

# **NCPEA**

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# The Cultural Ecology of Scholar-Practitioner Leaders: An Ethnographic Study of Leadership

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*The purpose of this critical ethnographic study was to examine the nature and meaning of cultural ecology in relation to preparing scholar-practitioner leaders. The ethnography focused on how the discourses and practices within the disciplinary setting of leadership preparation shape the identity of social scholar-practitioner leaders. The ethnographic study drew from Steward's (2005) writings on cultural ecology and Foucault's (1979, 1980) writings on "regimes of truth" and power/knowledge relationships, to frame a lens for examining the cultural forces at work in and through an ecology of the leadership preparation program. The author examined the cultural ecology of leadership preparation that is defined, in part, by developing scholar-practitioners as democratic, socially just leaders. Also examined is the evolution of a cultural ecology within the Department and the doctoral program.*

**Editors Note:** *Patrick M. Jenlink* is a distinguished Professor of doctoral studies in the Department of Secondary Education and Educational Leadership and Director of the Educational Research Center at Stephen F. Austin State University. In each ELRDR issue, we will highlight an exemplary model of doctoral research. He has authored numerous articles, guest edited journals, authored or co-authored numerous chapters in books, and authored, edited or co-edited several books. Along with his accomplishments in our field, Dr. Jenlink's stellar study serves as a model for the recent doctoral graduates whose research and writing is featured for this ELRDR issue.

## Introduction

Conceptions of educational leadership are embedded within the culture that surrounds them. This may be said of leadership preparation as well. There is, in this sense, a cultural ecology of leadership preparation and practice. Social psychological and cultural approaches to leadership preparation and practice often highlight the relational aspects of leadership, focusing on that which transpires between individuals in relationships of varying natures.

Within the cultural contexts of leadership as a discipline situated in educational settings, shifting patterns of social practice among educational leaders suggest a concern for naïve overspecialization engendered by disciplinarity; a affect of discourses and practices that work within a cultural ecology (Steward, 2005) of leadership preparation.

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Herein lies an important consideration for what Foucault (1979) termed “disciplinary practices” and how these practices inform or otherwise shape the preparation of educational leaders, particularly when “disciplinary practices” are viewed as forms of knowledge. Disciplinary or disciplining practices refer “to a set of discourses, norms, and routines that shape the ways in which a field of study such as educational administration and its related practices . . . constitute themselves” (Anderson & Grinsberg, 1998, p. 330).

Educational administration/leadership, as a field of study and practice, is a discipline that has a culture defined, in part, by its theoretical, epistemological, and pedagogical practices. Within these disciplining practices there are preparation concerns related to “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1980) that shape the social identity and the social practices of educational leaders. Disciplining practices and discourses, embedded in policy/procedure and curriculum and pedagogies, reflect a politics of truth (ideologies) in a society or a culture within society, and the discourses that are accepted as “truth” to the discipline, or functions as a surrogate for truth.

In this study the author examined the nature of a cultural ecology of leadership preparation, with specific consideration for how the discourses and practices within the discipline of educational administration/leadership shape the identity of educational leaders. Foucault’s (1979, 1980) work on “regimes of truth” and power/knowledge relationships served as a theory base for critically examining the cultural forces at work in and through an ecology of preparation programs, in particular focusing on discourse and practice as cultural influences that shape a sense of “self.” As well, the author was concerned the importance of framing and examining the cultural ecology of leadership preparation that is defined, in part, by developing democratic, socially justice leaders.

### **Purpose/Objectives**

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to examine the nature and meaning of cultural ecology in relation to preparing scholar–practitioner leaders. The ethnography focused on how the discourses and practices within the disciplinary setting of leadership preparation shape the identity of scholar–practitioner leaders. The study draws to the foreground a concern for how “regimes of truth”, bound in ideological and political beliefs, influence leadership as democratic and socially justice practice. Objectives of the study included:

- to explore the nature of and need for understanding the cultural ecology of educational leadership preparation;
- to examine, through a cultural ecology lens, the nature of “regimes of truth” in educational leadership preparation programs and how these regimes translate into disciplining discourses and practices; and
- to analyze, through a lens of cultural ecology, the conceptualization of scholar–practitioner leadership in relation to the curricular and pedagogical discourses and practices in leadership.

## Theoretical Frame

The theoretical framework for this study focused on the cultural ecology of leadership preparation (Bligh & Meindl, 2004). Cultural ecology is the human interaction with the environment (Sutton & Anderson, 2010), or in the case of leadership preparation, cultural ecology concerns the interaction between the individuals (faculty and students of leadership programs) and the social and cultural contexts within which leadership preparation takes place. The framework also considered the importance of examining the “regimes of truth” that impact the conceptualization of leadership, in particular as related to shaping the social identity of practitioners who are preparing to be democratic, socially just leaders (Bogotch & Roy, 1997; Giroux, 1994).

### Cultural Ecology

Cultural ecology is the study of “the role of culture as a dynamic component of any ecosystem of which humans are a part” (Frake, 1962, p. 53). As a field of study, cultural ecology examines the relationship between a given society and its natural environment, or in the case of educational leadership, it translates into the relationship between leaders and their practice and the environment of the school or educational setting. By extension, then, cultural ecology also studies the individuals that populate a preparation program in relation to the program being the pedagogical environment. Cultural ecology, then, is concerned with the culture of both preparation and practice. In this sense, cultural ecology is concerned with how the “social self” of the leader is developed in both the preparation and practice contexts; how leader identity is shaped.

Cultural ecology of leadership preparation is concerned with cultural consciousness, which is more than cultural assumptions, espoused values, and established practices and processes (Galpin, 1996; Schein, 1999; Zachary, 2005). Understanding the cultural ecology of leadership preparation and practice means examining the “regimes of truth” that define the culture of leadership preparation, ideologically and pedagogically. The study of the culture, examining the discourses and practices that shape the relationships between individual and environment, provides insight about the factors affecting the development of self within socio-cultural contexts (Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Zachary, 2000).

Sutton and Anderson (2010), in examining cultural ecology, explained that ecological work has focused on subsistence as a complex system that includes resources, technology, social and political organizations and forces internal and external to those organizations, and related cultural structures and artifacts. Bligh and Meindl (2004), in examining the cultural ecology of leadership knowledge, noted that complex systems of knowledge are part of the cultural ecology and therein knowledge becomes central to the subsistence of leadership preparation and practice. Importantly, as knowledge patterns within the cultural ecology of leadership have shifted, so too has the nature of discourse—discursive practices or rules of discourse are important considerations in the shaping of an ecology of leadership preparation (Cherryholmes, 1988; Foucault, 1980; Frattura & Capper, 2007).

Cultural ecology, with respect to “regimes of truth” and disciplining discourses and practices within preparation programs, is concerned with the relationships between individuals (students and faculty, as well as other cultural participants) and the presence and growth of politics and political complexity of identity formation, respectively (St. Pierre & Pillow,

2000). The development of the “social self” or “identity” occurs within and in relationship to the cultural ecology, and therein resides, in part, the importance of understanding the cultural anchors of preparation. If democracy and social justice are cultural anchors for leadership preparation, then the value for democratic, socially just leadership gives direction to and at the same time provides the basis for challenging the curricular and pedagogical practices of the preparation program and the faculty responsible for that program (Jenlink, 2013b).

### **Regimes of Truth in Leadership**

Anderson and Grinberg (1998) explained that the complexity and heterogeneity of experiences necessitates consideration of diverse theoretical and philosophical notions of discourse and practice within a discipline such as educational administration/leadership. Anderson and Grinberg (1998) further argued that disciplinary “regimes of truth” define, in part, knowledge in relation to leadership preparation and practice, and work to shape the social “self” of leaders; the identity of social justice leaders. In the cultural ecology of leadership preparation there are disciplinary discourses and practices at work in and through the curriculum and pedagogy that shape the social identity of educational leaders; discourses and practices that the culture “accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault, 1980, p. 131).

Advancing democracy and social justice as disciplining discourses in educational leadership preparation requires an inside out process whereby doctoral students concretize and internalize educational justice leadership systematically to new levels of thinking, patterns of internalized social justice discourse, and conscious habits of practice (Bogotch, Beachum, Blount, Brooks, & English, 2008; Brown, 2004; Frattura & Capper, 2007; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbell-Jones, 2005). Preparing democratic, socially just leaders requires curricular and pedagogical considerations for translating social justice into the disciplinary discourses and practices that define and articulate courses.

### **Cultural Ecology of Leadership**

The culture of contemporary education poses dramatic challenges for the educational leader. Shifting political discourses and pedagogical practices work to shape individual’s understanding of leadership in cultural contexts, and to shape the individual’s understanding of the leader’s social self—the identity as democratic, socially just leader (Bogotch, Beachum, Blount, Brooks, & English, 2008).

The ecological approach to leadership suggests that there is a critical point in space and time, a practiced place where an organization can dwell for an extended period through a process of continual learning and renewal (Hurst, 2012). The length of this period depends on many factors, but the key issue of concern here is the ability of leaders to be effective architects of choice, designing contexts with the optimal combinations of passion, reason, and power.

Importantly, an ecological perspective enables the educational leader to understand relationships. In this sense, the leader is constantly engaged in assessing the situations he/she is in, gauging how he/she feels about them, looking for systems of cause and effect, and trying to understand the power dynamics present. Whenever the educational leader interacts with people – students, teachers, parents, other cultural workers – in the educational setting, he/she is necessarily thinking in contexts of emotion, reason, and power (Hurst, 2012).

The educational leader, situated in the cultural ecology of the school or educational setting, takes on the identity of cultural ecologist. As cultural ecologist, the educational leader necessarily understands the cultural ecology, and with that ecology he/she necessarily focuses on three aspects of the ‘cultural core’: firstly, the relationship between the mode of subsistence and the socio-cultural context of the school or educational setting; secondly, the behaviour patterns associated with this, including the disciplinary practices and discourses and “regimes of truth;” and finally, how the cultural patterns affect other cultural features of the school or educational setting, such as teaching and learning (Steward, 2005; Sutton & Anderson, 2010).

### **Research Design/Methods**

This study incorporated a critical ethnographic approach guided by poststructural concerns for the relationship of knowledge and power and the “politics of truth”. First, using a critical ethnographic approach (Carspecken, 1996; Foucault, 1972, 1980; Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; McLaren, 1995; Quantz, 1992), it draws on the experiences of doctoral faculty and students who were/are primary participants in the implementation of the new doctoral program. The critical ethnographic approach was used to make visible those social constructs (Anderson, 1990) essential in the framing of critical narratives of faculty and students. Second, it draws on a poststructural lens (Anderson & Grinsberg, 1998; Foucault, 1980, 1984a, 1984b) to examine the “regimes of truth” and the shaping of scholar–practitioner leadership as a construct.

Woven into the methodological considerations for critical ethnography was an agenda of legitimating participant’s voice and locating the participant’s meanings in larger impersonal systems of cultural ecology of leadership preparation (Anderson, 1989; Frake, 162; Steward, 2005). Examining social constructs created by participants, as elements of the social and cultural ground, requires the use of a critical hermeneutic lens. The lens selected to guide the inquiry was grounded in Foucault’s (1979, 1980, 1982, 1988a, 1988b) views of “regimes of truth” as rules for discourse. Relevant issues associated with “disciplinary practice” and “disciplinary discourse,” the politics of truth also figured largely in the inquiry process. The influence of Foucault shaped the critical ethnographic approach.

Equally important to shaping the ethnographic lens was the use of a “cultural ecology” frame that guided the inquiry with respect to examining the “regimes of truth” within the curricular and pedagogical discourses and practices. The cultural ecology frame was informed by the work of Bogotch and Roy (1997), Bligh and Meindl (2004), Steward (2005), and Sutton and Anderson (2010), from which a cultural ecology heuristic was delineated and used to inform the development of interview questions, and guide the analysis of the data. The heuristic elements emphasized the societal, cultural, political, ideological, and environmental factors that shape discourses about leadership in the preparation program. The heuristic also considered questions related to the role curriculum and pedagogy play in translating leadership theory into learning and practice.

The participants included 27 doctoral students and 5 faculty members. Data sources for this study included: cultural artifacts (curricular and pedagogical as well as policy), transcripts of audio recorded conversations, transcripts of individual and focus group interviews of the participants, written artifacts from meetings, participants stories of their experiences and critical moments, personal journals, policy discourse (correspondence), and



reflexive journals. A critical inquiry into and analysis of the multiple data sources was used to examine for “regimes of truth”, key questions, themes, and emerging patterns related to the formation of “social self” or “identity”, and the role and relationship of social justice as a form or “truth” in leadership preparation.

### **Cultural Ecology of the University**

It is important to situate the reader within the cultural ecology of the geographical region and university. Stephen F. Austin State University is located in Nacogdoches, the oldest town in the state of Texas. Nacogdoches is a city that has a demographic profile of approximately 63 percent White, 25 percent African American, and 11 percent Hispanic. The demographic profile is shifting rapidly, with the Hispanic population growing steadily each year. With a population of approximately 30,000, Nacogdoches lies in the center of the eastern region called the Piney Woods. The people of Nacogdoches identify their location as Deep East Texas. Being less than an hour’s drive from western Louisiana, some Texans, who live west of Interstate 35, refer to Deep East Texas as being “behind the Pine Curtain,” a phrase suggesting less than positive interpretations of Deep East Texas culture and geography.

The dominant culture of Deep East Texas is reflective of the Deep South, and represented by “a preference for the concrete over the abstract that places concern with personal, family, and community relations” (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991, pp. 12-13). There is a prevalence of conservatism tempered by a strong sense of utilitarianism and anti-intellectualism that defines a southern epistemology of life, practice and activity. Deep East Texas, over time has grown into a cultural homogenization—a sameness that permeates all aspects of culture. Although there is a range in demographic diversity, the Deep East Texas cultural homogenization permeates the human geography.

Historically, SFA could be characterized as a small regional university that is not part of any one of several formal university systems that dominate higher education in Texas. SFA prides itself on not being part of a system, enjoying an identity as an independent institution that serves the needs of Deep East Texas, but recognizes its role in serving the broader needs of Texas albeit often in the shadow of Deep East Texas. SFA can also be characterized as a university in which service and teaching—in other words, practice—are valued more than scholarship. Faculty who arrive from the outside and who are not sensitive to the need to become part of the “place”, risk being assigned to a category of “placelessness” described by Kincheloe and Pinar (1991, p. 13). Such placelessness is reminiscent of the ethnographer’s “outsider” who is not part of the culture, and who is viewed with suspicion and distrust. Sensitivity to the local culture is essential if outsiders are to win acceptance by the locals who see themselves as insiders, and who demonstrate the clear hegemony of power often experienced as part of the larger cultural context of Deep East Texas, and the university. Importantly, one doctoral faculty member shared a critical perspective on the place,

The institution, the culture of this PLACE has had significant influence because the program had to develop within an environment that did not have a rigorous doctoral program . . . This region, university, and department did not really value academic rigor because it was not present in the programs. Rigorous requirements were not in place for any program, department, or course. It was an anti-reading, anti-writing, and anti-intellectual environment.

The culture of Deep East Texas, and therefore SFA to a degree, is one dominated by historical discourses that reflect arrangements of power and the hierarchy of participation, within and across the community and university. There are rules of discourse distinctly Deep East Texas, which, as Cherryholmes (1988) stated, “govern what is said and what remains unsaid. They identify who can speak with authority and who must listen. They are anonymous because there is no identifiable author” (p. 34). The condition of governance described by Cherryholmes is indicative of East Texas in that the historical context of this place has produced a hegemonic and hierarchical society with rules about participation that guarantees the reproduction of the dominance by one segment of the population. The rules of discourse contribute to the invisibility of social phenomena that seek to control and otherwise direct the activity of a Deep East Texas human geography.

### **Programmatic Ecology**

Situating the reader within the programmatic ecology is equally important. In simple terms, sharing the pedagogical, ideological, and political orientations of the program provides insight with respect to the culture within which the doctoral students and faculty interact. The doctoral program is an Ed.D. and is one of three doctoral programs in the university. Of the three doctoral programs, the Ed.D. program has the largest enrolment and is recognized for its high completion rate.

The preparation of scholar–practitioner leaders in SFA’s doctoral program began in the summer of 1997 with fourteen students and six faculty members. Subsequently, fifteen additional cohorts of doctoral students have been admitted across as many years at the time of this study, each cohort varying in size and demographic profile with African American, Hispanic and White students, and varying ratios of male and female students. The admissions process is a three-phase process. Phase one is characterized as more traditional with graduate application forms and materials submitted to the Graduate School. Phase two is at the Department level and requires a completed application form to the doctoral program along with a narrative leadership profile, resume, and references. Phase three is on-campus and includes a formal presentation, interview and writing sample. Each point of information collected in the application process is wholistically assessed by the individual faculty members and then collectively by the Doctoral Faculty Council.<sup>1</sup>

The cultural underpinnings – the values and beliefs – that guide the doctoral studies curriculum are instructed by the construct of scholar–practitioner leadership. The construct of

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<sup>1</sup> Doctoral Faculty Council references all faculty teaching core doctoral courses. It is important to note that the Doctoral Faculty profile in the early stages of the doctoral program was 100% White. The gender ratio was approximately 60% male and 40% female. As the program evolved, over time and in concert with each successive cohort of doctoral students, so too did the demographic profile of faculty. One African American female faculty member joined the doctoral program, and over time the gender balance has shifted to a female dominant profile. It is also important to note that in the early stages only two doctoral faculty members had doctoral teaching and dissertation experience, whereas now all faculty are experienced in teaching doctoral courses, however two have yet to chair dissertations. There has been a constant pattern of doctoral faculty joining the program for 2-5 years, then leaving. At this time, only one doctoral faculty remains of the original six that began with the program 17 years ago.

scholar–practitioner leadership<sup>2</sup> is premised on an alternative epistemology of *inquiry as practice*, wherein the leader as scholar and her/his leadership practice are inseparable from scholarly and critically oriented inquiry. Scholar–practitioner leadership is grounded in a postmodern—post-positivist view of leadership, which seeks to blur boundaries in the knowledge–practice and inquiry–practice relationships.

Historically, the “scholar” has most often been associated with academe and the university setting, and therefore her/his practice was understood as one of formal research and the development of formal knowledge (codified knowledge). Herein the “scholar” may be viewed as having a form of power. Foucault (1980) argued that, by its analysis, the relationship of knowledge and power might be understood. He explained: “Once knowledge can be analysed in terms of region, domain, implantation, displacement, transposition, one is able to capture the process by which knowledge functions as a form of power and disseminates the effects of power” (p. 69). Challenging the historical notions of “scholar,” recent efforts have been undertaken to reexamine the meaning of “scholar” within the context of educational leadership preparation and practice (Anderson & Jones, 2000; Jenlink, 2001a, 2001b; Jenlink, 2003a, 2003b; Riehl, et al., 2000).

Whereas historical notions of knowledge as “formal” or “codified” dominated the epistemological and cultural ecology of educational administration preparation and practice, what have been subjugated knowledges<sup>3</sup> with respect to leadership, i.e., “the historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functional coherence or formal systemisation” (Foucault, 1980, p. 69), are now emerging and are being recognized as legitimate and important forms of knowledge, in particular as the relationships of knowledge, inquiry, practice, and theory move to the foreground of discourses on and in educational administration and leadership.

A scholar–practitioner leader is aware of the origins, contexts, and patterns of the knowledge related to an issue; social problems that interpret as justice and equity issues in school and educational settings. Equally important, the scholar–practitioner leader works from a repertoire of inquiry methods to explore, create, and transform social relations and knowledge within the larger political, economic, and cultural struggles of education and society. What being critical implies is that at the same time as the questioning and researching

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<sup>2</sup> Leadership has been variously researched and written about for decades and therefore will not be explored within this paper in that such an activity in and of itself would fill volumes. However, for purposes of this study, leadership as used throughout connotes the practices and activities of individuals at all levels of the school and educational system that, through their actions, demonstrate an understanding of purpose and moral imperatives that guide and facilitate the practices and activities of others. Therein, leadership is premised on making permeable traditional role boundaries often associated with the authoritarian figure of the person in leadership roles in the school or educational setting. As well, leadership as used herein is understood as transcending the differentiation of traditional roles/responsibilities that set hierarchical structures in schools and define leadership identity, such as principal and teacher. As used in concert with scholar–practitioner, leadership denotes the processes and actions of any person (teacher, principal, parent, or student) who seeks cultural and social change through social critique and praxis. Leadership also connotes symmetry with respect to distribution and use of power and acknowledges that teachers as well as principals and parents are responsible for leadership within the school and educational systems. Bligh and Meindl (2004), in conducting an analysis of leadership books, historical and contemporary, provided insight to the patterns of knowledge and discourse that have shaped a cultural ecology of leadership.

<sup>3</sup> Knowledge domains that fall outside of the codified or formal knowledge accepted by positivistic and traditional orientations to administration and leadership preparation and practice, such as cross-disciplinary (Kincheloe, 2001), indigenous, and practitioner-based inquiry as discussed by Anderson and Herr (1999).

occurs, the knowledge, values, and beliefs that are uncovered must be framed within a consideration of their implications for social justice, caring, and democracy. This framing, questioning, and researching activity is embedded within a continuous critical reflection on what is uncovered.

To accomplish his/her work, the scholar–practitioner necessarily engages in critical inquiry to disembed ideologies that work to control culture and practice. Simultaneously, he/she exhibits an epistemological curiosity necessary to understanding and examining the origin of forms of knowledge dominant in the educational setting, and what other sources and forms of knowledge are necessary to creating learning experiences that are just and equitable for students from social groups of difference.

The scholar–practitioner leader understands the complexity of social relations and in general the complex nature of political and cultural struggles in which education is engaged within society. Pragmatically, the scholar–practitioner is consciously aware that every action has critical implications for themselves and others. He/she also realizes that reality is not something external to human consciousness that can be discovered through some scientific process. To be a scholar–practitioner leader implies that knowledge, values, and beliefs cannot be given or transmitted to others, but that these other individuals must be allowed participation in the construction of meaning, definition, knowledge, or action. Simultaneously, the scholar–practitioner understands the import of facilitating a critical literacy, for her/himself and for others. The scholar–practitioner leader embodies the values of social justice, caring, equity, self-criticality, and democracy and he/she understands that their role as leader is equally one of cultural worker and scholarly practitioner within the classroom, school, educational community, and in state and regional/national policy making contexts.

A fundamental concern for social justice and democracy is at the heart of scholar–practitioners’<sup>4</sup> work in schools. Inseparably linked with this concern is the question of whether schools are to serve and reproduce the existing society or to adopt a more critical role of challenging the dominant social order so as to develop and advance society’s democratic imperatives (Giroux, 1992a, 1992b, 1994; Kincheloe, 1999). The educational leader recognizes, as Niebuhr (1946) argued, that as a society our “capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but [our] inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary” (Niebuhr, 1946, p. xi). A more passive role lends to reproduction of the existing society, with its injustices, whereas a critical active role that challenges dominant social orders lends to transformation and the realization of a just, democratic society.

The scholar–practitioner understands that when social justice and democracy are central to the purpose of education, then schools enable the widest diffusion of teaching and learning as “a model of cultural renewal, in effect, to support something peculiarly consonant with the democratization of culture” (Scheffler, 1960, p. 57); democratization that mediates

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<sup>4</sup> The scholar–practitioner construct, as used throughout the reporting of this study, is based on the author’s work, conjoined with colleagues, over 17 years in conjunction with developing and implementing a doctoral program in educational leadership. Scholar–practitioner connotes a professional practitioner who moves beyond the casual consumer level of research, scholarship, and knowledge (inquiry and knowledge for practice) to practitioner level of inquiry, scholarship, and knowledge (inquiry and knowledge of practice) are integral to the leader’s practice, concerned with creating just, equitable, caring, democratic schools (including the administrator and the teacher-as-leader) on a day-to-day basis. For a comprehensive examination of scholar–practitioner leadership see Jenlink (1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2010, 2011, 2013a, 2013b).

social inequities and injustices reflective of deeply entrenched social issues in society. The scholar–practitioner recognizes, as did Dewey (1916, 1927), the importance of making political and moral considerations an integral element of their practice, distinguishing between education as a function of society and society as a function of education. A scholar–practitioner stance is grounded in an understanding of theories of social justice and democracy; an awareness of the principles upon which justice and democracy are founded, and the practices through which they are lived.

### **A Critical Ethnography**

The disciplinary discourses<sup>5</sup> of leadership preparation within practical and academic cultures of students and faculty members often influence the construction of social reality, shaping the meaning of social constructs that form the foundation for leadership practices. There is often a legitimation of social reality (Anderson, 1989) by individuals in power that also shape the construction of meaning related to social constructs. The construct of scholar–practitioner leadership, although idealized as a set of antecedents by faculty in the design of the program<sup>6</sup>, evolved through student interaction with faculty members, shaped by a constant critical self-examination on the part of the individual and collective faculty. Students often found the construct of scholar–practitioner leadership to be abstract and too theoretical, often juxtaposing what faculty posited as meaning against a critically pragmatic ground of day-to-day practice in schools.

We are now with our sixteenth doctoral cohort. The first and subsequent cohorts of doctoral students each experienced changes in faculty members, simultaneously experiencing a type epistemological uncertainty at times. Students and faculty members each brought forward their own signifier for scholar–practitioner leadership, yet there appeared to be underlying beliefs and values that provided coherence, albeit at times a coherence challenged by individual faculty members own ideological positions.

Explicit in the narratives of students and faculty are epistemological, methodological, and pedagogical considerations experienced as students and faculty members conjoined in socially constructing meaning for the construct of scholar–practitioner leadership. The following narratives are emblematic of considerations experienced:

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<sup>5</sup> Discourse in this sense refers to a culturally and historically located system of beliefs, values, and practices (including language), which produces particular subject positions that individuals take. Discourse makes it possible to give speaking authority to some while others must remain silent, and are anonymous because “there is no identifiable author . . . nor do they have a clear-cut beginning” (Cherryholmes, 1988, p. 34). It is important to note that understanding doctoral students and faculty members as subjects of discourses challenges the dominant belief that speaking (thinking) individuals are the origin of true statements, suggesting instead that there is a limited range of possible true statements within any given discourse (which exists independently of individuals) and that speakers are subject to and constrained by these limitations. In this analysis there is an inevitable relationship between power and truth because those who are given authority/power can speak and what they say becomes truth although the guarantee of this truth is materially based in the power given the speaker.

<sup>6</sup> See Jenlink (2001a) for full description of the antecedent knowledge base that guided, in the early years of the doctoral program, the development of the scholar–practitioner construct. It is noted that the antecedent knowledge has evolved in concert with the doctoral program.

Scholar–practitioner leadership embraces both scholarship and practice to create the space within which to engage others in developing co-constructed meaning around a shared purpose. Within this space of scholarship and practice, the leader builds community within and capacity of the organization. Leadership activities are framed within an ethic of care and defined through continual inquiry into the processes and patterns of the organization. The authentic self of the leader is grounded on a personal set of beliefs that seek moral excellence and goodness for individuals within, individuals served by, and the organization as a whole. (Keith<sup>7</sup>)

I would define scholar–practitioner leadership as a concept or an ideal that stresses the importance of reflective-reflexive inquiry in practice. It is leadership that seeks to look at the implicit dynamics of an organization as well as the explicit. It grounds educational practice in scholarship by drawing on scholarly research to inform practice and contributing to scholarship by critically researching practice and engaging in continuous critical reflective-reflexive inquiry and thinking about how people learn, what it means to be human and live in a dialogical community/society. (Trent)

My thoughts are that SP [scholar–practitioner] is a melding of the mind and the body—knowledge with practice—a cycle of obtaining knowledge and applying knowledge. The idea of it stems back to John Dewey, who stressed that there were things that were perhaps best learned through traditional academics, but others that were best learned through direct experience, and then intermingled with academics. Before Dewey, some of these approaches go back to Pestalozzi, then back to Rousseau, and then again back to Socrates. I also relate the SP [scholar–practitioner] ideology back to Zen, and some of the ancient Eastern philosophies. Zen emphasizes the merging of the mind and the body into one—at its naked core, that is what the SP [scholar–practitioner] framework promotes. (Stephanie)

Scholar–practitioner leadership has attributes of dialoguing critically, a conscious recognition of moral obligations to students and others, the ability to engage in self-critical, reflective practices and to apply this skill to political and social issues. (Martin)

Analysis of the student’s construction of meaning for scholar–practitioner leadership suggested a discourse rich with the language of scholarship, inquiry, reflection, criticality, and value for caring, and a sense of moral obligation. It is important to note that the narratives represented in this study reflect a type of coherent understanding shared by cohort members later in their doctoral studies experiences rather than earlier. The fact that students did not come to the doctoral program with an understanding of the scholar–practitioner leadership construct, and therefore socially constructed their individual meaning, brings to the foreground some concern for the signifiers that students might apply to the construct. As one doctoral student critically noted, “I actually think we should have had more antecedents than

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<sup>7</sup> Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

we had . . . some early readings and discussions surrounding the scholar–practitioner ideals would have been extremely helpful in my understanding of the construct.”

Faculty members’ constructed meanings, while sharing some epistemological grounding, tend to reflect some disparities in terms in how they understand scholar–practitioner leadership. Granger, a faculty member that joined the program faculty later in his career, explained scholar–practitioner leadership as “Leadership that is characterized by inquiring into professional practice through scholarly reading and research. The findings are applied to improve leadership practice.” Other doctoral faculty members elaborated on the scholar–practitioner construct.

Scholar–practitioners are individuals in any leadership capacity who utilize research and experience in a dynamically mutually related interaction to inform their practice and scholarly inquiry. Critical reflection and reflexion are ongoing generative activities that are ubiquitous in all aspects of the scholar–practitioner’s life. (Paul)

Critical scholar–practitioners are scholar–practitioners who utilize their scholarship and practice to promote social justice, caring, and issues of equity. Critical scholar–practitioners employ postpositivistic techniques to constantly critique their critical center, and are pragmatically aware of the elusive nature of one’s critical center. (Albert)

A definition is quite complex but involves the idea that education is a scholarly business and needs and deserves scholars to become the practitioners who lead the education enterprise in this great country. We can no longer depend on the management mentality to lead the vast and complex resources available to teaching and learning in today’s world. Schools must become learning centers and should display the values, attitudes and concepts of scholarship if we expect to continue to grow as a leader nation. (Mark)

Scholar–practitioner leadership is leadership characterized by an emphasis on critical reflection and informed practice as well as informing practice. The scholar–practitioner leader makes decisions based on an analysis of both the situation and the research literature pertinent to the situation. He or she models scholarship and ethical behavior. The modeling includes sharing ideas with the larger audience through publications and presentations to assist in influencing the direction of educational leadership. The ideal scholar–practitioner leader is also grounded in care and advocacy for the good of students and models the learning that we would hope that all would aspire to. (Sherri)

What surfaces, in the critical analysis of doctoral faculty member’s explanations of scholar–practitioner leadership, are foci of critical, ethical, and reflective practices and connections with care and advocacy. Each of these foci reflects, in part, the cultural ecology of the program, emergent over time. The philosophical and ideological underpinnings of a culture emerge – “regimes of truth” for leadership preparation – as discourse and are embedded in the curricular and pedagogical structures and strategies, respectively. The value for scholarship, critical reflection, applications of criticality, an ethic of care, etc. acknowledges the

foundational coherence, in part, that the students and faculty members shared within the program culture.

### **Legitimation of Social Reality**

When considering the power/knowledge issue raised by Foucault (1980) in his examination of disciplinary power, and examined by Anderson and Grinberg (1998) in their application of Foucault's power/knowledge relationship in the study of disciplinary practices in educational administration, analysis of narratives reveal an important discourse pattern that implicates itself in the legitimation of social reality as well as emerging as an issue of power. Faculty members and students share a perception based on their experiences in the program, that the department chair has provided much of the direction (sense of vision) and at times intellectual support for the idea of scholar-practitioner leadership<sup>8</sup>.

A closer critique of disciplinary practices and discourses revealed that students and faculty members viewed the department chair in dual roles of guiding the development of the doctoral program, while nurturing and mentoring faculty members and students in creating a scholarly inquiry culture. As one faculty member suggested, "Without his intellectual support the idea of the scholar-practitioner would not have evolved." Another characterized the chair this way, the Chair's "ongoing emphasis on scholarship and his resulting study and writing relative to the scholar-practitioner leader has further clarified the construct for students and faculty." The Chair advanced an understanding of "regimes of truth" that served to guide the faculty in creating a foundation for scholar-practitioner leadership as a construct that animated doctoral studies in the preparation program.

### **Analysis of Contexts**

An analysis of contexts, from a cultural-historical position reflected in faculty narratives, provides a contrasting and critical perspective of the context of the program/department as each has evolved in concert. In part, what is reflected is the dynamic nature of context as a component of the ecosystem of the program (Frake, 1962). As would be expected, the program has not been without challenges. As one doctoral faculty member who joined the department in 1999 reflected retrospectively, "the department was wrapped in a struggle to define itself as a major player of graduate education and the meaning of a productive entity". Reflective of the early days of developing the program, Bernice, a doctoral faculty member who had been integral to the preparation of the proposal for the program noted,

. . . doctoral studies were just a proposed idea when I first joined the department. As I think of the early meetings concerning the program, I think a descriptor of the proposed program would be pragmatic. The program was conceived as a means of preparing educational leaders who would make a positive difference in public schools. Scholarship and critical inquiry were not referenced as primary components of the

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that this perception originated early in the doctoral program, focusing on the then sitting Department Chair. A number of department chairs have succeeded the chair in reference and subsequently the emphasis on scholar-practitioner has shifted, in some sense as the cultural ecology of the Department has evolved. The Chair in reference continues in the Department as a doctoral faculty member, and the only member remaining from the original faculty members that helped implement the doctoral program.



program. More often terms such as field-based, relevant, action-oriented were descriptors used when describing the program. This was in keeping with the service orientation of the department. For the student and faculty member, service was the primary expectation. There is a much greater emphasis on scholarship in the program as it has evolved. While the focus is still on preparing educational leaders, a clearly evolved focus of the program is on scholarship and critical inquiry.

Albert, a doctoral faculty member who joined the program several years after the implementation of the program, offers a contrasting description of the program, lending a critical perspective. He described the program as

. . . optimistic, idealistic/not pragmatic in relation to maintaining the ideal in every aspect of the program; unsettled in that there were no graduates from the program and the program was still developing; administrative support for the program; 5 of 6 doctoral faculty positions filled; two views of a doctoral program evident among the faculty—the distinction being more in methodology (quantitative and traditional qualitative vs. alternative inquiry methods) than in flexibility to meet challenges to the program and to “grow the program.” the SFA program as a local phenomenon.

Reflecting on the program’s evolution two years into his tenure in the department, Albert went on to share that his perceptions and understanding had changed. He now believed the program was

. . . moving toward a more pragmatically contextualized idealism, at least in the area of the elective problem [no other doctoral level courses available]; the biggest success has been with student performance and student acceptance of high academic rigor; inability to develop strong support networks among students, department faculty, within the college, and within the university (the program as exclusive rather than inclusive); the growing national recognition of the SFA program through 2 journals and scholarly publications, predominately generated by 2 doctoral faculty.

Analyzing historical factors, which shaped the development of the program as well as impacted the evolution of the program, are important considerations in understanding the constraints of creating a new doctoral program. The history of a culture – the cultural consciousness – and the “regimes of truth” exemplified in the culture and through the programmatic structures draw attention to the cultural anchors (Zachary, 2000) that position the program. Albert, shared an important observation:

Historically, SFA has not had a scholarly culture, and has not had their cultural traits critically challenged. The plantation mentality (servitude, hierarchy, resistance to change) is firmly entrenched in almost a feudal system, in that the university is not a functioning interactive, synergetic whole, but rather a collection of lords who have total control over their own manors and retain that control as long as there is not a problem with or for the lords above them. This contributes to a rigid and systemic resistance to change, as well as enervating inequities.

Reinforcing this perception of historical factors, Bernice, who, as noted earlier, had been with the program from its inception stated:

The historical purpose of the department was to provide teachers and principals to this area a certification university, a regional university that served the school districts in the area. Because of this emphasis, the Higher Education Coordinating Board put program restrictions on us that exist today.

The constraints referenced include a condition for no changes in the program until a fifth year was completed, at which time the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB)<sup>9</sup> would give final approval.

Understanding the etymology of a construct that has been foundational to the development of the doctoral program in educational leadership. The historical factors that have challenged the programs development are important, particularly within an institutional culture that has a long history of service and teaching, but less of a history in doctoral studies and scholarship and research associated with doctoral studies.

In the section that follows, social and cultural patterns are examined in relation to the doctoral program and the implications that developing and implementing the program portends for the department, college, and university. Illuminating changes in cultural patterns offers insight into the symmetry of relationships between faculty and students, as well as between an academic unit's culture, the culture of the college, and the larger university culture.

### **Patterns—Social and Cultural**

As students and professors interacted across the first decade of the doctoral program, social and cultural patterns have changed, albeit in the context of a larger university culture and perhaps more importantly East Texas culture. Understanding the cultural ecology of a doctoral program is, importantly, about understanding the people who populate a program in relation to the program being the context for interaction; interacting with others (faculty and students) and interacting with the value/beliefs and by extension the curricular and pedagogical practices (Galpin, 1996). Perceptions of these changing patterns, are telling of ideological shifts, as noted in the narratives of faculty and students:

The most significant change brought by the doctoral program has been in our students. This change is in relation to how their perception of the culture in which they live has changed, and also in how they personally perceive the world. Whether a Baptist or Pentecostal Minister, a Black man or woman, or a “good old boy” bubba, how they see their lives and their region has changed. I have often characterized this change as the same kind of change that occurs from “missionary work.” Doors have been opened,

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<sup>9</sup> The Coordinating Board is a state level entity that has authority over all higher education institutions and which makes decisions related to approval of a new program. As was the case with SFA, a doctoral program is typically granted approval for a period of five years, during which time the institution must demonstrate that the program has met all criteria for full approval. This would include having qualified doctoral faculty with dissertation experience, an appropriate doctoral faculty to student ratios, and a capacity to provide the necessary fiscal support.

views have been broadened, and old life-long beliefs have been problematized. (Albert)

Faculty study groups were formed, program areas met weekly, and departmental meetings were more frequent. In addition, program area retreats for planning were instrumental in helping the faculty gain a shared vision for the department. From this shared vision for increased scholarship, partnerships were forged. As individuals worked on collaborative projects in pairs and in larger teams, social and cultural patterns began to change. (Bobbie)

One distinctive pattern is that the program has successfully established itself as a rigorous and personally as well as professionally enhancing scholarly culture. If the cultural context (university and region) in which the program is nested were like one found in a doctoral research institution, then the program would thrive. Unfortunately, because of the provincial and regressive culture at the SFA, the doctoral faculty did not realize the urgent necessity to form support networks. (Albert)

Here it is important to understand that, for the doctoral faculty, the task at hand was, in the words of Judith Butler, “to interrogate what the theoretical move that establishes foundation authorizes, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses (1992, p. 7). As the faculty members experienced the provincial culture of the university, the problematic nature of establishing a scholar–practitioner culture was made evident. With respect to social and cultural patterns, faculty members found that “one regime of truth simply replaces another” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 4). The task of doctoral faculty, in a poststructuralist sense of revealing the “regimes of truth,” was to “look awry” and ask questions that produced different knowledge and produced knowledge differently, thereby producing different ways of living in the world of academe, that is, creating reinscriptions that contributed to a changing cultural ecology of the department (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). Emblematic of this reinscription are faculty members shared experiences and understanding of those experiences.

Over time the social and cultural patterns in response increased knowledge about doctoral studies and what a doctoral program can and should be. Just as students were learning, so were faculty members. Discussion and debate still existed, but the addition of dialogue changed the patterns of interaction (a hard one to accomplish). (Gwen)

The department is moving toward a culture that values scholarship and research. When I first joined the program, this was held as a goal, but there was still visible evidence of a service-oriented culture, void of scholarship and research. I have seen progress made in practice towards the goal of developing a culture that values scholarship and research. More faculty members are involved in scholarship and research now than when I first joined the program. (Jasmine)

I see scholar practitioner as operating at a meta-cognitive level of understanding the way power shapes our lives. The world is our text to read, with acts to be recognized and values to be critiqued. We will be charged to help students in forming a new interpretation of their own lives and uncover new talents from their encounter with

school knowledge. Social justice and caring are displayed as the guiding principle to ensure equal power relationships in schools. The program and faculty in the department have shaped my understanding. (Heather)

Social and cultural patterns follow, in part, the rules of discourse. As Cherryholmes (1988) explained, “The rules of discourse govern what is said and what is unsaid. They identify who can speak with authority and who must listen (p. 34). These rules of discourse formulate what Foucault called discursive practice – or historically and culturally determined ways of acting – which in turn creates a specific discourse – or set of rules about what can be said (or written) and by whom. The doctoral faculty members, in a poststructural sense, interrogated the rules of discourse – the discursive practices as important forces in contributing to and/or resisting a foundation of the doctoral program that authorized the scholar–practitioner stance.

### **Scholarly Patterns**

In the evolution of scholarship in the department, as it relates to the development of a doctoral program, of particular importance was a focus on preparing scholar–practitioner leaders for schools in rural East Texas. Sharon, a doctoral faculty member, one of the original six that contributed to the program for a number of years, described the culture of the department as “one of high expectations for scholarship and research. Study, research, peer-reviewed presentations and publications have become the expected performative patterns of faculty members. This just continues to increase as the program evolves.” Reflecting, as faculty member, on the changing patterns in the scholarly culture of the department, Albert noted,

Scholarly activity represents a significantly different pattern. The sincere attempt to use consensual decision-making is also different from the extremely hierarchical university and regional culture. The pattern of criticality that pervades the curriculum is also different. The isolation of the department from others is similar to the larger cultural pattern. The relationship between faculty and students is similar. The liberal and radical ideological patterns evident in the courses, in faculty research, and in student dissertations are different. One pattern is the department’s inability to move from an idealized view of the program to a critically pragmatic view, which could potentially counteract the vulgar pragmatism, which characterizes the university. One emerging pattern is the doctoral faculty’s interrogation of the historical structures that mediate our current program. This is a pattern of inquiry that is not found or valued in the larger culture.

Ronald, a doctoral faculty member who had been with the program from its inception, and who had been in the department prior to the implementation of the doctoral program, noted that,

In the program, we have tried to increase the number of students who publish and participate in conferences; faculty members have increased participation in research and presenting research; faculty members have participated in the development of journals. Strong leadership and encouragement from the chair has sustained the research, presenting and writing activities. Emphasis when selecting new faculty who

value scholarship has sustained these activities; emphasis of scholarship on promotion and tenure has sustained these activities; new faculty with new ideas about publication has sustained these ideas; and the graduation of doctoral students who want to publish and research have sustained these ideas.

The pattern of scholarship and research runs deeply in the program culture; interaction between students and faculty with respect to research activity and publishing scholarly products is a significant transformation of the department culture. The cultural ecology of the department/program, while evolving as an ecosystem, retains only small components of the older, historical “regimes of truth” that dominated the daily activity of faculty. It is perhaps the evolution of what Anderson and Grinsberg (1998) referred to as “disciplinary practices” that has most contributed to the scholarly patterns. Routines and performative standards have changed, and the ecological balance in the culture of the department has shifted.

### **Knowledge and Learning Patterns**

A poststructural position on knowledge is concerned with critiquing institutionalized practices that marginalize and categorize knowledge (and knower) seen as extraneous (or dangerous) to the status quo. Cherryholmes (1988) noted structural approaches, or metanarratives, remove the individual from the center of the experience, adding, “. . . we have internalized appropriate rules and ideologies, have accommodated ourselves to dominant power relationships, and are more concerned with performing expected actions than with analyzing them” (p. 6). Integral to the scholar–practitioner construct as a centering of the doctoral program was an understanding of how metanarratives in the knowledge base dominate learning. The faculty took a position of interrogating, along with students, metanarratives.

Patterns in knowledge and learning provide critical insight into the doctoral program and the relationships that students share with faculty. One doctoral Student, Phoebe, noted:

When the patterns of knowledge and learning began to change to a shared responsibility within the community, I was able to see the possibility of a social construct of scholar–practitioner-leadership actually working. When faculty collaborated with students, when students shared the responsibility for the classroom and when dialogue was encouraged my understanding was clarified.

Another doctoral student, Roberta, explained the patterns of knowledge and learning that helped her as related to the dialogical nature of the program:

For me personally as a student, the dialogical learning environment helped to shape the social construct of scholar–practitioner leadership. Instrumental for me, were the foundational readings that provided a rich source of internal dialogue in my thinking and a source for stimulating dialogue with peers in the classroom setting. The combination of learning in the academic setting through reading and dialogue, and the experiential learning through summer internships contributed to my understanding of scholar–practitioner leadership. Reflective-reflexive writing helped to shape my concept of scholar–practitioner leadership. Conversations with scholars and classroom teachers also helped me to form my perspective.

Jessica offered this insight in terms of knowledge and learning:

The desire to have a democratic society does shape the types and patterns of knowledge. This requires us to understand the connecting patterns and relationships that undergird the live world. This formal thinking leads to the discernment of hidden patterns with an ultimate goal of enhancing empowerment and justice for people involved.

Social and cultural patterns, patterns of scholarship, and patterns of knowledge and learning that have been examined from the narratives of faculty members and students, reflect a culture in the program and department that is supportive of the preparation of scholar–practitioner leaders. However, a question is raised by these patterns that focuses attention on the college and institutional culture, and relatedly on institutional support for the doctoral program. The cultural resistance of change, within the institution (perhaps influenced by the regional culture of the State of Texas—behind the “Pine Curtain” of East Texas) and the need for increased scholarship, particularly within a dominant culture of service and teaching, illuminates the problematics associated with developing a doctoral program.

### **Final Reflections**

A foundation for the doctoral program was constructed through the work of doctoral faculty members early on; work focused on identifying and developing a construct of scholar–practitioner leadership. This work was situated within the existing cultural ecology of the department, which could be characterized as rigid with “regimes of truth” predicated on more traditional educational administration perspectives and knowledge. Interestingly, the “regimes of truth” were deeply embedded in the cultural ecology.

Initially, the discourse and collective thinking that shaped the scholar–practitioner leadership construct, guided students and faculty as they shared through coursework, and the larger work of growing a scholarly culture, in the constructed reality of a preparation program premised on the ideals of scholar–practitioner leadership. It is important to note that the continued construction of meaning has been affected by shifts in power/knowledge within the cultural ecology of a department/program where faculty turnover is relatively high, five new doctoral faculty members in the past seven years, with only one faculty member remaining that had a primary role in originally implementing the doctoral program. Interestingly, an emergent pattern in the shifting of faculty has been the positioning of non-doctoral faculty in the exchanges of political currency. What became evident, and continues to do so, is the resistance – i.e., continued advocating of more traditional administrative “regimes of truth” – from non-doctoral faculty in the department; faculty in principal and superintendent programs.

The affect of a changing faculty has been experienced at the most critical level, with the students in each cohort and by those students completing dissertation research. Notwithstanding the problematic of destabilizing student relationships with faculty, diminishing trust as a form of power struggle occurred in the shifting patterns of control. Importantly, students have often been the more resolute in mediating tensions associated with the growth of the doctoral program as they experience it over time; through and within the flow their preparation and practical experiences.

The cultural ecology of the leadership program was defined by curricular and pedagogical discourses and practices, not unlike that described by Anderson and Grinberg

(1998). It was evident that during the time frame for this study, when the doctoral student participants were in their program, the discourses and knowledge structures of the program were shifting in response to the political and ideological positioning of the academic setting, in part driven by accrediting agencies, impart by change in faculty, and in part by a shifting emphasis with respect to leadership literature and research. As participants reported in this study, the work of educational leaders must consider the dynamics of such positioning, in particular as he/she examines the “regimes of truth” at work within the preparation program, juxtaposed to the “regimes of truth” at work in his/her respective places of practice.

Shifting curricular and pedagogical discourses and practices worked to shape the individuals understanding of social justice leadership, and to shape the individuals social self – the identity as social justice leader. Such shaping of the “social self,” and related disciplinary discourse and practice was perceived as a form of cultural anchor within the ecology of the program. Often the question surfaced as to what stands as “truth” in relation to social justice leadership, which was perceived as resulting from conflicting frames of “truth” presented by faculty members in the different courses. “Regimes of truth” surfaced as dominant beliefs with respect to democracy, social justice, caring, community, and ethical/moral leadership surfaced and became patterns in faculty, students and faculty and students conversations. These patters reflected epistemological and pedagogical conflicts in relation to forming the leader “self” or “identity” as scholar–practitioner leader. Equally important, both faculty and students in the program reflected the importance of cultural consciousness as a primary ecological factor in shaping the identity of scholar–practitioner leaders.

### **About the Author**

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*Educational Leadership, Moral Literacy, and the Dispositions of Moral Leaders* (forthcoming from Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group).

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# A Study into the Perceptions of Students of Color and Their Ninth-Grade Academic Experience

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*Barnes, Mullen, and Lieb (2013) suggested that the effective implementation of the freshman academy promoted positive achievement outcomes for students of color. From a socio-cultural perspective through the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT), understanding the existence of racism is crucial to a positive academic environment (Beachum, 2013; Chapman, Dixon, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1999a). Using CRT, this study examined the perceptions of ninth-grade students of color who attended a ninth-grade academy in a racially diverse high school in North Carolina. The aim of the study was to provide educators with insight into how race and ethnicity play a factor in the educational experiences of ninth grade students of color and to determine if there are patterns or characteristics in their experiences. Additionally, this research study provided insight into programs and practices, which might lead to improved educational experiences for students of color and result in higher student achievement and decreases in dropout rates. This study found that 16 out of 26 students had positive experiences with the ninth-grade academy, race did not play a role in the programs and practices affecting their perceptions and experiences in the ninth-grade academy, and none of the 26 participants mentioned that race played a major factor in their overall ninth-grade academy experience. Evidence from this study suggests that neither race, gender, culture, nor teaching credentials played a major role in the student's perception of an effective teacher.*

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## Introduction

Educators have a disconnection with students of color, African Americans and Latinos, from impoverished backgrounds (Neild, 2008). Neild furthers by claiming students of color generally do not feel appreciated and the results are reflected in their disproportionate achievement in high school. In fact, when students enter high school, if they are not successful the first year, they are twice as likely to not even graduate (Noguera & Wang, 2006). As a result, these children might have less of a chance in life to obtain steady employment or contribute significantly back to society.

Even though no school of thought is a perfect panacea, some can and should, serve to help many educators understand and connect with students of color. Through the lens of critical race theory (CRT), educators can better learn to understand and forge meaningful relationships with students who have historically been neglected by the dominant culture. CRT began in the mid-1970s, as a number of lawyers worried about the slow rate at which laws were changing to promote racial equality (Chapman et al., 2013). CRT can be another way of examining race relations, particularly within the United States, in a broader context than the civil rights approach (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013).

Transition from eighth to ninth-grade is a challenging time for students and could be a factor in student success. Knowing about the relationship of ninth-grade transition to school success is crucial to understanding strategies and procedures that may help students graduate from America's public high schools (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). Viewing the ninth-grade academy through a CRT framework for ninth-graders of marginalized groups, can aid educators with better understanding past and current practices, as well as identifying what types of strategies are typically successful (Chapman et al., 2013). The objective of this work was to shed light on the ninth-grade academy through the experiences and perspectives from students of color. Specifically, this is a comprehensive examination of the perception of students of color of their ninth-grade academy experience.

## Problem Statement

Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century faces many challenges including high dropout rates and low student achievement. Despite increasing concerns and efforts, 30% of today's students are leaving high school without a diploma (Carter, 2008). In an effort to prevent students from dropping out, schools should be more responsive to the needs of today's students. Increased disengagement and declining motivation are predictors of school dropout (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). Additionally, many students face academic, procedural and social challenges transitioning successfully from middle school to high school (Ascher, 2006). In fact, Anderson (2008) identified ninth-grade as the *most critical point* to intervene and prevent students from losing motivation. Transition continues to be an area of concern for educators, students, parents, and the community and has gained recent attention. Darling-Hammond (2010) maintains that when students have been discontented from school, their experiences in the ninth-grade may be a determining factor in whether they graduate from high school.

When compared to other grades, ninth-graders especially encounter academic, procedural, and social challenges. Ninth-grade is the *pivotal point* for intervention in the educational process to increase motivation and prevent dropout (Galassi & Akos, 2012). Academically, these students often enter new school settings, in different locations, often

larger, and have an increased number of adults to whom to be accountable. Moreover, there is often pressure because, for the first time, academics count towards permanent credit for graduation and post-secondary opportunities (Coley, 2008). It is likely that many students initially fear being lost in a new and larger environment and socially probably worry about being accepted by their peers (Coley, 2008). Ninth-graders often experience psychological adjustments that affect this pivotal social transition (Barnes et al., 2013). Because this is such a crucial time for students, more research is needed in this area and CRT is one lens by which researchers may actually help further unpack these complex phenomena.

### **Characteristics of Ninth-Grade Academies**

During the 1960s, the public concerns about providing a supportive environment for early teenagers started the entire Middle School Movement that advocated replacing junior high schools serving grades seventh through ninth with middle schools comprising grades sixth through eighth (Srofe, 2009). This transformation shifted ninth grade students away from junior high schools and matching them with high schools. However, with many students struggling to make this transition, some educators were leery of the wisdom of subjecting 14-year-olds to the intense academic and peer pressure of high school. Phillips (2009), from The Gates Foundation, contended that over the years, the challenge of helping 14-year-olds reach academic success continued to be an issue. By the mid-1990s, high schools faced crises that included, in many cases, as low as a 70% attendance rate, student unruliness, and high rates of academic failures (Phillips, 2009). Educators had to rethink the design of high schools that encompassed ninth through twelfth grade students. To combat many of these issues, one approach school personnel considered was the school-within-a-school model (Cook, Fowler, & Harris, 2008). While the ninth grade students attended classes within the high school building, they could still be somehow detached from the rest of the 10th through 12th grade students.

Cook, Fowler, and Harris (2008) proposed that a separate ninth grade academy would be designed with interdisciplinary team teaching, block scheduling, and curriculum and instruction focusing on core academic subjects. Crosby (2011) believed these organizations should be restructured for a more flexible education, where small units would be created and anonymity dismissed. Additionally, Crosby recommended that ninth-grade academies have distinct characteristics, curricula that offered knowledge necessary for students to academically achieve, and teachers could assess students to determine which learning styles would best serve this population. Barnes, Mullen, and Lieb (2013) suggested that the effective implementation of a freshman academy promotes positive achievement outcomes for students of color.

