Stakeholders Perspectives of Factors that Facilitate and Hinder Student Success in High Achieving, High Poverty, High Minority Rural High Schools in Alabama

by

William A. Bergeron

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama
August 6, 2016

Keywords: Rural High Schools, School Improvement, Achievement Gap, High-Poverty Schools, Accountability

Frances Kochan, Chair, Wayne T. Smith Distinguished Professor of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology
Ellen H. Reames, Associate Professor of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology
Lynne Patrick, Associate Professor of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology
Linda Searby, Associate Professor of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology

Abstract

This study investigated high performing, high poverty, and high minority rural high schools in Alabama. Three types of schools, fringe, distant and remote formed the sample. The study examined key stakeholders' perceptions of the elements these schools face in fostering student success, the reasons these schools were successful and what differences, if any, existed in the perspectives of the stakeholders of these factors in the three types of rural schools. This study differs from most studies on the topic of overcoming the achievement gap in that the focus was on the perceptions of key stakeholders and not the programs, policies, curriculum, and leadership styles. It also investigated rural high schools, a group largely under-examined in the literature.

An exploratory qualitative multi-case study methodology was used for this study. The exploratory case format was used because the intention was to provide a better understanding of the challenges facing rural schools, but not to develop any conclusions or definitive solutions (Lewis, Thornhill, & Saunders, 2007). Data were analyzed in an iterative process, or what Creswell (2013) calls the data analysis spiral, of collecting, reviewing, analyzing, reflecting, and sense-making on the data collected. The reduction, simplification, and transformation of the data were accomplished in a multi-step process.

This study identified three major recurring themes of the challenges facing the participant schools: Student-Centered Issues, School Level Challenges, and Limited Community Support. There were eight subthemes within these broad themes. There were four (4) recurring themes of

why participant schools have been successful in improving student learning and achievement. These included: Student Focused Educators Curriculum Delivery, School-Based Strategies, and Administrative Leadership. There were 11 sub-themes within these larger themes. Finally, there were several areas were there as noticeable differences in the stakeholder perceptions between the types of rural schools. These differences in perceptions ranged from the programs and processes within the schools to a lack of stability within the students' home life and to difference in leadership approaches.

Acknowledgments

Numerous individuals have been extremely influential in my journey throughout my educational experience, all 30 years. I wish to acknowledge some of them. I wish first to thank my parents- without their constant support and encouragement I would not have been as successful in school or life. I also want to recognize, the many educators, both in public school and college that took their time to provide the support that has made this possible: Mr. Nestlen, Coach Lehman, Dr. Kelly, and Dr. Dyal. I also appreciate the time and effort of my dissertation committee. Without the support of these individuals, this dissertation would not have been possible. Thanks Dr. Reames, Dr. Searby, Dr. Patrick, and Dr, Bynum. Dr. Kochan, I cannot begin to express my sincere gratitude and respect for your guidance throughout this process. I would not have been as successful without your gentle nudges that kept me on track and your encouragement when it looked like there was no light at the end of the tunnel. Thank you for all you have taught me.

Most of all I thank my family; they have sacrificed more than anyone else. My wife Beth, who has spent many nights, weekends, and holidays by herself while I toiled on my classwork and dissertation. My children and grandchildren have celebrated many major milestones in their lives during this process without me and I have missed games, recitals, and other events. To all of them, I extend my heartfelt gratitude.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

The history of the American educational system can be traced back to the small one-room

schoolhouse with students of all grades working together. The curriculum typically focused on

the basics of reading, arithmetic, spelling, history, and penmanship. The student population

could range from a very few to as many as fifty (50) students in one class. This system, which

was initially largely controlled at the local level, has evolved into a massive bureaucratic

structure with directives and requirements imposed from all levels of government. The federal

government's increasing involvement in education is a direct result of the changing world

environment and the increasing demands for Americans to be competitive in the Twenty-first

Century economies.

Because of world events, such as the launch of the Soviet Spacecraft Sputnik on October

4, 1957 and domestic events such as the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for*

Educational Reform (1983), often refered to as "A Nation at Risk," there has been an impetus for

increased state and federal involvement in education and the imposition of standards and testing

on school systems throughout the nation. Between 1983 and 2005, federal spending on public

education increased from 246 billion to 499 billion dollars, after adjustments for inflation, with a

corresponding increase of per student spending from $5,691 to $9,288 over the same period.

The release of "A Nation at Risk" in 1983 focused attention on the achievement gap

between middle class White Americas and low socio-economic minorities in terms of

achievement on nationally and internationally normed test. Researchers have noted that, for

many children, this achievement gap exists from the time they start school in kindergarten and it continues to grow throughout their educational life (Chapin, 2006; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Williams 2011). There is considerable argument about the root causes for this achievement gap and the solutions to permanently closing the gap (Carey, 2014; Williams, 2011). While there is not complete agreement on the causes or solution for the achievement gap, there is general agreement that closing it is going to take a coordinated effort from all the key stakeholders (Books, 2007).

A significant roadblock to finding a solution to closing the achievement gap is the failure of many researchers and the government to recognize the social and cultural causes of the achievement gap (Carey, 2013; Carter, 2012). Among the root causes are a lack of parental involvement, especially in the poor communities, lower educational level of low socio-economic parents, greater amount of time spent on non-educational functions, and high level of poverty (Books, 2007 Crowe, 2013; Carey, 2014; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2005; Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, & Greathouse, 1996; Dearing, Kreith, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Ecdes, 2004; Jaynes, 2005, 2007; Merjor & Banks, 2002; Simpkins, Weiss, McCartney, Kreider, & Dearing, 2006). Additionally, once these students enter school, in many situations, there are also disadvantages if they are attending schools in high poverty neighborhoods. For example, schools serving high-poverty minority students tend to be staffed with younger, more inexperienced teachers, and the least effective teachers (Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor, 2005; Goldhaber & Brewer, 1997; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Phillips, 2010; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). While students from high poverty backgrounds, many who are also from minority groups, face many difficulties in becoming successful in school, there are schools that are being successful in helping them to meet high standards and matriculate to graduation

2

(Brown & White, 2014; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottcomp, 2006; Lee & Bryk, 1989). Research points to some elements that foster this success.

Factors in Fostering Student Success in High Poverty Schools

Research is clear that teachers are an important factor in student achievement, second only to the family circumstances (Goldholder &Brewer; Phillips, 2010; Stronge, Ward & Grant, 2011). These teachers, who are labeled as being of high quality, have a genuine concern about their students and their students know and understand this concern. These high quality teachers not only care about their students' success in school, but also are also concerned about their life after graduation as (Collinson, Killeavy, & Stephenson, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hanishek, 1971; Stronge, 2011; Wolk, 2002). They create a classroom environment that is perceived to be fair, consistent, and based on trust and respect (Stronge, 2011).

Research also indicates that high quality teachers are developed through quality professional development. High quality professional development is critical to closing the achievement gap and transforming a school into a high-achieving organization. The professional development needs of a school must be tailored to the needs identified in the school's improvement program. Quality professional development must be differentiated to the needs, circumstances, experience levels of the participants, while avoiding the one-size-fits-all approach (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Klein & Riordan, 2009). An important part of quality professional development is for teachers to have input during the process of developing the school professional development plans.

Professional learning communities are an effective method of providing professional development, allowing teachers to collaborate and learn to become more effective teachers (Chance & Sequra, 2009; Lambertson, 2014). These professional learning communities use the

principles of action research to enable teachers to identify and implement potential solutions to issues in their teaching practices. The use of professional learning communities allows teachers to collaborate and become more effective teachers (Chance & Sequra, 200; Lambertson, 2014). .

While high quality teachers are essential to student success, research also indicates that the school leader has an influence on student success through the manner in which he or she leads, the environment they create, and their knowledge and attitudes toward students and learning (Bass, 1995; Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillo, & Urban, 2011; Collinson, 2010; Griddin & Green, 2012; Leithwood, 2008; Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, & Peetsma, 2012). School leaders in high-achieving schools are consistent in delivering a clear message of high expectations and a belief that the students and teachers are capable of meeting these expectations. They foster environments with rigorous instruction, emphasizing that regardless of their background or economic situation, all students can achieve academically at high levels of learning (Griffin & Green, 2012; Leithwood, 2010). Leaders of high-achieving schools work to ensure a collaborative decision-making process is in place, realizing that they do not have all the best solutions (Murley, Keedy, & Welsh, 2008). Through this collaborative process, these school leaders identify and develop teacher leaders to ensure the school is focused on improving student achievement and creating a high-achieving school. Successful school leaders understand that the power of the team is greater than the ability of any one person in transforming a school into a powerful learning environment (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000). A significant aspect of the school's leadership for improving student achievement and transforming a school into a high-achieving school is the creation of a learning organization.

The ability of an organization to adapt to the ever-changing demands of the global economy and situation is critical to determining its success or failure (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009),

thus schools must incorporate a learning climate for all. The learning organization has its roots in Lewin's Change Theory of the 1940s and it forms the foundation of a successful continuous improvement program (Burnes, 2004; Schein, 2002; Weick, & Quinn, 1999). Lewin's change theory involves unfreezing the organization and pulling it and the people within it into Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Burnes, 2004; Schein, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978; Weick, & Quinn, 1999). This zone of proximal development creates the motivation for people to learn and move out of their comfort zone (Burnes, 2004; Schein, 2002; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Developing the institutional capacity to learn is critical to improving student and staff learning and achievement, while improving the organization's ability to meet their goals, objectives, and realize their vision (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Collinson & Cook, 2007; Finnigan & Daly, 2012). Learning organizations understand that learning is not only what the students should be doing, but also that the staff and faculty should constantly strive to improve their own learning and knowledge base. However, the learning capacity of a school needs to be differentiated. No two schools are exactly alike and just as students have different learning needs so does each school and system (Stoll, 2009).

Elements of School Success and Rural Education

Existing research provides a clear road map to what it takes to create a high achieving schools anywhere, high quality teachers and administrators, high quality professional development, high self-efficacy for both the students and teachers, collaboration, a culture of high expectations for students and educators, inclusion of community and parents, not only in the students' academic achievement but also in decision-making, and stressing the importance of high school (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004; Chance & Sequra, 2009). While it is true that these elements may be of importance in all schools, the research conducted on schools is

typically focused, designed, and tested in suburban/urban schools with their larger populations and very little research about school policies or issues unique to rural schools has been conducted. In fact, it is estimated that only about six (6%) of all educational research is conducted in a rural school setting (Hardre & Sullivan, 2008).

There is little incentive for the study of rural education and its impact on the students, communities, and the economy in general. Rural schools research is hampered by the lack of an agreed upon universal definition of "rural" (Arnold, 2000; Coladarci, 2007) resulting in many governmental agencies, researchers, and educational reformers viewing rural schools from an urban/suburban perspective (Harmon, 2001). Arnold (2005) stated that federal funding for rural research is typically used in "…generic programs…" that are also applicable to urban/suburban schools while Hardre` and Sullivan (2008) found that rural populations have been marginalized in the research or were being treated as small cities.

Rural schools comprise 7,810 rural school districts which equates to approximately fifty-seven percent (57%) of the school districts in the country, and 9,765,385 students, which is about twenty-one percent (21%) percent of the student population. Of the 7,810 rural school districts there are 1,821 located in the traditional southern states (U.S. Department of Education , 2015). In the southern United States approximately over thirty-three percent of students are enrolled in rural schools (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Nationally, minority students account for approximately twenty-seven percent (27%) of all students enrolled in rural schools.   A historical major complaint of those interested in rural schools has been an identified lack of attention to the unique problems and circumstances of these schools.

A primary issue is the lack of a consistently accepted definition of what is rural (Arnold, 2000; Coladarci, 2007). Existing rural school's research appears to view "rural schools" as a

monolithic group of schools that are unique and different from urban/suburban

schools. However, the National Center for Educational Statics has developed a three (3) tier

definition of rural. Using the locale codes of 41-rural fringe (an area within five (5) miles of an

urban area), 42-rural distant (more than five (5) but less than twenty-five (25) miles from an

urban area), and 43-rural remote (more than twenty-five (25) miles from an urban area).

Problem Statement

Much of the research conducted related to creating high quality schools in which

children from high poverty, high minority backgrounds succeed has been conducted at

urban/suburban elementary and middle schools and it is estimated that only about six percent

(6%) of all educational research is conducted in rural areas (Hardre & Sullivan, 2008). This is a

significant shortcoming, as in the United States there are approximately 7,810 rural school

districts, comprising about fifty-seven percent of all school districts in the country (U.S.

Department of Education, 2015). There are approximately 9,765,385 students or about twenty-

one percent (21%) of the United States student population enrolled in these schools (U.S.

Department of Education, 2015).

The traditional southern area of the United States is home to about twenty-three percent

(23%) of all rural school districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). These southern rural

school districts are responsible for educating nearly thirty-three percent of all the region's school

students (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). The communities these schools are

located in are often economically depressed with very high unemployment rates, high percentage

of adults without a high diploma or General Educational Equivalent (GED) and high minority

student populations. Often these students are performing below their urban/suburban

counterparts (Horst & Martin, 2007; Johnson, Howley, & Howley, 2002; Johnson, Showalter,

7

Klein, & Lester, 2014). These communities account for about thirty-six percent (36%) of all school dropouts (Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009).

In Alabama, where this study occurred, the rural student population is forty-two percent (42%) (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Many of these schools serve high minority and high poverty populations and the schools tend to be identified having low student achievement on standardized tests and low high school completion rates. However, there are some of these schools, there are being successful in fostering student achievement. There is no research available to indicate the reasons for their success.

Research Purposes

This study sought to investigate high-poverty, high-minority, and high-achieving rural high schools in Alabama, in their natural setting and context to understand what key stakeholders perceived facilitated their school success and the challenges they face in achieving and continuing that success. The study also examined the degree to which the key stakeholders of each school type differ in their perceptions of the reasons for their school's success and the challenges that are negatively impacting their progress.

Strengths in Rural Schooling

Much of the reason for school success in rural settings can be attributed to the strengths of this context. Carter, Lee, and Sweatt (2009) found that the rural schools they studied had established a trusting relationship with both the community in general and the parents of their students specifically. The development of this trusting and supportive relationship with parents and the community by the schools' leadership, faculty, and staff enabled students to build the social capital necessary to reach their full potential both in school and after graduation (Beaulieu & Israel, 2005; Horst & Martin, 2007). In building this trusting relationship, many rural schools

provide services that are outside the normal services associated with education and public schools (Agbo, 2007; Barley & Beesley, 2007; D'Amico & Nelson, 2000). These include home visits that help improve communication and relationships between parents and the schools (Meyer & Mann, 2006). Rural schools often serve sparsely populated areas and high-poverty families that have difficultly attending school meetings and conferences. These home visits help parents remain informed of their students' progress and school activities. Additionally, many members of the school's leadership, faculty, and staff participate in local organizations and activities. Research also indicates that rural school personnel tend to be more satisfied and active within their local community (Gibbs, 2000).

Rural schools tend to be the center of community life in rural communities. Often the rural school and its employees are the largest employer for the local community. The rural school often serves as the meeting location for many of the local organizations and clubs, the voting locations, and emergency and disaster shelter and relief facility. Rural schools are the hub of the community (Agbo, 2007; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009; D'Amico & Nelson, 2000).

The Rural School and Community Trust (2001) reports that rural schools tend to have smaller classes, enabling the teachers to spend more time with their students, learning their academic strengths and weakness. Along with developing a greater understanding of the students' academic needs, teachers and school staff have the ability to create a deeper understanding of the student's non-academic needs and their family life. This deeper understanding of the whole student enables the rural school faculty and staff to better meet the needs of each student (Johnson, Howley, & Howley, 2002). In addition to the high academic achievement, rural schools are safer and have fewer incidents of student misbehavior then larger

schools allowing teachers to focus on academics and not classroom management (Neiman &

Hill, 2011). Finally, rural schools have helped close the achievement gap for high-poverty and

minority students due to the small class size, lower drop-out rates, and a higher percentage of

graduates attending post-secondary education (Johnson, Howley, & Howley, 2002).

Present and Potential Challenges

Research indicates that there are elements within the context of rural environments that

hinder the potential of schools to foster student success. These present and potential challenges

include high levels of poverty that are intergenerational (Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, &

Hutchins, 2012; Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014), an increasingly more diverse

student population (Harmon, 2001; Howley, Theobald, & Howley, 2005; Masumoto & Brown-

Welty, 2009; Starr & White, 2008), limited opportunities for students with an education to find

employment within the community (Harmon, 2001), and lower levels of adult education in rural

homes (Crowe, 2013; Ecdes, 2004; Merjor & Banks, 2002; Simpkins, Weiss, McCartney,

Kreider, & Dearing, 2006). Additionally, researchers are finding that there are increasing

numbers of rural students requiring special education services, and an increasingly transient rural

population (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014; Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Kein,

2012). Rural schools also tend to be hampered by a resource poor environment and a weak tax-

base that make it difficult for them to compete with the wealthier urban/suburban schools in

compensation for teachers, administrators, and staff which, in turn, results in a high turnover

rate. This high turnover rate means that these rural schools have, in general, less experienced

teachers/administrators educating students.

Education and the Future of Rural Schools

Although there are some elements in rural communities that support schools and their purposes, rural schools face an uphill battle in providing a high quality education for their students and there is evidence that, in many settings, they may be failing to prepare rural students for a productive and successful future in the increasingly diverse and global economy. Gibbs (2000) reports that urban/suburban students are more likely to take calculus (93% to 64%) and physics (64% to 34%) than are rural students. Rural students tend to have fewer career opportunities, limited ability or chance of attending college or a post-secondary trade school (Hardre`, 2007; Martin & Yin, 1999; National Center for Educational Statics, 2003). Additionally, rural students are less likely to have access to advance placement and college credit courses or take calculus (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2001; Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012).

In Alabama, where this study occurred, forty-two percent (42%) of all students attend rural schools (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Thus, Alabama is one of thirteen states where rural education is critical to the state's educational achievement, and yet, Alabama has an environment that does not appear to be conducive to improving rural education (Johnson & Strange, 2009). Research indicates that in this region, schools tend to fall below the national average on several measures of educational achievement and outcomes (Gibbs, 2000), and the communities in which these schools reside face many of the present and potential challenges previously noted in rural settings.

Carter, Lee, and Sweatt (2009) found that thirty-seven (37) of the counties in Alabama had unemployment in excess of ten percent (10%) and thirty-four (34) of those counties were rural. Additionally, according to the 2000 census, twenty-six counties in Alabama had less than

ten percent (10%) of the population over the age of twenty-five (25) with a college education and twenty-three (23) of these counties were rural (Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009). Within the rural population of Alabama, there is a very high percentage of adults lacking either a high school diploma or a General Educational Development equivalent (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Kein, 2012). Carter, Lee, and Sweatt (2009) found that rural schools in Alabama account for about thirty-six percent (36%) of all dropouts. Additionally, the vast majority of students enrolled in rural schools are students of color and many of these students fail to achieve academically at the same level as their urban/suburban counterparts (Horst & Martin, 2007; Johnson, Howley, & Howley, 2002; Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). In this state, all rural schools on average have fifty-seven percent (57%) of their students receiving free/reduced price lunch, have a student population of thirty percent (30%) minority, meet ninety-five percent (95%) of their educational goals, and have a graduation rate of eighty-nine percent (89%) (Alabama State Department of Education, 2012). High-minority rural schools in Alabama have an average of seventy-one percent (71%) free/reduced price lunch, have a student population of seventy-seven percent (77%) minority, meet eighty-nine percent (89%) of their educational goals, and have a graduation rate of eighty-four percent (84%) (Alabama State Department of Education, 2012). After factoring out all rural elementary and middle schools that teach sixth grade and below, result in high-minority rural schools with an average of seventy-one percent (71%) free/reduced price lunch, have a student population of sixty-six percent (66%) minority, meet seventy-six percent (76%) of their educational goals, and have a graduation rate of eighty-four percent (84%) (Alabama State Department of Education, 2012). All of the rural schools in Alabama that have elementary grades are unitary or K–12 schools. These schools have sixty-two percent (62%) of their students receiving free/reduced price lunch, have a student population of

thirty-one percent (31%) minority, meet ninety-six percent (96%) of their educational goals, and have a graduation rate of eighty-seven percent (87%) (Alabama State Department of Education, 2012).

