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Dawn Michelle Carlson

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The Dissertation Committee for Dawn Michelle Carlson

Certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

**Practices That are in Place at a Diverse School Where African American Students
Have Increased Achievement**

Committee:

Martha Ovando, Supervisor

Jay Scribner

Charles T. Clark

Glenn Nolly

Dorie Gilbert

Paul Cruz

**PRACTICES THAT ARE IN PLACE AT A DIVERSE SCHOOL
WHERE AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS
HAVE INCREASED ACHIEVEMENT**

by

Dawn Michelle Carlson, B.S.; M.Ed.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my students, specifically my African American students, who have shown me their potential and success when placed in a positive environment with the right support.

Acknowledgements

First, I have to acknowledge God as he has held me tight throughout this long, yet fulfilling process. My family, and specifically my parents, for always believing in me and supporting anything I wanted to accomplish, by instilling a sense of confidence, perseverance, and courage. My husband, who has loved, supported, and encouraged me to never give up. Finally, I appreciate my many friends who continuously checked on me and believed in me with words and hugs.

**PRACTICES THAT ARE IN PLACE AT A DIVERSE SCHOOL
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Dawn Michelle Carlson, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

Supervisor: Martha Ovando

African American students are disproportionately underachieving in public elementary schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). School staff and school leaders need to understand why an achievement gap still exists between the White and the African American students on their campuses (Kafele, 2009; Noguera, 2003; Denbo, 2002; Ferguson, 2001). A few schools have made a significant difference in school achievement for students of color and researchers and educators need to identify what these schools are doing differently to promote student success, especially for African American students (Chenoweth, 2009; Carter, 2000; Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999). The purpose of this study was to identify the practices that are in place at a diverse school where African American students have increased achievement. The study took a holistic look at one diverse elementary school in order to highlight the practices that assisted in the school's success with African American students and their achievement.

The research questions for this study are:

1. What practices are in place at a diverse school where African American students have increased achievement?
2. What policies are in place at a diverse school where African American students have increased achievement?

The framework for the study is based on Samuel Casey Carter's Study of 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools. The methodology for this study used qualitative research guidelines, was ethnographic in nature, and used a single-case study approach. The data was gathered through observations, interviews, focus groups, and analysis of documental data. The findings for effective practices include: Supportive Leadership, Implementing Change, Staff Development, Distributive Leadership, Departmentalization, School-Wide Programs, Student Resources, Teacher Resources, Communication, and Planning and Teaming. The findings for effective policies include: Open Door Policy, Student Placement, Site-Based Decision Making Committee, Parent-Teacher Organization, and Grading.

The conclusions are that policies and practices must be in place for schools to run effectively and increase achievement. The specific practices and policies that appear to support African American students may be beneficial to campuses with similar backgrounds or demographics. Schools that embrace practices and policies, such as these are in a better position to enhance the achievement for all African American students.

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Chapter One

Introduction: Context of the Study

African American students are disproportionately underachieving in public elementary schools. While the research addresses African American pedagogy (Murrell, 2002; Howard, 2001; Foster, 1997), culturally relevant teaching (Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994), and schools that are successfully teaching children of color and high-poverty students (Carter, 2000; Meier, 1995), schools and school leaders need to be more focused on why an achievement gap still exists between the White and the African American students on their campuses.

This chapter offers an overview of the study. It presents the problem, the purpose of the study, and the significance of the study. It will also discuss the research questions, along with the limitations and the delimitations of the study.

The ultimate goal of administrators and teachers is to educate every child everyday. However, 'educating' a child is different from 'schooling' a child. Schooling represents, coming to the building, learning the routines, procedures, and rules to survive within the building. A number of researchers have documented that African American students are the least likely to get an equal education due to several factors:

1. African American students are labeled. Terms such as: 'at-risk,' 'disadvantaged' (economically or culturally), and 'culturally deprived' (Kunjufu, 1995; Delpit, 1995) do not establish a positive perception. Teachers who have negative perceptions of African American students may not teach African American students as effectively as White students.

2. African American students' experiences are not respected. When students' experiences are different from the educators' experiences, the students' experiences are not better or worse, just different (Noguera, 2003; Kunjufu, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995). All experiences have value; and the teachers and administrators as well as the students should respect these values.
3. African American students language is not respected. African American students make speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Black English or use their neighborhood slang. This does not mean they are illiterate or unintelligent. Teachers should demonstrate Standard English without condemning what the students already know and speak (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Hale, 2001; Kunjufu, 1995).
4. High expectations are not established for African American students (Noguera, 2003; Hale, 2001; Delpit, 1995; Kunjufu, 1995; Kohl, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Labels and assumptions about students from poverty and African American students create an environment for minimal success. Administrators and teachers must quit developing 'rationales for failure, instead of visions for success' (Delpit, 1995, p. 178).
5. Culturally relevant pedagogy should be used to teach the curriculum (Irvine, 2002; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994). "Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, pp. 17-18). It is about bridging the information for the students, taking the new information and placing it into a situation in which they are familiar.
6. Relationships are not developed with the parents of African American students. Building a relationship with the parents is one of the most important actions a school can take. The parents should know that the teachers and the administrator truly want what is best for every student. A level of mutual respect and trust

creates a positive community-school relationship (Hale, 2001 Delpit, 1995; Kohl, 1995; Kunjufu, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Parents send their children to school to get educated. It is the school's responsibility to ensure that each child is educated. If teachers address the factors listed above, classrooms and instructional practices will be created that are conducive to the educational success of African American students. Kunjufu (1986) makes this very powerful, yet very truthful statement, "You cannot teach a child you do not love. You cannot teach a child you do not respect. You cannot teach a child you do not understand" (p. 30). When approximately 80% of the teaching force—especially in elementary schools—are White females and the student population is increasingly diverse, teachers need to be better prepared to teach students of color, specifically African American students. Teachers need to understand the diversity in the classroom. Classroom diversity may include racial, ethnic, linguistic, class, gender, or religious diversity. Many teachers are taught to identify students in their classrooms as "at-risk," "disadvantaged," or "impoverished," thus creating "rationales for failure, not visions of success" (Delpit, 1995, p. 178). Teachers and administrators working in high 'minority,' low socio-economic schools should not celebrate minimal achievement; they should challenge the students and expect excellence.

In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* was passed ordering desegregation in the schools. This case is known for its contribution to assist African Americans in the civil rights movement. When *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* was passed it meant that no student could be excluded from school and that all students

must have equal access to an education. However, in today's public schools, all students are not receiving an equal education. Attending school and being in a classroom with a certified teacher does not guarantee that all students are learning.

House (1999) states "we have organized ourselves educationally in ways to disadvantage minorities, even while maintaining appearances of equality in such matters" (p. 2). He goes on to say, "No other developed countries have organized their educational system in this fashion" (p. 2). Our nation loves competition. We need to challenge the nation. America's charge would be the reinventing of the public school system. Otherwise, the old adage "all children can learn" could begin to become twisted into isolated visions of "what's good enough for 'ours' versus what's good enough for 'theirs'" (Meier, 1995, p. 5). The task of educating all students, especially African American students, is a serious one. People need to begin to question our definition of intelligence and the way we label one another.

Schools can squelch intelligence, they can foster intolerance and disrespect, they can affect the way we see ourselves in the pecking order. But that's precisely why we cannot abandon our public responsibility to all children, why we need a greater not a lesser commitment to public education. (Meier, 1995, p. 6)

Statement of the Problem

Misrepresentation of African American students has detrimental effects on their achievement. For instance, African American students have been over represented in special education, discipline referrals, and dropout rates (US Department of Education; National Center for Education Statistics; Noguera, 2003; Oswald & Coutinho, 2000). African American students have been under represented in gifted and talented programs,

AP and Honors courses, graduation rates, and enrollment in colleges and universities (USDOE; Texas Education Agency; Sloan, 2002). African American males are also targeted as students who are ‘hard to teach’ or who enter school without the ‘proper’ experiences needed to be successful in school (Kunjufu, 1995). African American students are no different than Hispanic students, Asian students, or even Anglo students. All students need to be taught so that they are engaged in learning and take an active role in their education.

Schools can change in order to support all students and allow them to reach their highest potential. Previous research shows that not all African American students are failing in the public school system (Carter, 2000; Meier, 1995). Central Park East (Meier, 1995) and the 21 high-performing, high-poverty schools from Carter’s study (2000) are examples of African American students being successful. Denbo found that “high academic performance of African American students is the result of educators believing in their students’ ability to learn and their own ability to teach and supporting those beliefs with a wide variety of opportunities to learn” (2002, pp. 13-14). Although these select studies have shown that African American students have been successful, more research is needed in order to identify practices or policies on campuses, which create more opportunities for success.

Purpose of the Study

The achievement gap continues between African American students and White students; however, some schools are beginning to reduce this gap. Research suggests

that by using culturally appropriate instructional strategies (Murrell, 2002; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994), developing awareness for diversity among the administration and staff (Noguera, 2003; Denbo, 2002; Ferguson, 2001), and building relationships between the school, the home, and the community (Beck & Murphy, 1996; Delpit, 1995; Kunjufu, 1995) tends to enhance student achievement. However, little is known about how the school as a whole can impact African American student achievement. Previous studies have focused on the principal, the teachers, or on the parent and community involvement in isolation. Thus it is imperative to focus our attention on schools that have experienced an increase in African American student achievement.

The purpose of this study was to identify the practices that are in place at a diverse school where African American students have increased achievement. Specifically, this study will take a holistic look at one diverse elementary school in order to highlight the practices that assist in the school's success with African American students and their achievement. Although the achievement gap still exists, some schools are successfully closing the achievement gap between African American students and Anglo students. However, further inquiry is needed to highlight the practices found in schools where more African American students are achieving academic success.

Research Questions

This study addressed two questions:

1. What practices are in place at a diverse school where African American students have increased achievement?

2. What policies are in place at a diverse school where African American students have increased achievement?

Definition of Terms

- African American students: students who have indicated African American as their race/ethnicity on their individual student record (i.e. PIEMS data, AEIS data).
- Increased student achievement: individual: students who have made at least a 15% increase in test scores (i.e. TAKS).
- Increased student achievement: campus: students within subgroups (i.e. African American, economically disadvantaged) have increased to attain scores at 80% or higher in all areas (Recognized status).
- Diverse campus: a campus in which the population of African Americans is at least 25% or higher, with similar percentages of Hispanic and White students.
- Diversity: diversity for the research describes the ethnicity and race of the students, socio-economic level of the students, education level of the parents, the family units, and languages other than English spoken by the students.
- Culturally relevant teaching: a pedagogy that builds upon a student's own culture to assist him/her with connecting new knowledge to themselves and what they know.
- Practices: systematic actions for the purpose of acquiring skill or proficiency; such as pedagogy, leadership, staff development, parent involvement.

- Administrator: the principal of an elementary school.
- Poverty: as determined by the Federal Government; students who qualify for free or reduced price meals (i.e. breakfast, lunch) based on family income verses family size/composition.
- Policies: guidelines from the district to the classroom; such as a district or campus policy dealing with Special Education referrals, discipline referrals, interventions for struggling students, and how students qualify for the interventions.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study with an ethnographic lens. It was a single-case holistic study of one diverse public elementary school in Texas. Data was collected through individual interviews with the principal and also with the teachers both individually and in focus groups. Observations occurred during each visit, along with writing copious field notes, and documents such as TAKS scores, PIEMS information, and policy documents were analyzed. Member checks were completed after the interviews were transcribed for reliability. Data was analyzed through coding to identify emerging themes.

Significance of Study

The achievement gap between African American students and White students has been the focus of previous research in isolated constructs; however, few have taken a

comprehensive look at how schools are making sure that African American students are more successful.

This study highlights effective practices, inform school leaders, and add to the knowledge base for educators of African American students. Further, this study may expand our understanding regarding the successful achievement of African American students

This study may also provide information for administrator preparation and teacher preparation programs regarding effective teaching strategies that promote African American student success. It will also generate information that schools can use to attempt to improve African American student achievement.

Assumptions

A number of assumptions were made in conducting this study. The first assumption is that practices that lead to African American student success exists in few diverse schools. The second is that the participants in such schools are willing to share their insight. The third assumption is that the participants will be honest in their responses. The final assumption is that the school in the study has incorporated practices that are different from other schools in order to increase the success of African American students.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations. The focus of this study was only on practices found in diverse schools experiencing success with students of color, including African American

students. This study was limited to the information and documents provided to the researcher by the school's administrator and teachers. Additionally, the study was limited to the information collected during interviews, observations, and documental analysis. Participants in the study included the administrators, teachers, and staff only. Additionally, observations included a parent night and a Site-Based Decision Making meeting, in which the parents were observed but not interviewed. This study was focused on one diverse public elementary school in Texas. Furthermore, an attempt was made to explain administrative decision-making, without judging the decisions of the administrator and to describe the instructional practices of the teachers without evaluating the teaching staff's pedagogy.

Limitations. This study was a single case study; therefore the findings may not be generalizable to populations other than the group studied or schools that do not have similar demographics and characteristics. Additionally, the study was limited by the span of time for collecting data during the study, as well as the information that the participants were willing to provide during the data collection.

Summary

This chapter focused on the disproportionate underachievement of African American students in today's public schools. The context for this study was discussed along with the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study. The significance of this study is that it is part of the growing trend that focuses on schools, administrators, and teachers who are facilitating success for African American students. The

contribution of this study to the existing research base is that it looks at the school holistically to identify emerging themes within the school. The current research identifies instructional practices, teachers' perceptions, school leadership, parental involvement, and staff development individually. This holistic analysis of the campus attempted to bring all of the pieces of the existing research together.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

A national crisis has developed surrounding the achievement of African American students. The difference in success between African American students and White students has been labeled the ‘Achievement Gap.’ The achievement gap is only one aspect of this crisis, which deals with test scores and academic achievement. African American students are also over represented in special education, educational disciplinary statistics, and concerns regarding poverty. All of these issues affect the success of African American students in the public school setting.

These issues, however, should be the exception and not the norm. Some research has identified schools that demonstrate African American students are being successful (Chenoweth, 2009; Brown, 2008; Carter, 2000; Meier, 1995), yet more research is needed in order to enhance African American students’ academic success. This chapter focuses on the literature surrounding African American students and increased student achievement. Thus, it includes a review of statistical data of African American students, African American students and poverty, oppression and racism in educational settings, theories for the achievement gap, African American Parents, culturally relevant pedagogy for African American students, leadership and African American student achievement, and common traits of high-performing, high-poverty schools.

Statistical Data of African American Students

Nearly all of the educational data that focus on African Americans reflect low levels of achievement. African Americans make up a small percentage of the population

in this country, yet so many statistics focus on this racial group. African Americans are in the media daily; however, only a handful of the stories show this population in a positive light. In the realm of education, the statistics for African American students are equally dismal.

In 2000, the National Center for Education Statistics showed African Americans represented 12% of the population in the United States and 15% of the population in public schools (NCES, 2003). Thirty-one percent of African American children live in poverty and 53% live in single parent families (NCES, 2003). When it comes to academics, the achievement gap between African American and White students continues. For instance, fourth grade African American students and White fourth grade students have made improvement in reading between 1992 and 2003, the National Assessment of Educational Progress Report Card showed White students' scores were about 30 points higher than African American students' scores (NAEP Report Card, 2003). Additionally, the fourth grade math scores also have a 30-point discrepancy showing that White students scored higher than African American students (NAEP Report Card, 2003). These scores reflect a basic understanding in both reading and math. If you look at proficiency levels, it is even more unbelievable. In reading, only 12% of African American fourth graders reach proficient or advanced levels, while 61% have not been taught to even the basic level (Education Trust, 2003). By eighth grade, only 7% of African American students reach proficient or advanced levels in math (Education Trust, 2003). When addressing academic concerns, schools often look for

assistance from special education services. Thus, concerns regarding the over representation of African American students in special education have emerged.

During the 2000-2001 school year African American students accounted for 19.85% of the students in special education (i.e. learning disabled, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, and speech impaired) (NCES, 2003). Nearly 20% of the students in special education are African American; however, only 15% of the public school population is African American. This constitutes an overrepresentation. Many statistics state that the percent of African American students in special education is significantly higher. These statistics are national and may vary among states, school districts, and campuses. Once identified for special education services, the students often times are removed from their classroom to receive services and instruction in another environment. They are not receiving the same instruction as the students who remain in the regular classroom.

When African American students are removed from their classroom to attend special education services, the students often times receive a watered-down version of the curriculum (Noguera, 2003; Kunjufu, 1995). In 1999, 35% of African American students in grades 7-12 had been suspended or expelled as some point in their school careers as opposed to 15% of White students. Additionally, 18% of African American student in Kindergarten through 12th grade have been retained at least once compared to 9% of White students. African American students are twice as likely to be retained, suspended or expelled. Upon a close examination of these statistics, one wonders why

African American parents want their children in the public school system. For many parents there is no choice. African American parents, who live in poverty, often only have public schools as an option for educating their children.