Regardless of whether or not students are in an academy, a connection between students and teachers has always been essential for the student's success in any level of education (Beachum, 2013). In this study, through the theoretical lens of CRT, the researcher was able to discover which practices were, and were not, beneficial to students of color in a ninth-grade academy.

## Background of Critical Race Theory

CRT emerged in the mid-1970s with an increased critical analysis of scholarship in education (Beachum, 2013). Based on evaluating educational policies, supporters of CRT concluded that law restricted educational access for African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1999a). Ladson-Billings's (1999b) study provided exposure to qualitative research in education that was essential to CRT at the time. Based on that study, CRT was examined as a lens through which to best explore educational practices in general. In fact, it was the necessary method for examining the impact of racism on education (Beachum, 2013). CRT Key Elements:

1. A criticism of the limitations of an immediate and simplistic approach to resolving racism
2. Story-telling and counter-storytelling
3. Revisionists interpretations of American civil rights laws and programs
4. Applying insights from social science writings on race and racism
5. How do race, sex, and class connect
6. The significance of cultural nationalism/separatism
7. Legal institutions and critical pedagogy
8. Criticism and self-criticism (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006, p. 31).

One major component of CRT is the creation of space where those from marginalized groups feel comfortable and are encouraged to share their perspectives. Through the lens of CRT, this study sought to discover how high school students of color experienced the ninth-grade academy and investigated what programs and practices in the ninth-grade academy were effective. Additionally, the study examined the impact of race on the experiences of students from marginalized groups in the ninth-grade academy. The following section highlights the methods used to collect data for the research.

## Methodology

The research questions set the tone for investigating the ninth-grade academy and are followed by a description of the population studied and an outline of the data analysis used.

### Research Questions

- RQ1 How do students of color at the selected high school, experience the ninth-grade academy?
- RQ 2 Based on their perceptions and experiences, what programs and practices in the ninth-grade academy are effective for students of color?
- RQ 3 How does race impact the experiences of students from marginalized groups in the ninth-grade academy?

The ninth-grade academy studied has an ethnically diverse student population. The school's diversity is reflected in its mission statement, "*To support an environment where high expectations foster lifelong success within a positive climate of diversity*" (Lexington Senior High School, 2013, p. 1). The ninth-grade academy is comprised of African Americans,

Latinos, Whites, Asians, and multi-ethnic students, Table 1. During the 2009-2011 school years, African Americans comprised the largest ethnic group, Latinos were second largest, Whites were third, and Asians were the smallest ethnic group.

Table 1  
*Ninth-Grade Academy Total Enrollment 2009-2012*

School Year	White <i>n (%)</i>	African American <i>n (%)</i>	Latino <i>n (%)</i>	Asian <i>n (%)</i>	Other <i>n (%)</i>
2009-2010 ( <i>N</i> = 228)	57 (25.0)	108 (47.4)	48 (21.1)	12 (5.3)	3 (1.2)
2010-2011 ( <i>N</i> = 287)	76 (26.5)	113 (39.4)	75 (26.1)	18 (6.3)	5 (1.7)
2011-2012 ( <i>N</i> = 317)	139 (43.8)	101 (31.9)	69 (21.8)	8 (2.5)	0 (0)

The participants in Table 2 corresponded with the student population of the whole ninth-grade academy in Table 1 over a three-year period, 2009-2012. The racial composition of the ninth-grade academy for the 2011-2012 school year has drastically shifted compared to the previous years in Table 1. White students were the largest racial group within the ninth-grade academy for the 2011-2012 school year. In the two years prior from Table 1, the Latino and African American population were the largest racial groups. The researcher selected the participants in Table 2 to racially mirror the population in Table 1 as much as possible. The major group excluded in Table 2 was White students since the focus of this study was how students of color experienced the ninth-grade academy

Table 2  
*Sample Study Enrollment 2009-2012 (N = 26)*

School Year	White <i>n (%)</i>	African American <i>n (%)</i>	Latino <i>n (%)</i>	Asian <i>n (%)</i>	Other <i>n (%)</i>
2009-2010 ( <i>N</i> = 16)	NA	8 (50)	3 (19)	5 (31)	0 (0)
2010-2011 ( <i>N</i> = 8)	NA	4 (50)	3 (38)	1 (12)	0 (0)
2011-2012 ( <i>N</i> = 2)	NA	1 (50)	1 (50)	0 (0)	0 (0)

The ninth-grade academy was located in an urban school system of an un-named mid-Atlantic state. This study site had a diverse student population in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture. In addition, the school had implemented the ninth-grade academy within the past five years and had low staff turnover. The staff exclusively worked with ninth graders and a counselor who had worked there since the school's inception. Its administrator also mainly worked with those staff and students in the ninth-grade academy.

All of the classes in the ninth-grade academy were held in an annex building of the high school. There were eight classrooms, some teachers *floated* because there was not



enough space to accommodate the estimated 250 student body in the ninth-grade academy. The ninth-grade academy's students were heterogeneously grouped into two teams.

The ninth-grade academy operated on a block schedule and teachers had the same group of students for fall and spring semesters. If a student was advanced in credits, s/he took classes outside the ninth-grade academy or enrolled in extra elective course. Ninth-grade academy teachers had fourth period common planning with which they attended to administrative issues, counseled students, held parent conferences, planned lessons, participated in staff development, and worked on a whole host of other tasks. Ninth-graders, in the meantime, took their elective classes outside the ninth-grade academy during that same period. In order for students to get promoted to the next grade level, they needed to pass six of their eight classes. Students who did not pass were not allowed to repeat courses in the ninth-grade academy; they had to take courses with upperclassmen in the general high school setting.

### Participants

The study sampled ninth-grade academy students from a small urban public high school with an ethnically diverse student population. Since the focus of the research was the experience of students of color in the ninth-grade academy, consent forms from White students were excluded. The researcher selected the participants based on race, gender, and grade level that corresponded with the student population, see Table 3.

Table 3  
*Participant Profiles*

Categories	Female	Male
African American	7	6
Latino	4	3
Asian	3	3
ESL	7	6
Honors	11	6
Remedial	4	5
Behavior Documented	2	5
No Behavior Documented	11	8

The data analysis was based primarily on student interviews and 26 classroom observations of the ninth-grade academy. Since female students outnumbered male students during the 2009-2011 school years, 12 males and 14 females were interviewed. During the 2011-2012 school year, an African American male and a Latina female were interviewed multiple times to mirror the ninth-grade academy's population. After interviews with the 24 students were conducted, over the 2009-2011 school year, it was determined that more data were needed. Subsequently, two additional students were interviewed 10 times (between

September 2012 to December 2012) on a bi-weekly basis. This was done to develop a better understanding about ninth- grade transition for students of color. Also, 26 ninth-grade academy classrooms were observed during the 2011-2012 school year for 30-90 minutes each.

## **Data Analysis**

Analyzing and organizing the data was a continuous process throughout the study with the chief goal of obtaining useful and *rich* information. Because data was reconstructed by the development of categories, findings and conclusions were connected to the existing literature. All information was coded into categories by the primary investigator. Systematic coding procedures ensured that all data was input accurately. Additionally, 50% of the data was double entered to ensure consistency. The researcher adhered to the following steps in collecting the data:

1. Organizing the responses of the interviews and compared them to the observation data.
2. Coding interview responses and observations by attaching basic marks to describe potential themes.
3. Analyzing the notes and codes looking for the meaning and themes in the data.
4. Examining the meaning and forming a classification system for individual meaning.
5. Attempting to form a collective meaning capturing the essence of the collective data.
6. Translating interpretation into information that was understandable; quotes, narrative texts, and other types of representation which captured the essence of interpretation.

Observation field notes and tape-recorded interviews enabled the researcher to listen to tapes and use notes repeatedly to identify themes and patterns. The multiple data collection methods required continuous organization and reflection of data collected while applying a basic coding system which evolved patterns and themes from the data. An ongoing analysis of data throughout the research study ensured data collected was connected to the research questions (Merriam, 2009).

The first data analysis procedure detected patterns of repeated information emerging from student individual interviews. This process allowed for reconciling data with information from the literature review on ninth-grade transition and ensured the research questions guided the study. The researcher compared the analysis of taped and transcribed interviews of participants with the document analysis to draw conclusions about the successfulness of the ninth-grade academy. While the researcher suspected certain outcomes, perceptions were not discussed with participants while conducting the research. The researcher's finding surfaced after all data was collected.

## **Findings**

The findings in this section were based on the three research questions. These findings determined the researcher's interpretations and conclusions about this study.

## **RQ1 How do students of color at the selected high school, experience the ninth-grade academy?**

Sixty-five percent of the students of color had a positive experience at the ninth-grade academy. They seemed to feel they learned from their teachers and received support. It appeared they also favored an enclosed environment. The participants who did not enjoy the ninth-grade academy were unable to distinguish displeasure from issues they faced in transitioning to high school in general.

The 25% of participants at the ninth-grade academy expressed satisfaction with their ninth-grade experience. As interviewed participants' opinions and observation data were analyzed, it became obvious that the ninth-grade academy's staff worked diligently to thrive as a school-within-a school and were devoted to the success of students of color. The mechanism behind what was being accomplished was a concentration on achievement and meeting goals from NASSP's (1996) *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*. During the interviews with the students, 16 out of 26 students mentioned they had positive experiences with the ninth-grade academy. Each of these participants reflected on their past and present classroom experiences and the effect it had on socialization and relationships. The other 10 participants felt their experience with the ninth-grade academy did not have a positive impact on them. However, when each explained why they were dissatisfied with the ninth-grade academy, the discontent appeared to be more about high school transition rather than the ninth-grade academy itself. The introductory interview sessions consisted of four or more questions. The focus of the first session correlated with the first research question. In sum, the overriding theme from this meeting was how 26 students of color perceived the ninth-grade academy.

**Perceptions of schooling and career opportunities.** The researcher's classroom observations and all 26 of the participants' responses indicated positive attitudes and beliefs about the schooling and career opportunities stemming from involvement at the ninth-grade academy. This success stems from the students' positive racial identity and critical race consciousness (Delgado, & Stefancic, 2013). Each participant emphasized a desire to continue their education beyond high school. One student, for example, said:

Being a Black male is hard in society and not too many of us get the chance to do well and succeed. I'm proud to be Black because statistics are against me. I'm determined to prove them wrong. So me, I can't forget who I am. I think it's very important [to see myself as African American].

## **RQ 2 Based on their perceptions and experiences, what programs and practices in the ninth-grade academy are effective for students of color?**

RQ 2 was formed based upon the ideas of researchers such as Vygotsky (1978), who asserted that learning is a social process and that the social and cultural backgrounds of students formed the cognitive schema from which they approach the learning process within the school setting. The social and cultural context of classroom practices and the school's organizational structures and systems can be equal with those already established in the student's social and cultural background, affecting academic achievement as a result (Delgado, & Stefancic, 2013). However, when the researcher investigated RQ2, results indicated that based on the

participants' responses, race did not play a role in the programs and practices affecting their perceptions and experiences in the ninth-grade academy. Participants described and advocated for programs and practices that benefitted students of any racial or cultural background. Quality teaching, personal relationships and *real-world* experiences were the responses all 26 participants gave that influenced their perceptions and experiences in the ninth-grade academy.

A total of 26 students participated in the second interview session. The focus of the second session corresponded with the second research question. Responses differed from what the researcher observed in the classroom, according to Table 4.

Table 4  
*Responses to Student Interview Question Session 2*

<b>Response to Questions</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Frequency n=26</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
1. Classroom instruction had the greatest impact on my ninth-grade academy experience.	Quality Classroom Instruction	22	98%
2. My ninth-grade academy peers were the greatest influence on my experience.	Relationships	2	1%
3. Extracurricular activities greatly influenced my perception of the ninth-grade academy.	“Real-World” Connections	2	1%

Based on student interviews and classroom observations of the ninth-grade academy, it appeared that participants overlooked the racial aspect of their ninth-grade experience because they had not interacted with a predominately White student population. Ninety-eight percent of participants mentioned they did not encounter racial conflicts, nor were racial matters discussed. However, the researcher's 26 classroom observations suggest differently. Racial conflict was evident and teachers integrated it into their curriculum.

The participants gave general responses to question two. The majority of them believe that quality instruction was the most effective practice that influenced them in the ninth-grade academy. Others elaborated on personal relationships and “real-world” connections. Overall, the responses from the participants were universal. Even though all of the participants were of color, none of them identified with programs or practices that affected a specific race or culture. However, when the researcher observed certain classrooms at the ninth-grade academy, he witnessed some practices that connected with students based on race (quality instruction, developing personal relationships, and “real-world” experiences).

### **RQ 3 How does race impact the experiences of students from marginalized groups in the ninth-grade academy?**

This question used CRT as a theoretical framework, which provided a vehicle for examining the student's achievement from an asset model. Based on this framework, the researcher analyzed the overall experiences of participants at the ninth-grade academy. From a CRT perspective, when people admit that racism does not exist, problems such as colorblindness, lack of counter-story telling, and stereotyping are often present (Parker & Stovall, 2004; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). Feelings of cultural alienation, physical isolation, and silence are commonly expressed from students of color who attend predominately White schools (Datnow & Cooper, 2000). Ninth-grade academies nation-wide, however, tend to be located in urban areas where students from mainly marginalized groups attend (Barnes et al., 2013). Tantamount to the research, in this study, RQ3 revealed that none of the 26 participants mentioned that race played a major factor in their ninth-grade academy experience. Based on student interviews and classroom observations of the ninth-grade academy, participants had overlooked the racial aspect of their ninth-grade experience because they had not interacted with predominately White student population.

**Classroom observations/trends that suggest that race is relevant.** Based on these classroom observations, a teacher's race played a significant factor in the participants' experience, despite their responses to the interview questions. If the teacher was nurturing/caring, organized, confident, creative, and energetic, the participants held the teacher's class in high esteem regardless of race. However, if teachers were of color and they had the previously stated attributes, they were perceived to be the most effective teachers at the ninth-grade academy. Teachers who lacked any of the five attributes (i.e., nurturing/caring, organized, confident, creative, and energetic) tended to have the most difficulty teaching the participants, especially if that teacher was of color.

Whenever the researcher observed a teacher interacting positively with one class, they encountered a similar experience with the other classes regardless of the classroom demographics and abilities. Those teachers that participants viewed unfavorably, tended to struggle with the students in all the classes that were observed. The participants who were observed off task for one teacher, were on task for another one, and vice versa. In sum, 98% of the participants' responses and classroom demeanor suggested that a teacher's race was not the only major factor in their ninth-grade academy experience.

**Evidence of racial recognition versus colorblindness at the ninth-grade academy.** The participants' responses suggested that they did not adopt a victim mentality. This defense motivated them to counter societal stereotypes about members of their racial groups and persevere in their academics, the same as Carter (2008) had claimed. The teachers the researcher observed were instrumental in socializing students of color in the ninth-grade academy to have positive racial identities that included awareness of racial discrimination. Same-race teachers were not the only ones implementing this practice, but all teachers were consistent with the ninth-grade students of color in the ninth-grade academy.

One of the main possible reasons why students' responses suggested that they did not adopt a victim mentality could be that they identified African American and White teachers as being consistent in reiterating the counter-narrative of African American and Latino achievement that produces the development of positive accomplishments in society. For example, when the researcher observed an English class in the ninth-grade academy, the

teacher listed the objectives, followed the state's guidelines, and assigned those students extra books to read. These books were counter-narratives about people of color. That teacher's classroom library consisted of *When Marian Sang*, *Maritcha: A 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Girl*, *Novio Boy*, *The Great Migration*, *La Mariposa*, *The Bluford Series*, *Voices from the Field*, *Children of the Dust Bowl*, and many other books explaining how people of color overcame diversity. Once students read these books, they gave oral reports to the class and had classroom discussions. Other ninth-grade academy English classes conducted similar activities with their students.

**Evidence of race as a factor in students' ninth-grade academy experience versus denial from the participants.** Twenty-six classroom observations conducted in the ninth-grade academy indicated that race was a major component in the lives of students of color. When the researcher interviewed 26 participants about how race affected their ninth-grade academy experience, all but two responded that it did not have an impact. However, when the researcher observed the interactions with students in the classrooms and social settings, the researcher witnessed something different. Students tended to socialize with each other according to race. Many teachers connected with students by using race and ethnicity as a focal point.

**Race addressed in the curriculum.** Whereas most participants responded that race was not discussed in the classrooms, the researcher observed it being discussed when the English I honors class covered *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Some African Americans were in that class, as well as White and Latino students. The English teacher, a White male, had a discussion with the students about the content of the story. The researcher perceived, for example, how frustrated and uncomfortable the African American male students were in the classroom when the class addressed the sentencing of the African American character, Jim, falsely accused of raping a white woman then he was executed. Whereas the students who were non-African American had, no problems objectively discussed the sentencing of Jim, the African American male students appeared angry over the character's portrayal in the story. The book had constantly used the word *nigger*. Many students probably did not have a problem reading it in class; however, the African American students appeared very uncomfortable. The teacher acted as the facilitator in this situation. The teacher used this assignment as a *teachable moment*, and led the class to the understanding that Whites often falsely accused African Americans of crimes and punished them accordingly. He connected the story according to what happened in the present day legal system with African Americans or other people of color. The students appeared engaged in the assignment and the African American students appeared to understand how race is central to one's lifetime experience.

**Teaching assignments.** Ten of the teachers at the ninth-grade academy were White, and the remaining three were African American. This ninth grade academy's staff population was slightly less racially diverse than the rest of the school. The three African American teachers taught only standard level and a few honors level ninth-grade academy classes. The Advanced Placement (AP), highest level in academic achievement, at the ninth-grade academy was taught by two seasoned White teachers. These teachers had been at the high school before the creation of the ninth-grade academy. They were in their mid to late 40s and each teacher had at least 20 years of experience. The student demographics in the AP classes contained 15% more White students than the other ninth-grade academy classes.

The 26 classroom observations along with the 26 student interviews gave the researcher a more complete understanding about how students of color perceive the ninth-grade academy.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to investigate how ninth-grade students of color experienced their first year at the selected ninth-grade academy. It focused on an academy's efforts in addressing the problems associated with ninth-grade transition. From this study, educators might develop a larger paradigm of pros and cons of ninth-grade academy for students of marginalized groups. The finding of this study mirror the literature suggested that the effective implementation of the ninth-grade academy promotes positive achievement outcomes for students of color (Carter, 2008). In keeping with Darling-Hammond's (2010) finding, this study also found that through the theoretical framework of CRT, a student's social and cultural capital worked cohesively with the capital within the context of the school to promote academic achievement.

The researcher's findings suggest that not an extensive amount of dialogue about race occurs within the context of many educational settings. However, in this selected school, there were clear structures in place that provided a comprehensive educational program for students regarding race. There was clear evidence of teacher belief in the student's ability to achieve and excel, regardless of race.

Evidence from this study suggests that neither race, gender, culture, nor teaching credentials played a major role in the student's perception of an effective teacher. Students of color identified the most effective teacher as one who was energetic, caring, well organized, and creative. Those teachers who possessed these attributes were the most beneficial, especially if they were the same race as the participant. However, those teachers who lacked any of those quality attributes had the most difficult time teaching, especially if they were teachers of color.

There was evidence to suggest that students at the targeted ninth-grade academy were motivated to learn. Students were actively involved, at least in most of the classrooms that were observed. Those who were not engaged in classes were honest about it. What actually motivated these students was not clear and could be researched in future studies. It is hoped that this study would influence educators to enhance their knowledge base of ninth-grade academies, to more effectively serve students of color, and reduce the high school dropout.

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# Teacher Quality Variables and Efficacy for Teaching Minority Students

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*In this analysis of the extant literature, we examined teacher quality variables that have shown a relationship with teacher efficacy for instructing urban minority students. We focused on the following areas: (a) importance of teachers, (b) teacher quality defined, (c) components of teacher quality, (d) self-efficacy, and (e) teacher efficacy.*

## Introduction

A review of the current literature revealed that much research has been devoted to the study of teacher quality variables (Darling-Hammond, 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Lieberman & Darling-Hammond, 2011; Marzano, 2009), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1982, 1986, 1997), and teacher efficacy (Hughes, 2012; Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998), but little research has been done with respect to these variables in teaching minority students, specifically. Accordingly, we focused on the relationship of these variables in improving student achievement for minority students. Because teachers are responsible for the successful learning of *all* students and because an achievement gap continues to exist between white students and children of color, we contend it is important to examine the link between teacher quality variables and teacher efficacy for teaching urban minority students.

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## **Importance of Teachers**

Coleman shocked educators with his finding that school level characteristics mattered little in explaining student achievement (Coleman et al, 1966). He argued that schools had only a negligible effect on student performance and that most of the variation in student learning was a product of differences in family background. Edmonds (1979) was the first to dispute Coleman's findings. In his 1979 article, Edmonds set forth six effective school correlates—clear and focused mission, principal leadership, high expectations for student achievement, opportunity to learn and time on task, frequent monitoring of student progress, and safe and orderly climate—which seemed to refute Coleman.

Subsequent findings related to student performance found teacher quality to be a strong predictor of student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2008, 2012; Lieberman & Darling-Hammond, 2011; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2010). In particular, Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain (2005) revealed that teacher quality plays a vital role in the progression of positive student results. Rivkin et al. (2005) projected that the after-effects of a one standard deviation increase in teacher quality produces an increase in student success of at least 0.11 standard deviations in the total mathematics test score and 0.095 standard deviations in reading test score allocations. Furthermore, Hanushek and Rivkin (2004) predicted that an underprivileged student (i.e. one who is eligible for free or reduced lunch), who is allowed to have five sequential teachers one standard deviation above the norm in teacher quality, can virtually overcome the average success variance coming from a disadvantaged populace.

## **Defining Teacher Quality**

Since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Public Law 107-110) became law and approximately two decades prior, one of the most important topics in the field of education is teacher quality and its impact on student achievement. This has been exemplified through numerous researchers and theorists who concur that both quality teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Marzano, et al., 2010) and teaching methods (Borich, 2011; Hanson, 2011; Lunenburg & Irby, 2011) are significant classroom learning predictors. For example, quality teachers have proven to be more effective in reaching and inspiring students when compared to ineffective teachers (Newton, Darling-Hammond, Haertel, & Thomas, 2010; Slater, Davies, & Burgess, 2012; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011).

Recently attention has been focused on the achievement gap and the equally substantial inequalities in access to educational opportunity for low-income minority students (Darling-Hammond, 2010a, 2010b; Howard, 2011; Paige, 2011). The gaps in educational achievement between White and low-income, non-Asian “minority” students remain large, and the differences in access to educational opportunities are growing (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012). Empirical research conducted on teaching minority students revealed that effective teachers can inspire an additional year's worth of achievement from their students (Mangiante, 2011; Popp, Grant, & Stronge, 2011; Tan & Barton, 2010).

Despite the significance of quality teaching, there is little consensus among educational scholars on the precise definition of a “quality teacher.” For example, Winters (2012) defined teacher quality as being good teachers who receive the largest gains in student achievement, whereas bad teachers are just the opposite. Kelly (2011) argued that in addition to test performance, a close examination of instructional processes, including strong verbal

and mathematical skills, a deep content knowledge, and strong teaching skills, as well as a positive school context are needed in order to truly understand teacher effects and improve learning in our nation's schools. Furthermore, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) suggest that teachers who possess these skills are able to positively affect change and improvement in every school.

Mangiante (2011) outlined measures of teacher effectiveness in low-income minority schools in accordance with the following characteristics: They engage students in higher order thinking; address central ideas thoroughly in order to help students acquire deep knowledge; foster substantive conversation among students; and connect student learning to the world beyond the classroom.

Earlier, Darling-Hammond (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of numerous state policies on quality teaching that resulted in the following conclusions:

1. Quality teaching is loosely related to a teacher's content knowledge.
2. Teachers who prepare formal coursework are more likely to engage in quality teaching.
3. A teacher's passion for learning has a positive effect on quality teaching.
4. Traditional content teacher certification has been shown to enhance student achievement; conversely, a teacher with alternative certification has not been proven to exert a constructive influence on student performance.
5. A positive relationship exists between new teacher induction programs and teacher quality; however, additional research is required in identifying the variables that could quantify this relationship.
6. Although personality traits and interaction styles may have a positive effect on teacher quality, these variables have yet to be included in quality teaching empirical research.
7. A teacher's state licensing scores have been identified as having a strong relationship to student achievement.
8. With regard to policy and the assessment of teacher quality, the variety and number of variables are predictors of student achievement.

Darling-Hammond's list of conclusions tends to support subsequent definitions of teacher quality provided by Winters, Kelly, Hargreaves and Fullan, and Mangiante. Darling-Hammond examined the definition of teacher quality from a state policies perspective.

### **Components of Teacher Quality**

Strong (2012) recognized five characteristics that reveal teacher quality: (a) experience, (b) program preparation and degrees, (c) type of certification, (d) coursework taken in preparation, and (e) teachers' test scores. Seven components of teacher quality are examined in this section: (a) knowledge of subject matter, (b) teacher degree and coursework, (c) teacher certification, (d) experience, (e) verbal ability, (f) content knowledge, and (g) pedagogical knowledge and training.

## **Knowledge of Subject Matter**

Knowledge of one's subject matter is considered to be one of the most debatable issues. While it would appear that knowledge of subject matter would be an irrefutable predictor of quality teaching, research has shown that the connection between student achievement and subject matter knowledge is inconsistent (Kansanen, 2009). For example, the following variables come into play as teacher quality inconsistencies evolve: (a) the ambiguity of describing the necessary level of knowledge a teacher must possess; (b) the assessment of subject knowledge to college level coursework; and (c) the lack of research in other subject areas, excluding mathematics (Arzi & White, 2008; Kansanen, 2009).

The investigation of specific knowledge and the capability of teachers to choose, coordinate, and present their subject matter has attracted the interest of numerous researchers in the field of education. For example, a variety of functional definitions are used to define subject matter knowledge, and the amount of specialized college coursework consistent to the field of study a teacher is trained to teach is used to assess the level of his or her knowledge. Cohen et al. (2010) argued that one of the most common fundamentals used to relate to quality teaching is the type of college degree held. There is some evidence that teachers who obtain their degrees with a major or minor in either mathematics (Amadalo, Wasike, & Wambua, 2011; Zhang, McInerney, & Frechtling, 2011) or science (Zhang, McInerney, & Frechtling, 2011) have higher student achievement outcomes than those who lack a background in these respective subject areas. Ingvarson and Rowe (2008) further noted that available research data pertaining to one's knowledge of a particular subject matter is too narrow and concentrated on mathematics. Yet, available research is comprehensive and confirms how vital knowledge of subject matter is to teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2009a).

Although a review of the research suggested that a number of courses are indeed useful, the requirement of a particular major field of study is questionable. In other words, no research can reach comparable conclusions that overtly measure a potential teacher's area of expertise as it relates to the assessed correlation between subject matter preparation and student learning. Based on an examination of surveys designed to establish a relationship between subject matter and teacher performance, however, it is essential that teachers fully understand the important ideas in the subjects they teach. As defined by student test scores, the connection between subject matter knowledge and teacher quality in the arts and sciences and in the foundations of education is unclear (Floden and Meniketti, 2005).

## **Teacher Degree and Coursework**

In a study conducted by Rice (2003), the selection or status of the educational institution a teacher attended was found to have a positive influence on student performance, particularly at the secondary level, which may indicate a teacher's cognitive aptitude. Equally, coursework in the teacher's subject area taught played a role in positive educational effects. For example, the combination of content knowledge and academic coursework appeared to enhance teacher effectiveness. In addition, positive effects with respect to new teachers who learned the teaching profession through field experiences lessened classroom uneasiness.

Darling-Hammond (2000) examined six studies associated with teacher coursework and degrees obtained. She found a constant and positive effect of coursework on teacher efficacy. The results from these studies had enormous inferences for educational policy given

that states license teachers who have fulfilled the required coursework for a degree yet who have not had any pedagogical training (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Wilson and Floden (2003) also examined a number of studies that consisted of educational degrees and coursework as aspects of teacher quality. Contrary to Darling-Hammond's findings, Wilson and Floden concluded that it was questionable to verify the significance of educational degrees and coursework. However, most meta-analyses appear to confirm that coursework preparation may have a slight to reasonable positive outcome on student performance, particularly in the areas of mathematics (Amadalo, Wasike, & Wambua, 2011; Zhang, McInerney, & Frechtling, 2011) and science (Zhang, McInerney, & Frechtling, 2011).

Stronge et al (2011) stated, "The ability to apply and integrate knowledge or skills to a particular population in a specific setting is the key to characteristics of an effective teacher" (p. 339). Ingvarson & Rowe (2008) concluded that more studies on the subject of teacher coursework preparation and degrees earned would be beneficial due to the lack of irrefutable data and the existence of inconsistent results. Although there may be certain circumstances in which subject matter preparation may predict teacher quality, there is apparently insufficient evidence to depend on these factors alone. Given that a majority of school districts increase teacher salaries based upon advanced coursework and degrees, these data might possibly serve as significant inferences for use by school districts and policy makers.

## **Teacher Certification**

Cochran-Smith et al. (2012) argued that establishing certification requirements is the most important common state mandate proposed to enhance teacher quality. Consistent with Cochran-Smith et al. and Darling-Hammond et al. (2002), Koppich, Humphrey, and Hough (2007) emphasized that teacher certification is the key to ensuring teacher quality. This assertion was supported by others (Georges, Borman, & Lee, 2010; Harrell & Eddy, 2011; Wayne & Youngs, 2003) who claimed that certification is vital to successful teaching outcomes in a particular subject, namely mathematics.

In a large-scale review of state policy evidence concerning teacher quality and student achievement, Darling-Hammond (2000) established that the most significant forecaster of student achievement is a state's quantity of certified teachers. In another large-scale study, Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002) found that students who were more frequently taught by certified teachers surpassed those who were taught by under-certified teachers (i.e., emergency, temporary, or provisionally certified), which resulted in an additional 20% of academic improvement per year.

Rice (2003) indicated that there are numerous types of teacher certification that include regular (or standard), provisional, advanced, emergency, alternative, and private school certifications. Thus, due to the rising need for qualified teachers, numerous states allow the hiring of teachers who are either uncertified or whose certification is acquired through nontraditional means (Albina, 2012; Kaplan, 2012; Schonfeld & Feinman, 2012; Tricarico & Yendol-Hoppey, 2012). In a report focused on qualified teachers in California, Darling-Hammond (2004) wrote, "among school resources, teacher certification status has been the strongest predictor of school-level student achievement in mathematics and reading followed by teacher experience" (p. 44). Goe (2002) noted that the percentage of emergency

permits was greatest in schools that had the lowest student achievement rates and in which socioeconomic status was found to be the most reliable forecaster of student success.

## **Experience**

Researchers indicate that although teacher experience does have a positive effect, there is uncertainty as to whether or not this result is linear. In regard to the various types of teacher preparation effects on student results, Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain (2005) identified a significant positive effect of a teacher's first two to three years of experience on student test scores, which was followed by an equalizing effect in subsequent years. There seems to be a shortage of studies to determine whether teacher outcomes can be improved through additional training.

Similarly, Sanders (2001) acknowledged that although the connection between teacher experience and student success has been investigated, there is no consensus among researchers regarding the quantity of years that makes a teacher "experienced." Experience between 3 to 8 years appeared to be the rationale for effectiveness. Correspondingly, Darling-Hammond (2000) signified that the association between teaching experience and teacher effectiveness is not constantly linear and has an inclination to even out before decreasing. More recent studies of the relationship between teacher experience and student achievement have resulted in similar findings (Tran & Nathan, 2010; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2012).

## **Verbal Ability**

Aloe and Becker (2009) suggested that when earlier studies were investigated by researchers on the effect of student achievement resources, verbal ability consistently had the most positive outcomes. Whitehurst (2002) indicated that each study, which involved an applicable assessment of a teacher's verbal or cognitive ability, accounted for more discrepancy than other distinctive features common among teachers. Other studies of the relationship between teacher verbal ability and teacher effectiveness as measured by student achievement yielded similar findings (Andrew, Cobb, & Giampietro, 2005; Fabry, 2010; Lanouette, 2012; Strong, Gargani, & Lu, 2011).

## **Content Knowledge**

According to Cohen et al (2010), teaching a course entails more than superficial knowledge of the subject. In other words, the more immersed that a teacher fully understands a particular content area, that knowledge presumably may be transferred onto students. As long as the teacher is teaching in his or her field of competency, there is a reasonable amount of affirmation to support this perception of competency. According to Darling-Hammond (2000), knowledge of subject matter, similar to degrees and certification, is sometimes regarded as a substitute for a teacher's aptitude. According to King-Rice (2003), teachers who acquired mathematics certification achieved higher subject matter knowledge test scores. In other research related to the assessment of content knowledge studies, Buschang, et al. (2012) found that out of 30 studies, 17 denoted a positive relationship between content knowledge and achievement, whereas 14 demonstrated no relationship.

Although Johnson et al. (2012) declared that research regarding the association of a teacher's subject knowledge with student achievement in high-need schools is somewhat unclear, Darling-Hammond (2000) indicated earlier that various researchers have proposed that a teacher's extended understanding of subject matter content for mathematics teachers is crucial. However, Darling-Hammond further argued that omitting the conceptual understanding of mathematical connotations, and teaching mathematics, forms a conceptual context that is incomprehensible. Reports on teacher evaluation procedures and curriculum decision-making substantiate Darling-Hammond's position (Mangiante, 2011; Shernoff et al., 2011).

### **Pedagogical Knowledge and Training**

The U.S. Department of Education (2002) affirmed that research connecting pedagogical knowledge and teacher quality "has been called into question" (p. 37), and a connection does not exist. However, others (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Konig & Blomeke, 2012; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2010; Wise, 2002) have argued with this claim. Strong (2012) asserted that the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) (2003) provide research that firmly defends pedagogical knowledge as a teacher quality criterion.

The National Teachers' Exam (NTE) had been reviewed as the most important instrument in connection to teacher quality; however, the conclusions vary. Numerous correlational studies provide weak associations between NTE scores and teacher performance as reported by supervisor or principal observation assessments (Strong, 2012). For example, Strong acknowledged that other factors, including cultural responsiveness, may affect the association between teacher quality and pedagogical knowledge. Villegas & Lucus (2002) provide six qualities of being culturally responsive: (a) understanding how learners construct knowledge, (b) using appropriate instructional strategies, (c) learning about students' lives, (d) being socioculturally conscientious, (e) holding affirming views about diversity, and (f) advocating for all students.

Strong (2012) indicated that although applying culturally responsive pedagogy is not a traditional replacement of teacher quality within policy, it is viewed as an important attribute within the teaching community according to Darling-Hammond (2010b), Hollins and Guzman (2005), and Villegas and Lucus (2002). Therefore, additional experimental research on cultural responsiveness is needed in order to affect policy, as indicated by Darling-Hammond, 2010a, Howard, 2011, Nieto, 2010, and Paige, 2011. Ladson-Billings and Darling-Hammond (2000) conceded that a large amount of research "suggests that there are some aspects of teaching to student learning that may be differently valued and represented in the repertoires of successful teachers in urban minority contexts" (p. 4).

Berliner and Nichols (2008) suggested that pedagogy is one of the rational acts of teaching. Although some individuals associate subject matter with the ability to teach, others believe that in order to be an effective teacher, knowledge of subject matter must be coordinated with the knowledge of how students learn (Cole, 2012). According to Strong et al (2011), individuals whose fundamental system is based on professional knowledge as being the chief component in describing an effective teacher place certain importance on this quality.



## Self-Efficacy Theory

Mainly due to the work of Albert Bandura, self-efficacy has a widely acclaimed theoretical foundation (Bandura, 1977, 1986), an extensive knowledge base (Bandura, 1997), and a proven record of application in the workplace (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Nine large-scale meta-analyses consistently demonstrate that the efficacy beliefs of organization members contribute significantly to their level of motivation and performance (Bandura & Locke, 2003).

Self-efficacy (also known as social cognitive theory or social learning theory) is a person's belief that she/he is capable of performing a particular task successfully. Self-efficacy has three dimensions: magnitude, the level of task difficulty a person believes she can attain; strength, the conviction regarding magnitude as strong or weak; and generality, the degree to which the expectation is generalized across situations. An individual's sense of capability influences her/his perception, motivation, and performance. People rarely attempt to perform a task when they expect to be unsuccessful.

Self-efficacy has powerful effects on learning, motivation, and performance; because people try to learn and perform only those tasks that they believe they will be able to perform successfully. Self-efficacy affects learning and performance in the following ways (Bandura, 1982):

*Self-efficacy influences the goals that people choose for themselves.* Persons with low levels of self-efficacy tend to set relatively low goals for themselves. Conversely, an individual with high self-efficacy is likely to set high personal goals. Research indicates that people not only learn but also perform at levels consistent with their self-efficacy beliefs.

*Self-efficacy influences learning as well as the effort that people exert on the job.* People with high self-efficacy generally work hard to learn how to perform new tasks, because they are confident that their efforts will be successful. Persons with low self-efficacy may exert less effort when learning and performing complex tasks, because they are not sure the effort will lead to success.

*Self-efficacy influences the persistence with which people attempt new and difficult tasks.* People with high self-efficacy are confident that they can learn and perform a specific task. Thus, they are likely to persist in their efforts even when problems surface. Conversely, individuals with low self-efficacy, who believe they are incapable of learning and performing a difficult task, are likely to give up when problems surface. In an extensive literature review on self-efficacy, Albert Bandura and Edwin Locke concluded that self-efficacy is a powerful determinant of job performance (Bandura & Locke, 2003).

### Sources of Self-Efficacy

Since self-efficacy can have powerful effects on teachers, it is important to identify its origin. Bandura has identified four principal sources of self-efficacy: past performance, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional cues (Bandura, 1997).

**Past performance.** According to Bandura, the most important source of self-efficacy is past performance. People who have succeeded on job-related tasks are likely to have more confidence to complete similar tasks in the future (high self-efficacy) than individuals who have been unsuccessful (low self-efficacy). School administrators can boost self-efficacy

through careful hiring, providing challenging assignments, professional development and coaching, goal setting, supportive leadership, and rewards for improvement.

**Vicarious experience.** A second source of self-efficacy is through vicarious experience. Seeing a co-worker succeed at a particular task may boost one's self-efficacy. For example, if your co-worker learns to teach online courses, this may increase your confidence that you can teach online courses as well. Vicarious experience is most effective when you see yourself as similar to the person you are modeling.

**Verbal persuasion.** The third source of self-efficacy is through verbal persuasion. Essentially this involves convincing people that they have the ability to succeed at a particular task. The best way for a leader to use verbal persuasion is through the *Pygmalion effect*. The Pygmalion effect is a form of a self-fulfilling prophecy in which believing something to be true can make it true.

Most educators are familiar with Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) classic study in which teachers were told that one group of students had very high IQ scores (when in fact they had average to low IQ scores), and the same teacher was told that another group of students had low IQ scores (when in fact they had high IQ scores). Consistent with the Pygmalion effect, the teacher spent more time with the students they thought were smart, gave them more challenging assignments, and expected more of them—all of which led to higher student self-efficacy and better student grades.

**Emotional cues.** Finally, Bandura argues that emotional cues dictate self-efficacy. A person who expects to fail at some task or finds something too demanding is likely to experience certain physiological symptoms: a pounding heart, feeling flushed, sweaty palms, headaches, and so on. The symptoms vary from individual to individual, but if they persist may become associated with poor performance.

### **Teacher Efficacy: A Theoretical Perspective**

According to Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy (2004), the construct of teacher efficacy has evolved from Rotter's (1966) locus of control theory and Bandura's (1977, 1986, 1997) social cognitive theory.

#### **Rotter's Locus of Control Theory**

Rotter's (1966) locus of control theory refers to the extent to which individuals believe that they can control events that affect them. Simply stated, locus of control is the principle that an anticipated ending is within one's dominion. According to Pendergast et al (2011), the two concepts of locus of control and self-efficacy are frequently obscured. For example, Rotter's locus of control was ascertained as a "generalized expectancy" whereas Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy was more specific to a particular task and situation.

#### **Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory**

Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory suggested that a hard-working participant in the learning process is taught through shared or social connections and modeled occurrences. Concealed within the theory is the motivational view of self-efficacy or the view that one embraces in regard to his or her aptitude of achieving a specific task.

For example, typically, pre-service teachers who desire to gain knowledge when teaching students how to read seek the advice of an experienced mentor and then have the liberty to teach brief lessons followed by teacher-mentor discussions. Subsequently, the pre-service teacher undergoes a sense of readiness and assuredness to competently instruct upcoming students. By doing so, achievement is acquired most of the time (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990).

Teacher effectiveness is described in the following two dimensions: general teaching efficacy (GTE) and personal teaching efficacy (PTE).

**General teaching efficacy (GTE).** General teaching efficacy (GTE) refers to the relationship between teaching and learning (Hebert, Lee, & Williamson, 1998; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990) which is further clarified as the belief that teachers are able to bring about positive student changes despite environmental out-of-school constraints (Ross, Cousins, & Gadalla, 1996) that affect teaching and learning (i.e., heredity, poverty, domestic and televised violence, parental value on education, etc.) (Soodak & Podell, 1996; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998; Tschannen-Moran, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001).

**Personal teaching efficacy (PTE).** Personal teaching efficacy (PTE) is more specific than GTE because the concept applies to an individual teacher's belief in his or her own teaching ability (Hebert & Williamson, 1998; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990) and indicates the confidence that a teacher possesses based on training, experience, or past successes (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). In other words, GTE is the belief that teachers can make a difference, whereas PTE is the self-efficacy belief that "I can make a difference" (Siwatu, Frazier, Osaghae, & Starker, 2011). Because GTE and PTE are independent of one another, teachers may have a strong belief that they can generally reach students yet at the same time be less than confident in their own teaching abilities (Knoblauch & Whittington, 2002).

### **Sources of Teacher Efficacy**

As previously mentioned, Bandura (1997) included four sources of self-efficacy: past performance, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional cues. Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) claimed that through an examination of teaching tasks and self-conceptions of teaching aptitudes, the comparable four sources subscribe as well to a teacher's sense of efficacy.

Henson (2002) affirmed that while the cognitive development stage is theoretically stable, empirical research designed to analyze the soundness and probable influence of developed teacher efficacy sources is limited. Thus, research is needed to further confirm the Tschannen-Moran et al (1998) model and to analyze the sources by which teacher efficacy is developed. In particular, research should be conducted to examine Bandura's four sources of teacher self-efficacy as well as the association between teacher characteristics as described in the Tschannen-Moran et al model (i.e., years of experience, teaching level, professional development knowledge, and teacher efficacy). Two recent studies provide partial support for Bandura's sources of self-efficacy and Tschannen-Moran et al (1998) model, specifically increasing in-service teachers' self-efficacy through content knowledge (Swackhamer, Koellner, Basile, & Kimbrough, 2009), teaching experience (Bosma, Hessels, & Resing, 2012), and professional development (Stewart, 2012).

## **Contextual Factors Influencing Teacher Efficacy**

Tschannan-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) proposed that aptitude and task assessments should be included as suitable measures of teacher efficacy as they relate to the sustained and limited efforts within the teaching profession. These findings have ramifications for schools operating under the misconception that all teachers must consistently provide low level and passive instruction in order to equip students to perform on proficient levels in response to the NCLB accountability standards.

Friedman and Kass (2002) affirmed that the influence of school environment, a principal's leadership style, community involvement, and decision-making create an impact on a teacher's personal and collective efficacy. Thus, relationships within the school can function as either a positive reinforcement or a negative interference in the general learning population (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006; Kurt, Duyar, & Calik, 2012).

## **Correlates of Teacher Efficacy**

A literature review provided support for a link between a teacher's sense of self-efficacy and other important variables, including time spent on interactive teaching (Chong & Kong, 2012; Clark & Greer, 2011); use of new teaching strategies (Powell-Moman & Brown-Schild, 2011; Shu & Franklin, 2011; Tella, 2011; Ying, Connor, Yang, Roehrig, & Morrison, 2012); teacher burnout (Brown, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007); and commitment to teaching (Bates, Latham, & Kim, 2011; Cayci, 2011; Khurshid, Qasmi, & Ashraf, 2012; Pendergast, Garvis, & Keogh, 2011; Viel-Ruma, Houchins, Jolivet, & Benson, 2010). Teachers with a high level of self-efficacy demonstrated less anxiety and a higher inner locus of control than those who had a low sense of efficacy (Greenwood, Olejnik, & Parkay, 1990; Lunenburg & Cadavid, 1992). For example, higher-efficacy teachers volunteered for extra-curricular school activities in an effort to increase their self-awareness (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2000).

## **Outcomes of Teacher Efficacy**

Several scholars have indicated that a teacher's sense of efficacy has been associated with two major variables: teacher behavior (Bostock & Boon, 2012; Cayci, 2011; Clark & Greer, 2012; Khurshid, et al., 2012; Powell-Moman & Brown-Schild, 2011; Power, Plevyak, & DeWitt, 2012; Shu & Franklin, 2011; Viel-Ruma, et al., 2010) and student achievement (Fancera & Bliss, 2011; Lumpe, Czerniak, Haney, & Beltyukova, 2012; Marat, 2007; Mohamadi & Asadzadeh, 2012; Moolenaar, Slegers, & Daly, 2012). A variety of attributes and experiences have been linked to teacher efficacy beliefs, including content knowledge (Swackhamer et al., 2009), personal characteristics (Bosma et al., 2012; Brown, 2012; Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Mehdinezhad, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007), and environmental factors (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Hughes, 2012). According to Desouza, Boone, & Yilaz (2004), beginning teachers who display a low level of stress tend to have a higher sense of efficacy concerning science instruction simply because they hold a bachelor of science degree or are capable of responding correctly to difficult questions (Aggul, 2011).

## Summary

In this conceptual analysis, we reviewed the research literature that was relevant to teacher quality variables and efficacy for teaching minority students. We included an examination of the importance of teachers; defined teacher quality; and discussed the components of teacher quality, including knowledge of subject matter, teacher degree and coursework, teacher certification, experience, verbal ability, content knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge and training. Self-efficacy and teacher efficacy and related variables were also discussed. Accordingly, educational leaders have been provided with a strong rationale for the importance of teacher quality and teacher efficacy in their professional practices.

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# Teacher Perceptions of Teacher Evaluations in the Fort Zumwalt School District

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*This study examines the perceptions of teachers in one Midwest school district relative to the current teacher evaluation system used in the district as well as a new model of teacher evaluation connected to Missouri's educator standards. To fully understand the perspective of the teachers, this study incorporates a mixed-methods approach which provides a variety of quantitative and qualitative data for analysis. Using survey data and focus group interview data, this study revealed that teachers perceive limitations associated with the current, more traditional evaluation process. Teachers understand benefits to the new Missouri model, but have reservations about its impending implementation. This study provides implications for the district as it moves forward with changing its teacher evaluation process.*

## Introduction

One of the most important responsibilities of a school administrator is conducting teacher evaluations that foster each teacher's ability to ensure student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Through effective evaluation, teachers have the opportunity to build their capacity in areas related to subject matter, affective behavior, and didactic processes (de la Rosa, 2005). However, previous research has provided evidence that the predominant practices in teacher evaluation do not always result in increased student achievement. Medley and Coker (1987) found a low rate of accuracy in school principals' judgments of the performance of teachers under their supervision. Principals are able to identify the best and

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worst teachers, but are not able to distinguish teachers who occupy the middle range (Jacob & Lefgren, 2008). Other studies have demonstrated that traditional teacher evaluation methods are unable to provide meaningful understanding of teaching practices beyond sorting out those teachers lacking the most basic skills (Darling-Hammond, 1986).

Until recently, little research has been conducted to determine which types of teaching evaluations can lead to increased student achievement. The Gates Foundation (2010) has brought considerable attention to this issue within the last few years through the publication of their Measures of Effective Teaching project (the MET project). Additionally, some researchers have begun to craft teacher evaluation instruments that are specifically designed to assist teachers in improving student achievement (Danielson, 2009; Marzano, Frontier, & Livingston, 2011). In this study, we seek to add to the literature on current teacher evaluation models by studying the implementation of a new teacher evaluation system in a large, suburban, Midwestern school district.

Our first purpose of this mixed-methods study is to gain an understanding of how well the current teacher evaluation process is working for teachers in the Fort Zumwalt School District, to determine items in an evaluation process that would benefit the district's teachers, and to understand teachers' thoughts regarding a new teacher evaluation model proposed by the state of Missouri. Our second purpose is to understand teacher perceptions of the current evaluation process used in the Fort Zumwalt School District, as well as gain an understanding of how this same group perceives future changes to the teacher evaluation process. We sought to answer several research questions:

### **Quantitative Questions**

1. To what extent do the teachers in the Fort Zumwalt School District feel the current evaluation system is beneficial to them and to their students? We predict that most teachers will perceive the current teacher evaluation process presently used by the Fort Zumwalt School District as not beneficial to them or their students.
2. To what extent do teachers in the Fort Zumwalt School District feel that characteristics associated with the *Missouri Model Teacher Standards* will lead to better teacher evaluations? We predict that teachers will view the content in new Missouri model as better criteria for evaluative feedback than the current system used in the district.

### **Qualitative Questions**

3. What are teachers' perceptions of the current teacher evaluation process used in the Fort Zumwalt School District?
4. What are teachers' thoughts regarding a new teacher evaluation system aligned with the *Missouri Model Teacher Standards*?

## Review of Literature

### Historical Perspective

A formal method of describing teachers' traits and attributes emerged in the 1920s as Charters and Waples (1929) identified desirable traits and actions of teachers by generating characteristics to be used in the evaluation process. Beecher (1949) provided examples of teacher evaluations based on teacher characteristics that were perceived as valuable during this time frame. During the 1940s and 1950s, teachers were evaluated by "presage variables" or specific teacher traits (Danielson & McGreal, 2000).

Clinical supervision took root in the 1960s and 1970s with teacher evaluation models that included a pre-observation conference, classroom observation, analysis, post-observation conference, and analysis of the analysis (Marzano et al., 2011). These models led to more formal examinations of teaching and the evaluation of teachers using structured models such as Madeline Hunter's model of teaching as a standard for excellence. In the 1970s, Hunter's model gained recognition as a research-based methodology of instruction and teacher evaluation (Danielson & McGreal, 2000).

### Current Trends in Teacher Evaluation Practice

The trend in teacher evaluation systems is moving from a teacher-centered set of behaviors, such as Hunter's teaching model, to a sharper focus on student learning (Danielson, 2009). There has been a great deal of research in the last 20 years examining the efficacy of various instructional strategies and their effects on student achievement (Hunter, 1982; Marzano, 2003). Much of the research on effective learning strategies has been included in recent teacher evaluation models (Danielson, 2009; Marzano et al., 2011; The New Teacher Project, 2010; Tucker & Stronge, 2005). Enough collective wisdom and technical savvy exists in the field of education to measure teacher quality and assess teachers both validly and reliably (Ingvarson & Rowe, 2008).

Two recent models of teacher evaluations include as a primary focus, effective learning strategies that lead to student growth. Danielson's Framework for Teaching and the Marzano Teacher Evaluation Model divide teaching attributes into various domains containing related behaviors. Both of these evaluation models emphasize quality conversations between the principal and teacher focused on teaching and learning (Danielson, 2007; Marzano et al., 2011).

Wiesberg, Sexton, Mulhern, and Keeling (2009) from the New Teacher Project wrote *The Widget Effect* to document their research regarding schools' lack of ability in assessing teacher effectiveness. They have defined the Widget Effect as "the tendency of school districts to assume classroom effectiveness is the same from teacher to teacher" (p. 4). Their concerns led to the development of the New Teacher Project's teacher evaluation process standards known as *Teacher Evaluation 2.0* (2010). This model provides a framework that stresses the importance of incorporating student learning in teacher assessment.

## Value-added Teacher Evaluation

In addition to requiring that states adopt rigorous standards for defining excellent teaching, new legislation contains specific requirements for the inclusion of student assessment data in the teacher evaluation process (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, 2009). Tucker and Stronge (2005) detailed several school districts' attempts to assess teacher quality using student achievement and learning as a primary factor. They concluded that the use of evidence of student learning should be present in quality teacher evaluation systems.

Tekwe et al. (2004) labeled this method of incorporating student achievement in teacher evaluation as value-added stating,

Value-added is a term used to label methods of assessment of school/teacher performance that measure the knowledge gained by individual students from one year to the next and then use that measure as the basis for a performance assessment system. (p.12)

Value-added models have emerged in the research as one way to statistically determine a teacher's effectiveness using various types of assessments as the primary data source (Gordon, Kane, & Staiger, 2006; Hill, Kapitula, & Umland, 2011; McCaffrey, Lockwood, Koretz, Louis, & Hamilton, 2004; Milanowski, 2011; Tekwe et al., 2004; & Toch & Rothman, 2008). Wright, Horn, and Sanders (1997) suggested that teacher evaluation processes should have a component detailing the teacher's effect on student growth. Despite the popularity of value-added models in the literature, some researchers have raised concerns with the use of these evaluation models (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008; Ishill & Rivkin, 2009). Specifically, they discovered issues related to insufficient validity of value-added research, inability for districts to implement the model, student background issues, inability to apply the model to all teachers, and classroom assignments as potential difficulties in using value-added measures for teacher evaluation.

## Theoretical Framework

Two theories provide the theoretical foundation for this study: (a) the halo effect (Thorndike, 1920) and (b) Theory X and Y (McGregor, 1960). The halo effect was developed by E.L. Thorndike (1920) and was used to study military officers' evaluations of soldiers. The halo effect refers to the idea that that officers relied mainly on general perceptions of certain characteristics when evaluating soldiers. Lachman and Bass (1985) found a number of personality traits that might contribute to the halo effect of teachers by administrators (e.g., courtesy, fairness, intelligence, sincerity, tact, etc...). This study did not identify many of the instructional pieces so important to producing high student achievement, such as those contained in the *Missouri Model Teacher Standards*. A halo error can result from a principal's general impression of a teacher, thus influencing his/her evaluation of the teacher (Feeley, 2002).