The vitality and future of these rural communities are highly related to the educational environment within which its students are educated, and their success in school (Ali & Saunder, 2006, 2009; Hardre`, 2007; Hardre` & Sullivan, 2008; Maxwell, Huggins, & Scheurich, 2010). Thus, is it imperative that the students in these schools be given the tools and environment they need to succeed and although the situation appears grim, there are some schools in the state that seem to be fostering such success, further research and study into how and why they are achieving this success (Lindahl, 2001).

Conceptual Framework

Although the research on rural school success is scant, research conducted on factors that facilitate and hinder school success and those that are of particular importance in rural settings serve as a foundation for this research. As previously noted, these characteristics of rural schools include the establishment of high expectations for student learning and achievement (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004; Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009; Chance & Sequra, 2009), involving the parents and community (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004; Chance & Sequra, 2009), stressing the importance of high school for the student's future success (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004), high quality teachers (Akiba & Anthorp, 2003; Lauer, 2001; Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005), a positive and supportive climate (Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010; Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014), high quality professional development for faculty and administrators (Chance & Sequra, 2009; Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005), high teacher and student efficacy (Chance & Sequra, 2009; Hughes, 1999; Lambertson,

2014; Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014;), collaborative teaching environment (Bruner & Greenlee, 2000; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005), and the transformation of the school into a learning organization (Collinson & Cook, 2007; King & Bouchard, 2011; Stoll, 2009).

Just as important to the creation of high-performing rural schools are the present and potential challenges, real and perceived, that have a significant impact on the ability of rural schools to achieve at a high level. These present and potential challenges include high levels of persistent poverty (Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012; Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014), increasing diversity in their student populations in terms of poverty and minority populations (Harmon, 2001; Howley, Theobald, & Howley, 2005; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Starr & White, 2008) and transient populations (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014; Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Kein, 2012). As a result of these changing demographics, rural communities are facing declining property values, loss of industrial and commercial development, which translates into a weaker tax base and fewer resources to ensure a quality education for the students (Strange, 2011; Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Kein, 2012). Rural schools often lack the funding necessary to provide a competitive pay package, professional development, and instructional support to ensure a quality education schools (Griffin & Green, 2012; Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Kein, 2012). Williams and King (2002) identified six (6) additional challenges facing rural schools: a shortage of highly qualified teachers and administrators, a lack of community and parental involvement, quality and focused professional development, low expectations, resistance to change, and a failure to prepare students for the twenty-first (21st) century. Rural schools also have a higher rate of student disengagement (Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009; Washor & Mojkowski 2014) and suffer from a high teacher

14

turnover rate (Gibbs, 2000 & Harmon, 2001). These facilitating and hindering factors are

depicted in Figure 1, which serves as the conceptual framework for this study.

Opposing Forces

Characteristics of Successful Rural Schools

Challenges to Successful Rural Schools

- ➢ Student issues
- ➢ Family inputs
- ➢ Teacher/staff influences
- ➢ School leadership elements
- ➢ Community Dynamics

High-Achieving, High-Poverty, & High Minority Rural Schools

- ➢ Demographic impact
- ➢ Declining resources
- ➢ Teacher/staff influence
- ➢ School leadership factors
- ➢ Community Dynamics
- ➢ Family issues
- ➢ Student elements

16

Figure 1: Facilitating and Hindering Factors of Successful Rural Schools

Research Questions

Three research questions guided the study:

1.   What factors do selected stakeholders in high-achieving, high-poverty, and high-minority rural fringe, distant and remote high schools perceive as present and potential challenges to their success?

2.   What factors do selected stakeholders in high-achieving, high-poverty, and high-minority rural fringe, distant and remote high schools perceive as facilitating their success?

3.   What if any, differences exist in these perceptions between each type of school, rural fringe, distant and remote high schools?

Significance of the Study

Much of the research conducted related to creating high quality schools in which children from high poverty, high minority backgrounds succeed has been conducted at urban/suburban elementary and middle schools and it is estimated that only about six percent (6%) of all educational research is conducted in rural areas (Hardre & Sullivan, 2008). This is a significant shortcoming, as in the United States there are approximately 7,810 rural school districts, comprising about fifty-seven percent of all school districts in the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). There are approximately 9,765,385 students or about twenty-one percent (21%) of the United States student population enrolled in these schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In Alabama, where this study occurred, the rural student population is forty-two percent (42%) (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Many of these schools serve high minority and high poverty populations and the schools tend to be identified having low student achievement on standardized tests and low high school completion

rates. However, there are some of these schools that are being successful in fostering student

achievement.

A major challenge facing these rural communities is an educational system that may be

failing to prepare rural students for a productive and successful future in the increasingly diverse

and global economy. It is critical that we conduct additional research to identify what actions

and programs have created these high-achieving schools in these high poverty and high minority

areas. This study attempts to add to the knowledge base by studying the perceptions of key

stakeholders of a high-achieving and high-poverty schools to determine why the stakeholders

believe the schools are successful and what challenges they perceive had to be overcome. It is

important that we engage in powerful conservations about school, student achievement, and

advocate reform out in the community, "…at church, the gas station, the barbershop, and the ball

field (Forner, Bierlien-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012, p. 11). It is imperative that research identifies

the characteristics of successful rural schools and enable others to participate in creating

successful schools. Finally, if rural communities are to survive, they must create new

economies, attract working-aged people and redesign their schools so the students are not at a

disadvantage, simply as a result of where their parents chose to live (Herzog & Pittman, 2002).

Research Design

An exploratory qualitative multi-case study methodology was used for this study. Yen

(2002) states that case studies are an appropriate methodology when one is attempting to answer

how or why questions. Additionally, a case study is used when the research is involving a real

life situation or setting (Yen, 2009).   The exploratory case format is used when the intention of

the research is to provide a better understanding of an issue or problem and not to develop any

final conclusions or definitive solutions (Brown, 2006; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill,

2007). Three individual schools were examined. Multiple data sources were used to collect

information. Among these were interviews of key stakeholders including the principal, counselor, school secretary, library media specialist, special education teacher, one (1) teacher from each academic area, custodian, bus driver, and child nutrition worker. Additionally, the researcher sought out local political, business and civic leaders which included the local mayor, Director of Community Development, librarian, Chamber of Commerce, Lions, Kiwanis and Civitan. The local phone directory or appropriate website was used in each location to identify the local stakeholders as a possible source of data. A key informant in each location also provided assistance. Additional documentary data was obtained through the schools' continuous improvement plans, web-sites, and historical data including available agendas faculty meetings, programs, and professional development. This corroborating evidence was than triangulated which ensured the validity of the study (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2006). Once each case study was independently analyzed to answer research questions one and two, a cross-case analysis was conducted to address research question three.

Limitations of the Study

1. Only high-poverty high-minority rural high schools in one state were included in the study.

2. Only high schools with grades seven (7) through twelve (12) were used in this study.

3. Only small schools, less than 375 students, were included in these case studies.

Assumptions

1. The assumption that the data provided by the participants was an accurate description of their perceptions was truthful and accurate.

2. All key stakeholders from each school will agree to participate in the data collection.

3. The transcripts are accurate.

Definition of Terms

      High Achieving Schools – three (3) or more consecutive years of student achievement scores above the national average.

      High-Poverty School – those schools were more than sixty-five percent (65%) of the students receive free and reduced price lunch.

      Learning Organization – Argyris and Schon (1996) defined organizational learning as the "…process of detecting and correcting problems to improve organizational effectiveness" (Finnigan & Daly, 2012, p. 44).

      Restructuring – the fundamental transformation of the philosophical, organizational, cultural underpinnings of a school.

      Rural Schools – Rural schools are those that serve communities of 2,500 or fewer populations. (Locale codes 41-Rural Fringe, 42-Rural Distant, and 43-Rural Remote). Locale codes from the National Center for Educational Statics:

      41 – Rural, Fringe: Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.

      42 – Rural, Distant: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.

      43 – Rural, Remote: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

Summary

This chapter presented an overview of the study of high-achieving, high-poverty, and high-minority rural schools in Alabama, the present and potential challenges they face in creating high achieving schools, and the future of rural schools, the purpose of this study, the conceptual framework, research questions, research design, limitations of the study, assumptions, and definitions. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the literature related to this study, it includes the history of accountability and federal involvement, closing the achievement gap, organizational learning capacity, rural schools, and small schools.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used for this study, including the research design, purpose, community and demographics, research questions, data collection methods, and analysis of the data. Manuscripts that report the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research in the area of rural schools follow Chapter 3.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 consist of manuscripts. Each manuscript deals with one of the research questions examined.

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

"An educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people."

~ Thomas Jefferson

History of Accountability and Federal Involvement

The development of the American educational system is steeped in the traditions, culture, and ethnic character of America's founding and development. The uniquely American educational system's roots extend all the way back to Plato, Aristotle, and even Saint Thomas Aquinas (McNergney & Herber, 2001). The founding fathers believed that education was essential for the Republic; they understood that freedom had to be tempered by the need to maintain social order; therefore, education was seen as a means to produce "good citizens." For the founding fathers "education meant socialization" (McNergney, 2001, p. 47).

Although the initial structures establishing public schools in America gave the primary control of them to local districts, the states had authority over these schools and the issue of who controls the curriculum and establishes the standards has been an issue for disagreement from the early years of their inception and is something that has continued to be an issue. As an example, in 1647, the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed the Old Satan Deluder Act in to ensure every town of over 100 families was to have a grammar school to teach reading and writing (Shurtleff, 1853). Thus, although the communities may have established the schools, the state was setting

guidelines as to when they needed to do so and what the purposes would be. The primary role of the federal government was providing land on which schools could be built.

With a steady flow of new immigrants entering the new nation and to develop a strong economy, many of our founding fathers took an active role in the development of an educational system in the newly created nation (Hirschland, 2004). The founding fathers were concerned with creating an educational system that would help instill a sense of nationalism in the multitude of individual nationalities that made up the population of the United States at the time of the American Revolution. Benjamin Franklin and James Madison were early supporters of a publicly funded educational system in the new nation (Hirschland, 2004). During the Constitutional Convention in 1787, there was a belief by many of the founding fathers, that "…only an informed, alert, intelligent, and uncorrupted electorate would preserve the freedoms of a republican state" (Hirschland, 2003, p. 347).

The Northwest Ordinance of 1785, passed by the Continental Congress during the period of time the nation was under the Articles of Confederation, divided the Northwest Territory into townships of six square miles. Each town was subdivided into thirty-six (36) squares of 640 acres that were to be sold. The proceeds from the sixteenth squares were designated to support education. This transfer of land continued throughout the history of the United States until the end of the 19th century. There had been more than seventy-seven acres of land given to the states to support education (Hirschland, 2003). The law was further expanded as new territories were added to the United States. In 1841, Congress mandated that the 36th square would also be added to the 16th section. By 1854, Alabama, the state in which this research was conducted, had earned $902,774.00 through the sale of the 16th square. This is equivalent to about 23 million dollars today (Hirschland, 2003). During the mid-1800s, the migration of settlers westward

resulted in the sale of land in the west resulting in a surplus of funds in the national treasury that were sent to the states in the form of loans that were never repaid, for use in improving education (Hirschland, 2003).

The Civil War was the last time federal land was available for K–12 education. In 1862, the Congress passed the Morrill Land Grant Act. This Act granted 30,000 acres of land for each senator and representative. This land was to be sold and the proceeds were to be endowed and used to support higher education in each state. In 1890, a second Morrill Act was passed to include the recently freed slaves in higher education. In Alabama, there are three land-grant universities, Auburn, Alabama A&M, and Tuskegee. Once the distribution of land for public education was ended, the federal government's involvement in education was minimal and occurred for "…relatively short periods of time and in times of crisis…" (Hirschland, 2003, p. 343).

The next major federal educational policy was the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, which focused on fostering and supporting vocational-technical education. The Act provided for the federal government to pay for the administrative staff, teachers, supervisors, and directors of agricultural, trade, home economics, and industrial subjects at the secondary school level. Additionally, the federal government obligated monies to pay for the cost of preparing teachers for these subjects at the secondary school level (P.L. 64-347; 39 Stat. 929). Although the government provided funding and guidelines for using these monies, the federal government was not deeply involved in the functions of schooling until October 4, 1957, when the launch of the Soviet Spacecraft Sputnik focused attention on the science education in the United States and resulted in the passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958. The law was passed because of the perceived failure of the United States educational system to maintain pace

with the Soviets (P.L. 85-864; 72 Stat. 1580). The purpose of this Act was to refocus

educational policy on mathematics, science, modern foreign languages, and increase the number

of scientists and mathematicians available for the military-industrial complex. The major

funding mechanism was the National Defense Student Loan Program (P.L. 85-864; 72 Stat.

1580). This law, enacted in 1958, resulted in the federal government taking a lead role in

educational reform and the start of a pattern of federal leadership in education that continues

today. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson established an initiative known as the "War on

Poverty." A component of this war was Johnson's belief that a major component of a program to

end poverty was a providing a quality education for all students (Groen, 2012). President

Johnson's initiative influenced educational policy for two reasons. First, desegregation had

become a federal court issue, and second, the money he sent to the states for public education

which had limited strings attached, initially (Groen, 2012). In 1965, President Johnson signed

the Elementary and Secondary Education act into law. This Act included the Title I program that

was designed to address the needs of disadvantaged children, children of low income families,

children of migratory agricultural workers, handicapped, neglected and delinquent children

(Groen, 2012). It represented a major investment of federal dollars in public education and

brought with it requirements and mandates and a new era of federal involvement in and control

over public schools.

Since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, there have

been several actions at the federal government level that affected education. In 1979, President

Carter split the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and created the Department of

Health and Human Services, and the Department of Education. In 1983, President Reagan

moved to reduce the federal government's role in education. He depended primarily on the

concept of block grants, with President George H. W. Bush continuing this trend. In spite of these changes in approach, education remains a strategic cornerstone of the national security of the United States and continues to get national attention from presidents and Congress. President George H.W. Bush created his America 2000, President Bill Clinton created Goals 2000, and President George W. Bush Passed No Child Left Behind, a revision of the Title I program in 2002. Finally, in 2010 President Barack Obama released his Race to the Top Grant program (U.S. Department of Education, (2014). The initial desire to provide a quality education for every child, expressed by Lyndon Johnson, has expanded over the years and moved the nation to comprehensive educational accountability in public schooling at both the national and state levels.

The Era of Accountability

Ronald Reagan's first Secretary of Education, T.H. Bell, established the National Commission in Excellence in Education in early 1981. This Commission on Education was charged with examining the quality of education in the United States (T. H. Bell, 1981). Secretary Bell directed the commission to identify issues, recommend solutions, and not to search for scapegoats in the process. The modern era standards movement was prompted by the release of the Department of Education Report, *A Nation at Risk,* in 1983 (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

The *A Nation at Risk* report addressed five areas within education, "…curriculum content standards, expectations of students, time devoted to education, teacher quality, and educational leadership" (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. 3). A key recommendation of this report was to focus education on the four-core subjects – Math, English, History, and Science – what the report calls the "…very stuff…" of education (U.S. Department of Education, 2008,

26

p. 2). Another major recommendation of the report was a significant increase in the number of hours of instruction in both subject content and effective teaching. Margaret Spellings, the second Secretary of Education for President George W. Bush, wrote that this particular provision of the recommendations resulted in focusing more hours on teaching philosophies and not content knowledge (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Secretary of Education Dr. William Bennett pushed the nation into the "back to the basics" movement in an effort to stem declining test scores on high stakes standardized test in relation to other industrialized nations in the world. This push intensified during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as globalization of the world economies and global competition increased. This globalization was often referred to as the driving force of standardized testing and educational reform. It was a global movement that was being initiated in many developed countries around the world (Sahlberg, 2010).

President George W. Bush signed the reauthorization of the elementary and secondary education act into law, commonly known as No Child Left Behind in January, 2002. During the signing ceremony President Bush stated, "The new role of the federal government is to set high standards, provide resources, hold people accountable, and liberate school districts to meet the standards" (Hirschland & Steinmo, 2003, p. 344). This act was the greatest intrusion of the federal government into public education in the history of the United States. A major policy shift created by this act was the focus on the "…underserved minority and low socio-economic populations or sub-groups assured that schools would more effectively serve those students" (Groen, 2012, p.6). This was the first time that schools were accountable for the learning and achievement of each sub-group within the school. These sub-groups included, all student, special education, free/reduced price lunch, Black, Hispanic, White, limited English proficient,

and others depending on the school and school system. The goal of this legislation was to ensure equality in educational opportunities and to eliminate low expectations for all students. However, although lofty goals were set, the Federal government has never fully funded this act (Federal Education Budget Project, 2014).

The No Child Left Behind Act focused on the elementary and middle schools, which was a dramatic shift from previous educational reform acts that had concentrated on improving education within the high school setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The emphasis of the act was focused on math and reading, which has resulted in a substantial decrease in the amount of time that students are participating in classes such as art and music. Additionally, there has been a reduction in the number of hours elementary students are participating in history and science instruction to enable the focus on math and reading (Groen, 2012). One final change, in the federal government funding of education, was a shift in the way Title I funds were spent in schools. The Bush Administration decided that rather than casting a wide net and spending money over a wide number of schools, the spending should be shifted to target the areas of greatest need. No Child Left behind focused on the underserved populations, minority and low socioeconomic groups and subgroups, the intention was to ensure schools effectively served all students (Groen, 2012). The objective of No Child left Behind was for every student in public schools in the United States to perform at the proficient level or higher no later than 2014. The act established objectives for continuous improvement that schools were required to meet each year. Additionally, there were consequences for schools and systems that failed to make the required Adequate Annual Progress (Groen, 2012; Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002).

As the annual measurable objectives of No Child Left Behind increased and obtaining and maintaining the required adequate annual progress became more difficult, even for some of

the best school systems in the nation, President Obama's administration began granting waivers

for the requirements of this law. No Child Left behind. On 23 September 2011, Secretary of

Education Arne Duncan said "…States are developing next-generation accountability and

support systems, guided by principles developed by the Council of Chief State School

Officers…" (Duncan, 2011), that were not anticipated by the authors of the Elementary and

Secondary Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind).

