrett and Budge 2012). The Framework towards Culturally Relevant Leadership (Beachum, 2011) draws attention to enacting leadership that challenges policies and practices that perpetuate exclusive practices in schools that impedes the learning of students of color.

This study documented factors and practices that may advance the understanding of how schools can effectively and positively impact the school experience of traditionally marginalized students by implementing, enacting, and evolving practices that increase and sustain academic achievement. Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative case study research design and methodology utilized to examine the factors contributing to the academic success evident in a high-poverty, high population of students of color school in a southwestern state. Employing qualitative research, the research sought to understand how the participants lived experiences and how they make sense of what is occurring at this school.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative researchers present a holistic account of the problem or issue under inquiry by providing an account of various perspectives, recognizing the multiple aspects involved in a situation, and descriptively detailing the larger picture that emanates from the multiple sources of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I chose qualitative research as my method of inquiry because I

want to understand the school factors that contribute to the academic growth of the students in a high-poverty, high population of students of color school. While many schools with these characteristics are underperforming, the majority of students in the school for this study are demonstrating academic growth. The researcher was immersed in the study through meaningful interactions with the participants in their educational environment, while analyzing and making sense of the data. Specifically, there are three aspects of qualitative research that influenced my selection of this inquiry for the study; (1) the desire to understand the phenomenon, (2) a personal role as the researcher, and (3) the desire to construct knowledge (Stake, 1995).

The first aspect of qualitative research most intriguing to the researcher is that this study presented the space to intimately explore the practices of the school selected for this study whose population of students are majority students of color with increasing academic performance despite their socioeconomic status. Engaging in a qualitative case study provides an opportunity to intentionally focus on a specific case while gaining a greater understanding of the phenomena as opposed to just seeking an explanation. The researcher explored factors that are germane to understanding how an urban school with at least 70% of students in poverty, 70% of students of color sustains academic growth of 70% of its students. Stake (1995) contends that "qualitative researchers have pressed for understanding the complex interrelationships among all that exists" (p. 37). Qualitative research provides a platform to probe for information and take a deeper dive into the experiences of this school in order to achieve an in-depth understanding.

Secondly, utilizing qualitative methods provides the opportunity for the researcher to make observations in a natural setting and become face-to-face with the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Stake (1995) emphasizes the importance of the researcher to be intentional about the particularization of the case by focusing on the uniqueness of the case. I achieved this level

of research by developing a rapport of trust with the participants of this study and becoming intimate with the data while recognizing the emerging themes. Although qualitative research encompasses a systematic approach, it also allows flexibility to probe into the experiences of the subject(s) and to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the case. In this study, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews and observations during the school day to capture the information in the most natural settings as possible.

The third characteristic of qualitative research as noted by Stake (1995) is that it allows the construction of knowledge. In this study, the researcher made sense of how a school with urban characteristics made academic growth possible for the students while interpreting the meaning that the school's leadership contributed to the phenomena. The researcher made frequent visits to the school, observed the participants and activities of the school in the natural setting, analyzed and synthesized the data collected during school visits all while being cognizant of personal thinking and judgment (Stake, 1995). The construction of knowledge took place throughout the data collection process which is explicated later in this chapter. A description of the complex interactions of the factors in all meaningful situations observed is provided. This qualitative research is exploratory, and qualitative research methods are appropriate to expand the knowledge base and acquire an understanding of how one particular school impacts the academic growth of its students.

Philosophical Framework

Epistemology

The epistemology undergirding this study is constructivism which refers to how a researcher knows what she knows. From the epistemological stance, the researcher endeavors to become closely connected to the participants of the study to gather subjective evidence from the

participant's perspective while conducting the research (Creswell, 2012). Using a Social Constructivism approach, I sought to understand the intricacies of the factors that impact student growth and how practices are enacted in a school with demographic characteristics that more often experience low performance. I had intentional interactions with the participants who had observed, experienced and/or demonstrated the actions responsible for the increasing academic achievement. These interactions were scheduled and occurred in their natural settings. Stake (1995) contends that "no aspects of knowledge are purely of the external world, devoid of human construction" (p.100). As a social constructivist, I l constructed knowledge and made interpretations of the phenomena based on my interaction with the participants of the study, observations, and artifacts.

Several scholars (Creswell, 2012; Crotty, 1998; Stake, 1995) embrace the art of asking open-ended questions that will yield thick descriptions of the participants' views and central to this process is gathering the interpretations of the participants and interpreting the meanings that the participants have about the phenomenon. This study was designed to understand the factors that enabled a school to produce academic growth for students of color from low socioeconomic backgrounds. According to Stake (1995), "most contemporary qualitative researchers hold that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered" (p. 99). As I attempted to construct meaning from the participants' experiences at the elementary school selected for this study, I considered each participant's experiences and the specific context to make sense of the participants' interpretations.

Ontology

Creswell (2012) describes ontology as the nature of reality and its characteristics. In other words, as the researcher in this qualitative case study, I assumed the philosophical assumption

that there are multiple realities. Merriam (1998) contends "that reality is not an objective entity; rather there are multiple interpretations of reality" (p. 6). Through interviews, observations, and interactions with the participants of the study, I gathered information, and explored and interpreted those realities to provide an account of the case.

Research Design

Yin (2002) recommends that novice researchers consider the advantages and disadvantages of varying designs and adopt the design which equips them with the maximum capacity to answer their research questions. I chose the case study design as a means to investigate the complexities and uniqueness of the factors that contribute to a school's achievement where at least seventy percent or more of the students are students of color, impoverished students, and demonstrate increasing academic performance (70/70/70). The case study design provides the opportunity for an in-depth study of the case while gathering data from multiple sources and giving meaning and interpreting the data.

The case was explored to provide insight into the factors that contribute to students' academic outcomes. Stake (1995) asserts that "case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi). The case study method was suitable for this inquiry as it provided the platform to acquire understanding and insight regarding a particular case to further understand the case in a natural setting which otherwise cannot be thoroughly explored using statistical surveys or controlled designs. The case study was "bound" (Bassey, 2012) by time and space. It took tplace over a period of eight months in an urban emergent school in a southwestern state, and the participants included individuals who have information about the school that positioned them to provide

thoughtful insight related to the case. Bassey's prescriptive definition of an educational research case study encompasses several key descriptors:

- the case study is bound by space and time.

- it is of particular interest to educational activity, program, institution, system or work of an individual.

- mainly in its natural context and within an ethic of respect for persons,

- informs the judgement and decisions of practitioners of policy makers,

- the researcher is able to collect sufficient data for the study.

The case study research design afforded the opportunity to understand and provide detailed descriptions of a specific case. The results of this study may have implications on policies and practices related to providing quality educational services to students attending schools with high-poverty/high population of students of color.

Setting and Participants

Setting

An intrinsic case study is an inquiry wherein the researcher pre-selects the case that will lend way for the researcher to understand the complexity of that particular case (Stake, 1995). Stake asserts that the researcher should choose a case that will do a "better" job than other cases, maximizes the knowledge to be gained, makes the best use of the available time, is willing to participate, and is accessible for the research study. Purposeful sampling was used for the study as a means to identify a school that has considerable knowledge and capacious experiences as it relates to improving the academic outcomes of its students. Patton (2002) defines purposeful sampling as selecting people, organizations, communities, cultures, events because they are "information rich" "and illuminative, that is, they offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon

of interest; sampling then, is aimed at insight about the phenomenon, not empirical generalization from a sample to a population" (p. 40).

The school identified for this research study must have satisfied the following characteristics:

1) Considered high poverty as evidenced by at least 70% of students on free and reduced school lunch.

2) Considered high population of students of color by at least 70% of students identified as students of color.

3) Considered making increasing academic progress where at least 70% of students meet or exceed growth as identified by the state's Annual School Report Card.

The specific strategy of purposeful sampling that was used to intentionally select the best case for the study is intensity sampling. Intensity sampling involves selecting "information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely (but not extremely)" (Patton, 2002, p. 234).

Based on my professional relationship with the state's school improvement division, I was able to work with directors who assisted in providing data to identify schools in the state with 70/70/70 characteristics. I also sought recommendations from the state's Office of School Improvement (OSI) who has in-depth knowledge of the schools throughout the state. The officers in the OSI visit schools throughout the state for ten months out of the year. I requested the OSI to share the qualifying schools that not only met the criteria but were also likely agree to participate. Additionally, I asked which school principals would be most open to allow this case study to be conducted at their school sites. After the defining characteristics were applied, there were only three schools remaining in the entire state that qualified for the study based on the 70/70/70 characteristics. Consistency of school leadership is important to this study because the

leadership would not have been able to describe their lived experiences if the leadership was not at the school while this increase and growth in academic performance occurred. According to the OSI, two of the schools had gone through a recent transition of school leadership and staff who would be critical to obtaining information-rich interviews for the study. There was one school that met all the characteristic and maintained consistent leadership. Not only did the school meet all the characteristics for the study but this school made the highest gains in academic performance out of the three qualifying schools. Additionally, the school leadership and most of the staff were still at the school. The school selected exceeded the minimum 70/70/70 characteristics for the study: 97% of the students are on free or reduced school lunch; 92% of the students are students of color; and 82% of the students met or exceeded expected growth based on state standards and the State School Report Card.

The growth percentage from the State Report Card is determined by comparing the students' scores on the state standardized tests to the same students' scores from the previous school year in the following core areas: math, English/language arts (ELA), and science. The school-wide accountability was developed in partnership with SAS Institute, Inc. and includes all end-of-grade (EOG) scores and end-of-class (EOC) math, ELA, and science scores. Additionally, the growth measures include school-level EOG math and reading indices. There are three designations for growth: (1) exceeds expected growth, (2) meets expected growth, or (3) does not meet expected growth.

The approval process required both district and school approval. I contacted the Superintendent of the school district to request permission to conduct the study in his district. The Superintendent gave his approval and suggested that I contact the principal to request approval to conduct the study at her school. The principal also granted permission, and

immediately following the conversation, I sent all of the required permission documents to the Office of the Superintendent and the principal's Administrative Assistant as requested by the superintendent and the principal. Within one week, all documents were returned electronically and submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval.

Participants

The targeted population included administrators, teachers, support personnel, parents, community members and volunteers. The participants in the study included the principal, assistant principal, teachers, parents, and community partners. As a first step in identifying participants, during the first visit to the school, asked about people that are viewed as the catalysts for the school's success. I asked a parent, school secretary, cafeteria staff, janitor, teachers, and the principal. There was also a flyer about the study and the researcher's contact information posted in the staff's workroom. Interested participants were instructed to contact the researcher about participating in the study. There were participants whom I met on my first visit and were identified as contributors to the academic success by their colleagues who had already contacted the researcher to express interest in the study. Six of the participants received their permission forms on my first visit to the school. I also received the names of several parents provided by front office staff, teachers, and the principal. I contacted three parents, and all three of them agreed to participant; however, one of the parents was not able to participate due to her health. I did have an information-rich conversation with the parent on during my first visit to the school while sitting in the office.

In addition to principal and assistant principal, there were eight other participants who were interviewed including four (4) teachers, one (1) multi-classroom leader, one (1) volunteer, and two (2) parents. The participants' experience in education ranged from seven years to

twenty-five years and their years at the school, Achievement Elementary School, ranged from one year to eight years. One of the teachers was the 2018 Teacher of the Year and the Principal was the 2018 Principal of the Year. Participants in the study are listed below in Table 2.

Using snowball sampling (Merriam, 2009), the participants were purposefully selected to include those who would most likely provide information-rich interviews, based on observations and responses from individuals who work or are members of the school community. An Informed Consent Form, as required by the Institutional Review Board, was disseminated to the participants to complete and return by the deadline given by the researcher.

Table 2. Study Participants

Participant Pseudonym Name	Race	Position	Years in Education	Years at Achievement ES
Dr. Glover	African American	Principal 2018 Principal of the Year	25+	3
Mr. Hernandez	Latino	Assistant Principal	20	1
Mrs. Felton	Filipinos	3rd Grade Teacher	7	7
Mrs. Artis	African American	Pre K Teacher Leadership Team Chair	14	8
Ms. Warmack	Caucasian	5th Grade Teacher	11	5
Mrs. Abdullah	African American	4th Grade Teacher 2018 Teacher of the Year	8	4
Mrs. Rome	African American	Multi Classroom Leader Leadership team	15	1
Ms. Lane	African American	Parent	2	2
Mr. Simmons	African American	Parent and Volunteer	5	4
Pastor Millar	African American	Community Partner and Volunteer	N/A	3

Data Collection

A distinguishing characteristic of case study research is the utilization of multiple data sources which ultimately strengthen data credibility (Patton, 1990). The data collection process was a two-phase process including a preparatory and a predominant phase of compiling rich and multifarious data sources. began with a preparatory phase wherein I identified the school based on state data and information from the state's Office of School Improvement as previously described earlier in this chapter.

The data collected during the preparatory phase included the name of the school, principal leadership history, the state school report card data for three years, the superintendent's contact information, and the principal's contact information. The researcher developed a profile of the school which combined the information from both state and district resources. It was established that the Administrative Assistant would serve as the main contact for scheduling visits to the school and requesting documents. The principal stated that she would be accessible and available throughout the study; however, she also did not want to hinder the momentum of the study if she was not available. The Administrative Assistant scheduled the initial visit was which included a tour of the school and a meeting with the principal and assistant principal; however, the assistant principal was not on campus on the day of the first visit.

The predominant phase of data collection was a complex process where the researcher gained access and collected various data that unveiled the nuances of what was happening at Achievement Elementary School. Interviewing and observations were the primary sources of data supported by document review and reflections. The varying data sources provided information that led to a robust study comprised of thick descriptions.

As the researcher, I took copious field notes to capture those real-time observations that are difficult to capture by solely listening to the audio recording. Field notes also helped to capture key phrases, provide nonverbal feedback to participants of the study about what is "noteworthy", and helped to describe the behavior of the participants during the interviews (Patton, 2002). Thick descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002) provided the intricate details of all pertinent data compiled from the study with anticipation of results that can be utilized to understand the factors that contribute to student achievement growth in a 70/70/70 elementary school. The interview questions for this inquiry were designed to guide the interview and collect data that include detailed descriptions and meaning from the participants.

Additionally, these observations and initial questioning also led to the identification of the documents that were reviewed for the study. The observations included an evolving process that was guided by an ongoing analysis of collected data relevant to the research. The interviews with the participants also revealed other participants whose experiences added to the richness of the study. Specific attention was given to how the school leadership engages, enacts, and sustains a learning environment where at least seventy percent of the students are demonstrating academic growth.

Observations

The observations provided increased opportunities for understanding the factors that contribute to schoolwide improvement and sustainable academic growth for the students at Achievement Elementary School. Qualitative studies are credited with providing opportunities of meaning-making *during* observations. During the observations, as the researcher, I maintained an intentional focus on identifying those distinguishable moments that could tell the story of the phenomenon and provide vicarious experiences for the readers of the study. According to Stake

(1995), the researcher's notes should provide a "relatively *incontestable description* for further analysis and ultimate reporting" (p. 62). This research study included a total of eleven visits to the school. The Administrative Assistant developed a schedule for visits to include observations at all grade levels, kindergarten through fifth grades. Six of those visits were devoted primarily to observations of classrooms where I would spend at least one entire period with each teacher. I was scheduled to spend at least an hour in each class which presented the opportunity to gather both non-verbal and verbal data. Although I did not interview any of the teachers with less than three years of experience, I observed three of those teachers in their classrooms.

Additionally, I made observations of daily operations and observed one Leadership Team Meeting and one Professional Leadership Community (PLC) Meeting. The Administrative Assistant (AA) also created a schedule for five visits for interviews and observations. The AA provided the telephone numbers for each participant in case there was a need to make other arrangements with the interviewees. The other five visits were devoted to conducting interviews and making general observations of daily operations of the school. Included in those visits were three consecutive days as well as observations of the summer school reading program and the afterschool tutoring program. As the researcher, I conducted school walkthroughs on every visit which also provided opportunities for gathering data that contributed to recognizing patterns and emerging themes. Stake (1995) acknowledges that providing recurrent opportunities to observe certain situations establishes a "representative coverage of the relationships for the particular case" (p. 63).

Observations were scheduled at times that were convenient and non-intrusive to the participants. As the researcher, I developed a fixed schedule that allowed for adequate time to write up the observations relatively close to the conclusion of the observations (Stake, 1995).

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Ultimately, every observation that was valuable to the study was aggregated with other useful data to capture the phenomenon under study.

During these informal and formal observations, I applied continuous interpretations and took field notes detailing the observations and my perception of the observations. The case design study calls for the researcher to analyze and synthesize the data while exercising reflexivity. The role of reflexivity is an important factor when designing, conducting, and interpreting qualitative research. It was my intent to ensure that the subjectivity regarding the disproportionality in education for students of color and culturally relevant leadership that is embedded within me as the researcher was "used as a resource that can be developed in ways that augment and intensify my research" (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 126).

Interviews

"The interview is the main road to multiple realities." ~Stake (1995, p. 64)

Two of the predominant uses of a case study are to acquire both descriptions and interpretations of the participants in the study (Stake, 1995). The case should not be presented exclusively from the perspective of the researcher. Interviewing is one of the essential techniques of a case study to extract multiple perspectives of the study. One of the crucial aspects of conducting a "good" interview is the ability of the researcher to construct questions that evoke detailed responses from the interviewees. I used qualitative research questions that were open-ended instead of "yes or no" questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Stake, 1995). Responsive interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) was utilized in this case study. Responsive interviewing involves active engagement between researchers and participants wherein the researcher responds to the information provided by participants by asking questions that might have not

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been predetermined by the researcher. Additionally, the researcher sees participants as "conversational partners" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. xv).

In accordance with the responsive interviewing approach, I used three kinds of questions: main questions, probes, and follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The main questions were designed to elicit the responses needed for the overall research purpose, while probes are key questions that often times revealed in-depth understanding and aided in maintaining the conversation. I designed follow-up questions to evoke detailed and specific responses related to the study with increased understanding. Stake (1995) deems the probes as the most critical to the technique of interviewing because they can bring forth expanded details and involved responses. In addition to selected open-ended questions, I maintained the flexibility to utilize other types of interview questions to close gaps in the data.

I contacted all ten of the participants prior to their interviews to discuss the interview process, their scheduled interview time, and to answer any questions that they had regarding the study. Twelve scheduled interviews were conducted and followed up with three of the participants to clarify answers to questions answered during their initial interviews. The principal and assistant principal were interviewed two times. Ten of the interviews were conducted at Achievement Elementary School in the Teacher's Workroom, one interview was conducted at a nearby elementary school, and one of the interviews with a parent was conducted at a local restaurant. All interviews were conducted in private rooms. Participants were interviewed for approximately one hour using a semi-structured, informal format to elicit genuine conversation between the participant and the researcher to establish a rapport with the interviewees. I also gained permission for follow-up interviews for the purposes of clarification or seeking a deeper understanding. All follow-up interviews took place within thirty days of the initial interview to

allow for a continuous flow. Too much time between interviews may cause a lack of connection between the two interview sessions (Seidman, 2006). The interview protocol included the initial open-ended questions (See Appendix A). Although there were specific questions outlined for the interview, the interviewer allowed for informal conversations (Patton, 2002) if it does not comprise making efficient use of the interviewee's time. Probes and follow-up questions were used to elicit additional responses for clarity or to gather a more descriptive response.

It was difficult scheduling an interview with one of the community volunteers whom I heard about several times from the principal and staff. I was able to finally schedule an interview with him after all observations and other interviews were completed and transcribed. Most interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to one hour. To address the sub-question of the role of the principal in institutionalizing cultural knowledge, I used Seidman's (2006) three-interview approach. This process provided an opportunity to conduct an in-depth exploration of the principal's cultural competence within the school context. Siedman's (2006) three-interview approach has three different angles: (1) focused life history, (2) details of experience, and (3) reflection on the meaning. While three interview sessions were scheduled with the principal and the assistant principal of the selected school, I only conducted two interviews with each of them. The third interview was not necessary because the researcher was able to ask follow-up questions during the second interview. The second interview was designed to collect the details of the overall question, and the sub-questions served as a guide to probe the principal for information-rich responses relevant to the study. In consideration of the principal's and assistant principal's schedules the interviews were scheduled for sixty (60) minutes; however, the second interview for both the principal and assistant principal was so engaging that they lasted beyond an hour.

Interviews were recorded during the series of sessions using adequate and reliable recording devices to ensure accuracy of data. The recorder on the researcher's iPhone X was used as a backup recording device. Patton (2009) asserts that the period immediately after the interview is critical because it is the opportune time for the researcher to give prompt attention to the field notes and identify any occurrences of senseless, vague, or ambiguous notes. Likewise, Bassey (2012) suggests that it is advantageous to analyze data as it is collected as opposed to delaying the process.

Each interview was transcribed using a clean verbatim method wherein stutters, partial words, false starts, and filler words were removed. This method was chosen for a cleaner, less distracting transcription without detracting anything meaningful from the transcribed interview. As the researcher, I used the voice recorder on Google Docs called Voice Typing. There was a total of one-hundred and fourteen pages of transcribed interviews that provided the unique, lived experiences of the participants. Using this method provided an opportunity to listen to the different angles from which the participants assign meaning to their experiences.

Document review

Documents were compiled that are pertinent to the study and used to gain a deeper understanding of what is happening at the school selected for this study. Documents that were reviewed and analyzed for this study included: the State School Report Cards for the past three years, the School Improvement Plans (SIP), school's vision and mission statements, Opportunity Culture Design Plan, and the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) PowerPoint presentation.

The researcher requested the SIP, climate surveys, meeting agendas and meeting notes from the Leadership Team meetings, student and staff handbooks, and the mission and vision

statements. How were the documents requested? After several requests, neither the climate surveys nor the meeting agendas and notes were provided; however, the other documents were delivered electronically. Based on information gathered from interviews, I also asked for information on Opportunity Culture and PBIS which was provided electronically. The Administrative Assistant also provided the results of a parent survey on the delivery of a training to the parents on the new program, Opportunity Culture as part of the documents for the study.

Researcher Journal

Observation data was collected from observations that could include classroom settings, school staff interactions with students on the educational campus, and school meetings. I took field notes and reflective notes in the journal designated for the study. Notes from both verbal and nonverbal communication were recorded in the journal.

Data Compilation and Storage

In qualitative studies, data gathering "begins before there is a commitment to do the study: backgrounding, acquaintance with other cases, and first impressions" (Stake, 1995, p. 49). Stake further notes that this informal data gathering is often "replaced or refined" as the study matures. In addition to obtaining IRB permission, prior to collecting data from interviews, observations, and document reviews, permission was obtained from all parties involved by a signed consent form that detailed the purpose of the research as well as the participant's role in the research. Once approval was obtained to conduct the study, the researcher began collecting data that was maintained in a data storage system (Stake, 1995). This organized system of data collection included the data being stored in both an electronic and hard-copy format. A data collection table was created to organize and document data collection sources. As the researcher, I took notes in the research journal while reviewing the documents notating items of importance

as it relates to the questions of the research. Data collection was continuous throughout the study until adequate data was acquired and saturation achieved.

The systematic process adopted for data storage and processing is endorsed by Bassey (2012): (1) the archive which is the compilation of all data with an identified date to dispose of the data, (2) the case record which includes all transcripts, observations, field notes and other documents used and approved for public access, and (3) the case report which is the end-point of the case study. The end-point was a picture-drawing case study that explored the practices, policies, programs, philosophies, and strategies that contribute to the academic growth of students in the school. Additionally, the inquiry sought to understand who is responsible for the development, implementation, and sustainability of these elements of success.