Considering the halo effect in the context of this study, we would expect teachers to appreciate an evaluation based on clear standards, such as those outlined in the Missouri standards instead of an evaluation based on the perceptions of the principal. The task for principals is to separate any personal connections they may have with teachers and focus on



clearly defined strategies when providing feedback to teachers. In addition, a well-defined evaluation system that is grounded in research may not be well received by marginal teachers who have historically received positive evaluations due to their close personal relationship with their administrators.

Another theory useful to examine the motivation of teachers' willingness to improve their performance is McGregor's Theory X and Y (1960). Maslow's hierarchy of needs served as the basis for McGregor as he established this theory (Mattaliano, 1982). Theory X assumes that employees dislike work and managers consider employees to be inherently lazy. Theory Y assumes employees are ambitious, self-motivated, and exercise self-control.

Teachers generally view principals as holding Theory X assumptions when it comes to relations with staff members (Sabanci, 2008). The traditional model of teacher evaluations can be viewed from the standpoint of Theory X, while newer models of teacher evaluation which encourage a stronger professional relationship between the teacher and principal are consistent with Theory Y. As we conducted interviews with teachers regarding the district's current evaluation process and their perceptions of changes to the evaluation process, we noted how McGregor's theory applies, if at all, to teacher perceptions.

## Method

### Sample/Participants

**Quantitative.** We distributed an electronic survey to every teacher ( $n = 1300$ ) in the school district in August 2012. Three hundred and fifty-eight completed surveys were returned resulting in a final return rate of 28%. Responses were received from teachers from every one of the district's 24 schools. We also collected information about the participants' total years of teaching experience and the grade(s) each participant teaches. The majority of the responses came from teachers with 18 years or less of teaching experience. High school teachers had a higher participation rate than middle and elementary school teachers.

**Qualitative.** We conducted focus group interviews at five schools in the Fort Zumwalt School District in September 2012. We selected two secondary schools and three elementary schools to ensure an equitable representation of K-12 staff within the district. Using the mean score from the survey for teacher perceptions of the *Missouri Model Teacher Standards*, we selected schools that appeared both eager and reticent about implementation of the new evaluation process. Membership of each focus group was comprised of teachers in various grades and subjects and varied from 6 to 11 participants. Focus group sessions were conducted at each school and lasted from 25 to 35 min in length.

### Research Design/Overall Approach

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach. We collected survey data from teachers in the Fort Zumwalt School District regarding their perceptions of content contained in the district's current teacher evaluation process and content contained in the state of *Missouri's Model Teacher and Leader Standards*. Additionally, we collected qualitative data through the use of focus groups comprised of teachers from five district schools to gain their insights regarding the teacher evaluation process.

## Data Sources/Instruments

**Quantitative.** For the quantitative piece of this study, we developed a 21-item survey. Items on the survey reflected specific criteria currently used by the Fort Zumwalt School District as well as criteria included in the Missouri model. Teachers rated each item on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) regarding whether the particular item should be included in a teacher evaluation.

**Qualitative.** For the qualitative portion of this study, we conducted five semi-structured focus group interviews. The goal of the focus group sessions was to expand on the quantitative data and to gain the insiders' perspective on what the teacher evaluation process truly means to them. The questions used to guide the focus group discussions were designed to allow participants to share more specific information about their impression of the evaluation system currently used in the school district and allowed participants to share their thoughts and concerns regarding the implementation of the Missouri model.

## Procedures

**Quantitative.** Permission to administer the survey was obtained from the school district. The survey was sent to teachers via email. Informed consent was obtained from each respondent. Teachers did not provide unique identifying information, thus ensuring confidentiality in their responses. Teachers had two weeks to respond to the survey. Survey data were exported into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to be analyzed and processed for use in SPSS.

**Qualitative.** We invited teachers from the various schools to participate in focus group interview sessions. We met with each focus group at their school before the start of the school day, so as not to interfere with contractual obligations with the teachers. We obtained informed consent from each participant. We audio recorded each focus group session, and transcribed the recordings into Microsoft Word documents to be used in analysis.

## Data Analysis

**Quantitative.** We used descriptive statistics to determine measures of central tendency and variability on all individual survey items and to calculate two summary variables. The summary variables provide an overall representation of teachers' perceptions for Fort Zumwalt-related evaluation content and Missouri model-related content. Each of the survey items were considered interval scales of measurement. We created two tables detailing descriptive statistics including the mean, standard deviation, minimum value, maximum value, and skew for each survey item.

To determine whether all items on the survey measured a common construct, we calculated Cronbach's alpha to determine the reliability of the overall survey. Additionally, we determined the reliability for two different groups of questions in the survey: (a) the items addressing teacher perceptions of the district's current evaluation system and (b) the items addressing teacher perceptions of the Missouri model. We compared these two groups of questions to determine if a relationship exists between the ratings of the two models. Finally, we conducted a *t*-test to determine whether there was a significant difference in the ratings of the models.

**Qualitative.** We transcribed each focus group interview and analyzed the transcripts, using open and focused coding techniques. To assist in organizing the transcript data, we also wrote five memos. Three overall themes emerged from the analysis of the transcripts.

## Findings

### Quantitative

To determine if the survey items measured a common construct, several Cronbach's alphas (measures of internal consistency reliability) were computed. Cronbach's alphas for the entire survey, survey items specific to the Fort Zumwalt teacher evaluation, and survey items specific to the Missouri model were .98, .96, and .96 respectively. Each of the surveys were found to be highly reliable.

Measures of central tendency were computed on all individual items and on two summary variables representing the aggregate of both Fort Zumwalt-related survey items and Missouri model-related survey models (see Tables 1 and 2). By looking at the mean scores from both tables, it can be inferred that there is overall high, positive regard for the content of both teacher evaluation instruments.

Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics on Fort Zumwalt Evaluation Items*

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	Skew
1	6.39	1.32	1	7	-2.92
2	6.54	1.20	1	7	-3.68
3	6.33	1.24	1	7	-2.82
4	6.16	1.31	1	7	-2.40
5	6.25	1.26	1	7	-2.65
6	6.02	1.48	1	7	-2.15
7	5.58	1.48	1	7	-1.25
8	6.30	1.38	1	7	-2.72
9	6.36	1.27	1	7	-2.99
10	5.60	1.58	1	7	-1.39
Average	6.15	1.14	1	7	-3.03

Table 2  
*Descriptive Statistics on Missouri Model Evaluation Items*

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	Skew
1	6.63	1.15	1	7	-4.19
2	6.45	1.24	1	7	-3.25
3	6.23	1.25	1	7	-2.58
4	6.38	1.22	1	7	-3.13
5	6.58	1.20	1	7	-3.87
6	6.09	1.30	1	7	-2.29
7	6.07	1.39	1	7	-2.19
8	6.33	1.27	1	7	-2.90
9	5.89	1.49	1	7	-1.77
Average	6.29	1.12	1	7	-3.48

The item with the lowest score from the Fort Zumwalt evaluation was completely unrelated to the lowest scoring item from the Missouri model. The item scoring the lowest on the Fort Zumwalt evaluation was “maintains instructional materials and equipment” — the lowest item from the Missouri model was “participates in professional collaboration to support student learning.” However, the top-rated items from both sets were very similar in that both were focused on providing effective instruction. The item from the Fort Zumwalt evaluation receiving the highest rating was “presents effective instruction and uses a variety of instructional methods” — the item from the Missouri model that received the highest rating was “understands content knowledge and aligns accordingly with appropriate instruction.” Thus, the data suggest that receiving feedback relative to the instructional act is valued most by teachers.

We conducted a Pearson’s correlation between teachers’ views on the Fort Zumwalt survey items and views on the Missouri Model items, after applying a log10 transformation to reduce the considerable skew in the variables. The correlation between the transformed variables,  $r = .87$ , indicates a strong positive relationship between the two types of survey items. In other words, the more positive ratings a teacher had for Fort Zumwalt evaluation items, the more positive ratings they had for the Missouri model.

Finally, we conducted a paired-samples *t*-test to compare ratings on the summary variables (averages) for the Fort Zumwalt items and the Missouri model items. There was a statistically significant difference between ratings,  $t(357) = -6.66, p < .01$ ; overall, the effect size is large with Missouri model items rated more highly than the Fort Zumwalt items (see Tables 1 and 2). The survey results indicate that teachers in the district prefer the content associated with the Missouri model over the content contained in the current district evaluation instrument.

## Qualitative

Three major themes emerged from the focus group interviews. First, perceived liabilities exist within the current teacher evaluation system. Second, there is apprehension regarding the implementation of the Missouri model. Third, there are perceived advantages to the Missouri model.

**Perceived liabilities exist within the current evaluation system.** Although focus group participants appeared to have a clear understanding of the evaluation process, they perceived there to be problems with the current system. Specifically, the formal classroom observation process, the subjective nature of the evaluation process, and the lack of professional growth associated with the evaluation process were three disadvantages noted by the focus groups. Each of these perceived disadvantages will be expounded in further detail.

**Classroom observation.** Teachers perceive the formal classroom observation process as one of the weaknesses associated with the current evaluation system. Specifically, teachers expressed concern that their yearly evaluations are based solely on two formal visits from the principal. One teacher likened the formal classroom observation process to a “dog and pony show.” Although some teachers appreciated their individual conversations with principals regarding formal classroom observations and final evaluation conferences, the majority of teachers felt these conversations lacked sufficient substance to promote professional growth. One teacher stated, “My principal will give me vague or no feedback at all about why I’m in

this column.” Another teacher stated, “They [principals] want to be too nice” instead of providing constructive feedback.

***Subjective nature of evaluation process.*** Another area of concern expressed by teachers is the perceived subjective nature of the evaluation process. The inconsistent feedback teachers receive from different principals is one example of subjectivity. One teacher shared her experience with having multiple evaluators over the course of her career and how each one had “their things they looked for, which was different.” Another teacher reported how two principals who evaluated her gave her two completely different evaluations. Some teachers also reported that newer principals tended to evaluate teachers “harder” in their eyes.

Consistent with the halo effect, teachers felt that the preexisting relationship between the teacher and principal had a strong influence on the result of the evaluation. As one teacher shared, “If you have a good relationship with your administrator, then you’ll probably end up with a better evaluation.” From the teachers’ perspective, some teacher evaluations have more to do with the level of the teacher-administrator relationship than it does with being able to demonstrate effective instruction.

***Evaluations are not conducive to professional growth.*** While most teachers seemed complimentary of their principals, many were not in favor of the school district’s current evaluation process or the instruments used to evaluate teachers. The following quotes illustrate some of the candid opinions of the evaluation process held by teachers:

- “I think the evaluation forms are ridiculous.”
- “They [evaluation forms] don’t help me.”
- “I often get frustrated when I get these evaluations back.”
- “I am not real impressed at the way we evaluate teachers right now.”
- “I don’t think it’s [evaluation form] a very good tool.”

There are items that principals must evaluate that are not of significant value for teachers, such as, “what does your classroom look like,” “where are things stored,” and “care of materials and supplies.” The quantitative data from this study confirms these observations as the lowest-rated item on the survey was, “maintains instructional materials and equipment.”

**Apprehension regarding the implementation of the Missouri model.**

Missouri’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education released the *Missouri Model Teacher Standards* during the summer of 2012. The Fort Zumwalt School District formally adopted the standards in September 2012. The timeline is important to the discussion of teacher apprehension because it provides context for the teachers’ perspective. It was apparent, depending on the school, that there were varying degrees of teacher understanding about the state’s new teacher evaluation model. Many teachers were not familiar with all of the nuances associated with the Missouri model.

***Logistical concerns.*** There was some concern with the overall logistics associated with the actual process of the Missouri model. Teachers were curious to know whether or not there would be differences for tenured versus non-tenured teachers with the Missouri model. Another logistical concern expressed was the amount of time it will take principals to conduct evaluations on every teacher, every year. Teachers were concerned with the amount of time it will take principals to meet with teachers on a regular basis, conduct frequent walk-throughs, and review teacher documentation of evidence of student growth.

**Measuring student impact.** A significant piece of the Missouri model that lies in stark contrast with the current evaluation system is the emphasis placed on measuring the teacher's ability to effect student achievement, or simply stated "student impact." Focus group participants expressed concern with the student impact component. One teacher asked, "Are we going to gauge our effectiveness as an educator on that beginning to end-of-year growth?" Teachers were in favor of multiple assessment pieces such as portfolios, benchmark assessments, pre- and post-test measures, DRA reading scores, formative assessments, and summative assessments to document student growth throughout the school year.

Because of the emphasis on student impact, ethical considerations were raised. Teachers wanted to know who will have the gifted students assigned to their classrooms and who will have students with learning disabilities assigned to their classrooms. The concern was that if their performance is based on individual student performance, teachers might want students assigned to their classroom who perform better on assessments. They wanted assurance that students will be distributed equally among all classrooms. Despite the fact that our conversations never discussed employment decisions based on teacher evaluations, one teacher lamented that, "If raises are based on test scores and those evaluations, there will be cheating happening."

**Professional considerations for implementing the Missouri model.** To ease their apprehension regarding the implementation of the Missouri model, teachers were hopeful that the district administration will clearly communicate the roles and responsibilities associated with implementing the Missouri model for all parties. One teacher summed up her desire for this communication by stating that it would be beneficial to have, "a really good, comprehensive introduction to this with: this is what the administrators will do, this is what you [the teacher] will do, this is what we will do together."

Using the Missouri model, teachers will be evaluated on their performance for each item with one of four labels. The nomenclature used for these labels are "New Teacher," "Developing Teacher," "Proficient Teacher," and "Distinguished Teacher." Many experienced teachers were troubled by the idea that they may be evaluated as a "New Teacher" once the Missouri model is implemented. As one teacher said, "I think [the label] 'New' is insulting - insulting to anyone who has been doing it and working hard and trying for the last thirty-five years."

**Special area teacher evaluations.** Teachers who work in special areas such as music, physical education, art, and special education were concerned that the new evaluation instrument may not appropriately measure their performance. Because special area teachers and special education staff typically do not have the responsibility of administering state-wide standardized tests, the student impact component of the Missouri model surfaced as a concern for this population of teachers. One teacher mentioned, "How are we going to provide the right data to show? We're novices at this whole thing so far."

**Advantages to implementing the Missouri model.** In spite of their concerns regarding the implementation of the Missouri model, there are components contained in the model that appeal to teachers. Some of the advantages include professional growth for teachers, an increased focus on student achievement, and the emphasis on principal "walk-throughs." The higher level of emphasis the Missouri model places on professional growth is encouraging for teachers. Teachers perceive the current evaluation system as being weak in this particular area. As one teacher stated, "I don't think that it [the current evaluation system] allows for them to dig deep into their own professional growth."

The standards outlined in the Missouri model are more relevant to instruction and place an emphasis on student achievement. Thus, there is a connection between the teacher evaluation to district, building, and individual goals which makes sense to teachers. Teachers appeared motivated to personalize and develop their own goals in which they can demonstrate accountability towards student growth. Another connection from the quantitative side of this study corroborates the teachers' sentiments regarding the instructional piece. Teachers rated both the Fort Zumwalt evaluation item and the Missouri model item related to "providing effective instruction" highest on the survey.

One of the strategies consistently praised by the focus group participants was the use of walk-throughs by the principal. Walk-throughs can be simply defined as more frequent, less lengthy classroom visits by the principal. One teacher commented that this practice validates the importance of what teachers do and it also communicates to students what they are doing is important. One teacher said when the principal walks through her classroom, "that's when [they] really see the true reflection of your teaching." One teacher commented on the positive nature of this strategy, "I appreciate the principal being in the classroom so much more. Because when I get praise, and it's the same as the kids, I like to know if it's something I'm really doing well."

## Discussion

### What was Learned

The first two research questions were designed to determine the extent to which teachers feel the content of the current teacher evaluation in Fort Zumwalt is working and to what extent they feel the content of the new Missouri model will lead to better teacher evaluations. The mean score for all of the survey content related to the Fort Zumwalt evaluation process was 6.15 out of a possible 7; the mean for the content in the Missouri model was 6.29. Comparing the summary variables becomes the key to answering the question of which evaluation system is preferred by the teachers in the Fort Zumwalt School District. In practical terms, the raw difference of 0.14 between the two ratings may not be considered substantial to district administrators; however, the results of the *t*-test indicate statistical significance towards the new Missouri model leading to better teacher evaluations than the current evaluation instrument.

It is also notable that in general, teachers who rate the current evaluation system positively also rate the Missouri model in a positive light ( $r$  between the two systems = .87). This result could lead to a variety of conclusions. First, there are more similarities than stark differences regarding the actual content of the two evaluation systems. Second, teachers have accepted that the evaluation process is a necessary component of their professional life. Third, teachers who desire meaningful feedback and embrace accountability will rate whatever process is used highly while those teachers who do not will rate the evaluation process poorly.

In addition to the quantitative data, there is qualitative data to support the relative weakness of the content outlined in the Fort Zumwalt evaluation instrument. Teachers seemed genuinely pleased that the Missouri model places more focus on student achievement as well as professional growth. The qualitative data also supports the survey data revealing that teachers feel the Missouri model will be a better evaluation tool than the current evaluation system.

Questions three and four were designed to allow teachers to provide personal insight into how they perceive both the current evaluation and the Missouri model. The qualitative data differ from the quantitative data with respect to how the teachers in the Fort Zumwalt School District perceive the current teacher evaluation system. While the quantitative data focused, by design, on the *content* of the two evaluation systems, the qualitative data revealed many perceived weaknesses associated with the *process* of the current evaluation system. It was evident that focus group participants had concerns regarding a number of evaluation processes contained within the current evaluation instrument such as formal classroom observations and the subjective nature of the evaluation process.

The evaluation system currently used within the Fort Zumwalt School is similar to the literature's description of clinical supervision from the 1960's and 1970's. Many teachers in the focus groups echoed findings from Marshall's (2005) research on this process. Among the limitations expressed by teachers include (a) ineffectiveness with current evaluation practices such as classroom observations, (b) receiving meager feedback from administrators, and (c) receiving evaluation documents that do not improve their practice.

Teachers do not perceive two annual formal, and often pre-scheduled, classroom observations provide sufficient data for principals to conduct a valid evaluation of their yearly performance. The alternative preferred method voiced by the teachers to counter this process is the implementation of regular walk-throughs by the principal. Teachers feel that if the principals are able to observe more frequent and natural classroom teaching acts, then they will have a better impression of what is actually going on in the classroom. Certainly, regular visits by the principal as opposed to infrequent visits that are scheduled in advance would eliminate the "dog and pony show," as one teacher described the current process. The benefit of frequent and unscheduled classroom visits by the principal is that over time, the principal obtains a better understanding of classroom activities throughout the entire school.

It is also important to recognize that observational data alone will not be sufficient for evaluating teachers using the Missouri model. The use of student achievement data is an equally important piece to this model. Teachers will need to provide artifacts demonstrating student growth. This process will require the teacher and principal to engage in meaningful discussions relative to all data collected regarding a teacher's performance. This collaboration allows the teacher and principal to mutually arrive at the teacher's level of performance based on both observational data and student achievement data.

Many teachers expressed concern with the distribution of students in their classrooms and its impact on an overall measurement of the teacher's effectiveness. It will be important to create classrooms that are equally representative of all academic levels. Random student assignment is not a sufficient method to accomplish this goal. An alternate strategy would be to assemble teams of teachers to collaborate on the process of creating classes so that each classroom has a balanced group of students.

The subjective nature of the current evaluation system was frequently discussed as a weakness by the teachers in this study. To counter the subjective nature of evaluations, the Missouri model offers two pieces that should be seen as a favorable change to teachers. The first item is a self-evaluation by the teacher on the three standards in which they will be evaluated. The second item contained in the Missouri model is the requirement by the teacher and principal to show evidence aligned with each level of performance. Both parties have access to a rubric that clearly defines each teacher rating along with examples of acceptable evidence.



Because student impact is a significant component in the Missouri model and because it marks a pointed departure from the current evaluation system, the concerns expressed by the teachers regarding what this piece will eventually encompass are reasonable. Teachers would like to see a multitude of assessment measures for gauging student impact as opposed to using just the state's end-of-year assessment. In particular, teachers of special area classes such as music, physical education, art will need to provide their own alternate assessments to demonstrate student impact.

### **Connections to Theoretical Framework**

Consistent with the pitfalls of the halo effect, many teachers felt that some of their colleagues received positive evaluations due to their close friendship with the principal. By implementing the Missouri model that (a) requires the submission of artifacts demonstrating teacher effectiveness and (b) contains a clear set of evaluation criteria, the halo effect can be reduced. As indicated previously, the negative attributes of this phenomenon were clearly observed by focus group participants in their own evaluative experiences.

In the current evaluation system, teachers are not evaluated based upon student growth or performance. Measuring student impact becomes an important element of the Missouri model with respect to limiting the halo effect. For example, when administrators and teachers use student assessment data to measure student growth over the course of the year, the clarity of that data is likely to counteract a significant portion of the effect of the interpersonal relationship between the teacher and administrator. Of course, the importance of the numbers could become exaggerated and be used for inappropriate conclusions themselves, but the use of quantitative data is likely to reduce the impact of personal relationships on the evaluation outcomes.

The Missouri model also provides teachers and administrators with a rubric containing straightforward criteria describing each level of teacher performance for each indicator contained within the model. The principal and teacher collaboratively use these criteria to determine the teacher's rating. The current evaluation system lacks a set of thorough criteria — teachers are often evaluated on each item based on administrator opinion, which of course, makes them susceptible to the halo effect.

Principals' views of teachers will make the biggest difference towards the successful implementation of the Missouri model. Administrators have to believe this process will lead to teacher growth, and ultimately, student growth. It is important to note that merely adopting the Missouri model may not persuade principals holding Theory X beliefs to completely change their view towards teachers. However, the potential exists for principals to change their Theory X views with some teachers through additional classroom observations, data collection, and collaboration.

Although the Missouri model is naturally conducive to a Theory Y atmosphere, it will require an administrator who embraces this type of thinking and it is not a given that the Missouri model will automatically change principals' views. Teachers genuinely appeared eager for an evaluation system that focuses on student achievement and one that engages them professionally with their principals. Currently, there may be surface-level discussions between administrators and teachers based upon formal classroom observations. In order for the Missouri model to reflect the ideals of Theory Y, the conversations between

administrators and teachers must move to more meaningful discussions of classroom performance and they need to be more collaborative than what currently exists.

### **Implications**

Missouri law mandates that all school districts alter their teacher evaluation systems by the 2014-2015 school year. At this point, the Fort Zumwalt School District has opted to use the Missouri model teacher evaluation as the district's new evaluation system. The teachers who participated in this study indicated several important considerations that could inform implementation of the Missouri model in their local district.

First, district administrators should consider providing in-depth professional development related to implementing the new evaluation system. As the focus group members indicated, district administrators need to clearly communicate roles and responsibilities for both teachers and building-level administrators. Next, the district can also assist teachers by defining which assessment data will be acceptable in terms of documenting student impact. However, teachers should also have the autonomy to select other pieces of evidence that demonstrate student growth. Allowing teachers the leeway to select their own evidence of student learning is consistent with a Theory Y framework and provides alternatives to documenting student impact required within the Missouri model. District administrators will also need to determine how special area teachers will be evaluated. Because student impact is a mandatory component of the Missouri model, the district will need to determine what kinds of assessment activities are appropriate for each discipline.

The district needs to recognize the substantial nature of change when it moves from the current evaluation system to the Missouri model. In order to address the issues previously mentioned, the district should use the 2013-2014 school year to learn about the new evaluation system. Finally, the discussion of school climate becomes paramount when discussing the effectiveness of implementing a new evaluation system. Because the Missouri model offers such a major departure from the current evaluation system, district and building administrators will need to create school climates that are conducive to positive change. Under the processes outlined in the Missouri model, school administrators will have to demonstrate collaborative leadership that may be uncomfortable for some and more natural for others.

### **Consideration for Further Research**

Because this research is concentrated on one school district in Missouri, it is difficult to generalize the results to a broader audience. An interesting topic for future research would be to gather data from other Missouri school districts who have adopted the Missouri model to determine its effectiveness in terms of student achievement and teacher satisfaction. This research would allow the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to determine whether or not the Missouri model evaluation system is making a positive difference in increasing student achievement.

## Conclusion

The nature of teacher evaluations is transforming to adhere to current legislative standards and to validate recent research efforts in the area of effective evaluative practices. This study gives a voice to the teachers who will be evaluated with a process that differs greatly from traditional evaluation methods. It is evident that teachers desire an evaluation process that allows them to grow professionally and contemporaneously leads to greater student achievement.

It is encouraging to see the field of education moving to evaluative practices that focus on the teacher's impact on student learning. Specifically, the Missouri model will allow teachers to focus on a very limited number of goals each year that are tied to student growth. As one focus group participant shared, "Our [former] evaluations seemed to go a mile wide and an inch deep; now we might be able to go an inch wide, but a mile deep." Teachers appreciate the advantage the Missouri model will have relative to its impact on students.

School administrators who find themselves in the midst of implementing new teacher evaluation systems can use the information from this study to plan effectively. Of particular value are the findings that address thoughtful measures of student impact, conducting in-depth professional development, and providing insightful feedback to teachers. The teachers who participated in this study appear supportive of implementing a new evaluation model. Both the quantitative and qualitative data reveal teachers' frustration with the current, outdated evaluation process. The same data were used to indicate the teachers' support of an evaluation process that will ultimately lead to improved instructional practices. This final point is important when considering the essential goal of linking the teacher evaluation process to increased student achievement.

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# **An Analysis of Oppositional Culture Theory Applied to One Suburban Midwestern High School**

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*This study explored whether and to what extent Ogbu and Fordham's Oppositional Culture Theory applied to African American high school students at one Midwestern suburban high school. Based on multiple interviews with six African American students, the study found support for some aspects of the theory but not for others.*

## **Introduction**

The gap in achievement between Whites and Blacks in the United States has been a problem for many years. The cause of this gap has been the focus of considerable research but is not yet fully understood. One explanation for the gap was proposed by John Ogbu (1978). He stated that the difference in cultural attitudes toward society and education between African Americans and Whites stemmed from the means of migration for African Americans. Ogbu argued that African Americans were brought to the United States forcibly as slaves, involuntary minorities, and therefore have a more antagonistic view toward the dominant White culture as a whole than other minority groups. Later, Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) further developed Ogbu's original premise into what is known today as oppositional culture theory. This theory strives to explain the gap between African American and White students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

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At the high school where the lead author works, there are major differences between the average performance of White and African American students. On the state achievement test in 2011, 55% of White 11<sup>th</sup> graders met or exceeded state standards in Reading while only 23% of African American students did the same. The corresponding statistics for Math are 55% of White students met or exceeded while only 22% of African Americans did, and numbers for Science are very similar (Illinois Interactive School Report Card). Discrepancies also appear in discipline: according to the district's data management system, in the 2011-2012 school year, African American students received 23% of all discipline referrals though their representation in the school population was only 11%.

As will be clear from the literature review below, research on oppositional culture theory is mixed. As a White female assistant principal who was struggling to understand and remedy the achievement gap in her school, the lead author wondered to what extent the theory applied in her setting. Hence the purpose of the study was to explore whether and to what extent the tenets of oppositional culture theory apply to African American high school students at one Midwestern suburban high school. By qualitatively examining the cultural and academic perceptions and experiences of African American high school students at the research site, we can better understand the factors influencing the academic achievement of those students. With this understanding, the lead author and other administrators at the school can design interventions to specifically address the needs of African American students, their families, and the community as a whole with the goal of working toward narrowing the achievement gap.

### **Review of the Literature**

Oppositional culture theory, first proposed by Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu in 1986, grew into the accepted explanation for the achievement gap in the following decade (Tyson, 2002). The theory proposes that opposition to assimilation by African Americans to the perceived White culture is an important part of the educational experience of African American youth. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) described four hypotheses that encompass the definition and reasoning behind oppositional culture theory. Those hypotheses are: 1. Involuntary minority students (African American) perceive fewer returns to education and more limited educational opportunities; 2. African Americans exhibit greater resistance to school than other race groups; 3. High achieving African Americans are looked down upon by their peers; 4. Disenfranchisement with school produces the achievement gap we see today.

Some research, supporting the tenets of oppositional culture theory, indicates that African American cultural attitudes are a result of poverty and the challenges relating to the structural system of both educational and professional success (Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, & Johnson, 1990; Whaley & Noel, 2010; Wilson, 1987). Such research has found that African Americans, in contrast to Whites, do not believe a good education will result in good jobs (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 2003). According to Mickelson (1990) "the material realities of the opportunity structure, in the form of lower pay and fewer jobs and promotions for minorities, women, and members of the working class, shape adolescents' perceptions of the value of schooling for their future and how these attitudes, in turn, affect their academic behavior" (p. 45). Racial discrimination and prejudice have limited the opportunity for African Americans to reach levels of professional and financial success that are comparable to Whites (Akom, 2003). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) state "ecological

factors such as the job ceiling tend to give rise to the disillusionment about the real value of schooling, especially among older children, and thereby discourages them from working hard in school” (p. 179).

Beard and Brown (2008) emphasize that all students internalize negative and positive beliefs about their abilities and intelligence. African American students often connect school success with the adaptation of behaviors associated with the dominant White culture (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2003). According to Akom (2003), “African American students often protect their pride as African Americans by adopting anti-school behaviors” (p. 317). Based on these explanations, academic success and high achievement indicate a selling-out or opposition to the African American identity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). “Not only does this oppositional culture act as a bulwark between African Americans and White America, it also provokes African Americans to persuade their same-race peers to devalue academic success because of its association with ‘Acting White’” (Palmer & Maramba, 2011, p. 435). Some researchers argue that the motivation and school-related skills of African Americans are poor because of their negative attitude about the dominant White culture (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998) and because of school cultures characterized by low expectations for minority students (Delpit, 1995, 2012; Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan, & Shaun, 1990).

Although many studies support Ogbu’s position, some research fails to support it. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) tested the four hypotheses associated with oppositional culture theory and did not yield findings consistent with those of Ogbu for any of them. They found that African American students liked school and believed it would help them acquire better jobs in the future. Other studies have also found that African American students’ attitudes towards school are generally good (Carter, 2008; Diamond, Lewis, & Gordon, 2007; O’Connor, 1999; Tyson, 2002). Further, several studies raise questions about the African American peer teasing aspect of Ogbu and Fordham’s theory (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Diamond et al, 2007; Harper, 2006; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Tyson, 2002). For example, Tyson (2002) observed behaviors of African American students at two elementary schools. His research indicated positive attitudes toward school as well as a positive educational support system among peers at the research sites. Further contradictions to oppositional culture theory are found in a variety of research studies conducted to determine African American students’ attitudes toward education and how that relates to their academic achievement. Akom (2003), for example, points out that many of the previous studies regarding social conflict fail to consider the ways in which many African Americans navigate and collectively excel in the White dominated school settings while maintaining strong connections to their cultural roots. Relatedly, Harris (2006) concluded that the resistance model does not take into account variance within minority populations.

In order to explore the relevance of oppositional culture theory to African American students at Croft High (pseudonym), the study addressed the following questions:

1. Does oppositional culture theory apply to the educational experiences of a small number of African American students at Croft High School?
  - a. What are the perceptions of a small number of African American students in terms of returns for education and educational opportunities?
  - b. To what extent do African American student participants experience resistance to schooling?



- c. How are high-achieving African Americans viewed by their peers?
- d. How do African American students perceive that their attitudes and perceptions toward school effect their academic achievement?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Croft High School is located in the central part of Illinois, 20 miles from a major city. Of the approximately 2,036 students in 2010-11, 73% were White, 11% African American, 12% Hispanic, 1% Asian, 0.1% American Indian, and 3% multi-racial. The school's population consists of 44% low-income students, 2% Limited English Proficient students, 14% students with Individualized Education Plans. The school did not make adequate yearly progress according to the state expectations and in 2011 was on academic watch status for the sixth year (Illinois Department of Education, 2013). The community has historically been very blue collar although it currently has no factories or industry within its school district boundaries. Surrounding cities have provided industrial-related employment for many of the local residents in addition to the local businesses and major city located nearby.

Study participants comprised six African American students enrolled at Croft High School: three female and three male students between the ages of 15 and 18 years old. They were selected via purposive sampling, and included two students with low achievement (below a 2.0 cumulative GPA on a 4.0 scale) (Alise and Connor), two students with moderate achievement (GPA of 2.0 to 3.0) (Nicole and Donte), and two students with high achievement (3.0 to 4.0 GPA) (Valarie and Anthony), in order to include a range of academic performance. The lead author had had previous interactions with three of the students, and chose them partly on that basis, while three were selected randomly from lists of African American students fitting the needed GPA criteria.

### **Design and Data Sources**

The study used a qualitative interview approach designed to find out the essence of participants' beliefs and attitudes about school with a focus on elements of oppositional culture theory. The primary data source was interviews, and the lead author conducted approximately 12 hours of individual audiotaped interviews over a three-month period. Specifically, each of the six students was interviewed four times using a semi structured format. Each of the four interviews with each student focused on a different one of the four tenets associated with oppositional culture theory. Interview one focused on perceptions and opportunities associated with benefits and returns to education, with questions about such issues as: educational background, plans after high school, the importance of grades, effort in school, getting a good job, and family background. Interview two focused on engagement and resistance to school including questions about issues such as: feelings, likes, and dislikes regarding school, perceptions of teachers and principals, discipline, differences in study habits and behaviors of African American and White students. Interview three focused on relationships with peers regarding educational achievement covering the topics of: factors influencing high and low achievers, peer support and harassment, and "Acting White." Finally, interview four focused on attitudes toward school and the achievement gap with a

focus on: effort, success in school and work, attitude and achievement, and work and educational opportunities for African Americans. Some background data was also collected on each student, including course enrollments, GPA, standardized test scores, schools attended, discipline statistics and parental guardianship, in order to provide additional context for student responses. The lead author obtained informed consent from all the interviewees, as per Institutional Review Board requirements.

The lead author transcribed the interviews and analyzed them along with observational data using open coding and axial coding to organize the data into meaningful concepts and then themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

## Findings

Several themes emerged from the data. First and foremost is that the *participants' families value education* and push their students to work hard in school. Student responses indicate that this value is translated to high expectations for their students regarding grades and hard work. In addition, *peer influence is both positive and negative*. Students reported that peer influence can be positive in the form of friendly support when studying or in the form of recognition for advanced placement enrollment, for example. Negative peer influences occurred through friends detracting from students' attempts to study, behavioral distractions in the classroom, and accusations of Acting White. The third theme is that *students generally like their teachers*, and feel these teachers are influential. Fourth, *students believe they need better study habits*, citing such problems as lack of motivation and boredom, for example, as reasons for their low effort. And the final theme is that *student perceptions of themselves as victims of racism coexist with internalized oppression*. The students recognized that they were victims of racism, but their responses indicated that they themselves hold many negative beliefs about African Americans.

### Participants' Families Value Education

All of the participants indicated that their families stress the importance of education and want them to get good grades. For example, Alise, one of the low achieving participants, indicated "my mom is just like whatever, just as long as you graduate and get good grades." She went on to state: "They don't like seeing C's and stuff like that. My dad and my mom like seeing C's and above. Like if I'm failing and stuff, I get stuff taken away...My mom took away my X-Box because I had a D on my report card." The other low achieving participant is Connor, who indicated that his grades are disappointing to his family:

My mom and dad are always on me about homework... They want to see all B's or all A's. I am really a D+ or a C student, so they are always disappointed in me. I'm trying. Hopefully this year it will be all A's and B's but right now I am averaging C's. My dad said no more D's and I am like ok. He just starts taking away everything, and I was like ok. No more D's.

Nicole, a moderate achieving student, reported very high expectations from her parents. From her statements it appears her mother is the monitor of grades within her household:

My mom does not take a C in the house... You better have a B or an A. She would prefer an A so if I got a C on my report card I'm pretty much like keys taken away, phone taken away. She checks my grades on the computer all the time. I like tried to change my password because I got a C on a paper. She's like, what is the password? I can see you changed it... I've got to be in some extracurricular activity also. My mom, she wants me to go to college and get that extra education. But like, if I have to wait and to go to work first [that is ok]... Now like my dad, he wants me to go straight into college and not have a job.

Nicole maintains a 2.94 GPA on a 4.0 scale. Due to enrollment in Advanced Placement classes, her weighted GPA is a 3.25. The interview excerpts above indicate that both parents of Nicole place emphasis on academic achievement as well as value continuing education.

Donte, who lives with his brother, responded, "My brother hates to see bad grades. If he sees one he always says you can do better than this. What happened? Etc. He wants me to do well." Donte's GPA is a 2.82 on a 4.0 scale. Donte performed well on the ACT in the areas of Math and English but struggled more in Reading and Science.

Anthony, one of the high achieving students, indicated both of his parents have high expectations. His father's expectations focus around a model of achievement where college and employment take center stage in regards to importance. His mother, however, encourages him to work hard but to also explore all that life has to offer:

My dad is like I went to U of I [University of Illinois], you should go to U of I. I feel like my mom is so proud of me, anything I do is right. But my dad is like, he just found out Saturday I got a 28 [on the ACT]. He thought I got a 30 and was like, oh I didn't know you got a 28. Like that was bad. My mom was like, a 28 that's awesome! It's like my older siblings made good grades so if I didn't make good grades I wouldn't be as good as them. Everything is a competition to me. It's like I have to make a better grade, I have to do better on this than my brother did. It's like I got a 28 on the ACT so my sister is not going to be happy unless she gets a 30 while my older brother got a 25. I feel like that's how it is at my house. I expect her to do better.

Valarie described her parent's expectations as very high. She indicated they do not enforce that expectation with disciplinary consequences, rather try to motivate and support her in school: "To my parents a C is an F in my house. I can't get a C. My parents are not the strictest.... It was just instilled in my brain that if you want to be successful, you want a good job, and you want a good life then this is what you have to do." Valarie is a high achieving student. She is ranked 152 out of 457 students in her class and maintains a 3.31 GPA.

In summary, all six students, including low, medium, and high achievers, seem to have families who hold high expectations and encourage them to do well in school.

### **Peer Influence is Both Positive and Negative**

Another theme to emerge from the data was that while some students stressed the positive influence of peers, others stressed more negative influences, and some reported experiencing both. Participants indicated a number of positive ways in which their peers influence their

academic achievement. When asked if her friends ever deterred her from doing well in school, Nicole, a moderate achiever, replied: "I don't have any friends like that. All my friends are like me and everything consists of college. When they are going to study we are like, go study. It's not like come out with me. No, you don't have that choice." Valarie expressed similar thoughts when she indicated, "Some will help you because they want to do well in school too." Valarie maintains peer relationships with students who have a similar work ethic and academic achievement as herself.

Some of the lower achieving students, including Connor and Alise, indicated that low achievers do not look negatively on the high achievers. According to Alise: "They don't tease them or like bully them or anything. I guess they kind of like give them respect or something like that I guess ... Yeah and like, even people I don't know get more respect than like the dumb people."

Nicole, a moderate achiever, indicated she believed that many of the high achieving students work harder than fellow students. The tone and context of the interview indicated she respected the students in advanced placement classes because of their effort: "They have more drive and want to do better. That is why they are in that class. In regular classes they are just doing it to graduate. The classes [AP] are harder."

Donte, a moderate achiever, agreed by saying, "I don't look at them differently [negatively]. I just believe they study harder than I do, they do more work than I do, and they catch on a whole lot faster than I do." The statistics from the research site regarding African American enrollment in AP classes for the 2012-13 school year indicated only 14 of the 477 total students enrolled in AP classes are African American. This is approximately a 3% representation as compared to the 11% representation of African Americans in the total student body.

Participants also indicated ways in which their peers negatively influence their academic achievement. Donte indicated that some of his friends discourage him from studying: "It depends on the person and where we are at. Like if we are at school and I am talking about doing some work, they are like are you crazy? You can do that later." He did indicate that one specific person provides support and encourages him to study for math. He stated, "like I got a best friend and she helps me with my calculus and stuff."

Some participants reported being accused of Acting White. Peer teasing and verbal ridicule in respect to Acting White focuses around being perceived as adopting the attitudes and behaviors associated with the White community as opposed to the African American community. Nicole reported experiencing this type of harassment frequently:

Everyone calls me an Oreo. I wrote a whole college essay about that. Most of the African American kids here don't like me. The loud ghetto kids hate me. I am like that one kid that sits on the side and looks at the other African American kids being ghetto. I'm like are you kidding me? You just proved them [White people] right. They [African Americans] are just obnoxious and I am like just stop.

When asked to explain what Acting White means she connected the accusation of Acting White with social group and patterns of speech:

It means you talk with proper English, you hang out with more of a different race. Like, I cannot hang out with too many African American people in town. They make

me so mad because they are obnoxiously annoying, ghetto. I hate it so much. They say I am stuck up.

Alise described similar experiences. She has a twin sister who socializes in a different social group than she does. Alise associates voice volume, clothing, and speech patterns with the term Acting White:

Yeah, I get accused of Acting White in school. They are comparing me to my sister. My sister is like oh yeah, all ghetto and stuff. You would hear her all the way over by the cars and stuff. I'm more mannered or something like that. I wear Abercrombie and stuff like that and she wears all the African American clothes and stuff like that. Apparently I'm the White twin and she's the African American twin. I'm like White on the inside or something. I'm like proper and I don't cuss or anything like that. Apparently that is Acting White for some people.

When asked if White people ever get accused of Acting African American Alise replied, "Yeah there is a lot of them. Mostly it is the boys not the girls. The sagging pants and rapping all the time; that is considered Acting African American." When asked if one was good and one was bad, Alise indicated Acting White was good and Acting African American was bad.

The trend of teasing African American peers tends to characterize certain social groups, with some ridiculing their peers more than others. Additional factors that contribute to Acting White include how you talk, what you wear, how you act (being preppie or nerdy, for example), study habits, financial status, the neighborhood you live in, speech patterns, and use of profanity. While students indicated that intelligence does factor into the term, they said Acting White is more about the broader picture. The fact that Alise reported that she gets accused of Acting White supports the idea that Acting White goes beyond doing well in school, since she is one of the lower achieving students in the study.

### **Students Generally Like Their Teachers**

Although students mentioned and discussed teachers they disliked, most of the participants had positive relationships with most of their teachers. Alise, a low achiever, described the majority of her teachers as caring. She said they want their students to learn and to be successful:

I pretty much like all of them. I feel like if you have a really good teacher you are going to do better. I feel like if the teacher is not really enthusiastic and just doing it for the money, I don't really participate in that class. But when I have an enthusiastic teacher like Ms. [Science] I am going to do good in her class. She really loves her job and I'm going to do good to make her feel good. Most of my teachers I really get along with. Like Mr. [Social Studies], Ms. [Child Care], Ms. [English], Mr. [Social Studies 2], and Ms. [English 2]. What teachers do I not like? I don't think I have a teacher that I don't like. My teachers, my counselor, and my parents all help me do well. Like Ms. [English], she tutors me every day. Any subject she can help me with she does.

Anthony, one of the high achievers, indicated that his relationship with each teacher is very important. He needs to feel connected to them as a person as well as a teacher:

I think teachers are like programmed a certain way. I have never had a class where I just like hated the teacher and wanted to get out of the class. I think it affects me in a positive way most of the time. For the most part my teachers are like really interesting, even though I've had like teachers who just weren't good teachers. I've had really interesting teachers I can have a conversation about even something that is not related to school.

The importance of individual teachers and staff was also highlighted by Nicole, who indicated her counselor as well as one of her teachers had been instrumental in helping her through the college application process. We have included excerpts here from all three levels of achievement, illustrating that liking teachers was not limited to the higher achievers.

### **Students Believe They Need Better Study Habits**

All of the students reported that they should work harder in school, though some of them also reported studying pretty hard some of the time. Alise, a low achiever, recognized that she does not study very much. When asked about homework, Alise indicated she only completes half of her homework and pays attention most of the time. While she connects it to an excessively busy schedule, she later indicated her motivation often wavers: "Um, well I don't really study that much cause I have color guard practice all the time. But when I do have time to do my homework, I make sure that I really understand it or I don't go on and stuff like that."

Connor, another low achiever, stated he studies between 30 and 60 minutes a week and described himself as lazy when it comes to school work: "I have assignments and homework; sometimes I do them sometimes I don't. I try to get by sometimes. I'm a good test taker I would say. I pay attention in class. It's just I do not like to do homework." Looking at Connor's semester grades it appears he has not made many gains academically. At the end of the first semester, which is half way through the school year, he earned one B, one C, and three D's.

When asked to describe herself as a student, Nicole indicated she did not have very good study habits. She was not intrinsically motivated to study: "Hmm, I'm not going to say I have very good study habits, because I don't at all. I can't sit and stare at something for too long. I get very easily distracted." However, she also said she pays attention, takes notes, participates in class discussions, and completes all of her homework: "Honor roll, I always want to get that and I really want to be in NHS [National Honor Society]. So like and at graduation you get all those tassels. I'm like I want that so I want to get really good grades and to be considered one of the good kids."

Although he earned a GPA of 2.71 Donte indicated he doesn't study much because it bores him. Yet he also stated: "I'm a good student. I do ok. I work hard and school is important. I like math. Math is cool and I'm good at it. I do my work. I study for tests, that kind of stuff." Anthony, who is one of the high achievers, indicated he works hard in some subjects but not in others: "I am in all AP classes. My weakest subject is math. I'm not really good at math. My best subject is English, like I can write but yeah math, I'm not really good in math. On stuff like tests, I will study all night and not sleep if I have to." When asked what

hurdles kept them from studying more, students indicated that time management, distractions such as Twitter and Facebook, motivation, and a lack of comprehension were all factors.

### **Students' Perceptions of Themselves as Victims of Racism Coexist with Internalized Oppression**

Students recognized racism in society around them. For example, when discussing getting a job, all three male students felt their opportunities might be limited compared to Whites. Donte reported: "I can't figure out why I can't get a job right now. I am not going to say it's because I am African American but that is what I put in my mind. I think that if another White person was interviewing then I would assume the White person would get the job." Anthony reported dealing with the problem by working harder to overcome the limitations: "Like being African American I feel like some African American people have the mindset that they will never be better than a White person. For me, I just feel like I want to work harder to be better and stuff like that."

In a similar vein, when asked about Croft High School student and staff perceptions of African Americans, all of the students indicated that racial segregation and stereotyping of African Americans was a problem. Donte commented: "Sometimes in the morning I see kids together. I see certain colors. I'm not going to say African American and White cause there is Mexican too but you know, some stand here, some stand there, some talk to you, some don't." Donte was referring to the physical segregation of students by race prior to school. At the research site, high performing, wealthy, White students often stand in groups by the parking lot where their cars are; whereas, many of the minority and low achieving students stand by the cafeteria where they receive breakfast.

Valarie stated, "The street has a lot to do with it, like being in gangs. I mean they just put a stamp on African American kids like cause it's a stereotype." It should be noted that while all the students indicated that racism was a problem, Anthony perceived that being African American would be helpful in getting into college:

I feel like my chance [of getting into a good college] is actually better. Some colleges will accept African American students that don't meet all of the qualifications that a White student would have to meet. Like a White student with my ACT score might not get in, but as an African American student, I have a really good chance of getting in.

At the same time that students perceived themselves to be victims of racism, participant responses indicated that they themselves held many negative stereotypes about African Americans, indicating the presence of internalized racism. For example, Nicole indicated that African American families are weak-willed and value education less than White families, giving African American students a disadvantage when it comes to college:

I feel like if African American kids try really hard like the really smart White kids we have the same chance, but I feel like how we grow up and all, more White kids have a chance because their parents have more money and a stronger will to get their kids in that situation. But there are some African American parents who want their kids to go to school and actually get it, but not very many.

Additional examples of internalized racism were evident when students were asked what they felt would help reduce the achievement gap at the research site. Anthony stated: “I don’t know that it can be reduced. I think it is the mindset of people. Most African American parents don’t get involved in the academic stuff. If most African American parents got more involved and gave rewards and stuff it might increase their scores.” These statements indicate a negative stereotype regarding the involvement of African American parents in their child’s education.

Valarie also made statements revealing negative beliefs about African Americans in regards to behavior. As can be seen in the quote below, she believes that there is a double standard for African American and White behavior, but believes African American students should behave differently in order to change the negative beliefs of White society:

I mean, I know I see it every day. I feel like White kids are just at school but African American people want to make a scene. They want to be known. They are like, I’m just going to make a scene because I can. I’m like NO. They do that all the time. I see it everywhere I go, not just at school. A lot of White kids, when they do it, it’s like oh that’s just their personality, but when we do it, oh they are ghetto. So that also has something to do with it too. I feel like us [African Americans] as a whole, if people just tried more then they wouldn’t just see African Americans as just drug addicts and gang bangers and all that.

These stereotypes form and stem from perceptions of what it is to be African American versus what it is to be White. Many of the other students reported experiences similar to Valarie’s. All of the participants in the study stated they try to distance themselves from large loud groups of African Americans at school. Further, when asked about the difference between study habits of Whites versus African Americans, most students felt there was a difference. The students who were enrolled in more honors classes had very few African American peers to compare themselves to. As indicated earlier, African American enrollment in Advanced Placement classes at Croft is very low. Anthony indicated he felt White students study more than African American students. Alise and Valarie agreed. Here’s Alise: “To be honest there are more African American people here that don’t really care than White people who don’t really care. There are a lot of really smart White people here. There are some African American people that try but also a lot that don’t care at all...A lot of them are bullies.” Valarie said: “I feel like White people care more about education.”

### **Discussion and Implications**

The primary research question of this study was whether oppositional culture theory applies to Croft High. We respond to this question by specifically analyzing the findings in terms of the four tenets of Ogbu and Fordham’s (1986) theory.

The first tenet of oppositional culture theory states that African Americans’ perceptions of fewer returns for education and educational opportunities impacts students’ academic achievement (Ainsworth-Downey, & Darnell, 1998). Our findings show some support for this tenet. For example the three male participants reported a perception that it would be harder for them to find employment than for Whites, and these concerns directly reflect reality. In December of 2012, the unemployment rate of African Americans was 14%



as compared to 6.2% for Whites. In the same time period, African Americans between the ages of 16-19 had an unemployment rate of 41% while the rate for their White peers was 22% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Also, all of the students reported that stereotyping of African American students at school is a problem. Students also believe they do not exert enough effort, and that White students work harder than African American students. The data do not tell us whether that perception is accurate, or, if it is, whether the low effort is due to perceptions of fewer returns from education. On the other hand, the study also found that, in contrast to a prevailing belief in the US (Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2007), parents and families value education and have high expectations for their children in terms of academic performance and college attendance.

The second tenet states that African American students experience resistance to schooling (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Active resistance to school was not generally supported by the study. Findings indicate that most of the research participants had positive feelings about their teachers and work hard for teachers who have high expectations and care about them. Although students perceived that they had poor study habits, there is little evidence of negative feelings toward school on the part of the participants.

Tenet three states that high achieving African American students are perceived negatively by their peers in school (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Study findings were mixed in regards to this facet of the theory. Most study participants indicated they have positive perceptions of high achieving students in general, regardless of race. While students acknowledged that peer teasing does occur, half of the participants indicated students are teased for being stupid far more than for being smart. The moderate and low achieving students stated they respected and looked up to their peers who were enrolled in honors or AP classes because they work harder, study more, and catch on faster. These findings are consistent with a study conducted by Tyson (2002), who found that African American students surrounded themselves with peers who supported and valued academic success if they themselves valued academic success.

On the other hand, some students indicated that they had peers who distracted them from academic endeavor. Further, all participants were familiar with the term “Acting White,” and some reported having experienced being accused of it. According to oppositional culture theory, African Americans experience negative feedback from their peers for high academic achievement. By working hard in school and achieving, students are perceived to be buying into and conforming to the dominant culture and “Acting White.” Horvat and Lewis (2003) found that the African American students in their study tailored their behaviors to the environment in which they were in. When surrounded by African American peers who were not high achievers, they downplayed their own achievement but when surrounded by African American peers who were high achievers, they took pride in their achievements. The participants in the current study who indicated they were accused of Acting White claimed they did not bow to this peer pressure and alter their behaviors as a result. However, it would be surprising if such pressure had no influence on the behavior of African American students, though they may not even be aware of it. As has been noted earlier, very few African American students take AP classes at Croft, possibly partially resulting from negative social ramifications for African American students who choose to take those classes.

The fourth tenet states that African American students’ attitudes and perceptions toward school affect their academic achievement (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). This tenet presumes that the confluence of perceptions associated with the first three tenets results in

poor academic achievement of the African Americans who maintain those beliefs. As with the previous tenets, the findings of the study are not conclusive as they pertain to this final tenet. On the one hand, the African American students in the study indicated that they have parents with high expectations regarding academic achievement, generally positive feelings about teachers, and positive perceptions about high achieving peers. Yet some of the experiences Fordham and Ogbu (1986) propose in their theory of social conflict are evident, such as accusations of Acting White by their peers, being stereotyped by others, and the perception that they do not have the same employment opportunities as their White counterparts. African American students at the school receive a highly disproportionate amount of disciplinary action by school staff, and interviewees hold negative perceptions of African Americans as a group. So even though the students interviewed reported holding high hopes for continuing their education and did not report negative feelings about the school, a link between the negative features of the African American students' school experience that the study did find and the lower performance of African American students is certainly plausible.

The study has several limitations. First, the number of participants was small, and the findings may not be generalizable to other African American students at the school. Another important limitation is related to the lead author's position at the school, which may have influenced the way in which the students responded to the questions. Third, the study gathered little information beyond student perceptions. This last limitation may be important, as many aspects of oppositional culture theory may operate without student awareness. For example, the findings related to internalized oppression support the possibility that school culture negatively affects students' self-perception and hence behavior. Palmer and Maramba (2011) discuss the hidden curriculum within society, supported by educational institutions as well as the media, that portrays African Americans as criminals and thugs. These messages promote negative stereotypes associated with African Americans such as increased violence, drug abuse, degradation of women, and obsession with sex. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2005) emphasize that "the messages sent to young people of color by the dominant media can foster feelings of alienation and inferiority while also justifying individual and institutional racism" (p. 11). The study findings of internalized oppression on the part of interviewees support the notion that the students were likely not entirely aware of the negative effects of institutional culture on their school behavior.