President Obama's major educational policy is a four billion dollar grant program known

as Race To The Top, which one part of the one-hundred billions dollars for education contained

in the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA)*. This program is the largest

"…competitive education grant program in U.S. History…" (U.S. Department of Education,

2009). This policy is President Obama's administration's commitment to education that

"…stresses standards and assessment, recruitment and retention of effective teachers,

improvement of low-performing schools and the establishment of viable data systems for

tracking student achievement and teacher effectiveness" (Nicholson-Crotty & Staley, 2012,

p.161). Nicholson-Crotty and Staley (2012) further write that the Race To The Top grant

program was developed to encourage and reward states for developing innovative reforms and

achieving significant improvement in student outcomes. Many states changed their educational

laws and programs to become eligible for these grants (Nicholson-Crotty & Staley, 2012). To be

eligible to apply and be considered for a Race To The Top grant each state had to agree to, "…

(1) Adopting internationally benchmarked standards and assessments, (2) Recruit, develop,

reward, and retain effective teachers and leaders, (3) Create data systems that measure student

achievement and provide actual data for leader/schools to improve practice, and (4) Turn around

the lowest performing schools" (Matrin & Lazaro, 2011, p. 842). Race To The Top is one of the

most aggressive and ambitious educational grant programs ever attempted (Matrin & Lazaro, 2011).

President Obama's Race To The Top education initiative uses many of the same measures that were included in No Child Left Behind to evaluate schools and school districts, and further expands their use to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers as well (Gottlieb, 2013).   Some of the problems with the Race To The Top grant program include an emphasis on charter schools is unresponsive to rural states issues, it is not based in research or science, and it is inconsistent and often contradictory of other educational grant programs (Nicholson-Crotty and Staley 2012; Peterson & Rothstein, 2010; Ross, 2010). Additionally Race To The Top cannot fix the problem of the gap between "… (quantitative) teacher effectiveness rating and the (nonquantitative) concept of great teaching…" (Gottieb, 2013, p. 12).

The standards movement has shifted the focus of educational reform away from educational inputs to achievement outcomes (Kuel, 2012). The enormous increase in federal spending on education since the "A Nation at Risk" report in 1983, an increase from 246 billion to 499 billion, after adjustments for inflation with a corresponding increase of per student spending from $5,691 to $9,288, have failed to increase the United States standing in the world (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Many critics of the standards movement are concerned that instead of increasing the critical thinking, problem solving and dialectal thinking skills necessary for the United States to be competitive in the increasing global economy, teachers are "…teaching the test" (Sahlberg, 2010, p. 47).

For the classroom teacher, the level of interference with their professional judgment and autonomy, they feel as a result of school improvement and accountability efforts affect the support they are willing to give and the likelihood of their embracing or rejecting the

efforts (Anagnostopoulos, 2003). A major issue for teachers is the pressure to raise the student's

scores on the standardized exams, while at the same time reducing the number of failures in their

class; these are working against each other. It goes to the question of rigor and high

expectations, "…you can't raise standards and lower the number of students who

fail" (Anagnostopoulos, 2003, p. 312). A real danger in pushing teachers to lower their failure

rate is the chance of also lowering their expectations and rigor of the content taught in their class,

which could result in a lowering of the standardized test scores. Additionally, often a teacher's

effort to reduce a high failure rate only increases the student's behavior that lead to the failures in

the first place (Anagnostopoulos, 2003). Finally, many teachers blame the students and their

environment for low achievement, only about 12% of the teachers in one study identified

instructional practice as a factor in student failure and lack of achievement (Anagnostopoulos,

2003).

Sahlberg (2010), recommends three steps to improve student achievement, 1) focusing

the change effort on developing a trusting and collaborative relationship with the community, 2)

use more "…intelligent forms of school accountability and match them to external accountability

needs" (Sahlberg, 2010, p. 58), and "…leadership should encourage cooperation among teachers

and networking among schools" (Sahlberg, 2010, p. 61).

To meet the needs and demands of improving educational outcomes, schools and school

systems need to have the flexibility necessary to adapt to local circumstances, issues, and needs

(Forner, Bierlien-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012; Sahlberg, 2010). However, the requirements of the

accountability reforms not only develop the goals and objectives of school improvement but also

dictate the methods to achieve the stated goals (Sahlberg, 2010). However, this approach has not

been the resounding success many expected. In comparison to other industrial nations, foreign

exchange students find that schools in the United States are easier than those in their home country (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

The leading educational policy of the United States continues to be maintaining our current course and continuing to do more of the same (Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves, 2008; Sarason, 1990; Sahlberg, 2010). A review by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development – Program for International Student assessment methods (2008) found that those nations establishing test-based accountability systems have "…experienced stagnation or decline in student learning, often accompanied by an increased dropouts when compared to nations that…created favorable conditions for teaching and learning…" (Sahlberg, 2010, p. 52). As Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (2009) stated, "…data can't tell the whole truth" (p. 2).

In the United States, the educational policy is the result of debate and compromise that is necessary to meet the demands of democratic system, which is the strength of this nation. The standards-based movement leads to the belief that educational outcomes can be measured like any other manufactured product. The dependence on statistical measures to determine the quality of educational fails to measure those things that make great teachers such as, "…counsel troubled teens, take phone calls at night, and reach into their pocket for lunch money…" (Duncan, 2009, p. 1). Improving education should not depend solely on producing better learning outcomes or spending more money to education students. Improving education should include "…learning that is worthwhile and valuable to their families, communities…" (Sahlberg, 2010, 46). One major benefit of the accountability and standards movement is the increase in research into what works to improve student achievement in American schools.

It appears that our educational system is moving back to an industrial based model with "…productivity, efficiency…measureable outcomes, higher test scores…" (Sahlberg, 2010, p.

32

46). The drive for school improvement has focused on improving the basic skills and core content with common standards and measurable outcomes. However, a "School that does not stimulate desire to learn, need for learning, or curiosity to know more, is not able to generate productive learning…" (Sahlberg, 2010, p.46). The establishment of statistical measures for school improvement does little to create lifelong learners and results in teachers teaching the test. Wei (2002) states that, high-stakes standardized tests limit pedagogy sound teaching strategies, further deskilling teachers and making teaching routine, boring, and test-like. Eisner (2004) states that our reliance on standardized tests sends the message to our students that it is the grade that counts, not the knowledge gained. This leads our students to ask "What do I needed to know or is this on the test?" All students enter school with learning and achievement assets (Cooper, 2007), however, there is a disparity between the achievement of Whites and most minority groups. The implementation of high-stakes testing has focused educators as well as policymaker's attention on the causes of the difference and strategies to close the gap.

Closing the Achievement Gap

Introduction

The Department of Education Report, "A Nation at Risk" in 1983, focused the nation's attention, in part, on the achievement gap between white middle class students and the minority and low-income minority students. Research indicates that there is evidence of an identifiable achievement gap when students enter kindergarten (Chapin, 2006; Williams, 2011) and this achievement gap continues to grow throughout the students' school years (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Williams 2011). Researchers point to multiple potential causes for this achievement gap between the white and minority and low-income students with no root cause identified to date (Williams, 2011). The educational achievement gap does have part of its roots in the history of

the United States and slavery, closely followed by the Supreme Court Doctrine of Separate but Equal (1896). The inadequate funding continued even after the Brown V Topeka Board of Education 347 U.S. 483 (1954) overturned Plessy V Ferguson 16 S. Ct. 1138 (1896). Researchers and governmental agencies have identified a lack of cultural values, social issues such as poverty and continued segregation as either potential issues or contributing factors to the persistent achievement gap. The problem is that even the scholars that are calling for the closing of the achievement gap cannot agree on its root causes or a sustainable solution to close the gap permanently (Carey, 2014; Williams, 2011). While it is true that there has been no single cause identified for the existence of the achievement gap, to close this achievement gap it is clear that there must be a "…dramatic shift in the attitude and priorities of policymakers, administrators, and teachers…" (Williams, 2011, p. 65). It should be noted that the achievement gap is not simply between White and Black students but is an issue between White and most other minority students (Books, 2007; Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillo, & Urban, 2011; Carey, 2014; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2005; Cotton, 1996; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). The factor that most impacts education in the United States is poverty and the toll poverty takes on students (Books, 2007).

As noted above the achievement gap is only a symptom of much larger issues that are going to require a coordinated effort involving not only the schools, but also the families, community, and social service agencies from all levels of governmental to solve the significant issues that have contributed to the achievement gap (Books, 2007). One of the most significant problems with the closing of the achievement gap is the failure of researchers and policy makers to recognize the social and cultural causes associated with the achievement gap (Carey, 2013; Carter, 2012). It appears that the discussion of closing the achievement gap focuses on the

problem and the solution rest solely on the schools and is completely an educational

issue.   Many believed that closing the achievement gap was a school based technical issue that

should be solved by the schools. In other words, if the schools did a better job educating the

students, then there would be no achievement gap.

School improvement and closing the achievement gap is about improving the educational

outcomes for all students attending a particular school. The problem with school improvement

and closing the achievement gap is that it is, "…immensely complicated" (Stoll, 2009, p.

116). As outlined by Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2005), there are many causes for the

achievement gap, family, lived experiences, community, cultural, but they stressed "…school

factors including the quality of teachers" (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2005, p. 378).

While societal and cultural factors have an impact on student learning, there are settings

in which schools have been able to overcome these issues and there are some school factors that

have been identified as primary elements in student and school success. The accountability

movement has dramatically increased the focus on teacher quality, not only in the United States

but also in much of the industrialized world. The focus on the teachers results from the fact that

they are the largest single asset and expense for a school system. While the research on the

impact the teacher quality has on student achievement is mixed, as there is little research on the

impact for the at-risk students who "…tend to have fewer opportunities to encounter highly

qualified teachers" (Phillips, 2010, p. 471).   One of the most significant factors in determining

student achievement levels is a quality teacher (Goldhaber & Brewer, 1997; Nye,

Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Phillips, 2010; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). The fact

remains that the number of students from low income and/or minority family's has increased

dramatically since the 1970s and the need for highly effective teachers to work in the school with

these traditionally hard to reach students has not necessarily improved (Murnane & Steele, 2007). The research indicates that on average the schools that serve high concentrations of high poverty and high minority students have a greater percentage of teachers who graduated from non-competitive colleges (institutions that accept any student who graduated from high school), they failed their states required certification exam their first attempt, have fewer years of teaching experience, and are teaching out of their certification area (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2005; Darling-Hommand, 2000; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Heck, 2007; Ingersoll, 2002; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002; Murnane & Steel 2007; Phillips, 2010). The high poverty and minority students, the more difficult group of children to teach, tend to have the least effective teacher, who tends to have weak academic ability, and have the greatest turnover each year. Often, first year teachers are placed in classrooms with these students. These first year or novice teachers are often overwhelmed with attempting to manage their classrooms and this is further exasperated when this novice teachers is in a high-poverty high-minority school (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2005). A possible contributing factor to high-poverty and minority students being taught by less effective teachers could be the result of extensive pressure brought to bear on school leadership by affluent, non-minority parents to have the best and most effective teachers in the schools that teach their children (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2005). All these facts make it difficult for the neediest students to obtain a quality education.

Closing the Gap

The achievement gap tends to be determined by the "…results of standardized assessments, which provide only one dimension of a much more complex and nuanced reality of what students know" (Milner, 2013, p. 5). The problem with solving the achievement gap involves a multitude of social, community, and family issues along with a limited understanding

of the root causes of the problem. Many of the mandated programs, from the federal or state government, tend to be a one-size-fits-all solution, either which does not identify or correct the specific issues of student learning and achievement. School improvement and the closing of the achievement gap is further complicated by the federal system of government in the United States with its multiple, and often conflicted, levels of leadership and control. The evidence indicates that external interventions and school improvement initiatives are not always successful and have a varied success rates and local initiatives are even less successful due to the time and work involved in planning and implementation of the initiative (Hopkins, Bermen, Hewes, Overmen, & Brown, 2002).

Often left out of the discussion of closing the achievement gap are the parents of the underachieving students. Research indicated that parental involvement has a positive impact of student achievement (Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, & Greathouse, 1996; Dearing, Keith, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Jaynes, 2005, 2007). This parental involvement tends to be lowest in the high-poverty areas for many reasons, lack of parental educational attainment, working to support the family, and a plethora of family constraints and issues. The research does indicate that for the students facing major obstacles to their academic achievement benefit the most from parental involvement in their education (Crowe, 2013; Ecdes, 2004; Merjor & Banks, 2002; Simpkins, Weiss, McCartney, Kreider, & Dearing, 2006). Combined with lower parental involvement, in these schools that have a more challenging student body, these schools are also spending more time and their limited resources for non-educational purposes such as security and transportation than their more affluent counterpart schools (Carey, 2014; Crowe, 2013). These high-poverty schools tend to be the center of the community, this alone provides an opportunity for the school and community to work together to solve some of their achievement

issues. Innovative leadership and seizing the opportunity to make the school a community center

of action for education could go a long way in solving some of the larger issues, which resulted

in the achievement gap.

All too often, the discussion about closing the achievement gap focuses on a school that

has had some success in closing the assessment score gap and what that school has done

differently (Books, 2007). Another line of argument revolves around the school's learning

environment or the lack of a positive learning environment that is a condition for

learning. However, what "Bertiner (2005) calls the 600 pound gorilla that most effects American

Education today, namely, poverty and the well documented toll it takes on children, families,

communities, and Schools…" (Books, 2007, p. 12). Often, in the rush to improve the learning

and achievement of students, the school, community, governmental leaders and policymakers

fixate on the simple technical issues of teaching and learning and fail to realize the larger picture

of the problem. They are focusing on the tip of the iceberg while there is a massive hidden set of

issues below the surface (Carey. 2014).

However, there are school factors that can help to overcome the present and potential

challenges these students face. Research indicates that there are three school-based components

that enhance student learning and achievement; an emphasis on academics, collective efficacy or

the desire to succeed, and faculty trust (Brown & White, 2014; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottcomp, 2006;

Lee & Bryk, 1989). The emphasis on academics includes the "extent to which a school is driven

by a quest for academic excellence" (Hoy, et al., 2006, p. 427). Shause (1995) identified three

factors that contribute to academic emphasis of a school an emphasis on rigor and rewarding

proficiency, establishment and consistent enforcement of appropriate discipline, attendance

policies and consequences, and instructional practices. The concept here is to place an emphasis

on academic achievement throughout the school. This includes the continued academic growth

of the staff and faculty, as well as the students. It is the leadership's responsibility to create a

productive learning climate within the school. The collective efficacy is the shared belief that

the students, school, and community can obtain the achievement goals established for the

students. Finally, the faculty and parents must trust that each is going to do their part to ensure

the success of the students (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillo, & Urban, 2011).

One key aspect of the school's ability to boost student achievement over the long term is

ensuring that the students are engaged in their learning. Student engagement is a significant

factor in student achievement and the transformational school leader will influence student

achievement in a positive manner (Leithwood, 2008). Another factor in boosting student

achievement is teachers and administrators establishing high achievement expectations for the

students. When teachers and administrators do not set high expectations and allow students and

teachers to lower their expectations it can have a disastrous impact on student achievement

(Collinson, 2010). Setting high expectation includes moving teaching and learning away from

low-level knowledge type questions and moving towards analysis and synthesis type questions

(Elmore, 2006). It is important for the teachers to move their teaching to a level that supports

student learning and the higher level of expectations. The schools that have been most

successful in sustaining their efforts at closing the achievement gap, celebrated student, faculty

achievement (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillo, & Urban, 2011). School leadership, not only

monitored teaching and learning but also provided timely and constructive feedback and support,

and they expected excellence for students (Leithwood, 2010).

An often overlooked but important factor in rising student achievement is faculty and

staff offering encouragement to the students. In a survey conducted by the Minority Student

Achievement Network, researchers found that black students reported that

teacher encouragement was the single most important motivator of achievement (Cooper,

2007). Researchers also found that white students in the same districts believed that teacher

demands were the greatest factor in their achievement. The same survey also found that black

students have a great problem understanding the teacher's lesson and with reading

comprehension (Cooper, 2007). This complicates the process of improving schools and closing

the achievement gap. Schools must recognize and address the different motivating forces for the

school's diverse student population and implement programs and initiatives to support those

motivators. Finally, research does indicate that increasing student achievement and closing the

achievement gap is more difficult at the High School level. This is a result of peer pressure and a

dramatic decline in parental involvement at the high school level (Duke & Johnson, 2011;

Thielman, 2013).

School Districts:

The school district plays an important part in closing the achievement gap and improving

student learning and achievement. While there is considerable research about improving

achievement at individual schools, there is a limited body of research and knowledge of system-

wide improvement of student learning and achievement (Hopkins, Stringfield, Harris, Stoll, &

Mackay, 2014). The systems that have been successful in implementing system wide

improvements in student learning and closing the achievement gap have had well developed and

shared vision statements that addressed learning and the future (Leithwood, 2010). These shared

vision statements provide a focus for all key stakeholders and create a sense of purpose and

ownership in the implementation and results of the system's vision. Along with the shared

vision statement, these high performing school districts also have a clear mission statement that

is focused on student achievement, closing the achievement gap, and improving the quality of instruction within the system.

High performing districts place a premium, not only on student learning and achievement but also on the learning and achievement of the staff and faculty of the school (Murley, Keedy, & Welsh, 2008; Noonan, 2014; Savas, 2013). High performing districts used their professional development programs to improve the staff and faculty's skills, knowledge, and abilities (Murley, Keedy, & Welsh, 2008; Noonan, 2014; Savas, 2013). One critical aspect of the professional development was assuring that teachers have the ability to read, understand, interpret, and use the available student achievement data. This professional development ensured that these schools were not data rich and information poor (Leithwood, 2010). It is imperative that the entire faculty have the ability to use the student achievement data to improve their classroom instruction to ensure the students are learning at or above the established standard. Togneri and Anderson (2003) found the high performing school systems not only use achievement data generated by the high stakes testing, but also from other data sources such as, student work, attendance and discipline records, and community input to assess the progress of both the students and the schools. Many of the high performing school districts created learning cultures that included the continuous learning and achievement of the staff and faculty as well as the students. These high performing school systems created a system of accountability for the staff and faculty to ensure rigorous attention to student achievement (Leithwood, 2010).

It is important to note that high performing districts did not attempt to improve student learning and achievement in one massive, radical change. The most successful high performing school systems approached school improvement and closing the achievement gap in small manageable stages with established goals, objectives, and milestones to measure their progress

41

toward increasing student learning and achievement (Collinson, 2010; Leithwood, 2010). Many of the changes in these high performance systems began at the elementary schools, progressed to the middle and junior high school and finally the high schools (Leithwood, 2010). As these high achieving systems deliberated to create their improvement strategies, they ensured all the key stakeholders participated in a meaningful manner. Research indicates, "…neither top down or bottom up actions alone lead to successful reform, successful reform required a coherent strategy…" (Leithwood, 2010, p. 261). When all key stakeholders have participated in the decision-making process, they have also assumed ownership of the decisions and their consequences and outcomes. This ownership often leads to a more rigorous execution or implementation of the plan, thus increasing the likelihood of its success. School systems must work to develop a shared purpose and goal for student achievement and ensure they create a strong "will to improve" culture within the entire school system (Collinson, 2010; Leithwood, 2010). Creating this close and collaborative working relationship across the entire school system is critical for the success of school improvement initiatives to be successful. This desire to improve should also include a real sense of urgency throughout the entire school system and its stakeholders for school improvement and closing the achievement gap. This is accomplished, in part, by reducing the distractions that interfere with the educational process within the schools. As a part of the improvement incentives for the school, as the school improved their student learning and achievement, they were granted increasing levels of autonomy and discursion from the school system (Leithwood, 2010; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, & Peetsma, 2012).