Data Analysis

Stake (1995) accentuates the importance of the researcher's "interpretive powers" to maintain consistent engagement with the data (i.e., interviews, observations, etc.) to recognize and identify developing events and ongoing revelations. The criticality of the researcher possessing this skill stems from the fact that in qualitative studies, the research could divert unexpectedly, and the researcher must be equipped to redirect observations and pursue emerging issues (Stake, 1995). Data analysis is a continuous sense-making process that is not bound by any specific time but is contingent upon how and when the researcher relates one part to another part to understand the case (Stake, 1995). Data analysis is an ongoing quest to create meaning from all of the moving parts of the research process. As a researcher, I attempted to become one with the data as to not miss the inconspicuous information that added value and meaning to the study. I conducted a thematic analysis (Patton, 2002) focused on emerging themes which requires the ability to recognize patterns in the entirety of the data.

I employed Creswell's (2013) six data analysis steps: (1) organize and prepare the data for analysis; (2) read through all data; (3) begin thorough analysis using coding; (4) use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis; (5) advance how the description and themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative; and (6) interpret the data. Although Creswell's six data steps (as shown in Figure 3) depict a hierarchical approach with ordered steps from the bottom to the top, the phases are interrelated and not necessarily employed in sequential order. This process of data analysis includes validating the accuracy of information as a step that I incorporated throughout the study. Strategies suggested by Creswell, (2013) that I utilized during this study were: triangulating data, rich and thick descriptions, and clarifying researcher bias.
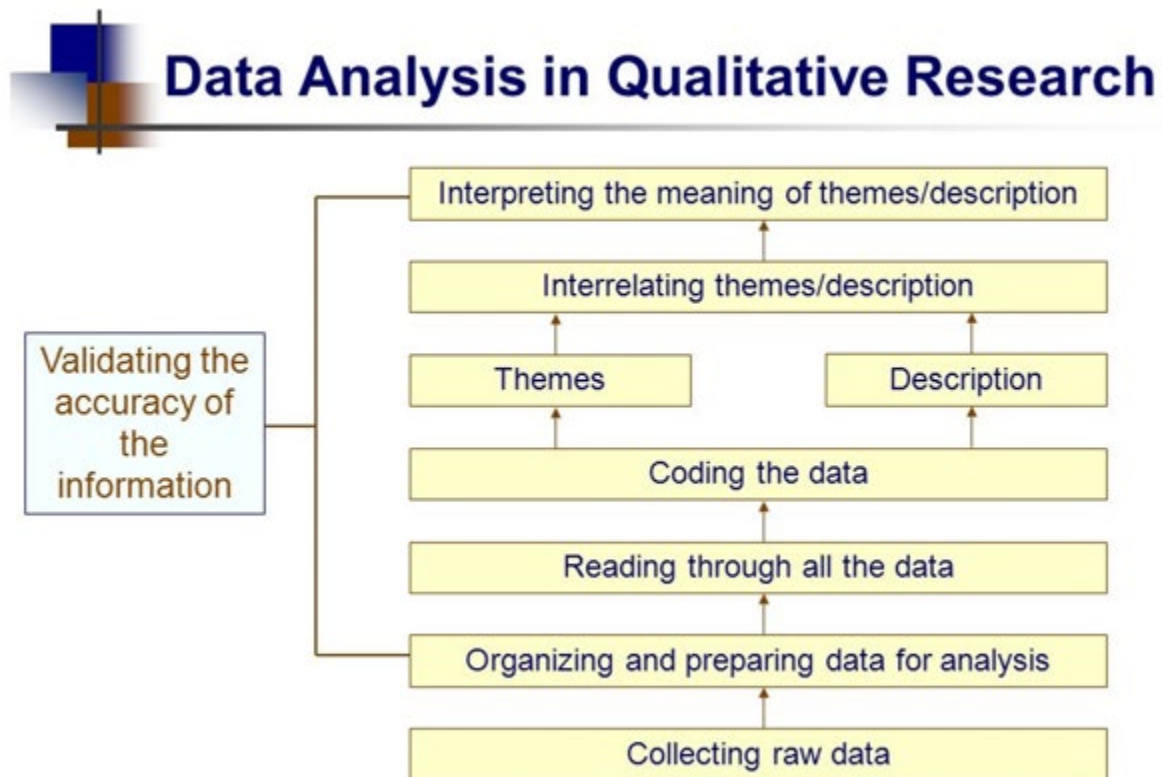
Figure 3. Creswell's (2013) Six Data Analysis Step in Qualitative Research

The conceptual framework for this inquiry consists of two frameworks: A Framework for Action (Parrett and Budge, 2012) and Culturally Relevant Leadership (Beachum, 2011). These two theories served as a guide and analytical frameworks to identify reoccurring themes evident from the observations, interviews, and documents. Merriam (2009) contends that qualitative researchers use theoretical frameworks to focus the inquiry and interpret the data. Although these two frameworks informed my study, I remained open to identifying themes not found in these frameworks.

Both deductive (a priori) and inductive coding were utilized to identify and accurately situate the emerging themes. Stake (1995) asserts that deductive coding is the use of pre-determined categories in which information from varied data sources can be sorted. In chapter two, based on the selected empirical studies, I identified five common reoccurring themes of successful schools: Shared Leadership, High Expectations and Accountability, Principal Leadership, Quality Teachers, School Culture/Equity. These themes were utilized during the a priori coding process. Themes that emerged that are not in pre-determined categories usually evolve from "direct interpretation". I identified the emergent themes based on the data collected for the study.

Coding

The coding process, which began during the transcription of the twelve interviews, was used to chunk information under broad categories. Word comments were used for the beginning of this process. Important information that answered research questions were highlighted as key points and the code was established and documented as a comment in the margin. I color-coded all of the information that was repeated throughout the document review process. This process was used for the interviews, observations, and reflections. Once completed, the researcher

continued the thematic coding process, connecting the codes with the a priori themes derived from deductive analysis.

After combining the codes into the a priori themes, I reviewed all of the codes that were remaining. These codes were then reviewed to determine if there were any emerging themes. As the researcher I reviewed all of the coding again to corroborate the initial clustering of codes into themes.

NVivo was used as a tool to manage, organize, and analyze data. All notes were uploaded and organized in NVivo. All transcribed interviews were uploaded to NVivo for ease of organizing and managing the data. The researcher also took notes from the interviews in the journal, and these notes were uploaded to NVivo as well. While data analysis software is instrumental in systematizing the data, the researcher conducted the analysis and gave meaning to the organized data collected from multiple sources.

All of the data were triangulated in order to "gain the needed confirmation, to increase credence in the interpretation, and to demonstrate commonality of an assertion" (Stake, 1995, p. 112). The observations, interviews, and the document review was used as part of the triangulation of the data as the researcher developed an in-depth understanding from multiple perspectives of the researched phenomenon. In qualitative research, triangulation enhances the validity of the research contingent upon the emerging of themes from these multiple sources of data. Stake (1995) identified this protocol as data source triangulation. We [the researchers] look to see if the phenomenon or case remains the same at other times, in other spaces, or as persons interact differently" (p. 112). Triangulation also provides a sense of "trustworthiness" and legitimacy for the research. Individual interview data, observation data, and document review data was used for triangulation purposes.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the case study refers to the ability to demonstrate a credible and worthy study. In qualitative research studies, Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that the trustworthiness consists of establishing: credibility- confidence in the 'truth' of the findings; transferability- showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts; dependability- showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated; and confirmability- a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not the researcher bias, motivation, or interest.

Credibility was established using multiple data sources: interviews, observations, the State Report Card (SRC) and other documents. The researcher also used member checking and triangulation of data to establish trustworthiness. The research included member checks by asking the participants to review the rough drafts, check for accuracy and palatability, and make suggestions accordingly. Information received from the participants was reviewed and considered for inclusion in the final case report; however, "it is not promised that the researcher will change the language of the report at the request of the subjects" (Stake, 1995, p. 115).

The information inclusive of the data sources for this study were triangulated to provide corroborating evidence. According to Stake (1995), "data source triangulation is an effort to see if what we are observing and reporting carries the same meaning when found under different circumstances" (p. 113). I triangulated individual interview data, observation data, data from the State Report Cards, and other document review data to validate emerging findings to increase the understanding of the phenomenon. The rich descriptions of data from multiple sources that were collected at different times or different settings increased the robustness of the study.

The trustworthiness of a study is also measured by the dependability of the study which refers to the consistency of the study. I used an audit trail that provides a detailed account of the research process in its entirety (interviews, observations, document review processes, data analysis, etc.), and adequately describes how the researcher arrived at the results of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Researcher's Role

The role of the case researcher is to recognize a problem, study it, and connect the unknown with the known (Stake, 1995). The meanings interpreted by the researcher are often influenced by the researcher's experiences because the researcher is a human instrument (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Stake (1995) notes that interpretation is essential to all research; however, in qualitative designs, the researcher's role is to "be in the field, making observations, exercising subjective judgement, analyzing and synthesizing, all the while realizing their own consciousness" (p. 41). The researcher engages in varying roles throughout the study and has the prerogative to decide when and how to execute these roles (Stake, 1995).

Stake (1995) identified six (6) case researcher roles: (1) researcher as teacher, (2) researcher as advocate, (3) researcher as evaluator, (4) researcher as biographer, (5) researcher as theorist, and (6) researcher as interpreter. As a qualitative case study researcher, I employed several of these roles to extrapolate meaning from the selected data sources.

As a former teacher, my delivery was as important as the content because I wanted to make sure that the students both received and comprehended the information. It was clear that if they did not understand, then I needed to take a different approach. Similarly, Stake (1995) asserts that the researcher as a teacher must understand that teaching is more effective when the learners have comprehended the study. The learners are the readers of the research and the

researcher as the teacher should be concerned with the familiarity of the words to the reader, the similarity of experiences, the attractiveness of the vignettes, and the sophistication of the assertions found in the study (Stake, 1995).

Stake (1995) contends that although the qualitative researcher has an obligation to communicate how the findings may be extrapolated and interpreted to make informed decision or contribute to the discourse around the studied phenomena, researchers often advocate for their findings. The researcher writes in such a way that may persuade the reader to interpret the findings as the researcher did. The case researcher as an advocate may be a subconscious role in an effort to provide a detailed, descriptive account of the various experiences during the study. My intent for this study was to write the "thick descriptions" in a way that demonstrates the validity of my findings.

The case researcher as a biographer is an interesting role because the study is bound by time and space so the researcher does not seek to understand the entire life of the study; however, the biographer role is based on a detailed description of a phase of the participant's life. Humans make meaning based on their experiences, and understanding those experiences is indicative of the next role of a case researcher, interpreter. As an interpreter of the collected data, it is understood that as the researcher, the interpretation was based on my perception. Triangulation of data is valuable when making interpretations of the data, and I used this method to ensure credibility of the findings. As the researcher, I was immersed in the study and intuitively made continuous decisions of how these case researcher roles were implicated in the study.

Potential Research Bias

My professional experiences include twenty-plus years as an educator from teaching to administration. Fifteen of those years were dedicated to working with students who have been

labeled as "at-risk," students who historically have been marginalized and "pushed out" from their regular home schools. My ongoing desire to help these students achieve academic success and self-worth has inspired me to seek ways to propel these students to greatness. I have been fascinated with the outcomes of students whose teachers create environments saturated with equitable school policies and practices and an intentional focus on high academic expectations of all students regardless of any perceived barriers. I have worked in partnership with many low-performing schools whose populations include majority students of color and students from low socioeconomic status homes. Many of the schools have been on a continuous cycle of unsuccessful school reform, and their solution has been to "push out" many students to an alternative placement. I am interested in investigating and understanding how one particular school has successfully navigated through barriers and placed the school on a trajectory of academic success.

It is my assumption that the school's leadership must include two primary characteristics: high expectations of all teachers and students and inclusive, equitable practices, in order to have considerable impact on the success of high poverty schools with high percentages of students of color in any school. While some might argue that this could eventually present an issue of bias, I argue that my beliefs, values, and experiences are invaluable to this study, and they inform, rather than 'bias' my design, data collections, and analysis decisions. As the researcher, I practiced reflexivity and use my experiences to shape the interpretation instead of bringing biases to the interpretation. I maintained a consciousness of my internal beliefs concerning the promotion of high expectations of all students and a champion for marginalized students.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher has the responsibility to maintain the anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of the experiences and data collected. Anonymity was achieved my using pseudonyms for the name of the school, school district, and all participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the researcher also informed the participants about the study and provided opportunities for the participants to ask clarifying questions. The researcher gave an overview of the purpose of the study, the interviews, the objective of the study, how the outcome of the study could be used, and how the participants' confidentiality would be maintained. The researcher ensured that all documents are secured throughout the course of the study. All participants were assured that they were protected through IRB and safeguarded by the researcher's attentiveness to their privacy.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter 3 was to describe the methodology employed for data collection and analysis. The key concepts investigated and explored in this study were the factors contributing the academic success of a high-poverty, high population of students of color school and the extent to which the leadership impacted the academic achievement. Through qualitative research and using the case study design, the researcher was able to understand the participants' beliefs and behaviors and how they made sense of their lived experiences at Achievement Elementary School.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

What does it take to reclaim the promise of education as the great equalizer especially in schools with a high representation of students of color in poverty? Wide-ranging, national educational reform initiatives such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) have swept the United Students in an effort to improve academic outcomes for marginalized groups of students. Particularly, students of color in high poverty communities across the U.S. persistently underperform as compared to their counterparts. The literature review in chapter two describes several studies where schools have been pulled out of seemingly dark corridors of hopelessness into schools that are now providing equitable education with impressive outcomes. Principals, teacher-leaders, and district leaders can benefit from the real-world examples and practical guidelines, all based on research and experience of successful, high performing schools with similar populations and refocus their efforts to become high-performing schools (Blankstein & Noguera, 2016; Parrett & Budge, 2012;). The findings of this study provide a framework of a school that has successfully shown consistent improvement of academic progress in a school serving students of color from low, socio-economic status communities.

Purpose

The purpose of this intrinsic case study is to understand how an elementary school with high poverty levels and high percentages of students of color of color improved and sustained the academic achievement of students. In this exploration, I employed a holistic qualitative

approach to find out the specific factors, programs, or initiatives that contribute to the students' academic achievement. Additionally, I explored the role of the school's leadership in the school's academic achievement and sustainability. This chapter details the outcomes of a thorough analysis explicating the factors that enabled an urban elementary school with a high percentage of students who live in poverty and a high percentage of students of color, to have a high percentage of students with increased academic achievement.

The research question that guided this study is: What are the factors that enable an urban elementary school with high poverty, and high percentage of students of color, to have a high percentage of students with increased academic achievement? Additionally, the following sub-questions were addressed:

1. Who is involved in the processes that enable students to be successful?

2. How did the school achieve this level of success and how does it sustain its progress?

3. What is the role of the school principal in institutionalizing cultural knowledge in a school with high poverty, a high percentage of students of color, and a high percentage of students with increasing academic achievement?

4. What specific practices and initiatives are implemented in the school?

In this study, I used a hybrid approach through a process of both inductive and deductive thematic analysis. An a priori analysis was utilized based on the five pre-identified themes as derived from pre-existing research on the phenomenon. An emergent analysis was used in pursuit of what materialized from an intensive investigation of the data collected in the study. The analysis using NVivo revealed an overlap in the overarching themes identified in both the deductive thematic analysis and the inductive thematic analysis.

Deductive and Inductive Thematic Analysis

The a priori analysis revealed that the five pre-identified themes aligned with the most frequently occurring themes identified in NVivo. With the high occurrence of these themes by the interviewees, these can therefore be described as factors that enabled the identified elementary school with high poverty, high percentage of students of color, to have a high percentage of students with increased academic achievement (the main research question for the study).

The emergent analysis for this research also included an inductive approach to coding wherein themes emerged directly from the data collected. Notwithstanding the expansive range of emerging topics, seven themes resurfaced repeatedly during this inductive process of coding and identification of themes.

Data Analysis

As detailed in chapter three, multiple data sources were used for this study to strengthen the data credibility (Patton, 1990) of the study. Interviews, observations, and documents were the three primary data sources. I conducted twelve scheduled interviews with three follow-up interviews (15 interviews in total), eleven site-based observations, and reviewed six relevant documents. Member checks were conducted to clarify meaning of the participants' responses as needed. The analysis of the one-hundred and fourteen pages of transcribed interviews, observations notes, reflections, and documents are presented throughout this chapter. Interviewees included the principal, assistant principal, teachers, multi-classroom leader, parents, and a community volunteer. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, I also had an opportunity to engage in conversation with a bus driver, other parents, volunteers, and staff.

During my educational career, I have conducted countless school walkthroughs and instructional walks at schools with an intentional focus on identifying exceptional practices as well as ineffective practices specifically at schools serving marginalized populations of students. While there is valuable information that can be gathered during these visits, it is often merely a snapshot of the school. I made a conscious decision to spend a consecutive three days at the school to gain a better understanding of the school's operations. This decision provided much more than an understanding. After the three consecutive days, the staff told me that I was no longer a guest, but I was an honorary member of their family. I was also invited to the promotion ceremony as well as the end-of-year staff social, and this kind gesture did not go unnoticed. My feelings mirrored the sentiments of one of the community volunteers, Pastor Johnson, who expressed that as a volunteer, he is treated like family.

Framework for Action and Culturally Relevant Leadership

Parrett and Budge's (2012) Framework for Action and tenets of Culturally Relevant Leadership (Beachum, 2011; McCray & Beachum, 2014; Horsford et al., 2011) were used to construct the conceptual framework that provided the structure for the analysis for this study. The Framework for Action is focused primarily on high-poverty, low performing schools becoming high-poverty, high-performing schools. Parrett and Budge (2012) designed it to conceptualize the function of leadership in seven high-poverty, high-performing schools sustaining academic gains for at least three consecutive years. The Framework for Action was foundational to this study because my investigation of the school selected for this study is intentionally focused on what is actually going on at the school that has contributed to the three-year progression of academic achievement for the students. Likewise, The Framework for Action, is focused on the actions that

have resulted in leading high-poverty schools to high-performance while examining three main areas: (a) Spheres of Influence, (b) Actions, and (c) School Culture.

Recognizing that the Framework for Action is focused heavily on leading schools that are high-poverty and high performing, I selected Culturally Relevant Leadership as part of the conceptual framework to guide the perspective of leading schools with high students of color populations. Culturally Relevant Leadership specifically emphasizes leadership that makes a conscious shift to provide equitable education for populations of students of color who have been traditionally marginalized and who are culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse. The Framework for Action coupled with tenets of Culturally Relevant Leadership provides framework to explore the factors that contribute to a school's academic success where there is an intersection of poverty and race in the school's population.

"Different by Design": Profiles of the School and Leadership

First Impression

While I had talked to the principal several times over the phone, I had never met her. A tall lady with glasses and hair pulled back in a bun walked out, shook my hand, and introduced herself as the principal. She gave a quick smile, told me that she had a situation that she had to deal with, and apologized for any inconvenience. She also extended an opportunity for me to walk down the halls to see the school because it would probably be almost time for dismissal when she would finish with the parent. This act demonstrated a respect for my time and her thoughtfulness for a visitor whom she had never met in person. The janitor, Ms. Riley, whom I thought was the receptionist at the time, volunteered to give me a tour of the school.

Students were walking down the halls in single-file lines dressed in khaki bottoms and blue polo shirts with the school's logo. Several of the students waved and smiled at me while

other students asked their teacher or Ms. Riley about me. Most of them wanted to know about the stranger in their building; however, these students soon became very familiar with my presence as I visited their school over the next eight months. Proud of his uniform, one of the students asked me if I liked his "new" uniform shirt. Although his shirt was the same as all of the other students' shirts, he was extremely proud of his shirt in particular. The teacher leaned towards me and whispered that the school donated a new shirt to him on that day because he arrived at school in a damaged uniform shirt.

Achievement School is one of only two schools in the district that has a uniform policy. Students are required to abide by this policy, and there are consequences if families do not comply with the uniform policy. Most of the participants agreed that the uniform policy is a positive for the school and allows the students to focus on their education instead of their fashion. Additionally, if a student's uniform is not clean or any other condition that would make the student feel uncomfortable, the school has a uniform closet for students to borrow a uniform for the day. A community laundromat will clean up to ten uniforms per week without charge for the school's uniform closet. Continuing with the tour of Achievement, Dr. Glover soon joined us, and she did not send one of her staff to locate us during the tour, but she walked down the halls until she caught up with us. Immediately she thanked Ms. Riley and told her how appreciative she was for stepping in for her. She also said to me, "Isn't Ms. Riley the greatest?" Dr. Glover went on to tell me that Ms. Riley is her rock, and she would not know what to do without her and her willingness to always try something new. The smile on Ms. Riley's face was unforgettable as she listened to her principal recognize her dedication as a member of the team.

Dr. Glover picked up trash during our tour and asked a teacher if she could help her carry books to the library. During my first visit with Dr. Glover, I observed her display a care and

concern for others, motivate her staff, and display characteristics of servant leadership. Her passion for the students was obvious as she talked about her desire to challenge the status quo and her fight to ensure student success in academics and life for every student attending her school.

School Profile

The school for this study was selected through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) as outlined in chapter three. The identified school for this research study had to meet the following established criteria:

1) Considered high poverty as evidenced by at least 70% of students on free and reduced school lunch.

2) Considered high population of students of color by at least 70% of students identified as students of color.

3) Considered making increasing academic progress where at least 70% of students meet or exceed growth as identified by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) Annual Report Card.

Similar to the study conducted on 90/90/90 schools (Reeves, 2003), the school selected for this case study must have been at least a 70/70/70 school as outlined above. Based on the 2018 state data and conversations with the state's Division of Accountability, the school selected was one of only three schools in the entire state that minimally met the criteria outlined for the study. Two of the schools had new principals who were not at the same school during the school year that the school made the increase in academic performance. The former principals of these two schools were recruited to turn around other low-performing schools in the state. The school selected, Achievement Elementary School, is guided by a principal who was recruited to the

school when the performance grade was a "D" and only 58% of the students were making academic progress based on the state's annual school report card. At the time of this study, the principal had been at the school for two and a half years, and the Assistant Principal had been at the school for one year serving only part-time at Achievement because he is shared with a sister-school. The former Assistant Principal of Achievement Elementary School, now collaborates with Achievement because she was promoted to the principal position at the sister-school. In Kimbrough County School District, sister-schools are two schools who have partnered together in school improvement efforts and share resources. The two schools support each other, share best practices, host professional learning opportunities together, and collaboratively engage in other activities that strengthen the relationship between them.

Table 3 depicts the profile of Achievement Elementary School over a span of three years. Although the school was selected based on the 2018 state data, this table gives an overview of how the school has performed under the leadership of the current principal who arrived mid-year in 2016. Pseudonyms have been substituted for the actual names to protect the identities of the school, study participants, school district, and community involved in the study.

Table 3. Achievement Elementary School Profile, NCDPI Annual School Report Card

Characteristics	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019
School Grade	D	C	B
School Performance Score	51	62	71
School Growth Score	80.7	85.0	90.6
School Growth Score Designation	Met	Exceeded	Exceeded
Percentage of Students Met or Exceeded Growth	58%	60%	82%
School Enrollment	241	228	216
Title I Eligible	Yes	Yes	Yes
Percentage of Students Free or Reduced Meals	97%	98%	98%
Percentage of Students of Color	92%	92%	93%
Percentage of Teachers with 0-3 Years of Experience	23%	25%	35%
Percentage of Teachers with 4-10 Years of Experience	27%	33%	25%
Percentage of Teachers with 10+ Years of Experience	50%	42%	40%

The archives for the school grades extend as far back as the 2013 school year, and the school maintained a school grade of "D" for at least four years straight. The school received its lowest performance score in 2015/2016 with a school performance score of 44 and only points away from a grade of "F". The data as presented in Table 3 shows that the school began to change that pattern in 2016/2017 where they met their school growth target. The school continued to demonstrate an increase in academic achievement in 2017/2018 with a significant improvement and earned a grade of "C". The school continued to accelerate academically earning a "B" in 2018/2019. Kimbrough County Schools recognized the school for this great achievement and the principal, Dr. Glover, was named "Principal of the Year" for the district in 2019. Eighty-two percent (82%) of the students either met or exceeded growth which was a 22% increase from the previous year where only sixty percent (60%) of the students achieved that status.