African American Students and Poverty

African American students and poverty students are not synonymous terms; however, when looking at the statistics it is hard to differentiate the terms. In 2000, 73% of Black fourth grade students were enrolled in schools that had 50% or higher eligibility for free or reduced lunch (NCES, 2003). “Poverty in the white mind is always primarily black” (Hooks, 2000, p. 4). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) at the US Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences presented “Status and Trends in the Education of Blacks” published in September 2003. This report states,

The poverty rate in 2000 for Blacks, at 22 percent, was the lowest since 1959. This rate is more than twice the rate for Whites, which was 8 percent. Poverty among Black children is particularly pronounced: 31 percent of Black children lived in poverty in 2000. (p. 12)

This report illustrates that it is sometimes difficult to separate the concerns of African American students and the concerns for students in poverty, when 1 out of every 3 African American student lives in poverty. According to researchers, it is also true that middle-class African American students show gaps in achievement as compared to their White counterparts. The reasons behind the achievement gap for middle-class African Americans may have more to do with teachers’ perceptions, teachers’ expectations, and

instructional pedagogy (Chenoweth, 2009; Kafele, 2009; Murrell, 2002; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Delpit, 1995; Meier, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

When focused primarily on poverty and African American students, socioeconomic level does matter. Bell Hooks (2000) describes race and class as “The white poor blend in, the black poor stand out” (p. 4). The largest percentages of African American students living in poverty are found within urban settings. In *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol writes about visiting six different urban areas, their schools and their neighborhoods. Kozol explains, “Poor people do not need to be reminded that the contest is unfair” (1991, p. 178). They see the world, many times, as unfair. They know another world exists because they see it in the media: on television and in magazines. However their world is much different. Kozol spoke to students about their school. The students were asked why they did not have a decent place to go to school and whether they felt like they mattered to society. One student responded,

... This [condition of the school] is to tell you [students of poverty] that you don't much matter. You are ugly to us so we crowd you into ugly places. You are dirty so it will not hurt to pack you into dirty places. ... We teach you how much you are hated. (p. 178)

A student's perception is his/her reality. African American students feel how society views them, but are still asked to become a part of it.

In early research, Kozol found that in 1991, African American students continue to attend public schools that were below standard. They had partially working plumbing and unsafe playgrounds/play areas. When it comes to ‘choice,’ the poor seldom have a choice. Many times the people in poverty must attend their local public schools. Within

the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, students attending a poor performing campus can transfer or receive a voucher to attend another campus that is higher performing. However, many people of poverty only have access to public transportation. The poor may not have a vehicle to take their child to another campus across town and many times bussing is not provided by the school district, although transportation is not specifically addressed in the NCLB Act. So, is there a choice? What looks just and equitable in policy form, may allow systemic racism to continue. African Americans have dealt with racism and oppression since their involuntary arrival to the United States. Deficit thinking is a form of oppression—“that is, the cruel and unjust use of authority and power to keep a group of people in their place” (Valencia, 1997, p. 4).

Oppression and Racism in Educational Settings

African American students whose “conscious, willed refusal of schooling for political or cultural reasons is not acknowledged as an appropriate response to oppressive education” (Kohl, 1994, pp. 28-29). The oppression in schools comes from White teachers teaching lessons written by Euro-American men about Euro-American history (Kunjufu, 1995; Kohl, 1994). African American students listen to history lessons, in which no African Americans exist, except as slaves. Yet, African American students must disregard their personal questions and comprehend the content of these lessons. Textbooks in today’s society are gradually making gains by incorporating all races’ and ethnicities’ achievements into the lessons. Nonetheless, these textbooks are

used to teach all children, even though the books show very little outside a White dominated world. Peshkin states that,

Schools certainly are not the only places where children formulate views about race, but because schools are often sites where children are more likely to encounter persons of another race or ethnic group, they play a central role in influencing the character of race relations in communities and the larger society. (1991, p. 65)

African American men and women have made major contributions to the world; yet have received little acknowledgement for these accomplishments. African American students need to hear about the accomplishments of African American people. These accomplishments will contribute to a sense of pride for African American students. The importance of an education is an integral piece in African American students reaching their aspirations.

Obtaining an equal education is more difficult for African American students than for White students. White students are members of the dominant culture; therefore they understand the hegemonic beliefs and values established at public elementary schools. When the majority of teachers are White women, then these teachers need to build relationships with their students, their parents, and the cultures within the community. Building relationships can produce more effective outcomes for African American students. One way African American students can be successful is to understand the “culture of power” (Delpit, 1995). Lisa Delpit (1995) lists five aspects of power, which have a connecting and complex theme:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a “culture of power.”
3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (p. 24)

Delpit focuses on the role of the educator more than on the students or the system. This particular area should be a focus for analysis, since the teacher is a catalyst for the education of children.

Moreover, for African American children to begin attaining an education, they must want to learn. They must take responsibility for their own learning (Chenoweth, 2009; Kafele, 2009; Hale, 2001; Tatum, 1997; Kohl, 1994). A disservice is being done to those students whose learning was not ensured by the teacher. African American students in particular need teachers who will engage them, challenge them, and instill in them a life long love for learning. In order to do this, schools must embrace diversity and develop culturally relevant pedagogy for African American students.

Theories for the Achievement Gap

Gail Thompson in *Through Ebony Eyes* (2004) describes 10 theories that have been posited to explain the causes for the Black-White achievement gap: the deficit-

deprivation theory, the theory of structural inequality, tracking, the theory of cultural discontinuity, the “Fourth grade failure syndrome,” the “acting white” theory, the peer-pressure-and-the-lure-of-street-life theory, the parents-are-at-fault theory, under-prepared teachers, and low teacher expectations.

The first three theories are interconnected. The first is the deficit-deprivation theory. Its basic premise is that there is a hierarchy of intelligence with Whites and Asians at the top and African Americans are at the bottom. Far too often, this perception is brought into the classroom by the teachers and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for the students. The second is the theory of structural inequality. The theory maintains that, “schools were designed to perpetuate class differences that exist in the larger society” (Thompson, 2004, p. 14). The third is tracking. Tracking refers to the placing of students within a track that prepares them for their socioeconomic future. Children who are gifted get tracked for college and higher education. Students placed in special education classes are tracked for vocational or lower-paying jobs. Due to the fact that African American students are overrepresented in special education, tracking is more detrimental to African American students than to White students.

The fourth theory is cultural discontinuity. Lisa Delpit explained this theory within her focus on the culture of power. The mismatch between the culture in the home and the culture in the school is described as cultural discontinuity. This clash “becomes evident in judgments and labels that teachers place on students with non-mainstream speech and styles of discourse, and through teachers’ use of instructional practices and

classroom management strategies that are at odds with community norms” (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 167).

The “Fourth grade failure syndrome” is the fifth theory. Jawanza Kunjufu (1995) dedicated an entire chapter to this theory in his book, *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*. Kunjufu has found that African American boys do well in school during the early years of pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade, but as the students get older, they tend to show less motivation and their grades begin to fall. By fourth grade many African American males are failing or fail during this particular year in school.

The “acting White” theory is when African American students who are being successful in school are seen among their peers as “acting White.” Some African American students feel that they must reject their home culture or their sense of self in order to be successful in school. Some students, who accept the notion that success in school is negative for their self-identity, take on a detached role in school. Majors and Mancini-Billson have identified this as the “Cool Pose” theory. They explain that the “cool pose furnishes the black male with a sense of control, inner strength, balance, stability, confidence, and security” (1992, p. 9). The aloofness of some African American males enables them to “deal with the closed doors and negative images of himself that he must confront on a daily basis” (1992, p. 9) within the school setting.

Thompson states that the peer-pressure-and-the-lure-of-street-life theory is more feared by many of the parents than by the teachers. One parent, concerned with the fact

that her daughter had dropped out of school, shared that “the desire to have the material possessions many of her [daughter’s] friends had and the desire to fit in with her [daughter’s] friends led to her [daughter’s] decision to drop out of school” (Thompson, 2004, p. 19).

The parents-are-at-fault theory is one that schools tend to grasp onto quickly and have a difficult time of letting go. When students come to school without their homework, when parents are unable to return phone calls, or when parents are unable to attend parent conferences, then many teachers and administrators put the blame for the students’ difficulties both academically or behaviorally. Often the perception of fault is a misunderstanding between what the teacher expects and what the parents expect. Both feel they are doing their job to support the student and become frustrated when the student is not being successful. Communication is one of the key components to increased achievement for African American students. Chenoweth, 2009, explains that, “all teachers do not teach equally well, and a kid who has two bad teachers in a row can suffer long-lasting effects on his or her achievement. Three bad years can be devastating” (p. 10). He goes on to cite a longitudinal study commissioned by the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development that found that “low-income elementary school children have only a 10% chance of being consistently assigned to good classrooms” (p. 10).

Under-prepared teachers is another theory for the achievement gap. Research shows that affluent schools tend to have more experienced teachers and schools with

high percentages of students in poverty tend to have teachers with 1-3 years of experience. Since 73% of African American students attend schools that have 50-100% of their population qualifying for the free or reduced lunch programs, then many African American students tend to have teachers with only a few years of experience.

The 'low teacher expectations' theory has been targeted by multiple researchers (Kafele 2009; Thompson, 2004; Noguera, 2003; Murrell, 2002; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Carter, 2000; Delpit, 1995; Kunjufu, 1995; Meier, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). If teachers have low expectations for students, it tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy for the students. Teachers can be more effective if high expectations are held for all students in the classroom.

Thompson's efforts have concentrated on both teachers and parents in an attempt to change beliefs regarding African American students and their education.

African American Parents

Many educators not only have difficulty teaching African American students, but have even more trouble 'dealing' with African American parents. For years researchers have stressed the role of parent involvement in student success. Although Marzano (2001) has found that individual teachers can have a tremendous impact on student achievement even without parental support or being in a strong school; there is also research to support increased achievement when parents play an active role in their child's education (Thompson, 2010; Chenoweth, 2009; Brown, 2008).

For African American students, their parents are not always viewed in a positive light and some are not even given a chance by the teacher before preconceived notions and mental models are brought to the surface of the teacher's mind. If a teacher is White or Hispanic, they tend to have stereotypical thoughts regarding African American parents; although, some African American teachers tend to hold some of the same views, especially if the teachers are middle class and the parents are deemed low socio-economic. Gail Thompson (2010) explains that teachers must build relationships with both the students and the parents. She suggests nine strategies in order to move forward,

1. Get rid of any negative mental baggage that you have about African American parents. If you have stereotypes about them, your mindset may lead you to speak to them disparagingly.
2. Face your fears. If you are afraid of African American parents because you believe they are dangerous, violent, or aggressive you will subconsciously erect barriers between them and yourself.
3. Don't wait until a situation has reached the point of no return before you contact the parent.
4. Present the parent with a balanced picture of his or her child. Explain the positives as well as the areas that need improvement.
5. Try not to be defensive.
6. Do not talk down to parents.
7. Try to put yourself in the parents' shoes.
8. Use mistakes as teachable-moment opportunities.
9. Don't blame all African American parents for any negative experiences that you have with a few. (pp. 73-74)

Students typically are judged first by their background and family. Teachers and parents must work together to support the students. Thompson believes that “regardless of students’ background, [the] teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and expectations have been shown to become a self-fulfilling prophecy for students” (2004, p. 13). When beliefs are challenged, then the teachers may become open to new instructional strategies in which to support the students, specifically the African American students within the classroom.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy for African American Students

Along with understanding the ‘culture of power,’ students also must be taught using a ‘culturally relevant’ instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1994), ‘culturally responsive teaching’ (Gay, 2000), ‘culturally appropriate’ pedagogy (Hale, 2001), or ‘African-centered’ pedagogy (Murrell, 2002). The teachers need to embrace a different way of teaching that will reach all students, but specifically African American students. Ladson Billings explains the “primary aim of culturally relevant teaching is to assist in the development of a ‘relevant black personality’ that allows African American students to choose academic excellence yet still identify with African and African American culture” (1994, p. 17). To this end, culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, p. 18). Culturally relevant teaching is not just a term that is used by the academy, it is a strategy that many teachers and schools are embracing to increase the achievement of their African American students.

Aristotle said that we can demonstrate the possible by studying the actual. Samuel Casey Carter did just that. He studied 21 high-performing, high-poverty schools. Nearly all of these schools also had a high population of students of color. Carter (2000) found several common traits:

- 1) Schools and stakeholders must “reject the ideology of victimhood,”
- 2) Schools must not dumb down tests and courses for African American and Hispanic children,
- 3) Schools must test constantly, for tests are the best way to determine whether each child is learning: testing used as an instrument of diagnosis, not of discrimination,
- 4) Schools must not allow social promotion,
- 5) Schools must hold teachers to the same high standards as the students, “teachers who cannot achieve high performance among low-income students, even after training from master teachers, must look quickly for another job” (p. 3).

The success of these schools is not an accident, but “the intended result of hard work, common sense teaching philosophies, and successful leadership strategies that can be replicated” (Carter, 2000, p. 2). These are not the only successful schools in America. Several authors have also shown that African American students can be successful. Deborah Meier (1994), in “The Power of Their Ideas,” also speaks to the intentional act of successful education. She explains that her book and her school are about “taking this vision of education and human possibility seriously” (p. 4). She goes on to say

The task of creating environments where all kids can experience the power of their ideas requires unsettling not only our accepted organization of schooling and our unspoken and unacknowledged agreement about the purposes of schools. Taking this task seriously also means calling into question our definitions of intelligence and the ways in which we judge each other. And taking it seriously means accepting public responsibility of the shared future of the next generation. It's a task for all of us, not just school people or policymakers or even parents alone. The stakes are enormous, and the answers within our reach. (p. 4)

Educational success for African American students is a serious task. We have isolated answers from some schools, teachers, and administrators who are being successful with African American students. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) documented eight successful teachers of African American students. These teachers were both African American and White, from different backgrounds and different educational institutions.

When African American students excel academically, often they are seen as “acting White.” If students do not want to be seen in this manner, they must intentionally make adjustments either academically or behaviorally. Many African American students appear to be unmotivated or unwilling to learn, demonstrating the cool pose theory. They may also act out or disrupt class. Ladson-Billings (1994) states that if African American students do not want to ‘act White’ then they must “purposely learn how not to learn” (p. 11). Hebert Kohl said, “at first, I confused not learning with failing” (1994, p. 6). He continued, “Deciding to actively not-learn something involves closing off part of oneself and limiting ones’ experience. Because not-learning involves willing rejection of some aspect of experience, it can often lead to what appears to be failure” (p. 4). Kohl had students that were obviously intelligent and thus choosing not

to learn. These students were different from the students who were truly struggling with concepts and the capacity to learn. The later were easier to deal with because Kohl could remediate lessons or change his teaching strategy to be more effective. For the students who were making learning a choice, he had to find the root cause of their refusal. As Kohl became closer to these students he found that some knew that teachers expected the African American or poor students to be stupid or incapable, so before the teacher could embarrass them, they would turn it around by their own free will. “On that level no failure is possible since there has been no attempt to learn” (Kohl, 1994, p. 28).

Teachers should not allow their students, especially African American students, not to learn. However, even experienced teachers might not be able to differentiate between a student who is refusing to learn and a student who is indeed struggling. Ladson-Billings addresses the question of expert teachers verses novice teachers. It has been reported that when African American students attend high-poverty schools, they have less qualified teachers. ‘Qualified teacher’ is a relative term. In Texas, teachers who are not ‘highly qualified’ are not allowed to teach at high-poverty or high-minority schools. ‘Highly qualified teacher’ only means that the person holds a degree in teaching and has taught for at least one year. Experienced teachers, who have taught in high-performing, high-poverty, diverse schools, understand the magnitude of using a culturally relevant pedagogy for their students.

Ladson-Billings states that the five components of culturally relevant pedagogy are:

- 1) When students are treated as competent they are likely to demonstrate competence,
- 2) When teachers provide instructional “scaffolding,” students can move from what they know to what they need to know,
- 3) The focus of the classroom must be instructional,
- 4) Real education is about extending students’ thinking and abilities, and
- 5) Effective teaching involves in-depth knowledge of both the students and the subject matter. (1994, pp. 123-125)

Therefore, one key facet is building relationships between the school and the home. Students need to be able to trust and build a relationship with their teacher and the teacher must build a relationship with the students. If a child does not feel a teacher cares about them or that they cannot trust their teacher, then they will not learn from that teacher. Teachers, who are sometimes considered experts, are more than knowledgeable teachers. They also know how to reach their students.

Researchers suggest that teachers use culturally relevant teaching to reach the African American children in their classroom. Culturally relevant teaching is not just generalizations for the classroom environment or philosophy, but it can also be specific to content areas. For instance, Ladson-Billings (1994) describes overarching tenets in a culturally relevant literacy program:

1. Students [African American boys] whose educational economic, social, political and cultural futures are most tenuous are helped to become intellectual leaders in the classroom.

2. Students are apprenticed in a learning community rather than taught in an isolated and unrelated way. Teachers embed reading instruction within larger contexts.
3. Students' real-life experiences are legitimized, as they become part of the "official" curriculum. Teachers depend heavily on the experiences of their students to make the literature come alive. They import the culture and everyday experiences in the learning.
4. Teachers and students participate in a broad conception of literacy that incorporates both literature and oratory. By building on the students' knowledge, teachers are able to teach complex ideas and skills without worrying that they are teaching above the students' reading level.
5. Teachers and student engage in a collective struggle against the status quo. Societal expectations for African American students are generally low; however, support is given by the teacher's expectations being exceptionally high.
6. Teachers are cognizant of themselves as political beings (pp. 117-118).

Literacy has been a major focus in Texas since the 1999-2000 school year.

When the kindergarteners entered school that year, they were tagged as the group who would have to pass the state standardized tests in 2003 as third graders. Literacy is now a national focus. The No Child Left Behind Act, which started in the spring of 2003, stated that all third grade students must be reading at a third grade level, by passing the state mandated reading test or they are not promoted to fourth grade. Additionally, in the spring of 2005, all students in fifth grade must pass both the reading and math tests in order to be promoted to the sixth grade. This is important because "retaining or failing students on a massive scale is done in districts with large numbers of minorities.