Research indicates that school systems with a highly bureaucratic leadership structure stifle innovation and stymie achievement (Collinson, 2010; Finnigan & Daly, 2012; Hopkins,

Stringfield, Harris, Stoll, & Mackay, 2014; Leithwood, 2010; Silins, Mulford, & Zarins, 2002). This type of school leader finds ways to reduce and even subvert input from key stakeholders in the decision-making process. This is accomplished by limiting access to information and the decision-making process, changing the rules without notice, and ignoring the rules and regulations. Systems that suppress input from key stakeholders are often protecting the status quo. This protection of the status quo is also stifling inquiry learning and action research projects that are critical to improving the teaching, learning, and student achievement. These leaders are very resistant to change. In contrast, the high functioning school systems include input and feedback about student learning and achievement as a part of the decision-making and assessment process (Leithwood, 2010). A major change that is necessary to ensure school improvement and closing the achievement gap requires system leadership to "…radically change their expectations for achievement of underperforming students and to lead their districts away from deficit thinking…" (Leithwood, 2010, p. 251) about their students. Sleegers and Leithwood (2010) identified two views of improving schools, the inside and outside view. The outside view is externally driven and implemented by the school staff and faculty while the inside view focuses on the schools "…capacity ...to transform themselves…" (Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, & Peetsma, 2012, p. 442).

Currently, there is a growing movement away from focusing school improvement on classroom instruction and looking at the student's perspective. At the school level, schools improve their teaching, learning and student achievement when the students understand the school vision and mission, teachers are using the best strategies and methods possible, and school leadership creates an environment that is conducive to teaching and learning, while being focused on the needs of their students (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2006; Pappano, 2010; Thielman,

43

2012). When schools develop a teaching and learning program that has what they call

coherence, which is the coordination of the learning program with a clear focus on the student's

learning and achievement that are sustained and complement each other for all students, their

effectiveness will increase and their students will achieve at a much higher level (King &

Bouchard, 2011).

An area that often affects low achieving schools is what Porter-Magee (2004) calls an

attitude among teachers that they are doing everything they can do to teach their students, under

difficult circumstances, and should therefore be left alone to teach as they deem best regardless

of the students' performance. Porter-Magee stated, "I am always fascinated by the degree to

which many educators absolve themselves from all blame when students and schools fail" (2004,

p. 26).

Principal Leadership and Student Achievement

In highly effective schools, a key aspect of leadership that is often over looked is the

leadership style of the school principal. The principal's leadership style has a significant impact

on the staff and faculty. It is important that school leaders are self-reflective on their leadership

style and the impact it has on the faculty and staff (Griffin & Green, 2012). Many successful

school leaders understand that they do not have all the correct answers or the best ideas for

improving student learning and achievement. These school leaders understand that they are not

all knowing and they ensure that the faculty and staff have real input into the decisions affecting

their teaching and student learning and achievement (Griffin & Green, 2012; Murley, Keedy, &

Welsh, 2008). These successful leaders take the time and effort to include not only the faculty

and staff but also the students, parents, and community in developing the schools plans for

improving student learning and achievement.

One of the most important traits school leaders at highly successful school possess is the ability to communicate a clear and consistent message of high expectations and the belief that failure is not an option. Three keys to developing a high performing school are a strong sense of community, a focus on learning and high expectations, and the ability to communicate these values effectively and efficiently (Johnson, Showalter, & Kein, 2012). When developing and communicating these values successful leaders do not work from a deficit model or that the students are the problem model (Leithwood, 2010). However, the communication process must flow in both directions to be effective and to ensure the faculty and staff buy into the program. These school leaders work to encourage teachers to solve problems and work to improve student learning and achievement. The collaborative nature of teamwork increases the instructional capacity of the school, especially when it is between the faculty and the leadership (Murley, Keedy, & Welsh, 2008). Working to create teacher leaders is an important step in developing a team that is focused on improving teaching, learning, and student achievement. The successful school leader takes the time to identify and develop these teacher leaders to ensure the team is focused and successful, improving student achievement and creating a high performing school is more than any one person can successfully accomplish it takes a team. Schools only improve through the "…collective power of the full staff to improve student achievement school wide" (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000, p. 261).

School leadership accounts for about twenty-five percent of the school's impact on student learning and achievement (Leithwood et al., 2005). School leadership is second only to the teachers in its impact on student learning and achievement. School leadership provides the spark for increased student learning and achievement. The impact of a school principal on student learning and achievement is immeasurable and the greater the need for improvement, the

45

greater the potential effect of the school's leadership (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillo, & Urban, 2011; Griddin & Green, 2012). The core practices of a school principal includes creating a school vision, establishing the directions of the school recruiting, and development of the staff and faculty, and creating an organization that is focused on teaching and learning (Leithwood, 2008).

The most highly effective school principals do not have a great deal of impact in developing a teacher's content knowledge; however, they do exert significant influence in motivating, providing appropriate support and appreciation of the teachers and their efforts to improve teaching, learning, and student achievement (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). The more school principals practice these leadership traits the more impact they will have on teaching and learning within their school. In high performing schools, the principals remain focused on the instructional aspects of school operations and delegate the day-to-day management issues to an appropriate staff or faculty member. The most successful principals, in high functioning schools, "… demonstrate knowledge of best practices in curriculum and pedagogy …" (Brown, 2011, p. 76). The bottom line is that high achieving principals spend their time creating a learning climate where high expectations of learning and achievement, for both faculty and students, are communicated. Additionally, there are appropriate rewards and consequences for failing to achieve these high expectations. To enable this principals to create this type of learning environment it is important that there is longevity for the schools leadership team especially the principal.

Research has found that stability of the school's leadership team, especially the principal, has a significant impact on student learning and achievement. The research indicates that unplanned principal turnover is one of the most "…common sources of school's failure to

progress, in spite of what teachers may do" (Leithwood, 2008, p. 29). Consistently high

performing schools have extremely stable leadership, which is focused on student achievement

and instruction all the time (Leithwood, 2008). This stability and security allows the principal

the flexibility to focus on improving the teaching and learning environment of the school and

less time worried about learning their job or ensuring they keep their job. In addition, the

stability of school leadership enables the principal and school staff and faculty to experiment

with new and better policies without the fear of failure or ridicule. Moving away from "the way

we have always done it" to new and innovative methods can be a frightening conquest for many

teachers. Having stable leadership with an innovative philosophy makes it easier for teachers to

step out of their comfort zone and try new ideas. Often times it is the experimentation that

results in significant improvement in teaching, learning, and student achievement. The fear of

making a mistake often results in the stagnation and a lack of innovation. Effective leaders

create an environment that is safe and conducive to innovative teaching and learning. In the end,

the greatest influence that a principal has in improving academic achievement emanates from

their ability to allocate the school's resources and the structuring or organization of the school

Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, & Peetsma, 2012). This ability allows the principal to allocate

resources to the programs and initiatives that best help the school achieve its shared vision and

the principal's priorities. In addition to the focus on innovation and student achievement these

principals have the flexibility and confidence to allow their staff and faculty a great say in the

operation of the school.

The leadership style of the principal has a tremendous impact on the performance of the

school, the teachers, and student achievement (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillo, & Urban, 2011;

Collinson, 2010; Chenoweth, 2010; Forner, Bierlien-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012; Heck, 2013). The

research indicates that many high achieving schools had leadership that allowed teachers a more active role in the decision-making process by creating an open and public debate about the school's/student's needs and inhibitors to student achievement and success (Heck, 1991; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). The free flow of ideas is critical, "…without this free flow of ideas, innovations, and information among individuals and groups in the organization, organizational learning is unlikely to occur" (Collinson & Cook, 2007, p.109). However, in schools where the information is controlled from the top, there is a potential for any unflattering information to be withheld. This style of leadership has had many names, democratic leadership, distributive leadership, and transformational leadership. This style of leadership is most likely to develop or emerge during turbulent and trying times within an organizations. A key component of this style of leadership is developing stakeholder buy-in through a shared decision-making process. This buy-in developed through shared decision-making process increases the likelihood of a successful outcome; all key stakeholders have ownership of the decision and are most likely to work diligently on the implementation of the decision to ensure its success (Brooks, 2014; Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillo, & Urban, 2011; Collinson, 2010; Crowe, 2013; Forner, Bierlien-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012; Leithwood, 2010).

The democratic leadership style has great promise for creating effective schools by delegating more authority to classroom teachers and placing emphasis on cooperation between not only the administrators, staff and faculty, but between the teachers within the school (Bowen, Ware, Rose, & Powers, 2007; Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillo, & Urban, 2011; Griffin & Green, 2012; Heck, 2013; Murley, Keedy, & Welsh, 2008; Leithwood, 2010; Thielman, 2012; Woods & Kensler, 2012). This cooperation also increases the transparency and the avoidance of the perception of secrecy. An honest and open exchange of information and ideas results in a

constructive debate and better decision-making (Collinson, 2010). This climate of transparency and openness prevents a work environment of suspicion, fear, and paranoia, to created positive learning environment, and creates a point that the entire faculty and staff can rally around to ensure high expectations and student achievement (Bass, 1995; Leithwood, 2008). One area of caution: for the school leader, as the interaction between the school's leadership and all the key stakeholders' increases, so does the potential for conflict and disagreements. The most effective leaders must be aware of this potential and be capable of channeling the discussion in a constructive manner (Collinson, 2010).

Teacher Effectiveness and Student Needs

Teachers are an important determining factor of student achievement, second only to the family circumstances (Goldholder & Brewer; Phillips 2010). As Stronge, Ward and Grant (2011) wrote, "The common denominator in school improvement and student success is the teacher" (p. 331). There is research that indicates the socioeconomic level of a student is not as strong a predictor of a student's achievement as the teacher (Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Rivers & Sanders, 2012). Teachers must take responsibility for student learning and achievement, of the "I taught it, but the student didn't do their homework or didn't study enough…" (Thielman, 2013, p.126) is inexcusable and should not be tolerated. About forty percent of the difference in student achievement can be attributed to the school (20%) school leadership and the teacher (20%) (Whitehurst, 2002). The problem is defining teacher effectiveness, as there is little agreement about how to measure teacher effectiveness. One research study identified an effective teacher as one whose students had high academic growth in a single year (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). However, the issue of what academic growth is, how it should be measured and what it means remains an issue of debate. Murnane and Steel

(2007) point out that with the increasing automation of factory and office type jobs, the demand for people with problem solving and critical thinking skills has increased the demands on our educational system. Thus, the issue of how we measure teacher effectiveness also remains an issue that has not as yet been resolved on a national basis. The impact teachers have on student achievement may be mixed in the research, but there is evidence that indicate that the level of education a teacher attains does have a positive effect on their student's achievement. The better educated a teacher is, as measured by their level of degree, and the more years of teaching experience appeared to be tied to an increase in student achievement (Rosa & Hill, 2004). Murnane and Steel (2007), found that there are two factors that predict a teacher's effectiveness in the classroom, their verbal score on the ACT/SAT and the college/university they graduated from with their education degree. In line with this finding there is a connection between the quality of the teacher preparation program a teacher graduates from and their students level of achievement (Wayne & Young, 2003).

Research indicates that effective teachers use a wide variety of instructional methods which include, but are not limited to, direct instruction (Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Allington, Block, & Morrow, 1998; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011), individual instruction (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011; Zahorik, Halbach, Ehrle, & Molnar, 2003), and constructivist methods (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011; Wenglinsky, 2000). These highly effective teachers ensure their students develop the critical thinking, problem solving, and dialectical reasoning skills necessary to be successful in life after graduating from high school, they spend more time teaching and less time on classroom management task (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011).

Effective teachers have and project a genuine concern about their students and their students know and understand this concern. These teachers have higher student achievement

levels than the teachers whom the students do not believe they care about their success in school or after graduation (Collinson, Killeavy, & Stephenson, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hanishek, 1971; Stronge, 2011; Wolk, 2002). These caring and effective teachers create classroom environment that are based on "…respect, fairness, and trust…" (Stronge, 2011, p. 341). Research indicates that these teachers also have fewer discipline issues in their classrooms, they make effective use of their instructional time with few distractions or interruptions, and are perceived, by the students has being fair and respectful. These highly effective teachers establish and reinforce high academic and behavioral standards within their classrooms. They are constantly checking for student understanding throughout their teaching and make adjustments accordingly throughout the process (Stronge, 2011). There is a cumulative impact on achievement for students that have highly effective teachers in consecutive years

Unfortunately, teaching is a seniority-based, bottom-up system allowing the longest and often most effective teachers to avoid teaching the students with the greatest need for the best and most effective teachers. As teachers gain in their seniority often they maneuver themselves into a schedule of the easier to teach higher achieving students or as a reward for being an effective teacher, school leadership often moves these teachers into classes with the better students (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2005). A potential remedy for this flight of effective teachers out of the high-poverty and high-minority schools is the payment of incentives or bonuses to attract the most effective teachers back into these difficult schools. In addition to recruiting high quality teachers, it is important that principals invest the time and resources into developing professionally and creating a positive school climate that values the teachers and students.

Leadership and Teacher Development

At the school level the teacher has the most significant impact on student learning and achievement (Leithwood, 2010). Principals in high-achieving schools often place a greater emphasis on classroom observations and they place a priority on spending time observing in the classroom (Heck, 1991). The research indicates that a key element of highly effective schools is constant and consistent monitoring of the instructional practices and providing timely and constructive feedback to the teachers (Leithwood, 2010). An important outcome of this consistent monitoring of instructional practices is that the school's leadership develops a first-hand understanding of the professional development needs of the faculty. The primary function of a school's leadership is to help improve the teacher's instructional abilities (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Kein, 2012). Thus, it is important that these teacher observations not be seen as punitive or a result of a negative opinion of the teacher's abilities (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillo, & Urban, 2011), but that they are used to look for professional growth and areas of need to ensure the teacher is providing the best teaching to their students. As a part of the observation program within a school, principals encourage their teachers to self-evaluate their teaching to identify areas that they need to improve that may be hindering students from reaching their full potential.

An area that has recently begun to receive more attention is new-teacher orientation to a new school. Often these new teacher orientations are a one-size-fits-all approach to all new teachers to a particular school or school system, whether they are recent graduates or have been teaching for a number of years in another school or system. The highly effective school has developed a system to ensure all new teachers know and understand the curriculum and policies of the particular school (Haynes, l999). Orientating new teachers to the school's mission statement, vision, and policies makes the transition into the school's teaching and learning

52

environment simpler and seamless. One aspect of this transition is the school's curriculum

guide, which should inform the new teachers about what they are expected to teach. These

curriculum guides should be written by a group of teachers that are recognized as master teachers

in their subject area (Haynes, 1999). The key function of an administrator of a highly effective

school, "inspect what you expect."

High performing schools are successful because they are doing the right things, from

"…classroom management to curriculum to assessment, to discipline" (Chenoweth, 2010, p. 17).

These high performing schools have four (4) things in common – achievement is a collective

effort, recruiting is critical, behavior is important, and curriculum is non-negotiable (Brown,

Benkovits, & Urban, 2011). These highly successful schools and leaders establish a high level of

expectations and they demand that everyone – faculty, staff, and students – work to achieve

those expectations, "…high performing schools…had clear, articulated expectations for learning

and improving, invested heavily in professional development, implemented challenging

curriculum, exhibited teacher responsibility for student, and critically examined their practice,

replacing them if they were not working" (Collinson, 2010, p. 207). These schools work to

develop a culture of teaching and learning that improve student achievement. The bottom line is

that for student achievement to improve, there must often be a shift in teaching

practices. Strategies for fostering such instructional change include formal professional

development activities, the engagement of administrators, faculty, and staff in professional

learning communities (Lave & Wenger, 1994; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; Leithwood, 2010),

or other endeavors such as teacher research endeavors or group reading and discussion circles

(Anderson, 2013; Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Wilfong, 2009).

School Climate

Research indicates that schools with a culture of teamwork and cooperation have a greater potential for improvement and innovation (Bryk & Schmeider, 2002; Finnigan & Daly, 2012; Mintrop, 2004; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005; Moolennaar, 2010; O'Day, 2004). School leaders must understand that a school's existing culture, with its established norms and rules, often hinder any effort at change, the attitude of "That's not how we do things" will interfere with a leader's attempt to create change (Bowen, Ware, Rose, & Powers, 2007). The school leader's key role is in creating an environment that is conducive to organizational learning and the leadership style that is most prevalent in in high performing school systems and schools is "…leadership for learning…" (Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2007, p. 179). This spirit of collaboration must extend past the staff and faculty to the students and other key stakeholders.

Students play an important role in the school improvement process and current research indicates that students are paying as much attention to the "…social forces operating in the schools and in the classrooms as they do to skill and knowledge development" (Cooper, 2007, p. 322). Therefore, the level of trust and cooperation between the teachers and student and parents has a significant impact on student achievement and their attendance. Administrators, faculty, staff, and parents must work together and trust that each other is going to do their part in the educational process. This is a critical element to improving student learning and achievement, especially among the most at-risk students within the school (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillo, & Urban, 2011; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Young, 1998). This development of trust has the potential to be "…the number one differentiator between the most and least successful organization…" (Kikoski & Kikoski, 2004, p. 101).

Along with the development of the trust between all of the key stakeholders in a school, seeking to improve student achievement and teacher efficacy is an important element. Successful schools have developed a collective efficacy or have created an environment or culture that ensures the faculty believes that they can make a difference or "…as a whole can organize and execute the actions required to have a positive effect in students" (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006, p. 4). It is critical that the teachers, students, families, and all of the stakeholders believe that they can accomplish the task necessary to ensure improvement in student learning and achievement. The teacher's sense of efficacy is a critical aspect of creating a high performing school.

Organizational Learning Capacity

A major factor in closing the achievement gap and improving student learning and achievement may be the organizations ability to adapt to the needs of the 21st century learners and the highly effective schools do not fail to recognize the need to change and adapt to the students learning needs (Collinson, 2010). A key element in a school's ability to change is the capacity of the organization to learn. Russ-Eft and Preskill (2009) states that the only way an organization can survive the rapid pace of change today is to ensure that members of the organization "…continually learn and share their learnings with others…" (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009, p. 57). The organization's ability or inability to adapt to the changing environment and demands has a direct impact on its success or failure. In our schools, teachers seem resistant to change, school cultures often tend to be recalcitrant in the face of change. To ensure an organization has a capacity for change its leadership must ensure that there is a shared vision and mission for the organization. Additionally, it is critical for the staff and faculty to believe their thoughts and ideas are important, and their voices are heard during the decision-making process

55

The development of organizational learning can be traced back to the 1940s and the work

of Kurt Lewin (Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001). In his article, "Kurt Lewin and the Planned

Approach to Change: A Re-Appraisal" (2004), Burnes states that if the organization does not see

the need for change, change will be difficult to implement and sustain. Lewin's Change Theory

plays a significant role in the creation of sustainable continuous improvement. Lewin's change

theory consisted of unfreezing, moving forward, and refreezing (Burnes, 2004; Schein, 2002;

Weick & Quinn, 1999). Lewin's change theory calls for unfreezing the organization, the

problem here is that people are essentially creatures of habit and they grow comfortable with the

routine within the organization, they know what to expect and what is expected of them, change

is difficult. Unfreezing the organization, according to Lewin's Change Theory, means moving

the members of the organization into what Vygotsky (1978) calls the Zone of Proximal

Development. This means moving the organization out of its current comfort zone and into a

position where they are no longer comfortable in their routines. This theory posits that change

will not occur until people are in their zone of proximal development; this creates their

motivation to learn (Burnes, 2004; Schein, 2002; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Once the organization

has been unfrozen, the learning can occur; however, Lewin cautions that without reinforcement

this learning will be short lived. The reinforcement of this learning results in what Lewin calls

the refreezing or stabilization of the new learning (Burnes, 2004; Schein, 2002; Weick & Quinn,

1999). A major stumbling block for improving student achievement and learning is the

resistance to change present in many struggling schools. Educational leaders need to unfreeze

the school and enable the school learn and improve.