Achievement, at the time of this study, had a student population of 216 students which has dwindled since 2013 due to a new charter school that was built in close proximity to the school. Principal Glover shared her desire to keep her students enrolled and expressed that she believes that Achievement is just as "good" as the new charter school. Ninety-three percent (93%) of the students at Achievement are students of color with most of those students identifying as black students. Ninety-eight (98%) of the students are eligible for free and reduced meals and live in high-poverty neighborhoods. The forty staff employed at Achievement have been challenged with improving one of the lowest performing schools in the state. The school has been on a steady progression of academic improvement for three consecutive years.

Different by Design

  Over a span of eight months and eleven visits to Achievement Elementary School, I was able to explore why the motto, "Different by Design", was echoed by the staff, parents, and community members. Principal Glover shared that when she accepted the principalship at Achievement, she knew that it was going to require a "different approach undeniably tailored to meet the needs of the students at Achievement". Principal Glover expressed that after she had spent time observing and listening, she told the staff that they could not continue doing "education as usual". Embracing the notion that the work required to turn the school around would have to be different, the staff created their new motto, "Different by Design".

  Approaching Achievement Elementary School for the first visit, there was no question that I was in the heart of a poverty-stricken community. I passed many small homes, a few small businesses, and several dilapidated homes. Some of the houses had manicured lawns; however, most of the lawns appeared to be covered with dead grass, dirt, and weeds. Located approximately a half mile from the school was an exceptionally large house as compared to the other homes that caught my attention because it looked vastly different from the other homes in the high-poverty community. There was a black iron fence around the house with a coded entry and a large circular driveway where several cars were parked.

  During my first visit to the school, the principal, Dr. Glover, discussed the poverty-stricken neighborhoods surrounding the school and her determination to challenge the status quo regarding schools in high-poverty communities. As she described the community, Dr. Glover asked if I noticed "the mansion"? She explained that the students called this house "the mansion" because it is the largest house in the community and comparatively, no other house comes close to its size. Dr. Glover conveyed that the house belongs to the Holmes family, an African

American family who were farmers and previously owned many acres of land in the city. The Holmes family was coerced by the city to sell most of their land and decided to build a family home on the remaining property. Dr. Glover shared that four generations have lived in the house at one time, and all of the generations have attended Achievement. The grandfather, affectionately known as Grandfather Holmes, and one of his daughters deliver a powerful presentation to the students every year called "From Struggle to Success". The students are always excited and they listen attentively as the life experiences of the Holmes family unfolds through storytelling by Grandfather Holmes and his daughter. From the onset, the students are intrigued because of their fascination with the Holmes' house; however, this presentation has been deemed by the staff as one of the most powerful events for the students. With a captive audience, Grandfather Holmes connects academic learning to real-world problems beyond the confines of their school.

An added bonus is that students who were classmates with a Holmes' student in their class were invited to "the mansion" for the annual Christmas party. All of the students in the class would dress up and attend a formal dinner and receive a gift from the Holmes family. Dr. Glover acknowledged that the Holmes family is an anomaly because over ninety percent of her students are on free and reduced lunch and live in low-income housing or exceedingly small homes in the neighborhood. The Holmes family is also one of the sponsors for the Winter Holiday Celebration held at the school. This is their way of giving to the other students because they cannot invite the entire school to their family home. Dr. Glover described the Holmes family as a pillar in the community who have been a blessing to Achievement and have not forgotten about their humble beginnings. Grandfather Holmes is also one of the mentors at the school, and some of his family members support the school by volunteering and donating new

uniforms for students at the beginning of each school year. The Holmes family also owns a small neighborhood store in the community. This is the only business in the community owned by a member of the community.

Directly across the school is a low-income housing development where many of the students and their families live. The administration noted that this saves on transportation costs because these students walk to school and those resources are directed to other initiatives. There is a crossing guard assigned to the area to ensure that the students cross the street safely before and after school. The large marquee sign in front of the school reads: Achievement Elementary School, Welcome Students and Parents, and We are Kimbrough County Schools Proud! I drove around the circular driveway that led to the visitor's parking lot which was all gravel. There was a large parking lot full of cars on the opposite side of the circle designated for the staff. Next to the visitors' parking lot were five parking spaces for the principal, assistant principal, two handicap spaces, and one space is designated to recognize the TEAM member of the month.

As I walked up to the red brick school, I noticed a seemingly new playground with many bright colors. Hanging on the outside of the building was a very large banner that had a large letter "B" in the center, and around the "B" were different sayings such as: Be proud, Be on time, Be you, and Be an Achiever. The theme of "Be" represented their current "B" school grade according to the school's Annual Report Card issued by the state that the school received based on their academic progress. This was the highest state performance grade earned by Achievement since letter performance grades were adopted in 2013. During my visits, both a parent and a volunteer directed my attention to the banner which signified their beaming pride in their school's academic achievement. The volunteer commented:

Those students are smart. I know that you saw the big banner outside. You can't miss it. The school used to be one of those failing schools, but now they are a "B". I was able to come to the celebration. The school is proud, and the community is proud of the school.

The pride in the school did not stop at the sign posted on the outside of the building but is evident inside of the building.

The school is particularly clean with shiny, polished floors, and walls full of motivational posters and murals. The posters and murals were either about character education or academic achievement. There were also nicely decorated bulletin boards on the walls of the hallways where student work was displayed. The school is divided into four wings: administrative offices, K-1, 2-3, and 4-5. The cafeteria is located at the front of the building across from the administrative offices and there is a considerably large library with an extensive collection of resources on the 4-5 wing.

The school's mission is posted in the front office, on the school's website, and found in the School Improvement Plan (SIP).

> Achievement Elementary School is committed to requiring high expectations for the success of all students. We are committed to implementing rigorous academic standards and promoting a sense of belonging within a safe and orderly environment. Achievement's administrative team and staff are dedicated to building an educational environment that is conducive to quality teaching and learning that will serve our diverse student population.

Analyzing the interviews, observations, and documents, it became clear that the mission statement at Achievement is more than words. The mission of the school is embodied in the staff and carried out daily.

School Administration Profiles-The Chosen Leaders

The Framework for Action (Parrett and Budge, 2012) and tenets from Culturally Relevant Leadership (Beachum, 2011; McCray & Beachum, 2014; Horsford et al., 2011) both emphasize the importance of school-based leadership in transforming schools segregated by social class and race. Parrett and Budge (2012) wrote:

> Although the answers are complex and challenging to distill, one feature stands out from the understandings gained from the hundreds of HP/HP schools studied: Significant student gains will not be sustained without effective leaders who serve as catalysts for the specific actions that in turn drive the success of these schools. (p. 33)

Similarly, McCray and Beachum (2014) stated, "In educational leadership in particular, leader attitude and perspective is a vital key to success." (p. 93). In an effort to begin conceptualizing the school's leadership and to answer research questions for this study, the subsequent section provides a personalized profile of the principal and assistant principal providing insight on how Dr. Glover and Mr. Hernandez contextualize their roles in transforming the high-poverty, high population of students of color school.

Principal Glover

Dr. Glover has been an educator for over twenty-five years, and Achievement Elementary is her first principalship. She was an assistant principal at two other schools in the district prior to coming to Achievement. Dr. Glover understands the plight of the students, families, and communities of Achievement Elementary School because she grew up in the area. She expressed:

Growing up in this area is what helped shape my decision to become an educator. I grew up in this area. I had no idea that I would end up being a principal here or even teaching in this area, but I knew as far as past experiences, how I grew up.

These experiences shaped why she became an educator, and Dr. Glover was the student who did not receive the education that she deserved because she was a reserved student who avoided trouble in school. Dr. Glover is known to push her students to be self-advocates and become the owners of their education. Dr. Glover is the principal who works to give her students the voice that she did not have when she was in school.

I was that child that was very quiet and the one that never caused problems. You forget about that child because they're not doing anything. Sometimes you may move on and you're not ready to move on yet because they haven't given you exactly what you needed because you're just there. I was that child that didn't raise my hand to ask questions. You know I may not have understood exactly what was happening. So I was that one who fell between the cracks. So that drove me because there are other kids who are just like that. I wasn't the one who said, here I am or, I need help. So yeah, that led me to become an educator because I feel like there are more of me when I was young.

Prior to Achievement, Dr. Glover was the Assistant Principal at another elementary school, and she explained that she cried when she received that appointment. She did not believe that the students at that school needed her. The school was the highest performing elementary school in the district, and the population and culture of the school was distinctly different with majority white students and only 40% of the students were eligible for free and reduced meals. However, Dr. Glover discovered that this appointment was a part of her destiny. She was removed from her

comfort zone and stretched professionally with professional learning opportunities that prepared her for her principalship at Achievement. Dr. Glover commented about her experience:

> When I got there, it was the best thing because I learned a lot from the principal that was there. So, I didn't know when all that transition was happening, I didn't know that this was really the opportunity that I needed to grow and learn from someone else, and not being in an environment that I felt comfortable in.

In my experiences as a district and state educational leader, I have worked with many principals who bemoan their assignment to a persistently failing school. Dr. Glover, on the contrary, confidently expressed her passion for working in schools where she believed the students needed her the most. Dr. Glover was chosen to lead Achievement Elementary School during the 2015-2016 school year, and she was excited to return to her community as the principal of one of the lowest performing schools in the state.

Assistant Principal Hernandez

Mr. Hernandez has been in education for twenty years and he grew up in Columbia. Mr. Hernandez discovered his passion for education while pursuing his degree in Chemical Engineering:

> When I was in college, I decided to become a chemical engineer first. I was doing my classes, but I was also taking English courses just to learn English. In Columbia we were not bilingual, so I was taking the classes for myself. During the class, I would initiate meetings with my classmates to study English. As a result, informally I began teaching the class. I was teaching English and discovered that it was something that I really enjoyed. Soon after that I stopped pursuing Chemical Engineering, and I became an

English major to teach English. I kept teaching my class and others who wanted to learn English. Then, I gradually became an English teacher.

Mr. Hernandez' passion and drive to work with schools serving high-poverty, high population of students of color schools stems from his experience in education in his native country. He understands what it means to do more with less; however, he also understands that these students still deserve access to an equitable education.

> I come from a very difficult background and there aren't a lot of opportunities for money and education where I come from. I saw the needs in our schools in Columbia. There was not a such thing as schools and classrooms with computers. In Columbia students don't have any of that. When I came to the U.S., I saw all the potential that the classrooms had. I saw the many tools in the classroom that students and teachers could use. I guess my knowledge of how things were in education where I was and coming from a place of deprivation in many cases, I saw the value in protecting the resources and tools that we have in schools in the U.S. Although the schools may be considered as high poverty schools, in comparison to where I come from, there are resources that are valuable to education in these schools. On the other side of that, it also pushes me to want to be able to level the playing field for students in high-poverty schools with students of color. Although these schools have more than the students in Columbia, they have less than other schools in the United States. So I want to work to level the playing field for the high poverty students of color. I see it from two different perspectives. We have to take care and value the resources that we have but also, we should always advocate to give our students more so that they have the same opportunities and expectations as the more well off or affluent communities.

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Both Dr. Glover and Mr. Hernandez communicated their awareness of the diverse communities and varying cultures represented at Achievement. The also expressed their obligation to be responsive to the needs of the students and families whom they serve at Achievement Elementary School.

The Significant Seven Supports

Seven significant themes emerged throughout the process of analyzing and coding the data. Every theme is meaningful, important, and necessary as it relates to the academic success at Achievement Elementary School. As noted by the principal, it was not one particular silver bullet but a combination of factors working in tandem with each other. The major themes identified were: Principal leadership as the catalyst for systemic improvement; shared leadership; shift in school culture; building teacher professional capacity; accountability; student-centered environment where students are loved; and spirituality. These significant, seven themes and associated sub-themes are presented in the immediate subsections.

Principal Leadership-The Catalyst for Improvement

The staff of Achievement gathered in the library for their Achievement Community Meeting (ACM). Dr. Glover believes that there is power in words; therefore, decided to abandon the term "staff meeting" and adopted Achievement Community Meeting. Every ACM begins with each staff member partnering with another staff member to share one success and one challenge that they are having as it relates to educating students. Dr. Glover obtained the attention of the group by saying, "Drumroll! Who is sharing the community success story this week?" A teacher jumped up and announced that for the first time in her three years of teaching at Achievement, one hundred percent of her students met grade level requirements on the mClass benchmark assessment. The room went into a powerful celebratory applause by the staff, and the

teacher's big smile and laughter soon turned into tears of joy. The teacher then publicly thanked Dr. Glover, and said, "I could not have done it without your guidance." Dr. Glover immediately approached the teacher with a big hug and told the teacher how proud she was of both the teacher and the students. This moment tugged at my heart, and although I did not personally know the students or the teacher, tears began to fall because I understand the depth of the impact on educational outcomes for high-poverty, students of color who are able to excel on reading benchmark tests.

Dr. Glover reminded the staff that their commitment to ensure all students are learning to high academic standards is the foundation to limitless possibilities for the students at Achievement. During the meeting Dr. Glover discussed the school's vision, acknowledged several staff for accomplishments or contributions, discussed the overall school data for the most recent mClass, and yielded the floor for the chair of the Leadership Team to discuss the upcoming professional development opportunities and the Professional Learning Community (PLC) schedule. The principal's enthusiastic demeanor at the end of the meeting seemed contagious as the staff left the library empowered to meet the goal of becoming an "A" school. One of the teachers said that she did not know how Dr. Glover does it, but she has a unique way of bringing out the best in teachers and students. This meeting reflected the belief by Achievement's staff, parents, and community that Dr. Glover serves as the catalyst for the school's transformation.

According to the majority of respondents, the principal played a key role in the school's upward trajectory of success. The theme of principal leadership had the greatest occurrence from the data analysis. During my visits, I randomly asked fifteen individuals such as teachers, parents, janitor, bus driver, and volunteers, whose leadership was responsible for the schools

increased academic achievement. Nine of the 15 said that the principal was responsible, one of the 15 said it was the principal and assistant principal, 2 of the 15 said it was the Leadership Team, and three of the 15 said that it was a team effort led by the principal. All 15 responses included the principal in some capacity (See Figure 4).
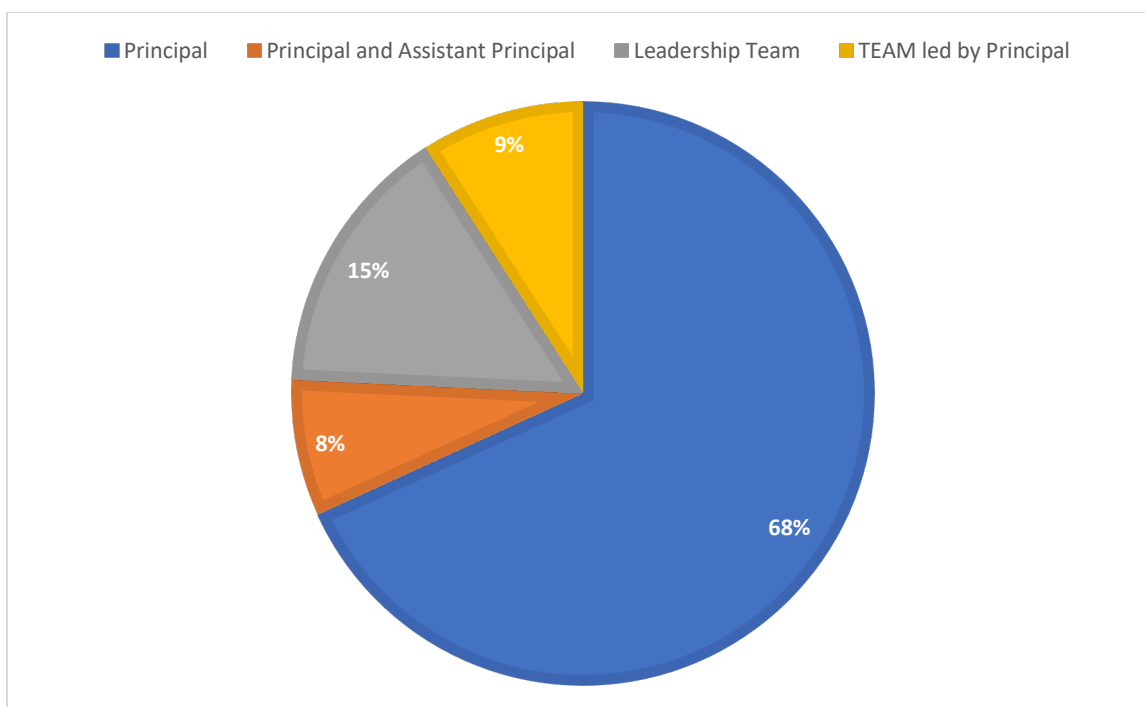
Figure 4. Principal Leadership

Ms. Artis, a teacher with 14 years of teaching experience and 7 at Achievement, mentioned that the principal is the key to the students' success, Ms. Artis specifically acknowledges the principal's dedication to student success and high expectations.

I think it's just really having a strong administrator who goes above and beyond the call of duty for the students as well as the staff. She sets high expectations for everybody. It's no, I can't do that, or I don't know how to do that. When you see her walking down the hall with a chalkboard and working with the students on a math problem, it makes you

think, why is my principal doing that, and this is something that I need to do. It helps you. It keeps you motivated to do more.

Dr. Glover believed that the only way that she would know what is happening at Achievement is to be visible. She also walked the halls to determine which teachers needed support and how she could support them. Similarly, Ms. Warmack, a teacher with 11 years of teaching experience and 5 years at Achievement, shared that the students' successes and overall improvement of the school have been the result of hiring a principal who believes in placing students first and has the drive necessary to motivate others to change. She said, "I think that came from the principal change and her beliefs and her drive to see them excel. It caught on to the teachers and now to the students." Later in the interview, Ms. Warmack continued this thought that it is the principal's leadership that has led to this increasing academic growth of the students at Achievement stating:

> Dr. Glover is always verbal about what she believes and what she believes we can do. She's always positive and always looking for even greater challenges to be overcome. When she first came, we were a D, and she came in saying that we are going to be an "A". And each year we have progressed a letter grade since she has been here. And even though our kids had been at a "D", and we had been low performing for so long, she still believed that we can do better than that. And I think once that caught on to the teachers and her never being negative about it. She always expected more of us and the children. It helped us all to have that mind-frame that we could do better than we thought that we could.

Pastor Miller's observation of Dr. Glover was consistent with the teachers. He stated that the principal is responsible for student success. He added that the leadership style of the principal is one of the factors responsible for the students' academic progression.

It's definitely the principal. I am a firm believer that there should only be one head on the body. Anything different creates a monster. I don't see anyone else trying to be the head, but I do see many leaders in the school because they are following good leadership. The principal takes the leading role and many people respect her. Sometimes some may think she may push a little hard, but when they started seeing the results, they were more eager to follow her. Also, I see her in the trenches as much as anyone else. She takes the lead, but she does not think she's better than anyone else. I've seen her cleaning up, and that's what a great leader does; they serve. I've also seen the office staff or the cafeteria workers to take on a leading role. I think she has developed many leaders and they have embraced it. I can only imagine, but to turn this school around, I'm sure everyone had to use their leadership skills no matter their position. They are all leaders in my opinion.

Blanchard (2019) asserts that the ideal leadership style is one that matches the developmental needs of the person you are leading. Like Blanchard's (2019) belief about leadership styles, Dr. Glover described her situational approach to leadership:

I learned quickly that my leadership style had to vary based on the circumstances. Some of my teachers needed me to be their coach and some of them needed me to give them more responsibility and empower them as leaders. Some of them needed attention, some needed direction, and some just needed to be motivated. Some of them needed to go.

During my observations, it became increasingly evident that Dr. Glover was not married to one particular leadership style.

Managerial Leadership

The transcribed interviews and observations provided several descriptions of the multifaceted leadership style of the principal. One of those leadership styles is managerial leadership which refers to the principal serving as an organizational manager ensuring that the school has processes and systems in place for activities such as planning, budgeting, staffing, problem-solving, and scheduling. Wenno (2017) contends that managerial leadership is essential to efficiently and effectively achieve quality education in schools.

Mr. Hernandez emphasized Dr. Glover's leadership as a managerial type based her managing the intricacies of the everyday life at Achievement and her willingness to lead by example and get involved in things that have to be done without keenness on superiority.

Dr. Glover is a hands-on principal. She is involved in every aspect of the school and every little detail. You know it's not that she's a micromanager, but it's more that she is involved in every decision in the school that has to be made. She leads by example and she lets you be a part of the decision-making process, but she also knows that she needs to know exactly what's going on in her building in order to be able to make the decisions that are going to impact every stakeholder, really.

Dr. Glover had many sayings as she walked around the building, and frequently she would tell her staff that they were close to "running a well-oiled machine". Sometimes, I would hear the staff repeat this saying as they referred to processes at the school that impacted the daily operation. As the principal, Dr. Glover believed it was her responsibility to remove any barriers that impeded her staff from building a school of excellence. Dr. Glover also removed barriers for parents and the community. When she arrived at Achievement, there was not always a person at the front desk to attend to such duties as answering phone calls, welcoming visitors, answering

intercom call from teachers, or checking-in late students. Without fail, every visit to Achievement, I was warmly greeted at the front office by either the receptionist or another staff member.

During the observation visits, it was evident that there were clear expectations for teachers, students and staff and structures were in place to guide the daily operations of the school. The procedure to sign in was followed by both the receptionist and whomever was filling in for the receptionist. In fact, the first day I visited Achievement Elementary School, the person filling in for the receptionist was the janitor, Ms. Riley. I would have never known that this was not her primary responsibility. Ms. Riley held students accountable by reminding them of the rules and calling teachers prior to sending students back to class which is one of the rules that was put in place to help teachers feel supported with student behavioral issues in the classroom. The principal also noted this practice as critical to ensuring that the teachers can direct their efforts towards improving educational outcomes.

Supporting them with behavior is one of the biggest pieces because teachers feel like they can't teach if they send a student up here to the office and I'll send them right back. I don't say the teacher didn't send a referral so you can just go back to the classroom. So most of the time, if it's for a legitimate reason. You just don't send a child to the office because they don't have a pencil. You work through that. But just that behavior piece and supporting them with that.

Managerial leadership also encompasses the ability to develop master schedules to maximize student learning of which Ms. Artis attributes to the leadership of the principal. She explained how Principal Glover allowed the teachers to create and submit their own schedules.

Through a collaborative leadership team meeting, Dr. Glover enhanced their schedules with time for shared reading and an intervention block.

> So at the beginning of this year we came up with our schedules. And so we were to submit them. And after we submitted our schedules, then Dr. Glover came back with the schedule with shared reading.

Mr. Artis also described the intervention block that was added to their schedule by Dr. Glover.

> We've been doing, in a way, it's kind of like cross teaching but not on those lines. So what happens is we have an intervention block built into the school day. And that wasn't something that was built in at first. It was just a regular classroom setting where you teach your math and your reading, and you know all of your subjects. Well we actually have intervention built in, and it's been that way for the last three years. After Dr. Glover came in and she did her halfway year in, her first full year we incorporated intervention. So that's an hour and fifteen minutes built into every school day.

> Dr. Glover also described the scheduling changes that were made to benefit the students and teachers. Her goal was to optimize the time by reorganizing the schedules to provide for intentional and focused learning in the classroom coupled with increased support to professional learning.