One important implication of the study is that further data collection is warranted to better understand the complex interactions between school, race, and achievement at Croft High. A school improvement model that relies on complex data collection such as Bernhardt's Continuous Improvement Model (2004) could inform improvement at Croft High. Bernhardt's model (2004) is grounded in building a portfolio that is a collection of multiple data sources, including data on: student demographics; student learning; student, parent, teacher, and community perceptions; and school processes (classroom practices, school programs, and assessment practices) (Bernhardt, 2003, p. 2). Figuring out how to improve school performance of African American students at Croft would then require intersecting data categories such as demographics, student learning, and perceptions to find out the parent, teacher, and student perceptions linked to low performing African American students. Another data intersection would involve school processes (description of school programs and procedures), student learning, and demographics to determine the relative effectiveness of school programs associated with low-performing African American students (Bernhardt,

2003, p. 4). Study data indicate that parents have high expectations for their students, though these expectations are not always translated into high school performance on the part of the students. Parent perceptions could be reviewed by demographic of the parent and students to see if there are any differences between subgroups of parents that could inform school efforts to work with parents. The school should also examine processes utilized to communicate and educate parents, making sure administrators are treating all parents as resources for educating students and equipping parents with the knowledge and understanding of the system to best guide their students in academic pursuits. The current study findings provide interesting information about perceptions and experiences of a small number of African American students. One thing these findings indicate is that systematic collection and analysis of a wider range of strategically selected data from a larger number of individuals is likely to be very useful in figuring out how to enhance achievement of all students.

Another important implication of the study pertains to the finding that study participants do not feel they put enough effort toward school. Motivation of students is related to the extent to which teaching is linked to their cultural background (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995), and implementing culturally responsive teaching has been found effective for increasing achievement of all students (Sleeter, 2012). Culturally responsive teaching means having high expectations for students, supporting students in appropriate ways, and making school culturally relevant by: building on students' existing knowledge, revising curricula, developing relationships with students and their families, and developing student awareness of power relations (Sleeter, 2012). Wlodowski and Ginsberg (1995) provide a framework of four conditions necessary for culturally responsive teaching, as follows: 1. Establish inclusion via a learning environment in which students and teacher feel respected, valued, and connected; 2. Provide choice and connect learning to students' personal lives; 3. Make learning challenging and meaningful for students by including students' perspectives and values; 4. Develop competence in students (p. 20). Such actions enhance intrinsic motivation, engagement, and thus performance, especially for students of color.

One additional specific action the school could take that links to culturally relevant pedagogy is the need to provide more representation of African Americans in the school staff. Currently only three of 135 teachers are African American, as is one out of five guidance counselors, and two out seven administrators. Croft High School needs to focus on recruiting and promoting more African American teachers and administrators to serve as examples of highly educated successful role models.

## **Conclusion**

Recent legislation has increased the focus on accountability for achievement for all students but has yet to create conditions that consistently close achievement gaps between various subgroups of students; indeed, the gap between African American and White student achievement persists (Sleeter, 2012). Ogbu and Fordham's oppositional culture theory posits that the achievement gap between African Americans and Whites has roots in African American reaction to oppression. The current study found modest support for application of some of the tenets of the theory to the high school studied. Although the results are not conclusive, they point to the need to work harder to understand the complex dynamics behind the performance of students of color, and in this case African American students in particular, in Croft High School and in US schools in general. The findings also point to additional kinds

of data that schools should be collecting in systematic ways, as well as the need to implement culturally relevant pedagogy.

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# ***Having Our Say: High Achieving African American Male College Graduates Speak About Parental Involvement and Parenting Style***

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*The purpose of this study was to examine the patterns of parental involvement and parenting styles of the parents of academically successful African American males who graduated from historically Black colleges or universities (Odom, 2013). More specifically, the study investigated relationships among students' perceptions of their parents' involvement, parenting styles, educational level, and family structure with the student's higher education grade point average. An online self-reported student perception survey instrument was developed and administered to 36 African American male participants. Survey data focused on how the graduates perceived their parents' child rearing practices or parenting style during their educational experiences from kindergarten through 12th grades. Additionally, three students agreed to participate in individual follow-up phone interviews designed to provide in-depth information regarding their perceptions of their parents' impact on their academic success. Common themes discovered in the data revealed that parents were involved every step of the way of their educational journey by holding their son(s) accountable, instilling the value of hard work, mandating rule following, encouraging curiosity, fostering a rich learning environment, and requiring academic excellence.*

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## Introduction

Historical depictions of the African American male have centered on him being lazy, unmotivated, dangerous, and without morality or intellect. Some current attitudes have suggested that African American males are generally more suited for the cotton field, football field, or basketball court but may not be suited for the classroom or boardroom (Schott Foundation, 2010). Nearly 60 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the disparity in academic achievement between African American males and other ethnic groups is often misunderstood and supported by theories of lack of parental involvement, little or no discipline at home, and fathers absent from the child rearing process (Mandara, 2006). Although educational research has substantiated and reported the problem of underachievement among African American males at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels, there is much debate regarding the causes for this cultural dilemma.

## Statement of the Problem

One of the greatest challenges facing colleges in America today is the disproportionate number of African American males who fail to earn a higher education degree when compared to African American women or any other ethnic group (Schott, 2010). Education researchers have explored the causes of this social problem and found a multitude of complex possible reasons for the low rate of African American male college completers. Jaschik (2005) described the dimensions and complexity of recruitment and retention of African American males in higher education as far reaching and entangles a group of issues that begin in early childhood and continue throughout K-12 schooling. Some of the compelling factors found to contribute to non-completers were *parenting styles, school expectations and practices, and students' attitudes and beliefs about school* (Jaschik, 2005).

Cuyjet (2006) added that poor school environments, discriminatory practices such as tracking, and the disproportionality of African American males staffed into special education as possible reasons for these statistics. Cuyjet suggested that the attitudes of African American males also contribute to the low graduation rate, as many do not consider academic achievement, or even high school graduation as worthwhile or desirable goals or they regard achievement as *not cool* among their peers.

On the other hand, many African American males have made different choices and have excelled academically. These young men escaped the stereotypes, completed their secondary education, attended college, and earned their degrees with many African American males recognized for high achievement (Cuyjet, 2006). Noguera (2003) discovered that regardless of the negative statistics on the plight of African American males, there is good news. "Most African American males are not in prison, do not commit suicide, and have not contracted HIV/AIDS," (Noguera, 2003, p. 431). Noguera agreed there are significant problems that confront African American males today. However, by understanding more about those who have escaped becoming a member of the failing statistics, researchers could expand the knowledge base and identify parenting practices and other factors that influence African American males to complete their college degrees.

Harper (2006) reported there is no single pathway for success in education and "nothing is more important than the consistent articulation of high expectations from parents" (p. 73). Hrabowski, Maton, and Greif (1998) interviewed dozens of successful African

American college students and their parents and found these parents were employing old-fashioned approaches to child rearing that were spiritually grounded. Additionally, parents encouraged their children to read and guided them toward positive influences and educational opportunities. Hrabowski et al. explored a body of research that focused on the strengths, resilience, and empowerment of African American youth. Included in this study were African American youth involved in activities that nurtured and cultivated leadership and artistic abilities, resiliency among African American youth who succeeded despite unfavorable odds, and empowerment research that examined ways that African American youth developed an inner sense of power in order to achieve despite environmental barriers. Hrabowski et al. posited that at least one supportive adult, inside or outside the family, was vital for student success.

Fleming (2001) claimed there was evidence that the impact on African American students was more positive at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) than at historically White colleges and universities (HWCUs). Even with occasional limited resources, African American students who attended HBCUs “purchased psychological well-being, cultural affinity, nurturing relations, and happiness” (Allen, 1987, p. 30). Fleming (2001) suggested that the African American college advantage resided in the “constructive networking that can be done with teachers, peers, mentors, and friends as opposed to the isolation that is sometimes reported from African American students at HWCUs” (p. 598).

Hrabowski et al. (1998) brought attention to the idea of exploring and defining why some young African American males are academically successful in their book, *Beating the Odds: Raising Academically Successful African American Males*. The authors of the book gave voice to an unnoticed and little researched population. These young men had their say regarding their struggles in and outside the classroom. They beat the odds and were successful. The colloquialism *having our say*, speaks to one giving a point of view, opinion, or reflection. During the 1990s, African American centenarians Sadie and Bessie Delaney popularized this saying in their book entitled *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years* (Hearth, Delany, & Delany, 1993).

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the patterns of parental involvement and parenting styles of the parents of academically successful African American males who graduated from historically Black colleges or universities (Odom, 2013). More specifically, the study investigated relationships among student’s perceptions of their parents’ involvement, parenting styles, educational level, and family structure with the student’s higher education grade point average. An online self-reported student perception survey instrument was developed and administered to 36 African American male participants. Data gathered focused on how the graduates viewed their parents’ child rearing practices or parenting style during their educational experiences from kindergarten through 12th grades. This study explored and contributed to the limited body of knowledge regarding a specific sample of successful African American young men who have equipped themselves educationally and are recognized as high achievers. By identifying the parenting styles and parent involvement practices of successful African American parents, school leaders could benefit from the study by gaining new knowledge that may increase the involvement of parent stakeholders in



schools. Additionally, this study could empower parents with effective parenting strategies that could help them to promote school success for their children.

### **Background of the Study**

Research provides compelling evidence there is a relationship between student success in school and parental involvement in K-12 education (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Yan, 1999). However, there has been negative discourse when researchers investigated and compared African American parents' patterns of parental involvement with Caucasian middle class standards, which historically painted a dismal outlook for African American males and their academic achievement (Yan, 1999). Abdul-Adil and Farmer (2006) defined parental involvement inclusively to "consist of any parental attitude, behavior, style, or activity that occurs within or outside the school setting to support a child's academic and or behavioral success in the school in which they are currently enrolled" (p. 2). Studies further reported that students benefitted when their parents were involved in their child(ren)s' schools (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Abdul-Adil and Farmer also reported that a child's readiness, school attendance, attitudes toward education, and postsecondary education entry were directly related to parental involvement.

Some researchers have suggested that parenting style, or the way a parent or parents raise a child might relate to academic achievement (Mandara, 2006). Multiple findings have made it clear that the relationship is complex. Mandara found within cultures, that qualitatively different versions of each parenting style exist and many studies have attempted to apply dominant culture standards to African Americans.

The results of this study will contribute to the limited body of literature regarding why some African American males succeed in college regardless of the current statistics and bleak forecasts for them. Seemingly, they are overcoming peer pressure and media depictions of the African American male by matriculating through higher education and receiving college degrees. With more understanding about what happens to this cadre of educated African American men, there may be K-12 applications for the education of African American boys regarding parental involvement and implications related to parenting styles. Perhaps a common set of themes or recommendations will evolve that can be generalized to parents of African American boys.

### **Research Questions**

Questions answered during this research included the following:

1. Which parenting style (authoritative, authoritarian, or permissive) is most often cited by graduates as measured by the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire-Short Version (PSDQ-Short)?
2. Are there parental involvement and parenting styles differences based on who reared the graduate?
3. Are there parental involvement and parenting styles differences based on the parent(s) educational level?
4. Is there a statistically significant relationship between graduates' grade point average and parental involvement?

5. Is there a statistically significant relationship between graduates' grade point average and parenting style (authoritative, authoritarian, or permissive)?
6. What are the graduates' perceptions of K-12 parental involvement and parenting style attributes that contributed to their success?
7. What suggestions related to parental involvement and parenting styles do African American graduate males have for parents currently raising African American boys?
8. What level of parental involvement do graduates report as measured by the High School and Family Partnership Questionnaire for Students?

### **Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses for Research Questions 2-6 guided this study:

- H<sub>0</sub>1.** There are no statistically significant differences among the authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting scores of successful African American graduate males.
- H<sub>0</sub>2.** There are no statistically significant differences in parenting scores (authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive) and parental involvement scores (parent involvement activities, student role in family decision making) by who raised the successful African American male graduates.
- H<sub>0</sub>3.** There are no statistically significant differences in parenting scores (authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive) and parental involvement scores (parent involvement activities, student role in family decision making) by mother's educational level.
- H<sub>0</sub>4.** There are no statistically significant differences in parenting scores (authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive) and parental involvement scores (parent involvement activities, student role in family decision making) by father's educational level.
- H<sub>0</sub>5.** There is no statistically significant relationship between graduates' grade-point average and parental involvement scores (parent involvement activities, student role in family decision making).
- H<sub>0</sub>6.** There is no statistically significant relationship between graduates' grade point average and parenting scores (authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Several theories influenced this study. These theories include Bronfenbrenner's (1986) and Spencer's (2006) *ecological theories*. Also influential were Epstein's (1995) and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997, 2005) *home-school partnership models*, *social capital theory*, and *role construction theory*.

Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological theory is a model that includes five systems that interact with a child: (a) the microsystem is the setting in which the child lives. It includes the family, peers, school, and neighborhood; (b) the mesosystem refers to the relationships between microsystems or connections between contexts; (c) the exosystem includes all the outer forces that influence the microsystem; (d) the macrosystem is the term used to explain

the culture and values that are defined by the child's microsystem and mesosystem; and (e) the chronosystem describes the transitions or environmental events throughout life. Bronfenbrenner proposed that home and school are the two main components of parental involvement. These factors influence a child's development; thus, parents and teachers should work collectively and cohesively for the benefit of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Spencer's (2006) phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory highlights the unique developmental experiences of African American children. More specifically, this theory examines the *why* of developmental trajectories of African American children. Because academic development takes place in a social context, this framework combines the individuals' intersubjective experiences with Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (Spencer, 2006). These experiences can include racism, inequity, and psychological support or its absence. Spencer asserted that African Americans are not a homogeneous group and some studies fail to consider this. Spencer also claimed that the phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory is useful when researching the unique experiences of African American children. Spencer's theory serves as the foundation for gender- and race/ethnicity-focused research that addresses resiliency, identity, and competence formation processes for diverse youth in both the United States and abroad (University of Chicago, 2012).

Epstein (1995) presented a model that shows how home, school, and community should function as a partnership. Although separate, these overlapping elements influence student success. This partnership includes six types of parental involvement: (a) parenting, (b) communicating, (c) volunteering, (d) learning at home, (e) decision making, and (f) collaborating with the community. Epstein explained this framework is intended to help educators develop comprehensive programs that support the school-home-community partnership. The model suggested that the adults in the home, school, and community form interdependent connections intended to foster student success.

When examining parental involvement, researchers often use the *social capital theory* as the theoretical framework for their studies. Social capital theory is based on the work of Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988, 1992). Social capital refers to the relationships, or networks, persons maintain for the purpose of acquisition and transmission of knowledge related to their children's education. Coleman (1992) described three forms of social capital: (a) level of trust, (b) information networks, and (c) social norms. Bourdieu (1986) asserted that various forms of capital are required to sustain levels of privilege, class, and social status. Coleman (1992) believed that families are responsible for conforming to certain norms to assure the success of their children, while Bourdieu (1986) emphasized the hindrances individuals have accessing resources. Collectively, studies have shown that the decisions made by parents about how to be involved in their children's schooling may be influenced by the parents' social networks and the degree to which they want to conform to school norms or middle class practices (Gavin & Greenfield, 1998).

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997, 2005) presented a theoretical model of the parental involvement process. From a psychological standpoint, their model explained why parents become involved in their children's education and how their involvement makes a difference in student outcomes. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) refined their model in 2005, claiming there is a reciprocal relationship between theory and measurements. Specifically, their research continued to explore the link between parents' psychological motivations for involvement and their involvement behavior (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005).

Price-Mitchell (2009) used system theory, complexity theory, and organizational theory to suggest that *boundary dynamics* are necessary when developing parent-school partnerships. These partnerships help children succeed through an emergent process of dialogue and relationship building in the peripheral spaces where parents and schools interact on behalf of children. Price-Mitchell (2009) suggested reframing these partnerships in the context of schools as *teaching communities* that generate new knowledge and innovation between teachers and parents. This theory is supported by the research conducted by Casanova (1996). Casanova posited that “parental involvement has multiple meanings and has been operationalized in studies in a variety of ways” (p. 30). Casanova proposed parental involvement does not always mean the same thing to everyone and it is not always positive. Consequently, parental involvement terms must be made clear, fair, and consistent among the school, home, family, and ethnicities within a given community (Casanova, 1996).

### **Research Design**

The design of this study is a sequential explanatory mixed method research approach. Relationships were examined among the independent and dependent variables. The independent variables included grade point average, family structure, and parent(s) educational level. The dependent variables were parental involvement and parenting styles.

The researcher administered a survey containing quantitative items to 33 participants. An interview instrument containing qualitative questions was administered to a subgroup of three students from the sample. Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) posited that in order to conduct a comprehensive analysis, the mixed method approach is most appropriate. These researchers suggested that often quantitative and qualitative data are both required when exploring factors and relationships among variables. Creswell (2002) described this type of research design as containing two distinct phases. Data from the first phase or quantitative survey were explored further in a second or qualitative phase (Creswell, 2002).

### **Participants**

An online survey tool was used to deliver the survey to participants. The researcher sampled African American males, ages 22-27, who earned a college degree from an HBCU. A sample of convenience was developed when one African American male, known by the researcher and who fit the research criteria, emailed a survey link to 50 African American males who also fit the criteria. Each of these 50 young men was asked to forward an email containing the survey link to seven additional African American males. The survey questions allowed the researcher to exclude any individual or individuals that completed the survey but did not meet the necessary criteria.

### **Instrumentation**

For the purpose of this research, the researcher combined four distinct surveys: (a) The High School and Family Partnership Questionnaire for Students (HSFPQ) (Epstein, Connors-Tadros, & Salinas, 1993); (b) The Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire-Short Version (PSDQ)-Short (Robinson, Mandlco, Olsen, & Hart, 2001); and (c) a demographic survey; and (d) a set of interview questions. Letters of permission to use and or alter both the

HSFPQ and PSDQ-Short were acquired. The demographic questions asked participants to respond to questions related to age, college classification level, grade point average, family structure, and parent(s) highest educational level.

The HSFPQ (Epstein et al., 1993) provided the researcher with a means to ask the participants questions about how involved their parents were in their schooling. The participants responded to seven items using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*daily*). Epstein et al. normed the scale on a sample of 1,290 students and found reliability of the 7-item scale to be .79. A second HSFPQ scale, the student role in family decision making, was also used. Participants were asked to provide information about the degree to which they or their parents made decisions regarding various student activities. The participants responded to the 19 items using a scale ranging from 1 (*parent decided*) to 3 (*it was up to me*). Epstein et al. normed the instrument on a sample of 1,269 students and found reliability of the 19-item scale to be .81.

The *Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire-Short Version-PSDQ-Short* (Robinson et al., 2001) contains 32 statements describing different parent reactions to child behavior. The purpose of this measure is to measure parenting styles along Baumrind's (1989) continuum of descriptors of authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive parenting styles. The short version was used for adolescents or adults to report in reflection how they were parented when they were children (C. Robinson, personal communication, May 7, 2012). Cronbach's coefficient alpha values were .86 for authoritative, .82 for authoritarian, and .64 for permissive (Robinson et al., 2001).

The scoring key of the *PSDQ-Short* was used to categorize the students' responses regarding their parents' parenting styles into the three parenting styles. Mean scores were calculated for both mother's and father's three parenting styles.

### **Procedures**

Participants of the study were directed to the on-line survey link with a description of the study and its purpose. The data from the online survey were entered into and analyzed using SPSS software. The data files were held in a secured locked cabinet in the researcher's home. Results are available to all participants upon request.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample and to respond to Research Question 1. Research Question 2 was analyzed using a series of one-way within-subjects analyses of variance (repeated measures ANOVA). Research Questions 3 and 4 were analyzed using a series of MANOVAs. Pearson product moment correlation was used to analyze Research Questions 5 and 6. Research Questions 7 and 8 were analyzed qualitatively using descriptive statistics to report the themes that emerged.

### **Discussion**

Graduates responded to questions regarding conversations or assistance parent(s) gave regarding grades, homework, and encouragement or praise. The data indicated that parent(s) were involved weekly with schooling. Graduates reported a high degree of involvement.

Graduates also reported jointly making decisions with their parent(s) regarding curfews, friends, money, chores, smoking, drug use, television and telephone use, clothes, and educational issues (Odom, 2013).

Qualitative data described parental involvement that was very hands-on in the early years. Parent(s) established a very stern study regiment (Odom, 2013). Students also reported participating in a variety of school and extracurricular activities. Mothers placed a strong emphasis on reading and studying with rewards tied to excellence in achievement. Graduates reported having developed intrinsic motivation during later schooling years as parent(s) lessened control (Odom, 2013).

Research literature suggested that African American parents often define parental involvement differently than school personnel (Lawson, 2003). Abdul-Adil and Farmer (2006) defined parental involvement to include any parent attitude, behavior, style, or activity that occurs within or outside the school setting to support a child's academic and or behavioral success. Clark (1983) described this as parents who establish and maintain supportive home environments, engage in frequent and meaningful dialogue with their children, help them with homework, and have clear and consistent behavioral limits. This particular sample of academically successful African American male graduates' parents demonstrated a type of parental involvement that is supported by the literature.

Fields-Smith (2005) reported that the roots of African American parental involvement trace back to slavery. During that time parents tied freedom to education, instilling achievement and the concept of improving one's personal condition through education and hard work. Parents and other adults supported the educational process at home. When parents could not help the child or thought another adult might have influence over a situation, decision, or behavior, they sought assistance from the community, family, a friend, or church member. Qualitative information obtained from the graduates' interviews demonstrated how their parents worked systematically and purposefully, creating in their sons a foundation for academic success during their earlier school years.

## **Parenting Styles**

Analysis of data indicated that on average the graduates reported their mother's authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting styles were higher than were their father's parenting styles. Further analysis revealed that most often African American mothers and fathers in this sample were described by their sons as using an authoritative parenting style. Graduates reported that their mother's permissive parenting style was significantly lower than their authoritarian or authoritative parenting styles. No difference was found between their father's authoritarian and permissive parenting styles. Qualitative results included comments regarding no difference between mother and father's parenting styles. This suggested that parents not only agreed upon expectations for their sons but also parental power was distributed evenly between the parents.

These results were similar to previous research studies of children in general and African American males specifically. Lewin, Lippitt, and White. (1939) first observed a teacher's leadership style in the classroom and its effect on student engagement. Teachers who were warm and fair created more engaging classrooms and students demonstrated more self-regulation and competence. Baumrind's (1971) four dimensions of responsiveness and control or demandingness has application and provides supportive research evidence.

Responsiveness, defined as parental warmth and love and demandingness or parental control, existed to a high degree and is present in the authoritative parenting style. Maccoby and Martin (1983) claimed that a child's environment should be supportive with warmth and love as well as containing firm guidance, control, and discipline. As was revealed in the current study, a high degree of authoritative parenting by both mothers and fathers was reported. Graduates felt loved and nurtured by their parents but they also understood their expectations and knew misbehavior would warrant consequences.

For the qualitative aspect of the study, graduates who were interviewed for this study reported parents using stern words and explanations when there was disobedience. Others reported being grounded, spanked, and losing video games or television privileges when young. All reported that these measures diminished as they aged.

Research also suggests that authoritative parenting may have a positive impact on African American males. Mandara (2006) proposed, after examining empirical research on parenting styles, that African American boys who have authoritative parents are more psychologically and behaviorally adjusted and have higher academic achievement than those in other types of families. The qualitative data supported Mandara's claim that spanking or the fear of being spanked appeared to be an effective way for African American parents to maintain control and discipline over boys. Some researchers suggest that the parenting styles of African American families have been understudied. The current study adds to the limited body of knowledge regarding what high achieving African American male graduates report about the parenting styles of their parents.

### **Parental Involvement, Parenting Style Differences, and Family Structure**

Fathers were highly authoritative when both mother and father raised the graduate. Substantial difference was found concerning the father's authoritative parenting style when the graduate was raised by both parents compared to being raised by their mothers. Hrabowski et al. (1998) interviewed dozens of successful African American college students and their parents and found these parents employed old-fashioned approaches to child rearing that were spiritually grounded. Fathers, when involved, represented a driving force in the male child's development. A father being present often meant more financial stability for the family and provided a positive role model for young males. Mothers in African American families often take a less dominant role in discipline when fathers are present. This research suggested that fathers not involved in raising the graduates were less involved, therefore less authoritative. These findings are supported in current research.

### **Parental Involvement, Parenting Styles Differences, and Parent(s) Educational Level**

There were no significant differences in mother's parenting styles regardless of the education level. No significant difference was determined to exist between father's parenting style and mother's education. Finally, there was no significant difference in parental involvement and family decision-making and mother's education level. There was however, a significant difference in the father's parenting style and father's education levels. Fathers with a college degree were more authoritative than fathers with less or more than a college degree.

These findings are contrary to most literature related to parents' educational level. Hrabowski et al. (1998) addressed the limited financial and academic resources parents

without a college education may offer their sons. Few researchers have studied the parenting styles of fathers, especially African American fathers. Mandara (2006) cited early research describing African American parenting practices as having unrealistic obedience expectations, misuse of power, low levels of reasoning, and little consideration or input from the child. Bluestone and Tamis-LeMonda (1999) reported the practices of middle-class African American mothers as engaging in child-oriented approaches to discipline instead of earlier African American traditional practices.

### **Grade Point Average, Parental Involvement, and Parenting Styles**

There was no statistically significant relationship between graduates' grade point average and parental involvement. There was no statistically significant relation between graduates' grade point average and parenting style.

### **Attending and Graduating From a Historically Black College or University**

The current study's qualitative findings cited the benefit of high achieving African American male graduates attending HBCUs. Benefits included access to resources that might have been unavailable elsewhere; ability to study with an empowered group of peers; and the ability to grow academically and socially without any pressure to attend to imminent Blackness. These comments are supported by the literature as it relates to how HBCUs nurture African American college males. Students are integrated into college life while their ethnic pride, self-esteem, and academic abilities are cultivated and refined. Seifert, Drummond and Pascarella (2006) best described the HBCU experience as one of engagement, support, acceptance, encouragement, and connection. The high achieving African American male graduates in this study give credence to this theory.

### **Recommendations**

This study demonstrated that high achieving African American male graduates from HBCUs do in fact exist. These young men experienced academic success in their K-12 education and successfully graduated from college. The graduates reported that early in their development their parents engaged them in dialogue about their schooling and learning. Parents possessed a high degree of parental involvement in their education. An authoritative parenting style was most often cited as parents provided a nurturing and loving environment over which they had firm guidance, control, and discipline. Parents provided rules, structure, encouragement, and set a high academic bar for excellence. As graduates grew older, they possessed an internal desire to excel and do well academically. Areas that warrant attention in the future include the following:

1. A study that compares African American male graduates from non-HBCU schools with African American male graduates from HBCUs.
2. A study that examines the parenting styles of African American fathers.
3. A longitudinal study on a sample of African American boys entering kindergarten that continues through college completion and the impact of parental involvement and parent training for parents.



4. The current study repeated with consideration to the motivation, resiliency, and competitiveness of graduates.
5. Attention should be directed to providing parents with a set of best practices for raising an academically successful African American male student. Those traditional institutions that are closely held and regarded should work collaboratively with educators to influence this change. Churches and community organizations are an appropriate starting place.

### **Recommendation for Practice**

The participants in this study clearly articulated a reoccurring theme of parents setting high expectations and purposefully developing a plan for their sons' academic success. The graduates reported that parents directed and guided until intrinsically the graduates were driven toward academic success. Some suggestions or recommendations for practice for parents of African American males include the following:

1. Identify how your son learns best (e.g., tactile, visual, auditory). Seek to have interest inventories administered to determine learning style. This is usually how your son will prefer and excel when learning. Schools can assist and Internet websites provided some appropriate resources.
2. Determine academic strengths and weaknesses of your son. Seek to have individual achievement and intelligence tests given. Schools may assist or private psychologists are an option. Such testing allows parents to seek remediation and/or enrichment instruction. In some cases, schools may not initiate this process unless the negative behavior of a child is involved or a learning disability is suspected.
3. Be an advocate for your son and his academic success. Make this a personal mission. Read, talk to other parents, and seek as many resources as possible. Do not wait for teachers or school officials to take the ball. Parents must learn to navigate the educational system.
4. Explore a variety of school options for your son. The neighborhood school may not be the best academic fit.
5. Look for activities in the community that provide opportunities for safety, learning, career exploration, curiosity, development, fun, enrichment, remediation, and real world connections to school curriculum for your son.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the patterns of parental involvement and parenting styles of the parents of academically successful African American males who graduated from historically Black colleges or universities (Odom, 2013). More specifically, the study investigated relationships among student's perceptions of their parents' involvement, parenting styles, educational level, and family structure with the student's higher education grade point average. Although a large body of research suggests that African American males are underachievers and lack the ability, parental support, or desire to achieve academically, this study suggested not only that this is a fallacy but provided insight into the parenting

practices of a particular sample of young African American college graduates. These graduates provided an exception to what is seemingly a stereotypical rule. They reported that their parents were highly involved and used authoritative parenting practices. There were no significant relationships observed among parent(s) educational levels, grade point average, or family structure.

Clearly observed was that no matter the educational levels of the parents, graduates' grade point average, or family structure, parents were highly involved in their graduates' educational experience. Parents set high expectations and created a roadmap for their son's success. The home environment was warm and nurturing with rules and boundaries.

These young men credited their parents' parenting practices for their success. They suggested that parents be involved every step of the way by holding their son(s) accountable, instilling the value of hard work, mandating the obeying of rules, encouraging curiosity, fostering a rich learning environment, and requiring academic excellence. The results of this study indicated trends in parental involvement and parenting styles. This research provided a testimony from African American male graduates who attested to a process that led to academic success for each of them

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# Understanding Alternative Education: A Mixed Methods Examination of Student Experiences

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*Alternative education plays a critical role in the opportunity gap that persists in the US public education system. However, there has been little research on alternative schools. Scaffolded by a theoretical framework constructed from critical theory, self-determination theory (SDT) and student voice, this research examined how well students in alternative schools were being served. The purpose of this mixed methods study was to document, describe, and analyze the student experience at alternative school. The first phase used self-determination theory and extant data to describe students attending an alternative school. Distinct groups of students were established using cluster analysis. These groups provide a vehicle for maximal variation sampling of participants in the second phase, a narrative inquiry. This study found that SDT predicts which students are on track to meet their educational goals, and that these students experience personalized education and develop strong student-teacher relationships. The student stories establish the importance of alternative schools but also reveal the need to change the ways our educational system employs alternative programs. This study suggests a path that can ultimately lead to effective alternative education.*

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## Introduction

Disparities in school performance among various groups of students were first dubbed the “achievement gap” in 1963 (Walker, 1963). The achievement gap refers not just to a gap in standardized test scores, but graduation rates, discipline, data - an “opportunity gap” (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Alternative schools (the terms alternative school and alternative program, used interchangeably throughout the literature reviewed, are used interchangeably in this paper) play a pivotal role in all. Serving students labeled “at-risk” of educational failure, alternative programs operate “with a relatively high degree of autonomy” (Lehr & Lange, 2003, p. 60), ignored and exempt from accountability. The number of alternative schools and students is growing, the result of increases in suspensions and expulsions, pushing students out of their traditional schools and into alternative schools (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009).

There is no standard definition of alternative education (Aron, 2006). Most researchers and the US Department of Education agree that alternative education serves students labeled “at-risk” of educational failure (Lehr et al., 2009). These students may be disruptive, truant, involved with the juvenile justice system, failing academically, pregnant, or already parents. (Carver & Lewis, 2010). They are disproportionately students of African American, Latino, or Native American descent, have low socioeconomic status (SES), and often have special needs (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Fairbrother, 2008; Loutzenheiser, 2002; Smith, 2003).

Many alternative schools warehouse problem students and ineffective teachers (Kelly 1993; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lehr & Lang, 2003; Warren, 2007). Alternative schools are often created for the benefit of the traditional schools, which use alternative programs as holding pens for their disruptive and underperforming students (Brown, 2007; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lehr et al., 2009; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009; Muñoz, 2004; Warren, 2007). Through the overuse of suspensions and expulsions, disadvantaged youth are marginalized. Zero-tolerance policies and an increased focus on accountability in traditional schools lend rationale to exclusionary discipline policies (Brown, 2007; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Lehr et al., 2009; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009).

Poor students, students of color, and those with disabilities are disproportionately disciplined and disenfranchised (APA, 2008; Martinez, 2009; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Most of these students drop out or end up in alternative schools (Advancement Project, 2010; Arcia, 2006). Alternative schools can be supportive places. (de la Ossa, 2005; Poyrazli et al., 2008; Quinn, Poinier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006; Saunders & Saunders, 2001). However, even in these programs, “at-risk” students are viewed as deficient, and given an easier route to graduation, making success in post secondary education or careers less likely (Atkins, Bullis, & Todis, 2005; Darling & Price, 2004; Fairbrother, 2008; Loutzenheiser, 2002; Washington, 2008).

Previous studies have rightly emphasized the need to incorporate student voice into the research (Brown, 2007; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; de la Ossa, 2005; Loutzenheiser, 2002; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009), since little is known about how alternative schools meet student needs. Do alternative schools reengage students? How does learning, academic achievement, and personal development compare to the outcomes at traditional schools? Is alternative education really an alternative, or just a place to hide and hold disenfranchised students? Alternative program students are the best source for answers to these questions. This research sought to authorize the student perspective, by making meaning of their experiences. This

research captured how alternative schools affect the lived educational experiences of their students. In their own voice, students explain why alternative programs are important, and how they can be improved. It is hoped that these stories will compel more research and catalyze changes in policy, procedures, and instruction for alternative schools.

### **Purpose of the Study**

All aspects of alternative education need research, especially concerning student outcomes (Atkins et al., 2005; Brown, 2007; Foley & Pang, 2006; Kelly, 1993; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lehr & Lange, 2003; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009; Muñoz, 2004; Quinn et al., 2006; Warren, 2007). The purpose of this research was to examine student experiences in alternative schools to determine if their educational needs were being met and if opportunities for improvement existed.

This study analyzed student experiences in an alternative school. The two-phased, explanatory, mixed methods study gathered and analyzed quantitative data from a sample of the students, and then examined the reasons behind those results by interviewing a subset of the participants. The first phase made use of student surveys and records to identify and purposefully select participants for the second phase. The second qualitative phase, a narrative inquiry into student educational experiences, was emphasized because this study wanted to understand the lived experiences of students in alternative schools

The overarching questions that guided this study were: Do alternative schools provide a real alternative for the students who attend them, and how can alternative schools better serve their students? The specific questions this research explored in order to answer the larger questions were:

- 1) Who attends alternative school?
- 2) What is the lived student educational experience before, during, and after attending alternative school?

Understanding who attends alternative schools, how they came to be enrolled, and their experiences helped answer the question of whether or not students are provided an equitable educational alternative. Listening to the perspective of students provided essential input to improving alternative education practice.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Because the existing research is ambiguous and/or inconclusive, it is important to situate an understanding of this type of education within a theoretical framework. Three theories guided the development of this study.

#### **Critical Theory**

Examining alternative schools to determine if they provide a *real* alternative necessitated an investigation focused on collecting and analyzing data with an interpretive framework that accepts complexity, conceives knowledge as being socially constructed, and plays particular attention to the role power plays. Is it a *real alternative* that provides students with a fair and

equitable education, as opposed to a *reasonable solution* when viewed through the lens of a dominant White culture? This research embraced critical theory's goals of critique and transformation, restitution, and emancipation (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The literature suggests using a critical theory or a social justice lens to highlight student experiences in alternative education (Brown, 2007; Loutzenheiser, 2002; Muñoz, 2004).

### **Student Voice**

Student voice was this study's *raison d'être*. Students are capable of expressing their views about their learning and school experience (Groves, 2010; Kruse, 2000; Storz, 2008). The voices of students are essential to successful school reform efforts (Fielding, 2001; Fullan, 2007; Mitra & Gross, 2009).

Student perspectives are important to understanding how attending alternative school affects student academic, social and emotional wellbeing (Brown, 2007; de la Ossa, 2005). The voices of students help researchers appreciate how school contexts shape student behavior, and contribute or discourage persistence in school (de la Ossa, 2005; Loutzenheiser, 2002; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009). Students identify factors that contribute to or hinder motivational classroom experiences, thereby influencing their academic achievement (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; de la Ossa, 2005; Loutzenheiser, 2002).

### **Self-determination Theory**

Most students arrive at alternative schools disengaged from the educational system, often described as unmotivated, and bringing very little energy or commitment. Understanding student self regulation and motivation are central to the analysis of student outcomes. This study used self-determination theory (SDT) to provide a scaffold for that understanding (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

SDT posits that humans have three basic innate and universal psychological needs. The three are autonomy – feeling ownership for choices and behaviors, competence- feeling effective, and relatedness – feeling connected to others. An environment that satisfies these needs supports engagement in and mastery of skills and concepts within it (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Substantial research has linked basic needs satisfaction to student classroom behavior, academic achievement, cognitive learning, and persistence in school (Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2007). This is true across gender, age, and cultures (Chirkov, 2009; Guay, Ratelle, & Chanal, 2008; Jang, Reeve, Ryan, & Kim, 2009). Support of these basic psychological needs correlates to intrinsic motivation, which in turn is associated with student engagement and academic achievement (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryzin et al., 2007).

### **Methods**

This study identified, documented, and analyzed students' lived educational experiences. The methodology used was a two-phased, mixed methods design. The first quantitative phase drew upon SDT, using student surveys, to answer the question: Who attends alternative schools? A narrative inquiry grounded in student voice followed in the second phase, to answer the central research question: What is the lived student educational experience before, during, and after attending alternative school? An analysis of narratives combined the results of both phases.



## Data Collection and Analysis

This study was conducted at a school operated by a County Office of Education (pseudonyms were used for all organizational names and specific locations) in the southwestern United States, with eight locations, and 300 – 450 sixth through twelfth grade students on a 245-day school year. A quarter of the students were enrolled in independent study (IS), the remainder attended small (20 – 25 students) multi-grade classrooms.

**Participants.** The student population was highly mobile. In the 2010-2011 school year, the official enrollment for the school was 336, but 1,024 different students were enrolled at some time. The average mobility rate was 77%, with fewer than 30% attending for more than one year. Students were referred to the school by 22 local school districts, the probation department, and social service agencies. Most had been expelled from their local school districts, many transitioning into or out of the juvenile justice system. In the 2010-2011 school year more than 81% of students identified as Hispanic or Latino, while County enrollment was 44% Latino and enrollment for the 22 districts was 39% Latino. Special education students, and students with low SES were also disproportionately enrolled.

**Phase One - Quantitative.** The data collected in Phase One were obtained from student records and a student survey that utilized a Basic Psychological Needs Scale (BPNS) as its central component. Data were demographics, enrollment dates, perceived basic psychological needs satisfaction, self identified goals, and students' assessment of their instructional environment. After parent and participant consent forms were obtained, a convenient sample of students attending CCS completed a survey indicating how they felt about the school, their learning, and the instruction they receive.

**Instrument.** The survey was a modified version of the Basic Needs Satisfaction at Work Scale (BNSW-S), one version of the Basic Psychological Needs Scale (BPNS) (University Of Rochester, 2008). Two versions have been used in educational settings: BNSW-S (Brokelman, 2009; Gillison, Standage, & Skevington, 2008) and the Basic Needs Satisfaction in General Scale (BPNG-S) (Lovett, 2009; Wei, Shaffer, Young, & Zakalik, 2005). The BNSW-S was used because it is more established, context specific, and the reported reliability was higher.

The BNSW-S has 21 items: eight autonomy items, six competence items, and seven relatedness items. Participants respond on a 7-point Likert scale anchored by (1) not true at all to (7) very true. An adapted version of this scale was piloted with a total of 122 students. The instrument used in this study reflected the results of factor and reliability analysis in the pilot study.

**Quantitative data analysis.** Data from student records and the survey were coded and entered into SPSS. Totals for each subscale and BPNS were calculated, normality confirmed and outliers removed. The researcher checked the reliability of the instrument by looking at the internal consistency of the BPNS and its subscales. Using confirmatory factor analysis, the researcher also verified the theoretical subscale structure of the BPNS. The strength and direction of relationships between demographic variables such as age, grade, gender, time enrolled, instructional assignment, special education status, and free and reduced lunch qualification were determined by correlational analysis. Additionally, correlations between demographic variables and the BPNS were analyzed.

The researcher used cluster analysis to build student profiles. Cluster Analysis was used to group participants based on the BPNS subscale scores. Consistent with

recommendations made by Hair and Black (2004) and studies done by Mouratidis and Michou (2011) and Vansteenkiste, Sierens, Soenens, Luyckx, and Lens (2009), a Ward's hierarchical cluster analysis with an agglomeration schedule was used to explore the possible clusters, followed by a k-means clustering (Gore, 2000). Following the cluster analysis, the researcher used a double-split cross-validation procedure to examine the stability of the cluster solution (Breckenridge, 2000).

**Phase Two – Narrative Inquiry.** Consistent with maximal variation sampling, two individuals were purposefully selected from each cluster based how close to the center they were statistically. Qualitative data collection consisted of multiple one-on-one, 30 to 60 minute taped interviews with each participant over a six-month period. To reflect quantitative data results and data captured in previous interviews, the researcher amended interview protocols throughout the interviewing process.

*Narrative analysis.* Interview data were used to construct each participant's story. In this phase, narrative was the form of inquiry, reasoning, and presentation. The result was each student's unique account of their school experiences, told in their own words.

During pilot interviews, the researcher found that it impossible to capture all the richness of the voice recordings in a transcript. Therefore, the researcher created and coded voice clips creating an audio restorying for each participant by assembling selected clips in chronological order. As each story was constructed in auditory form, a transcript was created to facilitate the analysis of narratives.

*Analysis of narratives.* In the final stage, the researcher compared participant and cluster demographics, and performed a sequential event-state analysis on the narratives, comparing each participant's chronology of events. Commonalities and differences in the stories were integrated, with the results of Phase One to form profiles of each cluster. Using plot analysis and In Vivo coding the data were segregated, reduced, grouped, and regrouped. Themes emerged from patterns that the researcher identified and described.

Each theme was examined to determine how it explained or was explained by the quantitative results from the first phase. The researcher connected the results from the quantitative and qualitative analyses, and examined the results in relationship to existing literature using the lens established in the theoretical framework. The goal was to not only provide answers to the research questions, but to address the overarching questions with pragmatic prescriptions for improvement.

## Summary of Key Findings

### Quantitative Results

The data collected in the first phase were obtained from one hundred and eighty-three students, 54% of enrollment. The demographics of the survey participants were consistent with the school's population (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Demographic Comparison between Survey Participants and School Population*

	Survey Participants	School Population
Latino	81%	81%
White non-Hispanic	11%	11%
African American	6%	4%
Special Education	18%	19%
Limited English Proficient	47%	64%
Free or Reduced lunch	86%	79%
Female	17%	20%
Independent Study	25%	25%

The reliability of the instrument was substantiated, and a principal component analysis of the subscales confirmed the theoretical subscale structure. Correlational analysis showed a strong correlation between age and grade and a medium correlation between age and instructional assignment, indicating that students assigned to independent study (IS) were older.

As expected, all the subscales and the total for the BPNS were highly correlated. A two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) showed a significant correlation, with a medium to large effect size, between instructional assignment and BPNS, after controlling for age and grade. The BPNS totals were higher for students assigned to independent study.

Using the BPNS subscales, a cluster analysis established four significantly different groups (see Figure 1). Cluster membership had significant associations with grade level, instructional assignment, and how students responded to the question: "Do you learn more or less at this school compared to other schools?" Cluster membership also had a significant association with educational goals. Over 50% of Cluster #3 indicated they intended to pursue post secondary education.

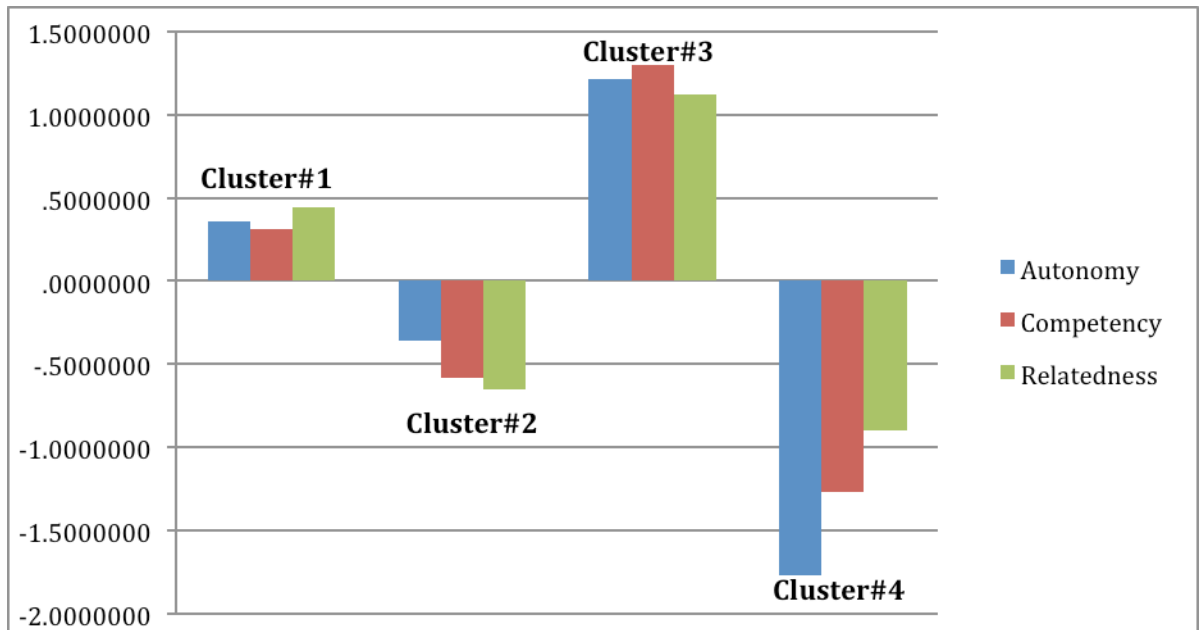


Figure 1. Z score means for autonomy, competency, and relatedness in each cluster

### Narrative Analysis

The clusters facilitated a maximal variation sampling of the survey respondents. The researcher selected two students with subscale totals closest to the means for each cluster to interview. Narratives telling each participant’s educational story in their own voice were assembled from the interview audiotapes (the students’ stories are available in their audio form and transcribed in Glassett Farrelly (2013).

### Analysis of Narratives

After completing the narrative analysis, the researcher compared participant and cluster demographics, performed a sequential event-state analysis on the narratives, and used commonalities and differences in the stories to integrate the results of both phases. This process identified a different set of traits for Cluster #1 and Cluster #3 compared with Clusters #2 and Cluster #4. These differences proved important because Cluster #1 and Cluster #3 had BPNS means higher than the average means for the whole sample while Cluster #2 and Cluster #4 had BPNS means lower than the sample mean. Referencing Figure 1, the researcher refers to these groups of clusters as “above the line” and “below the line”.

*Clusters #1 and #3.* The stories for the participants in the above the line clusters have characteristics consistent with SDT. These students were optimistic and they took responsibility for their past decisions. All four stories reference specific teachers by name who the students built a relationship with, and developed strong positive feelings for. None of the below the line stories contain a reference to specific teachers with whom the student felt connected.

All the above the line cluster members were successful academically, and were well on their way to accomplishing their educational goals. Two had graduated, one fulfilled all his graduation requirements and needed only to pass the state exit exam, and the fourth was returning to his traditional school for his senior year with a 3.8 grade point average.

*Clusters #2 and #4.* The below the line stories lacked positive, specific personal educational experiences. This was consistent with their low relatedness scores, which were not significantly different between the two clusters. The students in the below the line clusters were behind academically, and did not take personal responsibility, or expressed regret, for past decisions. They painted themselves as victims.

Using plot analysis and In Vivo coding, the researcher identified four themes:

- ***Middle school – the beginning.*** Each story had a critical turning point that occurred in middle school.
- ***Alternative school – individual attention.*** The most significant positive attributes of the alternative schools were personalized instruction and individual attention.
- ***Alternative school – academic expectations. Participants described learning environments that were*** less rigorous than that found at their traditional schools.
- ***Intended destinations – building social capital.*** Students' career objectives were dominated by law enforcement and indicated inadequate social capital acquisition.

### **Who Attends Alternative School?**

Students who attended alternative school were disproportionately male students of color (in this study Latinos) who qualified for free or reduced cost federal lunch and had extensive discipline records. A disproportionate number needed special education services. They were not a homogenous group. A profile of their basic psychological needs satisfaction showed a normal distribution, some motivated, academically successful, and possessing a positive sense of well being, while others felt controlled, unable to determine their own destiny, and disengaged from school. They all had a goal of high school graduation. Many dreamed of education after high school.

### **What is the Lived Student Experience?**

Each story was unique and provided valuable insight into the alternative school experience. Examining all the stories together, the qualitative phase of this study established four themes. For most, the journey to alternative school began in middle school. While attending alternative school, the small classrooms and independent study options allowed students to receive individualized, differentiated instruction and attention. Some students were able to build supportive relationships with teachers. However, there was evidence the alternative schools lacked the academic rigor of the traditional schools and failed to help students acquire necessary social capital.

## **Discussion**

This research presented vivid examples of what previous literature established. The student stories illustrated a need to integrate disparate concentrations of research into a pragmatic course of action. The recommendations for practice are summarized here as implications for educators in alternative education, educational leaders, and researchers.

### **Implications for Educators in Alternative Education**

This study provides specific suggestions for administrators, curriculum designers, counselors, staff, and especially teachers who are involved in alternative education. Educational reform is moving to personalized instruction, facilitated by an integration of educational technology (U.S. Department Of Education, 2010). Alternative education needs to be at the forefront of this transformation. This requires reimagining both the concept of independent study and classroom instruction. It embraces a learner-centered rather than teacher-centered approach, and puts a premium on student flexibility. Researchers have documented that learner-centered approaches are successful for at-risk students (Alfassi, 2004; McCombs & Quait, 2002). Alternative schools successfully employing a personalized learning approach exist (Steinberg & Almeida, 2010; Watson, 2011) and can be used as models. The results of this research showed that examining student basic psychological needs satisfaction can help implement a personalized learning approach, by identifying opportunities for program improvement and aiding in student placement and intervention.

The key to academic rigor is maintaining high expectations. Alternative schools often have cultures that categorize their students from a deficit rather than a strength-based perspective, leading to lower expectations and less rigorous instruction (de la Ossa, 2005; Fairbrother, 2008; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Muñoz, 2004; Washington, 2008). Teacher expectations, communicated through verbal and nonverbal cues, instructional practices, and feedback, can influence how students perform (Rosenthal, 2002; Weinstein, 2002). Expectations are particularly important for underserved students who suffer a systemic tendency toward lower expectations, which often produce a significant self-fulfilling prophecy effect, accompanied by learned helplessness (de Boer, Bosker, & van der Werf, 2010; Weinstein, 2002).

### **Implications for Educational Leaders**

Policy makers at the Federal, State, and local levels must both improve alternative education and address the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline practices. Studies show that schools with higher suspension rates have lower academic quality and school climate ratings (Losen & Skiba, 2011). Suspensions and expulsions have not proven effective in making schools safer or improving the learning environment (APA, 2008). Suspensions and expulsion rates are positively correlated to lower school-wide student achievement (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). These facts should lead Superintendents, Board Members, and site administrators to discourage the discretionary use of suspensions and expulsions, implementing instead, programs identified by research as effective at keeping students in school while still maintaining safe environments (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Gagnon & Leone, 2001).

Absent federal or state legislation, most alternative programs go unmonitored (Lehr et al., 2009; Martin & Brand, 2006). Alternative schools need to be held accountable if improved student academic outcomes are to be realized. It is imperative that legislators and policy makers understand the systemic role alternative programs play. National, state, and local educational leaders cannot allow their fervor for increased test scores in traditional schools to sweep alternative students under the rug. They must avoid using alternative schools as off the record warehouses for disruptive and academically challenged students, keeping them away from established interventions and reporting systems in the traditional schools. Almeida, Le, Steinberg, and Cervantes (2010) warned of “a sea change in state policy and practice” that is needed to help alternative education establish itself “as a viable, proficiency-based pathway for the millions of young people who are failing to thrive in more traditional settings” (p. v).

### **Implications for Researchers**

*Alternative Education.* Professors and doctoral students in Educational Leadership programs need to pay attention to alternative education. It is a critical component to addressing opportunity gaps within the US public educational system. All aspects of alternative education need further research. National and state databases need to be examined to determine accurate enrollment numbers. Demographics of alternative school student populations need to be compared to the student populations in the traditional schools from where students are referred. State and national test score data bases should be mined for student achievement data in alternative schools.

There is a need to incorporate student voice into research and alternative education reform efforts (Brown, 2007; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; de la Ossa, 2005; Loutzenheiser, 2002; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009). In this study students have offered insight into what enhances their educational experiences, and what detracts from their success. Students have useful things to say about their education, what engages them, and what impedes their learning. The authors of this paper agree with past research suggesting more longitudinal studies highlighting student experiences need to be conducted using a critical theory or social justice lens, thereby empowering the marginalized student population in alternative education (Brown, 2007; Loutzenheiser, 2002; Muñoz, 2004; Poyrazli et al., 2008).

Also needed is further research measuring student outcomes in alternative schools (Atkins et al., 2005; Brown, 2007; Foley & Pang, 2006; Kelly, 1993; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Lehr & Lange, 2003; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009; Muñoz, 2004; Quinn et al., 2006; Warren, 2007). Research objectively measuring academic achievement and student learning is necessary to inform leaders at alternative schools. This study suggests that educators in alternative programs need not only to create caring, supportive environments but also to guard against watered down separate and unequal academic programs, which severely limit their students’ future choices. Future research “requires an adaptive philosophy of inquiry that neither sacrifices rigor for sensitivity or accuracy for appearances” (Muñoz, 2004, p. 15).

*Methodology.* The methodology developed for this study, in segments or its totality, is generalizable and useful to future doctoral research in education. It provides a theoretically informed mechanism for rigorous maximal variation sampling of participants in a narrative inquiry and includes both narrative analysis and an analysis of narratives. Audio files were the data source for the narrative analysis in this methodology. Creating stories in the participants’ own voice preserves the impact and meaning of their experience. Using this approach offers

researchers an opportunity to document diverse experiences and identify common aspects of experience for the phenomenon being investigated.