The research of developing a schools capacity for improving is limited (Hollinger &

Heck, 2011; Togneri & Anderson, 2012). Improving schools is not just about making changes

that affect student learning and achievement, but also to ensure sustained improvement of learning for the faculty and staff as well. Developing the institutional capacity to learn is critical for a school to improve teaching, learning, and student achievement. Institutional learning capacity is defined as "…the deliberate use of individual, groups and systems learning to embed new thinking and practices…" Collinson & Cook, 2007, p. 8). Argyris and Schon (1996) defined organizational learning as the "…process of detecting and correcting problems to improve organizational effectiveness" (Finnigan & Daly, 2012, p. 44). These new skills provide a means to achieve the shared vision and mission of the organizations. There are six (6) factors that support organizational learning: learning is a priority for everyone – teachers, students, administrators, and staff; inquiry learning is stressed; the dissemination of the learning; shared responsibilities; developing relationships; and self-fulfillment for all participants (Collinson & Cook, 2007). These are the critical components to making any organization a learning organization. This concept of a learning organization, with its focus on learning, means that learning is not only what the students should be doing, but also the staff and faculty of the school should constantly strive to improve their own learning and knowledge base. To support this organizational learning, the school's leadership must work to create an environment that is supportive for learning throughout the organization.

Throughout much of the history of school improvement, the overarching philosophy for change has been externally driven from the central office or the state and federal governments. This philosophy has led to a lack of innovative action at the school level and has hogtied the school's leadership. This type of approach has a chilling effect on the enthusiasm of the school level faculty and staff. Mitchell and Sackney (2011) found building the school's capacity to learn and improve student learning and achievement includes having the right people

in place, ensuring their professional growth and fostering their interpersonal relationships, and the organizational structure. Unfortunately, in education there seems to be a one-size-fits-all approach to improving educational outcomes. States and school systems tend to create policy that mandates of how all schools should operate within their jurisdiction. King and Bouchard (2011) recommend what they call "…Adhocracies…" (p. 659), or a mix of the bureaucracies of the school system, state and federal government and the school-based learning community. This mix allows the implementation of the best practices as directed from the bureaucracies and allows the school to work collectively to identify the best way to implement the programs. Allowing the school leadership to use their informed professionalism ensures greater input in the decision-making process and the development of the institutional learning capacity of the school. These accountability programs tend to focus on the creation of improvement plans, objectives, goals, and milestones and often ignore the social interactions that are critical for improvement. The social process of developing knowledge is critical for improvement (Finnigan & Daly, 2010).

However, building the learning capacity of a school needs to be differentiated. There are no two school that are exactly alike, and just as students have different learning needs so do each school and system (Stoll, 2009). Institutional learning capacity is critical, to change a school's achievement levels it will require reforming the school and the way it operates. Things will not change if the school's faculty and staff continue to operate in the same manner. "Capacity for change is all about learning" (Stoll, 2009, p. 133). It is important to change the pattern of developing quick fixes and one-size-fits-all solutions to create long lasting improvements in student learning and achievement (Thielman, 2012). As previously noted, principals should focus on developing their teachers through high quality professional development. This

professional development is not only essential in fostering high quality teaching and enhancing

teacher retention, it is an essential step in improving the capacity and operation of the entire

school (King & Bouchard, 2011). Thus, high quality professional development must be tailored

to the needs of the school and its faculty and staff. To be successful this professional

development must have the flexibility to allow the local school to adopt and differentiate the

professional development to fit the local needs and circumstances. The key to institutional

learning is that change must become a "…habit of mind…" (Stoll, 2009, p. 121). For learning to

occur, according to Vygotsky (1978), the learner must be moved into their "Zone of Proximal

Development."

The Zone of Proximal Development is when a student is pulled out of their comfort zone

they will work to adjust, or become comfortable, in their new position (Vygotsky, 1978). The

Zone of Proximal Development is where learning occurs. Vygotsky (1978) also stated that the

social aspect of school is what motivates students to learn.

For organizational learning to occur, according to Finnigan and Daly (2012), the first and

most important step of organizational learning is the identification of the problem or issue. Until

the root cause of a school's failure to achieve at a high level is identified, efforts intended to

improve achievement will remain focused on symptoms of the root cause, learning equals

solving problems. Wen (2014), the critical difference is a learning organization identifies the

issues and establishes a "research team" to identify and research potential solutions, recommend

potential solutions, analyze the feedback, and make adjustments.

Schools that are learning organizations have a process in place that enables the staff and

faculty to not only learn as individuals but also to share and implement, as a group the new

ideas. A key connection for organizational learning is the research that connects organizational

learning with innovations (Chang, Hsiao, & Tu, 2011; Liao & Wu 2010). The existence of organizational learning enabled organizations to adopt innovative techniques to improve teaching, learning, and achievement within the school (Silins, Mulford, & Zarins, 2002). A key aspect of this organizational learning was how the "…capacity for collaborative learning defines the process of organizational learning…" (Silins, Mulford, & Zarins, 2002, p. 202). The school's climate has an impact on its ability to become a learning organization. The climate must be supportive and trusting which is conducive to organizational learning or it may be a toxic and dysfunctional climate, which will inhibit organizational learning. The very hierarchal structure of public schools in the United States results in less innovation, creativity, and out of the box thinking in the classroom (Coleman, 1997).

The benefit of collaborative learning is greater engagement, problem solving, and higher order thinking skills (Stefl-Mabry, Doane, Radlick, & Theroux, 2007). Teachers who work in a learning organization develop their "…critical thinking skills that will facilitate their ability to communicate, collaborate, reflect, and compromise" (Stefl-Mabry, Doane, Radlick, & Theroux, 2007, p. 297). Schools that are operating as a learning organization must have a focus on more than just the learning of their students; they must also tend to the learning of their staff and faculty (Bowen, Ware, Rose, & Powers, 2007). Schools that operate as a learning organization have a high level of collaboration and learning for all. The school's leadership team has a tremendous impact on creating the climate that is conducive to collaboration, learning, and achievement.

Introduction

While a great deal of the issues facing rural schools and their potential solutions are similar to those of the suburban/urban counterparts the circumstances encountered by rural schools are significantly different and therefore the solutions require an innovative and unique approach in these rural communities. Often the elements of rural communities are also the present and potential challenges to establishing a high-achieving school. These strengths and weaknesses include, family ties and obligations and the sense of community. Rural school students are often raised in families that have a high percentage of adults without a high school diploma and unemployed or under-employed. These students often lack the parental role model that stress the importance of obtaining their education and the prospect for a high quality job in their community is extremely limited. Additionally, many rural students are forced to place their educational goals and aspirations on hold to enable them to help support the family either by obtaining a low-skill job or working on the family farm. Aside from the family circumstances the very nature of the rural community can hinder the educational opportunities for rural students.

The nature of the rural community its potential for isolation and low density housing complicates the delivery of educational services for many rural students and is something that suburban/urban schools typically do not face. For many rural students, the school can be a great distance away from their home requiring extended bus rides in excess of one-hour each way to school. In communities where poverty is high, this distance can prevent the student from staying after school for additional instruction, tutoring, and extra-curricular activities due to parents' inability to afford the additional cost of transporting them home from school after the bus has

run. Additionally, many rural school children's parents work in the distance industrial

suburban/urban areas resulting in long commutes. The poverty and work schedules of many

rural parents prevent them from participating in normally scheduled school activities which

increases the pressure on the school to accommodate the unique needs and circumstances of the

rural families, students, and community. These rural school often serve as the central focus of

the community; they are much more than just a place to educate children.

The schools in these rural remote communities are often the center of community life and

they are often the primary employer. This places the school in a unique position to influence the

direction of the community and provide a guiding light to a brighter future. It is extremely

critical that these rural schools accommodate the needs of the community and parents to enable

them to participate in their children's education. This is accomplished through scheduling school

functions in a manner that enables the greatest participation possible, offering adult education

classes, and providing transportation for after-school activities and school functions. The very

nature of the rural community is also an issue in the recruitment and retention of high quality

administrators, faculty, and staff. The lack of adequate housing and quality jobs for spouses

results in long commutes for faculty and staff, increasing the length of their workday, and

decreasing their willingness to remain at school to provide the support and services necessary for

the school community. The combination of high poverty and remote location of many rural

community's increases the pressure of the schools and result in limited resources to meet the

needs of the school students.

The increasing level of poverty, higher minority populations, falling property values, and

limited industrial development or commercial business results in limited resources to meet the

educational needs of the students, their families, and the community. As the needs of these rural

school student is increasing and tax base necessary to support their education is decreasing. Rural school spend a much larger percentage of their resources providing transportation to and from school for their students. Aside from the public monies to support schools, the rural schools' high poverty and high minority populations makes it more difficult for schools to raise revenues through school fundraisers. A large percentage of many high schools' discretionary revenue comes from the money students spend during the mid-morning breaks. In high poverty schools, this account is limited which limits the ability of the school to support student learning and achievement. Coupled with these local issues for rural schools are the perceptions of many non-rural decision-makers and the population in general.

Many people have the perception or belief that rural equals backward or ignorant (Howley, 2001). Adding to this general perception about rural communities and schools in many high poverty, high minority rural communities is a prevailing attitude of apathy and failure in both the community and school (Maxwell, Huggins, & Scheurich, 2010; Theobald & Wood, 2010; Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014). There is no monolithic or typical rural community; this complicates the study of rural schools and student achievement. There is great diversity of the rural population in the United States (Coladarci, 2007; Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012; Johnson & Strange, 2007; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Singh & Dika, 2003). However, one critical fact that is typically true of most rural communities and schools is that the school tends to be the "hub" of the community (Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009; Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014).

One critical aspect of high-performing rural schools is community and parental involvement over a sustained period of time. This community and parental involvement includes participation in the decision-making and sharing of accountability for the educational outcomes

of both the students and schools (Williams & King, 2002). There is no doubt that parental involvement has a positive impact on their students' educational outcomes and achievement (Jeynes, 2011; Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014). However, a major issue facing rural schools is the lack of critical parental involvement, which can lead to weak student motivation and poor attendance (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014). This lack of parental involvement is not always a result of parental apathy, but often the result of job conflicts, work hours, transportation issues, embarrassment of parental illiteracy or educational level, or an outright lack of valuing education (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014; Williams & King, 2002). A major cause of this lack of parental involvement is the vast geographical area that many rural school serve (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, (2014). This results in a more difficult time commuting to the rural schools, increasing the expense of parental involvement and making extra-curricular activities all but impossible for many rural students.

Present and Potential Challenges to High Quality Rural Education

The rural stereotype, societal challenges, and the persistent lack of resources have left the rural communities and parents with a feeling of outright abandonment (Maxwell, Huggins, & Scheurich, 2010). The problem is the present and potential challenges to rural education vary widely for rural students (Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012). The needs of rural schools and their students can even vary widely within a single school district (Arnold, 2000). The very nature of rural school districts, with their small student bodies, can result in a large swing in student achievement measures (Coladarci, 2007; Horst & Martin, 2007). The solutions to fixing the unique problems in rural schools necessitate individualized school responses. Williams and King (2002) identified six (6) critical challenges facing rural schools.

They include a shortage of highly qualified teachers and administrators, a lack of community and parental involvement, quality and focused professional development, low expectations, resistance to change, and a failure to prepare students for the twenty-first (21st) century.

In comparison to urban schools, rural schools, on average, have higher levels of students living in poverty (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004). This poverty in rural areas of the United States tends to be persistent and intergenerational (Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012; Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Rural schools are becoming much more diverse with more students living in poverty, as defined as receiving free or reduced price lunch, and higher levels of minority students (Harmon, 2001; Howley, Theobald, & Howley, 2005; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Starr & White, 2008). Rural areas in the United States are becoming places with higher levels of poverty, limited opportunities, and providing limited or no benefit for individuals obtaining an education or vocational training (Harmon, 2001). In addition to increasing poverty and minority students, rural districts are experiencing an increasing number of students requiring special education services. A final demographic reality for many rural communities and schools is the transient nature of the rural population. The transient agricultural rural families result in a significant interruption of the education of their children and result in a lower level of achievement for the student (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014; Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Kein, 2012).

The changing demographics of the student population of rural schools has resulted in significant funding issues. Rural schools lack adequate funding and often have a weak tax base (Harmon, 2001). The increasing level of poverty has resulted in lower property values, fewer businesses, and industrial development, resulting in a lower level of local funding for rural

schools. The reduced funding restricts the school's ability to address the educational issues associated with increased poverty (Strange, 2011; Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Kein, 2012).

An additional revenue issue for many rural communities and schools is the tax exemption for many farms and timberlands which further reduces the funding for schools (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Kein, 2012). These funding issues have also resulted in rural teaching salaries to be, on average, twenty-one percent (21%) lower for first year teachers and about thirty-five percent (35%) lower for teachers with a master's degree and twenty (20) or more years of teaching experience (Griffin & Green, 2012). To help rural schools meet the challenges they face, a Government Accounting Office Report recommended that the United States Department of Education provide targeted assistance to rural schools that will help them meet the unique challenges they face (Arnold, 2005; Government Accountability Office, 2004).

The decision-makers often ignore or leave out the input of rural schools during the discourse about education issues and reform in the United States (Williams & King, 2002). Often the solutions to educational problems are approached in a one-size-fits all, and this approach does not work with rural schools due their diversity and differing needs (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Howley, 2001; Starr & White, 2008). Many scholars make the assumption that they know what the "best practices" are and that they are the same everywhere (Howley, 2001). The United States Department of Education continues, "…Talking about rural communities as small cities…" (Arnold, 2005, p. 3), this philosophy forces the rural schools to implement policies and reforms that were developed for suburban/urban schools. The generalizability of studies conducted in suburban/urban schools to rural schools is difficult (Hardre` & Sullivan, 2008). The United States Department of Education tends to fund programs designed to help rural schools solve issues that are unique to rural schools that in reality are

appropriate to solving issues and problems at suburban/urban schools as well (Arnold, 2005). In addition to the externally driven issues facing rural schools, there are a host of concerns from within the rural school building.

Student disengagement is strongest in the rural schools. To counter this student disengagement it is important that school hire teachers that are capable of relating to the unique cultural of rural communities, this is critical to school and student success (Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009; Washor & Mojkowski, 2014). One of the essential skills that teachers in rural schools must develop is the ability to conduct action research to enable them to develop new approaches to their teaching and student learning (Lambertson, 2014). Additionally, for rural schools and teachers to be successful in increasing their students' achievement, they must develop the ability to teach across the curriculum. This is often difficult because rural schools, for a variety of reasons, tend to have younger and less experienced teachers (Gibbs, 2000). These rural schools have a high turnover rate of their better, more experienced teachers for a multitude of reasons, including "…social and cultural isolation, poor pay, …limited mobility, …lack of personal privacy…" (Harmon, 2001, p. 10). Many rural school systems have developed a policy of growing their own, developing programs and partnerships with universities and colleges to help local students obtain a teaching certificate and coming home to teach (Farmer, et al., 2006; Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014).

Successful Rural High Schools

While the vast majority of educational studies focus on suburban/urban schools, the available studies on what makes rural high schools successful have identified several common traits. The creation of a culture of high expectations (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004; Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009; Chance & Sequra, 2009), including the community and parents (Bottoms,

Presson, & Han, 2004; Chance & Sequra, 2009), a focus on the importance of high school (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004), rigorous and focused professional development (Chance & Sequra, 2009; Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005), and high quality teachers, and school culture have a significant impact on the success of rural schools and rural student achievement (Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005). The most often implemented improvement strategy of successful rural schools is increased learning time, the use of professional learning communities for professional development, and an increase in the use of instructional technology (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014). Along with these findings, strong leadership, supporting teacher quality and developing supportive policies for the school, is important for creating successful rural schools (Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005). In addition to strong school-level leadership, a critical element to the transformation of a rural school is the support of the central office leadership of the school's improvement efforts (Chance & Sequra, 2009). As a part of transforming a school, the leadership must be mindful that change, even change that is slow and deliberate, can upset the dynamics and culture of the school (Chance & Sequra, 2009). Finally, a critical, but often overlooked element of high-performing high schools is a well prepared student starting with the elementary school (Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005). There is a prevailing belief that rural students are not as well prepared as their suburban/urban counterparts (Gibbs, 2000). The key challenge for rural high schools is to maintain the benefits of being a small rural community while improving the student's education and abilities to compete for the high-tech high-skilled employment or college (Gibbs, 2000).

High Expectations

The major obstacle the high-performing rural high school had was the prevailing philosophy or belief that every child has the ability to learn and the sky is the limit for all students (Carter, 2012). When the teachers established high expectations and communicated them to the students, students were more focused on their school work and student achievement increased (Chance & Sequra, 2009). Within these high achieving rural schools, there was a great deal of excitement or academic optimism (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006; Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014). In addition, establishing high expectations, rigorous goals, and a belief that all students within the school could meet the challenge and be successful is critical to creating a successful school (Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014). The schools that were successful focused on changing student attitudes and developing the student's self-confidence and esteem. These schools had to change the prevailing sense of helplessness in their students (Hughes, 1999). As a part of these high expectations, highly successful schools reported that teachers required three (3) or more writing assignments each month and many emphasized reading and writing across the curriculum (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004). Bottoms, Presson, and Han (2004) found that eleven (11) of the twelve (12) schools in their study had established graduation requirements that were higher than the states requirements. Before a school can become high achieving, they must overcome the attitude of low expectations for achievement by the school, teachers, parents, community, and students (Williams & King, 2002).

The early studies of high performing, high needs schools identified that content standards that are aligned with the curriculum, teaching strategies, professional development and assessment programs (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005; The Charles A. Dana Center, 1999; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). More recently

the use of data-driven decision-making is seen as critical to creating high performing schools

when combined with rigor, high expectations and high quality teachers (Barley & Beesley, 2007;

Kannapel, Clements, Taylor, & Hibpshman, 2005). In addition to the high standards, there must

be high quality instructional leadership with a focus on the standards and expectations

(Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty,

2003). To ensure that the students were successful in this environment of high expectations and

rigor, schools implemented strategies such as creating an eight (8) period day, those who were

passing their classes and state assessment went home after the seventh (7th) period, while those

struggling had to stay for the eighth (8th) period for focused assistance (Maxwell, Huggins, &

Scheurich, 2010). Adding electives that were of interest to the students, the idea was to have the

students develop interest in learning in general (Chance & Sequra, 2009). Still others added

additional Advanced Placement and college credit courses (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Wilcox,

Angelis, Baker, and Lawson (2014) found that if the course work is perceived to be relevant to

the student's personal and educational goals, they are more likely to be interested and engage in

the work. Bottoms, Presson and Ham (2004) found that schools established a mandatory help

policy for struggling students, even if it meant that the student had to miss an elective class. The

creation of a freshmen transition program was a critical component of many successful rural high

schools. This transition program was designed to help freshman adjust to the challenge of high

school (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004; Chance & Sequra, 2009). Early intervention during

high school is critical and the intervention must be targeted and focused on the individual need of

the student (Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012).

    To many rural students, success is about more than high grades or test scores; it is about

becoming a successful and productive adult (Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014). As a

70

part of making the students productive adults, schools have created work-based learning experiences. These community-based learning experiences are an integral part of the school's curriculum (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004; Washor & Mojkowski, 2014). Many of the high-performing high schools required students to develop an academic and career/work plan (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004; Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014). These plans included milestones, objectives, and goals (Williams & King, 2002).