> Giving teachers time where they can come together, that's a practice that I changed. So normally they have 40 minutes of planning time and now they have 75 minutes. So giving them that time, that's a practice that we changed. Giving them time to get together because they feel like sometimes you know I'm so overwhelmed…you know this had to happen and this had to happen. You know just giving them that time to come together. PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) is another practice that we added.

Dr. Glover believed that it was important for the teachers to be able to present their own data. The staff were required to begin "digging deep" into their data and posting the information on the data wall in the staff's workroom. Dr. Glover stated, "This practice has changed and shaped us as a school."

While creating a process to provide for a balanced operational budget for school programs and activities is a practice of effective managerial leadership, Dr. Glover explained that the budget was not her main concern during her first year because she was so concerned about school improvement and her focus was on school culture, developing the teachers, and curriculum and instruction. Dr. Glover discussed her plan to implement an inclusive budgeting process to ensure all monies are deployed effectively beyond the initial budget planning.

> I have to plan in advance. If Ms. Mariah don't tell me you have this money right here, and you have to go ahead and spend it. I'm so focused on the outside that I may not allocate it as needed. This year when we start working together, I'll let them know. Well I'll tell them the budget, but I want them to go ahead and start planning for things that they would like to purchase that's going to benefit our students. You know, way in advance. But yeah, my leadership team is the go-to for things, you know changing things or if they want to come up with different things.

The administration has also designed processes to identify and solve, resolve, dissolve or absolve school-based problems/conflicts in a fair, democratic way. The Assistant Principal described this practice as designed and executed by the school's leadership.

> We make sure that we take the time to listen. We want to make sure we know exactly what the issue is and where the issue is coming from. That means we listen to everyone who is involved. We try to make sure that we operate in a manner that is fair. We don't

act on an issue until we have all of the information. We try to do that. Anytime there's something going on at the school, teachers, students, parents or a volunteer, we consider what everyone has to say because we want to hear all sides. We believe it's very important that no one feels that we have a bias. We deal only with the issue at hand.

Transformational Leadership

A transformational leadership style was recognized as part of Dr. Glover's integrated style of leadership. The essence of transformational leadership encompasses the capacity of a leader to use their charisma to transform their followers' mindsets, behaviors, and actions to guide sustainable change and influence them to reach unprecedented levels of success. Overwhelmingly, the participants in the study expressed how Dr. Glover's motivation, vision for the school, and belief in the staff compelled them to change which ultimately placed the school on an upward trajectory to academic success.

Dr. Glover's response showed that her leadership style is transformational because she always ensures that every staff or member has set objectives to achieve and meet the set goals. Recounting her initial leadership approach, she stated:

> I came in listening and looking and watching to what needed to happen in order to make a change. And so I support my teachers. You know I try to give them what they need in order to be successful. I'm willing to do what they do as far as teaching and you know providing support as to what can I do to help you be a better teacher.

Dr. Glover shared that one of her strategies of developing the leadership capacity in her staff is to give them a responsibility based on their unique talents and the needs of the school. Dr. Glover gives individualized consideration and support which is one of the dimensions of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Fernandez, 1993).

While the idea belongs to the principal, she guides staff by serving as a thought partner instead of dictating what needs to get accomplished. This critical thinking process has allowed them to experience leadership, and the end result is that the staff walks away with the "credit" for the responsibility which has empowered the staff's belief in their ability to lead.

As expressed by the principal, this level of collaboration is vital to a positive decision-making process although the principal acknowledges she is slow to delegate when there is something that she feels that the task requires her specific leadership.

> I wanted them to have conversations and come up with things and go with their suggestions and of course if it doesn't work then we can move on to something else. All of that success was their doing, us working together as a team, and we took those relationships that we developed and that helped a lot.

Assistant Principal Hernandez mentioned that appointing a team member to chair meetings is motivating and encouraging. Achievement's principal and assistant principal demonstrates the use of Intellectual Stimulation, one of the four dimensions of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), by encouraging the staff to use their knowledge, creativity, and innovative skills to enact leadership. Dr. Glover does not mind taking risks to develop her staff to become leaders and impact change in the school.

> One of the greatest practices I believe are the consistency of the Leadership Meetings and getting the feedback from the staff. Leaders develop within the team because sometimes Dr. Glover or myself may not be able to attend the meeting, and the team will carry out the meeting without us. It lets them know that they are valuable and their opinion and knowledge matters. Many of the practices that we have come from suggestions from the staff.

The teachers realize that Dr. Glover intentionally involves the staff in decision-making and the staff have confidence in the system that allows the Leadership Team to represent the staff, problem-solve and make decisions. Ms. Artis, one of the teachers, expressed, "Sometimes the teachers have leadership responsibilities and take the leading role. Dr. Glover wants us to take on more leadership roles and take responsibility."

Dr. Glover has developed systems that positions her ability use characteristics of the transformational leadership style. This thought is consistent with the participants' interviews as they consistently expressed the same vision for academic success at Achievement, their principal's relentless pursuit of sustainable change in the culture of the school, her ability to stimulate and motivate the staff to reach beyond expectations, and her commitment to their development and well-being.

Instructional Leadership

Principals and assistant principals are expected to demonstrate proficiency in several areas as the school-based leader and being actively engaged in curriculum and instruction, professional learning, and student outcomes are among those areas. These practices are usually associated with Instructional Leadership, and researchers have asserted that instructional leaders have an indirect impact on student learning (Hallinger, 2005; Khalifa, 2013; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Lumby & Foskett, 2011; Parket et al., 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Robinson et al., 2008) Using the term, instructional leadership, Dr. Glover commented, "It is my responsibility to develop my staff." She further stated that what has remained consistent is her focus on practicing Instructional Leadership for the past three years. With excitement and confidence, Dr. Glover said that teaching is her passion, and if she does not know anything else, she knows how to teach students.

During observations, Dr. Glover was often in classrooms modeling effective instructional strategies for the teachers including pulling students out for individualized instruction. Dr. Glover mentioned several times that although she is an administrator, her first love in education is teaching, and she finds great joy going into the classrooms helping teachers and helping students. There was not one day that I visited Achievement Elementary School that I did not observe Dr. Glover visiting classrooms or meeting with teachers about their instructional practices. Dr. Glover describes how her teachers view her leadership:

I'll take a small group, I'll do this, and I'll teach a lesson. So you know just stepping in. They don't look at me as just their principal. They look at me as being a teacher as well. That's my background. That's what I do.

Dr. Glover explained that her Leadership Team meetings provide the space for her to introduce initiatives and programs for both teaching and learning. In one particular case, Dr. Glover "saved" a teacher who appeared to be unraveling in front of her class. Students were not listening, neither engaged, nor on-task. I am sure that having a "researcher" in the classroom witnessing this behavior added pressure to the teacher as well. Dr. Glover does have a level of influence and authority as the principal of the school; however, she did not take over the class, but assisted the teacher by introducing and modeling a collaborative instructional strategy known as Think, Pair, Share that immediately engaged most of the students. The teacher was relieved and thankful for her principal's assistance. The teacher began using the same strategy for the next question and eventually regained control of her classroom. Dr. Glover winked her eye at the teacher and exited the room. Later when I asked Dr. Glover about her intervening in the classroom instruction during that period, she responded,

I know my teachers well and their areas that need developing. I will never embarrass or

take power from my teachers, and neither will I be their crutch. I empowered her to

regain control by following the model that I presented to her. The students are familiar

with my presence in the classroom, so it was business as usual for them. I knew that she

was welcoming of my support in that moment.

The theme of principal leadership was prevalent during the analysis and almost equivalently, the

principal's commitment to a shared decision-making emerged as a theme with frequent

occurrences throughout the coding process.

Shared Leadership

Serving at Achievement are two, energetic, instructional experts who were hired in the

capacity of Multi-Classroom Leaders. They are known around the school as MCLs, and they

provide instructional coaching to teachers as well as make critical decisions in areas such as

instructional programs, scheduling, and professional development. The Multi-Classroom Leader

is the "cornerstone" of a program called Opportunity Culture. Opportunity Culture is one of the

programs selected as a non-negotiable by the team as a tool to transform Achievement where

more students and teachers have the opportunity to access teachers who are trained and identified

as instructional experts.

At first glance, I thought that the teachers had instructional assistants to help them in the

classroom; however, after careful observation, it was apparent that the MCLs possess leadership

competencies coupled with an explicit focus on curriculum and instruction. The MCLs were

hired intentionally to share leadership responsibilities with the principal and assistant principal.

Interestingly, the MCLs appeared to have more decision-making authority than the part-time

assistant principal. The assistant principal made decisions as it related to technology; however, the MCLs seemed to be entrenched in every aspect of decision-making at Achievement.

This common theme of shared leadership was revealed among the participants who emphasized that a shared leadership approach was actively practiced in their school. Shared leadership for the staff, parents, and volunteers at Achievement is defined as a collective decision-making process demonstrated by what they perceived as an open-door policy of the principal. The development of The Leadership Team was touted by the individual participants as the avenue by which virtually every staff's opinions are considered in decision-making and implementing policies. During my visits to the school, I randomly asked fifteen different individuals who should I talk to about the positive changes that have occurred at Achievement and 13 of the 15 respondents either said the Leadership Team or included the Leadership Team in the list of people to talk to about the school. The Leadership Team as a conduit by which shared leadership was exercised is a process mentioned over 80 times by the interview participants.

Mr. Hernandez who is an Assistant Principal with over 20 years of teaching experience and 1 year at Achievement stated that:

> For example, if there is an emergency, and the district needs an answer right away or a decision has to be made immediately, there is no time to pull in the leadership team, and the principal has to make the decision. The main thing is that we trust the principal to make good decisions. She always thinks about the students first and how it impacts the staff. Other than that, if it's a decision that impacts all of us then it's a shared decision and is brought to the leadership team first.

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Mr. Hernandez recognizes that as the Chief Administrator of a school, there are situations when district leadership requires the principal to make a decision, and there is not sufficient time to call a leadership team meeting to make the decision. The team trusts that when Dr. Glover has to make these decisions, she makes decisions guided by what she believes is best for the students and staff at Achievement. Basically, decisions that have to made that impact the team and students at Achievement are shared decisions. On rare occasions, decisions are made solely by the principal, and then communicated to the team.

In a separate statement, he added:

> There's the school's leadership team. However, most of the ideas are proposed by Dr. Glover. It doesn't mean that she's going to discourage someone from coming up with something that needs to be done. But it's just that most of the ideas are coming from her, but the school leadership team are actually the ones who make the decision and the team usually is comprised of herself and myself, teachers, counselors and EC specialist and a member of the TA, you know, the teaching assistants.

> During my observation of one of the Leadership Team meetings, I observed this practice in action. The principal came in and apologized for her tardiness. She told the team that she reviewed the scores the night before and was excited for the 2nd and 3rd grade students. She expressed that she was disappointed in the scores for 4th and 5th grade. The principal stated that she knows that they are all working hard, but she was ready to hear how they were going to work smarter to get the students where they need to be academically. The 4th and 5th grade team leaders began discussing how they would adjust and create a detailed plan to improve the outcomes. The entire leadership team became engaged in this process of providing feedback and suggestions on how to move forward with these students. It was interesting to notice a shift in the

dynamics of the group during the academic performance discussion. Everyone became very serious and detailed in their responses. The topic which was initiated by the principal soon became a discussion that was driven by the staff. The Leadership Team chair also was very comfortable and confident in keeping the flow of the meeting and staying focused on the agenda. In a like manner, Dr. Glover describes her leadership team as such:

> Leadership team. We have a leadership team. Each grade level is represented and then we have our instructional assistants who are part of that. We sit down once a month and we come up with things. I let the chair run it, and I'm just in there for support and we come up with things. I lay it out if I get something from downtown central office. My leadership team is the go-to for things, you know changing things or if they want to come up with different things.

Additionally, Dr. Glover added that she always solicits her staff's input because she believes in the energy that erupts from collaboration and teamwork:

> You know I want their input because I don't know everything, and they don't know everything, but when we put two heads together, then you know. The team atmosphere is what I'm looking for. It's not just you come up with this. It's let us come up with this as a team and see what we can come up with together.

> Parrett and Budge's (2012) Framework for Action contends that principals who lead HP/HP schools have a distinguishing characteristic of embracing shared and distributed leadership:

> Recognizing the critically important opportunities others have to lead from various vantage points throughout the system (for example, other administrators, teachers,

support personnel, school trustees, parents, families, and community members), HP/HP

principals seek to share decision making authority and governance of the school. (p. 57)

Correspondingly, the principal considers the parents' contributions to the decision-making

process as indispensable and very crucial.

> Yes. I listen to my parents too. I'll take suggestions from them. I had a parent that said
> she was willing to do some things as far as dance and things like that you know. So yeah,
> any suggestions that my parents have, you know that they think would be great for our
> school, I'll listen to that.

Some of the teachers who were interviewed explained that they know that the principal

has the responsibility and the authority to make the final decision; however, they appreciate that

they are considered in the process.

These teachers expressed what proved to be a dominant belief regarding shared

leadership that the principal did not display dictator like authority but rather did everything

possible to hear their voices and allow them to give input regarding the decisions being made.

This same sentiment was a recurring theme in the data. Similarly, Mrs. Felton, a 3rd-grade

teacher with seven years of teaching and seven years at Achievement said that the principal

always involved them in decision-making and gave them freedom to voice their opinions.

> The principal will call us especially if we are a part of the team. We are placed in a team
> like if you are on leadership team then you can participate, and we can voice whatever is
> our opinion and then we can also relay it to our colleagues. We can participate in the
> decision-making.

Correspondingly, Ms. Lane, a parent expressed how honored she feels to have the unique

opportunity that few of the parents have experienced and that is to represent parents during the

Leadership Team meetings. She added that the principal tends to seek parents' opinions to have the perspective from a parent's point of view on topics discussed and decided upon during the meetings.

> There is a leadership team and they discuss things that they need to make decisions on in those meetings. I have been in the meetings and Dr. Glover asked the teachers what do they think. She will also ask for the parents' opinions on some of the decisions. She wants to know the answer from the home perspective. You know, like they had to make a decision about homework and she asked me what was my opinion.

In a like manner, Pastor Miller, a community partner with three years at Achievement corroborates the shared leadership strategy exhibited by the principal.

> I don't really know how decisions are made at the school, but I do know that sometimes administration will ask our volunteers what do we think about something especially if it involves us. They don't just make a decision and leave us out. I would think they operate the same way with each other and involve those who may be impacted by the decisions made at the school. The principal doesn't seem like a dictator to me.

In the same vein, Ms. Warmack said that it is typical of the principal to assign projects to a team:

> Most of the time through teams or groups. And then of course the principal has her input or she may give us a vision for something and then we can kind of work in a group to see how we can make that happen.

Similarly, Mrs. Rome, an MCL with more than 15 years of experience and 2 years of experience at Achievement mentioned that they are involved in decision making. She said:

We have leadership meetings. Decisions are made with staff meetings. And as I said Dr. Cooper is the MCL for K-2 and she meets with her six teachers weekly and so do I. I meet with my six teachers weekly. So generally, because she and I both share a room we always correspond to say what we want to see happening with Opportunity Culture with the teachers and then every Monday we meet with Dr. Glover and so we are all on one accord you know. So us as administrators so to speak, we have all decided on the Monday what we are going to work on this week, going for the next month, and so forth and so on. When we meet with our teachers, we're saying the same things. When we're in leadership meeting, we're saying the same things, and at staff meetings, we're saying the same things.

These sentiments ultimately suggest a strong presence of shared leadership and how crucial it is to the perceived and actual success experienced in the school. Without the feeling of engagement and importance, these staff might not feel empowered to do their jobs effectively or like they have a role in school success. Due to the shared leadership culture, however, the staff members believe fully that they are part of the school's success. Among the participants, it was common to hear that shared leadership was a key component of the success efforts of the school.

According to the evidence it seems like the involved principal takes the leading role in the school; however, the principal is not the only one who is involved in the leadership process. The principal is only one of the leaders in the school. The observations and the interviews clearly support the shared leadership approach where the principal does not work in isolation but brings her team along to make important decisions that contribute to the growing academic success of the students. The school's Leadership Team plays an indispensable role and is a value-add to the

school. Every person interviewed consider the Leadership Team as a viable decision-making pipeline for the school.

Shift in School Culture

During the coding process, culture showed up in two different aspects. The first is the way that the administration, teachers, and staff work together for the students and the set of beliefs, values, and assumptions they share. The second way that culture showed up is the way that the principal institutionalizes cultural knowledge which refers to how the principal advocates for equitable practices within the school culture.

Relentless Pursuit of Excellence

"You know when I first got here, the school was so close to an F, we could kiss it." Dr. Glover recalls the state of the school upon her arrival two and half years ago. She knew that there were policies, structures, practices, and values and mindsets that were perpetuating underachievement at the school. As the principal, she made a conscious decision to prioritize changing the school's culture by making it one of her three primary goals. Following her mentor's advice to choose three issues to focus on at the beginning of her tenure at the school, Dr. Glover told me that "The culture was the biggest piece that we had to change here. …[S]o changing the culture was one of those things."

Dr. Glover believed that in order to achieve excellence, the most significant shift in the schools' culture was to confront the beliefs that many of the staff held about the students. Dr. Glover recalled the conversations with her staff where the teachers would attribute the students' low performance scores on characteristics beyond the students' control such as their race, socioeconomic status, and/or their parents. Recognizing that the shift had to start internally, Dr. Glover embarked upon a process to engage her staff about the complex systems of oppression

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where students are blamed for their (mis)education. Gloria Ladson Billings (2006) characterized it as an "education debt" owed to the students, and likewise, Dr. Glover characterized it as damage that must be restored: "We must repair the damage that we have inflicted upon the students at Achievement." Dr. Glover used herself as an example to begin the dialogue that would evoke a change to anti-deficit thinking. Dr. Glover is from the same community as the students at Achievement, and she described how she almost slipped through the cracks. One of the most powerful conversations with Dr. Glover was when she discussed her education with these powerful statements:

> "Yes, I was a black student, but I made it. Yes, my family was poor, but I made it. Yes, I was considered low-performing, or whatever the term was back then, but I made it. A teacher looked beyond these so-called deficits and focused on my assets. Adding to all of that, I was quiet so if you know, if you didn't ask me, I didn't tell you. That's why it's important to know where our students come from and what is their culture. Now, I am Dr. Glover because someone took the time to learn about me, and I want to give every one of my students that same experience.

According to Terrell and Lindsey (2018), institutionalizing cultural knowledge is "making learning about underserved cultural groups and their experiences and perspectives an integral part of the school's professional development (p. 34). Dr. Glover believes that the school still has work to do in this area; however, they are making strides to understand and incorporate the cultures of the students, families, and communities of Achievement.

The participants in the study emphasized a belief that equal educational opportunity is core to the school culture and equity. As such, the participants expressed the notion that equality in education is where everyone has equal and fair access to a quality education regardless of their

socio-economic background and equity is giving the students what they need. Towards this end, Hernandez echoed the belief that their goals are to ensure every student is equally represented and that their needs are met regardless of their background. He stated: "Because most of the students are in poverty and we tend to provide all of the students with the same opportunities. But there are other students who may need a little bit more and then if that is the case, we try to provide the student with that extra portion that they need based on what we see." Similarly, Mrs. Artis echoed similar views adding that creating a motivating, caring, and supportive environment is core to the administration's goals. "I think this year it's really been based upon the students' needs. Trying to reach every child; trying to reach every home and just showing a loving and nurturing environment here and letting them know that we are here to help them in any way that we can."

Mrs. Felton expressed that diminishing the racial disparities in education is core to the mission. She discussed the vision of the school is about impact and the mission is narrowing the achievement gap: "The vision of our school is to really come up with a great impact. And it's really our mission to improve the gap so that we will be able to have high outcomes regardless if they are Hispanic or American, or Black American. But we really would like to target those kids, especially those kids who are struggling."

This emphasis on inclusiveness and support for all students seemed to be prevalent in the interviews I conducted. The respondents each expressed a belief that helping students on an individual level was of great importance and significance. Achievement's mission strives to ensure that a high-quality education tailored to meet the needs of individual students is provided to all students. A parent, Mr. Simmons, emphasized a similar point when he told me about his understanding of the school. "The vision and the mission... from what I know about the school,

the aim is to offer first world education to every single child regardless of their cognitive or physical ability. So the overall mission is just to give each child an opportunity to learn and prepare them best for their next level of education."

Also identified in the analysis was the presence of a tailored curriculum that was adopted to ensure that every student's needs are met, especially students of color at Achievement. The school has contract staff to work with their ELL students. The school has hired a certified ELL teacher on staff, and has implemented Rosetta Stone as part of the curriculum as needed for identified students with language barriers. However, Dr. Glover did not believe that on student in particular would have an equitable opportunity for high standards learning without the individualized instruction provided by the contracted teacher. The student did not speak any English and was a first-year student at Achievement in the fifth grade. While the student was eligible for promotion to the sixth grade, the staff did not feel confident sending the student to middle school without readiness. The parents agreed to retain their child in the fifth grade and the outcome is described by Dr. Glover,

> By far this year she has surpassed some of my students who have been here forever. And so I was glad with that decision that we made but it all goes back to that motivation. She wanted it. She knew that she wasn't like everybody else so to try to get where she needed to be, she worked really hard. I didn't want that hard work just for her. I wanted that for all of my students. Yes, we do have different things that we do for students who come in with different needs.

Mrs. Rome, the MCL, explains how the Leadership Team reviews the data and considers the culture and race of the students when deciding on instruction.

We have had conversations in regards to cultural differences in relation to academics because our last report the last data that we have from our EOG, we found that the Hispanic students were achieving better results than our African American students. We had to say okay what did we do different for them, how can we do better or do other things to meet the needs of our African-American students.

A part of institutionalizing cultural knowledge is understanding the cultures of the students. As the principal, Dr. Glover has a thorough knowledge of the different cultures of the students, and she recognizes the importance of the teachers having this knowledge to increase the impact they can have on academic achievement. Dr. Glover explains how she has been able to bring awareness to some of the implicit biases and shifted the deficit thinking of her staff by taking the staff on trips to the communities where their students live. The trips were not designed to elicit sympathy but utilized as a tool to awaken empathy. This heightened understanding of the students' cultures which also led to including students' interests in lessons to improve engagement and making adjustment in consequences for certain behaviors.

One thing that we also do that we started when I got here is we will get on the bus and we will go out and do home visits. We do fliers to get them to come here. We tell them what's happening. I want my teachers to experience the neighborhoods where the kids you know, where they are coming from. So you know if a child does not have their homework, then you may understand why.

Dr. Glover also educates her staff on some of the experiences that students from high poverty, majority black and brown communities are more likely to face which may perpetuate low achievement. If the teachers have these tools in their educational arsenals, they can better serve their students. The students are not given a pass on completing homework or meeting high

expectations. The expectations are the same and not sacrificed because of home circumstances; however, the school may extend more opportunities for the students to complete the work especially if they face barriers beyond their control.

> Sometimes we have to have some homework sessions because they may not have lights at home and could not do their homework. They may not tell you that this is what happened, but a lot of times you have to have that relationship with them so that they are able to come to you and say I couldn't do my homework because there was too much noise in my house last night. So teachers are giving them opportunities outside of the home to complete their homework.

The behavior of the principal as well as the practices of the staff as outlined by the interviewees is a descriptive representation of how the principal institutionalizes cultural knowledge at Achievement Elementary School.

The interview participants also expressed the element of school culture that is fostered and cultivated by attitudes, expectations, and understanding of where students need to be and how to get them there. The culture was described as; a culture of learning and achievement; a culture of community; and a culture of effective communication where staff were committed to doing whatever it takes until all students achieve academic excellence at Achievement.