### **Conclusion**

This research had two overarching questions: Do alternative schools provide a real alternative for the students who attend them, and how can alternative schools better serve their students? No one can listen to the students who provided their educational stories in this study without appreciating the importance of the alternative programs they attended. Alternative schools do provide an alternative education path, without which many students' goals of a diploma and continuing education would not be attainable. It was in alternative school that the participants of this study received individual attention, and were able to chart out a path to either graduation or a return to their traditional schools. Many came to value an education for the first time. Students who had believed they were incapable of learning were able to build a relationship with caring supportive teachers. These teachers guided the students in taking responsibility for their own learning. This study, however, casts doubt that alternative education levels the playing field for underserved, marginalized students.

It is necessary to take a systemic view when answering the second question, how can alternative schools better serve their students? Research clearly lays out a path for building upon the strengths found in alternative education, to reach the goal of a real alternative - an alternative that confronts and closes the opportunity gap. The path starts with new discipline policies and procedures. Educators need to recognize the first discipline referral or poor citizenship grade as an opportunity for successful early intervention, not the beginning of a paper trail that ultimately results in removal. The menu of interventions must include alternative programs that provide an opportunity for personalized learning in an environment that supports the creation of caring, nurturing relationships with teachers. Teachers trained and practiced in behaviors that foster these relationships, establish and maintain high expectations, and support the growth and maintenance of student social-capital. Teachers, schools, districts, states, and the federal government must become accountable to each other and the students they serve, not simply with standardized test scores, but with measures of student goal attainment, and basic psychological needs satisfaction. It is time to let alternative education out of the closet, and focus on what it can be. When educators follow this path, then the system will offer a real alternative for all students.

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# Differences in Hispanic Access and Success Rates for Undergraduate Health-Related Studies in Texas Health-Related Institutions: A Multiyear, Statewide Investigation

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*In this investigation, we analyzed Hispanic student access and success in health-related degrees by examining enrollment and graduation rates over a period of 13 years. Archival data were obtained from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board consisting of the number of Hispanic students enrolled and number of degrees awarded in the health-related degrees at Texas health-related institutions for each year beginning with 2000 through 2012. Statistically significant increases were not present in the number or the percentages of Hispanic students enrolled in undergraduate degree programs or for the number or the percentages of undergraduate degrees awarded. The lack of statistically significant increases should serve as a call to examine the higher education system.*

## **Introduction**

The ability to obtain a quality higher education and healthcare remain priorities for Hispanics because increases in this group accounted for more than half of the total population growth between 2000 and 2010 in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, Department of Commerce, Economics, and Statistics Administration, 2011). Yet, Hispanics continue to be underrepresented at all levels of higher education with only 12% of the total undergraduate and post baccalaureate student enrollment in 2008 being Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010). Despite substantial gains in the percentage of American

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college students who are Hispanic, rising from just 3% in 1976 to 13% in 2010, the percentages have not increased at the same rate of population growth (NCES, 2012a). According to the Pew Hispanic Center (2009), 28% a bachelor's degree compared to only 13% of Hispanics of the same age. The population distribution of Hispanics is not equally dispersed throughout the country. According to The U.S. Census Bureau Department of Commerce, Economics, and Statistics Administration (2011) over one half of the Hispanic population resides in just three states: California (28%), Texas (18.7%), and Florida (8.4%).

Among positive higher education outcomes, college completion remains one of the biggest disparities between White and Hispanic students (Fry, 2011). This lack of completion has the potential for severe economic impact on both a state and national level. In a policy proposal for the group *Excelencia in Education*, Santiago (2011) warned of a looming crisis caused by the combination of a rapidly expanding population and a lower than average education attainment. In 2005, The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education predicted a decline in the skill and income of U.S. residents in the next two decades because the least educated groups are becoming the fastest growing segment of the workforce (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2005). This decline translates into a loss of tax base and larger financial decreases (Kelly, 2005).

Additionally, Hispanics are under-represented in healthcare professions; a fact linked to health disparities in the minority populations (Cason et al., 2008; Grumbach & Mendoza, 2008; Smedley, Butler, & Bristow, 2004). In 2003, the Institute of Medicine and the Sullivan Commission on Diversity in Healthcare Workforce stressed that the failure to reverse the downward trend of minority representation in nursing, medicine, and dentistry could place the health of a one third of the nation's citizens at risk (The Sullivan Commission on Diversity in Healthcare Workforce, 2004; Smedley et al., 2004). Major areas to address for strategic policy revision included examining educational preparation in primary school, changing responses to affirmative action challenges, and revising admissions policies (Smedley et al., 2004; The Sullivan Commission on Diversity in Healthcare Workforce, 2004).

Connecting healthcare education trends to general state education and population trends allows for a more circumspect analysis of the magnitude of the issue. In 2005, Texas was declared a majority-minority state, meaning the non-White population had surpassed that of the White population. Hispanics comprise 38% of the population in the State of Texas, the second largest proportion of the national Hispanic population behind California (U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics, and Statistics Administration, 2011). For the first time in modern history, Hispanic students comprised 50.2% of the public school total enrollment population during the 2010-2011 school year (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2011). However, Texas mirrored the national trend of Hispanic underrepresentation of in higher education and healthcare professions in the late 1990s. In 2000, the state responded with an initiative adopted by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) called the *Closing the Gaps Higher Education Plan* (Vega & Martinez, 2012). The original plan had the specific goal of increasing the number of Hispanic students completing undergraduate degrees from 18,000 in 2000 to 36,000 in 2010, followed by 50,000 by 2015 (THECB, 2010). In April 2010, the THECB announced a strongly reworded and accelerated revision to the plan when it became apparent the numbers were consistently below targets.

The implications of the disparity of Hispanic students in obtaining healthcare related degrees are far reaching. Specifically, The Sullivan Commission on Diversity in the Healthcare Workforce (2004) asserted that without major interventions, the continued

trajectory of declining representation in health professions where the minority participation is not reflective of the population will have a substantial impact on the economic and social well-being of the state and nation. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration [HRSA] (2012), Texas currently has a general health professional shortfall in the areas of primary care, mental health, and dentistry. In addition, Texas is the state with the second largest Hispanic population and one of the fastest growing states in the nation; an economic and healthcare crisis looms in the absence of filling the healthcare shortage with the diversity representative of the population.

Created by the 1965 Texas Legislature, the THECB has worked to achieve academic excellence of Texas students. The philosophy of the coordinating board rests on the premise of access to and quality of education as inseparable foundations for meeting the goals of Closing the Gaps by 2015 plan (THECB, 2012a). Included in the THECB's mission is initiative development and implementation to increase significantly the number of Texans completing college. This goal reflects the impetus for alignment of the state's future workforce needs and higher education outcomes. The board also recognizes that although Texas educational outcomes have improved, the speed of achieving parity with a global economy is lacking (THECB, 2012a).

The purpose of this study was to examine Hispanic student access and success in health-related degrees by examining enrollment and graduation rates over a period of 13 years. Archival data were obtained from the THECB consisting of the number of Hispanic students enrolled and number of degrees awarded in the health-related degrees at Texas health-related institutions for each year beginning with 2000 through 2012. The health-related degrees for which data were available included certificate, undergraduate, masters, doctoral, medical, dental, and nursing.

In this investigation, Hispanic student enrollment numbers and percentages of student enrollment in health-related degrees at Texas health-related institutions were calculated for each year of data (i.e., fall 2000 through fall 2012). Research questions used to guide this study were (a) As a function of degree type, what is the difference in the number of and percent of Hispanic students enrolled in health-related undergraduate degrees at Texas health-related institutions between the fall of 2000 through the fall of 2012?; (b) As a function of degree type, what is the difference in the number of and the percent of health-related undergraduate degrees awarded to Hispanic students at health-related institutions between the fiscal year 2000 through the fiscal year 2012?; and (c) What trend is present in the percent of Hispanic students enrolled in and awarded health-related degrees at Texas public institutions between the fall of 2000 through the fall of 2012 academic years?

## **Methodology**

Archival data from the Texas Higher Education Accountability System for Hispanic students in the state of Texas were obtained for this investigation. For the purposes of this study, participants included Hispanic students for which Texas public higher education institutional health-related degree enrollment data between the fall of 2000 and the fall of 2012 and completion data between the fiscal year 2000 and the fiscal year 2012 were available. Institutions reporting data include (a) The Texas A&M University Health Science Center and its component institutions, agencies, and programs; (b) The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston; (c) The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas; (d)

The University of Texas Medical School at San Antonio; (e) The University of Texas Dental Branch at Houston; (f) The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center; (g) The University of Texas Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences at Houston; The University of Texas Dental School at San Antonio; The University of Texas Medical School at Houston; The University of Texas Health Science Center–South Texas and its component institutions; and The University of Texas School of Public Health at Houston (Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 1, Chapter 5, Subchapter A, Rule §5.3, 2003).

The Accountability system is an interactive, online data collection tool designed to track performance on critical measures such as participation, excellence, success, and research. The system is modeled on *Closing the Gaps by 2015*, Texas' higher education plan that contains data scholars may use to generate queries, reports, and statistics regarding higher education (THECB, 2012b). Health occupational data in this study were available for the state's nine health-related institutions (Texas Higher Accountability System, n.d).

Data were collected using the interactive access feature of the Higher Education Accountability System. Specifically, the following variables from the Participation and Success categories were downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis: (a) Health-related Institutions, (b) Health-related Undergraduate Degrees, (c) Health-related Certificates, (d) Health-related Bachelor degrees. Further, degree data were delineated by Hispanic students for each of the fiscal years between 2000 and 2012. Following the download of data into an Excel file, the data were imported into the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)* for analysis.

Prior to conducting inferential statistical procedures, the data for each research question for each year were examined using standardized skewness coefficients and kurtosis coefficients. Thirteen of the 16 standardized coefficients were within the range of normality, +/- 3 (Onwuegbuzie & Daniel, 2002). Therefore, parametric paired samples *t*-tests were the most appropriate statistical procedure for the normally distributed data.

## **Results**

### **Hispanic Undergraduate Enrollment**

From the fall of 2000 through the fall of 2012, 7,655 Hispanic students were enrolled in undergraduate health-related degrees at Texas health-related institutions. Throughout the 13-year period, the number of Hispanic students enrolled in undergraduate health-related degree programs increased. A slight decline, however, was observed in the fall of 2005 through the fall of 2008 with a recovery and upward trend beginning in the fall of 2009 continuing through the fall of 2012. A detailed listing of the number of Hispanic students enrolled by fall semester as well as the mean number of students by institution is presented in Table 1.



Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics for the Number of Hispanic Students Enrolled in Health-Related Undergraduate Degrees at Texas Health-Related Institutions by Fall Semester*

Fall Semester	Total Hispanic Enrollment	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
2000	514	30.00	64.25	98.65
2001	540	32.00	67.50	112.28
2002	595	37.50	74.38	117.57
2003	592	39.00	74.00	114.74
2004	535	36.50	66.88	97.25
2005	475	36.00	59.38	78.25
2006	461	37.50	57.63	73.85
2007	471	40.50	58.87	74.27
2008	541	48.00	67.63	87.18
2009	608	56.00	76.00	92.62
2010	698	67.50	87.25	95.51
2011	772	70.50	96.50	111.19
2012	853	50.00	106.62	127.86

*Note.* Eight health-related institutions provided data for each of these fall semesters.

The total undergraduate enrollment in health-related undergraduate degrees from the 2000 fall semester to the 2012 fall semester was 37,137, and Hispanic student enrollment for this period was 7,655. The number of students increased in both the total and the Hispanic student populations with slight decreases in the 2004 through 2007 fall semesters. In 2008, the overall student population increased more than the Hispanic student population, yet both groups experienced a continued upward trajectory.

With regard to the number of Hispanic students enrolled in undergraduate degree programs, a statistically significant difference was not present,  $t(7) = -1.43, p = .196$ . Although not statistically significant, the average number of Hispanic students enrolled in these undergraduate degree programs in Texas health-related institutions increased from the 2000-2001 to the 2011-2013 year. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2  
*Descriptive Statistics for the Average Number of Hispanic Students Enrolled in Undergraduate Degree Programs at Texas Health-Related Institutions for the Fall Semester 2000 and the Fall Semester 2012*

Fall Semester	<i>n</i> of Institutions	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
2000	8	64.25	98.65
2012	8	106.62	127.86

Figure 1 depicts the mean number for undergraduate Hispanic students. The mean number of undergraduate Hispanic students almost doubled from the fall of 2000 to the fall of 2012.

This difference represents an increase of 70.0% over this period. Yet as previously mentioned this difference was not determined to be statistically significant.

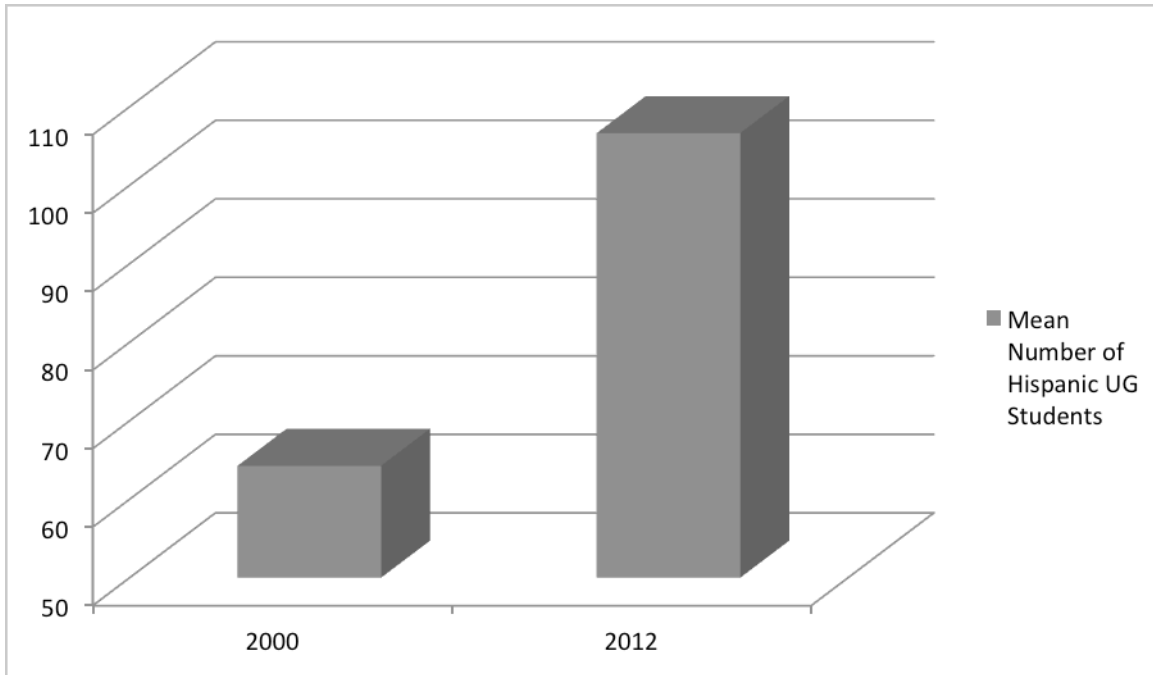


Figure 1. Mean number of Hispanic students enrolled in undergraduate degrees at Texas health-related institutions.

Regarding the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled in undergraduate degree programs in Texas, a statistically significant difference was not present,  $t(6) = -1.24, p = .26$ . Although not statistically significant, the average percentage of Hispanic students enrolled increased from the fall of 2000 through the fall of 2012. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics for the Percentage of Hispanic Students Enrolled in Undergraduate Degree Programs at Texas Health-Related Institutions for the Fall Semester 2000 and the Fall Semester 2012*

Fall Semesters	<i>n</i> of Institutions	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
2000	7	14.00%	0.18%
2012	7	16.99%	0.10%

Despite the lack of statistical significance, the mean percentage of undergraduate Hispanic students increased almost three percentage points from the fall of 2000 through the fall of 2012. The data for undergraduate Hispanic students are from seven institutions and do not include many institutions where this segment of the population may be increasing such as community colleges. Figure 2 depicts the mean average percentage of undergraduate Hispanic students.

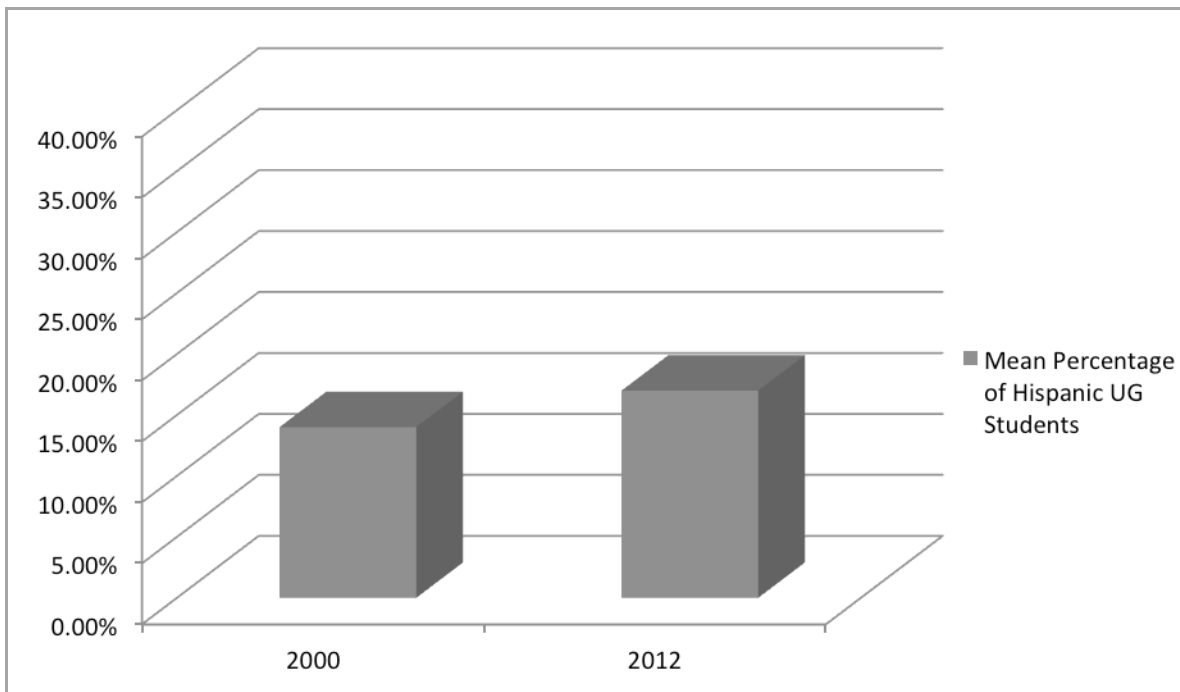


Figure 2. Mean percentage of Hispanic students enrolled in undergraduate degrees at Texas health-related institutions for the fall of 2000 and the fall of 2012.

### Health-Related Degrees Awarded

From the fiscal year 2000 through the fiscal year 2012, 4,987 certificates were awarded at Texas health-related institutions, and 925 were awarded to Hispanic students. Throughout the 13-year period, the number of Hispanic students receiving health-related certificates increased. However, a slight decline was observed in the 2004 through the 2006 fiscal years with a recovery and upward trend until fiscal year 2012. A detailed listing of the number certificates awarded to Hispanic students by fiscal year as well as the mean number of certificates awarded by institution is presented in Table 4. The number of certificates awarded increased for the total enrollment and the Hispanic student populations. The lowest year following the initial fiscal year 2000 was fiscal year 2009 with only 36 degrees awarded to Hispanic students.

Table 4

*Descriptive Statistics for the Number of Health-Related Certificates Awarded to Hispanic Students at Texas Health-Related Institutions by Fiscal Year*

Fiscal Year	Total Hispanic Health-Related Certificates	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
2000	22	0.00	3.14	5.43
2001	78	0.50	9.75	21.90
2002	96	0.50	12.00	28.46

2003	87	1.50	10.88	24.84
2004	64	0.50	8.00	16.55
2005	65	0.50	8.13	16.78
2006	67	1.50	8.38	19.67
2007	90	1.50	11.25	28.61
2008	69	1.50	8.63	20.80
2009	36	1.50	4.50	10.35
2010	101	3.50	12.63	27.78
2011	81	1.50	10.13	22.36
2012	69	2.00	8.63	16.73

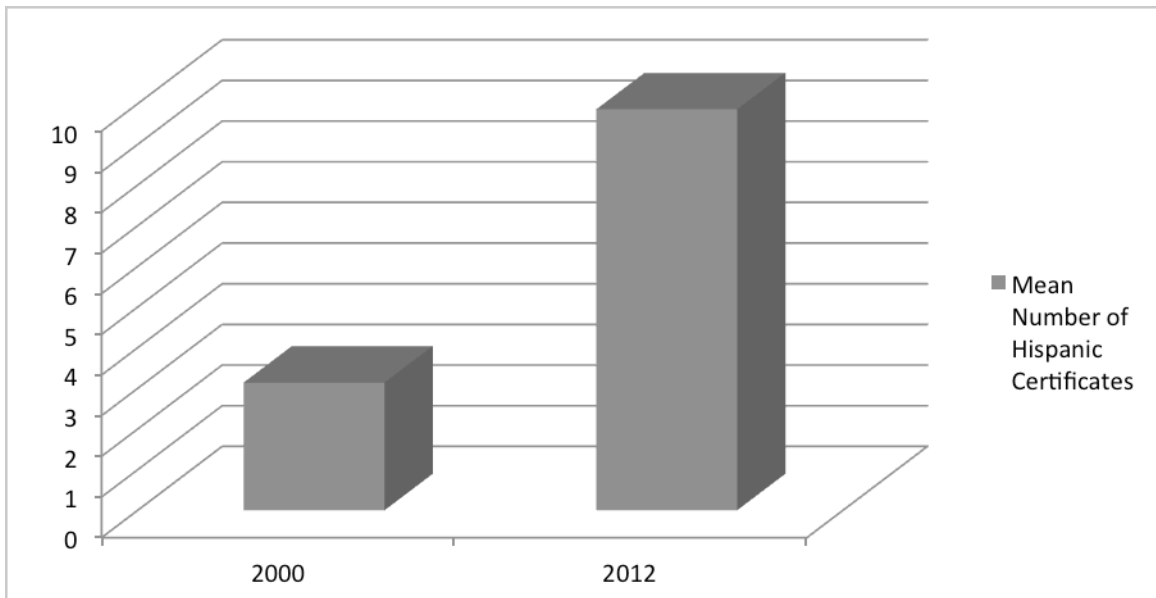
*Note.* Seven health-related institutions provided data for each of these fiscal years.

A statistically significant difference was not present,  $t(7) = -1.33$ ,  $p = .233$ . Although not statistically significant, the average number certificates awarded to Hispanic students at Texas health-related institutions increased from the fiscal year 2000 to fiscal year 2012. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 5.

Table 5  
*Descriptive Statistics for the Number of Certificates Awarded to Hispanic Students at Texas Health-Related Institutions for Fiscal Year 2000 and Fiscal Year 2012*

Fiscal Year	<i>n</i> of Institutions	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
2000	7	3.14	2.05
2012	7	8.63	6.68

Despite the lack of statistical significance, the mean number of certificates awarded to Hispanic students more than tripled from fiscal year 2000 to fiscal year 2012. Although a difference was present, Hispanic enrollment has not increased by an amount needed to be reflective of the population increase (U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics, and Statistics Administration, 2011; Wright, 2008). Figure 3 depicts the mean number of certificates awarded to Hispanic students.



*Figure 3.* Mean number of certificates awarded to Hispanic students at Texas health-related institutions for fiscal year 2000 and fiscal year 2012.

From the 2000 through the 2012 fiscal years, 18,564 bachelor degrees were awarded at Texas health-related institutions, and 3,499 of these bachelor degrees were awarded to Hispanic students. Throughout the 13-year period, the number of Hispanic students receiving health-related bachelor degrees increased. However, fluctuations were observed in the fiscal year 2004 through the fiscal year 2009 with a recovery and upward trend until fiscal year 2012. A detailed listing of the number bachelor degrees awarded to Hispanic students by fiscal year as well as the mean number of bachelor degrees awarded by institution is presented in Table 6.

Regarding bachelor degrees awarded, a statistically significant difference was not present,  $t(6) = -1.33$ ,  $p = .233$ . Although not statistically significant, the average number bachelor degrees awarded to Hispanic students at Texas health-related institutions increased from the fiscal year 2000 through fiscal year 2012. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 7.

Despite the lack of statistical significance, the mean number of bachelor degrees awarded to Hispanic students almost tripled from fiscal year 2000 to fiscal year 2012. This difference represents an increase of approximately 214.0% during this period. Figure 4 depicts the mean number for bachelor degrees awarded to Hispanic students.

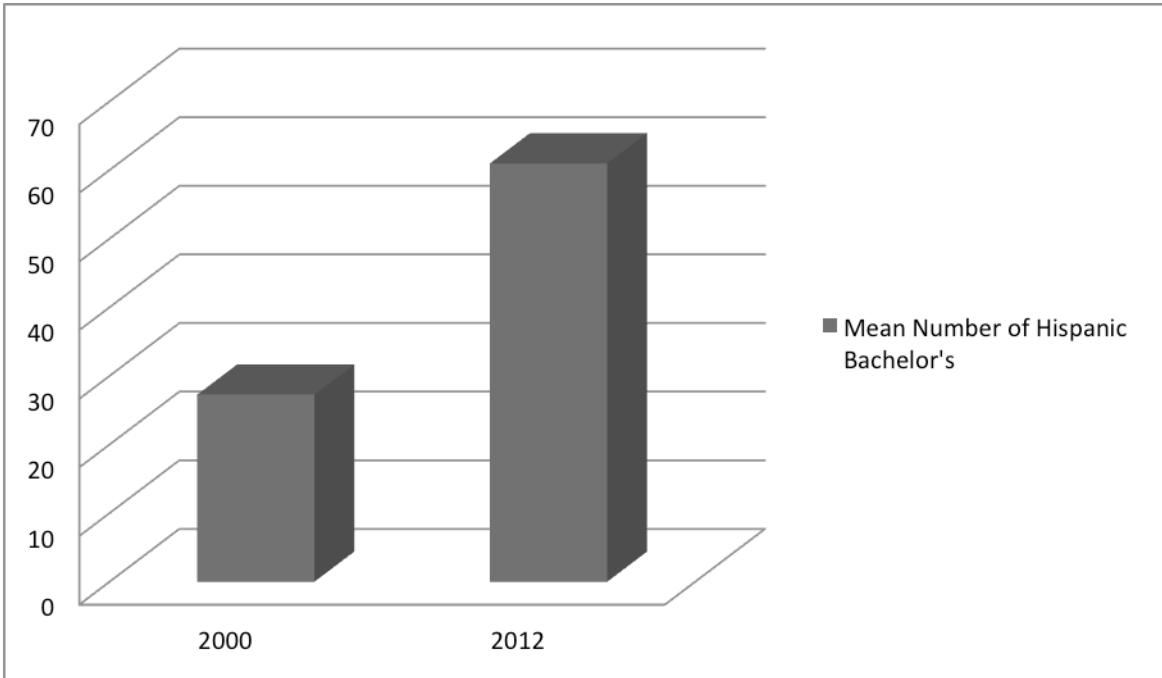
Table 6  
*Descriptive Statistics for the Number of Health-Related Bachelor Degrees Awarded to Hispanic Students at Texas Health-Related Institutions by Fiscal Year*

Fiscal Year	Total Hispanic Health-Related Bachelor Degrees	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
2000	191	8.00	27.29	38.90
2001	196	9.00	24.50	33.86
2002	180	12.50	22.50	32.92
2003	194	12.50	24.25	36.78
2004	233	14.50	29.13	43.31
2005	260	17.00	32.50	42.77
2006	228	19.50	28.50	32.90
2007	264	21.00	33.00	39.20
2008	239	17.50	29.88	37.79
2009	283	24.50	35.37	42.90
2010	362	28.50	45.25	54.35
2011	414	33.50	51.75	56.77
2012	455	36.50	56.88	65.66

*Note.* Seven health-related institutions provided data for each of these fiscal years.

Table 7  
*Descriptive Statistics for the Number of Bachelor Degrees Awarded to Hispanic Students at Texas Health-Related Institutions for Fiscal Year 2000 and Fiscal Year 2012*

Fiscal Year	<i>n</i> of Institutions	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
2000	7	27.29	39.90
2012	7	56.88	69.79



*Figure 4.* Mean number of bachelor degrees awarded to Hispanic students at Texas health-related institutions for fiscal year 2000 and fiscal year 2012.

### **Percentage of Hispanic Undergraduate Enrollment**

From the 2000 fall semester through the 2012 fall semester, 37,137 students were enrolled in undergraduate health-related degrees at Texas health-related institutions, and Hispanic student enrollment for this period was 7,655. Throughout the 13-year period, the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled in undergraduate health-related degree programs increased. A detailed listing of the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled by fall semester is presented in Table 8.

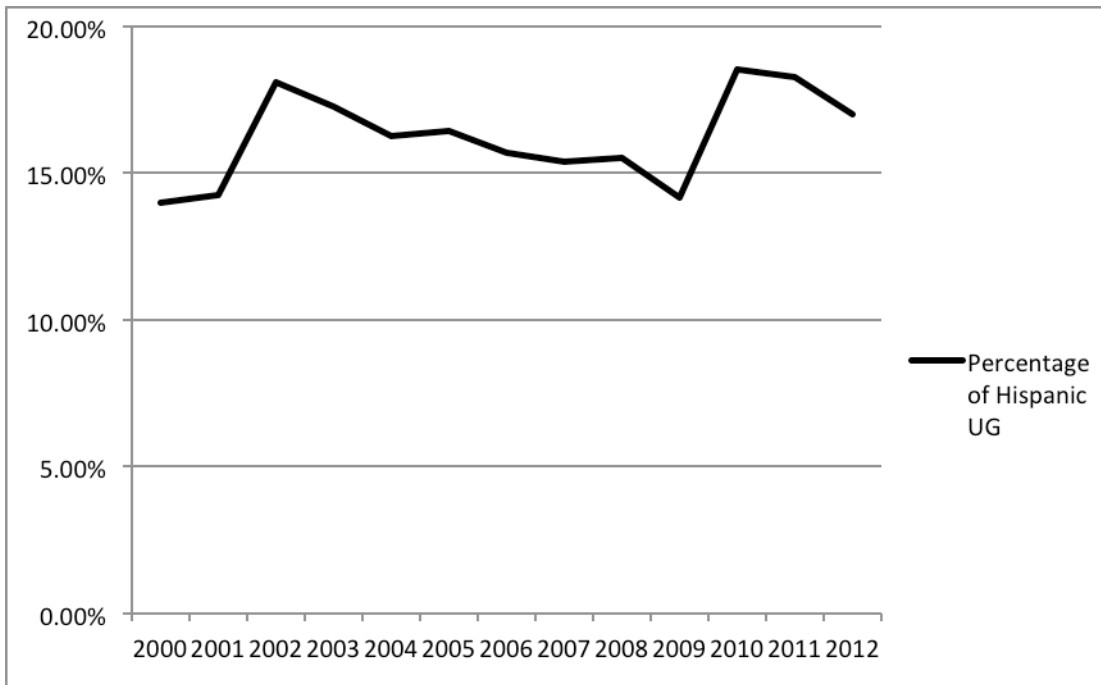
Table 8

*Descriptive Statistics for the Percentage of Hispanic Students Enrolled in Undergraduate Degrees at Texas Health-Related Institutions by Fall Semester*

Fall Semester	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
2000	11.00%	14.00%	0.12%
2001	11.67%	14.25%	0.11%
2002	15.00%	18.10%	0.10%
2003	15.61%	17.26%	0.10%
2004	13.71%	16.25%	0.10%
2005	13.90%	16.43%	0.09%
2006	12.56%	15.71%	0.08%
2007	12.63%	15.39%	0.09%
2008	12.72%	15.51%	0.10%
2009	16.05%	17.48%	0.08%
2010	17.03%	18.56%	0.07%
2011	16.78%	18.29%	0.08%
2012	12.76%	16.99%	0.10%

*Note.* Seven health-related institutions provided data for each of these fall semesters.

Overall, the percentage of Hispanic students increased during this time with two periods of increases followed by declines. The largest increase occurred in the fall to the fall of 2012. The fall semester of 2001 was the semester with the least percentage of students. Figure 5 depicts the change in trends over time.



*Figure 5.* Percentage of Hispanic student enrollment to the total student enrollment in health-related undergraduate degrees for the fall 2000 through fall 2012.



## Percentage of Students Awarded Degrees

From the fiscal year 2000 through the 2012 fiscal year, 4,987 health-related certificates were awarded at Texas health-related institutions, and 925 Hispanic students earned one of these certificates. Throughout the 13-year period, the percentage of Hispanic students receiving certificates increased with several periods of fluctuations. A detailed listing of the percentage of certificates awarded Hispanic students by fiscal year is presented in Table 9.

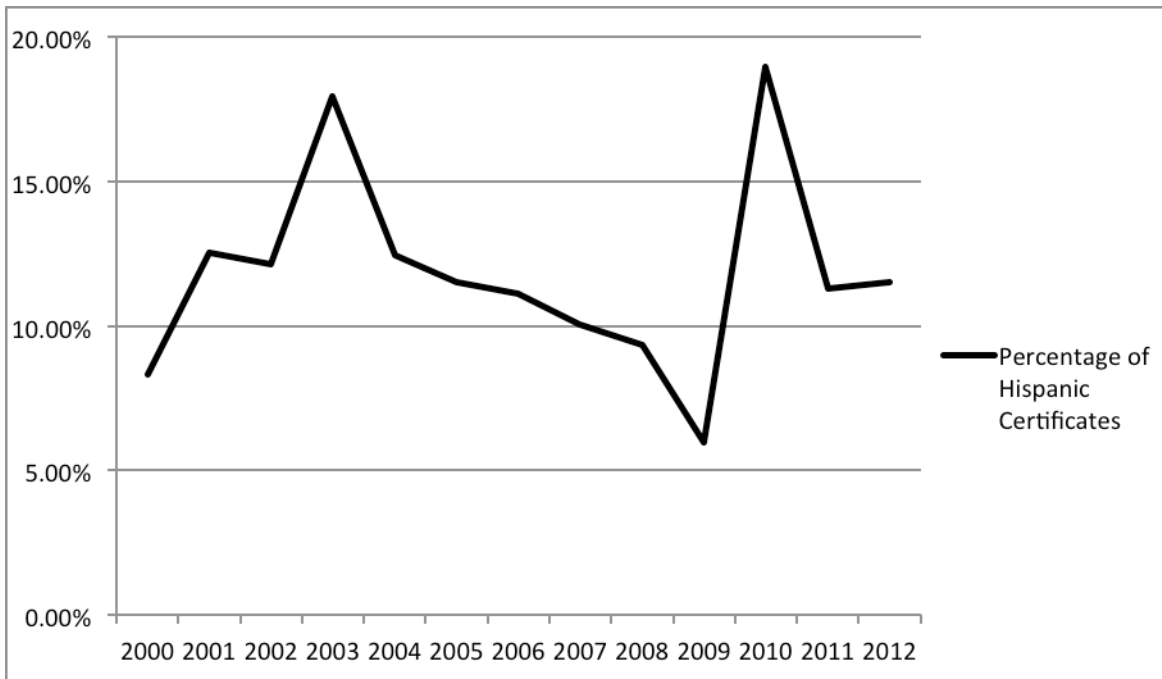
Table 9

*Descriptive Statistics for the Percentage of Health-Related Certificates Awarded to Hispanic Students at Texas Health-Related Institutions by Fiscal Year*

Fiscal Year	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
2000	7.00%	8.36%	0.08%
2001	7.69%	12.57%	0.14%
2002	10.26%	12.14%	0.14%
2003	15.94%	17.95%	0.11%
2004	13.49%	12.48%	0.11%
2005	14.29%	11.51%	0.10%
2006	7.14%	11.15%	0.11%
2007	5.65%	10.08%	0.15%
2008	6.60%	9.34%	0.10%
2009	4.64%	6.01%	0.06%
2010	15.27%	19.00%	0.19%
2011	9.95%	11.29%	0.10%
2012	8.33%	11.51%	0.10%

*Note.* Six health-related institutions provided data for each of these fiscal years.

The largest increase occurred in fiscal year 2003 and fiscal year 2010. Further, the year with the lowest percentage of certificates awarded to Hispanic students was fiscal year 2009 at 6.01%. Figure 6 depicts the trend in percentages over time.



*Figure 6.* Percentage of health-related certificates awarded to Hispanic students from the fiscal year 2000 through the fiscal year 2012.

From the fiscal year 2000 through the fiscal year 2012, health-related bachelor degrees were awarded to 18,564 students at Texas health-related institutions. Hispanic students received 3,499 of those degrees. Throughout the 13-year period, the percentage of Hispanic students receiving bachelor degrees increased with several periods of fluctuations. A detailed listing of the percentage of bachelor degrees awarded Hispanic students by fiscal year is presented in Table 10.

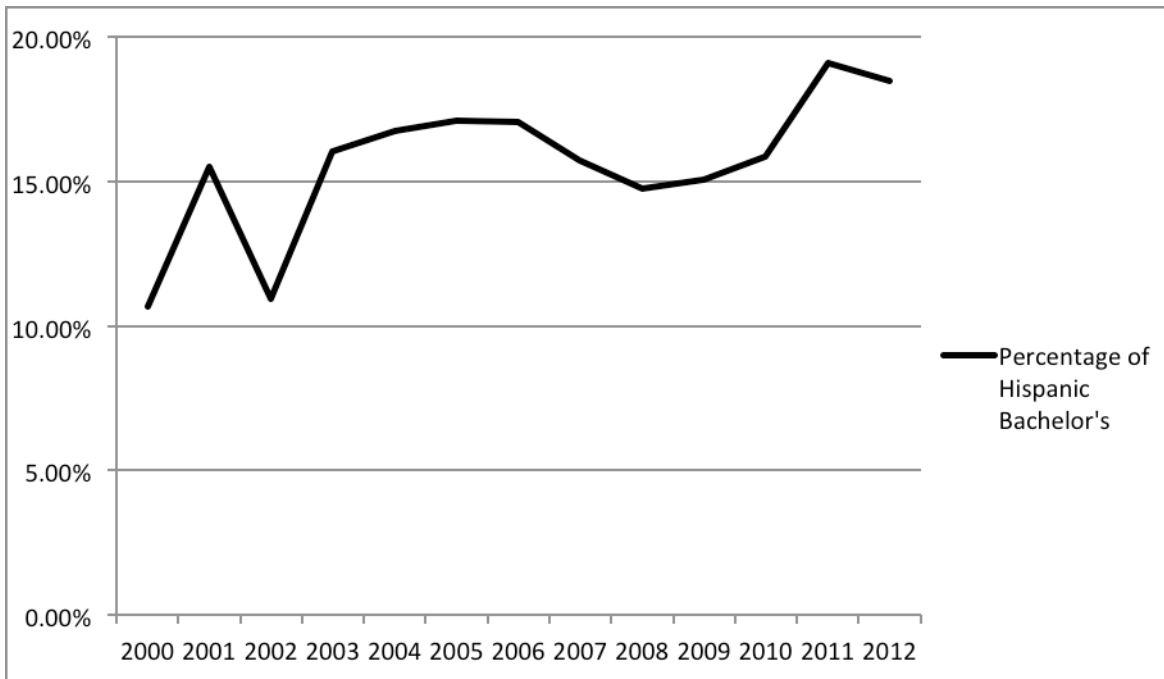
The largest increase occurred in the 2010 and 2011 fiscal years. The two years with the lowest percentage of bachelor degrees awarded to Hispanic students were fiscal year 2000 (10.71%) and fiscal year 2002 at 10.96%. Figure 7 depicts the trend in percentages over time.

Table 10

*Descriptive Statistics for the Percentage of Health-Related Bachelor Degrees Awarded to Hispanic Students at Texas Health-Related Institutions by Fiscal Year*

Fiscal Year	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
2000	7.77%	10.71%	0.09%
2001	13.36%	15.53%	0.09%
2002	9.04%	10.96%	0.12%
2003	13.39%	16.04%	0.11%
2004	12.04%	16.76%	0.11%
2005	14.00%	17.11%	0.09%
2006	14.36%	17.07%	0.10%
2007	13.31%	15.74%	0.08%
2008	11.06%	14.11%	0.09%
2009	11.95%	15.10%	0.09%
2010	16.31%	15.90%	0.10%
2011	17.94%	19.14%	0.08%
2012	15.89%	18.48%	0.10%

*Note.* Six health-related institutions provided data for each of these fiscal years.



*Figure 7.* Percentage of health-related bachelor degrees awarded to Hispanic students from the fiscal year 2000 through the fiscal year 2012.

## Discussion

A goal of this study was to add to the literature by specifically addressing the participation and success of Hispanic students in health-related degrees. The original intent of the study was to examine the participation and success rates of Hispanic students for *all* healthcare programs where data are reported to determine the efficacy of initiatives to decrease disparities in health professions. However, as health-related data available from the Texas Higher Education Accountability System are limited to the nine designated Texas Health-Related Institutions the scale of the study was severely truncated.

When examined as a group or in the context of the Texas Hispanic population increases, meaningful success in most areas appears to be limited. The increase in numbers but not in percentages reflects the natural increase in the Hispanic population. For the increase to be meaningful, an equal increase should be present in the percentage of Hispanic enrollment of the total student population other than what would occur by chance (Gall et al., 2007).

Visually, trends in both enrollment and health-related degrees awarded to Hispanic students over 13 years reveal slight increases overall with areas of fluctuation throughout the period. Noticeable declines following periods of growth occurred in the percentage of Hispanic student undergraduate and master enrollment between the 2004 and 2009 fall semesters. Similarly, trends for percentages of health-related degrees awarded to Hispanic students were relatively unimpressive over the same period with minimal fluctuations.

President Barak Obama (2009) emphasized the importance of college completion and degree attainment in a global economy. In 2011, the publication *Winning the Future: Improving Education for the Latino Community* was released by the White House in recognition of the rapidly increasing Hispanic population and their impact on the national labor force (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Highlighted in this initiative were dire warnings that Hispanics have the lowest attainment of any other group in the United States with 13% holding bachelor degrees and only 4% holding master degrees. Texas State Comptroller Susan Combs (2008) also warned of the potential negative financial impact of the inability of the state to supply skilled workers and a larger, less-educated workforce. However, this problem was evident before 2008. The THECB initiative *Closing the Gaps 2015* was adopted eight years prior, in 2000, as a proactive attempt to eliminate the consequences of an increasing undereducated portion of the state population. Although the Closing the Gaps percentage targets are not expressly for health-related degrees, the participation goal which could be extrapolated for all degree types for Hispanic student was an increase of 2.7% from 2000 to 2015 (THECB, 2010). Participation from the 2000 through 2012 fall semesters increased approximately 3% for undergraduate, 4% for master, 3% for doctoral (statistically significant), less than 2% for medical, and 9% for dental degree programs. Thus, the Closing the Gaps plan goals were met for the majority of health-related degrees, the progress was not a statistically significant one. It would be expected that the efforts and expense of initiatives with the attention of government agencies and warnings of dire economic consequences would result in more substantive change.

To plan and to prepare for the years beyond 2015, the THECB (2013) released the higher education Enrollment Forecast for the years 2013-2020. The forecasts are predicted based on current trends predicting a growth of enrollment in Texas public 2-year and 4-year institutions from 1.44 million enrollees in 2012 to a predicted 1.58 million in 2020. An

interesting area of projected growth in enrollment is in 2-year colleges, which are expected to outpace university enrollment. The forecast specifically mentions the lack of projections for health-related institutions because their enrollments are more state policy driven than tied to state population. Beneficial research would be the re-examination of measures from the current study when data become available.

Hispanic student success in higher education is based on four constructs for success: technical support, emotional and moral support, financial support, and mentorship support (Valverde & Rodriguez, 2002). In the original research for the theory, for healthcare measures, successful Hispanic students identified the roles of mentors from the healthcare community as important factors for their continued success. Thus, researchers should focus on which constructs are important for Texas students.

Results within this study were consistent with the findings of Cason et al. (2008), Grumbach and Mendoza (2008), and Smedley, Butler, and Bristow (2004) in that Hispanic students are underrepresented in the health professions. Furthermore, the current study findings are consistent with Fry's (2011) assertion that college completion rates remain one of the biggest disparities between White and Hispanic students. Findings were consistent with Santiago (2010) and Gardner (2011) in that Hispanic enrollment and number of degrees are increasing in general. However, the increases are not enough to attain the goals set for *Closing the Gaps 2015* initiative.

With the limited data reporting required by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, it is difficult to assess state progress accurately with respect to Hispanic student enrollment and completion in health-related degrees. Therefore, accountability does not exist for benchmarks and measures that are not being assessed. As data were not reported for almost 1.2 million students, the majority of which are community college students where Hispanic students would be more accurately accounted, it is imperative that the state make available all data indicators and measures for each reporting institution. Both nursing and allied health professions were specifically identified as critical areas for increasing minority representation in the *Closing the Gaps 2015* initiative. Currently, finding accurate answers to straightforward questions regarding Hispanic student success and access in health care professions is not likely to happen with the publically published data. Instead, data are presented in a puzzle fashion where the pieces do not match; hence, limiting the ability to determine the larger picture. From reporting measures, to initiatives, state policy makers and higher education administrators owe the taxpayers of Texas an accurate assessment of state funded health-related programs to ensure the state's fiscal health, quality of health services, and labor force stability.

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# High School Size and White Student College Readiness: A Statewide, Multiyear Analysis

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*We analyzed 5 years of Texas statewide data on high school size and college readiness in English Language Arts, math, and in both subjects for White students. Using Greeney and Slate's (2012) criteria, large-size high schools had over 1,500 students, medium-size high schools had 401 to 1,500 students, and small-size high schools had enrollments under 400. White students enrolled in large-size high schools had statistically significantly higher college readiness rates in English Language Arts, math, and in both subjects than White students enrolled in medium-size and small-size high schools for each of the 5 years examined in this study. Effect sizes were moderate for all 3 areas and for all 5 years. As such, support was provided for the economies of scale theoretical framework. Implications for policymakers and recommendations for research are present.*

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship of high school size on the Texas Education Agency College-ready Graduates indicator for White high school students. The College-ready Graduates indicator is one of six indicators recognized by the Texas Education Agency in its college readiness definition. For purposes of this study, we examined the College-ready Graduates indicators for English Language Arts, Mathematics, and both subjects combined for Texas White high school students for the 2006-2007, 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010, and 2010-2011 school years.

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## **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is to provide empirical information to school districts, superintendents, and school boards regarding the relationship of high school size to the Texas Education Agency College-ready Graduate indicators for White students. Results from this investigation may assist educational leaders and policymakers in planning facilities that might enhance student preparation for college. Although a substantial body of literature on school size is available (e.g., Chavez, 2002; Greeney, 2010; Lee & Smith, 1997; Stiefel, Berne, Iatarola, & Fruchter, 2000; Zoda et al., 2011), research on school size and college readiness is quite limited (Morris & Slate, 2012). Accordingly, more investigation is needed (Conley, 2007; NAASP, 2004; Trusty & Niles, 2003; Venezia et al., 2003).

## **Theoretical Framework**

In previous studies, two theoretical frameworks (i.e., economies of scale and student connectedness) have been used to describe the relationships between school size and student performance (e.g., Greeney, 2010; Riha, 2011; Zoda et al., 2011). Given the recent studies in which student performance has been statistically significantly better in larger-size schools (e.g., Greeney, 2010; Greeney & Slate, 2012; Riha et al., 2013; Zoda et al., 2011a, 2011b) than in smaller-size schools, we relied on the economies of scale theoretical framework for this investigation. The economies of scale theory was originally designed as an economics model to describe the reduction in costs that arise due to expansion (Sullivan & Sheffrin, 2003). The theory evolved in education as a way to predict the cost efficiency of achieving a particular output based on school size (Bowles & Bosworth, 2002). Larger schools are expected to provide more opportunities for students in a plethora of student production measures. Economies of scale is an important theory for school leaders to consider in facility planning that will meet not only budgetary demands but also the student production values of college readiness.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions were examined for the 2006-2007, 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010, and 2010-2011 school years: (a) What is the effect of school size on the percent of White College-ready Graduates who score at or above the criterion score in English/Language Arts?; (b) What is the effect of school size on the percent of White College-ready Graduates who score at or above the criterion score in mathematics?; and (c) What is the effect of school size on the percent of White College-ready Graduates who score at or above the criterion score in both subjects?

## **Method**

### **Selection of Participants**

Data used for analyses were obtained from the Texas Education Agency Academic Excellence Indicator System database. The sample consisted of Texas public high schools that included Grades 9 to 12 students in the 2006-2007, 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010, and 2010-2011

school years. Archival data collected from the Texas Education Agency Academic Excellence Indicator System were student enrollment; percentage of White College-ready Graduates in English Language Arts, percentage of White College-ready Graduates in math, and percentage of White College-ready Graduates in both subjects combined. Schools that had nontraditional configurations (i.e., academy, charter, or alternative) were excluded from the analyses. Accordingly, a sample size of approximately 1,000 high schools in the state of Texas was used to determine the relationship between school size and the College-ready Graduates indicators.

The school size criterion established by Greeney and Slate (2012) was applied for the size categories. Greeney and Slate (2012) recommended classifying schools into three size categories based upon the frequency distribution of students enrolled in high schools in the state of Texas. The three size categories were large-size, medium-size, and small-size. Large-size schools enrolled over 1,500 students, medium-size schools enrolled 401 to 1,500 students, and small-size schools had enrollments under 400.

### **College Readiness**

The Texas Education Agency (2006) first collected the college readiness information in 2006 as a response to the Governor's order to track information that related to college preparedness of students graduating from Texas public high schools. Each of the three College-ready Graduate values (i.e., English Language Arts, mathematics, and both subjects) are presented as a percentage of the school's high school graduates who met or exceeded the criterion score on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, SAT, or ACT. Calculations for each value are derived using the following formula: the number of graduates who met the criterion divided by the total number of graduates who had results to evaluate. The College-ready Graduate indicator is unique in that the indicator includes scores on all three examinations (i.e., TAKS, SAT, and ACT), is based on prior year graduates, has a measure for both subjects combined, and is tied to the district and campus where the student graduated.

## **Results**

Before calculating an inferential statistical procedure to address the three research questions in this investigation, the underlying assumptions of an analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedure were checked. The data for the three college-readiness indicators for the 5 years of data were determined to be largely normally distributed (Onwuegbuzie & Daniel, 2002). Moreover, the assumption verified by the Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variance for the three college-readiness indicators for the 5 years of data was met. Accordingly, a parametric ANOVA procedure was justified (Field, 2009).

### **Results for English Language Arts College Readiness**

For the 2006-2007 school year, the ANOVA resulted in a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 877) = 27.20, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in White students' college readiness rates in English Language Arts between large-size high schools and small-size and medium-size high schools. College readiness rates in English Language Arts for

White students in large-size high schools were 9.68 and 6.28 points higher than the college readiness rates in English Language Arts for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. College readiness rates in English Language Arts for White students in medium-size high schools were 3.40 points higher than in small-size schools. Delineated in Table 1 are the descriptive statistics for the English Language Arts college readiness rates of White students in Texas high schools by school size for the 2006-2007 school year.

Regarding the 2007-2008 school year, the ANOVA resulted in a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 897) = 51.64, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in White students' college readiness rates in English Language Arts between high school sizes. College readiness rates in English Language Arts for White students in large-size high schools were 13.21 and 6.88 points higher than the college readiness rates in English Language Arts for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. Additionally, White students who were enrolled in medium-size high schools had higher college readiness rates in English Language Arts than White students in small-size high schools by 6.33 points. Depicted in Table 1 is a clear stair step in performance, with increases in White student college readiness in English Language Arts as school size increased.

Concerning the 2008-2009 school year, the ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 899) = 57.48, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in White students' college readiness rates in English Language Arts between large-size high schools and small-size and medium-size high schools. College readiness rates in English Language Arts for White students in large-size high schools were 11.21 and 6.68 points higher than the college readiness rates in English Language Arts for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. College readiness rates in English Language Arts for White students in medium-size high schools were 4.53 points higher than in small-size schools. Represented in Table 1 are the descriptive statistics for the English Language Arts college readiness rates of White students in Texas high schools by school size for the 2008-2009 school year.

With respect to the 2009-2010 school year, the ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 893) = 53.81, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in White students' college readiness rates in English Language Arts between large-size high schools and small-size and medium-size high schools. White students' college readiness rates in English Language Arts in large-size high schools were 10.57 and 5.99 points higher than the college readiness rates in English Language Arts for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. College readiness rates in English Language Arts for White students in medium-size high schools were 4.58 points higher than in small-size schools. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the English Language Arts college readiness rates of White students in Texas high schools by school size for the 2009-2010 school year.

Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics for White Students' College Readiness Rates in ELA by School Size for the 2006-2007, 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010, and 2010-2011 School Years*

School Year and School Size	<i>n</i> of schools	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>2006-2007</b>			
Small-size	314	48.78	18.07
Medium-size	277	52.18	14.89
Large-size	289	58.46	15.45
<b>2007-2008</b>			
Small-size	323	46.06	17.52
Medium-size	278	52.38	16.49
Large-size	299	59.27	14.33
<b>2008-2009</b>			
Small-size	317	59.10	14.82
Medium-size	281	63.63	12.41
Large-size	304	70.31	11.69
<b>2009-2010</b>			
Small-size	315	62.11	14.35
Medium-size	278	66.69	12.16
Large-size	303	72.67	11.21
<b>2010-2011</b>			
Small-size	327	66.94	14.29
Medium-size	259	73.21	11.07
Large-size	307	76.52	11.74

For the 2010-2011 school year, the ANOVA resulted in a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 890) = 47.64, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in

White students' college readiness rates in English Language Arts between large-size high schools and small-size and medium-size high schools. College readiness rates in English Language Arts for White students in large-size high schools were 9.58 and 3.31 points higher than the college readiness rates in English Language Arts for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. College readiness rates in English Language Arts for White students in medium-size high schools were 6.27 points higher than in small-size schools. Delineated in Table 1 are the descriptive statistics for the English Language Arts college readiness rates of White students in Texas high schools by school size for the 2010-2011 school year. The college readiness rates in English Language Arts for this school year were higher than the college readiness rates in English Language Arts for the previous 4 school years.

### **Results for Math College Readiness Analyses**

With respect to the 2006-2007 school year, the ANOVA resulted in a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 876) = 34.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in White students' college readiness rates in math between large-size high schools and small-size and medium-size high schools. As delineated in Table 2, the college readiness rates in math for White students in large-size high schools were 9.70 and 6.86 points higher than the college readiness rates in math for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. Small-size and medium-size high schools had comparable college readiness rates in math for White students in the 2006-2007 school year.