Being retained does not increase learning but rather significantly increases the student's chances of dropping out of school eventually" (Shepard & Smith, 1989). African American students are retained twice as often as White students (NCES, 2003). Therefore, a sense of urgency surrounds the literacy of African American students, and although researchers claim that teachers attempt to help students, they may not be successful without administrative support.

Teachers alone cannot create student success; strong leadership must support the teachers. Therefore, the principal supports the positive efforts of the teachers to change instructional practice on the campus by understanding the needs of all students, including the African American students.

Leadership and African American Student Achievement

The culture and climate of the campus is reflective of the leadership of the campus. The school principal supports teachers and students financially, through policies, and through a shared vision for the educational success of each student. Ensuring student success is no small task for the principal at a high-poverty school. When so many students, especially African American students, are disproportionately underachieving academically, the administrator must delineate the source of the problem in order to create a positive outcome for the students.

Collective effort on the part of the principal and the teachers is a component of success for all students. "Effective principals reject the notion that teaching is an 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. job. They expect the same of their teachers" (Carter, 2000, p. 11). This

philosophy also holds true at Central Park East (CPE) in New York's East Harlem. In 1974, Deborah Meier, principal of CPE, was given the opportunity to create a school. The school was in a poor community and was populated by predominantly Latino and African American students. Meier hired teachers with similar philosophies regarding children and learning and put all the school's funding into the classroom. Meier identified herself as a teacher-director. She had her own classroom of second and third graders. An answering machine was placed in the office to handle calls. Additional teachers were hired and eventually CPE elementary was expanded to add CPE secondary school (CPESS), which graduated their first class in 1991.

As the school leader, Meier had been tired of working in a system where curriculum had been 'dumbed-down' for certain students (i.e. African American students, Latino students, poverty students). She wanted to create a school with strong subject matter, with intellectual challenges that spurred curiosity, with teachers who allowed students to ask questions, and with students who felt comfortable to take risks. CPESS focused on five major "intellectual habits." Meier (1995) wanted her students to internalize these habits so that when they studied in school or out of school, they would consider the following:

1. Concern for evidence—How do you know that?
2. Viewpoint—Who said it and why?
3. Cause and Effect—What led to it? What else happened?
4. Hypothesizing—What if...? Supposing that...?
5. Who cares?/So what?

Meier believed that ‘knowing and learning’ were important, but would only make a difference if students were convinced that ‘knowing and learning’ mattered. Meier, as the leader, saw fit to stick to her principles and made sure that students were not just successful, but that they could also think on their own. In addition to making sure the students’ needs were being met and students were being taught to think, Meier also made sure the faculty was learning and growing. She created discussion sessions surrounding race, socio economic status, and gender. Strong leaders know the challenges of their campus and find ways to approach and engage dialogue surrounding those areas. Dialogue sessions are much easier when they are focused on challenges and concerns in reading, math, or science. The sessions are much more difficult when the focus is race. However, in order to increase the achievement of African American students, discussions should focus on race and culture and their role in the educational process. When a staff works this closely together toward one common goal, it begins work as a learning organization.

When a “group of people who functioned together in an extraordinary way—who trusted one another, who complemented each others’ strengths and compensated for each others’ limitations, who had common goals that were larger than individual goals, and who produced extraordinary results,” they were experiencing a learning organization (Senge, 1990, p. 4). Senge says, “Leadership springs from a deep personal conviction” (1990, p. xvii). Meier personifies what Thomas Sergiovanni calls “Servant Leadership.” Servant leadership describes principals who are “responsible for ‘ministering’ to the

needs of the schools they serve. The needs are defined by the shared values and purposed of the school's covenant" (Sergiovanni, 1995, p. 320). As Meier 'ministered' to CPE/CPESS's parents, teachers, and students, she provided leadership that encouraged others to become leaders themselves.

Within learning communities, a level of trust, respect, and communication must be developed. Principals must be able to

discuss promising school practices without the fear of violating a taboo; they need to learn to share problems without worrying about appearing inadequate. They need to recognize that adult learning is not only legitimate but also essential. They need help clarifying and becoming confident about their goals, ideas, and practices so they can act thoughtfully. (Barth, 1990, p.74)

Communication with teachers, parents, and students is key for successful schools.

When the principal communicates his/her thoughts and also allows others to speak, then effective decisions can be made. Meier exemplifies leadership through example. She knew what African American students needed and was given the opportunity to confirm her beliefs. The road to success was not easy, but she was serious in her conviction toward student learning and that desire and dedication was contagious for the faculty, the students, and parents. Meier brought hope to a community that had lost sight of possibility. For "it is hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem hopeless" (Fullen, 1998, p. 8).

Research of Traits from High-Performing Schools

Several researchers have focused on traits of high-performing schools regardless of socio economic levels. For instance, Reyes, Scribner, and Scribner (1999) focused on

Hispanic students and determined *Lessons from High-Performing Hispanic Schools*.

They reported five traits:

- 1) Establishing collaborative governance and leadership,
- 2) Building collaborative relationships with parents,
- 3) Empowering the surrounding community,
- 4) Creating student-centered classroom environments, and
 - They focused specifically on two content areas: reading and math.
- 5) Using student advocacy assessment practices

A more recent study focused on majority/minority context. The findings cannot be generalizable to diverse schools; however, Carter (2000) found traits for high-performing schools. In *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools*, Carter found that the one common factor among these schools was not curriculum or teaching methodology, but excellent leadership. “Running a high-poverty school is one of the most important leadership positions in America” (Carter, 2000, p. 3). The one key component that the ‘No Excuses’ principals followed was training and bringing out the best in teachers. Carter found seven common traits of high-performing, high-poverty schools:

- 1) Principals must be free,
- 2) Principals use measurable goals to establish a culture of achievement,
- 3) Master teachers bring out the best in a faculty,
- 4) Rigorous and regular testing leads to continuous student achievement,
- 5) Achievement is the key to discipline,
- 6) Principals work actively with parents to make the home a center of learning, and

7) Effort creates ability (pp. 8-11).

Carter explains that even though individual schools solve problems in their own way, some ‘best practices’ emerged from his research. He found five effective practices, which include: involving parents, training teachers, testing students, teaching children, and spending money.

Carter found parental accountability crucial. “Principals of high-performing schools want parents who value education and who will instill in their children the values that make for success in the classroom” (2000, p. 14). Carter affirms that the principals create contracts with the parents stating that the parents will support their children’s efforts to learn.

Finding qualified teachers and training them in effective instructional practices are among additional challenges faced by school leaders. “All high-performing schools make it their professional obligation to improve the daily course of instruction, because whatever else needs to happen to improve academic outcomes, teacher quality has to improve first” (Carter, 2000, p. 18). Teamwork and collaboration are also key components to teacher training within high-performing schools.

Testing is common practice from the national down to the classroom; however, testing should be used to diagnose, not discriminate. Short-cycle assessments and benchmark tests should be used to determine whether students are learning and to focus instruction. Principals in high-performing, high poverty schools, feel that testing should be used to “figure out the problems, fix them and move on” (Carter, 2000, p. 26).

The ‘how’ and ‘what’ to teach children is another effective practice found during this study. “High-performing principals know that children need to be taught basic skills in a sequence that logically builds from the most elementary foundations to increasingly higher-order conceptual thinking” (Carter, 2000, p. 27).

A principal’s budget is the final effective practice that emerged in Carter’s study. “Principals are often forced to manipulate their budgets to their advantage because their budgets are not suited to meet their needs” (Carter, 2000, p. 34). Carter found that effective principals spend their money on two things: curricula and teachers. “Ironically, in the public school system, these are the two areas where the least spending flexibility is provided” (Carter, 2000, p. 31).

While these studies (Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999; Carter, 2000) advanced the notion that effective practices may assist students in majority/minority schools, few have focused on diverse schools where African American students are actually successful. Therefore, this study will attempt to determine what practices are in place within a diverse school where achievement has increased, specifically among the African American student population.

Summary

The literature suggests that African American students are disproportionately underachieving academically across the nation. Consequently, many researchers have focused on individual pieces such as the overrepresentation in special education, questions surrounding poverty, instructional practices of teachers, leadership of the

campus, and parental involvement. This study will take a holistic approach to gathering information and data that identifies practices that contribute to increased African American student achievement at a diverse public elementary school.

To achieve this holistic perspective, a qualitative study with an ethnographic lens will be used. Interviews and observations will be conducted, along with documental analysis to identify emerging themes that contribute to African American student success.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to present the methodology of the study. It includes: research design, site selection and participants, data collection procedures, instruments; interviews, observations, focus groups, documental review, data analysis, and validity and reliability.

Given the low levels of African American student achievement (NCES, 2003; NAEP Report Card, 2003), it is imperative to focus on how few schools are introducing practices that support African American student success. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify practices that are in place at a diverse school where African American students have increased academic achievement as measured by state assessments. The research questions were:

- 1) What practices are in place in diverse schools where African American students have increased achievement?
- 2) What policies are in place in diverse schools where African American students have increased achievement?

Research Design

This study followed qualitative research guidelines. Specifically, a single case study approach was used and this study was ethnographic in nature. Zou and Trueba (2002) state the importance of educational ethnography is that “Schools and teachers have suddenly acquired a new significance and demand additional support to prepare a new generations of Americans from highly diversified ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds” (pp. 1-2). They go on to say,

Certainly educational ethnography must recognize the intrinsic difficulty in making sense of the world of other peoples whose languages and lifestyles are different than ours. [It] can best help us make sense of other worlds, and of children from those worlds in our own classrooms. (2002, p. 2)

Qualitative research is flexible. “We are now exploring new ways to conduct qualitative research in schools with diverse student populations in order to pursue a new reform pedagogy based on principles of equity, justice, fairness, tolerance, and multiculturalism” (Zou & Trueba, 2002, p. 2). This study focused on a diverse public elementary school, with an emphasis on African American student achievement. Most studies that address African American student achievement focus on schools that are predominantly African American, the leadership in the schools, or the specific teaching practices all within isolated constructs. Wolcott (2002) lists several attributes of ethnography, the first listed is holistic. “The holistic attribute seemed especially important, since it points to the ethnographer’s concern for *context*. That quality seemed destined to remain a key feature” (Wolcott, 2002, p. 34).

The framework for the present single case study of one diverse public elementary school in Texas was based on Samuel Casey Carter’s research. This research study included 21 schools across the United States, but only focused on two Texas schools. One was a KIPP Academy school serving 5th-9th grade students and the other is a charter school with 92% of the student population being African American. Carter’s framework includes involving parents, training teachers, testing students, teaching students, and spending money, which will be a guide to focus on a diverse public elementary school in Texas. A case study is “a holistic inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon

within its natural setting” (Harling, 2002 p. 1). A single case study is important in order to take an in-depth look at one diverse school’s practices of increased achievement.

Site Selection and Participants

For this study there were two levels of selection: the first level focused on the site (i.e. school) and the second level focused on the participants. The school was chosen using purposive sampling. “Purposive sampling allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested” (Silverman, 2001, p. 250). The criteria for choosing a school were that the school must have at least 25% of its student body identified as African American, yet no more than 65%. The remaining population was closely balanced with Hispanic and White students. The school had over 55% of its student body qualifying for the free or reduced lunch program. The school had made a difference in the achievement of African American students as compared to their White counterparts. The school held a ‘Recognized’ rating, according to TEA. The principal retained her position during the time of increased achievement.

When identifying a school, one was found that met the criteria. However, prior to beginning the research the school backed out. Again the researcher attempted to locate a school that met the criteria. Several schools that met the criteria were already participating in research projects and did not want to tax their staff. The school that did give permission for research had 22% of its population as African American students, which is less than the stated 25%. It also had approximately 40% of its students

considered as economically disadvantaged, which is also below the 55% previously stated. This is a very diverse school not only in regards to ethnicity and socio economic status, but also in the family units and the special education students on the campus. The researcher felt due to the diversity, this school would still offer insight toward the research questions.

The second level of selection focused on the participants. The use of purposive sampling was also how the participants were chosen. “Purposive sampling demands that we think critically about the parameters of the population we are interested in and choose our sample case carefully on this basis” (Silverman, 2001, p. 250). The participants included the principal and some of the teachers. The principal was included because she was the school leader. Teacher participants were chosen for interviews using the following criteria: teachers have been at the school during the time of increased achievement (at least 2 yrs); teachers with less than 2 years at the school are not eligible; and teacher participation was voluntary. Once a group of teachers was identified, they were asked whether they would like to participate in individual interviews or in a focus group session. Interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis beginning with the principal. The principal was interviewed two times, once at the beginning of the project and once at the end. The assistant principal was interviewed. Seven teachers were interviewed individually. Two focus groups made up of teachers were also conducted. Each interview lasted between 25-45 minutes and included open-ended as well as pre-determined questions.

Background and information was noted, but not used as criteria for the selection process. The background information of the principal and teachers included: race/ethnicity, gender, years of experience, and grade level taught. The principal, assistant principal, and 18 teachers agreed to participate. Seven of the teachers were individual interviews. The rest of the teachers were divided into two focus groups. Table 1 provides a graphic description of participants' participation in both interviews and focus groups.

Table 1

Teacher Participant Information

Data Sets	Individual Interviews 7 Total	Focus Group Team Leaders 7 Total	Focus Group Primary 6 Total
Background			
Race / Ethnicity	White = 4 Af Am = 1 Hisp = 2	White = 5 Af Am = 1 Hisp = 1	White = 4 Af Am = 0 Hisp = 2
Gender	Female = 6 Male = 1	Female = 7 Male = 0	Female = 6 Male = 0
Years of Experience	1-5 yrs = 0 6-10 yrs = 3 11-20 yrs = 2 > 20 yrs = 2	1-5 yrs = 1 6-10 yrs = 2 11-20 yrs = 4 > 20 yrs = 0	1-5 yrs = 3 6-10 yrs = 1 11-20 yrs = 1 > 20 yrs = 1
Grade Level Taught	2 = Reading Specialist 1 = Gifted/Talented 1 = 2 nd grade 2 = 4 th grade 1 = 5 th grade	1 = Kindergarten 1 = 1 st grade 1 = 2 nd grade 1 = 3 rd grade 1 = 4 th grade 1 = 5 th grade 1 = Special Education	4 = 1 st grade 2 = 2 nd grade

Data Collection Procedures

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Institutional Research Board (IRB) at The University of Texas at Austin on December 13, 2004. The researcher sent a letter to the superintendent of the school district on December 14, 2004. A thorough description of the study and a list of potential schools were given to the district for review. The researcher then contacted the research and accountability department from the school district on December 16, 2004. Several conversations occurred by phone and email clarifying the study and requirements. The school district granted permission for the study on January 28, 2005. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted approval on January 31, 2005. The researcher then contacted the principal of the school that was suggested by the director of the research and accountability department of the school district on February 1, 2005. This school met the criteria of the study. The researcher described the study, a potential timeline, and an agenda for the initial meeting. The initial meeting was scheduled for February 14, 2005.

On February 10, 2005, the principal contacted the researcher and declined his initial permission. There were several factors for denying approval. The researcher began to contact schools again in a face-to-face manner on February 14, 2005. The research and accountability department had shared the information for all the schools in the district to assist in determining which school met the criteria. The researcher found three that qualified and attempted to make contact with the principals. The researcher went to each of the schools on February 14, 2005. One of the principals offered two

other schools that also fit the criteria. None of the principals agreed to give permission on that day. The researcher called and spoke to several principals again on February 28, 2005. One particular principal was interested and a meeting was set up to discuss the study and the requirements. The meeting was held on March 10, 2005 and the principal gave permission to conduct the research at her school.

At the initial meeting the researcher offered an informed consent form to the principal and explained the criteria for the teachers. A tentative timeline for the study was created. An informed consent form was given to each participant who agreed to take part in the research study. The informed consent described the purpose of the study, policies, procedures, possible risks, and expected benefits related to this study, as explained in the IRB manual. The data for this study was collected during a 2-month window, which began on March 14, 2005 and was completed on May 13, 2005.

Data Collection Instruments

Silverman (2001) lists four major methods used by qualitative researchers: interviews, observation, analyzing texts and documents, and recording and transcribing data. The four methods used in this study included: interviews, observation, focus groups, and analyzing documents.

Interviews

In the course of interviewing, open-ended questions were asked to allow participants to offer their own reasons, definitions, and experiences for particular activities or situations. For instance, Silverman offers ‘authenticity’ rather than

reliability as one of the main issues of the qualitative researcher. “The aim is usually to gather an authentic understanding of people’s experiences and it is believed that open-ended questions are the most effective route towards this end” (Silverman, 2001, p. 13). He goes on to say that interviewing offers “a rich source of data which provide access to how people account for both their troubles and their good fortune” (Silverman, 2001, p. 114).

The researcher interviewed the principal, the assistant principal, multiple teachers, and parents. Each interview was audio-taped and lasted a minimum of 30 minutes using the two specific research questions as well as questions posed for clarification or elaboration for the understanding of answers. The criteria for choosing the teachers were that the teachers had to be teaching at the school during the time of increased achievement. They had been at the school for at least 2 years. They were willing to participate. Interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis beginning with the principal. The principal was interviewed two times, once at the beginning of the project and once at the end. The assistant principal was interviewed. Seven teachers were interviewed individually. Two focus groups made up of teachers were also conducted. One parent was interviewed individually and one focus group of 3 parents was interviewed. Each interview lasted between 25-45 minutes and included open-ended as well as pre-determined questions. Table 2 offers a description of parent participants by the type of data set: individual interview or focus group; race; gender; and number of children enrolled at Allen Elementary.