Culture of Learning and Achievement

The empirical studies (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Edmonds, 1979; Gallager, 2012; Giles, Johnson, & Brooks, 2005; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Parker et al., 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Reeves, 1995), referenced in chapter two recognized the importance of student learning and high achievement for all students. Three of the teachers described the school's culture of learning and achievement based on the shared beliefs of the school. Mrs. Felton stated,

"We believe that every child has the ability to learn and that they have this ability to reach to their full potential." Likewise, Mrs. Artis shared the school's belief that they could reach the highest academic achievement designated by their state department of public instruction and how this belief is embedded in the culture:

> We believe that we can be the highest school, an "A" school. Our administrator has embedded that in us, and we have made great growth in the process. And she has motivated us to even push even further. She has made us see that we can be on top. We can be number one. So I think with the administrator with her motivation and inspiring us to do has made us know that we can do the impossible.

Ms. Warmack describes how this culture of learning and achievement is also a belief of the students as evidenced by the data that reiterates that the students are learning, growing and achieving:

> I think we believe that our kids can overcome where they came from, basically. They can go above what statistics may say that they can do. And as they see that from year to year and see their growth, they're starting to catch on and see that they can do more than what they have been doing.

> Throughout the halls of the school, there are motivational posters and murals that

reiterate the importance of academic achievement. Dr. Glover describes how they approach academic achievement and high expectation of teaching and learning for all students:

> So, if one kid doesn't get it and the other ones get it, then you still haven't done what needs to happen. We need to make sure that everybody gets it. And it's not just in one particular grade level because we focus a lot on three, four and five, but it starts in pre-K.

So, you know, if those kids are not learning, and even if you are not teaching them, they still belong to you.

Later in the interview Dr. Glover describes the culture of learning and achievement that she drives home to the instructional staff and what she expects to observe in classrooms. Her voice was escalating with excitement as she talked about high expectations for teachers and students. I was able to experience the motivation and the drive that the teachers, supporting staff, parents and volunteers shared during their interviews. I observed the adrenaline and the passion coming from the principal as she proclaimed that education is of the utmost importance at Achievement.

Okay so we know that kids learn in different ways so if we are pushing them to their limits that's what I want. I don't want mediocre. I want to know that you have pushed this child to their limit, okay. I want to know that you have gone above and beyond what you know they are capable of doing and once you reach that point, then I feel satisfied.

During one of my observations, there was a fire drill, and the students were led out of the building in a single-file line. All of the lines were in the same formation as they exited the building in an orderly fashion with teachers reminding the students of the rules and procedures regarding fire drills. The teacher whose class I was observing continued her lesson during the fire drill. She gave the students the rules and proceeded to instruct and ask students questions. The caliber of teacher demonstrated in this moment represents the "whatever it takes" motto held at Achievement. The teacher did not want to lose valuable instructional time to the fire drill and decided to continue the lesson.

Culture of Community

A culture of community was expressed when describing the change in the culture of the school that has driven them to unprecedented success at Achievement. Their school community is often described as family-oriented, a safe place, community-friendly, and a team where relationships are built with each other, families, and the community. Ms. Warmack emphasized the family environment experience.

It's kind of more like a neighborhood environment. Everybody knows everybody, everybody is friends with everybody, everybody looks out for everybody. Because when I think of a family environment, I think more of back 15 years ago when we were more like a nurturing school. But now it's more dealing with what we believe we can do. So now it's more of a neighborhood and everybody's trying to make sure that everything is what it should be.

The element of teamwork and unity among the staff, students, and their parents are among characteristics that describe the school's culture. Principal Glover and her team are still working on the culture of the school and during the interview she described her collaboration with the team to improve the culture; however, she notes that the school's culture has improved during her time at Achievement.

We are not where I would like for us to be, but we are a lot better than what we used to be. They respect each other. They care about each other. They are willing to work together as a team and support each other. We are getting there. We like doing things even now outside of school and teaching each other and coming up with new ideas to support our students. To be honest you know, that's another important factor in shaping your culture.

Mrs. Artis described the school as a family-oriented environment that " is a caring school for each child. We get to know the parents and the family as a whole and not judging where they're from. We look at the child itself and we look at the parents and you know we do things with the parents and trying to give them suggestions and interventions on how they can work at home with the child." Mrs. Artis also mentioned parent night that includes showing them their children's work.   Overall, the school is family oriented where "every parent feels that they are welcome and their voices are important."

Community volunteers are an integral part of the culture of community at Achievement. While the school has a goal to increase their community partnerships, during four of my school visits, I observed volunteers and community partners engaged and supporting the school. During several interviews, the participants described the community volunteers who come in during Youth Empowerment time to mentor students and serve as gender-specific role models to students. These volunteers also take the students on field trips and expose the students to learning outside of the school. The community volunteers also have donated bicycles and a 50-inch television for a give-away designed to motivate students and parents. Pastor Miller and his congregation have fostered a relationship and partnership with Achievement. Pastor Miller has been a part of the Achievement community for three years, and he describes the culture as an environment based on love and high expectations:

> The perfect word to describe Achievement is love. They treat everyone like family. They even treat me like family, and I don't work there. I just volunteer my time. I would also say it's a school of order. I can tell that they have rules and expectations for those students. You know some principals are always in their office or they have someone else to talk to you, but Dr. Glover always makes time for you if she's available. I would

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describe the school as a school that pushes those students to be their best. They have good teachers and those students have proven this community wrong.

Pastor Miller continued expressing how pleased he is that the community is an intentional element of the Achievement family.

> That's another way I would describe the school. They are community-friendly. They like to involve the parents and the community in what they are doing. I'm proud that I'm a part of this school. You have caring teachers who are teaching these students what they need to know. It's a safe school too because I've never heard of anything bad happening here. If it did, I didn't hear about it.

The school has a new partnership with the local community college that sends a Spanish-speaking college student to work with students who are English Language Learners. The volunteer works with the students who speak limited or no English. Dr. Glover expressed that while they invested in Rosetta Stone for these students, she believes that the personal interaction from the volunteer is more effective. If this partnership continues to be beneficial, Dr. Glover would like to request an additional Spanish-speaking volunteer. Achievement also has a volunteer from a local dance studio to teach ballet to the pre-K students. The majority of the parents are burdened financially and cannot afford dance lessons. The community has stepped up to provide this opportunity for the students. Dr. Glover described one of the performances:

> Parents come in, and they love it! We had performances where certain kids did certain things. My little pre-K kids had their little tutus on, and they were doing ballet. Not that they took lessons, but we did that here with them. You know parents love to see their kids perform so that's something that we are doing. We are working more with the volunteers coming in and the outside community coming in to support our kids.

The partnership with the local church is Achievement's most robust partnership. The church has a rotating volunteer schedule specifically for Achievement. Pastor Miller is proud that someone from the church is at Achievement every week. Some of the members of the congregation are a part of the community mentorship program at Achievement. Not only does the church consistently provide volunteers for the school, but they also donate supplies as needed to the school.

The church also donates to the Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) program where students are rewarded for staying on track with their behavior goals. PBIS is implemented in each classroom, and teachers believe that this has also contributed to the success of the school. This program holds students accountable for their behaviors and provides an avenue for teachers to redirect inappropriate behaviors and reward positive behaviors. Pastor Miller really believes in the students, and during his interview, he was beaming with pride as he described the partnership. The church partnership has also opened doors for other partnerships in the community. Dr. Glover is appreciative of the church informing Achievement of other opportunities in the community that may benefit the students and their families such as clothing, food, or supply drives.

Culture of effective Communication

Effective communication in education is necessary whether it is administrator to teacher, teacher to student, teacher to teacher, school to parents, or school to community. Dr. Glover realized upon her arrival at Achievement that there was a lack of dialogue between the teachers. They were not having meaningful conversations about students, curriculum, instruction, or data with each other, and they did not have relationships with each other. Additionally, teachers were not communicating consistently or frequently with parents. The dialogue that existed within the

community was that Achievement was a failing school. Principal Glover describes the culture change:

> The PLC's (Professional Learning Community Meetings) were not happening. So when you come in and see things like that you know they don't have a relationship, and if they don't have a relationship with one another, and it doesn't have to necessarily be outside of the school, but just within the building. So if you develop that relationship, then probably nine times out of ten, it will happen outside of the school. So now they are taking trips together. They just had a beach trip with each other, well some of them. So getting them to know each other was one thing that helped us to grow and you know to support each other and to help each other and to say what can I do. Getting them to know that it's not just about you, but it's about everybody.

The culture of the transformed Achievement Elementary School is the extreme opposite of the culture described by Dr. Glover's of her earliest days at Achievement. Interview participants all identified the value of relationships as a strength at the school. These relationships evolved over time because of the opportunities that were intentionally created to advance communication efforts. Resultantly, communication now evolves organically at Achievement which has been an integral element in creating their atmosphere of family as described by the interview participants.

Commonly, I observed teachers in their workroom conversing about various topics, both personal and professional. I would often hear laughter and see smiles which was an indication that the staff enjoyed each other's presence. On one occasion, I walked in and they looked at me and apologized for their bursts of laughter. One staff said, "This is the teacher's café right now instead of the teacher's workroom." We all laughed, and I assured them that they should

continue to enjoy each other and not apologize for their genuine interactions. This room was also a "safe haven" for the staff where they could freely express themselves. I witnessed staff using this room to get away and talk to each other if they were having a challenging day. Staff also consoled one another in this same room where they shared laughs and exciting happenings.

The teacher's workroom was also a place where the staff could schedule their Professional Learning Community meetings as well as the MCL led meetings. One teacher expressed her appreciation for the increase in their planning time from 40 minutes to 75 minutes. The principal listened to the teachers and their concern regarding adequate time to collaborate with each other on instruction and adjusted the schedule accordingly.

Communication with parents has also improved with structures in place to ensure consistent communication with families. The culture of dialogue that exists between parents and teachers has improved. Ms. Artis describes the requirement for all teachers to communicate with parent(s)/guardian(s).

> I'm here early, so some of us are here early and some of us are here late. We all have to have communication with our parents. If not daily, then every other day or every other week. Something has to go home with the student, communication. Anything, like with the PBIS, we not only call parents when they are doing bad(sic), but we have to call them when something is going good(sic). Something has to be positive when we make a phone call.

Ms. Lane, a parent at Achievement, is satisfied with the open communication at the school. She relies upon the weekly communication, EdConnect, that comes from Dr. Glover every week.

> It's never been a situation where if I don't know something that I can't find out.
>
> Somebody is going to reach out. I know sometimes Dr. Glover is busy and even with that

she still will get somebody to call you. If I have a question about something, I can call and ask the teacher and if they don't know, I'm pretty sure that they'll get someone else.

The parent vividly remembered when she was "stressing out" because she knew that picture day was approaching, and she had not received communication which was out of the norm. Without question, at the parent's request, the school resent the EdConnect to her which outlined the information for the upcoming picture day. Satisfied with the communication from the school, Ms. Lane stated, "The communication is very open, and they are very good with making sure that we are informed as a parent about things that are going on in the school. Even when the school gets funds, they send out memos about it." Another parent, Mr. Simmons describes his experience with the communication at Achievement.

I think it has an open-door policy where parents can come in and speak with the principal or administration at any time. It's one of those schools where it has not separated from the community because for instance there is a church down the road. I don't remember the name of it, but it is affiliated with the school. That's just one example of their connectedness with the community.

Hortsford (2014) expresses that just as culturally relevant pedagogy suggests that teachers are connected to their community, culturally relevant leadership suggests that principals and school leadership must be embedded in their communities. Dr. Glover established rules and practices to improve the communication and now it is embedded in the culture of the school. During the first ten days of school, the teachers must make a positive call home to the parents sharing something positive, their contact information, and answer any questions the parent/guardian may have. Additionally, Dr. Glover sends a message, EdConnect, to the parents every week with pertinent school information.

I make phone calls every Sunday at 5:30. They know they are going to get a phone call from me giving them an update on what's, that's another thing, of what's to come the upcoming week. So they know that there's a field trip coming up this week or they know there's no school.

Assistant Principal Hernandez expressed the challenge that the school has with two-way communication with the parents. While the school has several practices in place to communicate with the parents on a weekly basis, the effort is not consistently reciprocated by the parents/guardians. The school also invites the parents to Cultural Nights to have the opportunity for face-to-face engagement with parents.

We have a practice of engaging parents through Cultural Nights. This idea came from a teacher and now it's a practice. Dr. Glover has a practice of communicating to all parents through a message every week and this is a practice that I've heard many parents say is good for them. Now they look forward to getting the message. Because we don't have a very high parent participation on a regular basis, at least we know that we are able to get a message to them on a consistent basis.

Originally, Cultural Nights was an idea that came from one of the teachers who was frustrated with the one-sided communication with her parents. Her intent was to interest them in their child's stage performance and then have a conversation with them about the status of their child's academic progress. This idea is now a school-wide practice that is ingrained in the culture of the school. The open dialogue between parents and teachers that has emerged from the teacher's idea is now touted as the biggest opportunities for parental and community engagement at the school. Principal Glover exuded enthusiasm as she described the space for creativity and engagement that Cultural Nights has created for Achievement.

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So, one of the biggest things would be our chorus because kids have not…they listen to the music, certain types of genres you know, so they are not being exposed to different types. So, we do have a chorus here that the kids absolutely love! That's one of the things that we do here. We have a culture night where we have different cultures coming out. I told you that we have so many different types of cultures, so we'll do that and oh my God, they love it! We do. We have black history, but instead of just focusing on one culture and one particular month, we try to do it every so often, so we do it all together. Consistently, the interview participants emphasized the significance of communication to the success of the school. While they all lamented the arduous task of parents reciprocating the increased communication efforts from the school, they all agreed that communication is steadily improving.

The Heart of School Improvement

Building Teacher Professional Capacity

High quality teaching in high-poverty/high-performing schools extends well beyond the competence and technical knowledge that a teacher possesses (Fry & Dewit, 2010; Parrett & Budge, 2012). While 95% of the teachers at Achievement are fully licensed teachers and 100% of the teachers scored proficient according to the state's teacher effectiveness evaluation, the interviews conveyed that teacher quality is undergirded with a specific ideology associated with educating historically disadvantaged students who have an urgent need to achieve academically. The principal expressed that when her team conducts a search and interviews candidates for teaching positions at Achievement, they are most interested in candidates with a heart. According to Dr. Glover, "This job is God's work, and you have to have more than the skills to teach, you must want this and be passionate. You must have a heart for this work. If your heart

isn't in it, you won't last." During the time that Achievement was identified as a "D" school, Dr. Glover was aware that she needed to determine who had "heart" for the work, and who did not. One of their first professional development activities was to engage in a book study. All of the staff were required to read *The Energy Bus* by Jon Gordon. According to The American Center for Continuing Professional Education (ACCPE), the book "takes readers on an enlightening and inspiring ride that reveals ten secrets for approaching life and work with the kind of positive, forward thinking that leads to true accomplishment". Dr. Glover believes that this book study reenergized the teachers with positive energy and a heart for school turnaround work. More importantly, it exposed those "energy vampires" who were draining the energy out of others with their toxic behaviors of constant negativity. Dr. Glover appeared to exhale when she said, "I think that those ones who were not on that bus, they left". It was a process of consistently addressing their toxic behaviors and giving them responsibilities that caused them to re-evaluate if they were equipped or willing to do the difficult work of school transformation. Dr. Glover believes that her current team is riding on "the energy bus".

In an effort to understand the day in the life at Achievement Elementary School, I wanted to experience the day from start to finish. Staff with early morning duty were required to report to school at 7:30 a.m. I arrived at the school at 7:00 a.m. and to my surprise, there were already at least 10-15 cars in the parking lot. As I pulled around the circle which is where the student drop-off and pick-up is located, one of the teachers came out of the building. She thought that I was one of the parents, dropping off a student. The student handbook states that students are not allowed to arrive at the school prior to 7:30 a.m. The teacher told me that there are parents who must report to work early and need to drop their child off early. The teacher said, "Some of us volunteer early in the morning to greet those students. We understand the financial burden of

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many of our families, and they need their jobs." The handbook also requires parents to pick up their child no later than 3:00 p.m., and there were teachers who accommodated parents who worked late. Ms. Lane, a parent of a first grade, describes how the teachers go above and beyond for students and parents:

> For me I feel that it is a little family. By me being an educator as well, I have to drop him off earlier and all of the teachers are like, they know the situation of the parents and the specific needs of the students so they know the ones who have to come in early and the ones who have to leave late.

As the students arrived early at the school, one student was wearing black pants, and seemed to be in a panic as she explained that her child did not have clean khaki pants. She wanted to make sure that he would not get in trouble. The teacher quickly assured the parent that she would make sure that the student was in uniform, and he would not be disciplined. She told the parent to not worry, and then encouraged the parent to hurry to work so that she would not be late. Family immediately came to mind when I saw this action from the teacher, and the "heart" that the teachers have for the students and parents was evident. The teacher took the student to the uniform closet to get a pair of khakis for the student to wear for the day.

After arriving early, and teaching all of the day, some of those same teachers are assigned to the afterschool tutoring program at Achievement. The afterschool tutoring program is scheduled from 2:45-4:15. Achievement started with an academic enrichment and intervention block which extended the school day; however, after the first year, they were awarded a grant to provide an afterschool program for underachieving students. Parrett and Budge (2012) state that HP/HP schools usually take advantage of both extending academic time during the school day and providing additional learning opportunities outside of the traditional school day.

The assistant principal emphasized that the school has after school tutoring program to fortify the students with additional instructions and curricular activities, especially students who are struggling with their academics: "This sets our school apart from other schools in this area because most schools do not have an extended day program Our students get additional instructional time with quality teachers. This is a great initiative that benefits our students who are struggling with certain subjects." Similarly, Mrs. Abdullah emphasized that the school is assisting the students in a way most beneficial to the students. She added that the school has a plan in place to support tutorial classes for students who have fallen behind academically. According to her, tutoring is provided four days a week split between reading and math with two days of tutoring for each subject. Similarly, Mrs. Felton added, that they implemented a tutoring program for remediation for students who have low performance. "We also implemented a tutoring program. It's like after school for remediation. Our students who are really below grade level go to after school tutoring."

One of the greatest strengths noted in the analysis is the teachers' motivation and energy to support, coach, and mentor each other. Mrs. Felton, a veteran teacher, spoke about the benefit of taking advantage of the increased collaboration planning block to receive coaching from her colleagues and develop into a successful classroom teacher at Achievement:

I am just thankful that I'm here at Achievement. At first it was just like why, but now I have all of those answers. Achievement has made me a teacher as what I am today. At first it was very hard because of the class management. I had a hard time with managing the kids, but looking at those teachers who are very successful at managing the kids, I've learned from them. I tried to put it (those same successful classroom management skills) in my classroom, and then I was able to build relationships with the kids. You know

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when you are teaching and you are an experienced teacher, you think that you already

know that I can do that. But (it's different) when you are in front of the kids, and the kids

are looking at you. It's a living breathing moment, and you want to make a difference to

these kids. I asked myself. how can I start and how can I do it? But it's really a great help

that I had some co-workers who were very strong in classroom management, and I got to

see how they do those things.

Ms. Abdullah, believes that the increasing academic performance of the school is

attributed to the caliber of teachers at Achievement. According to Ms. Abdullah: "We have a

very diverse population of teachers. I wouldn't say the culture has to do with the improvement of

the students' academic performance. I think it has a lot to do with the teachers and their method

of teaching."

Likewise, a parent attributes his son's success to the strength of the teachers stating

"Remember I told you when he came here in the second grade, he was not reading on

grade level. He got to the fourth grade. He scored 100 on the 4th grade reading, and I

think he made 80 something in math. You know in fifth grade which was last year, he did

really well as well because he made a 96 in Science and a 95 in reading. We haven't seen

the math scores yet. But I can use him as an example, and I've seen growth. These are the

teachers who have taught him.

The principal, Dr. Glover, talks about what is different about the quality of teaching that takes

place at Achievement compared to how they used to teach prior to implementing change:

I would say our students are learning here. Our teachers have taken a different approach.

to how they are teaching our students. It's not just that "sit in the desk" you know. We're

doing different things in the classrooms. It's not like I taught, now you get it. Students are

actually getting involved in their education. They are doing small groups and they are

doing center activities. So it's a different way of learning now versus I'm just sitting here

listening to you teach to me today and then I go to lunch and have a special. Students are

learning and that is the way I think they need to learn versus just sitting there. So that

would be the biggest piece. They are learning and they are learning from each other.

That's it! They are learning from each other. It's not just a teacher giving instruction now.

It's students talking to each other and doing things together in small groups. You'll see a

lot of that.

Indeed, Dr. Glover was correct in that I would observe students taking responsibility for their

learning. During the observation of one math class, the students were given the task of teaching

their classmates how to solve the problem. The student could not call on the teacher for help but

could take advantage of a "lifeline" which was one of their classmates. Students were eager to

serve as a lifeline for another student. In problem solving, the students would ask each other the

thought-provoking questions to get to the answer. It was evident that this was not a one-time

exercise, but a practice.

Misassignment. Parrett and Budge (2012) contend that the misassignment of teachers

results in students being shortchanged and this practice perpetuates underachievement. Schools

with populations of students who are majority students of color, from high poverty

neighborhoods and underperforming academically have deemed aligning students with teachers

as an essential practice. Teachers must know their students including the communities they come

from in order to educate the whole child. Achievement Elementary School embodies this

characteristic according to a parent, Mr. Simmons who said, "A strength specifically would be

(Achievement) having the right teachers in the right places, I think. Having the right teachers in

the right place is not a coincidence. Sometimes students are transitioned to a different class if the teacher-student match is a hindrance to the students' academic progression. This is not a practice that happens often, but the staff and principal are aware that it is an option when necessary. Dr. Glover stated,

> You know we try to make sure that they are in the right classes and sometimes the personality of the teacher and a child do not quite go together so whenever we see that happening we have to make adjustments. We have done that before. I've taken a child out of a classroom before because that just doesn't work for them because that's a big piece.

Additionally, Ms. Abdullah considers knowing the students and their families a strength of the teachers at Achievement:

> I think our greatest strength, although we've had teachers to come and go, most of the teachers have been at the school for years. A lot of the teachers know the families, and they also have siblings. So that's a strength because they've been there, and they have worked with the families before, and they can give more insight on what's going on at home which helps us.

Quality of instruction improves when teacher quality improves, and at Achievement, the heart of the teacher is important. Dr. Glover and her leadership team are invested in building the instructional capacity of the teachers who are committed to school turnaround work.

Building Teachers' Instructional Capacity. Scholars have recognized quality teachers as the single most important factor in educating students and especially students in urban schools or schools with urban-like characteristics (Eckert, 2013; Ingersoll, 2004). Ladson-Billings (2006) also asserts that schools with this population of students are empowered when they are educated in classrooms that embody culturally relevant pedagogy. Achievement hired the MCLs to train

and support teachers while building their instructional capacity to provide a rigorous and relevant education for all of their students. Additionally, the teachers also support and model effective practices and strategies for each other. Ms. Warmack, talks about the value of teachers helping other teachers:

> We also have our MCLs (Multi-Classroom Leaders) who are teachers who help our other teachers who may be weaker and to help them to be able to perform as best as they can. The MCLs actually work with our teachers that may not be as high-performing as the other teachers or our newer teachers to help get them all up to the same level with quality teaching. And you know just being able to be in the rooms. They also pull out some of the children to help them in small groups.

> These same sentiments are conveyed by Dr. Glover as she described their new program, Opportunity Culture, which was implemented to bring in stellar teachers to coach and mentor other teachers in the school. Dr. Glover stated,

> So that's where we had the best of the best teachers to come in and either support students or support teachers and pay them more for that. You know, and so, my school as a team; not just me, we decided. I put together an Opportunity Culture team. We came up with what we thought would be best for Achievement Elementary students. We hired two MCLs. What they do is support teachers and they support students. They will pull a small group of students to support them, and it goes back to data. We're looking at the data now to see who needs what. It's individualizing that instruction. That is a piece that we have implemented this year.