Regarding the 2007-2008 school year, the ANOVA resulted in a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 899) = 33.22, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in White students' college readiness rates in math for 2007-2008 between the high school sizes. College readiness rates in math for White students in large-size high schools were 9.91 and 5.93 points higher than the college readiness rates in math for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. Additionally, White students who were enrolled in medium-size high schools had higher college readiness rates in math than White students in small-size high schools by 3.98 points. As noted in Table 2, a clear stair step in student performance was present for this school year, with higher college readiness rates in math as school size increased.

Concerning the 2008-2009 school year, the ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 893) = 32.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in White students' college readiness rates in math between large-size high schools and small-size and medium-size high schools. As revealed in Table 2, the college readiness rates in math for White students in large-size high schools were 8.79 and 4.39 points higher than the college readiness rates in math for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. College readiness rates in math for White students in medium-size high schools were 4.40 points higher than in small-size schools.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for White Students' College Readiness Rates in Math by School Size for the 2006-2007, 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010, and 2010-2011 School Years*

School Year and School Size	<i>n</i> of schools	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>2006-2007</b>			
Small-size	313	54.44	16.74
Medium-size	277	57.29	13.27
Large-size	289	64.15	13.09
<b>2007-2008</b>			
Small-size	324	56.25	17.70
Medium-size	278	60.23	14.36
Large-size	300	66.16	12.97
<b>2008-2009</b>			
Small-size	314	60.38	16.18
Medium-size	280	64.78	11.77
Large-size	302	69.17	11.62
<b>2009-2010</b>			
Small-size	319	61.50	14.21
Medium-size	278	65.51	11.92
Large-size	306	70.90	11.70
<b>2010-2011</b>			
Small-size	327	63.38	16.19
Medium-size	265	71.68	11.20
Large-size	309	74.97	12.02

For the 2009-2010 school year, the ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 900) = 42.94, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in

White students' college readiness rates in math between large-size high schools and small-size and medium-size high schools. As delineated in Table 2, White students' college readiness rates in math in large-size high schools were 9.40 and 5.39 points higher than the college readiness rates in math for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. College readiness rates in math for White students in medium-size high schools were 4.01 points higher than in small-size schools.

With respect to the 2010-2011 school year, the ANOVA resulted in a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 898) = 62.41, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in White students' college readiness rates in math between large-size high schools and small-size and medium-size high schools. College readiness rates in math for White students in large-size high schools were 11.59 and 3.29 points higher than the college readiness rates in math for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. College readiness rates in math for White students in medium-size high schools were 8.30 points higher than in small-size schools. Presented in Table 2 are the descriptive statistics for the math college readiness rates of White students in Texas high schools by school size for the 2010-2011 school year.

### **Results for College Readiness in Both Subjects**

Regarding the 2006-2007 school year, the ANOVA resulted in a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 876) = 37.55, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in White students' college readiness rates in both subjects between large-size high schools and small-size and medium-size high schools. As revealed in Table 3, the college readiness rates in both subjects for White students in large-size high schools were 10.87 and 7.08 points higher than the college readiness rates in both subjects for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. College readiness rates in both subjects for White students in medium-size high schools were 3.80 points higher than in small-size schools.

Concerning the 2007-2008 school year, the ANOVA resulted in a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 897) = 63.69, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in White students' college readiness rates in both subjects between the high school sizes. College readiness rates in both subjects for White students in large-size high schools were 14.16 and 8.01 points higher than the college readiness rates in both subjects for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. Additionally, White students who were enrolled in medium-size high schools had higher college readiness rates in both subjects than White students in small-size high schools by 6.15 points. Presented in Table 3 is a stair step in college readiness rates, with White students in large-size schools having higher college readiness rates than White students in medium-size and White students in medium-size schools having higher college readiness rates than White students in small-size schools.



Table 3  
*Descriptive Statistics for White Students' College Readiness Rates in Both Subjects by School Size for the 2006-2007, 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010, and 2010-2011 School Years*

School Year and School Size	<i>n</i> of schools	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>2006-2007</b>			
Small-size	313	35.86	16.55
Medium-size	277	39.66	13.98
Large-size	289	46.74	15.84
<b>2007-2008</b>			
Small-size	323	34.77	16.74
Medium-size	278	40.92	15.59
Large-size	299	48.93	14.45
<b>2008-2009</b>			
Small-size	311	45.26	15.50
Medium-size	281	50.49	12.67
Large-size	304	57.34	13.05
<b>2009-2010</b>			
Small-size	319	47.70	15.59
Medium-size	278	52.90	13.61
Large-size	306	60.06	13.38
<b>2010-2011</b>			
Small-size	328	52.59	16.06
Medium-size	266	60.91	13.45
Large-size	309	65.57	13.55

For the 2008-2009 school year, the ANOVA yielded a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 893) = 58.88, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in

White students' college readiness rates in both subjects between large-size high schools and small-size and medium-size high schools. College readiness rates in both subjects for White students in large-size high schools were 12.08 and 6.85 points higher than the college readiness rates in both subjects for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. College readiness rates in both subjects for White students in medium-size high schools were 5.23 points higher than in small-size schools. As noted in Table 3, White students were progressively more college ready in both subjects as the size of the school increased. Furthermore, more than 50% of White students were college ready in both subjects at the medium-size and large-size schools.

With respect to the 2009-2010 school year, the ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 900) = 58.93, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in White students' college readiness rates in both subjects between large-size high schools and small-size and medium-size high schools. As delineated in Table 3, White students' college readiness rates in both subjects in large-size high schools were 12.36 and 7.15 points higher than the college readiness rates in both subjects for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. College readiness rates in both subjects for White students in medium-size high schools were 5.20 points higher than in small-size schools. White students were progressively more college ready in both subjects as the school size category increased. As such, a stair step effect was present in White students' college readiness rates in both subjects.

For the 2010-2011 school year, the ANOVA resulted in a statistically significant difference,  $F(2, 900) = 65.72, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$ , a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). Scheffé post hoc procedures revealed that statistically significant differences were present in White students' college readiness rates in both subjects between large-size high schools and small-size and medium-size high schools. College readiness rates in both subjects for White students in large-size high schools were 12.98 and 4.66 points higher than the college readiness rates in both subjects for White students in small-size and medium-size high schools, respectively. College readiness rates in both subjects for White students in medium-size high schools were 8.32 points higher than in small-size schools. Presented in Table 3 are the descriptive statistics for the college readiness rates in both subjects of White students in Texas high schools by school size for the 2010-2011 school year.

## Discussion

White students attending large-size high schools had higher college readiness rates in ELA than did White students in small-size high schools during the 2006-2007, 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010, and 2010-2011 school years. Similarly, White students attending large-size high schools obtained higher college readiness rates in ELA than their peers in medium-size high schools during the 5 years analyzed. College readiness rates in ELA for White students in medium-size high schools were higher than the college readiness rates in ELA of White students enrolled in small-size high schools. Over the 5 years examined in this study, a stair step increase in college readiness rates in ELA was clearly present for White students. Represented in Table 4 is a summary of the college readiness rates in ELA for White students by school year.

Table 4

*Univariate ANOVA Results for White Students' College Readiness Rates in ELA, Math, and in Both Subjects by School Year as a Function of School Size*

Subject Area and School Year	Result	$\eta^2$	Effect Size Range	School Size with Highest College Readiness Rate
<b>ELA</b>				
2006-2007	Significant	.06	Medium	Large
2007-2008	Significant	.10	Medium	Large
2008-2009	Significant	.11	Medium	Large
2009-2010	Significant	.11	Medium	Large
2010-2011	Significant	.10	Medium	Large
<b>Math</b>				
2006-2007	Significant	.07	Medium	Large
2007-2008	Significant	.07	Medium	Large
2008-2009	Significant	.07	Medium	Large
2009-2010	Significant	.09	Medium	Large
2010-2011	Significant	.12	Medium	Large
<b>Both Subjects</b>				
2006-2007	Significant	.08	Medium	Large
2007-2008	Significant	.12	Medium	Large
2008-2009	Significant	.12	Medium	Large
2009-2010	Significant	.12	Medium	Large
2010-2011	Significant	.13	Medium	Large

White students who were enrolled in large-size high schools attained higher rates in college readiness in math than their peers in small-size high schools during the 5 years of data analyzed. Similarly, White students in large-size high schools had higher college readiness rates in math than their White peers in medium-size high schools. White students attending medium-size high schools obtained higher rates in college readiness in math than White students attending small-size high schools for 4 of the 5 years, with the exception occurring in the 2006-2007 school year. A summary of the college readiness rates in math for White students by school year is presented in Table 4.

White students attending large-size high schools achieved higher college readiness rates in both subjects than White students in small-size high schools for the 2006-2007, 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010, and 2010-2011 school years. Similarly, White students enrolled in large-size high schools had higher college readiness rates in both subjects than their peers in medium-size high schools during the 5 years examined. College readiness rates were higher in both subjects for White students in medium-size high schools than White students in small-size high schools. Presented in Table 4 is a summary of the college readiness rates in both subjects for White students by school year.

Studies conducted on the financial benefits realized by the construction of larger schools have demonstrated the cost savings associated with larger facilities (Andrews, Duncombe, & Yinger, 2002; Dodson & Garrett, 2004; Fox, 1981; Nelson, 1985). Small school advocates claim that higher achievement was realized in smaller schools (Cotton, 1996; Howley, 1995; Kober, 2006). However, academic achievement rates on standardized

tests in Texas indicated higher achievement rates in larger schools at the elementary (Zoda et al., 2011), middle (Riha, 2011; Riha et al., 2013a, 2013b), and high school levels (Greeney, 2010; Greeney & Slate, 2012). The current study about college readiness rates and school size further adds validation to claims that larger-size schools are academically more efficient than small-size schools in Texas. Some states have incentivized the buildings of larger schools (Lawrence et al., 2002). In lieu of the findings, Texas legislators could consider similar actions in their attempts to conform to standards that promote a college-ready education in Texas. Further studies are warranted regarding the effect of school size on student college readiness to expand the existing body of knowledge.

Finally, some district administrators are faced with the decision to consolidate small schools. Advocates for small schools voice concerns that the consolidation of several small schools into one large school will depersonalize education and undermine community identity, resulting in lower student achievement (Cotton, 2001; Krysiak & DiBella, 2002). Little convincing evidence exists regarding the effect of school consolidation on school and student outcomes (Andrews et al., 2002). Although findings delineated herein support the presence of larger high schools, mixed methods studies might be useful to compare factors associated with student college readiness before and after consolidation of small schools.

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# Negotiating the Double Mandate: Mapping Ethical Conflict Experienced by Practicing Educational Leaders

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*The purpose of this study was to capture and describe ethical conflict experienced by seasoned educational administrators. Narrative inquiry via electronic survey was conducted with 42 participants with follow-up interviews conducted with a smaller sample of purposefully-selected participants. Findings suggest that ethical conflict is inherent in the practice of educational leadership and is most often experienced in relation to colleagues when the ethics of justice and care collide. Moreover, leaders' ability to mitigate conflict, which is exacerbated by institutional and external factors, is improved when coupled by longevity and diversity of leadership experiences. Finally, the role leadership preparation programs and in-service professional development play in building theoretical foundations and competence in applied ethical decision-making cannot be overestimated.*

School leaders that rely on efficient approaches to solve dilemmas run the risk of suspending their ethical responsibility to students. Colnerud (1991, 1994, 2006) suggests that ethical tension and conflict finds their origin where ethical norms collide. The collision of these norms creates space for ethical dilemmas to arise in schools and in the decisions of those who work in them. In this context, leaders face a double mandate wherein their professional conduct is expected to support such norms as well as students' best interests. For example, when confronted with difficult decisions leaders can be: pressured by guidance that comes in the form of zero-tolerance (Keleher, 2000); influenced by norms associated with collegial loyalty (Colnerud, 1997); or suffer from the effects of goal displacement (Langlois & Lapointe, 2007). Further, in some cases, organizational conditions can inhibit moral agency

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or make inaction legitimate (Samier, 2008). While the literature suggests a multiple ethical approach can help leaders to make important decisions, such an approach does not dissipate conflict, but rather, can generate ethical conflict given that students, parents, colleagues and leader all have a certain ethical standing and do not always agree in terms of best interests.

Reconciling value-laden perspectives to promote moral ends is an ongoing problem in educational leadership and an important area of inquiry to which this project hopes to contribute. Although similar research has been conducted within the teaching profession (Colnerud, 1997; Pope, Green, Johnson, Mitchell, 2009), research is relatively slim that employs ethical theory to interpret conflict experienced by practicing educational leaders or relate their experiences to their personal and professional background and school context. Moreover utilizing the “critical incident technique” as a tool for capturing school leaders’ ethical conflicts has not been assessed. This research aimed to fill these gaps.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this research (McGee, 2013) was to capture and describe ethical conflict experienced by practicing educational leaders through a multidimensional theoretical lens. From this basis the following questions were investigated:

1. What is the nature of ethical conflicts that practicing educational leaders experience?
2. How does the nature of these ethical conflicts relate to leadership background?
3. How does the nature of these ethical conflicts relate to school context?

In addition to the above questions, this research also sought to explore the utility of the “critical incident technique” (Flanagan, 1954) to capture ethical conflict as perceived by seasoned educational administrators, as well as to forward recommendations for: leadership preparation programs; in-service professional development, and; future research endeavors. Before moving forward, it is important to share definitions of terms that were used throughout the research process.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Double mandate.** Educational leaders can be conflicted by the normative-descriptive binary. In other words, leaders can be simultaneously informed by the way things *ought* to be and by the way things are. Such conflict can make it difficult to support students’ best interests.

**Ethics and morality.** *Ethics* derives from the Greek, *ethos*, that implies individual actions, while the term, *morality* derives from the Latin, *mores*, that implies group customs. While some view individual ethics as a means to promote social mores (Robbins & Trebicht, 2009), others recognize that balancing personal, group, and professional ethics can involve competing interests (Starratt, 1991).

**Benevolence and beneficence in ethical decision-making.** Benevolence refers to a cognitive macromoral concept that resides at the communal level (Rest, Navarez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). Benevolence has to do with sympathizing with others and taking action as a result. Benevolent decision-making favors fairness and equity rather than contextualization

and intimacy. While educational decision-making grounded in benevolence can be efficient, it is not necessarily sensitive to individual student needs. Thus, leaders who practice this brand of decision-making risk compromising their ethical responsibility to students.

Benevolence, on the other hand, is action taken on behalf of others for the purpose of promoting their well-being. Benevolence is an affective micromoral concept that resides at the level of the individual (Rest et al., 1999). Benevolent decision-making issues from high levels of contextualization and intimacy that originates empathic volition that moves one to take action on behalf of another. Benevolent educational leaders are sensitive to individual student needs and take action to promote their well-being.

**Ethical Dilemma.** An ethical dilemma is a social situation that involves a conflict between imperatives such that supporting one often results in transgressing the other.

### **Literature Review**

Colnerud (1994) suggests that ethical tension and conflict finds its origin where ethical norms collide. In this context, educators face a double mandate wherein their professional conduct is expected to support both ethical norms as well as individual students' interests. The collision of these norms creates space for questionable situations to arise in schools that can taint the decisions of those who work in them. In such cases, educators who have a singular ethical focus can rely on one ethic at the expense of others. Colnerud's (1997) descriptive study of professional ethics in teaching found that ethical conflict "in relation to pupils, parents, and colleagues" can jeopardize the well-being of students (p. 630). Similarly, supporting the best interests of students is an important responsibility of educational leaders.

Of particular relevance to supporting the best interests of students are the work of Starratt (1991) and Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011). Starratt proposes a multidimensional ethical framework that includes the ethics of justice, critique, and care. Shapiro and Stefkovich add to this an ethic of profession that results when the ethics of justice, critique, and care are merged. At the heart of the ethic of profession is consideration of the best interests of the student. The determination of the best interests of the student can involve applying the ethic of profession to three thoroughly contextualized best interest correlates; that is, rights, responsibility, and respect (Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004).

### **The Ethic of Justice**

The ethic of justice focuses on the laws and rules that govern society and on the accompanying rights of individuals. Justice reasoning is a source of the uniformity that is typically found in decision-making in schools. For example, some school leaders adhere to the deontological perspective that forwards the non-relativist belief that all people are moral agents and therefore, ought to be respected. Thus, breaking rules that may jeopardize the rights of other moral agents, even if it serves a greater good, is not an option (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 1998). On the other hand, theorists such as Beauchamp and Childress (1994) advance a view that has its roots in utilitarianism. For those who align with this approach, rules are guides; and depending on the probable outcome of a situation, the rules may be violated. A useful way to describe the utilitarian perspective is via the principle of benefit maximization (Strike et al.) or choosing action bearing the greatest amount of benefit to as many people as possible.

## **The Ethic of Critique**

Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, and Kliner (2000) relate that the creative process is a powerful driver of innovation. Integral to the creative process is tension; that is, wherever there is tension can also be found an intention toward resolution. Thus, the ethic of critique highlights and relaxes the embedded tensions in the ethic of justice. The ethic of critique “takes aim at mindsets, structures, and practices that promote reproduction of the status quo” (Mansfield & Newcomb, 2014) and exposes the origins of privilege that legitimize social arrangements (Starratt, 1994). Educational leadership scholars who forward the importance of critique also emphasize the importance of purposeful action to create change at the macro level (Mansfield & Newcomb).

## **The Ethic of Care**

Similar to the way that critique supplements justice reasoning, the ethic of care interpenetrates the ethic of critique. Rather than pursuing macro-social aims, the ethic of care features a micromoral orientation aimed toward the nurturance of relationships. The ethic of care grew out of feminist scholarship and unlike the ethic of justice that locates law and order at its core; the ethic of care considers caring as foundational to ethical decision-making (Marshall, 1995; Noddings, 2008). Conceptions of uniformity that are typically assumed to be the foundation of decision-making in schools can ignore the ethical diversity that exists in them. In this context, it is possible for decisions to be made at the expense of the child’s best interests. Thus, “caring has an uncertain status in competition with other values or norms” (Colnerud, 1997, p. 634).

## **The Ethic of Profession**

Many professions such as law, medicine, and business have adopted codes of ethics that serve as guides or rules to be followed to advance professional practice. These normative codes typically outline high ideals toward which professionals ought to strive. Such codes of ethics can be normative or descriptive (Colnerud, 1997). Normative codes outline how things ought to be and descriptive codes outline how they are. The abstract nature of normative codes can limit their value in practice (Langlois, 2004; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Campbell (2001) “illustrates the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of applying ethical standards to actual situations in any professionally and ethically satisfying way” (p. 395). A more profound rendering of professional ethics may result through the blending of normative and descriptive ethical approaches. Working from this point of view, Campbell supplements empirical evidence with “first person narrative responses to the evidence” to offer that while professionals cannot recite relevant ethical codes, “most of us live lives in which we rarely have to stop to think how not to break the law” (p. 395). Her point here is to show that the moral core of the education profession reflects deeply embedded personal and public principles that ought to make codes of ethics independently irrelevant. Campbell goes on to suggest, “Professional ethics cannot be imposed, for by their nature they must be internalized to become part of the collective consciousness and the individual conscience” (p. 396). Her argument brings out a point of view in which normative and descriptive aspects reside in interdependence with each other. This point of view signals toward the work of Shapiro and

Stefkovich in the area of professional ethics in education and away from other fields such as law and medicine.

Shapiro and Stefikovich (2011) suggest that educational leaders must consider the moral aspects unique to the profession and that by combining the ethics of justice, critique, and care into an ethic of profession, educational leaders can be equipped with a tool of ethical decision-making that can help them to “leave behind any simplistic notions of right and wrong or good and bad” en route to dealing with the complexity of the post-modern world (p. 184). The ethic of profession can be understood to consist of a personal code of ethics coupled with a professional code of ethics. For example, Shapiro and Stefikovich suggest that in order to deepen the ethic of profession, leaders should “write out personal and professional ethical codes and compare and contrast their two codes” to determine where the personal and professional diverge and coalesce. This results in an internal dialogue that can make hidden code visible. Likewise, Sockett (2006) makes some relevant points in terms of unearthing personal ethics. He believes that the process issues from the Aristotelian concept of “*eudaimonia*” (p. 12 [italics in original]) or the thought that existing as a human being entails taking responsibility for the kind of person one becomes. Similarly, Starratt (2004) proffers a view of authenticity and advises that school administrators “bring themselves, including their deepest convictions, beliefs, and values, to their work” (p. 65). In addition to being barely discernible, Starratt goes on to suggest that authenticity is difficult to articulate because “it is so foundational, so close to the bedrock of moral motivation that it is rarely analyzed in its essential elements” (p. 66). Pertinent to both of these accounts of personal ethics is the concept of personal mastery made relevant by Senge (1990). Both Sockett and Starratt envision personal ethics as the simultaneous process of unearthing individual aspiration and awareness. To imagine is to intend toward something generally considered to be external, while the concept of the self typically points toward something internal. As a result, curiosity leads one to imagine, which informs self-awareness and development. This dual awareness of the external and internal creates a tension that by its nature seeks resolution through development.

### **Methodology**

As the above literature review suggests, the most effective way to investigate issues of professional ethics is by studying them in relation to the interactions agents have with those in their professional life. Moreover, the literature suggests taking an applied ethics approach, viewing and interpreting participants’ stories via a multidimensional theoretical lens. Thus, a qualitative approach whereby active school leaders share their experiences with ethical decision making in their own words was deemed the best approach, along with utilizing an interpretive lens that takes a more holistic approach to conducting research in naturalistic settings.

### **The Multidimensional Ethical Framework**

Applied ethics signals a path away from the tenants of pure reason and toward an acknowledgement that human factors such as affect supplement reason to form a more complete picture of ethical functioning. The present work subscribes to the notion that there should not be a dividing line between affect and cognition (Blasi, 1983), and that, in reality, attempting to divide affect from cognition is impossible and thus, a false binary. Rather, the

self exercises a central and active role in decision making that entails interplay between a variety of ethical, moral, and professional commitments. Thus, a multiple ethical paradigm is needed to get at the heart of ethical decision making in the case of this project.

As explained above in the literature review, the multiple-ethical paradigm consists of four areas related to applied ethics in school administration: (a) the ethic of justice, (b) the ethic of critique, (c) the ethic of care, and (d) the ethic of profession. In addition to viewing ethical decision making in light of these concepts separately, professional narratives were also examined to discover the interplay between the areas of consideration: for example, ways the ethic of justice interacted with the ethic of care, which will be explained in greater detail momentarily.

## **Participant Selection**

Participants were purposefully sampled from a pool of experienced practicing leaders who are pursuing/were pursuing a doctoral degree (both EdD and PhD) in an educational leadership program from an accredited, Research I university in Virginia. The reasoning behind this approach was based on the need to find seasoned educational administrators who have had ample experiences in the field and may be open to sharing their experiences with a peer researcher. The population consisted of 167 potential participants who were sent an email inviting them to participate in an online survey which was hosted by SurveyMonkey. The email provided a brief overview of the project, the name of the principal investigator, acknowledged that participation was voluntary, explained that data would be protected, and provided a link to the online survey. Follow-up emails were sent to the same population during the second and third week following the original message. The same population received follow-up emails because there was no way to distinguish between those who had and had not completed the survey. Participants who also wished to participate in a follow-up interview were invited to provide contact information.

## **About the Sample**

Regarding the years of experience that participants had as an educational leader, 6 of 42 respondents had 0-5 years experience (14.3%), 17 had 6-10 years experience (40.5%), 6 had 11-15 years experience (14.3%), 6 had 16-20 years experience (14.3%), and 7 had 21 or more years experience (16.7%). While a significant percentage of the sample reported an experience level of 6-10 years, no single experience level constituted a majority of the sample. Participants were asked to indicate the context in which the majority of their experience was invested. In terms of context, 11 participants reported that the majority of their experience as an educational leader was in urban contexts (26.2%), 5 participants reported that the majority of their experience was in rural contexts (11.9%), and 27 participants reported that the majority of their experience was in suburban contexts (64.3%).

To provide information relevant to describing the sample, participants were also asked to share the level at which the majority of their experience was invested. In terms of level, 13 participants reported that the majority of their experience was at the elementary/primary level (31%), 9 participants reported that the majority of their experience was at the middle level (21.4%), and 18 participants reported that the majority of their experience was at the high school level (42.9%). Additionally, 2 participants did not answer this question (4.7%). While

generalizability was not a specific goal of this study, it is important to point out that the spread of the sample in terms of years of experience and work contexts are varied, which signals toward a reasonable balance of the sample.

The sample of 4 participants for interview included leaders who identified evenly (current position) as assistant principal, principal, central office administrator, and other. Of the 4 participants, 3 were female and 1 was male; years of leadership experience reported, 0-5 years, 6-10 years, and 21+ years; and, in terms of leadership context and background, 2 participants reported that the majority of their experience had been in suburban middle schools, and 2 participants reported suburban high schools. Interview participants were purposely selected based on the nature of their critical incident reports amongst those willing to be contacted later.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected using narrative inquiry utilizing the “critical incident technique” and semi-structured interviews. Literature supports the critical incident technique as an appropriate means through which to examine practicing professionals’ responses to ethical dilemmas in education (Colnerud, 1997; Pope et al., 2009; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Further, decision-making from a multiple ethical perspective involves affect (Starratt, 1991). There is evidence that the critical incident technique can capture such emotional content since “it is reasonable to argue that the perceived ‘critical incident’ is essentially an emotional event...” (Cope & Watts, 2000, p. 114). Since this research aimed to collect fully contextualized data, this approach allowed participants to respond in their own words and from their own particular perspective; thus, providing a complete description of the ethical conflicts they have faced.

**Narrative Inquiry.** A survey platform was used to gather narrative data via the critical incident technique specifically. There are three assumptions commonly associated with the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954): First, it is important that the incident correspond to a clearly articulated case. Second, if the respondent cannot produce a clear account of what occurred, then the case is not valid. Third, the unit of analysis is the critical incident itself. According to Pope et al. (2009) using the critical incident technique “involves asking subjects to respond in writing to a single question about a significant experience” (p. 779). Thus, to capture information relevant to the research question, the solicitation posed to participants was: “Briefly describe a situation or a kind of situation in which you find it difficult to know the right or wrong thing to do from a moral/ethical point of view in relation to [student best-interest]” (Colnerud, 1997, p. 629; Pope et al., p. 779). Consistent with literature, added to this solicitation is “Feel free to describe a first-hand experience with ethics and [the best interests of the student] or more general ethical issues you have encountered with [the best interests of the student]” (Pope et al., p. 779). As noted above, of the 167 potential participants invited, 42 committed to participating in the survey. Of the 42 who participated, 39 responses fit the criteria as outlined above and were included in the data analysis phase.

**Semi-structured Interviews.** To further tease out the relationship of ethical conflict to leadership background and school context, semi-structured interviews were conducted. As noted above, from the pool of reported critical incidents that met the criteria for inclusion, four participants were purposefully selected for semi-structured interviews. Face-to-face

interviews, lasting approximately 60 minutes each, were conducted and digitally audio recorded.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

Maxwell (2005) advocates a three-pronged approach to data analysis: coding, organizing, and sense-making. In the present study, coding, organizing, and sense-making took place in an ongoing manner. As the critical incidents were received they were labeled with a numerical value from 1 to *N*. After examining the contents of the solicited critical incidents, a table scaffold was created displaying column headers representing anticipated domains of ethical conflict (Colnerud, 1997). After the critical incidents were categorized by domain of conflict, they were organized in a second table in relation to the ethical paradigms that conflicted (Starratt, 1991). The second table thus listed ethical paradigms of justice, care, and critique as row and column headers. Based on the outcome of this process, an organizational code was placed at the upper right corner that signified conflicting ethical paradigms.

Data gleaned via interviews were also organized and coded during the sense-making process. Reading transcripts numerous times enabled the gleaning of data that applied to four themes: 1) Ethical conflict and leadership background; 2) Ethical conflict and school context; 3) The role of ideals and principles in decision-making, and; 4) How decision-making helped or hindered meeting the needs of the student. Taken together, data from all sources were examined to find connections and make meaning that would produce substantive recommendations for professional development and future research.

### **Limitations**

Generalizability is not possible and was not an aim of this study. Moreover, since most of the data collected was based on reconstructions of past events, reported critical incidents are dependent on respondents' ability to accurately recall them. As noted (Rest et al., 1999), sometimes people know more than they can tell; therefore, the critical incidents "may not accurately reflect the intensity of [...] thoughts and feelings..." (Cope & Watts, 2000, p. 116). But as these scholars note, capturing critical incidents as they naturally occur is a methodology that is very difficult to operationalize so "researchers will always be dependent on the subjective representations of their respondents" (p. 116). In addition, since the population for this study was 167, and the sample was 42, the sample size (25%) can be considered a limitation as well.

## **Findings**

### **Conflict Domains**

Prior research suggests that situations that cause teachers to experience ethical conflict find their origin with students, parents, and/or colleagues (Colnerud, 1997). As Table 1 shows, 9 (22.5%) of conflicts reported by this sample of leader had to do with students, 10 (25.0%) of reported conflicts had to do with parents, and 20 (51.3%) of reported conflicts had to do with colleagues.

Table 1  
*Critical Incidents Categorized by Domain of Conflict*

Domain of Conflict	Students	Parents	Colleagues
	9	10	20

**Student.** Most frequently, the nature of conflict in the domain of student was related to substandard performance. Such substandard performance created the need for action on the part of the school leader. For example, one middle school principal recalled,

One year as a summer school coordinator, two eighth grade students performed poorly on their final Civics project, which meant they would fail the course. If they failed Civics they would have to repeat the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I knew this would be the second time each student had failed a grade in middle school. I had the authority to “pass” these students onto high school, even though they had technically failed a required course. I was conflicted between holding these two students to an academic standard versus putting them back into a potentially negative situation by having them repeat another grade in middle school.

Another school leader shared similar thoughts, adding,

In education, there are rules, policies, and guidelines that you are expected to follow. At times, a student has not followed the rules and are supposed to receive a specific consequence. There are times when you know the student’s home life and it is better for him/her to be in school than not...

Conflicts within the domain of the student were not limited to the K-12 school setting. Rather leaders in higher education also expressed concern about balancing ethical decision-making in the best interests of students:

In my work with students in higher education, I encounter ethical conflicts when students with psychiatric/mental health concerns appear to be at risk, and parents become involved out of concern. I am bound by FERPA, however must weigh the safety of the student, their right to autonomy, and their risk for harm in making decisions to talk with parents or other support persons outside the university.

From the sample responses above, it appears that in dealing with conflict in the domain of student, leaders are able to discern the connection between their decision-making and its impact on the student’s best interests. When deciding to spare students from unnecessarily negative consequences, leaders seem equipped to draw from more than one ethical frame and are mostly disinterested in what rationalism may call for. It is, however, also important to note that the voice of the student is largely absent in the accounts of these leaders.

**Parent.** It appears conflict that involves parents is more nuanced and problematic than conflict with students. This nuance often seems related to the competition that results when the parent and the educational leader engage in an *ethical tug-of-war* with respect to the best interests of the student. The tug-of-war signals toward the inclusion of the perspective of the



parent in the leader's scope of justice (Passini, 2010). As the following quotes highlight, such competition can create space for the best interests of the student to be jeopardized. For example, one respondent complained that while parents have the interests of only one child in mind, as a school leader, they are responsible for the welfare of hundreds of students:

Parents often refuse to accept the fact that their child is not the only child to be considered in most instances. As building administrators, we must always find the solution that is in the best interest of not only the one student but all the students.

In addition to struggling to define best interests in terms of individual responsibility as outlined above, school leaders also struggle with parents over definitions of best interests when individuals' moral and ethical commitments differ culturally (or what constitutes good parenting). For example, one principal described experiences whereby students were caught stealing items in the classroom or directly from other students. Additional investigation revealed that, according to this leader, the adults in the home have condoned stealing: "It is difficult to suspend a student for a day out of school for stealing when they have not been taught differently." Another principal described their negative feelings when faced with "bending the rules" with "problem parents" when issues of residency are raised, noting: "I hate when they are moved multiple times during their elementary careers."

**Colleague.** The collegial conflict reported in the present study primarily involved superiors, however leaders can also experience conflict with subordinates. An important concern of the respondents in this study was that ethical conflict was due to occupying an uneven position of power relative to those who oversee their decisions. In effect, these leaders felt that they had no real choice given the stance and expectation of their superiors, which can favor rational decision-making. Thus, subordinate leaders may jeopardize student best interests as a result of remaining loyal to their superior. In other cases, a leader may maintain loyalty to a teacher or other colleague at the expense of a student's best interest. For example, one respondent reported an incident whereby the leader turned a blind eye to student maltreatment. However, much of the conflict involving colleagues was more closely related to Samier's (2008) notion of moral inversion or the notion that legal-rational values prevail at the expense of other approaches to decision-making. For example, one leader expressed,

It creates an ethical conflict for principals every day when they are told to adhere to zero-tolerance policies and to bring better classroom and behavior management to their schools (thus increasing student achievement and growth) AND, at the same time, are told that they must keep a keen eye on the number of out-of-school suspensions of students with disabilities or students of color.

In another example, a school leader described trying to balance support for resource officers with protecting students:

I always have an ethical issue when asked to sit in with the police officer during an interrogation. We are supposed to watch out for the student and yet we are also supposed to let them talk which in many cases results in a confession and legal ramifications.

## Conflicting Ethical Paradigms

In addition to experiencing conflict across the domains of student, parent, and colleague, the participants also described ethical situations that showed conflict between competing paradigms. When the ethics of justice, critique, and care interface, they can conflict. Thus, leaders are called on to acknowledge the complexity of situations they face and view them as solvable puzzles. This conceptual frame is reminiscent of Shulman (1998) who observed that a fully developed professional educator ably confronts “highly situated problems that draw together theory and practice in the moral sea of decisions to be made, actions to be taken. Options are rarely clean; judgments must be rendered” (p. 525).

As shown below in Table 2, ethical paradigms can conflict with themselves and with other paradigms. The nature of the critical ethical incidents can be described by their location in Table 2. An examination of the pattern of results in Table 2 shows that of the 39 incidents, three (7.7%) involved justice vs. justice conflicts, 21 (53.9%) involved justice vs. care conflicts, 10 (25.7%) involved justice vs. critique conflicts, and five (12.9%) involved care vs. critique conflicts.

Table 2  
*Conflicting Ethical Paradigms in Reported Critical Incidents*

Conflicting Paradigms	Justice	Care	Critique
Justice	3	21	10
Care		-	5
Critique			-

*Note:* Dashes indicate that ethical paradigms did not conflict in reported critical incidents.

**Justice vs. Justice.** When participants described critical incidents where concepts of justice collided, most often school leaders explained this justice-justice conflict as having to do with individual respect, the principle of greatest good, zero-tolerance policies, and professional duty. Only three responses fit this category and is captured in the following quote:

Maintaining a safe, orderly learning environment for every student may conflict with an individual’s best interests...So, overall, weighing the best interest of one versus the best interests of many often times brings questions and conflicting emotions.

**Justice vs. Care.** Respondents struggling to negotiate the ethic of justice with the ethic of care were found among all domains (students, parents, colleagues) and most often had to do with struggling with emotions, relationships, and communications and values of trust and beneficence. Responses indicated attempts to balance consequentialist perspectives embedded in the ethic of justice with elements of contextualization emblematic with the ethic of care. For example, one school administrator shared,

In education, there are rules, policies, and guidelines you are expected to follow. At times, a student has not followed the rules and are supposed to receive a specific

consequence. There are times when you know the student's home life and it is better for him/her to be in school than not, which becomes trivial with finalizing your decision.

Similarly, another school leader explained a justice-care conflict in terms of handling a specific zero-tolerance policy infraction:

As a principal, I had a student come to my office and show me a small knife he had accidentally brought with him to school. Policy dictated zero tolerance, and an automatic suspension. However, I discussed the situation with the student, called his parent with him present, and had the child talk with the parent. I then told the parent that the child had done the right thing in coming to me, and had them come to pick up the knife.

**Justice vs. Critique.** Recall that the ethic of critique can help to relax tensions associated with the ethic of justice. Conceptual themes associated with the justice v. critique conflict were oriented in social justice concerns such as protecting special populations and preserving equality. For example, one principal recalled a family with a single working mother who sometimes needs the older child to watch the younger children if they are ill. Normally, these absences would not be excused, but this particular principal was able to contextualize the situation and excuse the absences indicating, "If she does not go to work, she does not get paid." While having the child in school is important, the welfare of the family took precedence in this particular situation. Rather than expel the student for excessive absences, the administrator critiqued the policy in light of social justice concerns that took into account the contextual complexities of poverty and family obligations.

**Care vs. Critique.** Similar to the justice v. critique concerns, the care vs. critique conflict includes elements of contextualization as well as acknowledgement of special populations. For example, a higher education administrator noted:

In my work with students in higher education, I encounter ethical conflicts when students with psychiatric/mental health concerns appear to be at risk, and parents become involved out of concern. I am bound by FERPA, however must weigh the safety of the student, their right to autonomy, and their risk for harm in making decision to talk with parents or other support persons outside the university.

Rather than experiencing conflict with a student with a disability, one school principal reported experiencing conflict with a teacher with special needs who was not meeting the requirements of the job. When confronted with instructional shortcomings, the teacher in question "wanted me to feel sorry for her because she has a disability." This principal then had to find a way to show care for the teacher while also "holding her responsible for her job duties."

Taken together, the ethical conflict that practicing educational leaders experience can be categorized in terms of both conflicting paradigms and domain of conflict as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3  
*Incidents Categorized by Paradigm and Domain of Conflict*

Domain	Students	Parents	Colleagues	Total
Justice vs. Justice	2	0	1	3
Justice vs. Care	5	4	12	21
Justice vs. Critique	1	3	6	10
Care vs. Critique	1	3	1	5

In describing the ethical conflict experienced by this sample of leaders it becomes clear that mitigating conflict with colleagues is integral to supporting the best interests of students. As is shown in Table 3, the majority of conflict leaders experience involves colleagues (51%) and of these collegial conflicts 12 (60%) involve the ethic of justice and the ethic of care. Also of note is that the majority of all conflicts (53%) involve the conflicts between the ethics of justice and care and that 26% of conflicts involve conflicts between the ethics of justice and critique.

### **Ethical Conflict and Leadership Background**

The three female interviewees emphasized how their years of experience, along with the varied contexts in which they have served over the years, played a major role in their ethical growth and decision-making processes. For example, one female principal shared that her almost 20 years of experience teaching and leading in the middle and high school settings had helped her understand the developmental process of youth across the years, enabling her to view infractions in terms of not only policy, but according to the developmental level of the student. Her rich background facilitated the decision-making process because she was better able to gauge appropriate vs. inappropriate behavior, perhaps better than someone who had less time in the profession and/or less diverse experiences. The other two female principals also noted the importance of their combined years in diverse settings and how their background facilitated the contextualization of relationships. While the sole male principal also expressed the importance of contextualizing relationships, his decision-making process was based on balancing “the mores of the community” and what is “best for the child within the context of the community,” with “what policy or normal procedure dictates.”

### **Ethical Conflict and School Context**

As the above section suggests, leadership background is closely related to school context. All four of the principals interviewed discussed the importance of understanding the background of the students, families, and community when making decisions, but more importantly, the importance of considering the age and grade level of the student. For example, the male principal said,

Obviously there is a difference between the way we may deal with elementary students – very young elementary students, middle school students and high school students because of the level, the age, the work that we’ve had with kids. Personally, at one of

my schools where I had multiple ages...I had sixth, seventh and eighth graders, and when I would bring in my sixth graders in I would discuss information with them and talk to them about what my expectations were...my expectations were quite different with my eighth graders, particularly those that had been with me for several years and they knew what our rules were, what I would tolerate and what I wouldn't. And so my expectations were different for the older students than for the younger students. And I think in many cases, we see that our expectations would be different for a junior/senior in high school that has seen numerous situations as opposed to a student who is in first or second grade.

### **The Role of Ideals and Principles**

While all four interviewees discussed the importance of taking a balanced approach to ethical decision-making, the three women specifically talked about the role of emotion and feelings of care that interplay in the decision-making process. It was also interesting that the sole male participant spoke about the inevitability of conflict as just one aspect of the job. Two of four participants (one male/one female) spoke about the importance of looking at the situation from the point of view of many in their quest to find a balanced approach. For example, the male principal said,

Principles will change; policies and procedures may change depending upon where you are, but your ideals kind of stay with you all the time. Ideals for me basically mean looking at situations and trying to do what's best for children...do what's best for kids. I'm constantly trying to balance what's best for the whole versus what's best for this individual student; what's best for the teachers in the teaching environment versus what I'm doing with this one student. But I always try to look at the individual child and make a decision that's best for the child without creating any kind of major conflict with our procedures, our policies and what we do for the whole.

Similarly, the female principal in consideration explained,

For me, one is your personal moral and ethical set of how you make decisions; that's one for me. Two, it's what we as a school have decided we are going to use as our guiding expectations and what consequences are going to be; we try to all be on the same page with that. There's the individual student piece and what that student needs, whether or not it may fit in that paradigm or that framework in which we have established as a school, district expectations and parental expectations too. But trying to weigh all that, I try to see things from various perspectives; from the perspective of the teacher, from the student perspective, the parent perspective, community perspective, what other students will see as a result of how we responded to that situation in trying to balance all of that for the most good of everyone involved.

### **The Best Interests of the Student**

For all four interviewees, making decisions that are ultimately in the best interests of individual students is directly related to all of the above concerns. While one principal

believed her commitment to fully contextualize relationships enabled her to do the right thing, she also noted the emotional aftermath (or not) vis-à-vis “the ultimate support you have” and whether “you are going to be backed or not from your superiors.” The other three participants were less confident in their abilities to always do the right thing, but also connected the ability to meet the best interests of students to whether or not written policy and district office personnel gave individual leaders “space” for autonomy. For example, one school administrator noted that he strives to be a “good administrator” and to have a “good ethical foundation” but that policy generally, and zero tolerance policies in particular, “forces us to make some decisions that aren’t in the best interest of children.” Similarly, another principal acknowledged mistakes she had made:

Well I mean there certainly were situations where I think I called it wrong. There were certainly times where circumstances were outside of my control. There are times when it doesn’t matter what I think; whoever is ahead of me and gets involved and makes a decision, it doesn’t matter what my input is. Sometimes people who supervise us have rules and policies that we don’t understand, things that we don’t get so see in the big picture, and so there were times I felt student’s needs were not served because of those circumstances...

### **The Role of Preparation Programs and Professional Development in Ethical Practice**

Only one of the three informants remembers taking a substantive amount of ethical training, but also noted that while this training was helpful, ethical theory did not become embedded in her personality until she had a chance to actually apply her knowledge in the field:

I did have a good ethics course...that helped, but I feel like you can’t really see the full spectrum until you’re in the middle of it and have to really sort through things, and consider, and think...

Two other participants seemed to lament the lack of ethical training because ethics was relevant to “everything you do” as a school leader. While all participants seemed to agree that on-the-ground experience was most important, they also believed a background in ethical theory would be beneficial to their work; especially to help them find balance between competing ethical demands. One principal noted that formal training provides an opportunity to “think...and see things from a different perspective and discuss with colleagues and reading a variety of pieces of literature” that would otherwise not happen if formal training in ethics was not present.

### **Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion**

Aligning with the research literature, leaders categorized their ethical conflicts as taking place within the domains of students, parents, and colleagues and described situations in which paradigms conflicted in terms of justice, critique, and care. Of the three domains, conflict with colleagues was most prevalent and within the domain of collegial conflict, the interface of the ethics of justice and care most often are the source of the conflict. In addition, the spread of

incidents across levels and contexts suggest that leaders experience conflict irrespective of the level and context in which they serve.

Findings also suggest that leaders strongly believe their background and experience in context empower them to mitigate conflict to the benefit of the student. However, in situations in which the best interests of students are not served, leaders attribute the malfeasance to external/institutional factors. Coupled to participants' strong ethic of care, balancing policy and expectations of superiors was a source of conflict. While the descriptions of ethical conflict provided in narratives and interviews suggested that leaders in this sample have an awareness of applied ethics, they do not attribute their awareness to pre- or in-service training, but rather personal values and sustained and varied professional experiences.

Although not specifically pursued, the narrative inquiry and interview data both contain undercurrents of issues related to social justice. For example, both sets of data include references to race and social class. The finding that ethical conflict is spread across levels and contexts suggests that factors such as race and social class may be significantly connected to the ethical conflict leaders' experience.

Moreover, the concern for the student via the ethic of care is a predominate value that emerged in both the narrative inquiry and interview portions of this study. The leaders' perceptions of care, however, are incomplete because neither the critical incident data nor the interview data include the voice of the student. Because of this, leaders' conceptualizations of care are often based on inferred rather than expressed needs (Noddings, 2008). Since the ethic of care is integral to revealing the voice of injustice (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011) leaders who fail to consider the expressed needs of students may simultaneously fail to support their best interests (Mansfield, 2013).

In line with Campbell (2008), the responses of these participants are silent on the role their leadership preparation programs played in their ethical development. Campbell's concern that leadership programs model teacher preparation programs remains pertinent fifteen years later: that educational leadership and foundations departments work together to develop leadership programs that make firm connections between ethics in theory and ethics in practice (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011; Starratt, 1991) and that purposeful steps are taken to make leadership for social justice a cornerstone of educational leadership programs (Mansfield, Newcomb, & King, 2013). Similarly, steps can be taken to serve practicing leaders by providing opportunities for professional development that teases out the necessary components to balanced decision-making such as context, relationships, and age/level of students.

In terms of areas ripe for future research, there is a need for inquiry that amplifies the voices of students (Mansfield, 2013). For example, this study can be replicated featuring the student as participant. Remember that Iacoboni (2008) found that while humans are born wired with the capacity for assuming the perspective of others being wired does not also mean that such perspective taking is automatic. Care and empathy are integral to supporting the best interests of students and affective factors such as these are enabled when leaders are able to take the perspective of the student (Johnson, 1993; Singer & Lamm, 2009). It is difficult to imagine being able to assume the perspective of students without talking with them first (Johnson; Mansfield). While the critical incident technique proved fruitful in the case of this project, additional research could be done with students to test the efficacy of this tool to better understand the perspectives of students.

In comparison to the teaching profession, the leadership literature is sorely lacking in research that explores the complex and nuanced world of the persistent ethical dilemmas that school leaders face on a day-to-day basis. This study sought to address these gaps generally as well as specifically study the problem of the double mandate that school leaders meet their accountability standards to the institution while also meeting the best needs of students. By utilizing the critical incident technique, this study captured and described the complexity of ethical conflict experienced by a sample of practicing educational leaders through a multidimensional ethical lens. By demonstrating the ways practicing leaders wrestle with ethical beliefs in applied situations, ideal visions of how things ought to be, coupled with the realization of the sometimes-unseemly realities of what really is, the literature receives a modest yet important contribution from this study.

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# A Study of the Value Added by Transformational Leadership Practices to Teachers' Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*Based on Bass and Riggio's (2006) Augmentation Model of Transactional and Transformational Leadership, this quantitative study sought to identify the amount of variance in teacher job satisfaction and organizational commitment that can be explained by principals' transformational leadership behaviors, above and beyond the influence of transactional behaviors. Pennsylvania high school teachers totaling 156 and located in five Pennsylvania high schools were surveyed about their job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and about the leadership behaviors in which their principals engaged. The researcher then used hierarchical linear modeling to test the augmentation model within this sample group. The results of this study provide researchers with a replicable method with which to examine this leadership model. They also provide practitioners with actionable guidance on leadership behaviors that can positively influence teachers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment.*

## Introduction

The challenges faced today by those who seek to improve American public schools will require leadership that is able to bring about what Bass (1985) referred to in his seminal text *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations* as “second-order changes:” those changes that go beyond “first-order” changes of degree that “can be handled adequately by the current emphasis on leadership as an exchange process” (p.4) and require a transformation of the environment through new ways of examining old problems. Through his extensive work on leadership theory and behavior, Bass developed the Full Range of Leadership Model, which

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includes various behaviors in which leaders engage. These include transformational behaviors, which can help the leader bring about powerful changes in an organization. The model also includes more mundane but no less essential behaviors, called transactional behaviors. Bass's theory was that, although leaders regularly engage in most if not all of the Full Range of Leadership behaviors, the most effective leader would practice the transformational behaviors more frequently and the transactional behaviors less frequently. Knowing that both types of behaviors are common and necessary, it is important to examine the relative impact of all of these behaviors in the school context to see which are the most effective in bringing about powerful and sustainable change.

Transformational leadership has undergone testing in a variety of work contexts over the past thirty years, and has been the subject of various studies in educational settings since the early 1990s. Since then, according to Nguni, Slegers, and Denessen (2006), "a large number of studies have reported evidence of effects of transformational leadership on school organizations, the implementation of large-scale innovations, teachers' psychological states and attitudes, teachers' role behavior, and student engagement" (p. 149). The research suggests that transformational school leaders are able to, "alter their environments to meet their desired outcomes...by promoting educational restructuring and innovation, focusing on building vision, encouraging collaborative participation and raising the role of followers to that of leader (Silns, 1994, as cited in Barnett, 2003, p. 3). According to Leithwood (1992), "the collective action that comes from transformational leadership empowers those who participate in it. There is hope, optimism, and energy in a kind of leadership that facilitates redefinition of a people's mission and vision, renewal of their commitment, and restructuring of their systems for accomplishing goals" (p. 17).

Bass and Riggio (2006), in their Augmentation Model of Transactional and Transformational Leadership, posit that the combination of transactional *and* transformational leadership behaviors results in heightened motivation to designated outcomes (extra effort) on the part of subordinates, leading to performance beyond expectations. Essentially, transactional practices provide the foundation on which transformational behaviors can be added to bring about this exceptional performance. Numerous studies have been conducted to identify, measure and explain the effects of principals' transformational leadership behavior on teacher job satisfaction and/or organizational commitment. However, no research has attempted to use hierarchical linear modeling to test Bass and Riggio's Augmentation Model and thereby determine whether transformational behaviors have a measurable influence on these outcome variables *beyond* the influence of the more traditional transactional behaviors.

This study seeks to identify the amount of variance in teacher job satisfaction and organizational commitment that can be explained by principals' transformational leadership behaviors, above and beyond the influence of transactional behaviors. Its results are intended to provide some limited empirical support for the Augmentation Model in the field of education.

The primary question that is investigated is to determine beyond that of transactional leadership practices, what, if any, impact do principals' transformational leadership behaviors have on teachers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment? In addition, the following subsidiary questions considered beyond the effects of contingent reward (a transactional leadership behavior), are addressed.

1. What additional contribution does the use of idealized influence as a practice have on high school teachers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment?
2. What additional contribution does the use of inspirational motivation as a practice have on high school teachers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment?
3. What additional contribution does the use of intellectual stimulation as a practice have on high school teachers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment?
4. What additional contribution does the use of individualized consideration as a practice have on high school teachers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment?

In light of the results of the study by Marzano et al. (2005) and others like it, we believe that leadership makes a difference. Research and tools to inform principals' practice and help them create necessary change should be a national priority. According to Leithwood and Jantzi (2006), a great deal of the existing literature that seeks to assess school leader effects is "entirely speculative or theoretical in nature," and is therefore a "necessary but not sufficient foundation on which to build robust understandings of school leadership." They call for more sustained research about "the nature and effects of precisely conceptualized and adequately measured forms of school leadership" (p. 201) if educators are to have an adequate base of knowledge on which to build an adequate school reform movement. The results of this study may help principals looking to identify and adopt specific behaviors to help them carry out the important work of school improvement and school reform.

No study to date has used hierarchical linear modeling to measure the added value of transformational leadership behavior above and beyond transactional practices in the field of education. The results are of interest to those who have studied transformational leadership using other methods and those who may be interested in replicating its findings either in or outside the field of education.

### **Literature Review**

The concept of transformational leadership developed over the course of the second half of the twentieth century and continues to evolve today as it is applied and studied in various organizational contexts and associated with variables as diverse as employee creativity, productivity, and organizational commitment. An understanding of the development of transformational leadership theory is helpful in providing the reader with an appropriate context for this study..

In 1976, Robert J. House published *A 1976 Theory of Charismatic Leadership*, a paper which sought to review the traditional scholarship on the concept of charisma and "develop a speculative theoretical explanation of charisma from a psychological perspective" (p. 1) that would provide the basis for future leadership research. He began by referencing Weber's (1963) initial introduction of the term charisma and his use of this term to describe some leaders as "mystical," "personally magnetic," and "narcissistic." Weber had proposed that the charismatic leader inspires others to follow him because followers believe that he possesses a unique gift. Weber outlined four primary characteristics of charismatic leaders: they are more emotional than calculative, they cause followers to model their thoughts, behaviors and feelings after the leader, they instill self-confidence in the followers, and they can engender radical change because the beliefs and values are inconsistent with "established order" (p. 6)

House (1976) then hypothesized that charismatic leaders are different from others because they exhibit some combination of four specific personal characteristics: dominance, self-confidence, need for influence, and strong conviction that their beliefs are morally righteous.

House's work on charismatic leadership provided a partial basis for James MacGregor Burns' seminal 1978 book, *Leadership*. Burns is credited with initiating the concept of transformational leadership and contrasting it with what he called transactional leadership. He proposed that transactional leadership occurs when one person interacts with another with the purpose of exchanging things of value (payment for services rendered, for example), whereas transformational leadership happens when one or more people interact with each other and increase both their mutual motivation and morality. Another way to view this is to see transactional leadership as emphasizing tasks associated with management, while transformational leadership emphasizes those aspects of leadership that extend beyond management and into the realm of inspirational leadership. The prolific work of Bernard Bass (1985) and his colleagues incorporated the aforementioned work of House (1976) and Burns (1978) and created an operationalized definition of transformational leadership, as well as an instrument with which to measure it, called the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). Bass's model contains seven leadership factors. The first four factors are considered the components of transformational leadership, while the next two are considered aspects of transactional leadership and the last considered the absence of any type of leadership. The four components of transformational leadership are as follows: idealized influence (II) (transformational leaders serve as role models for followers and are admired, respected and trusted. They are seen as possessing certain unique qualities), inspirational motivation (IM) (transformational leaders motivate and inspire their followers by providing them with meaning and with challenging work experiences), intellectual stimulation (IS) (transformational leaders stimulate the thinking of their followers, encouraging innovation and creativity and involving them in the solution of a variety of problems), and individualized consideration (IC) (transformational leaders seem to care about followers, providing them with opportunities to grow personally and professionally and acting as a mentor or coach). The two components of transactional leadership are as follows: contingent reward (transactional leaders set goals for followers, and outline specific tangible rewards to be conferred upon achievement of these goals), and management-by-exception (transactional leaders address employee behaviors only when they are identified as in need of specific improvement). Finally, laissez-faire leadership is considered neither transformational nor transactional. Leaders exhibiting this component fail to engage in any identifiable leadership behaviors.