Table 2

Parent Participant Information

Type of Parent Participant	Race and Gender	Number of Children at Allen Elementary
Individual Interview -PTA President	White male	4 children
Focus Group	White female	2 children
Focus Group	White female	1 child – special education
Focus Group	Hispanic female	2 children – not bilingual

Observations

The goal of observation is to “gather firsthand information about social processes in a ‘naturally occurring’ context” (Silverman, 2001, p. 14). During observations, no interviewing takes place because the focus is on what actually occurred rather than a participant’s version of what transpired.

Observations were conducted during each visit while shadowing the principal and independently visiting teachers and classrooms. While shadowing the principal, observations of the campus climate and culture were documented. Classrooms, the cafeteria, recess, and the library were visited during trips to the campus. The researcher attended a site-based decision making meeting and one parent was interviewed following the meeting. Information from all observations was gathered and documented in field notes.

Observations were conducted to report the daily goings-on in the school, as well as gathering information regarding meetings, planning, teaching, and interactions

between the adults and interactions between students and adults. Possible foci were: student and teacher interactions, teacher and administrator interactions, the teaching and learning processes, and the classroom environment.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted consisting of 5-7 staff members, including special education teachers and special area teachers using the interview criteria for selection. The researcher held two focus groups with different teachers in each session. The researcher also conducted a parent focus group. The sessions were audiotaped and lasted 30-50 minutes. The session focused on the following areas:

- 1) Describe the leadership on the campus.
- 2) Describe the philosophy of the school.
- 3) Describe the supports and resources for the teachers and students.
- 4) Describe how you monitor student progress and what happens if a student is not being successful.
- 5) Describe parent and community involvement.
- 6) What additional information would you like to share or would you like me to know about your school?

The researcher took notes during the session to document body language and facial expressions not captured by the audiotape. After the session, the audiotapes were transcribed. The participants reviewed the transcriptions for reliability.

Documental Review and Analysis

Upon approval for the study, documents were requested for review and analysis. The purpose for documental review was to glean information as to policies, procedures,

and events, which may lead to a more in depth look into the effectiveness of the school.

Interviews and focus groups may be guided by information collected from these documents. The following documents were reviewed:

- Faculty handbook (including vision/mission statement)
- Student/Parent handbook
- Campus Improvement Plan
- School publications
 - Newsletters
 - Schedule of events and programs
 - Policies and procedures
- State/District standardized test scores
 - TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills)
 - Stanford Achievement Test

TAKS scores and PEIMS information were also analyzed for achievement increases and over or under representation of African American students in special populations, along with district and campus policy information.

Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis process began with recording the interviews. The interviews were transcribed and then given back to the participants for a member check. Once the transcripts were verified, then coding occurred. Coding was done in two ways. The researcher reread all transcripts, then cut and pasted by hand the emerging themes and trends. The researcher also used NUD*IST (N6) to identify themes and trends in the data. Any trends in the data were also compared with field notes and observations for triangulation.

Analysis of data and campus policy documents assisted in bringing all aspects of the school together to comprehensively identify practices that increase African American student achievement.

Validity and Reliability

Validity, as Hammersley (1990) defines it “means truth: interpreted as the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers” (as cited in Silverman, 2001, p. 232). Reliability, as Hammersley (1992) describes it, refers to “the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions” (as cited in Silverman, 2001, p. 225). Triangulation is one of several ways that ethnographers corroborate their data (Wolcott, 2002). Wolcott (2002) states that, “In the field, it becomes far preferable to gather data through multiple *techniques*—using triangulation” (p. 37). Wolcott also explained his sense of relief when he heard that “a good fieldworker could be objective without having to be neutral” (2002, p. 37).

In this study, the interviews were transcribed, reviewed by the teachers, and corrections or clarifications were made to their responses. Reviewing the transcriptions by the teachers allows for member checks. Member checks were used to validate the information gathered during interviews or focus groups. If information was added or deleted, the researcher acknowledged these additions or deletions. Field notes, documentation of interviews, and observations of the activities on the campus assisted

with validity of the data. Furthermore, triangulation was achieved by using different data sources such as interviews, observations, focus groups, and field notes.

Summary

This chapter described the process for collecting empirical data in order to answer the research questions. It explained how the researcher conducted the study. This qualitative, single case study focused on one diverse public elementary school in Texas that had increased student achievement with African American students over a 3-5 year period while maintaining the same principal.

Chapter Four: School Profile

The purpose of this chapter is to fully describe the school where this single case study was conducted. This chapter includes a description of the school facility, the neighborhood and the surrounding community, the family units that make up the school, the students including ethnicity, socio economic status, language, and special populations, programs and curriculum, the administration, faculty and staff, and other pertinent information.

The School

Allen Elementary is located in an urban school district in Texas. Just off one of the city's major thoroughfares, Allen is located in a quiet residential area. Upon driving to Allen, one will notice the large well-kept homes, mature trees, and beautiful yards. Allen is not your average 'little red brick school house.' It is red brick, but it spans one full city block and houses approximately 700 students. A well-kept sidewalk and lawn with large developed trees surround the front and sides of the building. In the rear of the building are portables that have been painted to match the main building. The walkways from the main building to the portables, as well as between the portables, are covered. Behind the school, along with the portables, is a huge playground area. Asphalt, grass, and pebbles make up the grounds that the Allen students enjoy during recess. An 8-foot chain linked fence safely surrounds the area.

As you approach the school, it is not uncommon to see adults exercising by walking or jogging around the school and neighborhood, people walking their dogs, or

sitting on the park benches, which are located in the front of the school, reading the newspaper and drinking coffee. There is a very relaxing and familiar feeling about being near the school. Wrought iron style lampposts and trashcans around the school help create a clean, well-kept atmosphere. The lampposts and trashcans also add to the focus of history for the building. Allen was built over 80 years ago in 1923 and is considered a historic building. Due to this, the neighborhood and community are very supportive regarding the school's preservation and appearance.

The Neighborhood and Community

On one side of the major highway, where Allen is located, the community is residential with many homes of all shapes and sizes including: houses, condominiums, and apartments. On the other side of the highway there are some houses but it is much more commercial: stores, restaurants, dry-cleaning, and shopping. A middle school is also located on the commercial side of the highway. The middle school allows Allen to use their facility from time to time.

Within the Allen neighborhood, there are homes ranging from \$1-3 million dollars and in contrast there are also two subsidized-housing apartment complexes. Allen students range from very affluent to students who qualify for free lunch. This aspect in itself creates a very interesting environment.

Allen is also positioned near a university, museums, and art establishments. As a result, many parents who work in these facilities send their children to Allen, although

they do not live within the school boundary. Therefore, the economic status of the Allen families continues to vary drastically.

The Family Units

Diversity is the key to why Allen elementary was chosen for this research project. Not only are the students diverse, but also the parents and family units at Allen are reflective of this diversity. Allen, like many schools, has both one and two-parent families. In some families, both parents work. Other families have stay-at-home moms or dads so that one parent is always available to help. Due to some of the high socio economic levels, several families have nannies. The nannies also volunteer and participate in activities at the school. Allen has many multi-racial families, which are growing more and more common in our society. Furthermore, extended families, which are strong within the Hispanic culture, are another aspect of the Allen family unit, which also adds to some of the linguistic diversity at the campus. Linguistic diversity at Allen includes Spanish, Chinese, Korean, and German. Another aspect of diversity is the number of same-sex parents at Allen. The diversity that makes up the student population is also a direct reflection of the family units at Allen Elementary.

Diversity/Parent Perception

Diversity is a huge component of the school itself. It is entwined within all of the data that was collected. Everyone interviewed: parents, teachers, and administrators, all mentioned the diversity within the school and community. “We have a very diverse population, which makes it fun, but also makes it challenging,” explained a fourth grade

teacher. The parents who were interviewed mentioned this factor including one parent who stated she specifically moved her family into the neighborhood so that her child did not need to be selected into the magnet program in order to attend Allen. The parent continued to explain that the reason they moved into the attendance zone at Allen was important because of the diversity. She wanted her son to experience a more real world environment. She stated that as long as they lived within the attendance zone, there would never be a concern that her son could be removed from the school due to displacing or dissolving the magnet program.

A second parent from the neighborhood explained that she had her son in private school, but due to learning difficulties, she brought him to Allen and now he is finally being successful. She felt that the support of the principal and the teachers created a positive, safe environment with the support he needed. The parent attributed the support and attention her son received to the diversity at the school. She stated that the teachers know how to work with kids who learn differently because of the diversity at the school. Additionally, a third parent who has a magnet student at Allen stated,

I chose the school. It's a little different for me. I did have a choice from other schools out there. I made the choice... on parent involvement as well as teacher involvement. I think here the teachers are very involved, not only in terms of what they have to do or the academics that they are instructed to give, but they just go a step further in terms of what they need to provide to the child.

Diversity is important in today's society and at Allen Elementary, it takes many forms.

The Students

The uniqueness of a school is often created by its student population. The students that make up Allen Elementary are no exception. Allen enrolls students in grades Pre-Kindergarten through 5th grade. As reported by the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) 2002-2003 Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report, the ethnicity of Allen's student population is 41% White, 32% Hispanic, 22% African American, and 4% Asian. Of the 730 students, the grade level distribution includes 17 pre-kindergarteners, 102 kindergarteners, 110 first graders, 128 second graders, 125 third graders, 118 fourth graders, and 98 fifth graders. Nearly 40% of the 698 students qualify for free and reduced lunch. This is not a Title I campus; therefore, it does not receive additional funds for students who qualify for free and reduced lunch. Allen is a bilingual campus with 22% of the students qualifying as Limited English Proficient (LEP) and 20% receiving bilingual services in Spanish. The mobility rate at Allen is 13%. The number of students enrolled in the gifted and talented program is 36%; conversely the number of students enrolled in the special education program is 8%.

As observed during the researcher visits, all the students at Allen wear uniforms everyday, with few exceptions. The uniform consists of khaki pants, skirts, or shorts and T-shirts or polo shirts that are red, yellow, white, or navy. Picture day is one exception when uniforms are not worn. Allen also has special days, such as Art Day, in which the students wear an 'Art T-shirt' instead of their specific uniform shirt.

The mission of Allen Elementary, as stated in the faculty handbook, on the website and within the Student-Parent Handbook, is

to prepare children to function successfully in a changing world by helping every student:

- Develop a love of learning
- Practice and demonstrate critical thinking skills
- Strive for maximum academic growth
- Recognize and enhance strengths and talents
- Value and respect oneself and others
- Appreciate a variety of cultures.

The parents, teachers, staff, and administrators, working in partnership, will promote communication and pursue growth to maximize the educational environment.

The school motto, as posted on the school website and in the school newsletters, is

“Positively Outstanding Education!” Allen also has the following six school rules:

- We will treat others as we would have others treat us.
- We will keep our hands and feet to ourselves.
- We will move about the campus in a quiet and orderly manner.
- We will avoid using profanity and name-calling.
- We will respect school property and the property of others.
- We will respect and obey all adults.

One third of this urban district’s elementary schools have magnet or vanguard programs on their campuses. Allen is no exception. Allen is a fine-arts magnet. The magnet motto is “Arts and Academics...A Challenge For Every Child!” The fine-arts magnet focuses on dance, art, music: choir and violin, and physical education: competitive gymnastics and track teams that compete at district sponsored events. The magnet program also supports the computer lab and the science lab. The principal

explains that even though the campus only gets money for the magnet students, all students at Allen are exposed to the benefits of the program.

Allen uses the district's student code of conduct. It does not have a parent or student handbook, but has information and expectations that are placed in the 'Wednesday folder' that goes home with every child on Wednesdays. Allen also created a teacher handbook that is given to every staff member at the beginning of each year.

The Administration, Faculty, and Staff

The administrative team at Allen consists of the principal, assistant principal, magnet coordinator, social worker/counselor, and the secretary. The principal at Allen is a White female who has completed four years with this district. Mrs. Davis has been in the field of education for over 30 years. During this period of time she has been fortunate to teach in both primary and intermediate grades, in special education and gifted education classrooms, as well as music education. For 17 years Mrs. Davis was an elementary campus administrator in a northern school district, which is located in the midst of a major urban city. Additionally, she brought experience and knowledge from 2 previous districts. She has been married for over 35 years to her husband who also works in the field of education. Mrs. Davis has received numerous state and national awards ranging from Texas school ratings of Exemplary for nine consecutive years, Texas Blue Ribbon School Award, and the National Blue Ribbon School Award. She is a member of numerous state and national professional organizations. She has also conducted numerous professional training sessions regarding curriculum and instruction,

school safety, and effective teaching strategies. Her ongoing professional mission is to ‘establish and maintain a positive and exciting school environment that focuses on each individual child and their varied needs through a collaborative team effort with parents, teachers, administration and most importantly the individual child.’

The assistant principal has been at Allen Elementary for 17 years. She was a third grade teacher and then elevated into a position as coordinator for a specific campus project. The move onto the administrative team was a natural progression from her coordinator position. She has been the assistant principal for three years.

The teachers and staff at Allen are dedicated to ensuring all students are successful. Allen has 35 certified general education classroom teachers, five special education teachers, two reading specialists, one gifted/talented teacher, seven magnet teachers, one librarian, and six teaching assistants. At least one teacher at each grade level teaches in a Spanish dominant, bilingual classroom. If you look at the demographic make up of Allen’s teachers and staff, you will find that 92% of the staff are female, 8% are male, 8% African American, 18% Hispanic, and 74% White as reported by the Texas Education Agency’s (TEA) AEIS report for 2002-2003. The same report also shows the level of teaching experience at Allen with 29% of the teachers having 1-5 years of experience, 33% have 6-10 years of experience, 29% have 11-20 years of experience, and 9% have over 20 years of experience. Table 3 depicts TEA’s AEIS information displaying the number of teachers at each grade level,

ethnicity, gender; years of experience, and the number of support staff: non-classroom teachers.

Table 3

All Certified Teaching Staff

Number of Teachers per Grade Level	PK-1	K-5 1st-6	2nd-6 3rd-6	4 th -6 5 th -5
Ethnicity and Gender	74% White	18% Hispanic	8% African American	92%-Female 8%-Male
Years of Experience	29% 1-5 yrs	33% 6-10 yrs	29% 11-20 yrs	9% >20 yrs
Support Staff - Certified Teachers	5-Sped 1-GT	2-Reading Specialist	7-Magnet Teachers	1-Librarian 1-Nurse

Allen appears to have a very experienced and strong teaching staff. Some may look at the years of experience and assume that the teachers were good due to the amount of experience. Others may assume that due to the level of experience many teachers would be set in their ways. Allen has a good mixture of both. Due to the experience, many teachers have been exposed to multiple programs and teaching strategies. However, even though many of the teachers have experience, they are still searching for techniques and skills to assist their students to success. The teachers at Allen give up personal time before, during, and after school, as well as on weekends to support the students. Some of this time is compensated by stipends or exchanges of time, but in general, these teachers do whatever they need to do to ensure success for their students.

Child-Centered Philosophy

The philosophy at Allen is evident by the words and actions of the administration and staff members. Upon entering the school, the positive school climate is immediately felt by all. Even the cafeteria is set up for positive interactions between students, and is quieter than usual for an elementary school. The positive climate is only a part of Allen's philosophy. High expectations and structure are also apparent. "Student achievement is absolutely the driving focus. While that is probably something you would hear at any school, what it means here is that curriculum is kind of secondary to student achievement," professed a third grade teacher. However, a fourth grade teacher continued, we "teach to the child, not to the test."

Allen teachers and administrators use their own words to describe the philosophy at Allen. "Kids are always first here and [Mrs. Davis] will tell you that. And she means what she says," stated a very convincing fifth grade teacher. A teammate followed up stating,

Children are first. So if you are having a bad day or you are thinking that there is something in your life that may interfere with that, she [principal] says 'come to me and let's see what we can do' because the kids are first.

The philosophy of 'children first' seems to reign throughout the words of multiple staff members. The reading specialist shared her thoughts, "The philosophy I think is basically that kind of a philosophy that I think the state of Texas has, no child left behind."

In order to put the children first, you must meet the needs of the children both academically and on a personal level. The principal kicked it off by saying, “Teach to that child’s ability, not to the whole class. I think that kind of runs through the school.” The reading specialist followed suit explaining, “The idea is that we meet children where they are and move from there.” In any classroom, the students will range from high to low with a handful of kids at each level. So if the teacher is teaching to the middle, he or she will miss a large group of the students. The teacher will miss the lower group of students either by teaching at a higher level than they are capable of understanding or moving through the curriculum so quickly that students cannot keep up. The teacher may miss the higher group of students by teaching information that is already known, so the students disengage and are left to their own thoughts. In order to reach all children at Allen, the teachers “target the needs of students, emotionally and academically, to give them as much support as we can,” explained a fourth grade language-arts teacher. A fourth grade math teachers then added, we also “individualize instruction whenever possible to meet their needs instead of just dealing with one curriculum.”

The term, ‘it takes a village’ also lends itself to the philosophy at Allen. The teachers want to meet the needs of all students, but in order to reach that goal the whole school must be involved. A first grade teacher explains, “Everybody is responsible for everything.” As an example, another teacher on the fourth grade team stated, “One person can’t take the blame. If there is failure, then there is failure as a group. If there is

success, then we are successful as a whole group.” As a school we are “definitely child centered, meeting the needs of all the children,” explained a second grade teacher. The extent, to which the teacher will go, in order to ensure learning, is stated best by the Kindergarten team leader who said, we “strive to help all kids be successful, whatever level that is.”

Hearing these words from the teachers and administrators is very powerful. They don’t hesitate or pause to think about how they want to describe Allen. The statements are easily stated because Allen teachers truly believe and live their child-centered philosophy.