As the assistant principal reflects on the school, he considers the quality of their teachers as one of the greatest strengths of the school. Mr. Hernandez stated,

We were targeted to become an Opportunity School where great teachers become

coaches for other teachers which has made a difference. The commitment of the teachers,

and they are relentless teachers really. They develop relationships with the child, and they

don't give up really easy on certain kids. I would say strong leadership and the

commitment of the teachers is the strength of the school.

Achievement has implemented several practices to build instructional capacity. Both the

principal and assistant principal stated that most of the professional learning opportunities

provided by the school are based on the needs of the school which are identified by teachers,

MCLs, and administration. Opportunity Culture is the model that influences the professional

learning because they are trained to identify where ineffective instruction is taking place. There

is a common expectation that all teachers are high-performing which means all students are

receiving instruction that enables them to learn at high levels. The administrators believe that

there is still much work to be done in this area, but it has been critical to the success of the

students, and teachers are growing because of the dedicated focus on professional learning. The

ongoing review of data has also been the driver for many of the decisions made to improve the

instructional capacity of teachers at Achievement.

Accountability/High Expectations/Data Driven Decision Making

"High expectations without accountability is a recipe for disaster" is an aphorism that is

embodied by the staff at Achievement. It was also posted on the announcement bulletin board in

the teachers' workroom. Every interview participant verbalized the belief that every single

student at Achievement is capable of and will learn at high academic levels. The teachers were

allowed to wear t-shirts on Friday, and one of sayings on the school t-shirt is "Excellence

without Excuses". Low-expectations of students is intolerable at Achievement. High

expectations for students and teachers, as noted by Dr. Glover, is integral to the success of the students:

> I know that everybody can learn, but it's what do you expect for them (students) to do because whatever you expect, that's what they're going to give you. You know if you expect them to go above and beyond and to do their best, they're going to give you that. Sometimes teachers have already made up in their minds that they can't do this. How do you know they can't do it because you haven't tried it yet so don't say that. So just give me your best and give them your best and expect them to do more. You know, it is just your expectations of them. You expect higher for them.

As the researcher, I found that everyone is held accountable by taking ownership of the tasks or responsibilities of the work they were given. Ms. Abdullah reiterated this notion of teachers being held accountable for the instruction in each of their classrooms.

> At the end of the day each teacher is responsible for what they teach in their classrooms. I would say it's the teachers and their method of teaching. At our school, teachers are allowed to have their own style in the classroom. It just has to be quality instruction. We are held responsible for what we have to teach and for what students have to learn. At the end of the day, all of us know what our responsibility is as teachers.

> Tolerating low expectations is synonymous with perpetuating low achievement especially in high-poverty, high population of students of color schools. Parrett and Budge (2012) argue that "high expectations are simply paramount to success" (p. 73). According to one of the parents, Mr. Simmons, the principal and teachers are held accountable and begins with the district office.

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I think it trickles down from the superintendent because he seems to be someone who is driven. I get the feeling that most of the principals in the county, they are in a comfort zone as principals in their positions. So I think they analyze a lot of data. I wouldn't want to say that he puts pressure on them as principals, but he or should I say there is a level of accountability I can tell you. And I think that trickles all the way down to the students. Because teachers are held accountable so they know that they have to get the students where they should be. So, I think accountability starts at the top is one thing that has allowed that school in particular to maintain that growth.

Mr. Simmons' depiction of accountability at Achievement encapsulates the understanding of accountability from the perspective of school administrators, staff, parents, and volunteers. Accountability at Achievement is fostered by a data-driven environment.

Accountability is not limited to the staff, administrators, but students were also held accountable. As such, Pastor Miller emphasized that the principal and the teachers take on responsibilities. Sometimes they fulfill the role of parents just to ensure the students' needs are met. He added that the principal and the teachers are held accountable to bridge the gaps and sometimes stand in the position of parents.

The school holds these students accountable. They know that they come from poverty homes and many of them, their parents have to work two and three jobs just to make ends meet. The principal and the teachers take on the role of the parents sometimes. They stand in the gap for these parents. They don't allow these things to be an excuse for the students learning. The principal really believes that this school can be an "A" school. Ever since she's been here, the school has been improving. Like I said, this was a failing school, and now it's a "B".

Additionally, he emphasized that the principal holds everybody accountable including the parents in such a way that the students' needs will be met.

> They believe that every student here deserves an equal opportunity to the best education. They believe in the students. I think that they value the opinion of the parents and they value the community partners. They definitely value these students because I see how they invest in them and sometimes invest their own money for these students. They believe that they will be an "A" school and they value hard work. They value when students are making progress because they are always celebrating their success. Yeah, that's what I would say about their values. Oh….they value accountability because the principal holds everybody accountable, even the parents.

Additionally, Pastor Miller stated that the principal and teachers are holding students responsible and expecting them to achieve academically.

> I've always been told that if you feel better, you do better. I think that the uniform requirement and the caring and loving environment was a start for the change. Because someone else told them that they could do it, they started to believe that they could do. There was a mindset change. Because someone else can want something for you all they want but you have to want it for yourself. The principal and teachers started expecting the students to make good grades and achieve. They started holding students to a higher standard. I just believe that when you tell students that they will never be nothing or even if their parents tell them that, it's ingrained in you. This school had a huge task to turn this school around, and they did it.

Data-Based Decision Making

Achievement School has capitalized on the power of using data to drive instruction towards school improvement. They have placed value in progress monitoring, data reviews, staff meetings, and grade level meetings. Every meeting that I was able to observe included a discussion of the data. This culture of data-based decision making has been woven into the fabric of Achievement Elementary School. Dr. Glover describes it as the cornerstone of their decision-making.

> So, a lot of times we make decisions based on the data that we see as far as what our kids need. You know we try to make sure that they are in the right classes and sometimes the personality of the teacher and a child do not quite go together so whenever we see that happening, we have to make adjustments. We have done that before. I've taken a child out of a classroom before because that just doesn't work for them because that's a big piece. You know so we do a lot as far as using the data to help us make certain decisions.

Furthermore, Dr. Glover also uses the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) scores after common assessments are administered.

> I think it's knowing where our students are. We use the data to drive instruction okay. I give them that EVAAS information and they have to know exactly where they are. Because if you don't know and you think this is fine every year then you are not going to make an improvement because you think everything that you have done the previous school year was great. So, if I'm in the red then I know I need to get out of the red because the red is not good. We are just digging deep into the data and using that to drive instruction.

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Mrs. Felton credits the frequent review of data with the success in academic achievement. Mrs. Felton stated that now they are required to examine their data and plan for reinforcement strategies as well as activities for the students based on the data. Mrs. Warmack believes that the data holds the teachers accountable for the student academic outcomes:

> I would say for one, the data and being able to use the data to help them with their weaknesses and strengths and build on the strengths and being able to use that data to fill in some of the gaps that we would have years before missed the opportunity to fill them in. It's really accountability.

Data driven decision making was also evident during the observations as several of the classes that I visited had data walls or data notebooks for each student. Students were held accountable for their data and were responsible for their data notebooks. The teachers also talked about reflecting on their lessons to determine if they need to reteach a standard and provide another opportunity for students to demonstrate mastery. The teachers' workroom, which is also the location of the PLC meetings, also had a very colorful and detailed data wall which was explained to me by several of the interviewees.

A School Where Students Are Loved

Pastor Miller described the growing and progressive nature of the school as a place where students are loved.

> Well there is so much going on at Achievement, but I think what I would tell them is that students are learning, they are achieving, they are growing. The students are happy, and they are loved. I would say that teachers are teaching and there is a positive environment for students. That's it in a nutshell.

The interview participants had a common theme of the genuine affection that they have for their students. One of the teachers, Mrs. Felton expressed her love for both students and her colleagues: "Oh I am so grateful that I am at Achievement. I love my students. I love working with my co-workers and Achievement is a great school. I am so proud that from the level D, we grew up to a level B." Students are the center of every decision made at the school as it was frequently noted during observations, interviews, and document reviews that the school operates based on what is best for the students.

Student-Centered Learning Environment

During the study, I observed a teacher at every grade level and several different content areas including an art class. While I did observe the teachers standing in front of the class teaching, I also observed students who were learning how to take control of their education. In a few classes, the students were at the board teaching the other students. In some of the classrooms, the student did not ask the teacher for help, but asked other students for help. Students were the focus of the educational environment and their achievement seemed to be paramount. Mrs. Rome who has the opportunity to observe, coach, and mentor in many classes describes the learning environment as student-centered:

> I would say that it's a positive learning environment, student-centered environment. They're constantly motivated, you know encouraged. Reminded that they can do their best if they put the work in. But none the less, we let them know when they are not on task. We still have to be firm with them. I would say that it's a positive student-centered learning environment.

Assistant Principal Hernandez describes the positive environment at Achievement:

I would say do not judge a book by its cover for starters. Achievement, you know if you

look at the environment of where it is, people would say you know it's in a place where,

and I say that because of the location., but it's not the best location in town. We're

surrounded by a lot of poverty, and you could also even say some criminality levels. But

when you actually get in and you see the interaction of what's going on and the

commitment that the teachers have, it's a place where you truly really want your kids to

learn. It's a place where learning takes place despite the conditions and the environment.

This same sentiment was expressed by parents, volunteers, teachers and other supporting staff.

One parent stated,

His teacher would always call me and say, well he had an incident today, but he is better.

They would talk about it, and I thought that was really nice because she didn't have to do

that. I think also, that helped build him to be stronger, and showed him that other people

can help you, other people care, and other people love you.

The staff and the community are keenly aware that the school is surrounded by poverty

and in some cases surrounded by criminal activity. Achievement and their community partners

and volunteers have shown an undeniable commitment to confront and deny the prevailing

myths about the academic ability of students of color who live in poverty. The theme of love

resonates throughout Achievement, and they are focused on students first and have proven that

students at Achievement can progress successfully.

Safe Environment

Safety is another important factor of the culture identified in the data as it relates to the

type of school parents want their children to attend. The school was described as a safe and

serene environment that is conducive to learning. Dr. Glover emphasized that safety is the most

important factor to parents when considering the choice of school for their children. She stated further, learning is usually put second after safety sometimes.

Safety would be the first thing because a lot of times that's what parents are looking for. They want a safe environment. Even if sometimes, they put the learning part second, you know. If this is a safe environment, then that's where I want my child to go. We care about what we do here. That makes a lot of difference. We develop relationships with our students and with our parents and so if they know that you are on their side, you are there to support their child and to give them what they need, then they are willing to do what they need to do. We have to develop a relationship not just with our students but also with our parents as well.

Similarly, Mrs. Felton echoed a consistent description of the school as a safe learning environment.

When they (the students) come to school, even the parents who trust the teachers, because the kids are in a safe learning environment. We call it a productive learning environment. I've been here for a while, and I've learned some techniques from other colleagues. That is why I am proud to say that I have maintained that safe classroom environment in my classroom. But as a whole, as a school, I guess we have maintained a safe environment here at Achievement Elementary.

In the same vein, Pastor Miller's description is consistent with Ms. Felton's descriptions. He echoed the following:

I think the school is a safe haven for many students. They are able to learn in a loving caring environment. They are able to do better than they did the year before based on the school grades. I think the teachers make their classrooms places where students not only

can learn but want to learn. I've been in the classrooms, and you can't help but to learn in some of these classrooms. Some of the teachers have more energy than others and even I want to learn when I go in there (chuckles).

Showing familiarity with the school, Pastor Miller noted that while there are a few teachers who "aren't quite there yet" the students are learning. He also mentioned the additional support students receive in the school. This additional support als includes the school volunteers. He stated "We make the students feel safe."

A parent described Achievement as safe based on the teacher's commitment to understanding her family and using the information to create a safe space for her child to learn:

My son's teacher always tries to get to know about our family. She's able to help my son better because she knows about our family and our culture. The school really cares, and they have a practice of keeping the students safe and my son likes to learn because of his teacher.

Lastly, Mr. Simmon's description is somewhat similar to the other participants. He said the school's atmosphere is safe both physically and academically. He emphasized the safety to take risks and make mistakes as part of a safe environment.

The learning environment. Well let's start with the physical side of it. I think the classes are not overcrowded so physically it's okay. Students in terms of the atmosphere you know as it relates to classes, it's safe. In a sense that students don't feel as if they are not allowed to take risks or make mistakes. I think that's good for learning so in order to learn you have to make mistakes. I think the environment is safe; safe physically and safe as it relates to learning. Students feel that they can do something wrong, and they are given the opportunity to correct their errors.

Adequate support

Adequate support was also described in the findings as paramount to student success. Thus, support from teachers and parents is important to student success by meeting their needs regardless of their socio-demography. Ms. Warmack emphasized that providing the student with adequate learning materials including computer-aided learning resources will help the students to meet their needs to be successful in their education.

> By making sure that they have the materials that they need in the classroom and outside of the classroom. I think the electronics and different things like that have been a great plus and like we have some things that they can take home and having the things readily online that supports them at home that they can do. There are programs that they can do over the summer like i-Ready.

The teachers and social workers make a concerted effort to find out what students need at home to complete their assignments. If students don't have internet at home, the school has a partnership where families can receive an internet card for their laptops which gives them internet service access at home. Achievement also has a supply closet of donated school items from the community. The school has decided that this is not a battle that they want to fight. If students do not have their supplies, then there are supplies at the school. They teach the students responsibility based on the supplies that they provide to them, and not supplies that are requested from home. Some of the partners donate book bags full of supplies to the students in need. Achievement really try and keep the focus on the needs of the student and refrain from punishing them for anything beyond the students' control.

Spirituality

"Spiritual leadership traits and attributes exhibited by district and school leaders are gaining recognition as an effective leadership style for correcting what is wrong with the nation's schools" (Thompson, 2012). The staff at Achievement have embraced the "spiritual leadership" of their principal as an avenue to exercise their faith and believe in a higher power to help them become successful at a persistently low-performing school. The element of spirituality emerged throughout the study, and while some were initially reluctant to share about the weekly prayer at the school, it was quite clear that they believed that this practice greatly contributes to their success.

The weekly prayer involves staff and guests gathering to say prayers petitioning for change or intervention in a matter of concern. Dr. Glover emphasized that prayer is crucial in meeting students' needs and achieving target goals:

I don't put my faith on anybody because I know people have different faith. But one thing we do, or I do, and if teachers want to do it then they do it, but you know we pray every Wednesday morning. You know I'll say we're meeting in the gym if they want to come. I don't make anybody come, but if they want to come, they come. But I know that has a lot to do with where we are today. Because you know prayer changes things. I just continue to have faith in God and know that He can do all things. Things that we can't do, He can do it. That's something that I didn't mention. And we invite outside people to come in and just talk, not to the kids but to teachers who want to participate. We'll pray at the beginning of the school year and throughout the year.

Ms. Artis mentioned this practice as well at the end of her interview. She sort of chuckled as she told me which seemed to be an expression of uncertainty if she should share it, but it was a

practice that she believes is making a difference. "We pray every Wednesday. We do, the staff, we, before the kids get here, we have Morning Prayer. It's not mandatory. You can come in if you want to, and so most of the staff come. Yes, most of the staff come."

Likewise, Ms. Rome shared how she experiences the prayer time at Achievement.

I don't know if this is off the record or not but I know that religion is a funny thing in the school. But for me I appreciate that on Wednesdays, as a staff, we meet and we pray. We pray for what our goals are, and we pray for our students and I appreciate that. So I really like the piece because not only does it motivate us because sometimes we need motivation but it builds that bond stronger for us.

Achievement's strongest community partner is a local church in the community located about five miles from the school. It is not surprising that the Black church is the greatest community supporter because the African American church has historically been a pillar for high poverty schools in their community. Pastor Miller has delivered sermonettes to the staff during the motivational moment of the Wednesday morning prayer session. Pastor Miller also shared his experience:

I also know that they have believers here who pray for the students. I don't think they have to participate, but it's an option if they want to. I've been invited to pray with them before, and it was a good thing to be a part of. Most of the staff attended from what I could tell.

Pastor Miller also shared that his congregation prays for Achievement and specifically for the educational achievement of the African American students who always seem to get the "short end of the stick". Along with the staff at Achievement, Pastor Miller and his congregation believes that "prayer changes things",

During one of my observations, I arrived at the school early Wednesday morning and was invited into the prayer meeting. I decided to attend, and it seemed as if most of the staff members were in attendance. The optional prayer meeting lasted about ten minutes. There was a prayer where they prayed for the well-being and strength of the teachers, the students, the parents, the school, and for the students to do well academically. There was also a motivational moment where one of the staff read an inspirational poem and the meeting was adjourned shortly after the motivational moment and encouraging words from Dr. Glover. At the end of the meeting, staff began embracing each other with a hug, and most of them seemed energized to do the important work of confronting the challenges and successfully educating the students at Achievement.

While the students are not a part of this spiritual moment, one of the teachers stated, "I believe Mindfulness does for my students what the Wednesday prayer does for me. I see such a calming in them, and they are able to focus more". Mindfulness is a practice that has been supported by the school district especially in the area of mental health. I observed a Mindfulness exercise with students in one of the classrooms, and after inquiring about this form of meditation, the teacher informed me that they learned about this technique at a training provided by the district. Some of the other teachers at Achievement also attended the district workshop. Additionally, a Mindfulness trainer was invited to attend one of the Wednesday prayer sessions to lead the teachers in a Mindfulness exercise during the meditation moment. Spirituality emerged as one of the significant seven jewels that is making a difference in the lives of the students and staff at Achievement.

Summary of Findings

Findings detailed in this chapter are the results of a thorough investigation of the factors that contribute to a high population of students of color, high-poverty school's capacity to

improve student achievement. The Framework for Action (Parrett & Budge, 2012) and tenets of Culturally Relevant Leadership (Beachum, 2011; McCray & Beachum, 2014; Horsford et al., 2011) provided the structure for analysis of this case study. The deductive and inductive thematic analysis provided the unique opportunity to discover the interconnectedness of varying organizational characteristics that significantly shifted the academic trajectory of Achievement Elementary School. An extensive collection and analysis of data revealed an emergence of seven significant themes: principal leadership, shared leadership, shift in school culture, teacher quality, accountability, school of love, and spirituality.

The data analysis shows Principal Leadership as the catalyst for the school improvement at Achievement; however, apparent is the occurring frequency of the other six themes. All seven themes are deemed as critical factors to the success of the school according to the analyzed data. While each individual theme is important in how Achievement Elementary School has been organized for school improvement, the interrelatedness of each one is integral to the academic success of the school.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this intrinsic case study is to understand how an elementary school with high poverty levels and high percentages of students of color of color improved and sustained the academic achievement of students. The findings are based on an analysis of rich data that included observations, interviews, and documents that provided an opportunity to understand the lived experiences of school staff, parents, and community members. Unpacking the data provided the opportunity to understand the educational leadership practices that contributed to a high population of students of color, high-poverty school significantly shifting the odds for high academic achievement.

Underserved populations of students, especially students of color who come from low socioeconomic status families, lack equitable access to the rigorous academic content accessible to their mainstream peers (Goings & Ford; 2018; Lewis et al., 2012; Nadelson et al., 2020). America's K-12 public education system has been inundated with continuous shifts in educational reform movements such as NCLB (2001) and the most reform, ESSA (2015) that ostensibly aspired to improve education for underrepresented and disenfranchised populations of students. Each reform has duplicated the unfulfilled promise of closing the achievement gap between students of color and their white counterparts. Regardless of mandates for schools to make paradigm shifts to operate schools with inclusive environments that deliver rigorous and relevant instruction to all students, the progress remains stagnant and inequities persist

(Beachum, 2011; Ezzani & Brooks, 2019; Horsford et al., 2011; Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver, 2019).

The academic astuteness of students depends on the quality of America's public schools. Arguably, public schools have been promoted as the great equalizer (Downey et al., 2004; Khalifa, 2010) where students have an equal opportunity to social mobility if they work hard; however, consistently, an overwhelming percentage of schools serving students of color from low-socioeconomic communities are failing to provide an equitable education (Darling Hammond et al., 2005; Ingersoll, 2001; Yonezawa, Hones, & Robb-Singer, 2011). Parrett and Budge (2012) contend that "improving schools can make a significant difference in reducing poverty". This research study sought to discover and understand the factors that enabled a high-poverty, high population of students of color elementary school to demonstrate academic achievement for this population of students.

This study was designed to explore the leadership practices that contributed to the transformation of Achievement Elementary School. The research question that guided this study is: How does an urban elementary school with high poverty, high percentage of students of color increase and sustain student academic achievement? Additionally, the following sub-questions were addressed:

1. Who is involved in the processes that enable students to be successful?

2. How did the school achieve this level of success and how does it sustain its progress?

3. What is the role of the school principal in institutionalizing cultural knowledge in a school with high poverty, a high percentage of students of color, and a high percentage of students with increasing academic achievement?

4.   What specific practices and initiatives are implemented in the school?

In this exploration, I employed a holistic qualitative approach to find out the specific factors, programs, or initiatives that contribute to the students' academic achievement. Additionally, I explored the role of the school's leadership in the school's academic achievement and sustainability. For purposes of this study, a school is considered high population of students of color if at least 70% of the students identify as students of color; considered high poverty if at least 70% of the students are on free or reduced school lunch; and considered making increasing academic progress if at least 70% of students meet or exceed growth as identified by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) Annual Report Card.

This chapter is organized to provide meaning to the outcomes by connecting them to existing literature as presented in chapter two and extrapolating the results to future research, theories, policies, and practices. The discussion of findings, conclusions, and recommendations are presented in three subsections in this chapter.

Discussion of Findings

In this section I present an expanded discussion of the findings described in chapter four. Additionally, I explicate how these findings answer the research question and sub-questions for this study. The discussion will concentrate on the seven main findings while juxtaposing with existing research presented in the literature review and other applicable literature on successfully schooling students in high poverty, high percentages of students of color schools.

The overall research question for this study was: How does an urban elementary school with high poverty, high percentage of students of color increase and sustain student academic achievement? Through a deliberate and continuous school transformation process, Achievement Elementary School confronted the continuous inequities that existed for years. Practices were in

place that perpetuated underachievement, and staff morale was at an all-time low when the newly appointed principal, Dr. Glover, arrived at the school. After carefully observing and evaluating the state of the school, the principal was determined to organize the school, in the community where she grew up, for sustainable improvement. The principal's leadership was recognized as the stimulating force for the school's improvement. While the leadership of the principal was critical to the success of the school, there were other themes that emerged as contributors to achieving and maintaining the academic success at Achievement.