Burns (1978) viewed transactional and transformational leadership as opposite ends of a spectrum; however, Bass (1985) and colleagues saw transformational leadership as a value-added construct, whereby leaders do engage at times in contingent reward and/or management-by-exception behaviors, but those behaviors are used to complement and enhance the transformational behaviors that are at the heart of organizational change. They theorized that first-order changes of degree can be accomplished using transactional behaviors (such as contingent reward), but that higher-order changes required the addition of transformational practice. The figure below displays what is known as the Augmentation Model of Transactional and Transformational Leadership, which elucidates the interplay between these two dimensions of leadership practice. Once transactional leadership behaviors have led to subordinates achieving expected effort and performance, they are then augmented

by the transformational behaviors, leading to heightened motivation and performance beyond expectations. Thus, the full range of leadership potential is ultimately achieved through both of these styles of leadership. This model provides the conceptual framework for our study.

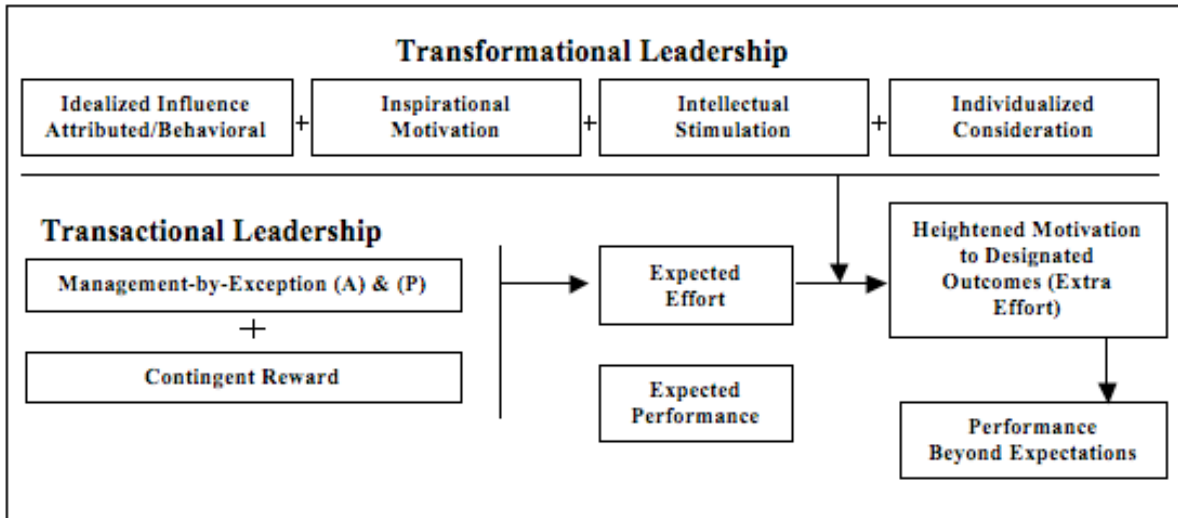


Figure 1. The Augmentation Model of Transactional and Transformational Leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

### Research Design

The population for this quantitative study was all certificated, instructional staff members in five high schools located in Lehigh, Bucks, Berks, or Northampton County, Pennsylvania. The school districts in this area are notable in their diversity, ranging from quite small (500 students) to very large (3,300 students) and from urban to suburban. Schools in this area also range from diverse to homogeneous in terms of the socioeconomic and racial diversity of their student populations.

The sample was selected using non-probability, convenience sampling. Also known as accidental sampling or haphazard sampling, convenience sampling allows a researcher to investigate all subjects who are available at the time of the study. Convenience sampling was particularly applicable in this case, for two reasons. *First*, it allowed all teachers in the population the same opportunity to complete the survey. *Second*, it was expected to yield higher levels of participation than random or purposeful sampling, since participation was completely optional for all potential participants. The total number of eventual participants was 156.

Three separate instruments were administered to participants in this study, using *ASSET*, a web-based survey system created by Bert G. Wachsmuth at Seton Hall University. Those instruments are The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ – 5X – Short), the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) and the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ).

## Analysis of Data

Research indicates that the transactional behaviors (of which there are three) impact job performance and therefore potentially impact employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment. This study sought to identify the impact of the five components of transformational leadership behavior on teachers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment *beyond the effects of the three transactional practices*. Thus, it was necessary to first conduct exploratory regression analyses using the three transactional behaviors as predictor variables to determine what impact (if any) these behaviors had on the teachers in this sample.

Contingent reward behavior (through which transactional leaders set goals for followers, and outline specific tangible rewards to be conferred upon achievement of these goals) emerged as a significant, positive predictor of all of the outcome variables. It accounted for 9% of the variance in participants' intrinsic job satisfaction, 44% of the variance in extrinsic job satisfaction, 26% of the variance in general job satisfaction and 2% of the variance in organizational commitment. The active form of management-by-exception behavior (through which transactional leaders address employee behaviors only when they are identified as in need of specific improvement) was not a significant predictor of any of the outcome variables, while the passive form of this behavior was a significant negative predictor of all of them. Principals do not necessarily engage in transactional and transformational leadership practices separately or in isolation of each other. Thus, in order to isolate and identify the unique impact of transformational leadership behaviors on teachers' job satisfaction and organizational commitment, it was necessary to first control for the significant positive effect of contingent reward behavior. This was done through the use of hierarchical linear regression.

Five hierarchical linear regressions were generated for each outcome variable. In all of the regressions, Model 1 was comprised of demographic variables (gender, age, dummy coded veteran status, and dummy coded novice status); Model 2 included the demographic variables and added contingent reward behavior, since it was the one transactional variable that emerged in the exploratory regression analysis as a significant positive predictor of all of the outcome variables; and Model 3 included demographic variables, contingent reward behavior and one of the five transformational leadership behaviors. The results of these analyses allowed the researcher to fully answer the primary and four subsidiary research questions presented in this study.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This study sought to identify a relationship between transformational leadership practices and teacher job satisfaction and organizational commitment. However, findings related to the contingent reward dimension of transactional leadership were striking. Contingent reward, defined as the leader setting clear expectations, providing resources and connecting achievement of goals with rewards for their subordinates, emerged as a strong and significant predictor of all of the outcome variables. In the hierarchical linear models, the addition of contingent reward behavior to demographic variables in Model 2 accounted for between 12% and 46% of the variance in teacher job satisfaction and 17% of the variance in their organizational commitment scores. Bass's (1985) work likens contingent reward to leaders'

explicitness and consistency, which “had moderate effects on reducing role ambiguity and role conflict” (p. 129). He goes on to state that “some of the contingent-reward behaviors also contribute indirectly to improved performance and satisfaction with supervision” (p. 129) as a result. In addition, The Augmentation Model of Transactional and Transformational Leadership outlined in Bass and Avolio (2006) and discussed earlier in this article, illustrates the relationship between these behaviors and indicates that contingent reward behavior provides the necessary managerial foundation on which leaders can add transformational behaviors in order to bring about heightened employee motivation and exceptional results.

An implication of this finding is that principals must set clear expectations in order to ensure that teachers are meeting acceptable standards, and also must sanction or reward them as appropriate, based on their performance. This is a basic managerial function. However, they must remember that such behaviors, though generally effective, are significantly augmented by the use of transformational behaviors, which provide the extra motivation for employees to reach their highest levels of performance.

Idealized Influence (attributed) is one of two transformational leadership behaviors that were shown in the regression analysis to account for the most amount of variance in teachers’ job satisfaction and their organizational commitment, once we controlled for the influence of contingent reward. Idealized influence is associated with leaders who are role models for ethical behavior, who instill pride in followers and thereby gain their trust and respect. The “attributed” label on this type of idealized influence refers to qualities attributed to the leader, rather than specific, observed actions. These attributed qualities include instilling pride in subordinates, going beyond self-interest for the good of the group, building respect and displaying a sense of power and confidence. In this study, attributed idealized influence emerged as adding variance to teachers’ extrinsic job satisfaction and their organizational commitment, even when controlling for demographic factors and significant transactional behavior (in this case, contingent reward). These findings reinforce those of Koh et al (1995) and Shaw & Reyes (1993).

As discussed in the review of relevant literature, Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) argue that the idealized influence dimension of transformational leadership should be de-emphasized in schools, while Nguni et al. (2006) assert that charisma (comprised of both types of idealized influence) has been shown to have the greatest influence of all the transformational leadership dimensions on employee satisfaction and commitment. The results of this study, like the findings in the related literature, indicate that idealized influence (attributed) does have a meaningful impact on teacher job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and thus should not be discounted in studies of leadership behavior and schools.

Individualized consideration was the second of two transformational behaviors that emerged in this analysis as a powerful influence on teachers’ intrinsic, extrinsic and general job satisfaction and is therefore worthy of a detailed examination here. Individualized consideration is the extent to which a leader listens and attends to the needs of his or her subordinates, and acts as a coach/mentor. Leaders who exhibit individualized consideration see their subordinates as individuals and demonstrate interest in their growth and development. According to Bass (1985), “Consideration for others has emerged as a consistently important aspect of leader-subordinate relations. Generally, it has been found to contribute to subordinates’ productivity. It is central to participative management to the extent that it focuses on the employee’s needs for growth and participating in decisions affecting his work and career” (p. 82). This finding supports those of Hulpia et al. (2009), Barnett (2003)



and Lee (1983) as cited in Evans & Johnson (1990), who all identified individualized consideration as strongly related to job satisfaction.

An implication of this finding is that principals who exhibit individualized consideration can have a profound influence on teachers' commitment and job satisfaction. Schools are unique work environments, because they are comprised of many small units (classrooms), in which the employees (teachers) carry out very similar work in a largely independent fashion. Depending on the size of the school, interactions between the building principal and his or her teachers can be infrequent and often impersonal. Principals interested in increasing teacher job satisfaction and commitment would be wise to put in place specific routines that allow them to demonstrate individualized consideration. For example, principals could hold more frequent, goal-oriented meetings with teachers to discuss their personal objectives and professional development activities, and provide them with support, feedback and encouragement. Principals could also frequently take time in a more informal context (interactions in hallways or at school events, for example) to talk one-on-one with teachers and get to know them on a personal level. Given the multitude of constraints on principals' time, these interactions must be purposeful and deliberate in order to significantly improve employee perceptions about their level of exhibited individualized consideration. The behaviors associated with individualized consideration are widely considered "best practice" in human relations management, but this study and others like it provide convincing evidence that they also have a significant impact on factors (in this case, teacher job satisfaction and organizational commitment) that directly influence student performance, which is the most important outcome of any school management practice.

The remaining three dimensions of transformational leadership (behavioral idealized influence, intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation) had a small but statistically significant impact on only the extrinsic form of job satisfaction. This provides limited support to the assertion of Bass and Avolio (2006) that transformational leadership behavior does produce results beyond those possible as a result of transactional behaviors alone. However, these behaviors did not emerge as significant in the models that included the other outcome variables, specifically: intrinsic job satisfaction, general job satisfaction and organizational commitment. It could be valuable for more research to be conducted regarding these three behaviors and their impact on job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Based on the results of this study, principals would achieve better results by exploring attributed idealized influence and individual consideration, the two behaviors that accounted for the most variance in the model.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Some recommendations for further study and research present themselves as a result of the findings of this study:

1. This study used hierarchical linear modeling to test Bass and Riggio's (2006) Augmentation Model of Transactional and Transformational Leadership in high schools. Replication studies, or studies of elementary or middle school teachers, would be valuable further contributions to the field.
2. Research could be conducted to explore the powerful relationship between contingent reward behavior (a dimension of transactional leadership) and teachers'

job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Contingent reward behavior accounted for so much of the variance in all outcome variables, it may be that this type of behavior is particularly necessary and effective within the school context. A researcher might also seek to discover whether, within the Bass (1985) Full Range of Leadership Model, contingent reward is a foundational behavior that must be in place for principals to effectively exhibit transformational leadership behaviors.

3. Research could also be devoted to a detailed examination of individualized consideration and/or idealized influence (attributed) behavior in school principals. Specifically, a researcher could identify principals whose teachers view them as high in these behaviors and seek to determine what specific routines they engage in that allow them the time and structure necessary to exhibit them in a consistent and meaningful way. This could provide guidance to principals wishing to engage in these types of effective leadership behaviors.
4. Another interesting avenue of study would be to learn more about the connection between principals' transformational leadership behaviors and the performance of their students on various types of assessments. What connections can be made between specific leadership behaviors and student achievement outcomes? In addition, it would be valuable to examine which aspect(s) of job satisfaction— intrinsic, extrinsic or general—have the most impact on student achievement?
5. A researcher could engage in qualitative interviews or focus groups with transformational school leaders in order to determine to what extent the Full Range of Leadership Behaviors are learned through professional development, mentoring or other means and to what extent they are behaviors to which leaders are inclined as a result of personality or other inherent characteristics. This would help those who provide professional development to school administrators understand how to increase their capacity in this area.

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# Alternative Education Completers: A Phenomenological Study

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*The purpose of this study was to explore the elements of the alternative education experience significant to successful completion of the program. This phenomenological paradigm provided the framework for all aspects of the qualitative study. Students, parents, administrators, and staff members of two alternative programs in the southeast Kansas area were the pool used to draw the participants. Criterion involved in selecting the student participants were those who were or had been enrolled in the middle level or high school alternative education program in two southeast Kansas districts, currently 18 years of age or older, and who had successfully completed one or both programs. Qualitative methods used to accomplish the research design were: (a) formal, semi-standardized, open-ended interviews with 12 current or former alternative education students, eight parents of program completers, and 10 alternative education staff members; (b) evaluation of student journals from the middle school alternative school; and (c) obtrusive and unobtrusive classroom observations.*

## **Introduction**

It is apparent that some students fail to prosper in the traditional classroom setting. Debate has occurred throughout the years as to the source for ensuring academic success for all students. Is it the public school system? Is it the student? Can it be the parents? What about all stakeholders? The blame game focuses attention on the problem, not the solution. The system, the students, the parents, and all additional stakeholders own accountability to effectively educate all students.

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Public school design plus academic, social, and personal concerns are responsible for students failing in school and failing to graduate. A few of the most frequently noted causal issues are:

- (1) schools that disregard various student learning styles;
- (2) irrelevant curriculum;
- (3) inadequate counseling services;
- (4) delayed intervention;
- (5) habitual truancy;
- (6) substance abuse;
- (7) single-parent home;
- (8) one or both parents are high school drop outs;
- (9) one or both parents are substance abusers;
- (10) one or both parents have been, or are currently incarcerated;
- (11) extreme poverty;
- (12) teen parent;
- (13) unsuccessful in traditional school model;
- (14) below grade level performance in core content areas;
- (15) high mobility;
- (16) involvement in foster care system;
- (17) raised by grandparents;
- (18) verbal, physical, or sexual abuse;
- (19) neglect;
- (20) credit deficient;
- (21) gang affiliation;
- (22) behavior/discipline issues;
- (23) low self- esteem; and
- (24) lack of social group or appropriate social skills (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006).

Considering the complexity of the academic, social, and emotional challenges facing America's youth, it is difficult for schools to know how to address this critical situation. Time, personnel, effective approaches, resources, and funding are all obstacles that prevent schools and programs from intervening in an appropriate manner.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The early alternative schools movement was primarily supported and developed from the basic tenets of the progressive education theory, generated from the progressive education movement in the United States between the 1890s to the 1930s. The dominant branches of this theory are: (1) developmental, child-centered instruction; (2) social reconstruction; (3) active citizen participation in all areas of life; and (4) the democratic organization of all public institutions (Schugurensky & Agguire, 2002). John Dewey was the principal theoretical draftsman of progressive education. He laid the groundwork for the developmental, child-centered and social reconstruction branches of that theory (Neumann, 2003).

Dewey's work in the progressive development of education and the influence of several eighteenth-century educational philosophers, posed a significant impact on the late nineteenth century progressive educator Francis W. Parker, whom Dewey called the father of progressive education (Neumann, 2003). Colonel Parker was Dewey's friend and colleague. He shared similar ideas on progressive education and opened a progressive school in Chicago in 1901 (Schugurensky & Agguire, 2002). The progressive education theory, and the public alternative schools movement that ensued, laid the foundation of alternative school programs for the academically and socially disengaged student.

The model guiding this study, regarding elements of a successful alternative education program, is based on the frequently named program features from a multitude of researchers. Successful program elements have been compiled by Stacey Aronson (1995) in a journal article on alternative learning environments.

Aronson (1995) understands the need for participation choice by all stakeholders within the alternative program. Successful program completion is more likely to occur when students, along with their parents, and staff choose to participate in that setting. Choosing to attend, rather than forced assignment, fosters ownership and commitment to the school. The whole student focus is necessary so that personal, social, emotional, and academic development may be addressed. Warm, caring relationships with teachers and staff members are a critical piece to the alternative school culture. Alternative programs foster expanded roles for teachers. Instructors not only function in the teacher role but as counselors, advisors, and mentors. A sense of community among teachers, students, and staff creates a connection between the student and the school, in addition to fostering the relationships described above. Alternative education teachers hold high expectations for all students while exhibiting flexibility and consideration of change according to student needs.

In addition to school culture, Aronson (1995) shares that organizational structure of the alternative school is central to success of the program. Personal attention and cultivating a sense of community is more easily accomplished when classes and schools are small. Most successful alternative schools possess some degree of autonomy. A measure of freedom from the customary district operating procedures is necessary given the very nature of the needs of at-risk students. Comprehensive programs linking vocational skills with experiential learning seem to better assist students in connecting their learning with future life and career. Extensive counseling services are necessary since the students landing in alternative programs experience a host of academic, social, emotional, and personal issues. The traditional school for students at-risk of failing has proven to be a hostile setting for most. Alternative programs must be structured in such a way as to generate feelings of comfort and safety. Clear, strict behavioral expectations with the administering of fair and consistent discipline assist in maintaining a comfortable and safe environment. Finally, research frequently reveals that programs that achieve a physical separation from the traditional school building tend to more successfully impact their students than those who remain integrated within the traditional school (Aronson, 1996; Gilson, 2006; Knutson, 1996; Mottaz, 2002; Quinn & Poirier, 1998).

Curriculum in alternative programs will vary. Some provide a stronger emphasis on personal development and behavior, some on basic skills, and some on core content academics, while others focus a great deal on vocational skills and preparing for the world of work. Regardless of the focus of the curriculum the alternative school must be flexible in designing a basic plan for each student, using multiple, specific strategies and methods to address the individual needs of the learner (Aronson, 1995).

System-wide features round out the most frequently named successful alternative program elements. The saying, “it takes a village to raise a child” has never been more appropriate in any other setting than the alternative school. Parental involvement, community involvement and support, and health and social services are key aspects to the success of most programs (Aronson, 1995).

Ultimately, the concepts that most appropriately address the needs of the at-risk student are the same concepts that would most appropriately address the needs of all learners. In this researcher’s opinion the most evident, crucial component to any learning program, be it a traditional school culture, or an alternative school setting, is the personal relationship of the instructor and the learner. That connection, that bond, forms an alliance capable of accomplishing great feats, against all the odds. As Quinn and Poirier (2006) reveal in their investigations of effective alternative education programs, the nature of the relationship between adults and the adolescents in their care is absolutely critical to the realization of the positive outcomes all educators have dedicated their lives to achieving.

## **Literature Review**

The literature studied in this review relates to alternative education programs within the United States. It examines the key components to current effective alternative education programs. The goal of the study is to be the voice that advocates for at-risk students and their educational needs, using the data to support the implementation, development, and evaluation of effective alternative education programs. Structuring effective education components into new and existing alternative programs and creating guidelines for hiring practices within those programs will increase the probability that more at-risk students will complete those programs. Program completers face a greater opportunity to become successful, productive citizens.

### **Effective Program Elements**

#### **Student-to-Teacher Ratio**

Universally, effective alternative programs are typified as student-supported environments, with fewer students per class and an emphasis on individual attention that provides opportunities for one-on-one interactions between staff and students (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Numerous authors and researchers have praised the effectiveness of alternative school programs and have identified small programs and class size as effective characteristics all alternative programs should embrace (Knutson, 1996).

Don Iglesias, former President of the Association of California School Administrators, understands that schools must work for all students. Margaret Hill, principal of a San Bernardino County alternative school, tells Mr. Iglesias that at their alternative school they employ a small student-to-teacher ratio. The staff at the alternative school knows all their students by name and the backgrounds of each individual student as well (Iglesias, 2002). The opportunity to know the names and the backgrounds assures the likelihood of the development of personal, caring relationships between student and staff and the personalization of the instructional program which the literature reveals as two additional, effective alternative program constructs.

Utilizing qualified instructional para-professionals in the alternative program is one of the key criteria that separate effective programs from ineffective ones. Licensed instructors provide the aides with the necessary guidance and structure to offer an economical way to achieve a low student-to-staff ratio. The integration of skillful instructional aides is one of many ways low budget programs can offer the individualized support the at-risk teen needs so desperately (Mottaz, 2002).

### **Social and Emotional Support**

Deprivation of appropriate social and emotional support is one of the key factors that lead many youth to academic and social disengagement. Personal, extended relationships, which are typical in an alternative school setting, are believed to provide social support, a sense of belonging, and bonding that goes beyond the experiences found in the majority of conventional schools (Dollar, 1983; Foley, 1983, 1984; Hahn, Danzberger, & Lefkowitz, 1987; Hamilton, 1981; Trickett, McConahay, Phillips, & Ginter, 1985).

Alternative programs are expected to address a myriad of antisocial behaviors. Although small school size, low student-to-teacher ratio, one-on-one relationships with staff members, a caring environment, and instilling student self-efficacy are all valid and effective constructs for at-risk teens, many require interventions that target a particular nature of antisocial behaviors. Intervention strategies that have been empirically validated reveal the greatest impact in modifying the more exceptional antisocial behaviors. Comprehensive, strategically planned, school-wide designs have fostered positive results, while those programs that have attempted to pull pieces together to meet the behavioral needs as they arise have failed to produce good, consistent results. Proactive, thoughtful program structure addresses the needs of these struggling teens much more appropriately and effectively than the deal-with-it-when-it-happens reactive method (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001). Specialists in the area of at-risk youth understand that antisocial behaviors are most effectively addressed concurrently and rigorously over prolonged periods of time (Van Acker, 2007).

Psychotherapy, behavior analysis, cognitive-behavior methods, and social casework intervention have all received empirical attention and documentation as displaying positive outcomes in attending to individual antisocial behaviors (Tolan & Guerra, 1994). Social and emotional support is crucial to program completion and success of the at-risk teen. Without the instillation of resilient and vigorous social and mental health neither personal nor academic success is to be expected.

### **Caring and Committed Staff**

Ruby Payne is a leading consultant to educational practitioners on the mindsets of poverty in the United States. Taking into account that a notable number of students landing in alternative schools have lived in a low socioeconomic environment most, if not all, of their lives, it is wise to pay heed to her work regarding appropriate approaches to educating them. Dr. Payne (2005) reveals the crucial aspect to achievement for students from poverty is to fashion relationships with them. According to her work, the way of thinking of those in poverty revolves around entertainment and relationships but the most important stimulation for learning is the relationship the student shares with his or her instructor.



Alternative schools with merit for impacting student success and program completion are designed to meet the needs of a specific at-risk population; consequently the adults that work with these students must exhibit specific attributes in order to address their needs. Every teacher employed in an alternative setting must choose to be there and possess a passion to support the at-risk youth in their personal and educational endeavor (Mottaz, 2002).

In most cases, the students enrolled in alternative programs have experienced negative interaction with school personnel for many years. The very issue they should not encounter is reassignment into yet another hostile educational environment. Alternative schools in the infant stages are susceptible to self-destruction when employing staff that are indifferent and detached from the young people relocated in these types of programs (Mottaz, 2002).

Haim Ginott (1972) believed teachers own an exceptional power to inflict misery or impart joy and comfort. No teacher is inherently bad, but many become frustrated and exasperated when dealing with the intense needs of the at-risk student, which is all the more reason that the alternative education instructor must possess an internal passion for the student who faces a myriad of factors impeding their educational achievement (Lloyd, 2001).

### **Family Involvement**

The breakdown of the family structure, lack of family support, and absence of family involvement substantiate a decline in academic progress and deterioration in social behaviors. Family and community participation is an integral component to the effective alternative program. Parents, siblings, spouses, or partners must be involved in self-help groups, school conferences, and school activities if improved performance is to occur (Ascher, 1982; Franklin, McNeil, & Wright, 1990; Franklin & Streeter, 1991, 1992; Orr, 1987; Trickett et al., 1985).

The National Alternative Education Association (2006) remains in constant pursuit of their quest for quality alternative education. Effective program guidelines have been developed as a result of that ongoing pursuit. Guiding Principle number five states that active parent involvement is encouraged in utilizing explicit approaches beyond just parent/teacher meetings. The alternative program must include a solution-focused approach between all stakeholders, relating to parents as equal partners in all aspects of an individual educational plan for their child. Parental involvement, decision-making, communication, and program evaluation are crucial to the success of each child within the alternative education program (NAEA, 2006).

Mottaz (2002) states parental/guardian input into the ongoing student learning plan is a significant indicator of quality in an alternative program and critical to the student's progress and success. Family involvement is not only crucial in support of the student's academic success but in attending to social disengagement, as well. The Safe Schools Framework (NEA, 2003) recommends the engagement of schools, community, and families to attend to problems relevant to youth antisocial behavior.

### **Individually Designed Education Plan**

Students enrolled in alternative schools are typically provided individual education plans. Every alternative student possesses unique academic and social needs. As noted previously, the challenge found in attempting to define alternative school programs is the no one-size-fits-

all approach to the academic and social structure. Alternative schools frequently provide self-paced, mastery-based curricula, and the school schedule itself can be adjusted to meet the need of the individual student. Students may attend school a few hours a day with options of mornings or afternoons and days of the week (Franklin, et al., 1990; Hamilton, 1981; Trickett et al., 1985).

Quinn and Rutherford (1998) distinguish six unique concepts that comprise a quality alternative school program. One concept that is crucial to academic success is the inclusion of methods for conducting the functional assessment of the students' academic and nonacademic needs. Understanding the academic and socio-emotional level of the student at the onset of enrollment allows for the design of a specific and effective individual instructional plan for each student. The curriculum must maintain a great degree of flexibility and require an emphasis on academic, social, and everyday living skills.

The staff at San Bernardino County alternative school in California knows all their students areas of strength and concerns. They use an arsenal of resources to make the program fit the needs of each student personally and academically. Appropriately designed and supported alternative programs can compel the struggling student to prosper and the potential dropout to thrive (Iglesias, 2002).

The success of any alternative school is the ability to design a program that meets the social and academic needs of the individual student (Gilson, 2006). The more the education plan can be patterned to address the individual needs of the at-risk student the greater the chance of increased achievement.

### **Self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy and its importance to alternative education program completion were not apparent through the original review of the literature. The concept of student self-efficacy and its essential capacity to impact program completion was reiterated by all three participant groups, in many of the journal writings, and witnessed in some of the observations. Upon completion of all data collection it was evident in this study that self-efficacy was a critical component to program completion and that further research in that area must be included in the literature review.

Throughout many of the interviews it appeared that not only did self-efficacy impact program completion but was a result of program completion as well. Completing the program led to feelings of self-confidence, self-worth, and the mind-set that they possessed the abilities necessary to be successful. Self-efficacy can play a role in a person's psychological state, their behavior, and their motivation (Bandura, 1977).

Self-efficacy can be developed. Teachers can implement certain strategies to build self-efficacy in their students. Mastery experiences yields the most effective way to boost self-efficacy. Anxiety, confusion, becoming overwhelmed, and failing erode and possibly destroy self-confidence. Lessons, instructional activities, and pacing designed specifically for the academic level of the student create mastery experiences. Increased self-efficacy is evident when school work is mastered over time. Vicarious experiences can lead to and strengthen self-efficacy as students observe peers succeeding in school. Credible communication and feedback increase self-efficacy by guiding students through the task or motivating them to put forth their best effort. A students' emotional state is a key aspect to self-efficacy. Teachers cognizant of students' anxiety levels will minimize stressful situations

whenever possible. A positive mood can have a positive impact on one's belief in their abilities, while anxiety may weaken it (Bandura, 1992, Margolis & McCabe, 2006).

Self-efficacy was examined in a study of 123 high school students in a metropolitan high school in the southeast United States. Data revealed better grades and increased levels of engagement in varied aspects of school resulted when teens were more confident in their general level of competence (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003).

A study of 102 ninth and tenth grade students in an eastern U.S. city explored the causal relationship between perceived self-efficacy and attainment of academic goals. The results suggested academic performance was impacted by personal goals. Additionally, students with a higher degree of self-efficacy set higher goals. Perceived self-efficacy in the area of achievement promoted goal setting and in turn motivated increased academic progress (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992).

### **Methodology**

This study focused on two, small, rural alternative education programs in Southeast Kansas, exploring what successful completers of those alternative education programs perceived to have influenced their positive outcome. To understand this phenomenon from the student's perspective, the following research questions guided this study:

- How do instructors and staff members influence successful program completion?
- What influence does family involvement play in successful program completion?
- How does student self-efficacy impact successful program completion?
- In what way does small student-to-teacher ratio influence successful program completion?
- How does social/emotional support influence successful program completion?
- What significance does the design and implementation of individually designed education plans play in successful program completion?

### **Research Design**

The nature of this qualitative study of the elements alternative education students believed were significant to the successful completion of their alternative education program situates well into the phenomenological paradigm. Additionally, this study employs the phenomenological variant of the exploratory approach. The focus was to explore the experiences of students completing an alternative program while gaining their perceptions of the effective approaches aiding them to successful completion of that program. The structuring of the study in the phenomenological, exploratory paradigm establishes the necessary framework to proceed in the quest of the elements alternative education students believed were significant to the completion of their alternative education program (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

While this study is rooted in the phenomenological philosophy of structures of consciousness experienced from the first-person point of view of a particular group of alternative education completers, it is further embedded in the critical theory paradigm. The perceptions of students regarding their experiences in completing alternative education

programs is important to this study not just for new knowledge, but to advocate and facilitate academic and social change in the alternative school setting in southeast Kansas.

### **Sample Selection**

In phenomenological studies it is vital that all those in the study experience the phenomenon being studied. Criterion sampling was selected as the sampling type because it proposes that all cases meet specific criteria in order to be included in the sampling group. The pool of participants selected for this study had to be students who had completed one of the alternative education programs in the southeast Kansas area, the parents of those completers, and administrators, and staff members of those two alternative programs. Miles and Huberman (1994) affirm criterion sampling in phenomenological studies is valuable for quality assurance in the pursuit of that study.

Parents of the student interview group and staff members employed in the two programs were added to the sampling to provide perspectives from varied sources of involvement within the alternative programs. The decision to include parents and staff members in the interview process was to gain a broad picture from all stakeholders regarding the perceptions of what worked and didn't work for students in the alternative education experience. The perspectives from parents and staff members assist in comparisons to student perspectives and afford deeper, richer data results. The alternative education constructs perceived to be most important to successful completion of the programs by all three participant groups would be defensible as underpinning constructs in the effective design and implementation of alternative education programs.

### **Instrumentation**

The qualitative study includes in-depth interviews, observations, and journal writings of young adults who were once at-risk of academic and personal failure. The population involves 12 students who previously completed a Type II or III alternative school in the southeast Kansas area, 10 staff members of those programs, and 8 parents of students attending those alternative education programs. Field notes from a total of six, 30-to-60 minute obtrusive and unobtrusive observations during times of student engagement at the alternative centers and memos from 32 middle school alternative education student journals round out the data sources for this study.

### **Data Analysis**

Based on the review of the literature this study was to analyze the elements of the alternative education experience perceived by alternative education students to be significant to successfully completing their alternative education program. This information may assist in the advocating of precise designs in the educational plans for the at-risk student, a design framework for new alternative programs, an evaluation tool for existing programs, an evaluation instrument for alternative education staff members, and appropriate staff hiring practices.

The data analysis and representation process used in this phenomenological study pursued the modified system of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method developed by Moustakas

(1994). Audio tapes of all the personal interviews were transcribed into text. Files were created and organized for the data. The texts were read with notations inserted in the margins for initial coding and recognition of themes and patterns, especially those that directly addressed the research questions. Statements of meaning were recorded for all responses that directly addressed the research question and lists were created for each individual. Analysis of the data collected in the interviews, observations, and student journals revealed five key areas; instructional practices, highly-qualified staff, social/emotional support services, caring and committed staff, and relationships.

In addition to the researcher, a long-time regular education teacher and an alternative education teacher read and coded the data following the Moustakas (1994) method stated above. These individuals also served as professional experts in peer debriefing sessions with the researcher. Debriefing sessions of all of the data allowed opportunity for consensus among the expert peer panel and discussion of any discrepant data.

This study, determining what students perceived as the critical elements leading to the successful completion of their alternative education programs, encompassed data collected from multiple data sources in an effort to support triangulation of the data and the trustworthiness of the study itself. Systematic, consistent methods of data collection were executed to the point of saturation with continued search for discrepant results throughout the study.

### **Summary of the Findings**

Data were collected as a part of the investigation of what successful completers of alternative education programs perceive to have influenced their positive outcome. Data sources included individual in-depth interviews of alternative education students, their instructors, and their parents, as well as, student journals, and obtrusive and unobtrusive observations.

#### **How do instructors and staff members influence successful program completion?**

1. Caring and committed staff members are the key element shared by all participant groups as critical to successful program completion.
2. Student participants stated that, staff members caring for them in the sense of their willingness to see them through to the end, was key to program completion. Caring and committed staff members are tireless and relentless in pursuit of student achievement and program completion.
3. Staff members agree that the critical element to successful program completion is to believe in the alternative education process and the students that fill their classrooms, developing positive relationships with students and family.
4. Highly-qualified staff members develop effective individual learning plans, designing the pace and the instruction to the individual ability and learning style, while holding high expectations for all students.
5. Parents considered highly-qualified staff members as more likely to impact program completion than the students did.

### **How does student self-efficacy influence successful program completion?**

1. The belief that you are incapable of learning or effectively completing the curriculum is the biggest obstacle to program completion.
2. Implementation of an appropriately designed individual learning plan develops self-efficacy and leads to program completion. Adjusting the academic pace to the appropriate level for each student assists the student to successful assignment completion. Completing assignments correctly and on time helps students to believe in their academic ability. Realizing daily success develops self-confidence.
3. Alternative education teachers believe in the students and their ability to successfully complete the program. They instill hope in their students. Hope helps students to stay the course through completion of the program.

### **How does small student-to-teacher ratio influence successful program completion?**

1. The smaller setting is more comfortable, safe, and orderly. Comfort and safety are two of the basic physiological needs that must be met in order for learning to occur (Maslow, 1943).
2. Smaller numbers of students allow teachers more opportunity for one-on-one attention and instruction. Individualized attention and instruction are more likely to assist students to program completion.
3. Smaller numbers creates a less intimidating environment and makes it easier to ask and answer questions in class. Once students begin to ask questions, they receive more individual feedback. Understanding, progress, and the likelihood of program completion increases.
4. Smaller numbers allow a greater opportunity for student and teacher relationships to develop. A positive student-to-teacher relationship increases student self-efficacy and the likelihood of program completion.

### **What influence does family involvement play in successful program completion?**

1. At the middle level, appropriate, supportive family involvement is critical to program completion.
2. At the high school level, family involvement is very limited. Students and teachers understand that the responsibility for program completion lies with them.
3. Non-supportive or antagonistic family involvement inhibits progress and/or reduces the likelihood of program completion.

### **How does social/emotional support influence successful program completion?**

1. Social/emotional support addresses Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). Certain basic needs must be met prior to the occurrence of learning. Needs of safety and security are found in the physiological tier of basic needs. Both alternative programs attended to the students' safety and security needs from the onset of enrollment.

2. Students stated that daily journaling at the middle school program was a therapeutic experience for them, allowing them to unload their minds of troubling thoughts or circumstances, while mindfully processing the issues to develop a sense of peace and comfort in preparation for the academic day.
3. Social interaction and appropriate conduct are stressed at the middle school program with rewards for positive social behavior. All participant groups involved in the middle level program believe this practice trains and reinforces appropriate conduct in real life situations.
4. Middle school program teachers, students, and parents feel that regular, internal and external, social/emotional support produces a more balanced individual and increases the likelihood of program completion.
5. Students, parents, and especially teachers at the high school program, believe that utilizing extended outside resources for social/emotional support would increase greater chances of program completion.

**What significance does the design and implementations of an individually-designed education plan play in successful program completion?**

1. An individual learning plan ensures effective assessment of academic level and ability at onset of the program.
2. Students do not become overwhelmed when instruction and pace are geared to their ability levels.
3. Experiencing daily success is critical to successful program completion.

**Summary of the Findings into Major Themes**

After examining the interviews, field notes of the observations from the two rural alternative schools in southeast Kansas, and the journal writings from the alternative middle school, I divided the findings into three major themes: caring and committed teachers are the most important reason for successful program completion, instilling hope is critical to successful program completion, and teachers' relentless pursuit promotes successful program completion. Staff members are the focus of the major themes. Responses from all three participant groups repeatedly concluded that program completion was all about the staff member and the characteristics that lie within that individual.

**Caring and Committed Teachers Promote Successful Program Completion**

Teaching, in general, requires more than the ability to instill knowledge. Caring and commitment are regularly echoed in the teaching field as critical qualities of the effective teacher (Payne, 2005). Caring and commitment of the alternative school teachers revealed a deeper, broader foundation than simply liking the students and the enjoyment of assisting their success. Countless demonstrations of caring and commitment were revealed in the conversations with the participants. Students and parents defined and embodied the caring and committed teacher with specific examples of actions and behaviors. Teachers at the alternative programs pursued extended schooling and training, making them better equipped to instruct at varied learning levels, modify instruction, and gain a deeper grasp of the core

content. Their assistance transcended beyond the classroom. Much of the time they would provide, counseling, resources, consolation, guidance, and sometimes just an ear to listen. Instructors and staff members truly believed that all students could learn, understanding that they do not all learn in the same way or within the same time frame. Teachers assume a large role in the student learning process, taking ownership of their students' learning, and understanding that merely teaching does not equate to learning. Staff members were a constant source of encouragement, recognizing and celebrating achievement as it occurred. Program completion was realized by these students because teachers were willing to do whatever it took and tackle any obstacle, while never giving up or giving in.

John C. Maxwell, author of *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (1998) has echoed the trait of caring throughout his writings and workshops on leading people and organizations to the successful achievement of their goals. His quote and leadership mantra, "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" (Maxwell, 1998, p. 103), sums up the responses related to the first major theme of the findings. Maxwell understands, as do the participants in this study, it is all about relationships; whether you are leading adults in an organization or teaching an at-risk student in an alternative school.

### **Instilling Hope Promotes Successful Program Completion**

Teachers at the alternative programs believed in the students as individuals. They believed every student could learn and successfully complete the program. Encouragement was conveyed constantly, reminding the students that their academic career became broken over time and that it would take time to repair it. Teachers helped students to see that they were with them for the long haul. The students simply needed to exhibit the critical components of hope; patience, a positive attitude, belief in their own abilities, and perseverance.

Utilizing specific instructional methods and practices and believing in their students' abilities instilled hope. Work was broken into smaller chunks to avoid the student becoming overwhelmed, at the same time, allowing opportunity for successful completion of assignments. As the small successes occurred, students began to believe that they could complete the work. Students gained confidence to tackle larger assignments once they realized they could accomplish the smaller tasks. Alternative program teachers were able to lead them on the journey to hope and beyond.

Parents were also vocal as to the vast differences between the alternative education teacher and their ability to teach, reach, and instill hope in their children, as opposed to their experiences with the teachers in the traditional setting. Many of the parents became emotional when they spoke to how miserable their children were in their previous school and how they witnessed them become confident, successful students with the love and support of their teachers in the alternative program.

### **Staff Members' Relentless Pursuit of Student Progress Promotes Program Completion**

Most at-risk students, specifically the individuals interviewed in this study, have experienced family and educators who have given up on them and their ability to be successful in school. Repeated interventions and repeated failures have led family and educators to a sense of frustration and exhaustion, not knowing what to do, or where to turn to for help. Most of the students interviewed did not feel they were capable of completing the program on their own,



especially when they first arrived at the alternative school. Teachers' relentless pursuit of student progress was new and necessary. The students had never experienced the dedication and determination of the staff members within these programs. The at-risk teachers working in the two alternative programs understood and were willing to stay the course to program completion with each student, working in the trenches every day, helping the student to understand that they would never give up helping them to achieve their goal.

### **Future Recommendations for Study**

*Mending Wall* (1914), a poem written by Robert Frost at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, speaks to the custom of neighbors meeting each spring to walk the fence line that divide their properties. The neighbors discuss the damages incurred to the fence from the previous winter. From that communication, neighbors reach consensus on an action plan to repair the damages and restore the fence to good condition. Walking the fence line with alternative education completers could provide the extended research necessary to identifying the key elements to academic success and program completion. Seeking input from alternative education students, their parents, and teachers as to the central components leading to program completion may repair and restore at-risk teens. That input could support the design and implementation of effective alternative programs and establish staff hiring requirements, creating a greater opportunity for more students to successfully complete alternative education programs.

### **Research**

More studies, especially case studies and interviews of students completing programs, could provide the communication necessary to educators for design and development of new alternative education programs. National input from students completing alternative programs is needed to provide extensive data for all facets of alternative school programs.

A better means of tracking students completing alternative programs must be implemented in order to gather extensive data needed to support effective change. Locating students once they have concluded an alternative program is difficult. These students hold the keys to better program design. It is the inability to locate and get them involved in a study once they have completed their program and moved onto job, college, or skills training that prove to be the obstacle to gathering accurate data. So much can be learned from these individuals as we strive to create and implement effective alternative education systems.

Research in the area of teacher/student learning as opposed to online learning would be insightful to the future of either type of program. Participants from this study strongly opposed online learning for the vast majority of at-risk teens. Only 2 of 12 students favored online learning instead of teacher-to-student instruction, with all 8 parents feeling that online learning was a negative substitute. Staff members were equally opposed to online learning, only two of ten staff members felt that online learning was as beneficial, or better than, teacher instruction.

## **Practice**

The current trend in alternative education is online learning programs. All participants reiterate that learning is more than the delivery of information. Learning is about relationships, involvement, and engagement between the teacher and the student. Teacher driven classrooms are critical to learning and program completion. The comfort level of interaction and involvement with a live person is more likely to impact learning, especially program completion. Online learning programs require a great deal of self-motivation and self-direction, placing the student in charge of their own learning. Most at-risk teens struggle to motivate themselves and lack the self-confidence needed to be in charge of their own learning. Technology has created a shift within the parameters of the learning opportunities available to students, but can a shift away from the classroom teacher and their relationships with students be supported, especially in the case of the at-risk teen?

## **Policy**

The most important task in any organization is the hiring and retention of highly- qualified, talented, and skilled personnel. Successful organizations employ job-specific interview procedures in order to select the most knowledgeable, skilled, and talented individual for each position opening. Considering the results of this study and the magnitude to which caring and committed teachers impacted academic success and program completion, policies and procedures for hiring highly-qualified, specifically skilled, and talented staff members should be the priority for alternative education programs. Numerous hiring programs are available to organizations and education systems. Many include interview content and procedures specific to the hiring of highly-qualified teachers. The most successful hiring programs gather knowledge, skill, and talent-specific attributes to match compatibilities and create job-specific interview questions for particular employment positions. Using the responses of alternative education program completers, better interview criteria and tools can be constructed in order to hire teachers who are qualified and willing to work with the at-risk teen.

Academic progress is limited when teachers are placed or reassigned to alternative education positions without their consent or desire. In contrast, teachers choosing and applying for positions in the area of alternative education realize positive academic gains with students. An aspect of alternative education that is frequently overlooked is the placement of staff with the appropriate mindset to engage with at-risk students. Bringing together teachers who share a common passion to assist and educate these youngsters increases the potential for student and school success. Most teachers value the prospect of teaching in a setting where colleagues share their educational philosophy. A teacher choosing to work with the at-risk teen is one of the major factors of increased student performance in the alternative setting as opposed to the traditional public school setting (Barr & Parrett, 1997).

Figure 1 below is a graphic representation of the overall findings from the study. The lower half of the graphic depicts the program elements found to be critical to program completion, with all roads leading to self-efficacy. As the study unfolded the attributes of caring and committed teachers resounded as the crucial component to program completion. One significant by-product of the attributes of the caring and committed staff members was the development of student self-efficacy. Results of the study reveal that student self-efficacy is the primary basis for program completion and in-turn is a result of program completion.

The upper portion of this graphic reveals the three areas the study discloses that necessitate attention for the design, implementation, and evaluation of an effective alternative education program. If designed appropriately program, policy, and personal components of the school lead to the development of student self-efficacy as well as program completion.

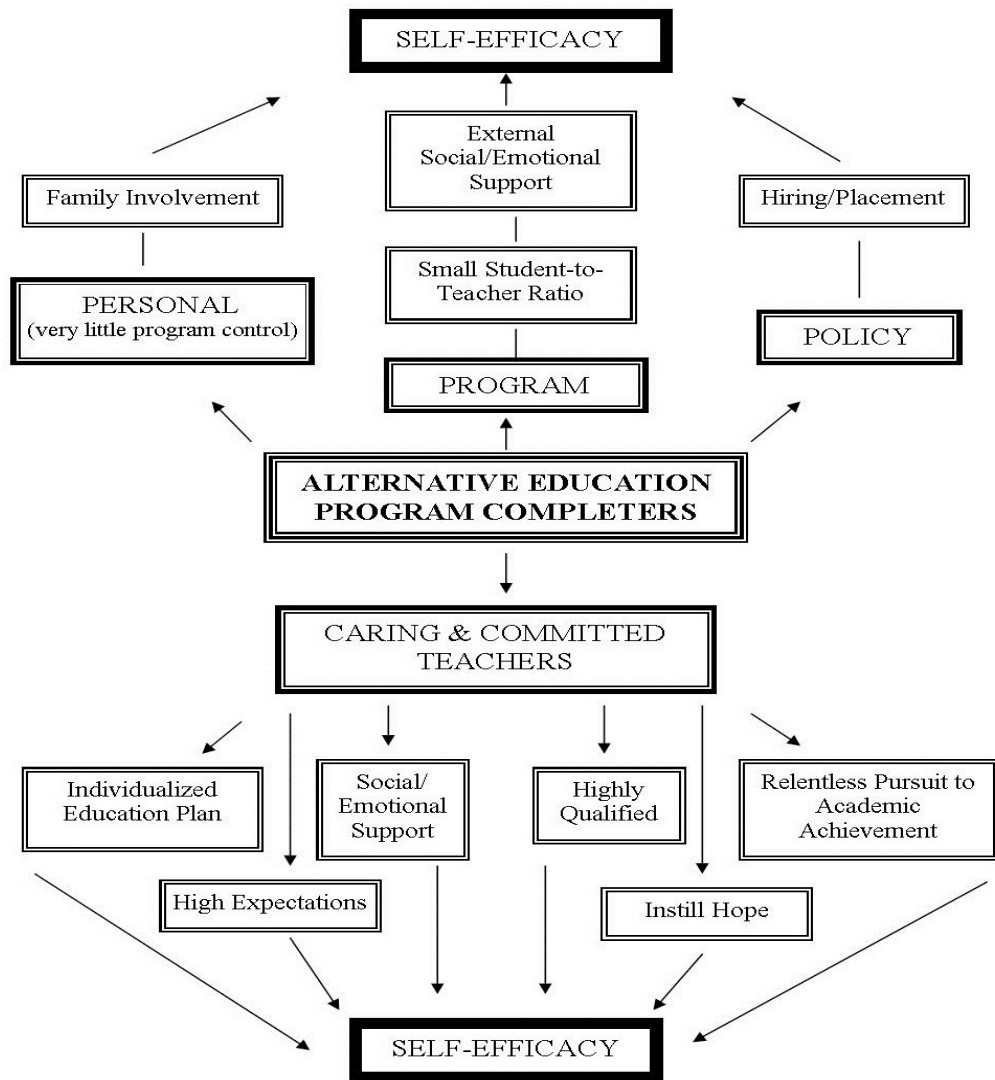


Figure 1. Graphic representation of overall findings.

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# Online Credit Recovery: Benefits and Challenges

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*School leaders are faced with selecting programs to support at-risk students in high schools across the United States. Increasingly, supplemental online learning is being selected as an innovative way to assist these students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery. Participants included twelve high school students who had been enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery, two content teacher monitors, and four graduation coaches. The perceptions of these respondents provide insight for school leaders selecting online credit recovery programs and policy makers.*

## Introduction

School leaders face the challenges of a significant drop out rate. In fact, there are more than one million American high school students who drop out each year (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). Increasingly, schools are utilizing supplemental online learning to assist students with credit recovery (Holstead, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2008). Critics of online education are concerned that some online learning options risk moving students through a course without their having received true educational benefit. However, others laud distance education for providing a highly engaging instructional environment that is self-paced, personalized, and facilitated by certified instructors who provide individualized support (Natsu, 2011; Trotter, 2008). Ultimately, school leaders are responsible for evaluating the process of credit recovery and supplemental online learning in order to improve at-risk student success and more effectively manage resources. One source of information that may be useful to school leaders is feedback from students and staff who work in this environment. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to identify the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for credit recovery from the perspective of students and staff.

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## **Growth of Blended and Online Learning Background**

Learning experiences can be classified by the amount of control that the student has over the content and nature of the learning activity. In traditional didactic or expository learning experiences, content is transmitted to the student by a lecture, written material, or other mechanisms. Such conventional instruction is often contrasted with active learning in which the student has control of what and how he or she learns (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). In their foundational work involving autonomy and self-determination, Deci and Ryan (1985) stated that students demonstrate the need for autonomy when they approach a task that warrants some degree of control and choice in the situation. They suggest people resist pressure from external forces such as rules, regulations, orders, and deadlines imposed on them by others because it interferes with their need for autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Sometimes a person even rejects help in order to remain in control (deCharms, 1983). An understanding of students' perceptions of support in online learning may equip teachers (both site-based and online) with strategies to promote autonomy and increase self-determination.

Individual autonomy can be developed by activities and programs that emphasize setting realistic goals, personally planning goals, accepting personal responsibility for actions, and developing self-confidence (Woolfolk, 2007). A significant amount of research in distance education has been conducted with adult learners who exhibit these attributes; however, there is a need to more effectively identify the traits that are necessary for adolescents to be successful in online learning environments and to provide remediation and training for students lacking in these qualities (Cavanaugh, Barbour, & Clark, 2009). Exploding advances in technology, and the need to support struggling students on limited budgets, are moving many school leaders toward supplemental online learning.

Distance education in the form of online courses and programs which serve the K-12 community are often referred to as *virtual* or *cyber schools* and operate in a variety of ways (Clark & Berge, 2005; Rice, 2009; Watson, 2011). The three dominant delivery models that have emerged for virtual schooling are independent, asynchronous, and synchronous (or a combination of asynchronous and synchronous). A student who is taking a course from a virtual school with an independent method of delivery is similar to a student who would take a traditional correspondence course with the added benefit of submitting assignments electronically (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Asynchronous online instruction occurs at different times and in different places, where learners choose when and where to access instructional materials. Using a synchronous method, teachers can facilitate an audio or text discussion with students in real time. Instruction and feedback occur immediately (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). These delivery models may be utilized to offer a full time curriculum or as a supplement to a full program.

### **Supplemental Online Learning**

In K-12 public education, there are two types of online education programs: full-time schools and supplemental programs. The goal of supplemental online programs is to give students the opportunity to take online courses in addition to the classroom curriculum offered by the local school. Supplemental programs typically do not give credits or diplomas, as the local school is accountable for oversight and assessment of student progress and the provision of special education services. The majority of supplemental programs serve high school



students; they are more numerous than full-time online schools and are operated at either the school district or state level (Holstead, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2008; Watson, 2011). Most of the new online credit-recovery options are offered by online schools and commercial curriculum providers who often tailor their programs for at-risk students (Trotter, 2008). Some of the benefits and challenges of online learning are discussed in the following sections.

### **Benefits of Online Learning**

Advances in technology allow at-risk learners multiple opportunities to receive credits to graduate on time, as well as provide them with different avenues to learn and have their learning assessed. Existing virtual learning programs differ from traditional education in a number of significant ways, one of which is the range of students served. Online learning programs can serve students of all ages, ability levels, and learning backgrounds. Most K-12 online learning programs focus on serving older high school students. A survey of district administrators reported approximately 64% of students in fully online programs are in grades 9-12. The reasons reported for online learning were to offer courses not otherwise available at the school, to offer advanced placement courses, and to offer credit recovery (Lips, 2010).

Proponents of online learning claim that it offers high-quality, engaging courses for students. The teachers are purported to be highly qualified, licensed professionals who deliver the online instruction and track student progress; and, online program features expand educational opportunities for students regardless of geography, family income level, or background (Holstead, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2008). Additionally, new formative assessment models provide performance-based virtual learning environments with tools to individualize instruction in ways that are impossible to replicate in traditional classrooms (Holstead, et al., 2008).

Shea, Pickett, and Petz (2003) reported on the relationship of pedagogy, design, and faculty development issues to students' satisfaction in e-learning courses in addition to proposing a conceptual framework for student learning in e-learning environments. As with traditional programs, the quality of instruction and course design, and how technology is adapted to promote them, is more important than the technology itself (Rovai, 2003). A more clear understanding of K-12 online at-risk students will enable courses to be scaffolded and adapted appropriately to bimodal student populations and will afford multiple avenues for students with different learning preferences. Specifically, research should examine the relationships among student needs, course design, and support services (Cavanaugh & Blomeyer, 2007; Watson, 2007).

In some online credit recovery programs courses are designed in such a way that students take a pre-test and only complete the sections of the course in which they were unsuccessful. In this way, students are able to complete the course and experience success much more quickly. Acceleration methods are used for vocabulary development, and there is a text-to-speech option for students who read below grade level (Natsu, 2011).