School Climate

“Since the climate of the school is a matter of impression, it is often difficult to define with precision” (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2007, p. 333). They go on to say,

Climate can be viewed as the enduring characteristics that describe the psychological makeup of a particular school, distinguish it from other schools, and influence the behavior of teachers and students, as well as the “feel” that teachers and students have for the that school. (p. 333)

Sergiovanni and Starratt (2007) equate climate with school health. They share an abridged version of Matthew Miles’ 10 dimensions to school healthy, which include: 1) goal focus, 2) communication adequacy, 3) optimal power equalization, 4) resource utilization, 5) cohesiveness, 6) morale, 7) innovativeness, 8) autonomy, 9) adaptation, and 10) problem-solving adequacy (pp. 335-337). Cohesiveness and morale are two key characteristics that are apparent at Allen through the comments of the staff.

The second grade teacher said,

I'm new, I mean this is my first year here and what I've seen and what I keep thinking...I'm happy to be here. At my other job people were not happy. It's just fun to be here. I think everybody here feels happy. I'm sure they have their bad days, but it is fun to walk in.

Enthusiasm is an important aspect of teaching. Excitement for teaching is expressed by many teachers at Allen. Another teacher stated that, "even when it's a bad day I have a good time. I enjoy coming to work. I look forward to it." When teachers are happy it carries over to the students. Both teachers and students are more productive in a positive learning environment.

The team building that Mrs. Davis has developed on the campus has made an impact across all grade levels and teams. She has tried to create a positive climate on the campus not only for the students but also for the teachers and staff. This productivity is apparent in the achievement of the students at Allen.

Curriculum and Instructional Supports

Allen follows the district mandates for curriculum and uses the state adopted textbooks and resources, but they offer so much more for their students. Allen teachers use Early Literacy, Guided Reading, Writer's Workshop, a Literacy Lab, a Science Lab, and a Computer Lab to support their students.

The Early Literacy approach, which includes guided reading, is implemented at all grade levels to teach reading to the students. During guided reading, students in

grades Kindergarten through second participate in ‘child-centered, literacy-based learning stations.’

In 1996, Allen created a Literacy Lab where students who are not reading on grade level receive additional, intensive, small group instruction. An Academics 2000 grant supported the initial start up of this lab. The Literacy Lab is a resource for teachers and parents, as well as the students. The Literacy Lab houses a professional resource library for the teachers and staff. Parents are also encouraged to come to the lab and check out books for their children or professional resource books for themselves, which offer strategies to assist their children in learning to read.

In the area of written language, the Allen teachers are trained in Writer’s Workshop, modeled after Lucy Calkins’ Teachers College Writing Project. Writer’s Workshop emphasizes authentic student work products and a portfolio to show evidence of the students’ growth over time.

The science lab is used for hands-on science experiments. One of the four courtyards is also designated for science experiments. On Saturdays, selected students come to school from 9:00 am to 2:00 pm for science camp. Many of the students who attend are at-risk or identified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). Lunch is provided at the camp. At the same time, many parents participate in ESL classes offered by teachers on the campus. Daycare is also provided for the parents if their children are not school age.

Technology is important at Allen. They have a computer lab with 24 Macintosh computers. Each 3rd-5th grade language art classroom and all 2nd grade classrooms have one iMac computer. Additionally, each 3rd-5th grade math classroom has one Compaq Deskpro or Presario computer. Furthermore, all classrooms have one Macintosh desktop computer and the entire building is wired for internet service. Computers are also located in the library, Literacy Lab, and the Resource Center. Allen uses Accelerated Reader, which is a computer based reading incentive program. Students learn how to create projects and research reports in document form and in PowerPoint presentation form.

Allen teachers offer support and enrichment for the students in many different ways. Tutorials are offered during the school day, after school, and even on Saturdays. During the school day, teachers tutor students during their conference periods. Teachers volunteer to give up one conference period a week to tutor struggling students. Many teachers admit to assisting students more than once a week. Students may also stay after school for academic support in reading or math free of charge. More over, Allen teachers offer 'Kid's College,' which is an enrichment program that students participate in after school. The parents pay for sessions and the teachers provide classes or lessons in different areas such as robotics; art: oils, sketch, landscape; creating and writing books with technology; math magicians; and science sidewalks. Finally, on Saturdays, Allen teachers and parents support learning in the area of science.

After-School Programs

Allen has two main after school programs; one is Child Care and the second is Kid's College. These two programs offer support; either academic support or a place the students can feel safe after school hours with people whom they know. The later allows for the students to remain at school rather than go home to an empty house or apartment since their parents work and would not be able to be at their home when the students were dismissed from school.

Child Care is a daycare that is managed by the teachers at Allen. The teachers work from 3-6 pm. The parents pay tuition, which pays the salary of the teachers as well as provides resources and snacks for students. Child Care enrolls 85 students plus staff members' children for a total of 97. Two of the Allen teachers are designated as leaders. One handles the finances and discipline; the other handles daily activities. Piano lessons are provided during the 3 hours and the parents pay additional fees for the lessons.

Kid's College is not a daycare, but has an academic focus. However, it is not tutoring. On Tuesday afternoons, the students participate in different types of educational activities, which include: 1) robotics; 2) art: oils, sketch, landscape; 3) creating/writing books by technology; 4) name that book; 5) math magicians; and 6) science sidewalk. The activities last approximately 6 weeks and for each new session a brochure of offerings is created. Parents pay \$45 per session.

Academic Standing

The students have done well on standardized testing during the time of the study. On the state Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) tests, the students have obtained the Recognized status as established by the Texas Education Agency. Table 4 shows the achievement gap between the African American students and White students. The gap between third and fourth graders is very small; however, there is still a gap in the fifth grade scores.

Table 4

Academic Achievement Gap

	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade
	Af Amer v. White	Af Amer v. White	Af Amer v. White
Reading	93.5% v. 100%	93.1% v 100%	70.8% v 94.9%
Math	96.7% v 97.5%	93.1% v 98%	75% v 97.6%
Writing	N/A	93.3 % v 100%	N/A
Science	N/A	N/A	66.7% v 90.5%

Summary

Allen Elementary is unique in many ways: starting with the actual building, the ethnicity of the students, socio-economic levels of the students, ethnicity and ages of the teachers, the ethnicity and educational levels of the parents, and types of family units, which range from single parent homes to extended families or multi-family units within the same house. The strength of Allen comes from the leadership in the school, the willingness of teachers to do whatever it takes to make the students successful, and the support from parents, community, and the PTO (Parent/Teacher Organization). Created

in the early 1920s, Allen is a historical building, yet it is far from ancient in its inner workings. Allen has twenty-first century technology, curriculum, and research-based teaching strategies. Allen is a family. The positive, warm feeling is apparent as soon as you walk through the door and it stays with you throughout your time in this fabulous red, brick schoolhouse.

Chapter Five: Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the two research questions for this study and determine what data was collected to support and answer the two questions.

Research Question #1

What practices are in place at a diverse school where African American students have increased achievement?

Upon analyzing the data, several themes began to emerge from the data that addressed the first research question. The themes included supportive leadership, implementing change, staff development, distributive leadership, departmentalization, school-wide programs, student resources, teacher resources, communication, and planning and teaming.

Supportive leadership. Leadership on a campus can be either administrative: the principal, the assistant principal or both working together; or it can be distributive, which encompasses the teachers as leaders in the school, building the capacity on the campus. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium states,

Effective school leaders are strong educators, anchoring their work on central issues of learning and teaching and school improvement. They are moral agents and social advocates for the children and the communities they serve. Finally, they make strong connections with other people, valuing and caring for others as individuals and as members of the educational community. (Jossey-Bass, 2000, p. 99)

At Allen Elementary, leadership is evident through their administration. In the traditional sense, the principal is the leader on the campus. Mrs. Davis is Allen's principal. Multiple teachers and parents described Mrs. Davis as supportive. One fifth grade teacher actually stated, "In terms of support, she's phenomenal." A first grade teacher also expressed her satisfaction with Mrs. Davis stating, "If we need something, sometimes [a team leader] will say, you need to talk to Admin...100% they've always supported us."

Mrs. Davis feels that it is important to set personal and professional goals for the teachers as well as for herself. She wants the teachers to continue to grow. A fourth grade teacher explained, "She [principal] really works to see that our personal goals are met. She will get you any training that you need. She gives us that opportunity to expand."

Mrs. Davis also supports the teachers in terms of building relationships with the parents. A fourth grade teacher states,

[Mrs. Davis] is extremely supportive [with] purchases and adopting programs. She is also very supportive with parents and disagreements between parents and teachers. She always comes to us first and says 'okay, tell me what's going on.' Then she does the same with the parents.

Teachers must feel supported by the principal in order to be more effective in the classroom. Bringing everyone: the school, parents, and community together to support the students, shows leadership in the building, as well as a collaborative effect to improve student achievement (Marzano, 2003, Elmore, 1996, Sergiovanni, 1995).

Implementing change. Implementing change is difficult for everyone involved.

Teachers are always concerned about what might change and what will stay the same.

“She did respect that some things going on here were good,” a third grade teacher stated appreciatively.

Mrs. Davis has been the principal of Allen for 4 years. She came in and observed during her first year; building relationships and beginning to identify strengths and areas of concern. At the end of her first year and starting in year two, she began to make decisions regarding what changes needed to occur at Allen. She discussed these changes with her teachers, offering data and best practices to support the direction she envisioned for Allen. Mrs. Davis explained her philosophy for change,

Don't dictate it but try to make the people stakeholders in the change and not get in a hurry to make the change. I find that through dialogue and taking my time that they will ease into it and they will accept it a little better. And also with the change... don't tell them it's this or nothing. Let them know, we are going to do this but if we don't feel good about it and if you don't feel good about it, then we will re-evaluate. It's not that it's the end of all ends. Mostly just trying to help them through dialogue and feel a part of the change rather than going in and dictating it. That takes patience on my part as well as some of the other people that are ready to make the change. You just have to, and that doesn't mean that you are going to get everybody on board. I know that. But you have a little bit better chance at that. Also, don't focus on...the change is not focused because things are not right. Don't look at it as something is broken, instead celebrate the effect you are having and look at it as I want to even get better rather than focusing on, it's not working, it's broken, now how are we going to fix it. Build on the positives that you have and that's one of the things that I've really tried to do. Some people are more accepting of that than others.

The teachers supported this philosophy and the changes Mrs. Davis began to make.

During a focus group session, one second grade teacher said, “She has really taken the

time with us, she doesn't just barge in and say, 'do it my way.'" Then a fourth grade teacher chimed in,

Right, and if someone is not doing it the way that she thinks it should be done, it's not, 'you've got to do it this way' or 'it's not done that way.' It's more like, this is a whole group idea, let's sit down and here's some ideas and you can take a part of it home or you can take part of this back to your classroom and use it.

As the dialogue continued the teachers spoke of a situation when Mrs. Davis met with the language-arts team and she had some specific expectations for the group and for the school. Mrs. Davis wanted the language-arts curriculum to be TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) focused. A fifth grade teacher offered an example of Mrs. Davis' passion for what needed to occur at the school,

There are things that she [principal] feels very strongly about and I will say, when she first came, she said this is where we're going and if you don't like it, find another place to go. So when she has to say that, she does. However, if you are uncomfortable with something, she will try to keep helping you move to the way that she wants you to do it.

When Mrs. Davis first arrived at the campus, the teachers were using programs, rather than focusing on the curriculum. The campus was exemplary and the teachers felt everything was going well. The more Mrs. Davis observed the classrooms and the teachers, the more she felt that many of the teachers were instructionally strong; however, they were not being as effective as they could be with the students. The district was also trying to align the curriculum to the TEKS, which offered her support for what she was asking the teachers to do. She was asking them to change the way they think, rather than totally change the way they teach. Now when the teachers plan, they

look at the TEKS and the objectives in order to pull from different sources and pieces of programs to offer a variety of ways to present the material.

As the teachers began to plan their lessons around the TEKS, they also found that several teachers needed additional instructional support. One way to gain instructional strategies and increase the teachers' level of instruction was through staff development and training.

Staff development. One area of change was staff development. All districts have specific days set aside for staff development. Some districts designate what trainings, workshops, or presentations will be provided, while other districts allow campuses to make their own decisions based on the needs of their students. Mrs. Davis offered the teachers a different option. The entire faculty meets every Thursday and accrues time, then the teachers are allowed to 'comp-out' on district staff development days. Each Thursday is designated to a specific topic. They are planned and organized ahead of time. The first Thursday is for the language-arts and special education teams. The language-arts team created a spelling program for each grade level that is aligned and that will assist the students in transferring what they are learning from one year to the next. In special education, the topics have been differentiation, inclusion, and modifications in the classroom.

The second Thursday is for science and/or math. There are teams set up for both content areas individually, but there are also times when they meet together since the content can be integrated.

The third Thursday is devoted to a book study. This past year the faculty read “The Art of Inquiry.” This book focuses on the Socratic method of questioning students and using higher order questions while establishing more critical thinking skills in the students. The previous year, they read “Love and Logic,” which was the discipline management philosophy that was used throughout the school. Mrs. Davis explains that Love and Logic is “a philosophy, not a program. One of the whole pretenses is that your children are what you are. You are the role model.”

The fourth Thursday is what Mrs. Davis calls “My Thursday.” On this day, she offers training on instructional strategies or team building activities, which she humorously refers to as ‘sermons.’ She said that she uses her Thursdays to give the teachers whatever they needed. If things had been rough and the moral was low, she would do team building and motivational activities. If several teachers were having difficulties with students who were struggling, she would then try and offer instructional strategies or differentiation, in order to fill their toolboxes with more ideas.

If there was a fifth Thursday during the month then it was a free day and the teachers did not meet. These meetings and trainings would last beyond the regularly scheduled hours for the teachers. This was intentional. The teachers would accrue enough hours that when the district had its scheduled staff development days, the Allen teachers would have the day off. They could go spend the day with their family, take a vacation or just relax. Mrs. Davis felt it was very important that the teachers had days off to rejuvenate themselves. These Thursday meetings occurred every Thursday for 10

weeks in the first semester, then repeated for 10 more weeks of the 2nd semester. At that time the teachers had enough hours to compensate for the staff development days. The teachers typically did not have to meet at the beginning of the year in August and September. The school year would begin and everyone made sure they were organized and on track, and then the ‘Thursday’ meetings began. During the second semester, the teachers were working very hard due to the excessive amount of testing and trying to make sure that everything that needed to be covered for the year was complete, the teachers were finished with their 10 weeks by the end of March. They did not meet in April or May. Beyond the ‘Thursday’ meetings, Mrs. Davis did not schedule regular faculty meetings; however, the teachers did schedule some meeting for themselves. These meetings still had to have a purpose. Often they were pertinent to the grade level or department and focused on curriculum or instruction.

Mrs. Davis encouraged the teachers to take leadership roles both in relationship to planning and guiding their teams instructionally and related to staff development. If the teachers felt there was a need, then they could meet to discuss that need, such as curriculum, instructional strategies, and differentiated instruction. Not all schools have this option for meetings and training throughout the year. The teachers and Mrs. Davis felt that it offers more consistency of the information, time for implementation and it also created time to ask questions as implementation occurred. These leadership roles also increased the leadership capacity on the campus.

Distributive leadership. Distributive leadership, as explained by Thomas Sergiovanni and Robert Starratt (2007), is “a collective responsibility for teaching, learning, and student achievement” (p. 198), in which the responsibility is shared by teachers; of teacher leaders such as coaches, academic deans, grade-level and team leaders, department chairs, peer supervisors, and per facilitators; of central office supervisors such as subject-matter and curriculum experts and professional development experts; and of principals and their assistants. (pp. 197-198)

In successful schools, collaborative cultures provide the norms and context for teachers to inquire into, reflect on, and improve their practice as individuals, as colleagues, and as members of communities of practice (p. 197).

Upon her arrival at Allen, Mrs. Davis shared that she sized up her staff and the systems in place at the school. She realized that she could create team leaders in each grade level or department in order to increase communication and start building capacity at Allen. She realized that the teams did not meet on a regular basis, nor did they have one person designated to speak for them. Mrs. Davis, having been an experienced principal, knew the benefits of meeting and planning as a team, as well as, holding team leader meetings to get information dispersed in an organized fashion. Each team was asked to nominate one individual. This allowed Mrs. Davis to give the teachers a voice and a speaker they have chosen rather than someone she appointed. She felt this process was important in order to gain understanding and acceptance by the teachers for this new way of sharing information. The teams were then expected to meet at least once a week

to discuss curriculum. If they needed to meet a second time to take care of housekeeping activities, then they did, but it was a team decision.

Departmentalization. Along with team leaders and team planning, departmentalization was encouraged, and then implemented. Departmentalization is a term that is used to describe what specific content areas on which a teacher will focus, such as math and science, as opposed to teaching all subject areas. Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers keep their students all day without any switching of the content areas. First and second grades each have one teacher who teaches all the reading, language-arts, spelling, and handwriting, then another teacher who teaches math, science, and social studies. A fourth grade teacher explained the upper grades' departmentalization system,

Third, fourth and fifth, have the same model. One science specialist is in every grade level, then two teachers who teach math, two teachers who teach language arts, and then everybody would do their own social studies.

The departmentalization was a change that the teachers seemed to embrace when it was presented and discussed. Along with departmentalization, Mrs. Davis wanted to implement some school-wide programs that supported Allen's philosophy for the students.

School-wide programs. School-wide programs are programs that are implemented and supported by all stakeholders within the school. Buy-in, a unified vocabulary, and everyone understanding why this method will be beneficial either academically or behaviorally are key components to implementing school-wide

programs on a campus.