Findings of this intrinsic case study revealed an academic infrastructure focused on the needs of the students that advanced the overall student achievement. Seven significant themes emerged and were discussed in detail in chapter four: Principal leadership; Shared leadership; Shift in school culture; Building teacher capacity; High expectations and Accountability; Love and Care; and Spirituality. The findings are closely aligned to existing research on school improvement in schools serving students of color from high poverty communities (Gallaher, 2012; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Parker et al.; 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Reeves; 1995; Stosich, 2017). These seven themes are housed in one of the four core elements found in the academic infrastructure at Achievement Elementary School (see Figure 5): School Leadership; School Culture Shift; Investment in Professional Capacity Building; and Supportive Practices.
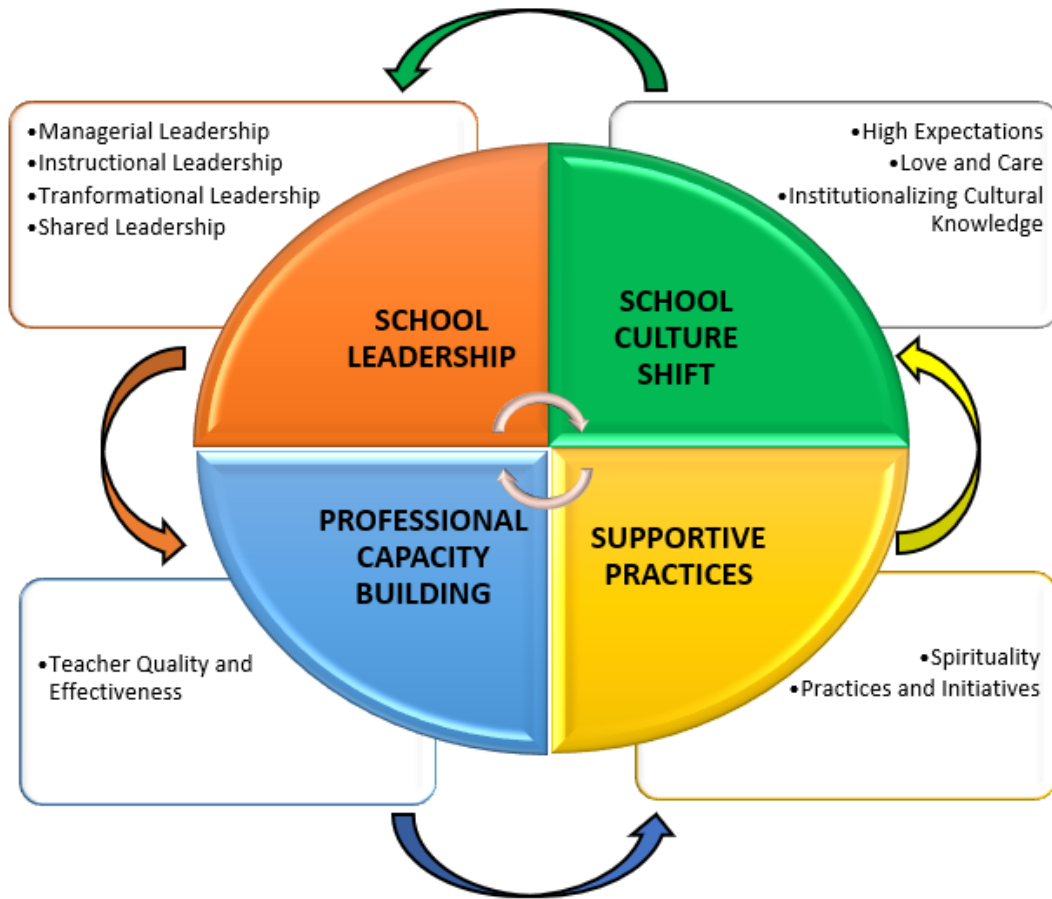
Figure 5. Academic Infrastructure Core Elements

School Leadership: The Impetus for School Improvement

Great schools do not exist apart from great leaders. (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2013, p. 1)

Who is involved in the process that enables students to be successful? Overwhelmingly, the interview participants acknowledged the principal as the impetus for the systemic improvement at Achievement Elementary School. The findings suggest that through the multiple leadership styles and practices of the principal, numerous individuals are involved in the process that enables students to be successful.

School Leadership

The findings suggest that there is a prevalence of effective leadership styles and practices exhibited by the school principal that is responsible for the growth in student achievement. The principal was described as a leader with a unique gift to empower others and bring out the best in teachers and students. As depicted in figure 4 in chapter four, when asked, all 15 respondents declared that Dr. Glover's leadership is responsible for the school's success.

These findings were parallel to other research on school turnaround especially in high poverty schools with majority students of color (Gallager, 2012; Parker et al., 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Stosich, 2017). Principals are considered as the preeminent catalyst for establishing sustainable foundations and systemic structures for student achievement. A substantial body of research supports this notion of principal leadership as a critical agent to meaningful change in schools (Bredeson, 1985; Leithwood, Sun, & Schumacker, 2019; Qadach, Schechter, & Da'as, 2020). Parrett and Budge (2012) contends that school leadership is particularly essential to the success of high-poverty schools. Scholars have argued that the principal operates from the greatest vantage point to ultimately impact positive academic outcomes (Khalifa, 2013; Lumby & Foskett, 2011; Parker et al., 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012). "Today, it is an accepted fact among educational reformers that principals are the key levers for school-based change. But how school leadership actually matters in the processes of school improvement remains far less clear" (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 61). The findings from this research study revealed how the principal's leadership mattered through three main leadership styles: Managerial Leadership; Transformational Leadership; and Instructional Leadership.

Managerial Leadership. The principal noted that embracing managerial leadership practices were foundational to setting the strategic direction for the school's transformation. The

principal formalized processes, established structures, enforced policies, and ensured there were operational systems in place that manifested work routines at the school. Dr. Glover referred to this system as a "well-oiled machine", a saying that was embraced and adopted by the staff at the school. While managerial leadership is the most fundamental and classic dimension of school leadership, the principal deemed it an essential administrative support that allowed her teachers to focus their efforts on improving academic outcomes for students. Bryk (2010) in his study of two high-poverty, high population of students of color elementary schools in Chicago notes that a weakness in managerial leadership practices can diminish the time allocated for effective instruction time and can negatively impact how the internal and external communities "see" the school. Scholars (Bryk, 2010; Martinez & Hernandez-Amoros, 2020; Wenno; 2016) agree that managerial leadership is necessary; however, these school leadership practices in isolation will not create the conditions to accelerate student learning.

Instructional Leadership. The role of principal leadership is becoming increasingly complex as the school leaders are challenged to not only manage their schools but evolve as instructional leaders (Dewitt, 2020; Rigby, 2014). Researchers (Khalifa, 2013; Lumby & Foskett, 2011; Parker et al., 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012) have argued that principal leadership can positively impact student learning. The principal of Achievement made known her commitment to instructional leadership and believed this to be her strongest asset in leading a school that had been persistently low performing prior to her arrival. Dewitt (2020) defines instructional leadership in this way:

> Instructional leadership is about understanding how to implement improvements effectively, build collective efficacy during that implementation process, and work together with teachers and staff to build a focus on learning, so that we can improve our

teaching strategies and increase student engagement. Instructional leadership is also about collecting evidence to understand our impact as leaders and practitioners (p. 21).

The interview participants also recognized their principal as an instructional leader. The teachers indicated that when the principal modeled effective instructional practices for them, it not only developed them as teachers but empowered them to implement these practices in their classrooms. Some of the teachers also noted that when their principal, Dr. Glover, would attend their PLCs and provide input on how to engage students and drive instruction that leads to student learning, it built their collective efficacy of the positive impact that their teaching and learning has on the student achievement. The instructional leadership practices implemented by Dr. Glover ultimately created a culture where teachers became progressively focused on their impact on the students' growth and achievement. The teachers credited this growth mindset to the instructional leadership demonstrated by their principal. Through instructional leadership, Dr. Glover's ultimately wanted to *transform* her teachers to an advanced level of instructional performance.

Transformational Leadership. "Transformational leaders are those who stimulate and inspire followers to both achieve extraordinary outcomes and in the process develop their own leadership capacity" (Money, 2017). Transformational leaders have the unique ability to galvanize their followers to do what they perceived as impossible (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Teachers and parents expressed how both the school and the community doubted that Achievement Elementary School could be academically successful until Dr. Glover became the principal and stimulated a drive in both teachers and students to strive for academic excellence. Although the general consensus among teachers, students, parents, and community was that Achievement would always be a low performing school with a state grade of D, they are now

academically progressing with a grade of "B" and a determination that they can become an "A" school. Although Dr. Glover recognized how critical her role is as the principal, she believed that teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement (Eckert, 2013; Ingersoll, 2004), and likewise, believed that it was her responsibility to implement processes and practices designed to ensure that teachers were improving instructionally and students were improving academically (Brazer & Bauer, 2013).

Bass and Riggio (2006) assert that there are four components of transformational leadership: Idealized Influence (II); Inspirational Motivation (IM); Intellectual Stimulation (IS); and Individualized Consideration (IC). Transformational leaders achieve exceptional outcomes by engaging in one or more of these components. The presence of transformational leadership practices represents change, and findings indicate that following the arrival of the newly appointed principal three years ago, extensive changes have occurred that resulted in students flourishing academically. These extensive changes created the conditions for teachers and students to be successful. Findings also suggest that the principal engaged in all four components of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Dr. Glover established authentic relationships with her staff built on trust and her staff also view her as someone with high ethics, morals, and sound values. Dr. Glover continues to nurture these relationships which has allowed her to have Idealized Influence (II) as a transformational leader. Her staff trust her leadership, have bought into the vision, and they are willing to follow her lead. Dr. Glover is known as a motivator at Achievement. During meetings, she is often providing Inspirational Motivation (IM) to her staff, and all of the staff interviewed believed that they were able to achieve beyond the imaginable because Dr. Glover motivated

them to make changes in the classroom that would lead to increased student performance. Dr. Glover is the staff and students' biggest cheerleader.

Dr. Glover also exhibits Intellectual Stimulation (IS) by taking risks with her staff by allowing them to make mistakes and learn from them. She encourages them to use their creativity, innovation, and ideas to impact student success. Dr. Glover is there to encourage them, and support and guide them when they make mistakes. While Dr. Glover acknowledged that this was hard for her to do, she believes that this is key to developing her staff into effective leaders which will ultimately lead to sustainable success. Dr. Glover is an advocate for genuine relationships, and it was evident that she knew her staff intimately and genuinely cared for her staff and students. Most importantly, the staff, parents, and community members knew that she was concerned about their development professionally and personally. While Dr. Glover held high expectations for her staff, she provided the tools to be successful. Dr. Glover exhibited the essence of Inspirational Motivation (IM).

Shared Leadership

The principal of the school selected for this case study identifies with transformational, instructional, and shared leadership. The simultaneous existence of these constructs, transformational leadership and shared instructional leadership has a significant impact on school performance (Marks & Printy, 2003). Shared instructional leadership is a term that describes shared and instructional leadership practices employed in tandem and demonstrated by an "active collaboration of principal and teachers on curriculum, instruction, and assessment" (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 371). Findings from this study indicate that the practice of shared leadership was critical to the success of the school. Second to principal leadership, shared leadership was one of the most reoccurring themes expressed by the interview participants. Shared leadership at

Achievement was demonstrated by including both informal and formal leaders on decision making. Formal leaders included positions such as principal and assistant principal, leadership team members, and multi-classroom leaders (MCLs). Informal leaders included all other teachers and support personnel.

Dr. Glover's approach to leadership was extremely methodical as she endeavored to "turnaround" Achievement Elementary School. It was very important to Dr. Glover that she organized the school for improvement by establishing a structural foundation at Achievement (Managerial Leadership), maintained an intentional focus on teaching and learning (Instructional Leadership), and inspired and motivated her staff through the change while challenging and developing them to become high performers (Transformational Leadership). Practices from these three leadership styles were in effect prior to fully emerging in shared leadership. When Dr. Glover arrived she described her staff as "hungry for direction". The majority of the staff were not ready to engage in decision-making because they needed someone to provide guidance and effective leadership. They needed someone to persuade them that they were capable of providing instruction that would ultimately yield academic progression for their students. Dr. Glover believed that it was important to involve her staff in decision-making (Gallagher, 2012; Lambert, 2003; Parrett & Budge, 2012) and eventually delegate responsibilities resulting in staff buy-in; however, she also knew that her underrepresented population of student deserved the very best and could not afford another second of mediocre education. Parrett and Budge (2012) assert that while shared leadership is necessary in advancing high-poverty, high population of students of color schools, the principal is particularly positioned to advance the transformational shift. After the principal laid the foundation and created conditions for her team to be success, she was able to create a culture of shared leadership where staff were encouraged to lead from various

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positions. At the time of the study, the principal was serving her third year as principal, and shared leadership was in full motion.

In high poverty, high population of students of color, high-performing schools, it is a commonly held belief that the principal is not the only leader (Gallager, 2012; Lambert, 2005; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Stosich, 2017). Achievement Elementary also has two "instructional experts" who were hired specifically to serve as leaders working with both staff and students. These experts are known as Multi-Classroom Leaders or MCLs and they provide coaching to teachers, work with small groups of students, and make critical decisions regarding instructional programs, scheduling and professional development. The MCLs were closely with teachers and students to not only build their capacity but to find out what they need to be successful. The student voice is important in the decision-making processes at Achievement.

Dr. Glover also selected teacher-leaders at each grade level to serve on the school's leadership team, a new team that was created to give teachers and other school leaders the platform to make shared decisions and lead the school through the transformation. This cadre of leaders were chosen to represent their colleagues and make decisions in the best interest of students and staff. Dr. Glover realized that building leadership capacity in her teachers and support staff would be critical to achieve, maintain, and sustain schoolwide improvement (Gallagher, 2012; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Parrett & Budge, 2012). The leadership team is also led by a chairperson selected by the members of the leadership team. While the members of the leadership are responsible for brainstorming ideas, and bringing their fellow teachers ideas and concerns to the forefront for discussion, and leading teams and projects, they have also taken on the role of identifying other teacher leaders not on the leadership team. If there is a project

that needs leadership, they can select a teacher who is not on the leadership team. This finding of shared leadership aligns with what Lambert (2005) calls "high leadership capacity schools":

> High leadership capacity schools are learning communities that amplify leadership for all, learning for all, success for all. These schools have developed the fabric of structures (e.g. teams, communities, study groups) and processes (reflection, inquiry, dialogue) That form a more lasting and buoyant web of interrelated actions. (p. 40)

The Assistant Principal considers the establishment of the leadership team as one of the most impactful practices at Achievement. He believes that the emphasis on shared leadership and building leadership capacity within the team has undoubtedly contributed to the school's improvement. The leadership team carries out meetings and responsibilities even in the absence of the principal and assistant principal. The members of the leadership team have come to believe that they are a vital component of their school's advancement. Veritably, the staff have confidence in the structure of the leadership team and believes that the leadership team is also responsible for the school's improvement that has ultimately resulted in students achieving as progressively higher levels. The shared leadership practices were not limited to only include school's staff. The parents and volunteers also shared that they are included by providing input and feedback on situations that involve them. Likewise, Dr. Glover expressed that she listens to her parents and volunteers and considers their suggestions as Achievement makes decisions that concern the external community or will have an impact on the families.

Who is involved in the process that enables students to be successful? Achievement Elementary School is consistently pursuing a sustainable culture designed to build on intellectual capital where leadership roles are shared and distributed throughout the team (Nappi, 2014). Findings suggest that while the principal is deeply involved and has implemented many

processes to catapult the school to unprecedented dimensions of academic achievement, there is a team of both formal and informal leaders who have worked in the trenches to champion student success. This team includes the principal, the school's leadership team, multi-classroom leaders, teachers, and support staff. Additionally, there are a group of volunteers who are at the school weekly supporting students with their academics and life situations. There are also processes and practices that include the involvement of students and parents to give input which has contributed to the transformation at Achievement Elementary School.

Achieving and Sustaining Academic Progress

How did the school achieve this level of success and how does it sustain its progress**?** Findings in this study revealed an emergence of four themes that answered this research sub-question. The research conducted found that to achieve a high level of success and sustain the progress in this school with a high population of students of color, high-poverty student population, the school had at its core: a Shift in School Culture; a Student-Centered Environment; Professional Capacity Building; and High Expectations and Accountability.

Shift in School Culture.

"Changing school culture is difficult, in part, because it requires people to challenge their mental maps or mind-sets–the images, assumptions, and personal perspectives we hold about people, institutions, in the world in general" (Parrett & Budge, 2012, p. 63). Dr. Glover emphasized that as she made her initial observations at her newly assigned school, she was convinced that a shift in the culture was the one of the first transformations that needed to take place. Dr. Glover also was strategic in assembling teacher-leaders and other leaders within Achievement who could lead the school in a change process that would shift the school culturally and embrace a school focused on high academic standards for all students. This

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finding aligns with the findings of a case study by Leithwood and Poplin (1992) in 12 improving schools where the school leaders selected staff members who exemplified a commitment to the school's mission and priorities to serve on leadership teams at their schools. These staff members served as informal leaders who "actively communicated the school's cultural norms, values, and beliefs in their day-to-day interpersonal contacts; and they also shared power and responsibility with others through delegation of power to school improvement "teams" within the school" (p. 10).

The leadership team at the school selected for this study includes the principal, assistant principal, grade level teacher-leaders, multi-classroom leaders, teacher assistant, and a parent representative. This team was chosen based on their demonstrated commitment to the new direction of the school. These team members also had influence and were willing to create a sense of urgency with their colleagues to embrace the strategic vision and initiatives designed to transform their school. The principal acknowledged the tireless work of this team to implement the strategic plan, identify and remove barriers, and create the action to move the school forward. Many of the participants acknowledged that changing the culture of a historically failing school was daunting, and the process is ongoing. The school leaders are continuously working on sustaining the acceleration and instituting sustainable change (Kotter, 2012).

Dr. Glover characterized Achievement's old culture as "flawed" which in-turn had inflicted damage on the students' educational opportunities. She challenged her leadership team to work together to create a culture that would repair the damage that had been imposed on the students. The current culture of Achievement is an evolved culture, and the findings disclosed three major areas where there was a significant shift: Culture of Learning and Achievement; Culture of Community; and a Culture of Effective Communication.

Learning and Achievement. The main focus of Achievement was student learning and demonstrated academic achievement. Researchers (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Edmonds, 1979; Gallager, 2012; Giles, Johnson, & Brooks, 2005; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Parker et al., 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Reeves, 1995) who have conducted extensive studies on high performing, high population of students of color, and high poverty schools, considers a targeted focus on high academic performance for students as critical to school improvement. Uniformly, every participant discussed the shift in their culture to a belief that all their students were capable of learning to high standards and achieving their student goals. All students had individualized goals and teachers expressed their commitment to ensuring that their students reached the goals. Some teachers shared that there were common instructional practices that teachers had to implement in their classrooms, and other teachers indicated that there was flexibility in how they taught concepts as long as students were able to demonstrate mastery of standards on assessments.

There were several instances where I observed non-instructional staff (i.e., librarian, school secretary, and custodial staff) asking students what they learned in class that particular day. This was a common practice that was exercised to keep students and staff always focused on student learning. On one occasion, while waiting in the front office lobby, a student walked into the office. The secretary greeted the student and asked how the student was doing. Immediately following the student's response, the secretary asked if the student knew the next question. Without hesitation the student told the secretary that she wanted to know what he had learned today. The student began discussing a lesson about the planets, and he could give detailed information about several of the planets. The secretary gave the student a "high-five".

Although the student was in the office for a behavior issue, the first order of business was to focus on the student's education.

The school's culture of achievement and learning was adopted by everyone, and learning was not restricted to the classroom. Teachers were observed teaching before school, teaching after school, and even teaching during fire drills. The staff were committed to removing any barriers that would prevent students from learning at school. Additionally, teachers, social workers, and administrators consistently made attempts to identify barriers to learning that students had at home and provided assistance so that learning could take place at home. For instance, if students did not have internet at home to complete online iReady lessons, then the student was provided an internet card. Additionally, there were students who were presented with refurbished computers through a community partnership that provided computers for students and families without a computer at home. Achievement embodied a "whatever it takes" stance to ensure that students were provided every opportunity to learn and every opportunity to achieve. The principal and the leadership team rejected the notion that school improvement should be targeted to "bubble kids" (Ahn & Vigdor, 2013) who were more likely to improve the school's performance score. They deemed this practice as counterproductive and adopted practices that focused on learning and achievement for all students.

Community. Establishing a culture through building trusting relationships, interactions and genuine opportunities for collaboration was a common theme. One volunteer described the school as "community-friendly" where everyone was treated with respect and felt included. Teachers and parents used words such as "family-oriented", "neighborhood", and "supportive" when describing their school community. Parrett and Budge (2012) contend that:

Collaboration and trust are hallmarks of HP/HP schools. Leaders in these schools model

trusting behaviors an established structures that guarantee that teachers have an

opportunity to work together and provide protocols to ensure collaborative efforts are

successful. They also nurture trust among teachers, students, and families by providing

opportunities for teachers to develop an accurate understanding of poverty's influence on

the lives of their students and families. (p. 102)

The principal expressed that the teachers "respect each other" and "they are willing to

work together as a team and support each other". Another teacher expressed that Achievement is

a "caring school for each child" and is "family-oriented". Community volunteers are integral to

the success of the school and are woven into the school community as part of the family. The

principal is also from the community and understands the importance of the community to the

school and vice versa (Hortsford, 2014). Especially in "urban" schools, assuming that the

community and school are independent of each other forges a disconnect between the school and

community (Brooks, 2015). Achievement is building a bridge with the community that has

helped the school achieve success and now the community is serving as volunteers to mentor and

tutor students at Achievement which is helping the school to sustain the success. Achievement

has three strong partnerships: community church partnership, the community college partnership

and the Holmes family partnership. The other partnerships are "developing" partnerships and

living in an impoverished community poses challenges in developing significant community

partnerships.

Effective Communication. Communication has been the linchpin for the shift in the

school culture. All of the interview participants discussed how effective communication is

between administration, teachers, and staff. They also discussed the ongoing efforts to increase

communication between the school and parents. The principal implemented consistent Professional Learning Community Meetings to provide an avenue for the teachers and MCLs to have meaningful conversations about teaching and learning, curriculum and instruction, and data. Teachers believed that as a result of them having the opportunity to discuss and share best practices with each other, instruction has improved in school and students are learning more. The teachers have also renamed the teacher's workroom to the "teacher's café" when they need to talk to each other and get support during days when they need social-emotional support. Teachers no longer struggled alone and in silence, but because of the increased effective communication, teachers are talking and building relationships in and out of the classroom. One teacher noted that the principal increased their planning time and she was appreciative of the principal creating a schedule that considered the time needed for meaningful and effective communication focused on improving instruction.

Effective communication practices extended beyond the school and were critical in establishing open communication with parents. Community and parent engagement is upheld by Parrett and Budge's framework and culturally relevant leadership and identified in other literature (Harris, Andrew-Power, & Goodall, 2009) as vital to successful school improvement efforts. One parent was in tears as she communicated the communication that she receives from her son's teacher, and she believes that the strong communication she has with the school and the teacher is one of the reasons that her son is successful academically. All teachers are required to make an initial contact with the parent that includes a positive report only. Additionally, teachers must make ongoing calls at least monthly with at least one positive report during the conversation. One teacher reported that there are teachers who call all of their parents on a weekly basis. The principal sends a weekly voice communication to parents and interview

participants stated that this has been a practice that has bolstered parent engagement at the school. Parent engagement was considered one of the existing barriers at achievement; however, Achievement has implemented practices that has improved the communication. Additionally, the school's social workers visit the homes of students for face-to-face communication with parents.

Love and Care. "Love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others" (Freire, 2014, p. 89). The theme of love and care resonated with the interview participants as the intrinsic motivation that propelled them to achieve unparalleled academic success with students at Achievement. Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Watson (2014), whose research is grounded in the "power of love" as a means to meet the academic needs of students of color, believes that genuine love and care impacts students' academic knowledge and furthermore, advances them far beyond educational standards. One parent credited this ethos of care and love with developing her son into a stronger student with confidence to self-advocate and ask questions. The student struggled with his parents' divorce, and as a result he would have challenges during the school day.

Both parents interviewed were passionate as they described the care and love that the school staff has for the students at Achievement. One of the volunteers stated that the perfect word to describe Achievement is love because it was evident that the school is a safe haven where students are loved. The principal, Dr. Glover, also described Achievement as a "safe and loving" school that equips their students with the education that they need and deserve. While some of the interview participants may not have used the word love, they expressed that at Achievement, there is an affectionate concern for the well-being of the students which drives the staff to embrace the "whatever it takes" position to ensure student success for all students. According to Clingan (2005), this is called a Pedagogy of Love where the core of human

motivation is "love", and she also contends that based on her research, "everything that is written about change, transformation, or justice is about love".