Another program takes the student through a critical mistakes framework, which discusses why an answer is wrong. This helps guide the student to the correct answer by reviewing content and giving hints on where the student might look. This is also used for Response to Intervention (RtI) to develop individualized learning paths and tutorials for students who need remediation on a particular concept (Natsu, 2011). Providers claim they

tailor learning to individual students by using flexible pacing and schedules, extra practice, frequent assessment, and robust monitoring and reporting on participation and progress, while also allowing openings for personal interaction with teachers. In many cases, the programs are billed as ways to enable students not only to salvage credit for a class but also to develop skills and work habits that will contribute to their continued academic success (Natsu, 2011). While Barbour's (2007) qualitative study involved a small number of participants, the preliminary guidelines included strategies to build student skills and increase independent learning. It also included the concepts of embedding directions, adding visual cues, and using interactive activities.

In their evaluation of highly effective high schools, Bottoms and Anthony (2008) described one high school that offers a virtual academy that students access online. Each course has a posted syllabus with lesson plans and assignments. Students use email to send completed assignments to the teacher and take tests online when they have finished a unit or course. Students do not have to pay fees to take courses, and they can receive full credit. The advantage is that students work on missing credits outside of the typical school day--even from their own homes.

Although benefits to online learning have been reported, challenges also exist.

### **Challenges in Online Learning**

Along with the benefits, there are also a number of challenges associated with virtual schooling. Researchers Barbour and Reeves (2009) have listed studies which show that the students who are typically successful in online learning environments are those who are independent learners, intrinsically motivated, and who have proficient time management, literacy, and technology skills. These characteristics are typically associated with adult learners and are the very characteristics that at-risk students generally lack (Oliver, Osborne, Patel, & Kleiman, 2009). Most research into distance education has been targeted toward adult learners. Recommendations for further studies include evaluating the factors that account for K-12 student success in virtual school environments (Barbour & Reeves, 2009).

Online learners may still face some real barriers even if they have a faculty who design interactive, engaging online learning environments and utilize user-friendly course management tools. Although the promise of online learning suggests enhanced flexibility that provides an educational opportunity to anyone with Internet access, not all students have the same abilities to access and engage in online learning (Blocher, Sujo de Montes, Willis, & Tucker, 2002). Most online learners work within an asynchronous setting where they choose the time and location for their study to a much greater extent than students enrolled in traditional courses. Consequently, the students' ability to self-monitor and garner resources independently is vitally important. Without these qualities, success in an online learning environment is less likely (Blocher et al., 2002). This is especially relevant given researchers suggestion that at-risk students need genuine motivation through validation and meaningful social interaction (Archambault et al., 2010; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007).

In a mixed-methods approach using online surveys that included open-ended questions, Oliver et al. (2009) evaluated how high school students responded to the experience of being enrolled in online courses during the school's first year. The study focused on students who had failed a course and were enrolled for credit recovery. It also included students who were seeking challenge through accelerated coursework. A survey was

distributed to all students and teachers in the state who were involved in the summer 2007 session. Ninety teachers and 706 students responded to the surveys for a response rate of 86% (Oliver et al., 2009). Teachers stated that the opportunity for students to self-pace and access course materials from any location at any time were two of the most positive aspects of the online courses. Additionally, the teachers were able to integrate web-based resources into content material without difficulty. This afforded students individualized and unique learning opportunities. Academic proficiency, technical skills, and self-direction were reported by the teachers as weaknesses for the students in credit recovery (Oliver et al., 2009). Recommendations included ensuring course design and alignment to national standards, providing more worked out examples, especially in math, and more use of embedded videos. Credit recovery students were reported to be less motivated and less interested in taking another online course. Issues related to low self-efficacy in the online context were also noted. Credit recovery teachers stated that their students required more supervision and mentoring from an instructor to succeed (Oliver et al., 2009).

The evaluation of effectiveness of student supports is vital in the K-12 context, especially when considering the alternative nature of the online educational experience, and the proclivity for at-risk student populations to seek this option for credit recovery (Rice, 2006). The characteristics identified as successful to at-risk students-- instructional environments that are self-paced, personalized, offer diverse instructional methods that are facilitated by competent caring adults (Rice, 2006) are the very characteristics that are praised in distance education circles. In a comprehensive evaluation of the literature surrounding K-12 distance education, Rice reported the need for further research that examines the relationship between student supports and at-risk student needs in distance education. This is essential in answering questions about the benefits or drawbacks of distance education for all students.

Some critics are concerned online credit-recovery options run the risk of simply shuffling students out the door without their having received the full value of a high school education. The undeniable fact is that some students succeed in the virtual education environment and some fail, just as they do in traditional classroom environments. The key is to better comprehend the critical components in an educational context that enhance success for all students not the platform used to deliver the instruction (Rice, 2006). The "No Significant Difference" (NSD) literature in education can be interpreted in two ways. First, the NSD findings demonstrate that delivering instruction or academic content at a distance is not an inferior method of providing an education. There is much more to the learning process than just the delivery method of instruction. Further, the NSD findings indicate that converting a traditional course into an online or technology-mediated distance delivery course does not necessarily improve student outcomes. Achieving gains involves more than adapting content to the medium; it involves a course redesign which maximizes the use of technology (Russell, 2001).

Students who are behind academically when they enter ninth grade require special supports from caring teachers and courses designed to help them acquire the content knowledge and learning skills that they missed in earlier grades (Herlihy & Quint, 2006). Without this, their risk for dropping out of school and experiencing unemployment is increased exponentially. Once students experience academic failure, for whatever reason, it is difficult to reroute them and get them fully engaged in their education. Because course failure may lead to delinquency or other school failures, this can begin a decline that results in

dropping out of school (Nastu, 2011). Online learning gives students an opportunity to get back on track. Online learning is a learning platform which is more about supporting the improvement of teaching practices and student achievement opportunities than it is about innovative digital technologies (Blomeyer, 2002).

The majority of K-12 students learning online participate in supplemental virtual schooling programs sponsored by school districts, universities, consortia of schools or, as is often the case, state departments of education (Tucker, 2007). Because students can integrate courses from these programs into their traditional brick-and-mortar high schools, supplemental programs allow students to take online courses in addition to their regular school-based courses. Supplemental virtual programs offer the most important information to public school reformers (Tucker, 2007).

The question for educational research is how to optimize instructional designs and technology in the online context in order to maximize learning opportunities and student achievement. Specifically, promising practices for promoting K-12 online success for credit recovery have not yet been fully evaluated (Oliver et al., 2009; Rice, 2009). Most research has been conducted on adult learners enrolled in virtual courses and/or distance education programs, and there is a disconnect in K-12 between policy decision makers and those who are charged with implementation and support of online credit recovery programs (Rice, 2006). It is imperative that leaders have the ability to accurately measure and analyze virtual education in order to discern the positive and negative impact on student achievement. This information will help determine and recommend promising practices in the online learning realm (Holstead et al., 2008). Little research into the effectiveness of K-12 online learning has been published, and there is a need to evaluate the quality of lower-performing student virtual learning experiences (Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Means et al., 2009). An examination of at-risk students' experiences with online learning for credit recovery may contribute to recommendations for how they are supported in their virtual coursework. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery.

## **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research question: What are stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery? The following sub-questions were used to answer the overarching question:

1. What are the students' perceptions of the benefits of supplemental online learning?
2. What are the students' perceptions of the challenges of supplemental online learning?
3. What are staff member perceptions of the benefits of supplemental online coursework for at-risk students?
4. What are staff member perceptions of the challenges at-risk students encounter while enrolled in supplemental online learning?

## Methodology

Given the research questions, this study was implemented with a qualitative approach using the case study method, which is appropriate when the researcher intends to generate a clear understanding of people or to capture the characteristics of events (Yin, 2009). Additionally, the case study method is an effective method for gathering information when the phenomenon to be studied is descriptive in nature, especially when describing why or how a phenomenon occurred or when an event is bounded by time and place (Creswell, 2007). This study probed into the relationships between students and their online coursework and between students and the teachers who support them on site while they are engaged in online learning. This method provides a rich, deep description through multiple means, two of which are a review of archival data and interviews in the participants' natural context at a given point in time (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007).

## Sample

This study employed purposive sampling (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007). The primary participants were twelve 10<sup>th</sup>- 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who were previously enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery at a large suburban high school. The student participants were considered at-risk for not graduating with their peers due to the fact that they had failed two or more courses in high school. Students requiring credit recovery take six traditional 50 minute course in addition to the supplemental online course which is completed at the end of the school day or on the students' own time. To ensure confidentiality, all study participants were assigned pseudonyms. From the population of at risk students, twelve agreed to participate in the study. There were four male and eight female students. Six out of eleven students were designated as economically disadvantaged and qualified for free or reduced lunch. One of the students was served in special education under the category of specific learning disability. Three of the students had been retained in middle school. Ten out of twelve had been retained in high school due to insufficient credits. All are in danger of not graduating in four years. Five out of eleven students have had more than fifteen absences in any high school year; (for one student no data are available). Nine out of eleven students (one – no data) are at or below the 20th percentile for class rank. Eight out of nine students failed math in ninth grade, three out of nine failed math and literature in ninth grade. Ninth grade data are only available for nine out of twelve participants. Overall, given the available information, the twelve student participants failed 78 classes (one half semester course) in high school and only two are currently classified as twelfth graders.

Teacher participants included the two content teachers who supervised and supported students on site as they completed their online coursework. Additional participants included a focus group of four graduation coaches from four of the five high schools in the county. These graduation coaches, who are certified high school teachers or school counselors, provided support and supervision for the supplemental online programs in each of their respective schools. As recommended by district leadership, the researcher made initial contact with the graduation coaches through a face-to-face meeting. A brief summary of the project was described and a request for their participation was made. They were not expected to decide at that time, and they were reassured of confidentiality and the option to decline without repercussion if they chose. Once approved, the researcher met with the school

principal, the two teachers, and the graduation coach who support supplemental online learning at the selected school in the study. Students requiring credit recovery maintain six traditional courses at 50 minutes each in addition to the supplemental online course. The lab is open at the end of school day three days a week for one hour. The students are strongly encouraged and expected to complete the majority of their online coursework at home or other location away from school.

### **Data Collection**

This study employed face-to-face structured interviews of 12 students and two teachers. It also included a 50 minute focus group interview with four graduation coaches from four out of five high schools in the district. Additionally, content analysis was conducted on data related to the academic history of the students in the study. Further, in order to gain a broad perspective of student achievement related to online coursework, available data involving the success or failure of all students enrolled throughout the county in supplemental online learning for credit recovery program was reviewed from the previous school year. Interview protocols were used for all participants. Face validity was established through a review of the protocols by a panel of three experts. Participant feedback regarding the interpretation of their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for credit recovery was given. By interviewing a number of participants, validity was established as the comments of participants were connected and evaluated against each other. The goal of this process was to comprehend how the participants developed and made meaning of their experience (Seidman, 2006).

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Following each recorded interview or focus group session, the recording was transcribed to create a preliminary coding list and gain an overall sense of the ideas and tone present (Creswell, 2007). Further coding was used to identify central themes by examining phrases and words that were repeated (Glesne, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). From these central themes, iterative sub-themes emerged and were organized into categories. Historical academic data of student participants, as well as the success or failure rate of all students enrolled in supplemental online learning in the county in the previous school year were analyzed for common patterns and themes and to gain a broader perspective of students involved in the supplemental online context.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The purposive sampling of this study limited the generalizability of the findings. The students in the study self-selected or were encouraged by teachers, counselors, or parents to enroll in supplemental online learning. The self-reporting nature of the data collection was an additional limitation. Teachers and graduation coaches were self-selected to support students in the online learning lab or assigned by their principals to this role. The results of this study will not be generalizable to all students enrolled in online learning for credit recovery, nor will they be indicative of all supplemental online learning programs. There are many variables in this case study which could not be controlled, such as how many and

which students enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery during the semester in the study and which staff members were assigned to support the students. The personal experiences of the researcher, the students, and the teachers are additional variables. Nonetheless, this method was selected to allow the researcher to gather data from several perspectives and sources, adding to the vast description of the case.

This study is delimited to one large suburban, southeastern Georgia high school. This school was selected because it is the largest in the district, and it represents a diverse population of students and academic programs. This study was also delimited to 10<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who were previously enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery and does not represent all students engaged in online learning in the school. Additionally, as this was a qualitative endeavor, the experiences of the participants delimit the findings to their responses and render the findings unique to the perspectives and situations of the students and teachers involved. Furthermore, as the researcher is the instrument for collecting data, an element of bias and subjectivity is acknowledged. Finally, in keeping with case study methodology, which notes that cases are bound by place and time (Yin, 2009), the content analysis of student data was delimited to the students' high school careers. Data related to the pass/fail rate of supplemental online coursework was delimited to the 2010-2011 school year, and the interview data was delimited to the semester in the study.

## **Findings**

Analysis of data from student interviews revealed four major themes related to the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for credit recovery. The first was the expectations of themselves, others, and their online coursework. As students began their online coursework, they soon realized that it was all about them and that their success or failure rested with themselves. Secondly, student responses and historical data demonstrated the complicated situations students were in and that they were at risk for more than academics. The negative academic history, economic disadvantage, and home life all impacted their school performance. Next, students described the significance of having choice and control as they took ownership of their online learning. Finally, students reported the lasting benefits and the impact of online coursework.

### **Benefits – Student perspectives**

A review of data from student participant interviews revealed benefits and challenges to online learning in three of the major themes. The first reflected the students' perception in regards to the expectations of self, others, and their online coursework. All students acknowledged personal responsibility for success or failure in their online coursework. Although coursework was not especially difficult, it did require effort that involved taking notes, reading, and memorizing. In addition, they felt supported by friends, family, and school staff.

Students cited several characteristics of online learning and circumstances that promoted choice and control. Students experienced ownership of their learning, and options as to when, where, for how long, and in what way they would complete their online coursework. Distraction was reduced and learning enhanced as students conveyed their positive experiences with online learning. One student noted:

It's all me and I learn at my own pace; it's just more helpful. I don't have to decode what a teacher says because I can read what the screen in front of me says and if I don't understand it then I can try to turn it into my own lingo, my own wording, and I can understand it better. It's you and the work, and you can focus on that.

Students also indicated that their experiences in online learning carried over into other areas of their lives. They described increased skills and how those skills were applied in traditional coursework. For example, they felt more effective taking class notes and had a better understanding of core course content. Students also gave specific examples of improved grammatical skills, writing ability, and mathematical conceptual understanding. In addition, they felt more resourceful in their ability to locate information and study assistance on the Internet. They can scan texts more efficiently online and in the classroom that saves them time and reduces frustration. Hope and encouragement that they might graduate as a result of their online learning success was an additional benefit.

### **Challenges – Student perspectives**

Interview responses revealed challenges with coursework, motivation, technology, and internal/external struggles. Data also revealed recommendations to others, and how support of a teacher continues to impact student success in online coursework. Students described difficulties with academics, primarily in math. Lack of self-motivation and poor time management impacted their lack of success in both traditional and online classes. All students endorsed use of technology daily and several anticipated careers in the field; however, participants also described that technology was confusing and frustrating at times.

Students enrolled in online courses with online teacher support described poor interaction and complications when attempting to communicate with online teachers. For example, one student stated, "I had someone I could call and talk to on the phone and stuff and she was supposed to help me. But it was just really complicated to get answers. I had to wait days to get any information back. That was probably the worst part about it." This sentiment was reinforced by other students that participated in courses that were fully online.

Students who attended lab sessions after school described the limited role of the monitor and lamented the teachers' ability to assist with specific content. Online learning was also not compatible with every student's preferred learning style. Work, attendance, cost, discouragement, and poor time management placed students further at-risk for not completing their online coursework and dropping out of school.

Data from the interview protocols supported the third theme which described the importance of choice and control. This was evidenced as students acknowledged their individual experiences regarding working at their own pace, managing their time, managing their learning by reading thoroughly and taking notes, and making themselves work on their online coursework even when they did not prefer it. Students acknowledged personal consequences when they made poor choices. Overall, students revealed a self-awareness regarding the expectations of experiencing success in online learning; but the majority of them expressed the need for teacher support –both online and on site. They described needing a teacher who knows the specific content they are working on. Teachers are also needed to answer questions, to clarify confusing vocabulary or learning expectations, to



assist when they get stuck, or to be available online at various hours. The students acknowledged the benefits of online learning, but admitted, “We are not there yet.”

### **Benefits – Staff perspectives**

According to staff members, content teachers and graduation coaches have very different roles, purposes, and perspectives. Content teachers, who function as monitors for students working on site on their online coursework, stated their role is one of objective separation. They have a narrow, immediate goal of assisting students in their current online coursework and stated that acknowledging student failure freed students to admit need and seek help. This contributed to positive community.

Graduation coaches have complex roles and work with students more often and on a deeper level. They are concerned about everything going on in the students’ lives, not just their academics. All staff members described how the online environment is more positive for students than the traditional classroom. Mastery is required in an online class, and students found motivation in that.

Staff members described how online learning promotes success, even though the students were at-risk for more than academics. The students had jobs and outside activities that caused conflicts for them. They experienced a sense of accomplishment because they had to work hard in online coursework. Staff members described how students have a limited perspective and that “they’ve never had it easy.” Students were described as grateful, humble, and appreciative. As a result of being enrolled in online courses for credit recovery, students built positive relationships with staff members and peers.

Interview protocol data also revealed benefits of choice and control for at-risk students. Staff participants described how options promoted student ownership and autonomy. When students had increased opportunities for success, they began to mature and manage their own time more efficiently. Staff members saw their role as one of a partnership where they facilitated and supported students, not controlled or directed them. Positive student examples promoted and motivated other students to be successful in their online coursework.

The positive impact of success in online coursework carried over to other classes and their lives. Students began to believe they can graduate. They developed good memories of school, and they celebrated each others’ successes. Because students had to work for their own success, it was more meaningful. Mastery is required in online learning, and that impacted students’ perceptions of success and failure.

### **Challenges – Staff perspectives**

Staff participants described the challenges encountered with online learning for credit recovery by their at-risk students. They reported providing technical support and collaborated with content providers regarding problems with course materials. They also described the need to be frank and forthright with students regarding student personal responsibility for their online coursework. Staff served as advocates and intermediaries for students with parents, teachers, and administrators. When trust was established the students sought them out for support and shared their successes. These are some of the challenges they identified.

Many classroom teachers had limited understanding of the role of the graduation coach, and the coaches reported that teachers could be easily taken advantage of. Staff members described that the students as at-risk for more than academics, distracted, and unmotivated. They had limited parental support or involvement. Further risk factors included attendance and outside responsibilities. To communicate with students and overcome some of these challenges, texting was reported to be the most effective method.

The graduation coaches described 'life changing experiences' that had a significant impact on the students' academic performances. Some students had lost a parent or sibling to death, had a parent incarcerated, or had a parent deployed overseas with the military. Having a limited understanding of the challenges at-risk students face was a challenge associated with this experience.

According to staff responses, students experienced anxiety, severe pressure, and feelings of being overwhelmed, which lead to shutting down or seeking destructive outlets. Staff members described students as being poor time managers and that cost was a big factor in whether students chose the option of online coursework for credit recovery.

The need to continue to seek online options for credit recovery was reported. They experienced frustration over policy makers who are slow to regard online learning as a viable option and described online learning as rigorous. Staff members described the need for stakeholders on the ground and directly responsible for the implementation of online learning to be a part of the decision-making process.

## **Discussion**

Studies have shown that the technical, organizational, and academic abilities of students may limit their access to the proposed benefits of online learning (Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Clark & Berge, 2005). At-risk students specifically, are described in the literature as displaying weaknesses in academic proficiency, technical skills, and self-direction (Blocher et al., 2002; Oliver et al., 2009), but online learning can help struggling students interact with academic content in a new and different way. Online learning is set up in such a way that it places control of the learning in the hands of students. Students for the first time begin to develop self-efficacy and experience control over their learning. Individual autonomy can be developed by activities and programs that emphasize setting realistic goals, accepting responsibility, and building self-confidence (Woolfolk, 2007). Students in this study described how they soon realized that the responsibility for their online course success rested in them. Support was generally available, but they had to seek it out. Not all of them were able to garner the resources they needed, and a few were unsuccessful in their online coursework as a result. It would be expected that these millennial students would be 'digital natives' and comfortable with all facets of technology. However, while all students reported daily use of technology for personal and social reasons, some described it as confusing and frustrating. Moreover, students reported that they generally had control over the time, place, and effort involved in their online learning. Many described a passive learning experience where they read a predictably organized learning module and took tests. For some students, this structure and sequential presentation of content contributed to greater understanding and lasting learning because it reduced distractions and allowed them to track their progress and know what more was expected.

Students also endorsed the benefits of embedded design elements. This finding aligned with Barbour's (2007) research on effective asynchronous course design for high school students. Specifically, students commented on the benefits of frequent summarization, worked-out examples and models, especially in math, the use of visuals and video, the avoidance of excessive text, and an accessible readability level. This supported similar recommendations made by Oliver et al. (2009).

Much has been described in the literature regarding the benefit of individualizing the online learning environment for at-risk students (Holstead et al., 2008; Natsu, 2011); however, the students in the study reported no such benefit. The students were using four different online platforms, and none of them were adjusted or altered in any way to meet the needs of individual learners.

As in traditional instructional practices, giving frequent and meaningful feedback to students is a critical component to student academic success. Further, providing an engaging instructional platform and active learning opportunities are highly effective components in both distance and face-to-face environments (Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Barbour, 2007; Rice, 2006). Several of the students in the study took an online course through a state-run virtual school. These students had the benefit of an online teacher to support them. However, participants described poor interaction and complications when attempting to communicate with the online teacher. It should be noted that some participants did not have computers in the home. Further, the lab at the school was only open and available to students Monday through Wednesday. Therefore, a problem or question emailed to a virtual teacher on Wednesday would not get to the student until Monday afternoon when the student reported to the lab. Attendance issues and employment responsibility further complicated this interaction.

Staff members reported several features of online learning that promoted student success and suggested that it lacks the negative social and academic experiences encountered in a traditional classroom. This is an important finding considering at-risk students need genuine motivation through validation and meaningful social interaction (Archambault et al., 2010; Christle et al., 2007). Staff participants described also how students experience anxiety, pressure, and withdrawal as a result of repeated failure in school and that students are more likely to advocate for themselves and seek assistance in the lab after school. They are encouraged to acknowledge need and request help from the teachers (monitors) who are assigned to the lab.

Most students enrolled in supplemental online courses attend a brick-and-mortar school, and generally the online program requires a mentor be provided to the student. It is expected that this mentor be available for both technical and academic support (Watson, 2007). Student participants presented contrasting views of the available support in the online learning lab. Some acknowledged that the monitors provided academic as well as technical assistance, while others noted the limited content knowledge of the monitors as it related to their own online coursework. Overall, the students felt that the monitors' primary responsibility was for accountability, not necessarily instructional support.

### **Recommendations**

First and foremost, school leaders who make decisions regarding how to best support at-risk students and improve graduation outcomes should review the results of this study. At-risk students have complex issues and challenges that require different options, considerations,

supports, and opportunities. Opening a lab at the end of the school day for an hour, a few days a week and staffing it with a couple teachers does not adequately provide for the learning and emotional needs of students who require additional supports. Considerations must be given as to how to provide follow-up, accountability, and ongoing encouragement and communication with at-risk students enrolled in online credit recovery. It is incumbent upon school leaders to ensure that all staff members have the opportunity and training to better understand their roles in reaching and supporting at-risk students, especially those who are enrolled in additional online coursework in order to recover credits and graduate on time. There is a potential for tremendous student growth and re-engagement in their education in online learning. Supporting needy students in a high school is the responsibility of all staff, not just the graduation coach and a few others. On-site mentors and tutors may significantly impact the success or failure of at-risk students in online coursework. When hiring new teachers, principals should consider individuals with knowledge of content, technical skills, and the ability to relate to students of all abilities and backgrounds. A well-organized, well-planned program with staff to support each of the main content areas, and who are available to communicate with students on off hours will further enhance student performance. Students enroll in online courses with differing levels of academic ability, autonomy, and self-efficacy. A system of supports that is scaffolded to meet the needs of individual learners will likely yield the greatest results and promote student independence with lifelong benefits. Further, a system of accountability that provides data regarding the effectiveness of various online platforms is vital when considering which option is most appropriate for the targeted population. Additionally, online learning is a viable option for many learners, not just those recovering credit. School leaders set the tone and the climate in their schools, and when the success of all students by all means becomes a priority for the principal that impact is felt in every classroom.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The school leader's responsibility is to promote a positive learning environment that allows all students to access effective and engaging instruction. As school budgets shrink and students lean toward technology, online learning must become a part of every high school students' educational career. There is a substantial gap between what is and what works - with teachers and policy makers holding on to ineffective programs and delivery models. Strong leadership with a clear plan is needed to bridge the gap and bring America's education system into the 21st century. By developing an increased awareness of stakeholders' perceptions of supplemental online learning for credit recovery, local leaders will be better prepared to optimize the benefits and reduce the barriers in the K-12 online context.

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# **A Comparative Case Study of Factors Distinguishing Between High and Low-Performance on Reading Achievement in Elementary Rural Appalachian Schools**

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*This qualitative comparative case study identified factors that distinguish between high and low-performance on reading achievement in elementary rural Appalachian schools. This study determined the most effective instructional reading strategies, as well as other influential factors, implemented by school districts in the rural Appalachia area with similar student demographics and economic disadvantages. Data were collected through interview questions to assess the staffs' perceptions of their school's instructional program, leadership strategies, and teaching methods. Observations of classrooms during reading instruction also were conducted to identify instructional strategies being used. Results indicate high teacher morale, teacher efficacy, supportive leadership, meaningful professional development, and instructional strategies such as: explicit small group instruction, uninterrupted time spent on reading instruction, and inclusion of literacy centers are all variables that discriminate between these high and low performing schools.*

## **Introduction**

A major function at the elementary school level is teaching children how to read. Research provides evidence that specific early literacy concepts can predict young students' later reading achievement (DeBruinParecki, 2004; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Strickland & Shanahan, 2004). If children do not acquire basic reading skills in their elementary school years, their future educational and occupational performance could be

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severely affected. According to the National Right to Read Foundation (2007), forty-two million American adults cannot read; fifty million are unable to read at a higher level than is expected of a fourth or fifth grader. The National Institute for Literacy (2007) reported that forty-three percent of those whose literacy skills are the lowest live in poverty.

Reading is a skill that has often been taken for granted by many different stakeholders (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). However, after the federal government passed a law to hold school districts accountable for student reading levels, schools began paying closer attention to their reading scores and feeling the pressure of the NCLB Act, which called for 100% of students reading at a proficient level by 2014. Effective reading ability provides students with the weapons to combat the ever increasing demands of the world and to perform higher on any test (Reading First, 2007).

Previous research has not typically examined high-performing, high-poverty schools in Appalachia or other rural areas. This study examines critical factors that may contribute to a student's achievement in rural Appalachia such as: within-school support and leadership, professional development, data-based decision making, and effective instructional strategies in the classroom.

### **Objective**

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe factors distinguishing between high and low-performing elementary rural Appalachian schools on reading achievement. In particular, this qualitative comparative case study compared instructional reading strategies, as well as other variables that distinguish between two schools with similar student demographics and economic disadvantages in a rural Appalachia area.

This particular study was developed to assess the following question: What factors differ in rural Appalachian elementary schools that are high and low-achieving in reading? The study examined critical factors that previous research has identified as influencing a student's reading achievement, predominantly in studies of urban contexts.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research methodology was selected for this study. The researcher gathered data through observations and interviews. The primary research question for the study, "What factors differ in rural Appalachian elementary schools that are high and low-achieving in reading?" drove the choice to utilize the case study method.

In this study, the lead author gained access to both sites by obtaining permission from the school administrators. The sources of data for the study were observations, transcripts from interviews, and document analysis. The observations took place during each grade level's reading instruction. Interviews were conducted with one classroom teacher per grade level (K-3) and the principal at each site. Each school's website, as well as their Kentucky State School Report Card, was utilized to review demographic data and state end of year test scores.



## Sample

Criteria for selection of the two school sites for this research included the following decision rules:

1. Each elementary school is located in an Appalachian county in Kentucky;
2. The schools serve a high poverty student population; both have over fifty percent of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch;
3. The ethnicity of students tested in both schools is one hundred percent Caucasian;
4. The student to teacher ratio for each school is fifteen to one;
5. Both schools were recipients of the Reading First grant; and
6. One school had to be high performing and the other low performing based on data collected under Kentucky's state accountability model.

School A, ARC Elementary (ARC and Bohman Elementary are pseudonyms used in this study) had 95.24% of their third grade students score proficient or distinguished on the Kentucky Core Content Test (KCCT) for reading in 2009 and 100% in 2010. The school's attendance rate during 2009-2010 was 95.1%, and their grade retention rate was 0%. ARC Elementary has met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) every year. The mission statement of the ARC Elementary School is... "to provide all students with the BEST respectful academic, social, and emotional learning experiences and environment where every student experiences SUCCESS ON THE ROAD TO PROFICIENCY."

School B (Bohman Elementary) had 57.69% of their third grade students score proficient or distinguished on the KCCT in reading in 2009 and 53.7% in 2010. Bohman Elementary's attendance rate for 2009-10 was 92.7%, and their retention rate was 0.9%. This school did not meet the requirements for AYP in reading for the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years. The school status in 2010-11, as a result of not making AYP for two years, was School Improvement – Year 1. The consequences were to notify parents, implement school choice, and write or revise the school improvement plan. Bohman Elementary's mission statement states: "We, the staff, students, and parents, do believe in the following: Our teachers will always teach all students to do the best of their ability, our students will always do their very best, our parents will always help all students to do their very best, and our school will always be a great place to learn."

## Participants

The participants in this study included the principal at each school and one teacher from each grade level (K-3). Due to the small size of each school, there was only one teacher per grade level observed and interviewed at each site. The average years of teaching experience at ARC Elementary was 9.5 years, and at Bohman Elementary, the average was 11.2 years experience. Both schools reported 100% of classes taught by teachers who participated in content-focused professional development. Neither of the schools had teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Standards nor with a doctoral degree. At ARC Elementary, 27.3% of all teachers had a bachelor's degree, 36.4% had received a master's degree, and 36.4% had acquired a Rank 1 (those holding regular certificates and who have a master's degree in a subject field approved by the Education Professional Standards Board or equivalent

continuing education and who have earned thirty semester hours of approved graduate work or equivalent continuing education; or those teachers who have met the requirements for Rank II and earned initial certification of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards). Bohman Elementary reported 30% of all teachers held a bachelor's degree, 60% had received master's degrees, and only 10% had acquired a Rank 1.

### **Data Collection**

The lead author gained access to both sites by obtaining permission from the school administrator. The purpose of the study, the type and number of participants required, and the time frame of the study were explained via email. Data collection methods utilized included observations, interviews, and document analysis. The data collection process began by reviewing the information on each school's website, as well as accessing each school's report card from the Kentucky Department of Education website. Multi-method data collection strategies increased validity in the investigation and facilitated triangulation.

### **Observations**

The observations took place during each grade level's reading instruction and lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes each. To help ensure validity in the observations, the researcher used the standard Reading First Observation forms, which were also used by school, district, and state coaches, along with field notes at the bottom. These forms are checklists based on the five Reading First components for effective instructional practices as identified by the National Reading Panel. The components observed were phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency during whole group, small group, and centers. Each form had a place to fill in observer name, school name, teacher name, date, and class/grade level observed. See Appendices A, B, and C for the elements included in the observation checklists.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were an additional method of data collection. The general interview guide approach was used in order to collect the same information from each interviewee. This also allowed the interviewer to modify the order and wording of the questions, as well as, an opportunity to clarify statements and probe for additional information. According to Patton (2002), in an interview guide, "...the interviewer remains free to build a conversation within a particular subject area and enables the interviewer to explore, probe, and ask questions that elucidate and illuminate that particular subject...and to establish a conversational style" (p. 343). Interviews were chosen in addition to observations in order to obtain more information about the "why" behind the instruction of the teachers. This also allowed teachers to share their perspectives about various factors and how these factors have influenced their teaching practices. The principal at each site also was interviewed using some of the same questions. A few modifications were made to the questions regarding their leadership role.

The interviews were conducted during planning periods or whenever someone was available to cover a participating teacher's classroom. The interviews lasted approximately fifteen to thirty minutes and were conducted in the teacher's classroom or in a private office

outside of their classroom. The principal interviews were conducted in their offices. With consent of all participants, interviews were tape recorded for later transcription and analysis. Field notes also were made during the conversation. As recommended by Patton (2002), notes consisted primarily of key phrases, lists of points made by the respondent with key terms, and words shown in quotation marks to capture the interviewee's own language. The interview questions were developed in order to glean information about the teachers experience levels, feelings about their instruction prior to and after Reading First implementation (if they were there during initial implementation), professional development, and how well they felt supported by the administration. All questions were designed to inform the research question, "What factors differ in rural Appalachian elementary schools that are high and low-achieving in reading?" The interview questions can be found in Appendix D.

### **Data Analysis and Synthesis**

As noted above, multiple sources of data and methods of collection were used including interviews, observations, and analysis of documents such as school report cards. Using a variety of methods helped the researcher understand the proposed inquiry as well as provided reliability and validity to the study (Glesne, 1999; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995).

### **Observation Analysis and Synthesis**

After collectively reviewing the observation data, it was organized onto a spreadsheet in order to interpret and compare the findings from each classroom at both schools. The top of each column was coded using numbers to identify the teachers observed (T1=Teacher 1). Next, the findings were analyzed to identify and compare consistencies and/or inconsistencies between policies and practices being used in each classroom at both schools.

### **Interview Analysis and Synthesis**

The process of data analysis for the interviews began with a verbatim transcription of each interview followed with line by line coding. The concept of line by line coding requires the researcher to take every line of the document and assign a code to each line. Charmaz (2006) noted that this type of coding works especially well for interview data. The participants' responses to each question from ARC Elementary were compared to the responses from the participant's at Bohman Elementary. Each interview was analyzed inductively to identify patterns and relationships in order to see if categorical themes emerged. If categories were formed, the data were reviewed deductively to determine if the categories were supported by the overall data set.

### **Limitations of the Study**

In doing the qualitative research of this case study, there were limitations to consider. Case studies are limited to describing particular phenomena rather than predicting future behavior (Merriam, 1998). According to Yin (2003), these studies, "...are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes" (p. 10). One can hardly design a single study that takes into account all persons, places, and periods to which one hopes the findings

will generalize. This qualitative comparative case study identified factors that distinguish between high and low-performing on reading achievement in elementary rural Appalachian schools.

One limitation was the small sample size. Specifically, the researcher interviewed and observed only one teacher per grade level (K-3) at each school for this particular study. Another obvious limitation was time constraints. Classroom teachers have a limited amount of time during the day in which they are willing to give up to participate. The interviews were conducted during planning times or during a time that the teacher could be covered by another staff member. Other limitations may include that this was not a longitudinal study and the teachers' ability to reflect accurately about professional development sessions they may have received in the past. These limitations are not, however, significant enough to render the benefits of the research findings unworthy.

## **Results**

The findings of this study are organized into sections based on the overall research question and common themes that emerged from observations and interviews. The most prominent findings are summarized below.

### **Teacher Morale**

When schools have teachers with high morale, they also have a higher probability of having students with high morale; teacher morale has a direct impact on student achievement (Keeler & Andrews, 1963; Whitaker et al., 2000). In this study, it was evident from data collected during observations and interviews that teachers at ARC Elementary had high morale. Many activities, rewards, and celebrations were in place to recognize student and teacher achievement. Teachers expressed that their school was a happy place to be and that everyone has a positive attitude. One teacher went as far as comparing them to a big happy family. Another teacher stated:

I think the morale of the building is great. I think we've all got the positive attitude. We know what our goal is, to have high test scores. That's what we work toward, and we're all willing to work together. I think we have a great, great staff.

The principal at ARC Elementary noted that she feels a healthy school culture and work ethics are the two most influential factors in the academic success of her school. As a result of working where there is a positive school culture and good work ethics, teachers and the principal at ARC Elementary reported high morale.

In contrast, teachers at Bohman Elementary were hesitant and put more thought into the questions that focused on morale during their interviews. While, most teachers expressed that the morale of the building was good overall, their responses appeared guarded. One teacher was more specific by explaining that some days it is good and some days it is bad. There are a couple of celebrations for students that take place during the school year; however, there is nothing in place to celebrate or boost teacher morale. Many teachers noted that there just was not enough time or they were too busy. Two of the teachers reported that there was little done for teachers and felt that more could be done. The principal at Bohman

Elementary stated that the teachers at her school were hard-working and credited them as being the most influential factor to the student's success at her school.

Studer (2008) reported that it is the role of the administrator to create a culture where the staff believes that their work environment is unlike any other. The goal of the school leader is to promote the type of school climate that will foster excitement and commitment to the improvement of the school. Studer (2008) discovered that when employees develop a purpose for their work and perceive it as meaningful, increased performance within the organization results. The principal at ARC Elementary creates opportunities to motivate her staff and support them in achieving their goals. Data revealed that teachers at ARC Elementary felt valued and inspired by their principal. In analyzing the data from Bohman Elementary, however, this type of support and motivation was not clear.

The principal at ARC Elementary recognized that motivation and celebrating success was critical to boosting teacher morale. Whitaker (1999) found that keeping teachers motivated and enthusiastic about their job is an important task for principals. Similarly, Thompson (1996), author of *Motivating Others*, stated, "The principal is not only responsible for self-motivation, but, more importantly, is held accountable for the motivation of the school staff and even students" (p.3). A true leader is continually lifting up employees participating in their day-to-day grind in order to help them do the best job possible. Thompson (1996) also pointed out, "Principals who are effective 'motivators' create other conditions which satisfy the needs of individuals within the school" (p.5). Principals also celebrate teachers' achievements knowing that school success depends on the hard work of the teachers employed there. One teacher at Bohman made reference to the fact that there was a lack of celebrations and felt that there could be more.

## **Teacher Efficacy**

Teacher efficacy has been defined as the extent to which teachers believe they can affect student learning (Dembo & Gibson, 1985). Teacher efficacy relies on convincing teachers to believe in what they do and take ownership of their teaching. Self-efficacy and locus of control must be distinguished, but they work together, because the way in which a person tends to attribute control informs that person's beliefs about their abilities (Bandura, 1997). Generally, those who believe that situations cannot be controlled or changed do not persist as long when a task is difficult, and it becomes easy to relinquish personal investment or responsibility in that situation.

Teachers at ARC Elementary demonstrated a high sense of efficacy and an internal locus of control. Even though they work in an environment with many disadvantages, they were still motivated to change the system and held themselves accountable for finding ways and implementing strategies to make their students successful in reading. In contrast, teachers at Bohman Elementary demonstrated a low sense of efficacy and an external locus of control. All four teachers that were interviewed at Bohman indicated that they felt parental involvement was a factor that affects student's reading achievement. They saw this as something that was out of their control and a factor to blame for low student achievement, as opposed to viewing parents as untapped assets. Teachers with low general teaching efficacy do not feel that teachers in general can make a significant difference in the lives of students, while teachers with low personal teaching efficacy do not feel that they, personally, affect the lives of the students (Ashton & Webb, 1986).

## **Principal's Perceptions of Teachers**

Teachers at the two schools in this study reported contrasting perceptions regarding support from their principal. Each principal used a different approach to offer administrative support. The teachers at ARC Elementary voiced that they felt extremely supported in terms of instructional practices and relationships. The principal at ARC Elementary takes a personal interest in each of her teachers. She makes concentrated efforts to meet with teachers in order to discover their strengths, individual personalities, and instructional needs. Teachers feel that she is behind them 100% and has complete buy-in to whatever they are doing. The principal at ARC Elementary stated that she views her teachers as experts.

The principal at Bohman Elementary took a different approach to administrative support in relation to improving reading instruction for students in grades K-3. She focused her efforts on providing resources that teachers need in order to increase student achievement. Teachers described her as hard-working and a stickler for following the rules. The teachers perceived her as very helpful in reference to discipline and enforcing rules. The principal at Bohman Elementary was very interested in analyzing student data and their achievement. In contrast to the principal at ARC who described her teachers as experts, the principal at Bohman described some of her staff members as teachers who are ready for retirement and resistant to change. She also viewed the newer teachers in the building as lacking maturity and indicated that some of them may not have the sufficient educational background to be in the profession of teaching.

The different views that each principal held about their teachers, in turn, affected their leadership styles and how they interacted with teachers. These interactions had implications for relationships and long term sustainability of school improvement. Principals might be unaware of their personal leadership styles; but in reality, they could be practicing one or more theories in their day to day activities. McGregor (1960) classified leadership as either an authoritarian style (Theory X) or a more egalitarian style (Theory Y). While implementing a Theory Y approach, an administrator nurtures an environment and recognizes that employees have the capability to be high performers, develop and assume responsibility, and be self-motivated.

The principal at ARC Elementary clearly demonstrated a Theory Y approach to leadership. She created an environment in her school that promoted effective communication and trust. Effective principals trust the teachers to do their jobs without constant supervision, and the teachers feel this support and empowerment. Due to the principal at ARC Elementary creating this type of environment, the teachers became self-directed and channeled their efforts toward the achievement of organizational goals including high achievement in Reading.

In contrast, the principal at Bohman Elementary implemented a Theory X approach to leadership. McGregor (1960) contended that a tough or soft approach to managing may be used by embracing Theory X. One who practices a Theory X leadership style may drive their employees at work because they think they are lazy and this is the only way to get things accomplished. They also insist on complete compliance, rigid organizational patterns, and controls based on imposed authority. While the principal at Bohman clearly cares about student achievement and providing her teachers with the resources they need, she lacks close personal relationships and a level of trust with her teachers that is important for strengthening

school culture. This problematic culture stems in part from her Theory X leadership style, which is grounded in and further reinforces the poor views she holds of her teachers.

### **Teachers' Perceptions of the Principals**

The principals' perceptions of their roles in supporting teachers and reading achievement at both schools were very closely related to their teachers' perceptions. The principal at ARC Elementary demonstrated the interpersonal and intrapersonal traits Leithwood and others (2004) suggest are needed to "develop people." She discussed her efforts of working hard to put a schedule in place that allows teachers at her school to teach to their strengths. She added she will do just about anything to get them the resources they need for instruction. Finally, she talked about how she strives to be fair and how much she cares about her staff. She does not expect anything out of them that she would not do herself and stressed how important it is that they know that. While the principal at Bohman Elementary also discussed how important it is for her to provide her staff with the resources they need, she also admitted to being "hard-nosed" and that she accepts no excuses. She stands firm on her belief that all students can learn, and she will accept nothing else. This attitude relates back to the Theory X style approach to leadership where there is less of an emphasis on building relationships.

These findings about school leadership are supported by the research of Studer (2003) who found that personal relationships within business have a profound impact on the sustained improvement of an organization. Studer argued that it was the daily relationships with employees that provided the foundation for motivation in their jobs. Studer found that the way leaders interact with and treat their employees is the primary mechanism by which a leader can improve performance. This emphasis on relationships was characteristic of the ARC principal. However, the Bohman principal was focused on the task with little attention to relationships. In fact, she viewed her staff through a deficit lens, which further diminished relationships with them because the teachers were less interested in having healthy relationships with her as well.

### **Teacher Professional Development**

Despite the eighty hours of professional development that was mandated for teachers during the Reading First grant and the twenty-four hours that teachers are still participating in on a yearly basis, teachers at ARC Elementary and Bohman Elementary could not specifically pinpoint a professional development session that focused on literacy instruction that stood out to be beneficial. The teachers at ARC Elementary noted that the sessions they enjoyed most were the ones that were hands-on and allowed them to make things they could take back to their classrooms and use. One teacher at Bohman Elementary expressed that she felt many of the professional development sessions at their district were "one size fits all" and rarely offered ideas or suggestions that she does not already do.

Organizational change literature, along with experience in general, indicates that innovations can disappear quickly once the impetus for them disappears (Rogers, 1995). While conversations about professional development were not ideal at either school, teachers at ARC Elementary spoke more favorably about their experiences than teachers at Bohman Elementary. For example, one ARC teacher went into great detail that the training she received during Reading First made her realize she was not teaching effectively and enhanced

her instruction. Two of the teachers at Bohman Elementary were newer teachers and had not received the trainings offered during Reading First. However, the teachers that did receive professional development during Reading First did not sustain the practices that were set forth by the grant.

On the contrary, the teachers at ARC Elementary sustained many of the practices after the Reading First grant was over. In particular, they continue to implement differentiated and small group instruction through utilization of personnel across the domains of general education, special education, and entitlement programs. They also continue to apply the information gained through training on the use of instructional materials, programs, strategies, and approaches based on scientifically based reading research. Finally, they have sustained the use of the GRADE and DIBELS assessments and utilize the training they received on how to use screening, diagnostic, and classroom-based reading assessments to identify student difficulties. ARC Elementary sustained these practices as a result of higher student achievement in reading.

Literature reviewed in this study presented a strong argument that teacher professional development plays an important role on student growth. Sousa (2006) found that like students, teachers need brain-based learning experiences that are relevant and challenging and provide opportunities for active participation. In Bohman Elementary's case, there is a significant disconnect between the way the district and the school expects teachers to differentiate instruction to raise student achievement yet provides professional development that is "one size fits all" and not specific to the needs of the students or teachers.

### **Instructional Practices: Explicit Small Group Instruction, Literacy Centers, and Instructional Time**

Another finding in this study is that there are differing approaches to instructional practices for reading in Grades K-3 at each school. Teachers at ARC Elementary meet with small groups of students for explicit differentiated instruction during the literacy block, as well as an additional forty minutes during a supplemental reading time. This small group instruction during the literacy block occurs with groups of three to four students during the literacy center time.

On the contrary, teachers at Bohman Elementary do not meet with small groups of students during their literacy block. The teachers do not implement literacy centers as part of their reading instruction. Instead, they implement a traditional approach to learning using the basal text and whole group instruction as their primary means of instructional practice. However, they do meet with small groups of students during a thirty minute block that occurs at a different time of day where they work with students in tiers one, two, and three where the instruction focuses on the students' needs.

Literature supports that small group instruction is effective because the teaching is focused on precisely what the student needs to learn to move forward (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Tomlinson (2003) centered her instructional theory on the construct of responsive teaching, which asks teachers to tailor their reading instruction to the individual performance level of every student. Centers allow students the opportunity to work independently while the teacher addresses the individual needs of those students who benefit from additional help in a small group setting. Centers offer a chance to reach the needs of diverse learners relative



to readiness, interest, and learning style by including differentiating strategies (Tomlinson, 2001).

The literature reviewed in this study indicated that the most successful school districts spent a longer amount of time in daily reading instruction. Carnahan & Levesque (2005) suggested that schools should provide ninety minutes of protected instructional time and student intervention with supplemental reading. Observational data for this study indicated that the implementation of explicit and differentiated small group instruction practices was a consistent part of the instructional reading lessons at ARC Elementary. Such practices were implemented not only during the uninterrupted literacy block but also during an additional forty minute supplemental reading time every day. However, at Bohman Elementary, explicit and differentiated small group instruction only took place during the thirty minutes of supplemental reading time that occurred outside the literacy block.

### **Significance of the Study**

After applying in 2002 and receiving funding in 2003-2004, 74 Kentucky schools began Reading First implementation during the 2004-2005 school year. Schools across the state began the year by acquiring a baseline score on the required standardized test GRADE, which revealed that only 30.1% of students in grades K-3 in the state scored at the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile or above. This translates to 5,593 students out of 18,538 reading on or above grade level in the fall of the first year of Reading First. By the end of the fifth year of implementation, Kentucky had 77% of all K-3 students reading at or above proficiency based on GRADE results (Carney, 2010).

At the end of year four, students from eleven schools in Kentucky averaged the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile or better on GRADE; all eleven of these were rural Appalachian schools. The fact that all eleven schools were rural and Appalachian strongly recommended such schools for study. Previous research has not typically examined high-performing, high-poverty schools in Appalachia or other rural areas. If stakeholders can develop an understanding of what policies and practices characterize these schools, it would inform recommendations that could be replicated in similarly situated schools with historically low performance.

This study examined reading achievement in one high performing and one low performing elementary rural Appalachia school. The central question that drove this research was: What factors differ in rural Appalachian elementary schools that are high and low-achieving in reading? It examined critical factors that may attribute to student achievement in rural Appalachia such as: teacher morale, leadership, professional development, data-based decision making, and effective instructional strategies in the classroom. Results from this study led to the conclusion that high teacher morale, teacher efficacy, supportive leadership, meaningful professional development, and specific instructional strategies are all factors that affect student achievement in reading. The influence of the principal on all variables that emerged is highlighted. More importantly, ARC elementary serves as a case demonstrating that schools can effectively serve students from backgrounds with disadvantages.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The findings of this qualitative comparative case study offer particular insight into the types of leadership support and instructional strategies that contribute to student reading

achievement in grades K-3 at two elementary schools in rural Appalachia. Since there is limited research on this topic, the opportunity for further exploration of this topic has strong merit. This study could be replicated in other schools to inform stakeholders regarding factors that increase student reading achievement.

Further research should be done in this area to determine whether or not it would be beneficial for low performing schools to implement specific instructional methods. Further research could also be done comparing other schools which meet AYP and those which consistently fail to meet the standards to determine whether instructional methods and leadership support are different. Comparing other schools in this area could identify different methods and trends in student reading achievement.

Another possible area for future research would be to conduct a longitudinal study of low and high performing schools over time. It would be important to assess the sustained impact that leadership support and the implementation of specific instructional practices such as explicit and differentiated small group instruction have on reading achievement over a given period of time. Principals could document all instructional changes over an extended time while tracking student achievement to determine which strategies are most effective for growth in student reading achievement. Further studies could include comparing urban schools to rural schools in order to compare and contrast the factors affecting reading achievement. Finally, research linking specific teachers in a school to their student's achievement as opposed to an index score based on all teachers, and research quantifying variables in a model (i.e., morale or professional development) to see which ones are the most powerful predictors of student achievement should be conducted.

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**APPENDIX A  
OBSERVATION FORM FOR WHOLE GROUP INSTRUCTION**

Whole Group Instruction

Progressing – X

Not seen at time of observation – Leave blank

Not applicable – NA

Components observed:

Phonemic Awareness \_\_ Phonics \_\_ Comprehension \_\_ Vocabulary \_\_ Fluency \_\_

<b>1.</b>	<b>Date:</b>		
	Core materials provide basis for instruction		
	Physical arrangement of the room facilitates student movement/learning		
	Review of previous lesson(s)/activates prior knowledge		
	Direct instruction of skills/strategies		
	Adjusts and extends instruction through scaffolding		
	Use of concrete materials (text, word cards, magnetic letter, etc.)		
	Opportunities for students to practice skills/strategies		
	Opportunities for students to engage in meaningful discussions		
	Effective pacing of instruction to include essential elements of reading instructions		
	Monitor students' understanding and provide positive and corrective feedback		
	Variety of student movement (i.e.. floor, desk/tables, fine/gross motor)		
	Assessment of students' knowledge of skills/strategies		

Additional Comments:

APPENDIX B  
**OBSERVATION FORM FOR SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTION**

Small group instruction

Progressing – X

Not seen at time of observation – Leave blank

Not applicable – NA

Components observed:

Phonemic Awareness \_\_ Phonics \_\_ Comprehension \_\_ Vocabulary \_\_ Fluency \_\_

2.	Date:		
	Core/Supplemental materials provide basis for instruction		
	Students' text is at their instructional level		
	Before Reading: Provides a thorough book introduction		
	Before Reading: Connections made to previous lesson(s)/activates prior knowledge		
	Before Reading: Review of needed vocabulary		
	Before Reading: Mini-lesson of skill/strategy		
	During Reading: Various reading formats (shared, partner, choral, etc...)		
	During Reading: Students practice fix-up strategies		
	During Reading: Use of various levels of questions		
	During Reading: Monitor students' understanding and provide positive and corrective feedback		
	During Reading: Apply/practice the skill/strategy taught during mini-lesson		
	After Reading: Clarify/Summarize text		
	After Reading: Opportunities for students to engage in meaningful discussions		
	After Reading: Summary of lesson		
	After Reading: Students given opportunity to practice fluency		
	Transition provided for next activity		

Additional comments

APPENDIX C  
**OBSERVATION FORM FOR LITERACY CENTERS**

Literacy Centers

Progressing – X

Not seen at time of observation – Leave blank

Not applicable – NA

Components observed:

Phonemic Awareness \_\_ Phonics \_\_ Comprehension \_\_ Vocabulary \_\_ Fluency \_\_

3.	Date:		
Centers focus on the five essential elements of reading.			
Organizational pattern of centers is evident (Work Board, Center Chart, etc...).			
Materials are organized and accessible to students.			
Centers have clear objectives.			
Students can articulate center objectives.			
Centers include an assessment component (i.e. Literacy Center-students respond to text using story elements graphic organizer).			
Student movement between centers is organized.			
Help system for students is evident.			
Specific location for completed student work (pocket folder, hanging folder, clipboard, etc...).			
Students' behavior follows classroom rules.			

Additional comments:

APPENDIX D  
**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS**

1. How many years have you been teaching?
2. How many years in your current position?
3. How would you describe your ties to this community?
4. What factors do you feel affect student's reading achievement at your school?
5. Tell me about some of the instructional practices or activities that you use in reading.
6. What is it like working with your principal?
7. What is or was it like working with your reading coach?
8. Describe how the faculty works together at your school.
9. How many years were you a part of Reading First?
10. Describe your literacy instruction before Reading First.
11. Describe the types of PD you have received focusing on literacy instruction.
12. How did your teaching methods change (if at all) in literacy since Reading First?
  - a. Whole group
  - b. Small group
  - c. Centers
13. Describe how Reading First changed the way you interact with other teachers for literacy (if at all).
14. Describe how your school meets the needs of students in Tiers 2 and 3.
15. What do you think the key factor has been in the success of your scores in K-3?
16. How often is the principal in your classroom observing the literacy block?
17. In what ways do you feel supported by your principal?
18. Do you have a Reading/Literacy Coach in your building?
19. How often is the coach in your classroom?
20. In what ways does your coach support you?
21. How would you describe the morale of the building?
22. Describe ways the school celebrates success and/or boosts morale.