Parental/Community Involvement

The key to building a successful school and the development of a supportive community and parental involvement is to communicate, communicate, communicate (Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009). Williams and King (2002), found that "…schools are microcosms of their communities…" (p. 19) and Former Secretary of Education Richard Riley stated that rural schools should lead the way in making the school the center of the community (Harmon, 2001) because if the schools and community are not working together as a team "…both school and education suffers" (Howley, 2001). It is important that the principals in these rural communities are stable and they collaborate with not only the parents, but also the community in general to ensure they create and maintain a high-performing school (Fusarelli & Militello, 2012; Kaplan, Owings, & Nunnery, 2005; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). A key to changing the attitude of apathy and failure is to meet and talk with the community (Maxwell, Huggins, & Scheurich, 2010). It is not only important for the principal to involve the community in the school, but to also participate in the community outside the normal school related activities to build trust and productive relationships (Carter, 2012).

Close working relationships with the community in general was critical to the success of rural schools (Agbo, 2007; Barley & Beesley, 2007; D'Amico & Nelson, 2000; Semke &

71

Sheridan, 2012). Meyer and Mann (2006) found that home visit programs helped improve communications and relationships between parents and the school. In creating these positive relationship, it helps the family make connections to the school and results in potentially having a positive impact not only for the student, but also the school (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). The successful rural schools developed relationships with the community and enlisted their support to improve teaching, learning and student achievement, it is all about the interaction (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Howley, 2001). When the teachers and parents work to create an atmosphere of caring and support, it creates the trust that is necessary to transform schools. Building the trust is more about parental support then it is about involvement (Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009). Carter, Lee, and Sweatt (2009) caution that community involvement can vary widely; one-size-does-not-fit-all. Irvin (2012) found that parental educational level is the single most important factor in the student's educational goals and aspirations. There is a direct connection between the parent's ideas and attitudes about education and their student's level of achievement (Farmer, et al., 2006; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005; Semke & Sheridan, 2012). To help change parental attitude and beliefs about education, rural schools often provide adult literacy and education classes as a mechanism to alter the parent's attitude and increase their ability to help educate their children (Williams & King, 2002). Rural schools often provide services that are not part of the traditional educational services many associate with schools (National Education Association, 2008; Semke & Sheridan, 2012).

Teacher Quality and Efficacy

As previously noted, the most important element separating high and low performing schools are teachers who are focused on student learning, achievement, and needs (Akiba & Anthorp, 2003; Lauer, 2001; Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning,

72

2005). Successful school leaders of high-performing schools have a significant impact on

student learning and achievement through the recruiting of quality teachers and creating a school

culture and climate that embraces high expectations for students and teachers alike (Cheny &

Davis, 2011; Fusarelli & Militello, 2012; Young, Crow, Orr, Ogawa, & Creighton, 2005). High

teacher retention rates are important to enable change efforts to take effect and have an impact on

student learning and achievement (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004).

The recruitment and retention of quality teachers is a significant issue for rural schools,

not only do rural districts have a difficult time recruiting teachers, but also in retaining them

(Harmon, 2001; Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Kein, 2012). The issues in teacher recruitment

and retention in rural school districts are the commuting distance, no job available for their

spouse, low pay, social and geographical isolation and a lack of adequate housing (Gibbs, 2000;

Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014). An additional stressor on recruiting and

retaining quality teachers is the probability that a rural teacher is going to be teaching out of area

or having multiple preparations for their teaching schedule (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, &

Rosenthal, 2014). An essential aspect of increasing teacher retention rates and student

achievement is teacher efficacy. Hardre` and Sullivan (2008) found that teachers' attitude and

outlook had a greater impact on student's attitudes then did their peers. Hughes (1999) found

that in high achieving schools, faculty and staff enjoyed being at their school and teaching their

children; they did not want to leave. Teachers in high-performing schools had a more positive

attitude about their school, its leadership and the students (Mid-Continent Research for

Education and Learning, 2005). The schools that had low teacher efficacy were typically low

achieving (Chance & Sequra, 2009; Lambertson, 2014). In the rural schools with high teacher

efficacy, the teachers report feeling more empowered to innovate and take risks, as well as a feeling that they were valued and appreciated (Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014).

Professional Development and Professional Learning Communities

School leaders focusing all their attention on student learning and achievement and ignoring the teachers' learning needs is tantamount to treating the symptom and not the root cause of the problem (Woolley, 2006). High achieving schools have a professional development program that is designed to focus on learning that supports the school improvement goals, objectives, and milestones. Professional development is the key to turning a school into a learning organization, and the goal of any reform program is the identification of poor or ineffective teaching practices and replacing them with quality, research-based strategies that will address the needs of the student population of the school (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). To accomplish this task, it is important that schools create "high-quality, locally relevant professional development…" (Williams & King, 2002, p. 23).

Effective professional development plans are aligned with the school's improvement plan, and are created through collaboration and shared responsibility; it is the key to teacher buy-in and the heart of the process (Chance & Sequra, 2009; Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014; Williams & King, 2002). Highly effective schools have a high level of collaboration in the development of their professional development plans, and school leadership must bring the faculty into the decision-making process, in a collaborative discussion to identify professional development needs and a course of action (Bruner & Greenlee, 2000; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005). High quality professional development must be tailored to the needs of the school. For professional development to be successful it must be differentiated to the needs, circumstances, and

experiences levels of the participants (Klein & Riordan, 2009). Ball and Cohen (1999) stressed the importance of professional development to be developmental as opposed to a one-size-fits-all program that gives credit for seat time and not the actual learning. Professional development is most effective when it occurs in quality professional learning communities (Moore, Kochan, Kraska, & Reames, 2011).

It is important for teachers to be seen as an integral part of the process of developing the school professional development plans. Professional learning communities are an effective method of providing professional development, allowing teachers to collaborate and learn to become more effective teachers (Chance & Sequra, 2009; Lambertson, 2014). These professional learning communities are a key method of improving student achievement and to transform the culture of a school; however, leadership must be aware that it is difficult to sustain the collaboration over the long-term necessary to create transformative change (Maxwell, Huggins, & Scheurich, 2010). It is important to ensure that the collaboration is not simply between teachers at the same school but also between schools, with colleges and universities, and even across state and international boundaries (Starr & White, 2008).

While many school systems and schools have invested heavily in professional development as a method to ensure that the schools' vision and teaching are aligned, there is little evidence that professional development has any lasting impact on teaching, learning, and student achievement within a school. A teacher's core beliefs about control of their learning and teaching in the classroom has an impact on the implementation of any professional development they receive. A learning organization understands that after the excitement of professional development wears off, the school must work to ensure the learning continues to be implemented in the classroom (Klein & Riordan, 2009). The research does indicate that often teachers will

75

modify their teaching practices to fit some of the new ideas into their current practices (Klein & Riordan, 2009). Teachers cherry pick the parts of the professional development that fit comfortably into their current teaching strategies. This incremental approach to changing teaching methods and strategies results in the least disruption to the teacher's comfort zone.

The professional development programs that seems to have a lasting impact on teaching and learning include, "…coaching, training, extended time devoted to learning new content and pedagogy and the opportunity for reflection with peers" (Klein & Riordan, 2009, p. 62). A critical aspect of this learning is the reflection and debriefing process that enables the learner to transfer the new knowledge (Klein & Riordan, 2009). The professional development that allows the participants to actually do the activity has a greater probability of making it into the classroom as a learning activity for the students (Klein & Riordan, 2009).

When working to create a highly effective school, the school's ability to problem solve and create organizational change is important. Using the principles of action research or collective inquiry to solve the achievement issues of the school. It is important that the professional learning communities in schools focus their action research on the identification of the problem, potential solutions, and a feedback loop on the effectiveness of the solutions to allow the professional learning community the ability to modify, abandon or maintain the solution they developed. "In today's high-speed unpredictable environment, learning and inquiry are considered a necessity for an organization if they hope to improve, innovate, and react flexibly to changing conditions" (Collinson, 2010. p. 206). Finally, for the staff and faculty to be willing to be innovative and work to improve their teaching, the administrators must develop a no harm, no foul, and no blame policy (Leithwood, 2010). Leadership must expect some failure in any attempt to change or improve their schools. This no blame policy is

necessary to ensure that there is a continuous effort to improve student learning and achievement (Leithwood, 2008).

School Climate

There is evidence to support the idea that school climate has a greater impact on student engagement and achievement than do a student's parents or peers (Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010; Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014). The development of a positive and supportive school climate is a strategy to retain teachers in rural schools and to increase the public perception of teacher efforts and their success (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014). The leadership of high-performing schools "…works to change the culture from isolation to collaboration [and support]" (Lambertson, 2014, p. 43). The high-performing school has a pervasive culture of looking out for each other and the elimination of isolationism in the classroom (Chance & Sequra, 2009).

In these high-performing rural schools, there is a pervasive attitude that the school should help students create the social capital or develop relationships with positive role models to help guide and support the student in their education and employment decision-making (Farmer, et al., 2006; McGrath, Swisher, Elder, & Conger; Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014). It is the norm for teachers in these high-performing schools to make the time to meet to discuss the progress of at-risk students and to offer tutoring and help before and after school, as well as during lunch (Chance & Sequra, 2009; Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014).

As a part of a supportive school climate, the principal and leadership team must be seen as instructional leaders and create a supportive collaborative climate within the school with a focus on student learning and achievement (Chance & Sequra, 2009; Starr & White, 2008). A significant tool in creating this collaborative environment and a positive school climate is a

leadership team that is open to new ideas, change, teacher innovation, and collaboration in most decision-making (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Chance & Sequra, 2009).

Small School Research

In the early 1990s, the federal government implemented the small learning communities program as a reform initiative to improve student achievement, outcomes, and to help close the achievement gap (Kuo, 2010). This initiative gained steam in the early part of the new millennium when the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation began to pour one billion dollars into small schools research (Gates Foundation, 2008). While the results of the small schools research is mixed, there are indications that smaller schools have high graduation rates, are safer campuses, and have a higher sense of school spirit (Chen, 2008; Gardner, Riblatt, & Beatty, 2000; Levine, 2010; Werblow & Duesbert, 2009).

Much like the issue with defining what a rural school is, there is little agreement concerning the definition of a "small school" or the ideal size of a school (Page, Layzer, Schimmenti, Bernstein, & Horst, 2002). Additionally, most of the available research fails to identify the actual size of the school in their studies. In states such as Wyoming and Montana the perception of small and large schools is very different than in say New York or New Jersey (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Page, Layzer, Schimmenti, Bernstein, & Horst, 2002). This makes it very difficult to zero in on the benefits of "small schools".

Slotta and Fernandez (2011) described a major feature of small schools as a "…learning community where teachers, administrators, students, and parents support common and specific learning objectives" (p. 94). In these small schools, teachers tend to have a higher number of classes to prepare lessons for and experience a greater demand on their time for "…advising, grading, advocating, and facilitating …" (Viadero, 2001, p. 268) than do teachers in the larger

78

comprehensive high schools. While there is a greater demand on the time and talents of staff and faculty in small schools, the greatest benefit of small schools is the increased time the staff and faculty have to participate in individual conversations, developing a greater understanding of their students' strengths and weaknesses, and developing productive relationships with parents and families (Ravitz, 2010). The ability of the staff and faculty to develop this greater understanding of the student and their family results in an increase in the students' learning and achievement. Levine (2010) urges the staff and faculty of these small schools to take advantage of the increased understanding of the students and focus on improving instructional delivery to meet the educational needs of the students and the community. Additionally, this more intimate relationship and understanding of the students and their families have resulted in an increase in student engagement, community involvement, more collaboration, and a narrowing of the achievement gap (Lehman & Berghoff, 2013).

Lehman and Berghoff (2013) caution teachers and administrators that simply being a small school does not ensure increased student achievement and improved outcomes. Key requirements to create a successful small school include a creation of a shared vision, curriculum goals, and the establishment of high expectations. These successful small schools have developed a transparent and inclusive policy and decision-making environment that include not only the staff and faculty but also parents and the community as well. It is about empowering staff and faculty to be innovative without fear of retribution if they fail (Wallach, 2010). Finally, Levine (2010) warns that the benefits of small schools can be mitigated by external mandates.

Small Rural Schools

Ravitz (2010) stated, "…rural schools represent a distinct population of small schools" (p. 296). Often these small rural schools are the heart of their communities, providing space to

79

hold community meetings, providing entertainment, and are often the largest single employer within the community. These rural schools and communities have unique characteristics that include a cohesiveness that does not exist in suburban/urban schools and communities (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Parker, 2001). These small rural schools become the heart of the community and are the foundation of local life and culture. The school is more than just a place for students to learn and the unique characteristics of these school have an impact on student achievement and outcomes.

These small rural schools have a higher rate of participation in leadership and extracurricular activities. This is a result of the need for a larger percentage of students to participate, to enable the school to field sports teams, bands, and other extracurricular activities (Parker, 2001). The close knit nature and strong sense of community encourages greater participation of the parents and community as well (Parker, 2001; Stewart, 2009). This greater participation in sports, extracurricular activities, and school leadership creates a greater level of school spirit and pride which results in students feeling a greater level of satisfaction. It is believed that this greater satisfaction and school spirit leads to greater student engagement and achievement (Darling-Hammond, Ross, & Milliken, 2006; Lehman & Berghoff, 2013; Page, Layzer, Schimmenti, Bernstein, & Horst, 2002).

Achievement in Small Schools

Just being a small school does not in and of itself ensure improved student achievement and better outcomes. Wallach (2010) found that the critical factor to ensure improved student achievement and outcomes was the quality of the student/teacher relationships along with the greater opportunity for small schools to meet the learning needs of their students. However, it is important to understand that there is no recipe that will create a successful school and high

student achievement (Darling-Hammond, Ross, & Milliken, 2006). What is known about creating a successful small school is breaking the old patterns of the factory model school with its impersonal "…fragmented curricula, segregated and unequal program options and inability to respond effectively to student needs" (Darling-Hammond, Ross, & Milliken, 2006, p. 163).

The research on small schools indicates that these small schools provide students with an environment that encourages students and teachers to develop an understanding of the needs of each student and develop a strong almost family type relationship with their students, parents, and the community (Armstead, Bessett, Sembiante, & Plaza, 2010; Ayers, 2000; Kuo, 2010; Phillippo, 2010; Ravitz, 2010; Wallach, 2010). The advantage of this type of student/teacher relationship is the ability of the teacher to know the strengths and weaknesses of their students, to individualize student learning, and adopt teaching methods/strategies that best meet the needs of their students. This more intimate knowledge of students' strengths, weaknesses, and needs combined with improved teaching methods and strategies serves to improve student engagement, lower drop-out rates, improve attendance and graduation rates, while reducing student behavior disruptions, and improving the students feeling of individual worth (Kuo, 2010; Page, Layzer, Schimmenti, Bernstein, & Horst, 2002; Phillippo, 2010; Wallach, 2010).

While many large high schools operate with very formal and rigid operating structures and rules that help create a sense of alienation for the students, small schools must break this trend and the culture of teacher independence and autonomy in the classroom. Small schools, with their more intimate setting and relationships, tend to have a more collaborative environment and sharing culture. These teachers and administrators are more likely to participate in quality professional development, have a collaborative culture, participate in shared decision-making, and have a greater level of satisfaction with their work environment (Darling-Hammond, Ross,

81

& Milliken, 2006; Page, Layzer, Schimmenti, Bernstein, & Horst, 2002; Wallach, 2010). This translates into high student achievement and satisfaction, lower drop-out rates and better attendance (Darling-Hammond, Ross, & Milliken, 2006; Lehman & Berghoff, 2013; Page, Layzer, Schimmenti, Bernstein, & Horst, 2002).

Socio-Economic, At-Risk, and Minority Status Factors

Research indicates that the larger high schools have a negative impact on the learning and achievement of low socio-economic students, at-risk students, and students of color (Darling-Hammond, Ross, & Milliken, 2006; Page, Layzer, Schimmenti, Bernstein, & Horst, 2002). While small schools, in general, have higher student achievement than do large schools, Stewart (2009) found that small schools were often successful in mitigating the effects of low socio-economic, at-risk, and minority status on student learning and achievement. However, Stewart (2009) also found that higher socio-economic students tended to have higher achievement in the larger schools. These low socio-economic students, at-risk students, and students of color were more likely to work, participate, and succeed in these smaller school environments (Stewart, 2009). It is clear that there is no one panacea or one-size-fits all solution to the optimal size of a student body.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

</div>

As stated earlier, it is not simply a function of school size that determines the quality of the education a student will receive or the outcomes the school will produce. A critical aspect of a successful small school is its organizational structure. Research has proven time after time that two schools of the same size and having the same demographics but have a different organizational structure can have very different student achievement and outcomes (Schneider, Wyse, & Keesler, 2006). There is no optimal school size, the size of a school is dependent on

the needs of the community and the student it serves, with rural areas having more small schools

than suburban/urban areas (Darling-Hammond, Ross, & Milliken, 2006; Dee, Ha, & Jacob,

2006). What is clear from the research, the organizational structure of a school has a significant

impact on its effectiveness and its student achievement. Successful schools have a "…track

record of innovation, responsiveness, and adaptiveness" (Halsey, 2011, p. 7). These schools

have a unique separation and autonomy from other schools and the central office to make the

decisions and have the flexibility necessary to implement their shared vision and create the

environment necessary to ensure student achievement and success (Feldman & O'Dwyer, 2010;

Wallach, 2010). A final thought from the research is many believed that larger high schools

were more cost effective in the per student cost to educate students with their economy of scale;

however, when the per graduate cost is calculated, small schools tend to be more cost effective

with their higher graduation rates and lower drop-out rates (Kuo, 2010; Loveless & Hess, 2006;

Page, Layzer, Schimmenti, Bernstein, & Horst, 2002).

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

"…an intimate portrait of even one school would tell us a lot about the reality of public education" (Walcott, 1973, p. ix).

Introduction

In Alabama, approximately forty-two percent of all school students are attending a school designated as rural (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). An analysis of the National Center for Education Statistics database for Alabama for the school year 2003–2004 identifies two-hundred-thirty-four (234) schools as rural. Of these, twelve (12) have been classified as high-poverty, high-minority, and high achieving rural high schools.

There are numerous studies that suggest what it takes for a school to be successful, many of which were not necessarily conducted at schools that were high-achieving. While some examined high achieving, high poverty, minority schools, the majority of these studies have been conducted at urban/suburban schools. Additionally, most of these studies examined these issues in elementary or middle schools. Much of the research investigated programs, policies, curriculum, leadership styles, and few asked the key stakeholders why they believed their schools were successful or what present and potential challenges they perceived hindered their ability to improve student achievement.

Current rural school research discusses the disparity in urban/suburban and rural schools research (Arnold, 2005; Hardre` & Sullivan, 2008; Harmon, 2001; Howley, Howley, & Yahn,

2014; Starr & White, 2008; Williams & King, 2002). Further, most rural school research is conducted as if there was a well-accepted monolithic definition of a rural school. This is not the reality. In fact, the National Center for Educational Statistics in 2006, working with the United States Census Bureau, changed the school identification locale codes to an urban centric system. The locale codes for rural schools include locale code 41 – rural fringe which is defined as five (5) miles or less from an urban area, locale code 42 – rural distant which is defined as between five (5) and twenty-five (25) miles from an urban area, and locale code 43 – rural remote which is greater than twenty-five (25) miles from an urban area.