High Expectations and Accountability. The academic infrastructure at Achievement hinges on a strong belief that all students must be held to high academic standards, and teachers and students alike must believe that they can and will succeed. The highly embraced motto "High expectations without accountability is a recipe for disaster" is exemplified throughout Achievement. Additionally, the adopted saying can be seen on bulletin boards and t-shirts and heard in meetings. The principal strongly believes that a belief that students can learn is not enough; it must be paired with effective curriculum and instruction. Teachers take responsibility for the teaching and learning that occurs in their classrooms. Progress monitoring is critical to the success at Achievement, and they frequently monitor the data to determine if students are learning at expected levels. The increased school performance grade every year means that a higher percentage of students are achieving grade level status and more students are meeting the expected growth according to state standards. The administration, teachers, students, support staff, community volunteers, and parents understand that the only way that they will continue to grow is if everyone agrees to give their absolute best.

Similar to Kannapel and Clements (2005) study of eight high poverty, high performing schools, I found that this school has high expectations for faculty and staff who held high expectations for all students. Research shows that public schools have not been as successful educating poor and students of color compared to middle-to-upper income white students; however, a laser-like focus on academic achievement and high expectations is essential to success in high-poverty, high population of students of color schools (Gallager, 2012; Kannapel

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& Clements, 2005; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Reeves, 1995; Stosich, 2017) and the findings in this study support these conclusions.

Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge. What is the role of the school principal in institutionalizing cultural knowledge in a school with high poverty, a high percentage of students of color, and a high percentage of students with increasing academic achievement? Terrell and Lindsey (2018) assert that school leaders should cultivate an environment infused with culturally proficient norms. This includes "making learning about cultural groups and their experiences and perspectives an integral part of the staff's professional development" (p. 34). Understanding the cultures of the students and their families is an element of institutionalizing cultural knowledge, and Dr. Glover has a keen awareness of the cultures of her students and families. She also possesses a similar consciousness about the cultures of her staff and is able to describe different aspects of the cultures of her diverse staff. Dr. Glover believes that the diversity in her staff is one of the strengths of her staff viewing their differences as strengths instead of barriers to success. Dr. Glover shared that she is collaborating with her leadership team to develop professional learning opportunities to establish this same belief as it relates to the cultures of their students. Beachum and McCray's (2014) Culturally Relevant Leadership Framework believes that principal leaders at this stage have demonstrated both liberatory consciousness and pluralistic insight. While the school has grown significantly in creating a culturally proficient (Terrell & Lindsey, 2012) school environment, Dr. Glover believes that Achievement has not reached reflexive practice (Beachum & McCray, 2004) where the ideas consistently become practice.

> When our teachers meet with their parents individually, either before or after the Culture
> Nights, they learn more about the culture of the individual families. I would say that we

are "becoming" in this area like Michelle Obama's book. Yes, we are in the process of getting to know or discovering all of the cultures at Achievement.

The principal also plans field trips with the teachers to the communities where the students live. Although the school is positioned in the community, and there is evidence of poverty as close as across the street from the school, the principal wants the teachers to go deep into the community to gain a better understanding of where the students come from, and some of the hardships and struggles that they endure. Coupled with the field trip is professional development that reiterates the school's vision to provide a high-quality education to all students. The principal does not want her teachers to lower their standards for students who live in adverse conditions but provide the level of support students need to succeed. The expectations remain high at Achievement despite students' races or socioeconomic statuses. Parrett and Budge (2012) contend that "high expectations hold incredible power, often single-handedly determining the fine line or enormous chasm between success and failure" (p. 73). Scholars (Bustamante et. al., 2009; Khalifa, 2013; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012) advocate that leadership and pedagogy exercised through a cultural lens promote inclusiveness that has a positive impact on marginalized students' academic achievement. As conveyed by one of the parents at Achievement, the teacher goes above and beyond to understand her family's dynamics and culture which has positively impacted how the teacher engages with the student during instruction. The parent believes that her child loves learning because of his relationship with his teacher.

This profound statement from a parent is a testament to one of the findings of this study that institutionalizing cultural knowledge, a component of the cultural shift, contributes to the academic success of Achievement.

Instructional Capacity Building

The principal of Achievement has been credited with leading her team to achieve its highest state performance grade in history; nevertheless, it is also the belief at Achievement that the heart of the systemic school improvement are the teachers. Supported by research, teachers are the most important factor in turning around low-performing schools serving economically-disadvantaged students of color (Eckert, 2013; Ingersoll, 2004). The interview process for teachers at Achievement includes a panel interview, and the focus is to determine if the teacher candidates have the "heart" to work at a school that serves an underrepresented, disadvantaged student population. The teacher candidates must demonstrate that they understand and believe the established urgency at Achievement to ensure that all students are learning to high standards. Additionally, their competencies must expand well beyond the technical knowledge required of educators. Researchers (Fry & Dewit, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Parrett and Budge, 2012) support the notion that the effective teacher at schools serving traditionally marginalized students embodies unique pedagogical skills.

Achievement has committed to focusing all professional development on building the instructional capacity of their teachers. Wagner et al. (2006) contends that a compelling practice in school transformation is to evaluate the current expertise on the team, determine which positions are needed to significantly impact teaching and learning, and strategically assign or onboard staff to those positions. The leadership at Achievement decided to implement the Opportunity Culture program which included hiring two instructional experts, Multi-Classroom Leaders (MCLs). Opportunity Culture was adopted based on the promise that 100%-700% more students are reached with effective instruction by expert teachers through this model. The MCLs lead small, collaborative teams of two to eight teachers in the same grade level or subject area

where they focus on the instructional standard of excellence. The MCLs also work with teachers individually by providing coaching, modeling effective instructional strategies, and giving feedback on lessons. Additionally, sessions are scheduled to review and analyze student learning data followed by designing plans to change instruction if there is not evidence that every student is experiencing high-growth learning.

The lack of quality teachers and instability of the teaching force is a harsh reality in schools with underrepresented populations (Jacob, 2007; Lewis et al., 2012; Papay et al., 2017). Understanding this challenge, Achievement has invested in building the instructional capacity of their current teachers to become highly effective. The interview participants regarded their quality of teachers and the capacity building practices as contributors to the school's success.

Supportive Practices

What specific practices and initiatives are implemented in the school? Findings indicate that Achievement implemented specific policies, practices and initiatives in the school as part of the school's journey to improve the academic achievement for all students. The Leadership Team underwent a process of "pruning and growing" (Parrett & Budge, 2012) to identify and abandon practices and initiatives that were not making an impact on the growth of the school. The principal also led the team through an evaluative process to examine and eliminate those practices, structures and initiatives that are currently perpetuating injustices to students of color from impoverished communities (McCray & Beachum, 2014; Dantley, 2010). This practice of liberatory consciousness identifies with the culturally relevant leadership framework as a form of critical consciousness (McCray & Beachum, 2014). Additionally, they identified practices and programs that should remain or be implemented to support the school improvement plan.

Spirituality

Spiritual leadership is a hidden strength oftentimes ascribed to African American school leaders with a boldness to improve schools (Thompson, 2012). The principal, Dr. Glover, believes that her faith in God has been instrumental in the upward trajectory of academic achievement for the students. Dr. Glover believes that "prayer changes things" and regards prayer as one of the preeminent factors that has contributed to the school's success. The majority of the staff voluntarily participates in a Wednesday morning prayer time where someone leads prayer and an inspirational moment is shared. One of the teachers believes that the prayer time motivates the staff, gives them strength to do their most challenging work, and has been the catalyst for staff bonding.

The principal makes intentional efforts to tell her staff and students that she cares for them and is deeply concerned about what happens at the school. The principal also believes that developing relationship with parents makes a difference because if her parents understands that she cares about what happens with their child at school, then they are more apt to believe in and support the school. According to Thompson (2012),

> "Spiritual leaders take responsibility, lookout for their colleagues, and lead by example not by dictatorial orders and punishment. This attitude of looking out for others is certainly what makes the spiritual leader an effective advocate for school improvement and student achievement" (p.108).

This spiritual leadership has inspired most of the Achievement team to follow the principal on a spiritual journey and join her every Wednesday morning to petition God on behalf of Achievement. Throughout the interviews, I would often hear the participants make statements so as "thank God" and "my God" during their conversations with me. The school's most

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involved community partner is a local black church in the community who prays for Achievement's academic success every week at their sanctuary. The theme of spirituality continued to resurface during the study.

Student Attendance

"Children living in poverty are two to three times more likely to be chronically absent— and face the most harm because their community lacks the resources to make up for the lost learning in school. Students from communities of color as well as those with disabilities are disproportionately affected (Attendance Works, n.d.). Achievement School understands the consequences of chronic absenteeism and has an attendance policy in place to hold parents and students accountable for school attendance. The attendance policy is paired with a care system whereby the school social workers will call home and conduct home visits to check on the students. Sometimes the social worker is able to reach the student and transport the student to school.

Uniform School

Achievement School is one of only two schools in the district that has a uniform policy. Dr. Glover discussed the school uniform whereby students are required to abide by this policy, and there are consequences if families do not comply with the uniform policy. The majority of the participants agree that the uniform policy is a positive for the school and allows the students to focus on their education instead of their fashion. Realizing the impact of the existing financial barrier for students living in poverty, Achievement provides one uniform to every student at the beginning of the school year. The principal describes the process:

This year we will give every student a top and a bottom during Open House. We went out

and raised money and got people to support us with uniforms so everyone will get a

brand-new shirt and pants or skirt, you know, a bottom. We will do that at Open House.

The interview participants uniformly believed that the uniform policy has encouraged students to

divert their attention to instruction rather than their fashion. One of the parents, Mr. Simmons

believes that the uniform policy has both relieved a financial burden for parents and encouraged

students to refocus.

Additionally, if a student's uniform is not clean or any other condition that would make

the student feel uncomfortable, the school has a uniform closet for students to borrow a uniform

for the day. A community laundromat will clean up to ten uniforms per week without charge for

the school's uniform closet.

Initiatives Contributing to Success

There are four main initiatives that emerged from the study: Opportunity Culture, After-

School Tutoring Program, Youth Empowerment Mentoring Program, and PBIS.

Opportunity Culture

Opportunity Culture is the newest initiative at Achievement Elementary School where

two "excellent" teachers were hired to work with an assigned team of teachers to increase

student outcomes by extending the reach of exceptional teachers. Principal Glover also increased

professional learning opportunities within the school day through this initiative using protected

time for planning, collaboration, and development according to the Opportunity Culture Design

Plan (OCDP) for Achievement. The OCDP also suggested that students need excellent teaching

consistently to close gaps and propel ahead, and teachers need more support through coaching,

mentoring, and professional learning. Ms. Abdullah emphasized that several measures were

implemented including a special intervention block where students attend a class based on the specific subject area whereby the student needs remediation. The MCLs also lead data days twice per week as a component of the Opportunity Culture initiative.

After-School Extended Day Program

The School Improvement Plan outlines the design of the afterschool program. Achievement selects up to 50 of its lowest performing students to receive the supplemental programming taught by the highest performing teachers at Achievement. In addition to the teachers who are assigned to the afterschool program, the MCLs who are considered the "master" instructional leaders at Achievement, are the directors of the program and must be present during the afterschool program. The MCLs also provide training, monitoring, evaluation, and feedback for the afterschool model. Benchmark testing is administered quarterly to all students; however, the students enrolled in the tutoring program participate in monthly benchmark testing. Students also have the opportunity to test out of the afterschool tutoring program once they meet their academic goals.

Youth Empowerment Mentoring Program

The Youth Empowerment Mentoring Program is a gender-specific mentoring program for black males at Achievement. The staff and faculty at Achievement observed the absence of a black adult male both in the home of their students and on their staff. The program was designed for the black male students to have a black male mentor to encourage them both socially and academically. Pastor Miller is the coordinator of the program and takes great pride in the opportunity to partner with the school. The tutors talk to the male students about life situations and living as a black male in society. They also provide tutoring and expose them to life outside of their communities through field trips. As an extension of the Youth Empowerment Program,

there are female volunteers from the community who mentor and tutor other students who are not in the Youth Empowerment Mentoring Program.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

PBIS is an evidence-based framework implemented schoolwide to address student behaviors through a system of positive reinforcements. The Center on Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports assert that if PBIS is implemented with fidelity: (a) students achieve improved social and academic outcomes, (b) schools experience reduced exclusionary discipline practices, and (c) school personnel feel more effective. The PBIS Team, which consisted of the assistant principal, MCLs, teachers, cafeteria staff, and a bus driver, established a system of clear school-wide expectations with incentives and consequences that guided the implementation of the PBIS program. The focus was on the recognition and celebration for students' successes. The PBIS program was actively employed in each classroom visited during observations. Students were recognized and praised for positive behaviors, and students received interventions to guide them to refocus their unsuccessful behaviors.

Implications for Practice

There are several implications for practice resulting from this intrinsic case study. This study offers school districts that consist of schools with students of color from economically-disadvantaged homes an academic infrastructure that has been successful at one particular school. The district could develop professional development offerings based on the core elements found in this study. The academic gap persists, and low-performing districts and schools are continuing to search for ways to improve educational outcomes for students of color living in poverty.

The findings in the study strongly suggest the centrality of principal leadership as the impetus for school improvement. This has an implication on both school leadership preparation programs and school district professional learning plans for school leaders. The school leadership exemplified by the principal was multifarious with a blend of practices from the following leadership styles: Managerial leadership; Transformational leadership; Instructional leadership; and Shared leadership.

The core elements found in this study have implications on how school districts can support schools. District leaders are tasked with conducting school walkthroughs and leadership walks with principals. While these core elements are unique to the school in this study, they can serve as a starting guide or model when providing support to schools with similar populations. District leaders can also use the findings from this study to identify principals for schools serving students of color in poverty. It is a common practice for districts to be reactive instead of proactive as it relates to school reform. The change in principalship is usually the result of state accountability measures placed on the school district to improve the academic performance of low performing schools. The principal's appointment to Achievement was the result of a persistently low achieving status by the state. Successful turnaround principals are usually transferred to another low-performing school in crisis once they have changed the status at their existing school. A proactive posture is needed to identify and place principals in schools serving marginalized populations of students prior to a crisis instead of playing "musical chairs" with a few successful turnaround principals.

Additionally, this study has implications on how schools can develop systems to expand the professional capacity of teachers at schools with similar demographics as the school in this study. Achievement had an intentional focus on not only providing high qualified teachers for

their students, but they invested in professional learning models that would equip teachers to become highly effective by implementing instructional strategies that would advance students' learning. The principal embodied a compelling vision to ensure all teachers were coached and mentored to excellence with an emphasis on data-based decision making to inform the instruction in their classrooms. Additionally, hiring the "right" teachers for schools serving underserved and underrepresented populations is an implication of this study as research has indicated that the teaching force in schools serving students of color and students living in poverty is representative of many ineffective, inexperienced teachers. The school in this study realized that teaching under challenging circumstances required a "heart" for the work and relentless dedication to the academic achievement of all students. These qualities were a must in order to be considered for hire at Achievement.

Implications (Recommendations) for Further Research

This case study focused on one elementary school with a population of over 90% African American students, and over 90% of students living in poverty. While the results of this study are not meant to be generalized, the findings are closely aligned to existing research on high-performing, high-poverty, high population of students of color schools. There is a need to continue thoroughly investigating the factors that contribute to the success of these schools because the opportunity gap for marginalized populations continues to persist in America's public schools.

The focus of this study was not on the school leader; however, the principal of the school, who was identified as the change agent, is an African American female. Using the Culturally Relevant Leadership framework, this study revealed that as an African American leader, the principal was able to institutionalize cultural knowledge based on her experience as a Black

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leader from her community which was also the school's community. While there is limited research on the impact that Black school leaders have on schools serving majority black and brown students, there is a need to continue researching this impact on black and brown students' academic achievement.

Within the same school district and in the same community of the school in this study is another school with the same student demographics; however, the school has remained on the state's persistently low-performing list. Additional research that includes a comparative study of neighboring schools with similar demographics and different performance outcomes would benefit those districts who are struggling to understand why one school succeeds and another school fails.

Another recommendation for future research is that researchers could examine Principal Leadership in high performing schools and examine the presence of the multifarious leadership style of the principal in this study. This is especially relevant to the identification of leaders and/or the development and training of leaders. In addition, studies focused on Principal Leadership would be valuable to research on principal burnout, lack of support and other issues. The principal in this study realized that she must relinquish power and implement a structure of teacher leaders in an effort to not reach burnout. Understanding how these leaders overcome common barriers could be helpful for the prevention of leaders becoming discouraged and transferring to other schools.

An interesting finding in this study was the make-up of the teaching force when the school was successful in comparison to the teaching force at Achievement when the school was low-performing. The school had less experienced teachers during the school year that the school earned a "B" in comparison to the percentage of experienced teachers when the school was

designated as a "D" school. I am not suggesting that teacher experience does not matter, but this was unique to this study and has implications for future research.

Spiritual leadership is another area where additional research could be explored. While many of the participants believed that the school was successful because of their religious practices at the school, this was not a part of the conceptual framework for this study. There is limited research on the impact of this style of leadership. Researchers (Dantley, 2010; Thompson, 2012) have investigated the idea of spiritual leadership and recognizes its impact on school transformation that addresses academic achievement that is both inclusive and equitable. Dantley (2010) contends "principals who are transformative leaders are those who allow their spiritual selves to assist them in the execution of their leadership responsibilities (p. 215). The principal in this study undeniably credits much of her success as a turnaround leader to her spirituality and the meaningfulness that spirituality has in communities of color. Exploring this connection as it relates to the racial and ethnic characteristics of the principal and its impact on student outcomes in schools with majority students of color is also an implication for future research.

Finally, continued research on schools with populations of students who are majority students of color of color and economically-disadvantaged and the factors that contribute to their success would add to the existing literature exploring viable models for school improvement. In this study, it was determined that there were numerous factors, themes, and core elements that contributed to academic achievement; however, an in-depth examination of student roles and perceptions or even from the vantage of the school district is a recommendation for future research. Examining the subject from varying perspectives could prove valuable.

Researcher Reflections

Pursuing my doctoral degree has been a personal transformative experience of incomparable adventures wrought with personal and professional growth. Embarking upon the quest towards the pinnacle of scholarly achievement has been a daunting yet fulfilling experience with unpredictable waves of exhilaration and exhaustion. My 25 years of experience in education as an educator, administrator, non-profit executive, and district superintendent of schools has been undeniably rewarding; however, I have been entrenched in systems across this nation that have struggled to adequately address the apparent perpetual unstable landscape of schools serving students of color from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This academic journey has provided the opportunity to acquire a deeper understanding of the systems that perpetuate inequities for marginalized students and discover the overwhelming complexities involved in school transformation.

Admittedly, one of the most impactful and insightful opportunities I have experienced were the unforgettable months that I shared with the staff, students, parents, and volunteers at Achievement Elementary School. The opportunity came at a time when professionally, I was the superintendent of a district responsible for the lowest performing schools in the state, and Achievement provided a reminder that there are schools and leaders with a concerted focus on providing a high-quality, equitable education to all students. After spending days observing at Achievement, and attending events, the staff embraced me as part of their family which made for interviews where genuine conversations ensued.

After every visit, I sojourned back home which was an hour away from the school. During this time, I reflected on the observations of the day or listened to recordings of the interviews conducted on that day. This time of immediate reflection provided an opportunity for

me to become immersed in the data. The interviews produced various emotions which assured me that they were being thoughtful and transparent in their responses. Sometimes we laughed, other times were serious, and there were moments when tears were shed. One interview participant told me that she felt that I was a "God-sent" because she needed someone to talk to that particular day.

As I write my final chapter, I do so during a national pandemic that has affected schools and families across the nation. Our country is also in the midst of a national social justice movement focused on protecting black lives. Will these events exacerbate the academic disparities that separate students of color from their white counterparts? For me, this creates a greater urgency to improve our schools serving students of color from low-income homes with the education that they deserve.

Conclusion

The basic premise of this study was to develop a profound understanding of the factors contributing to the reversed trend of low performance at a specific elementary school with a high demographic of students of color who live in poverty. Additionally, the researcher sought to understand if the principal institutionalized cultural knowledge. Heightened accountability by national reforms have attempted to close the pervasive achievement and opportunity gaps that exist; however, America's public schools have been unsuccessful in providing an equitable, high quality education for every student. Despite these unfavorable trends of low academic achievement that are bequeathed to schools educating marginalized student populations, there are schools that have successfully embarked upon improvement journeys resulting in high-performing, high-poverty schools with high percentages of students of color (Gallager, 2012; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Parker et al.; 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Reeves; 1995).

Achievement, the school selected for this study, has also traversed along a successful quest of school improvement. This study found that there are four core elements operating in tandem that have contributed to Achievement's success and the sustainability of academic progress: School leadership; School Culture Shift; Professional Capacity Building, and Supportive Practices. The success of the schools depends on the simultaneous execution of all components of the academic infrastructure (Figure 5). The Wallace Foundation (2011) asserts that:

> Education research shows that most school variables, considered separately, have at most small effects on learning. The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach critical mass. Creating the conditions under which that can occur is the job of the principal. (p. 2)

Dr. Glover expressed that there was not a silver bullet that catapulted the school to unparalleled dimensions of academic success for the students; but it was the careful (re)design of the school which included the seven significant themes that emerged during the study and the will to maintain momentum through the ebbs and flows.

Additionally, the principal institutionalizes cultural knowledge through creative professional development, and she recognizes that while this is a work in progress, it has proven advantages for the students and the diverse staff population. Dr. Glover shared that the journey of school improvement is comparable to losing weight. Those who want to lose weight often want the results over night, but they fail to realize that the weight was not gained instantaneously. Dr. Glover and her team acknowledges that the school had been low-performing for many years, and they have been committed to staying the course to foster students' academic outcomes and maintain a steady climb in academic performance towards a school grade of "A".

Achievement is one of several success stories, and we must assiduously promote immense visibility of successful school models that have demonstrated the capacity to disrupt deep-embedded trends of low achievement. Although the findings of this study are not intended to be generalized and the researcher recognizes that every school is unique within its individual context, school leaders can learn from the experiences of successful schools.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Research Question:

What are the processes and practices that enable an urban school with high poverty, high percentage of students of color, to have a high percentage of students with increased academic achievement?

Research Questions	Interview Questions
What are the processes and practices in the school?	1. What is the vision and/or mission of your school? 2. How would you describe your school? 3. What contributes to the student growth in achievement at your school? 4. Tell me about practices that make a difference. 5. What are the policies the school has implemented? 6. Tell me about programs that have made a difference. 7. What do educators (Administrators and teachers) and staff believe and value in your school? 8. How does your school (individually and systematically) sustain improvement in student achievement?
Sub-Question A: Who is involved in the processes that enable students to be successful?	1. How are decisions made at the school? 2. What factors are considered in the decision making processes? **3.** Who is involved in the decision-making in your school?

Sub-Question B: How did the school achieve this level of success and how does it sustain its progress?	1. How would you describe your school? 2. What are the greatest challenges of the school?
Sub-Question C: What is the role of the school principal in institutionalizing in a school with high poverty, high percentage of students of color, and a high percentage of students with increasing academic achievement?	1. How would you describe the school's culture? 2. What changes in the school culture have contributed to the improvement of students' academic performances? 4. How did the changes take place? 5. What role do students' cultures, their families, and communities play in the in the instruction and curriculum of the school? 6. How about leadership of the school and how it meets the needs of students?? 6. What does the school and its leadership emphasize in the school? 8. In what specific ways does the school emphasize and focus on issues that arise in the school?
Sub-Question D: What specific practices and initiatives are implemented in the school?	1. Tell me what is happening here. 2. What are the practices that make a difference? 3. What specific initiatives have been implemented? 4. How do you know they are working? 5. Who takes a leading role in the school? 6. How would you describe the learning environment for the students in the school? 7. What do you consider the strengths of the school? 8. How are resources deployed effectively for student success?