Mrs. Davis felt that with the strong focus on reading due to the “No Child Left Behind Act.” All the teachers who teach reading and writing should be using the balanced literacy approach. Guided reading was one of the keys to this approach. Mrs. Davis sent teachers for training and had district personnel come to the campus to model lessons and observe lessons. Kindergarten and first grade implemented this approach first. Then guided reading was fully implemented in grades 2nd-5th last year.

Along with balanced literacy, Mrs. Davis wanted a school-wide discipline program, which would blend with the philosophy of the school. Allen uses Love and Logic, which is “an intense discipline program using natural consequences,” explained an Allen teacher. Love and Logic was a way to present natural consequences. The students assist in deciding on their own consequences and it offers the students accountability for their actions. The basis for this program is that the students still feel that the teacher or adult cares for them, but the students learn there are consequences, positive and negative, for their actions.

Love and Logic was a book study for all of the Allen Elementary teachers during the second year Mrs. Davis was principal. Last year the teachers opted to select a book to assist in their delivery of instruction and methods of questioning. The book that was chosen and studied was “Art of Inquiry.” This book supported the teachers in developing better ways of questioning the students at a higher level when checking for understanding.

Mrs. Davis has a ‘student first’ focus, so her decisions are based on what is best for the students. Both of these programs focused on the academic needs as well as the behavioral needs of the students. In order to continue to support the students, additional resources were needed. Acquiring and creating resources is one way she supports student achievement.

Resources for students. Resources for the students come in varying degrees; from personnel, to specific areas of the building, to programs, to committees whose sole purpose is to identify ways to support the students.

The reading lab is set up for “really intense, either one-on-one or small group help for 30-40 minutes a day,” explained one of Allen’s reading specialists. It is for remediation and to ‘fill in the gaps’; it is not necessarily for the poor readers. The reading lab also supports parents, since they can come and check out books to read with their children at home.

Allen elementary has two reading specialists. One focuses primarily on Spanish speaking students, but works with other students. The other reading specialist works with all non-Spanish speaking students. Both specialists support teachers and parents. As a first grade teacher explained, “The two reading specialists are absolutely invaluable. The reading specialists provide support for us in the classroom. They provide support in working with parents. They find ways to better serve their children.” One of the reading specialists was asked what she does and she responded,

What I do for the children is we take a look at the result of [assessments] and we look and see which of the students are in the most need and then we group them

accordingly and we provide reading intervention. Mainly students who are below level. Right off the bat.

Then she was asked what happens when a new student comes in and she explained,

We kind of look at here we are again. We kind of reassess who's where, how far, who's in more need now and then we have them go back into the classroom to keep with [where] they are going, have the teacher kind of keep them moving along while we pick up the next one and bring them in...so we dismiss and admit based on how far they have progressed.

The bilingual reading specialist stated that,

It [reading groups] ranges from small group to up to 6 in a group. It's individual at times. I pull individually and sometimes I will pull a group to read. Sometimes I may just have one. This week I'm going to give them 2 sessions of individualized instruction just to keep them from getting distracted from the other group. It's kind of flexible grouping.

She went on to discuss the support for third through fifth grade,

Sometimes the teachers in the upper grades, basically have smaller groups because of bilingual, I'm kind of more accessible to the upper grades where they see that a certain student may be falling behind so then I go and look and see where has he's been, what is he's doing now, and then I pull them out for a little bit to try and give additional support. I try to pull them or go into the classroom to provide the additional support, whether it be additional instruction or try to have them focus on the lesson, what it is they are doing, just clarify their understanding of the instruction. Just motivate them and provide parent communication. I do a lot of that too for the students that have transitioned from bilingual to regular classroom.

The library supports all students, but the librarian especially wants to support struggling students. Since the librarian was a classroom teacher at Allen for more than 10 years, she has a vested interest in student achievement. The library is connected to the computer lab; therefore, the students have access to vital resources, which could enhance their learning experience.

Tutorials occur before school, during school, and after school. Tutorials after school are free to students, as opposed to the Kids' College, which was previously mentioned. Tutorials that are offered either before school or during school are usually offered in the areas of reading and math. Many of the teachers at Allen provide tutoring. Sometimes teachers tutor their own students, but more often, teachers tutor other students from different grade levels. This allows the students to hear information in a different way. It also creates situations in which the students can build relationships with multiple adults. The goal is to show the students how many people at Allen care about them and want them to be successful.

Allen also tutors in the area of science. Saturday Science camp is Allen's way of offering science tutorials in a more hands-on and experiential way. Allen received a grant for science, which helped fund their Saturday Science Camp for kids who were struggling. Students come to school Saturdays from 9:00 am-2:00 pm and participate in hands-on science experiments or go on field trips in order to offer more experiences and exposure in the area of science.

The Intervention Assistance Team (IAT) is another resource for Allen elementary. The IAT is made up of the principal, special education team leader, classroom teacher, and the counselor. This team looks at the difficulties a student is experiencing then identifies the resources that might be able to support the students. The difficulties might be in the areas of academics, emotional or behavioral, or attendance.

A plan is created and implemented. The parent can be a member of the IAT to establish the home support needed to bring all aspects of the students' support system together.

Volunteers are a strong resource at Allen. Parents, senior citizens, and organizations, such as the Junior League come to Allen to assist students. Many of the volunteers read to the students, or the students read to the volunteers. The volunteers may also lead the class in an activity while the classroom teacher pulls a small group off to the side to work with them on specific strategies or concepts.

Finally, Allen brings in speakers throughout the year to discuss multiple topics from academics to culture, from self-esteem to career awareness. In addition to the speakers, Allen provides the experience of field trips for their students. All grade levels go on 2-3 field trips a year. The teachers feel that going to an exhibit will give the students a visual so that the new information will be locked into their long term memory. This experience also makes connections that can scaffold new learning.

Resources for teachers. The teachers at Allen have many resources available to them. These resources include support from Mrs. Davis, the principal, support from the parents, modeling and coaching from Allen's specialists, materials from Allen's library, and attending professional development.

The main resource besides Mrs. Davis and her leadership team is the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO). The PTO provides financial support as well as physical support in terms of volunteers and contributions to the classrooms. As one teacher stated, the "PTO is amazing. They are really, really involved. They came in over the

summer and put whiteboards in our classrooms. A dad built them.” Another teacher explained, “The PTO is going to replace our chain link fence with wrought iron. It’s cosmetic but it’s really nice to have that feeling that people love the school and want to make it beautiful.” A third teacher continued, “They have Work days on Saturday where the PTO comes up and paints a hallway or does a garden.” At Allen the PTO is an integral piece of the puzzle in terms of support and resources for the teachers.

Another resource for the teachers is the reading specialists and gifted and talented teacher. Allen has two reading specialist, one focusing on the bilingual students and the other on English speaking students. The reading specialists not only work with the struggling students, but also assist the teachers with strategies, professional books, and leveled books for the students. The GT teacher meets with individual teachers, as well as entire grade levels. She plans with them and offers strategies for the teachers to support and differentiate instruction for their students.

The library is not only a resource for the students, but it is also a resource for the campus and the teachers. Since the computer lab is adjacent to the library, the teachers can do research on the internet, as well as find books to enhance their lessons. Teachers and parents can check out books from the campus library to share with the children. The more exposure children have to literature, the more engrained literacy will become to their development.

Staff development is offered to the teachers by the principal on-site and supported financially off-site. Mrs. Davis offers staff development herself and brings in

experts in the areas of need for the school. Additionally, Mrs. Davis provides substitutes and/or pays the registration fee for off-site staff development or training. After teachers attend professional development off campus, the teachers are expected to share new learning with their colleagues.

Communication. Communication is an integral part of the efficient workings of a school. Communication must occur among every stakeholder: between administration and central office, administration and the community, administration and teachers, teachers and parents, teachers and students, and between school and home in general. Open lines of communication are essential to all stakeholders.

Additionally, communication between teachers creates the dialogue for effective instruction and guides curriculum. Teachers must communicate both horizontally and vertically. Horizontal discussions occur among teachers and support staff that work with the same grade level. They develop lesson plans, plan activities, and develop assessments in order to ensure learning. Vertical conversations occur between 2-3 grade levels to discuss the transfer of learning, extensions of learning, and continuous, common vocabulary throughout the content areas.

Disseminating information, such as the teachers sharing information from their professional development trainings, is one way Mrs. Davis supports communication across her campus. She also has regularly scheduled meetings in which she may share additional professional development or express concerns for school climate. Face-to-face communication also includes the principal meeting with the team leaders, the team

leaders meet with their teams, or another teacher calling a content area or committee meeting. Additionally, Mrs. Davis disperses information in writing by email or in her weekly newsletters. Other avenues of communication rely on the parents through the PTO or the community members through the Site Based Decision Making Team. Communication is an integral piece of school improvement when used effectively by campus leaders and teams.

Planning and teaming. The teachers work together in teams both vertically and horizontally to support each other and the students. A primary teacher offered her insight as to how planning and conversation can improve the climate at Allen. She explains,

I've only been here three years. I think that the direction that the school has been going since I came has been to work intelligently, to find best practice; to get the training that we need for best practice. And then to work it out in teams so that nothing is on one person's plate and the rest are kind of following along. We make contributions as we go.

Planning as a team was a new concept that Mrs. Davis established after she arrived. The teachers expressed their appreciating and approval sharing that planning was easier when everyone could share ideas or brainstorm together.

Along with specific practices that are in place, there must also be policies to support the decisions that are best for students.

Research Question #2

What policies are in place at a diverse school where African American students have increased achievement? Several policies emerged from the data, including an open

door policy, student placement, Site Based Decision Making Committee, Parent-Teacher Organization meetings, and grading.

Open door policy. Mrs. Davis has an open door policy, which provides both teachers and parents, access to come and visit with her if they have a question or concern regarding something that is occurring at Allen. A teacher explained, “She [principal] has an open door policy. She is going to sit and listen to me and as tremendously busy as she is, she always does. She never will tell you, I don’t have time for you.” Another teacher stated, “The administration has an open door policy. There’s nothing you just can’t poke your head in and ask.” The teachers feel that Mrs. Davis is approachable and that they can go talk to her as a teacher or as a parent. “I can come in as a parent and she treated me the same way. I just think, we all...we think she’s fair,” stated a fourth grade teacher whose child attends Allen. Parents feel Mrs. Davis is available to them as well.

One parent remarked,

Once you get used to how she does things, she is all about listening. I don’t want to say that she is straight and narrow. She will work with you, but she will not, I don’t want to say break any rules, but she will only do what is in the best interest of the child and the school. If you’re unhappy as a parent, I’m sorry. We’re not teaching you. We are focusing on your child and what is the best case scenario or best solution to whatever problem they are having. [She] will try to fix it but I think she’s not focusing on making every parent happy. In the process she will, of course she will try to, but she wants to make sure that she is doing whatever is in the best interest of the child in solving whatever problem there seems to be. And I think she tries to focus on doing what’s right for the child and the learning environment and not so much the parents, and the teachers. We’re going to keep our children learning and happy.

Mrs. Davis explained that she works hard to make sure that students get what they need, which may be in spite of the parents’ needs or parents’ requests.

Classroom placement policy. The parents I spoke with explained the policy and procedure of determining a student's placement into classrooms. At the end of the school year, the parents may request or make a recommendation for the teacher they would like to have for their child. This is not an automatic decision and most parents are encouraged to write the characteristics of the type of teacher that would best fit their child's personality without offering a specific name. A parent offered her specific situation,

At the beginning of the year we didn't get any of the teachers we requested and I was almost in tears, I couldn't even look at [the principal] because I was so mad at her. I never told her this. I was just so mad because we had this conversation and everything and it turns out it was who they picked. We didn't want Ms. 'A,' because I didn't know her. I knew Ms. 'B.' She [Ms. 'A'] has been the best thing that has ever happened. So they [principal and teachers] know and they pay attention. So it's been great. I'm very happy with everything and the way everybody has worked.

Even when the parents have a complaint, Mrs. Davis listens to the concerns, but often asks them to be patient and to try to work with the school. The parents that I spoke with seem to be pleased with Mrs. Davis and the decisions she makes for their children, even if Mrs. Davis' decisions are not exactly the results the parents were trying to attain.

The policy and procedures given to the teachers state that the students should be separated by academic level: high (above grade level), medium (on grade level), or low (below grade level) based primarily on reading and then looking at math scores; then also be gender. As the students are placed into classroom for the next year, they must be equally distributed so that each teacher has a heterogeneous group both academically and by gender. Other contributing factors include special circumstances such as whether

the students are in special education, 504, ESL; then looking at the personality of the teacher and some specific students; and finally the personalities among the class: Are there certain students who should not be in the same classroom? Once the teachers have followed the policy for classroom placement, Mrs. Allen goes through and looks at the classroom placement for each student and also reads the input forms to see what specific information the parents offered and continues to determine if placement is good for the students and teachers.

Mrs. Davis does have policies in place to allow parent input on many different topics. The Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) and the Site-Based Decision Making Committee are two ways that input is collected from parents, as well as how decisions are communicated back to parents and community members.

Parent meetings/parent involvement organization. Parent involvement in the school to support the students is crucial. Schools typically provide multiple avenues for parents to volunteer. Additionally, for parents who work full time or multiple jobs, what the school primary requests is support. Schools want the parents to work with them to support the students at home with homework, share information and ask questions. The parents want many of the same things, along with the school providing a strong education with fair and equitable practices. When the students know that their parents and their teacher are all working together they know everyone cares. There are organized ways for the parents to become involved such as the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO).

The PTO at Allen meets once a month. They hold an executive board meeting prior to the general meeting. The executive board meeting includes the PTO officers and the principal. They make decisions about the PTO's budget and how they can support the school. At the general meetings they share information with all parents (who attend) and vote on different items. An interview was conducted with the PTO president but neither a general meeting nor an executive meeting was attended.

The PTO president has four students at Allen. He feels that being a part of both the PTO and the Site-Based Decision Making Committee has increased his knowledge of how the school works and how important it is for everyone to work together for the students. When he was asked why he chose Allen versus sending his children to a private school he stated,

We [he and his wife] believe in public school. I think there is good parental involvement... It is, to me it's a real life school in that it is diverse, ethnically it's diverse... I think there is a good staff and I think she's a great principal.

He seemed very impressed with how hard the teachers and principal work. He also explained that as the PTO president, many parents want to complain and vent to him, but do not want to be involved. He explained, "My answer is continually, that's fine. If you want to do that or believe that, do something about it." Sadly, he said this is his first and last year as the president.

Site-based decision making committee. The Site-Based Decision Making committee is another way that parents can become more involved in their school. The Site-Based committee has a more political focus in that they make decision regarding

campus initiatives, budget spending and staff allocations. As previously stated, parent involvement can take many forms, but establishing how their school will best education their children is essential for improvement in all aspects.

The Site-Based committee makes decisions regarding the campus and the students. The district requested a particular number of participants, which includes 6 teachers, 3 other staff members, 4 parents, plus the PTO president, and 2 community members. Mrs. Davis had all the positions filled. An agenda is shared a week prior to the meeting. Parents or teachers are allowed to give input or suggestions during the meeting. Those who speak are given a time and that is the only time they are participating in the meeting. After speaking they are excused and any decisions made are communicated to the individuals in writing at a later time. The Site-Based committee discusses many different types of items; such as district budget, staff development, school fundraising, early release days, grading, and the Team Leader retreat. However, in the end, Mrs. Davis ultimately makes the final decisions. During researcher observations, it was evident that she listens and takes all committee members' contributions into consideration when making her decisions. The minutes are typed and posted after the meeting, usually within 24 hours.

Grading policy. The Site-Based Decision Making Committee may assist in creating the grading policy specific to Allen, yet still staying within the district's policy on grading. Most of the direction comes from the district; however, there are some areas that the site-based committee will discuss and then place into school policy. The

global grading policies that come from the district are not specific enough for Mrs.

Davis. Allen's grading policy states,

Per district policy, all assignments, tests, projects, classroom activities and other instructional opportunities should be designed to assess mastery of the designated instructional objective(s).

Reteaching is a necessary component in mastery of the taught curriculum. Reteaching must occur whenever the teacher determines that a student has not mastered the taught objective at an independent level. There must be documentation of re-teaching when the teacher determines that a student has not mastered an objective.

Documentation must consist of entries either in the teacher's lesson plans or grade book. Not all re-taught objectives may be re-graded. When a teacher reassesses mastery of the TEKS, the highest possible grade that can be earned on the reassessment is a 70%. (Allen's grading policy)

She wants all her teachers to be on the same page so that one teacher won't grade one way and another teacher grades differently. She feels that consistency in grading is not only for the benefit of the students and parents, but also to ensure learning of all students. It becomes difficult to determine if all students are learning if grading becomes too subjective or if teachers in the same grade level use different rubrics or choose to grade different assignments.

Additional Findings

Some of the data that was obtained does not necessarily fit into one of the two research questions. Two additional findings were identified: diversity and an attitude of caring.

Diversity of the school is an important component of the school and is entwined within all of the data that was collected. Everyone: parents, teachers, and administrators

that were interviewed, all mentioned the diversity within the school and community. It was discussed related to the students' ethnicity and race, the socio-economic levels of the students and families, the parents' educational levels, and the cultural differences.

The teachers and principal discussed diversity as an affirming attribute for Allen.

One teacher felt that

One of Allen's strengths is a diverse student population and a diverse teaching faculty. We have a variety of skills, variety of backgrounds. I think particularly in the public domain, you don't often see. You tend to end up with more homogeneous both faculty and student populations. So there is a wonderful diversity here.