Many high-minority and high-poverty rural high schools in the nation and in Alabama, are being successful, yet there is limited research into why or how they have overcome the odds to create a high-achieving school. This study examined that issue.

Research Design

The goal of this research was to develop a better understanding of high-achieving, high poverty, and high-minority rural high schools in Alabama. This study used a qualitative approach to examining the issue because it appeared to be the most relevant approach. Qualitative research is used when the researcher is interested in the process or context of the phenomena rather than a generalization about the phenomena (Chikada, 2011; Yusuke, 2013). The study used a multiple case study design as it was believed that it would enable the researcher to develop insight and understanding into why these high-achieving, high-poverty, high-minority rural high schools in Alabama have increased student achievement in the face of the present and potential challenges to success that so many other similar schools failed to overcome.

A case study methodology allows a large amount of contextually sensitive data to be collected and analyzed during this investigation. This method enabled the researcher to collect

an extremely wide range of data allowing for in-depth lived experiences of the key stakeholders (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014) and enabled the researcher to conduct a cross-case analysis to identify where the cases intersected and how each was unique. The descriptive and exploratory nature of the case study enabled the researcher to identify the differences in the key stakeholder's perceptions and the findings of the available research.

The use of a case study methodology supports a deeper and more detailed study into the phenomena than is possible with other research methods (Creswell, 2007; Rowley, 2002). Merriam (1998) wrote, "…research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspective of those being studied offers the greatest promise for making significant contributions…" (p. 1). As an exploratory case study it is believed that it will help "…gain novel and fresh slants on things about which quite a bit is already known" (Roberts, 2010, p. 143). The multiple case study approach enables the researcher to study several cases with the intention of developing a better understanding or insight into a phenomenon and to enable the researcher to replicate or contrast the findings of the individual cases (Berg & Lune, 2010; Stake, 1999, 2004, 2006; Yin, 2014). The benefit of using a multiple case study approach is the increased strength of the results obtained (Yin, 2014), the increased ability to make inferences from the results of the research, and the increased validity that results from multiple case studies provide (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) adds that multiple case studies help create a more compelling narrative. Stake (2006) recommends the researcher select cases that will best help the researcher understand the phenomenon and that will provide balance and variety.

The three (3) individual cases that made up this multiple case study include high-functioning, high-poverty, and high-minority rural high schools in Alabama. Each of the schools are from a different classification of "rural" as outlined by the locale codes from the National

Center for Educational Statics (2006); rural fringe, rural distant, and rural remote. The multiple case study approach enabled the researcher to study the individual cases to determine the key stakeholder's perceptions of the elements of the school's success and the impact of potential present and potential challenges to that success. This study is designed to identify if the perceptions of stakeholders about high achievement in rural schools are consistent across these three (3) types of schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate what the key stakeholders perceived as the factors that made high achieving, high-poverty, high minority rural high schools successful and the present and potential challenges to that success. A secondary purpose was to determine if these perceptions differed across three rural school types: fringe, distant, and remote.

Population and Sample

Criterion sampling (Patton, 2001) was used to select the schools that met the criteria for a high-achieving, high poverty, and high-minority rural high school in Alabama. There was a three step process used to identify the schools that were high-poverty, high minority, and high-achieving. All schools in Alabama with a locale code of 41, rural fringe; 42, rural distant; or 43, rural remote, with a grade population that included students in grades 7–12, as identified by the National Center for Educational Statistics, comprised the initial population. In Alabama there are a total of two-hundred and thirty-four (234) schools identified by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2006) as rural schools, either rural fringe, distant, or remote.

Once these two-hundred and thirty-four (234) schools were identified, the researcher eliminated all the schools that did not have a free/reduced price lunch population of at least sixty-five percent (65%). The sixty-five percent (65%) or higher poverty level was selected to ensure

that the top third (1/3) level of poverty were included in the study. This resulted in potential pool of fifty-six (56) schools. Once the schools meeting the high-poverty standard were identified, the researcher identified the schools with a minority population exceeding sixty-five percent (65%) of the student population. The sixty-five percent (65%) or higher minority enrollment was selected to ensure that the top third (1/3) level of minority students were included in the study; this further reduced the potential pool to sixteen (16) schools. All schools failing to meet this threshold were eliminated. Finally, all schools failing to meet one-hundred percent (100%) of their Annual Yearly Progress goals were eliminated. This resulted in a pool of twelve (12) schools in Alabama. The schools in each rural school category with the highest combination of high-poverty and high-minority were chosen for inclusion in this study.

Once the potential participant pool was identified, the researcher contacted the school via email explaining the purpose of the research project, why that particular school was selected as a potential participant, and a request that they participate in the project. This email was followed up by a phone call about five days later. A total of six (6) schools were contacted; one rural distant and two rural remote schools declined to participate in the study. The schools representing the rural fringe agreed immediately, and the initial rural distant school declined to participate; however, a second rural distant school readily agreed. Each of the schools agreeing to participate did notify their central office for approval. The rural remote school was more elusive. The first choice never responded to the email nor did the principal return phone call; the researcher was consistently told the principal was at school each time a call was made. The second rural remote school initially agreed but later backed out. Once the schools agreed to participate, each principal of the participating schools signed a letter agreeing to participate in the study.

Participant Demographics

Once the schools were selected and the actual participants were chosen, the researcher used a combination of random purposeful and snowball sampling it identify the actual participants to be interviewed. Creswell (2007) defines purposeful sampling as individuals who can "…purposefully inform an understanding…" (p.156) of the case or phenomenon studied. Snowball sampling is defined as the original chain referral method, asking participants to identify other potential participants who may have an interest or knowledge useful to the study (Bernard & Ryan, 2010) and it "typically proceeds after a study begins and occurs when the researcher asks participants to recommend other individuals to study" (Creswell, 2005, p. 206). In this study, individuals were selected for interviews based on their position or knowledge of the school. After reviewing the three (3) schools' websites, the researcher identified key positions/functions common in each of the schools to request an interview with the principal, counselor, school secretary, library media specialist, special education teacher, one (1) teacher from each academic area, custodian, bus driver, and child nutrition worker. These positions were selected to ensure as broad a perspective as possible concerning the reasons for high student achievement and what they perceive as present and potential challenges to student success. Prior to visiting each school, a review was made of the local governmental phone directory and key individuals were selected for an interview, such as the local mayor, Director of Community Development, and the local librarian. A review of the local online phone directory was used to identify local business and civic organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, Lions, Kiwanis and Civitan. All these individuals, positions, and organizations were selected to provide the most complete picture possible of the reasons for the high student achievement and their perceptions of the present and potential challenges to that success. Parents were solicited to

participate when they came to the school. Snowball sampling came from asking all the

participants if they knew another individual that might like to participate. Participant

demographic data is identified in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

Type School	Participant's Position	Gender	Race
Rural Fringe	Principal	Male	Black
Rural Fringe	Teacher	Female	White
Rural Fringe	Teacher	Female	Black
Rural Fringe	Teacher	Female	Black
Rural Fringe	Assistant Principal	Female	Black
Rural Fringe	Community Stakeholder	Female	White
Rural Fringe	Parent	Female	White
Rural Fringe	Community Stakeholder	Male	White
Rural Fringe	Parent	Female	White
Rural Fringe	Parent	Female	Black
Rural Fringe	Classified	Female	White
Rural Fringe	Community Stakeholder	Female	White
Rural Distant	Principal	Male	Black
Rural Distant	Teacher	Male	Black
Rural Distant	Teacher	Male	Black

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

Type School	Participant's Position	Gender	Race
Rural Distant	Parent	Male	Black
Rural Distant	Teacher	Female	Black
Rural Distant	Teacher	Male	Black
Rural Distant	Community Stakeholder	Male	Black
Rural Distant	Community Stakeholder	Female	Black
Rural Distant	Classified	Female	Black
Rural Distant	Parent	Female	Black
Rural Remote	Instructional Partner	Female	Black
Rural Remote	Parent	Female	Black
Rural Remote	Community Stakeholder	Female	Black
Rural Remote	Teacher	Female	Black
Rural Remote	Teacher	Female	Black
Rural Remote	Teacher	Male	Black
Rural Remote	Classified	Female	Black
	59% Educators	31% Males/	24% White/
	21% Community Stakeholders	69% Females	76% Black
	20% Parents		

Once the schools were identified, the researcher submitted a Research Protocol Review Form: Full Board or Expedited to the Auburn University Institutional Review Board for research involving human subjects with all the required documentation and received approval to proceed

with this research project. After receiving the approval from the Institutional Review Board a request letter was sent to the principals of each of the three (3) schools identified to participate in this study seeking approval authority to see if they could grant approval or did this request have to go through the superintendent's office for permission to conduct the research in their schools. This letter explained the research purpose and a request for access to school personnel, school meetings, and archival documents. Approval was secured in writing from each of the school principals.

Community and School Demographics

For this study, three high-functioning, high-minority, and high-achieving rural high schools were chosen. High schools were chosen due to the limited research that has been conducted in rural high schools in the United States. Each of the schools have achieved one-hundred percent (100%) of their annual progress goals for the school year 2011–2012 (the last year data is publicly available), with a minimum of sixty-five percent (65%) poverty (based on percentage of free/reduced price lunch) and at least sixty-five percent (65%) ethnic minority populations. The schools represent each of the National Center for Education Statistics locale code for rural fringe, distant, and remote schools. Each of the three (3) schools chosen ranked highest in the student achievement, level of poverty, and minority populations for high school containing grades seven (7) through twelve (12). The three (3) schools selected are all located in central Alabama and an average of seventy-five miles from the State Capitol in Montgomery (see Figure 1).
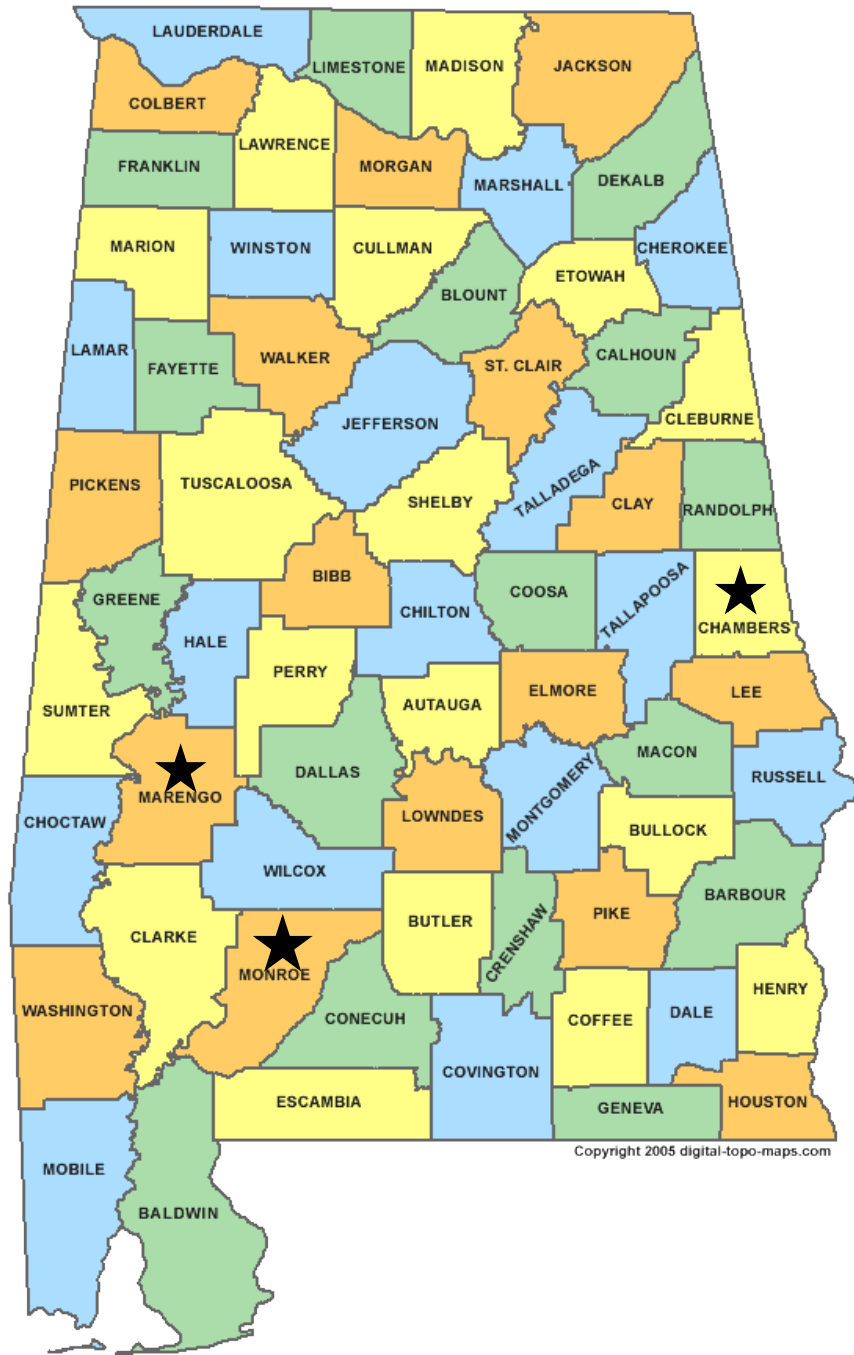
Figure 1. Title/Caption

High School Demographics

  Buddy High School is a rural remote school, (more than twenty-five miles from an urban area) with a student population of approximately 370 students, fifty-one (51) ninth graders, sixty-seven (67) tenth graders, thirty-eight (38) eleventh graders, and forty-eight (48) twelfth graders. The student body is 100% African-American. Buddy High School is located in west central Alabama approximately ninety-six (96) miles southwest of Birmingham. Buddy High School is located in Buddytown, Alabama which has a population of 1,775, of which approximately 90.59% is minority, 55.66% female, and 35.77% are under the age of eighteen. The medium household income for Buddytown was $29,911.00 and the major economic engine for Buddytown is predominately agricultural and service industries.

  Ridge High School is a rural distant school (more than five (5) and less than twenty-five (25) miles from an urban area) with a student population of approximately 244 students, thirty-one (31) ninth graders, forty-four (44) tenth graders, thirty-five (35) eleventh graders, and twenty-seven (27) twelfth graders. The student body is 92% African-American and six percent (6%) split between Multi-race, Pacific Islander, and White. Ridge High School is located in east-central Alabama approximately forty-eight (48) miles east of Birmingham. Ridge High School is located in Eaglet, Alabama which has a population of approximately 81,096 of which approximately 36.2% is minority, 51.3% are female, and 22.4% are under the age of eighteen (18). The medium household income for Eaglet was $29,911.00 and the major economic engine for Eaglet is predominately manufacturing, agricultural and service industries.

  Nextdoor High School is a rural fringe school (less than five (5) miles from an urban area) with a student population of approximately 233 students, 44 ninth graders, 43 tenth graders, 42 eleventh graders, and 39 twelfth graders. The student body is ninety-four percent (94%)

African-American, five percent (5%) Hispanic, and one percent (1%) White. Nextdoor High

School is located in east central Alabama approximately one-hundred-eleven (111) miles

southeast of Birmingham. Nextdoor High School is located in Tiger, Alabama which has a

population of approximately one-hundred-eighty (180) of which approximately 41.11% are

minority, 50.00% are female, and 16.66% are under the age of eighteen (18). The economic

engine for Tiger is predominately a bedroom community.

Research Questions

The study addressed three research questions.

1.   What factors do selected stakeholders in high-achieving, high-poverty, and high-

minority rural fringe, distant and remote high schools perceive or anticipate as challenges to their

success?

2.   What factors do selected stakeholders in high-achieving, high-poverty, and high-

minority rural fringe, distant and remote high schools perceive as facilitating their success?

3.   What if any, differences exist in these perceptions between each type of school,

rural fringe, distant and remote high schools?

Data Collection Methods

The multiple case study included data gathered from multiple sources: archival data, and

semi-structured interviews. The collection of archival data included the retrieval and analysis of

the school's state report card, cohort graduation reports, ACT/SAT testing results, school

website, other social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), continuous improvement plan, school

communications to parents and community, curriculum documents (classroom syllabi, pacing

guides, and available classroom improvement plans), and media reports. A semi-structured

interview protocol was used to gather information from school leaders, staff, faculty, parents,

community members, and other key stakeholders. The use of open-ended questions was critical

to capturing the participant's perspectives and opinions. When necessary, the use of follow-up

questions, probes, and structuring questions was used to ensure as complete a record as

possible. Institutional Review Board approval for this research was requested and received due

to the inclusion of human subjects and to ensure compliance with applicable regulations,

guidelines, and ethical research principles.

The researcher sent a request to the school for archival documents, parental newsletters,

school newspapers, school announcements, the ACT profile report for each participating high

school, achievement data, the school's continuous improvement plan, faculty/departmental

meeting minutes and agendas, school demographic information, and any available documents for

programs at the school designed to increase student achievement such as success coaches or

instructional partners. Then each schools web-site was extensively reviewed and all pertinent

data were analyzed. The school agreed to supply the documents and they became a part of the

data used to complete this study.

The primary data sources for this study were semi-structured interviews conducted with

the key stakeholders of each of the schools. An interview protocol was developed to ensure

clarity and prioritization of the critical information sought from each interview. Each of the

interviews lasted between thirty (30) and ninety (90) minutes and recorded and

transcribed. These interviews were designed to collect information from the participants about

their background, opinions, beliefs about why their school was successful, and what present and

potential challenges were perceived as hindering increasing the student achievement. The use of

semi-structured interview protocol enabled the researcher to use discretion during the interview

process and to ask probes where necessary to gather all the pertinent information and to redirect

the participant when they wander off topic or fail to completely answer the question. This format allowed the researcher to develop complete and rich understanding of the topic. The interview protocol included descriptive type questions to develop insights into the thinking of the participant, these questions allowed the researcher to determine the processes or how things work within the school. Structural questions were posed to develop an understanding to the internal structure, both formal and informal, and to understand the relationships that were a part of the school. The contrast questions provided insight into the differences in the experiences of the participants. An inverted funnel questioning format was used during each interview. The inverted funnel format initially asked background-type questions and gradually built to broad open-ended questions (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Prior to conducting the initial interviews, the interview protocol was tested with administrators, staff and faculty from a local rural fringe high school, to ensure clarity of the questions, to identify unclear or inappropriate terminology, that the answers to the questions matched the intent of the questions, and the flow of the questions seem appropriate and natural.

The interviews began with an introduction designed to introduce the researcher, the purpose of the research, and the specific reason the participant was asked for an interview. The participant was advised that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw their consent at any time. Each participant was asked to sign an Institutional Review Board Consent Form prior to the start of the interview. After the interview was completed, the researcher thanked each participant and informed them of the process and what they could expect from the researcher as the project progressed.

Analysis of the Data

The data collected for this research project from interviews, documents, school websites, were analyzed in an iterative process, or what Cresswell (2013) calls the data analysis spiral, of collecting, reviewing, analyzing, reflecting, and sense-making on the data collected (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). It was essential that the data be reduced, simplified, and transformed into codes to make it useful (Berg & Lune, 2012; DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). This reduction, simplification, and transformation of the data was accomplished by coding the data. The coding process enabled the researcher to create a detailed understanding of how the data both supports and refutes the theoretical framework and research questions for this project.

Once the researcher completed the analysis of the data and the themes that emerged, the researcher attempted to triangulate the data. Triangulation is the process intended to ensure the validity and integrity of the findings. Triangulation is critical to ensure that the findings are based in the data and not in some pre-conceived ideas of what is believed to be true based on experiences and interpretation of the research (Berg & Lune, 2012; Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Cresswell, 2013; Merrian, 1998; Stake, 1995, 2004, 2006; Yin, 2014).