A fourth grade teacher stated, "our school is so diverse." She was immediately followed by a first grade teacher stating, "It's incredibly diverse." The teachers see the diversity as a positive influence for the school and for its students. Even the principal explained that

If what is important to you is that your child gets a great education and good teachers to work with them on a daily basis who are committed to what they need with a great dedication to them and in a diverse situation, then you probably need to come to Allen.

The parents also mentioned diversity including one parent who specifically moved into the neighborhood so that her child did not need to be selected into the magnet program to attend. She wanted him in the attendance zone so that there would never be a concern that he could be removed due to moving or dissolving the magnet program. A second parent from the neighborhood had her son in private school, but due to learning difficulties, she brought him to Allen and he is finally being successful. She

felt that the support of the principal and the teachers created a positive, safe environment with the support he needed. A third parent who has a magnet student at Allen stated,

I chose the school. It's a little different for me. I did have a choice from other schools out there. I made the choice... on parent involvement as well as teacher involvement. I think here the teachers are very involved, not only in terms of what they have to do or the academics that they are instructed to give, but they just go a step further in terms of what they need to provide to the child.

This specific quote leads into the second additional finding: an attitude of caring. The teachers stated over and over how much they care for the students. A second grade teacher stated,

It is all about the kids. We truly care about the whole child. It's not just about whether they are reading on level, but also are they happy at school. Their emotional well-being is as important as their academic success. This impacts the kids just like reading or math.

The teachers explained that Allen is truly 'a village,' bringing everyone together to help the students because the whole school cares about student success. The reading specialist states, "Everyone helps out. Parents come and supervise stations while the teacher pulls small groups. Teachers all assist with any students that need additional support. The aides pull students, too." Mrs. Davis shared that "You will not find anyone including the custodial staff, who doesn't care about the kids; who is not here to help out. They will help in any way they can."

Summary

Policies and practices are the foundation of every school. They are built upon the beliefs and values of the stakeholders. All decisions regarding the children should be based on these beliefs along with what is best for the students. The philosophy of the

school; vision and mission, should provide the focus for where the school is headed.

Stakeholder buy-in naturally occurs when the shared vision and mission are ingrained into all aspects of the school.

Chapter Six: Summary, Conclusions, and Implications

This study focused on one diverse elementary school where African American students were successful. It was a holistic, qualitative study, in which the researcher attended one school function, one site-based decision making meeting, interviewed two different focus groups, the principal twice, the assistant principal, one parent individually, one group of three parents, and seven teachers individually. The researcher also reviewed policies and procedural documents. The research questions were: 1) What practices are in place at diverse schools where African American students have increased achievement? and 2) What policies are in place at diverse schools where African American students have increased achievement? The purpose of the study was to identify policies and practices at this particular school, which caused increased achievement for African American students.

Summary of the Findings

Practices in a diverse elementary school where African American students are successful were identified through the following themes: supportive leadership; implementing change through staff development, distributive leadership, and departmentalization; school-wide programs; resources for students; resources for teachers; communication; and planning and teaming. Themes identified through policy included open door policy, classroom placement policy, parent meetings/parent involvement policy, site-based decision making committee policy, and grading policy.

School-Wide Practices

Practices identified in this study were found to be school-wide practices. This means that the practices were not specific to teachers, classrooms, departments, or grade levels, but were implemented throughout the entire school by most personnel at the campus.

Supportive leadership. Leadership was found to be an effective way to create an environment where students are achieving at high levels. Effective leadership includes having a clear direction or vision as to where the school is going and also how to obtain that goal. This is congruent with Blankstein's (2004) assertion that the mission statement "serves the organization by providing specifics about: (1) what we want to do, (2) how we will know if we are succeeding, and (3) what we will do to ensure success" (p. 72). When the leadership of the campus has full belief in the direction of the campus then the staff will have strong ties and thus more potential for buy-in. "A school's vision should guide the collective direction of its stakeholders" (Blankstein, 2004, p. 77). The difference between the mission and vision is that the mission "reminds us of why we exist" and the vision "paints a picture of what we can become." (Blankstein, 2004, p 77). Once the leadership has clearly stated the direction, it becomes imperative to keep focused on that goal. "Staying the course means that careful attention is paid to developing leadership of others in the organization in the interests of continuity and deepening of good direction" (Fullan, 2006, p. 62). Administrators and teachers must create the shared vision together.

Although the administrators and teachers worked together, monitoring and communication ensured that everyone stayed focused on the end result. Teachers often feel as though they should be allowed to teach without being closely monitored because they are professionals. This supports what Richard Elmore, as cited in Fullan, 2006, states, that “educators equate professionalism with autonomy—getting to use their own judgment, to exercise discretion, to determine the condition of their own work in classrooms and schools” (p. 57). However, others affirm that

No one can lead in an environment where differences in practice and learning outcomes are ignored or trivialized. No one can lead effectively where constructive feedback is regarded as an invasion of privacy, an affront to professionalism. (Schmoker, 2006, p. 29)

Everyone needs feedback in order to improve. Improvement includes support as well.

The challenge is to be responsive while simultaneously developing a sense of responsibility in others. This involves encouraging subordinates to take risks—and back them up when they fail. It means working hard to make other people successful—and giving them the credit. In short, taking charge involves letting go. (Educational Leadership, 2000, p. 124)

The support from administration during the journey toward increase achievement is crucial. Teachers must be able to go to the principal and request support such as resources, curriculum planning, or instructional strategies. “It’s this simple: schools won’t improve until the average building leader begins to work cooperatively with teachers to truly, meaningfully oversee and improve instructional quality” (Schmoker, 2006, p. 29). When the administration on a campus changes; the status quo typically changes. How an administrator implements those changes, and which changes are

deemed important, tells a lot about not only the administrator but also the possibility for successful change.

Implementing change. Implementation of change required all stakeholders to understand the ultimate goal and support the changes that the new administration implemented. Change was implemented slowly in order for teachers to see why improvement was needed. Change is all around us—personally and professionally—in all aspects of life. This relates to what Fullan (1993) found that “the main problem in public education is not resistance to change, but the presence of too many innovations mandated or adopted uncritically and superficially on an *ad hoc* fragmented basis” (p. 23). Change has to be understood by all stakeholders, they then need to be motivated to take the next steps toward change for “this is what it will take for sustainable success—the wisdom and commitment of the crowd” (Fullan, 2006, p. 60). True change takes time. It is sometimes hard to be persistent and remain focused when things seem to be failing or in jeopardy (Kanter, 2004). Everyone must stay the course and continue to be diligent in their actions toward the common goal.

In order to keep everyone focused, a strong person must be in leadership. “Leadership could be considered the single most important aspect of effective school reform” (Marzano, 2003, p. 172). Therefore leadership plays a crucial role in student achievement. Marzano (2003) has identified 3 principles of leadership for change:

1. Leadership for change is most effective when carried out by a small group of educators with the principal functioning as a strong cohesive force.

2. The leadership team must operate in such a way as to provide strong guidance while demonstrating respect for those not on the team.
3. Effective leadership for change is characterized by specific behaviors that enhance interpersonal relationships. (pp. 174-176)

The first principle refutes that one titular person should lead the school. Leadership should be expanded to include teachers. When teachers take an active role in leading on a campus, it builds the leadership capacity (Lambert, 2003) within the organization.

Distributive leadership. Distributive leadership was embraced by the principal realizing that she could not operate on her own. The principal realized she must initially have focus, hope, and access to resources; however, to begin the journey, she must create a leadership team and build capacity within the school in order to implement the changes necessary to impact student achievement. This affirms Fullan's belief that "all leadership, if it is to be effective, must have a strong component of *sharedness*" (Educational Leadership, 2000. p. xx). Shared leadership or distributive leadership is contingent on building capacity. When teachers take the lead with ideas or even implementing new procedures or events, it makes a strong statement because it didn't 'come from the top.' The idea and the work came from the staff. Building capacity is about giving teachers the freedom to make decisions. It is also building mutual respect and trust amongst the staff and between the teachers and the administration, specifically the principal. Capacity building strategies can be successful because "they give people concrete experiences that improvement is possible. People need proof that there is some reality to the higher expectations" (Fullan, 2006, p. 62). When the staff is struggling,

they look to the leaders on the campus that are their peers and not their superiors for guidance and for models of how to react. If the leadership team stays the course and keeps the focus on the goal, then the entire staff will observe a united sense of perseverance. Fullan (2006) explains that, “leaders developing other leaders is at the heart of sustainability” (p. 62). This is an integral component of why distributive leadership is important.

Leadership throughout the teams or grade levels is also important for communication and for creating alignment of curriculum. One way to focus in on the curriculum is to establish departmentalization on multiple grade levels.

Departmentalization. Departmentalization is a key component of the school to address all students’ needs, including African American students, and was utilized to strengthen instructional practices. Each teacher teaches one or two specific content areas in order to go deeper and provide more structured lessons, such as teaching only math and science or only teaching reading and writing. Since the teacher only has to teach one to two content areas, he or she can focus more on creating lessons that are hands-on or that will provide the sticking power for students to retain the information for future reference. This is similar to the five advantaged Chan and Jarman found related to departmentalization:

1. Specialization: Students receive basic education from teachers specialized in particular disciplines. From the teachers’ perspective, instructional time is better utilized by concentrating on fewer disciplines.

2. Instructional teams: Grade level instructional teams can be formed to coordinate teaching efforts across each discipline. Students benefit because they are exposed to the instruction wisdom of more than one teacher.
3. Teacher retention: With a more focused workload, teachers are able to complete their teaching assignments with greater satisfaction. The result is greater stability and retention of highly qualified teachers.
4. Transition: Departmentalization in elementary schools aligns with middle school organizations, better preparing students for transition.
5. Flexibility: Departmentalization allows students to move between grade levels according to ability, and from ability group to ability group within grade levels (2004, p. 70)

Departmentalization can positively impact students and teachers. Teachers should be chosen due to their strengths in particular content areas, so that they are teaching from their greatest area of knowledge. Often departmentalization is only done in the upper grades; however, it can be done in the primary grades too.

In order to support these changes, resources must be put into place. A vital resource for teachers is professional development. This is one way of keeping people focused as you continue the change process. Giving staff new ideas and motivating them to move forward toward the goal keeps everyone headed in the same direction.

Staff development. With strong implementation and a focus on campus needs, staff development at Allen had a significant impact on student achievement. The principal met with teachers at least once a week to develop instructional practice and

knowledge. On-going, embedded staff development can be more powerful than a 3 or 6-hour “sit-n-get” seminar or workshop. This is congruent with Reeves findings,

With an emphasis on internal capacity, the leadership of professional development efforts comes from the faculty itself, and a large part of professional education takes place in the classroom while teachers are engaged in authentic teaching. (2009, p. 63)

Embedded professional development, easily stated, is learning that occurs within the school day and within the classroom. Teachers will observe and learn from other teachers with students realistically participating in day-to-day activities. These activities or lessons are focused specifically for the person who is observing, yet it is the type of instruction that occurs on a daily basis. Roy found that “educators are more likely to enhance their classroom practices when they experience hands-on learning activities connected to their real work, real curriculum, and real classrooms” (2009, p. 3).

Staff development must be pertinent to the individuals involved and must be something that the teachers can see themselves doing or having the support to implement it within their classrooms. From a constructivist perspective, professional development should not be receiving ‘knowledge’ from ‘experts’, but rather

Staff development...will include activities such as action research, conversations with peers about the beliefs and assumptions that guide their instruction, and reflective practices like journal keeping-activities which many educators may not even view as staff development. (Sparks, 1994)

Teachers working together, collaborating, allows a deeper understanding of concepts, strategies, and new practices. It also creates a platform for dialogue that might not occur naturally.

While staff development occurred at the campus level, it was also available at the district level, for trainings such as new district-wide initiatives. This affirms Booth's thinking that "collaborative teams may be [called] from across a district or entire schools may attend district-wide training sessions where grade [level] teams have opportunities to voice specific issues, concerns, reflections, and questions" (2002, p. 22). Attending a training established by the district provided a common language and built-in support from the district, as well as provided opportunities for teachers from different campus to collaborate.

Staff development can be either for a selected content area, a group of teachers, or a school-wide initiative. When initiatives or programs are implemented school-wide, there is a stronger sense of buy-in from the staff and the potential for full implementation since 'everybody has to do it.'

School-wide programs. Conducting 'needs assessments' to determine where the school should focus their efforts was one effective approach to determine school-wide programs. This is congruent with the assertion that a "comprehensive approach that allows for student construction of meaning while interacting with the content, the teacher, and other students" is necessary (Marzano, 2007, p. 31). Through this approach the school incorporated programs such as readers' and writers' workshops, which are curriculum based; Love and Logic, which focus on discipline; using anti-bullying strategies to target character education; and work stations or departmentalization, which have a more structural component. A school-wide program may have a content area

focus such as reading, writing, or math. It may also target a particular group of students such as English Language Learners. Typically school-wide means just that, across the entire campus. Sometimes, school-wide may loosely mean a large section of the campus such as departmentalizing in second through fifth grades. Balanced Literacy used to be considered a program, but over time it has developed into more of a philosophy for teaching reading and writing.

The importance of school-wide programs is to establish a belief that with this focus we can create a better learning environment for the students and the campus (Fullan, 2008), whether it is about discipline, safety, or teaching and learning. Everyone needs to buy-in to this program, system, or philosophy. Full implementation is what will create success. In order to fully implement specific programs, the campus will need to obtain additional resources.

Resources for students. Securing resources from various levels is a task that administration took on in order to provide for the students. Resources come in many forms, from personnel to materials and from functional space to time. If you ask any educator what they need in order to support the students, typically it is something that requires either money or time. The school did not receive any government assistance, so all resource funding had to come through either the general budget or fund raising for the campus or through the PTO.

Typically, when thinking about ‘resources,’ one focuses on the previous mentioned items. Eric Brown (2008) presents a different type of resource list,

1. Academic plans for every student, which are clear, focused, and widely understood by different teacher across the curriculum.
2. Close monitoring of each student's learning on a frequent and timely basis through the use of formative assessments.
3. A systematic plan to give extra time and support to students experiencing initial difficulty in learning.
4. Strong parent partnerships between the school and community.
5. A collaborative culture in which teachers work together in teams to analyze student achievement and develop strategies to improve the current levels of achievement.
6. A belief that it is the school's job to see to it that students learn (rather than merely be taught) and the expectation that all students can and should learn at high levels.
7. A safe and orderly school environment with clear parameters for student behavior and consistent enforcement of those parameters (pp. 19-20).

Brown's list shows that there is a considerable difference between what is typically listed as needs to support students and the list he created. One of the most important differences is that Brown's list can be implemented immediately by teachers and administrators. The school does not have to rely on outside funding, materials, or policy changes. Brown goes on to say that, "when schools create these conditions, they have a significant, positive effect of student learning" (2008, p. 20).

At Allen, building positive relationships with the students was another resource teachers could provide. This affirms Kafele (2009) belief that successful teachers, or more accurately stated, teachers who have successful students, know their students and their students know how much their teachers care for them and their learning. This

interest and knowledge must be genuine. Students know when a teacher truly knows and cares for them and when a teacher is ‘going through the motions.’ When a teacher focuses on student learning, activities and lessons become stimulating, engaging, and most importantly, fun (Kafele, 2009). Teachers are a resource for students. They should be one of the most invaluable resources a child has access to while at school.

In order to increase student achievement, the teachers also need resources and support to create this positive, nurturing, learning environment.

Resources for teachers. Resources for teachers included time for collaboration and planning; specific staff development set by the principal; structured meetings, which included vertical and horizontal discussions; and funding for materials. The principal secured each of these items by providing time, using fundraisers, organizing presenters, or obtaining books for book studies. These resources are in alignment with other researchers’ findings focused on student success. As Todd Whitaker (2003) states, a principal’s job is to hire the best teachers and improve the ones he/she has.

Teachers are the number one indicator of student success (Chenoweth 2009; Kafele, 2009; Whitaker, 2003; Marzano 2001). Strong teachers can take students to their potential and even surpass expectations; whereas poor teachers can take good students and make them average or even below average. Resources could be deemed a loaded word depending on the needs of the individual teachers.

Teachers need support at different levels and in varying degrees. Teachers may need materials, access to technology, a colleague to come to their room to either observe

current practice or model instructional strategies, books or articles to read, professional development to attend, or time to dialogue and plan instruction with either their grade level team or their content team.

Resources can also come in the form of support from administration, the district, and other professionals. Teachers must feel supported (Whitaker, 2003). Just as students need to know their teachers care, a teacher needs to know their principal or administration cares. When teachers feel supported, they are more willing to try new techniques and implement new strategies. They may also be more willing to discuss concerns and ask for help to support their struggling students. When teachers have the support from administration and from their peers, they feel more confident knowing they are doing the right things for students. Support is a crucial resource for teachers.

Another resource that is critical, yet not always seen as a resource is communication. The principal provided time for both vertical and horizontal meetings. These meetings were productive and crucial to creating dialogue to support students and create alignment within the curriculum and instructional practices. When communication is clear and explicit, it assists the teachers with a basic understanding of what they need to do, which in turn helps the staff to determine how they will get there and what they will need along the way. Communication must continually flow throughout the organization to be deemed a resource for staff.

Communications. Campus-wide communication was a key component of the school's organization. There were many forms and levels of communication. There was communication between teachers and parents, teachers and students, teachers and administrators, and between teachers themselves. Administrators not only communicated with their staff, but with parents and the community as a whole. Effective communication not only allows for all stakeholders to know what is going on, such as events and activities, but it also can become a catalyst to promote forward progress. If the principal can effectively articulate where the school currently is and where it is headed, then everyone will be able to take the journey together all focused on the same end result.

Open communication also occurs when teachers and parents feel they have access to the principal. Such accessibility has been recognized as essential for visibility on the campus. This is aligned with Beth Whitaker's (1997) findings,

The research has demonstrated the great need for strong instructional leadership in schools and has identified several common characteristics of effective leaders. One of those characteristics, extremely important in the life of a school and often neglected, is that of being a visible principal. (p. 155)

Visibility creates not only access to the leadership on the campus, but it also allows for the teachers to gain information informally. When the principal is visible and accessible, then the teachers feel there is more communication occurring. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) feel that the proposed effect of visibility is twofold:

1. It communicates the message that the principal is interested and engaged in the daily operations of the school

2. It provides opportunities for the principal to interact with teachers and students regarding substantive issues. (p. 61)

Principals often times are seen as having all the answers; however, they should not be expected to know everything and just tell people what to do. Instead they need to learn to “ask the right questions, facilitate dialogue and help build shared knowledge” (DeFour, 2006, p. 12). Creating collaborative teams is an effective way to build shared knowledge.

Planning and teaming. Through explicit direction from the principal, planning as a team gained more structure and focus campus-wide. The difference between team planning and true collaboration has to do with the conversation of the teachers. The teachers had used more traditional team planning prior to the principal’s arrival. They discussed activities and planned lessons every week. The principal encouraged more conversation and required the teachers to align curriculum and ensure what specifically was being taught and evidence of what the students were learning. DuFour refers to this type of planning as true collaboration. DuFour explains that collaboration,

Represents a systematic process in which teachers work together interdependently in order to *impact* their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school. (2006, p. 3)

Collaboration is one of the most effective tools for teaching and learning. “The very reason teachers work together in teams and engage in collective inquiry is to serve as catalysts for action” (DuFour, 2006, p. 4).

In many schools, collaborative teams are also called Professional Learning Communities or PLCs (DeFour, 1998), which is a school's "collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe and what they seek to create" (p. 25). These collaborative teams share a common purpose, are action oriented, participate in collective inquiry, focus on continuous improvement, and assess progress and improvement based on results. These collaborative teams are more specific in nature and provoke a stronger purpose than traditional planning.

Additionally, planning signifies just that, creating a plan. The goal behind Professional Learning Communities is taking action. You can create plans, put them in binders, make them color coded, and attach aesthetically pleasing visuals, but if the plan stays in the binder and if it is never implemented, then it has not served its purpose. Within the PLC framework, people do not just hope it happens, they actually ensure that action takes place. Schools must 'walk the walk' and not just 'talk the talk.' The leadership on the campus needs to set the example through their actions. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say." Leadership by example is vital to a sustained focus on the end result.

The leadership on the campus must not only create structured practices and procedures, but also must support and establish policies that will increase student achievement.

School-wide policies. Policies identified in this study were found to have a school-wide focus. This means that the policies were implemented throughout the entire

school.

Open door policy. An open door policy is open communication and feedback between stakeholders. The teachers and parents could come in to see the administrator to ask questions or express concerns. She made herself available to them. The principal established her own accessibility to the parents, teachers, and students through an open door policy by actually meeting with them when they needed to speak with her and not sending them away to schedule an appointment.

Accessibility to supervisors is congruent with what Whitaker (2003) and Barth (2001) relate to an increased positive climate on the campus because staff members feel as though they can come and have discussions or express concerns to someone who can actually do something to support the employees. Staff members and parents truly want to be heard when they have a concern. They do expect something to be done, but often it is truly about expressing their concerns and knowing that someone has taken the time to listen (Thompson, 2010; Kafele, 2009).

Parents typically have many concerns when they enroll their child in school. They want to be able to speak to the principal about any concerns regarding their child. A high percentage of the time the concerns surround the child's teacher.

Classroom placement policy. Parents were always concerned with whom their child's teacher would be for the school year. Who is this person that will spend the next 9-10 months teaching, supporting, and influencing their child? Therefore, classroom placement was an important policy put in place for parents, students, teachers, and administrators. When placing students in classrooms, the principal ensured that there should be heterogeneous grouping including males and female; ability – high, medium, and low performing students; race and ethnicity; and then looking at personalities. Personalities were not just between students but also the personalities of the students and the teacher to create a good fit. All of these considerations will make for a better environment for the students and more positive interactions between the students and their teacher (Kafele, 2009; Brown, 2008). Some classrooms are created using homogeneous grouping by ability or even by gender. Some schools have created single-sex classrooms to meet the unique needs of boys and girls using gender specific practices.

Creating a positive and nurturing environment in the classroom and in the school is essential for parents to feel reassured that their child is going to be safe and make progress academically (Thompson, 2010; Kafele, 2009). Parents like to be involved and see the interactions themselves to know what is occurring on a campus. This gives them a sense of assurance and eases their mind.

Parent meetings/parent involvement policy. Administration worked closely with the parents and community to have united involvement with everyone focused on the same outcome: student success. The parent meetings focused on events, fund raising, creating a positive environment for the students, as well as materials and resources for the teachers. Parent involvement includes assisting in classrooms, putting up bulletin boards, and volunteering at the school. Parent involvement takes many forms but the one consistency is that when parents are involved in their child's education, the child is more successful (Kafele, 2009; Carter, 2000; Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999). It takes teamwork between parents and teachers to make a child successful. This supports Kafele (2009) findings that "in order to get a job done that involves two or more individuals, these individuals need to be coordinated in a kind of way that will allow them to work as a unified, common goal-oriented, team or unit (p. 62). When focusing on parental involvement, many times the teachers or administrators will make assumptions regarding a lack of involvement by parents. The school should never make assumptions. They should first get to know their students and the families in order to find a better way to communicate and support the child and maybe even support the family. Gail Thompson (2010) describes seven reasons why parents, specifically African American parents, may appear to not care about their children's education,

1. Many African American parents had negative K-12 school experience, and many also experienced racism during their pursuit of higher-education degrees.

2. Many African American parents fail to show up for “Open House” and “Back to School Night”
3. African American parents may limit their contact with educators and their time at the actual school site because they have been traumatized by recent negative experiences.
4. Educators have given them mixed messages. Although educators *say* they want African American parents to be more involved in their children’s education, many educators don’t really mean this. Through the actions of various educators, many African American parents have inferred that they are actually not wanted on campus.
5. The level of academic support that a parent is able to give. It is very likely that many parents won’t be able to help their children do some of the homework that is required—because of their own weak skills.
6. They are so overwhelmed by life that their children’s education is actually low on their list of top priorities.
7. They aren’t aware of how they can support them [children] academically. (pp. 68-70)

The seven reasons Thompson listed are general explanations of the assumptions made by teachers and administrators that some parents do not care about their children’s educations. All parents care about their children and want them to be successful. Many parents do not know how to become involved and many school staff, including the principal, do not always want involvement unless it is within their terms. Schools and homes must work together; have common language and common goals for the success of all students.

The parents had some organized options for involvement such as Parent-Teacher Organizations (PTO) and Site-Based Decision Making (SBDM) teams or committees. PTO organizations follow specific guidelines as determined by each state. The main purpose of this organization is to support the schools with human capital such as volunteers and free labor: putting up bulletin boards, painting the school, planting trees, etc. They also support the school financially by raising money to purchase technology, books, paint or trees for school beautification, programs to support the students academically, or additional supplies for the teachers. The PTO met on a regular basis to plan, discuss events, and brainstorm ways to provide continuous support to the school year round.

Site-based decision making committee policy. Another form of organized involvement, which includes parents and community members, as well as teachers, is the Site-Based Decision Making (SBDM) committee. As opposed to the PTO organization, the SBDM group only assists with making decisions. They do not volunteer or raise funds. The SBDM committee served in an advisory role to make decisions regarding curriculum, planning, hiring, programs, and even how the school budget was spent. They provided input in these areas although the principal had final say. The SBDM committee did approve campus based staff development.

As the district implemented new initiatives, the SBDM committee limited other programs brought to the campus. Similar findings in the research on school reform, Gene Hall and Shirley Hord (2001) explain how important Site Based Management

(SBM) is to limiting the number of changes that may be implemented during a school year or even as part of the campus' on-going vision. Although the district initiatives are non-negotiable, if the campus can keep their number of changes limited and focused, the more chance the school will have of increasing success and not becoming overwhelmed.

There are a number of stakeholders on the SBDM committee, which is purposefully created in order to view each decision through different lens. As per legal state policy, this committee is made up of the principal, who is the chair; two-thirds classroom teachers; one-third school based professional staff; one non-instructional staff member; two parents chosen by the PTA/PTO who have children within the district and who are not an employee of the district; at least two community members; and no more than one business member. As per district policy, the principal can appoint additional parents or community members, but must at least have the minimum serving on the committee. Classroom teachers should be nominated and elected by the classroom teachers on the campus. The same is true for other school-based professional and non-instructional staff members—each will be nominated and voted on by each designated group. Each person will serve a 2-year term.

Although the state mandates specific policies, the district also creates local policies based on the state standards. In addition, the school may create policies for their specific campus, based on state and district policies, which allows some autonomy at the campus level (Hall & Hord, 2001).

Grading policy. Campus-wide the grading policy was re-evaluated. The principal wanted consistency in grading by grade level, and then across the campus. She wanted grades to reflect student learning only. She did not want other factors being evaluated within the students' grades, such as if the child put their name on the paper or if the assignment was turned in 3 days late. She wanted to be able to see if the students were learning what was being taught.

The policy on grading is based first on state and district policy; then set specifically for a campus. Many campuses do not adjust the grading policy set by state and local boards; however, this principal felt strongly about putting certain beliefs in writing and upholding these beliefs in order to hold their students to a higher standard to promote an atmosphere of success. Assessments must be used as a measure for determining student learning and not “solely as an accountability measure, as it does in the case of standardized testing” (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006, p. 3). Continual monitoring for learning is the key to ensure learning for all students. Fisher and Frey (2007) state that when a “teacher regularly check for understanding, students become increasingly aware of how to monitor their own understanding” (p. 3).

Late work or ‘no name’ on a paper was an automatic deduction in the overall grade. By creating a campus policy indicating that grades are strictly given for content, the teachers knew that the grade reflected whether the student understood the information that had been taught and not whether the student turned their paper in on time or put his/her name on the paper. The campus also established rules and

disciplinary actions for late work, etc. without attaching it to the grading aspect of learning. This is similar to Winger's findings that in order to ensure student learning, a teacher cannot measure compliance or factual recall, a teacher must shift focus to measuring high-level thinking and understanding (2009).

Grading should be based on student growth and progress should be reflected in the grades. Students should not feel as though their grade has to do with how the teacher feels about them. Students should know what their grades are based on, such as a rubric or the teacher stating the expectations prior to the assignment being given. Grading policies can be very effective and positive in regards to monitoring student growth and increasing achievement. Winger (2009) explains that, "once we have distinguished non academic factors from learning, we must carefully define the learning we are targeting and ensure that the academic portion of the grade deliberately assesses student progress toward it" (p. 74).

Policies can be proactive and effective for student learning if they are established with the focus on what is best for the students. Schools need to continually monitor policies and ensure that they are still serving the purpose of protecting student learning. They also serve as evidence for values and beliefs on the campus.

Additional Findings

Although not addressed by the study itself, the researcher discovered additional themes that needed to be acknowledged. These included diversity and a caring attitude.

Diversity was recognized as an emerging phenomenon at the campus. Factors contributing to the diversity in this study include the students' ethnicity, socio-economic level, parent educational level, and the teachers' ethnicity. Increasing achievement can be difficult at diverse schools, as opposed to homogeneous campuses. One explanation is in Doug Reeves research on 90/90/90 schools, where 90% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch, 90% of the student population are in the ethnic minority, and 90% of the students are meeting standards in reading and other content areas. For African American students in diverse schools, they are typically only acknowledged in February during Black History Month. Students know when the school is only focused on their culture because the calendar or holiday says it is time to do so. Celebrating African American students and cultures throughout the year can be more beneficial than doing one large program during one month (Thompson, 2010; Kunjufu, 1995). Student must feel as though they belong, feel that the adults at the school care about them, and feel that the adults care whether the students are successful (Kafele, 2009).

An attitude of caring is not an attribute that all schools share. Although caring about the students should be universal within schools, it seems to be localized within schools that tend to be successful. Teachers that show that they care for the students and that the caring is genuine, tend to get the students to a higher level of learning (Kafele, 2009; Delpit, 1995). Students know when a teacher cares for them and when the teacher is just doing his or her job. Students are perceptive and need to know that adults care for them and care whether they are learning. They want to be held accountable. For some

students, the teacher is the only adult that the students feel actually care for them. When they are with each other for 7 or more hours a day, 5 days a week, often times the students spend more time with their teachers than their parents.

Conclusion

Given the nature and the findings of this study, the following conclusions are advanced: increasing achievement for African American students requires supportive leadership; implementing change through staff development, distributive leadership, and departmentalization; school-wide programs; resources for students; resources for teachers; communication; and planning and teaming. Practices are typically established by the campus principal or the school administration after identifying areas of concern through a needs assessment.

Establishing clear policies that specifically focus on campus needs may include open door policy, classroom placement policy, parent meetings/parent involvement policy, site-based decision making committee policy, and grading policy. Policies are dictated by the state and district, but enforced by the campus administrators. Policies should support and protect the best interest of the students.

Diversity can be seen as a positive or negative situation for schools. Diverse schools create a real-life environment for students; however, it presents a unique set of challenges. Schools that welcome diversity set the tone for all stakeholders. Adults and students know that everyone is important and the environment is inclusive for all.

Schools that hire or expect the adults to care for the children develop stronger relationships between the staff and students. When relationships are in place, then expectations are higher and the support is present to move students to a higher level of achievement. The old adage, child doesn't care how much you know until they know how much you care, still holds true.

Although this study focused on practices and policies for African American students achievement gains, these practices were not intentionally created to impact African American students. However, it can be concluded that when schools have practices and policies in place, all students including African American students have increased achievement. Schools that embrace practices and policies, such as these are in a better position to enhance the achievement for all African American students.

Implications

The study supports two levels of implications: for practice and for further research. Practitioners currently in the field of education or researchers focused on increasing achievement for African American students may employ and develop the various practices and policies highlighted by the study.

The following three recommendations are presented for practitioners: using distributive leadership, establishing staff development, and creating time for team planning and collaboration. First as a campus administrator, building leadership capacity on the campus is crucial. Teachers need to feel empowered to make decisions and stand up for what is best for the students. Creating a leadership team and allowing

teachers to take the lead by facilitating meetings and being part of the decision making process gives them more credibility with their peers. It also forms a support system between the administration and the teachers. Second, staff development must be purposeful and directly impact students. Embedded staff development can be one of the most powerful strategies for teachers to see the impact of using new instructional practices with students. Delivery of staff development needs to not only come from the administrators, but examples also need to be presented by the staff themselves. Colleagues who present information or share samples of students' accomplishments seem to gain more respect and create more buy-in from the staff, rather than a consultant who comes and speaks to the staff that has never been on the campus before. There are times when the latter is positive and well received, but often teachers need to hear from their peers that new implementations are realistic and will bring results. Finally, team planning needs to be structured and have a level of specificity that aligns with high achievement. The agenda for each meeting needs to include discussion surrounding best instructional practices and strategies, student results, and how to support struggling students. A monitoring component must be built in so that teachers can determine if students are reaching their goals and ensure the learning of all students.

The focus of this study was limited in that it was a single case study, at an urban, public elementary school campus serving African American students within a diverse environment. Therefore, the researcher was not able to account for the

background of the African American parents, nor the specific involvement by the African American parents in school activities.

Additional studies could attempt to look at African American students who have affluent parents versus African American students who have middle class parents or parents that live at the poverty level and the students' level of achievement. Due to the singular scope of the study, additional research could also include multiple campuses, suburban or rural areas, secondary campuses: middle or high schools, schools with majority African American student population, and private schools. These could be factors that influenced the African American achievement.

The following are suggestions for future research: using multiple elementary campuses, using suburban and rural geographic areas, using different states, using secondary campuses such as middle schools, junior high schools, and high schools, using private schools, and using homogeneous campuses either racially or socio-economically or a combination. By gathering research at multiple like elementary campuses, some generalization could be made to support instruction and leadership on these types of campuses. In order to support African American students in suburban and rural communities, more research could be done to identify differences between the geographic areas of urban, suburban, and rural. Although multiple researchers feel that students must be targeted in elementary school, there is research that says that students can still be 'saved' once they arrive at middle and high schools. Research in those areas is extremely important to the future success of African American students. Many

private schools specifically target African American students, students of color, and students of poverty; however, more research will increase the likelihood of academic increases across content areas. Although this study was on a diverse campus, additional research can focus on racially homogeneous campuses. Particularly looking at schools that are predominantly African American and identifying specific practices that are successful. Research must continue to explore effective practices and policies that promise to embrace academic achievement for all students.

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Vita

Dawn Michelle Carlson-Scruggs graduated from Gering High School in Nebraska. She entered Peru State College where she graduated with a B.S. in elementary education and special education in 1992. She taught elementary school for 9 year. During that time she received a M.Ed. in special education from Texas Tech University. In 2000, she was accepted into the Principalship Program at the University of Texas at Austin. She received a M.Ed. in Educational Administration in 2003. She became an administrator in 2001 and received a principalship in Fort Bend ISD in January 2006. She continued her doctoral studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Currently, she is Coordinator of Leadership Development for Fort Bend ISD in Sugar Land, Texas.

Permanent Address: 8403 Idle Wind Court, Richmond, Texas 77406

This manuscript was typed by the author.