The researcher conducted peer debriefings as an external check on the validity and integrity of the data for each of the case studies. The researcher asked cohort mates and the dissertation chair to be a devil's advocate as a method to ensure the findings were valid. The peer debriefers asked questions about methods, sources, and analysis of data. As is the normal protocol, the researcher kept detailed notes on these debriefings and asked the peer debriefers to do the same.

The peer debriefing process for each of the case studies focused on ensuring the validity and integrity of the data to answer the research questions of what factors do selected stakeholders perceive as present and potential challenges to their success and what factors do selected stakeholders perceive as facilitating their success? Additionally, this peer debriefing process was completed during the cross case analysis to ensure the validity and integrity of the data to answer the research questions of what, if any, differences exist in these perceptions between each stakeholder group or between each type of rural schools, fringe, distant, or remote.

Coding Process

The coding process is a method that researchers use to attach meaning to the data that they have collected and is the first step in data analysis. The researcher began the coding process initially by reading the data not to code the data, but as a refresher or to get a feel and understanding of what each participant had said and the information jotted down (Cresswell, 2013). During this initial review process, the researcher conducted memoing, the writing notes or a running commentary in the margins (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

The second run through the data for coding purpose was conducted using an open-coding approach which the researcher broke the raw data, explored ideas and meanings (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). Starting with the open-coding process enabled the researcher to conduct the analysis on a very wide perspective, starting with a broad sweep and narrowing the scope down with each pass through the data. During this process, the researcher developed emergent codes that emerged from the data and they are not included in the a priori codes (Berg & Lune, 2012; DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). Starting with open-coding prevents the researcher from missing data that was not anticipated in the development of the a priori codes. The third run through, the data from an a-priori or a predetermined code based on

99

an understanding of the current research used the conceptual framework (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). These a-priori codes are developed from the existing research base and structured from the research questions and goals (Bernard & Ryan, 2003; DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011).

A codebook was developed. This was an evolving document that was constantly modified as the researcher developed a better understanding of the data and how it was connected to the theoretical framework of the study (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). This codebook was developed to ensure that the codes and its definition were specific enough to be meaningful, but also broad enough to be inclusive of the idea and concept it was intended to represent. Cresswell (2013) recommends no more than between twenty-five (25) and thirty (30) codes be included in the codebook, while Bernard and Ryan (2003) recommends no more than between fifty (50) and eighty (80) codes in the codebook. Cresswell (2013) recommends that the codes in the codebook be held to as few as possible due to the need to reduce these codes into five (5) or six (6) themes necessary for publication. Keeping these guidelines in mind the researcher developed a codebook for this study that contained nineteen codes that were broken down into the seven themes.

As data were collected, the software program ATLAS.ti was used to conduct the analysis. This analysis consisted of memoing or the recording of thoughts and impressions, while the researcher was engaged in the analysis of the data. During the analysis of the data, the researcher conducted coding, the breaking down of information into usable or manageable pieces and put a name to that piece of data. Theme or category development was conducted by combining codes developed into broader inclusive themes or common ideas. Finally, the researcher conducted winnowing of the data to reduce the volume of data to be analyzed. This

process took several passes though the data to ensure all the pertinent information and data had been identified.

Pilot Study

Prior to conducting this study, the researcher worked with the dissertation chair, the superintendent of a school system in Alabama that has two (2) rural high schools, and a principal of a rural high school to develop an initial set of interview questions for each of the groups the researcher anticipated interviewing during the actual study. After several revisions, additions, and deletions, a final set of interview questions was developed that were designed to answer the three (3) research questions and that addressed the theoretical framework of the study. Using these questions, the researcher conducted interviews with a representative of each category, administrator, counselor, school secretary, library media specialist, special education teacher, one (1) teacher from each academic area, custodian, bus driver, and a child nutrition worker.

This pilot study used the questions developed for the actual study. The data collected during the pilot study was not used in the actual study, the pilot study sample did not meet the demographic or achievement requirements. The pilot was conducted between February and March 2015. The data collected from the pilot study was used to make the necessary adjustments in the interview protocols to ensure the questions accurately portrayed the intent of the researcher.

During the pilot study, the researcher used the same interview protocol; however, changes were made to improve the interview protocol. The data collected as a part of the pilot study were not used in the actual study because the pilot sample characteristics were not the same as the target population, they were not stakeholders in a high-poverty, high minority school. The pilot study took place during July 2015. The researcher identified several concerns

during the pilot study. During the interviews, it became obvious a few questions were not soliciting the data intended and these questions needed to be reworded. The researcher also encountered participants providing the data they believed the researcher was looking for and not answering the questions with their ideas and perceptions. This concern was addressed during the introduction of the researcher and purpose of the research.

Conclusion

Chapter Three outlined the research design, purpose of the study, populations and participants, community and school demographics, research questions, data collection methods, analysis of the data, and coding process. The chapters that follow describe the data collected and answers the research questions and implications for future research through the manuscripts that addressed each of the research questions.

MANUSCRIPT 1: LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES IN ALABAMA'S HIGH POVERTY,

HIGH MINORITY, HIGH ACHIEVING RURAL SCHOOLS

Introduction

The modern era of accountability and standards movement, was ushered in with the publication of *The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983) better known as "A Nation At Risk," which resulted in a greater involvement of state and federal governments in public education. Despite this involvement and the implementation of numerous federal programs focused on improving public education, large percentages of children from minority groups and high poverty settings are not performing at the same levels as their affluent counterparts (Chapin, 2006; Williams 2011), leading to an achievement gap between them which seems to be widening.

This move toward accountability refocused reform efforts on setting high educational outcomes for all students (Kuel, 2012). Numerous state and local initiatives have been implemented throughout the nation in an attempt to close the achievement gap and assure that all students are successful in all schools throughout the country. Although this gap is closely related to social and cultural components (Carey, 2013; Carter, 2012), much of the criticism focuses both the cause and solution being squarely in the educational system with the conclusion being that if the teachers and schools did a better job, there would be no achievement gap. While this conclusion may not be accurate, research does indicate that schools account for approximately forty percent (40%) of the impact on student achievement (Whitehurst, 2002). The research also

indicates that the quality of the teacher has a direct impact on the educational achievement of high-poverty high-minority students (Phillips, 2010), and that the quality of the school leadership impacts student learning indirectly (Leithwood, 2010). Additionally, though the achievement gap persists throughout the country, there are schools in which this gap has narrowed or been overcome and in which students from high poverty situations are thriving academically. In order to make this happen, schools must overcome many challenges. This research examined those challenges in an under-explored setting – rural schools.

Purpose of the Study

This is part one of a three-part study investigating high performing, high poverty rural high schools in Alabama schools. This part of the study examined key stakeholders' perceptions of the challenges these schools face in fostering student success. This study provides information for others interested in improving student learning and achievement and extends and enhances the existing research on improving student success in rural school settings.

Challenges to Student Success in Rural Schools

While the literature reports many challenges in rural schools, it is important to note that there is a great deal of diversity in the rural population of the United States (Johnson & Strange, 2009). Thus, the challenges to rural education within different districts and states may vary widely (Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012). Thus, the needs of rural schools and their students can even vary within a single school district (Arnold, 2000) and the solutions for fixing the unique problems in rural schools necessitate individualized school responses or differentiation.

However, when examining the issue in general, a number of barriers have been reported. One of the pervasive challenges rural school systems face is the attitudes and prejudices of others

toward them. There is a perception by many policymakers that rural is tantamount to being backwards and ignorant (Howley, 2001). This is sometimes coupled with a prevailing attitude of apathy and failure in high-poverty high-minority school communities, meaning that rural schools must fight an uphill battle in their quest to improve student learning and achievement (Theobald & Wood, 2010; Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014).

Another major concern for rural schools is the high number of adults who lack a high school diploma and are either unemployed or under-employed. This often results in high levels of persistent poverty that are intergenerational (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014), an increasingly low socio-economic and miniority population populations (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009), and a highly transient population (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Research indicates that this can, in turn, can result in students not having a strong parental influence stressing the importance of learning and academic achievement and low levels of expectation and/or resistance to change (Williams & King, 2002).

Causes for the lack of parental involvement may be the result of work conflicts, work hours, transportation issues, embarrassment due to low parental educational levels or illiteracy, or because parents place no value on education (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014). The lack of parental involvement can lead to poor student motivation and attendance issues (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014).

Additionally, many rural students are forced to place their own educational and career goals on hold to help support the family. These issues are further compounded for the school by low-density housing, high poverty, work schedules, and work locations which are often in distant towns. These factors sometimes prevent students from taking advantage of tutoring and extra curricula activities due to the high cost of transportation for both the school and parents. These

realities also mean that rural schools spend a higher percentage of their operating funds on transportation for students.

Many rural communities have limited business or industrial development resulting in a lack of employment opportunities for students (Harmon, 2001). The lack of business and industry results in a lower tax base, and a higher percentage of the land exempt from any property taxes resulting in fewer resources for schools.

Another barrier to school success is that decision-makers and policy-makers often leave rural communities out of the process or ignore their concerns and input during the problem solving process (Williams & King, 2002). The very nature of rural communities and the lower tax base also places additional stress on school leaders in the recruitment and retention of quality teachers along with limited or poor professional development programs (King & Williams, 2002). There is a general lack of adequate housing, jobs for spouses, and a lack of amenities to attract quality administrators and faculty. This can result in long commutes and extended time away from family and can reduce faculty and staff willingness to stay after work to provide the support and services necessary for these rural schools. All of these factors often result in high teacher turnover (Gibbs, 2000; Harmon, 2001), making residents and parents in rural schools feel they have been abandoned (Maxwell, Huggins, & Scheurich, 2010).

Methodology

An exploratory qualitative multi-case study methodology was used for this study. Case study format was chosen because the researcher was interested in developing a better understanding of the real life settings or situations (Yen, 2009) of learning and achievement in Alabama's rural schools. The exploratory case format was used because the intention was to provide a better understanding of the challenges facing rural schools, but not to develop any final

conclusions or definitive solutions (Lewis, Thornhill, & Saunders, 2007). This study differs from most studies on the topic of overcoming the achievement gap in that the focus was on the perceptions of key stakeholders and not the programs, policies, curriculum, and leadership styles.

Population and Sample

The purpose of this study was to identify the forces that hindered success in high-poverty, high-minority, and high-achieving rural high schools in Alabama, in their natural setting and context to understand what key stakeholders perceived as the challenges they had to overcome to achieve success.

This study examined three (3) individual cases of high-minority, high-poverty, high-achieving rural schools in Alabama. Each of the schools are from a different rural classification as outlined by the National Center for Educational Statics (2006) locale codes of rural fringe, rural distant, and rural remote. This was done to determine if there were similarities or differences in perceptions based on the type of rural school studied. The results of that study are presented in Manuscript 3 of this publication. Criterion sampling (Patton, 2001) was used to select the schools that met the criteria of high-poverty, high-minority, high-achieving rural high schools. A three-step process was used to select the schools for inclusion in this study. An analysis of the National Center for Educational Statics database for the school year 2003–2004 identified two hundred thirty-four (234) rural schools, with a locale code of 41, rural fringe; 42, rural distant; and 43, rural remote in Alabama. Once all the rural schools in Alabama were identified, the researcher eliminated all the schools that did not have a minimum of sixty-five percent (65%) free/reduced price lunch, to establish the definition of high poverty for this study. This resulted in a pool of fifty-six (56) schools. After establishing the high-poverty schools the researcher identified the schools with a minimum minority population of sixty-five percent

107

(65%) resulting in a pool of sixteen (16) schools. Finally, schools failing to meet one-hundred percent (100%) of their Annual Yearly progress goals were eliminated resulting a pool of only twelve (12) schools. The schools with the highest combination of the three screening factors, high-poverty, high-minority, and high achieving, high schools were contacted and asked to participate in the study. This process was repeated until one school from each of the rural classification agreed to participate.

Data Collection

Once the schools were selected, a combination of random purposeful and snowball sampling were used to identify the actual participants. Individual were selected for participation based on their position or knowledge of the school. A review of the schools website and the local phone directory, retrieved electronically, were used to identify these key stakeholders. During each interview, the participants were asked to identify others who may have an interest or knowledge useful for inclusion in this study. Data was collected using a semi-structured interview protocol which was recorded and transcribed. There were a total of twenty-nine interviews which lasted between twenty minutes and one-hour and fifteen minutes. The participant's position, type school, gender, and race are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant's Position	Type School	Gender	Race
Principal	Rural Fringe	Male	Black
Teacher	Rural Fringe	Female	White
Teacher	Rural Fringe	Female	Black
Teacher	Rural Fringe	Female	Black
Assistant Principal	Rural Fringe	Female	Black
Community Stakeholder	Rural Fringe	Female	White
Parent	Rural Fringe	Female	White
Community Stakeholder	Rural Fringe	Male	White
Parent	Rural Fringe	Female	White
Parent	Rural Fringe	Female	Black
Classified	Rural Fringe	Female	White
Community Stakeholder	Rural Fringe	Female	White
Principal	Rural Distant	Male	Black
Teacher	Rural Distant	Male	Black
Teacher	Rural Distant	Male	Black
Parent	Rural Distant	Male	Black
Teacher	Rural Distant	Female	Black
Teacher	Rural Distant	Male	Black
Community Stakeholder	Rural Distant	Male	Black

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

Participant's Position	Type School	Gender	Race
Community Stakeholder	Rural Distant	Female	Black
Classified	Rural Distant	Female	Black
Parent	Rural Distant	Female	Black
Instructional Partner	Rural Remote	Female	Black
Parent	Rural Remote	Female	Black
Community Stakeholder	Rural Remote	Female	Black
Teacher	Rural Remote	Female	Black
Teacher	Rural Remote	Female	Black
Teacher	Rural Remote	Male	Black
Classified	Rural Remote	Female	Black
59% Educators	41% Rural Fringe		
21% Community Stakeholders	34% Rural Distant	31% Males/	24% White/
20% Parents	24% Rural Remote	69% Females	76% Black

Data Analysis

The data collected from individual interviews were analyzed in an iterative process, or what Creswell (2013) called the data analysis spiral of collecting, reviewing, analyzing, reflecting, and sense-making on the data collected (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). The reduction, simplification, and transformation of the data were accomplished in a multi-step process. An initial reading of the data was done to get a feel for the information and as a refresher to develop an understanding of the data (Creswell, 2013). During this initial

reading of the data, a running commentary was made in the margins (Bernard & Ryan, 2012).

The second reading was used to conduct open-ended coding, breaking the raw data down into

ideas and meanings (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). It was during this process

that emergent codes were developed (Berg & Lune, 2012; DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, &

McCulloch, 2011). Finally, a pass was made through the data from an a-priori perspective.

These a-priori codes were developed in advance based on our understanding of the current

research (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

Findings

These schools were successful in fostering student achievement. Therefore, they used

strategies to deal with the challenges they and their students faced in trying to achieve this

success. However, these challenges were still present and were something they needed to be

aware of in order to develop strategies and processes to deal with them. These approaches are

reported in Manuscript 2.

The researcher identified three major recurring perceptions of the key stakeholders of the

challenges facing the participant schools. The major recurring perceptions identified during the

analysis of the study interview data included, student-centered issues, school level challenges,

and limited community support. These three major perceptions were further broken down into

two (2) or three (3) supporting themes as the participants identified them during the study. In

order to be included as a theme, the topic had to be identified as important by a minimum of

forty percent (40%) of the participants interviewed. These supporting themes are outline in

Table 2. Each of these major stakeholder perceptions and the corresponding sub-themes are

addressed in detail throughout this section.

Table 2

Challenges Perceptions and Sub-themes

Student Centered Issues	Limited Community Support	School Level Challenges
Negative Pressures on Students	Divided Community	Teacher Attitude
Lack of Security and Stability	Public verses Private Schools	Limited Resources
Motivational Issues		Lack of Local Control

Student Centered Themes

The first theme identified as a barrier to be overcome in order to foster student success was categorized as being student-centered. Student-centered issues are those issues that are typically outside of the schools' normal span of control. The major sub-themes identified within the data are negative pressures on students, motivational issues, and a lack of security and stability. Each of these sub-themes has a significant impact on both the student's ability and desire to be successful in school.

Negative Pressures on Students

Seventy-five percent (75%) of the participants believed that negative pressure on students was a key challenge in improving student learning and achievement. This negative pressure on students stems from several factors. The student's family situation and environment seemed to be a determining factor in the student's ability and desire to be successful academically. Zophiah from Buddy High School stated, "…what's hurting them is their home background, the lack of and level of support from their families and home environment."

This lack of family support and encouragement is not only obvious to the staff and faculty of the participant high schools, but to the community stakeholders also. As Ryan, key

Stakeholder of Ridge High School stated, "…I think it's a lack of effort on the parental part and it's heartbreaking to me that a child goes home with a folder and it doesn't get signed because the parents don't care about what their grades are." In addition to a seemingly disinterested parental involvement, there are also concerns about the environment some of the students in these participant schools are coming from and returning to after the school day. One parent stated that,

> "... I think it all starts at home. If you don't have the support at home and you have to live in some of the stuff that some of the kids have to live in and you want to come to school and do math or do something, I mean they can't think about things like that when they live in who knows what at home. (Dawn, Parent Next Door High School)

This concern about the home environment extended out into the community in general. Many of the participants expressed concern about disruptions from the community being brought to school and disrupting the positive achievements being made by the students. As one parent stated "…the negative stuff that takes place in the community has a drawback when you're trying to do things on the positive side and then you have other people pulling against you (Jodie, a parent from Ridge High School).

All of this turmoil in the student's home environment sometimes creates a learning climate for the students that may cause them to fail in reaching their full potential. There appear to be two powerful forces working against the students in these participant schools. Some participants perceive that many of the students in these participant schools do not recognize the value of a quality education, "I think, honestly, the biggest hurdle we have to face is I don't know that many of our people [students], they don't see the value of an education" (Chrissy, Next Door High School). A major contributing factor in this phenomenon is that many of these students

face a daily onslaught of peer pressure to come up short academically. One teacher stated it this way, "…I would say peer pressure. The students not wanting to meet their full potential or give one hundred and twenty percent, because it's not the cool thing to do. Everybody's not doing it or they don't think it's cool" (Kathy, Next Door High School).

A final, and alarming, finding within this area is the active undermining of the students' education by significant family members in a student's life. Some participants shared that many of these students are being raised in an environment that discourages them from working to their full potential and provides a great deal of negative motivation that makes it very difficult for the teachers of the participant schools to overcome in the relativity short period of time these students are with them. There is a pervasive attitude of many of the students that there is no need to obtain an education because there is no possibility of bettering their circumstances. As one parent explained, "We've got a lot of parents that are against that. You're against that because you don't have any motivation yourself, to have enough self-esteem about yourself to meet the requirements to help that child" (Samuel, a Parent of Buddy High School). Ryan, a community stakeholder of Next Door High School stated it this way:

> If I see a certain type of lifestyle as a child then I'm thinking that's going to be the system, or that's what my life is going to be like…Why do I need to get a high school education? By God, why do I need to learn a skill or go to college? I think those are some of the things that some of these children face...

Several of the participants expressed a concern that parents were fostering this type of attitude where parents, in some case, are actively holding their children back, some who do not want to see their child be more successful in life than they were. Ryan, a community stakeholder of Next Door High School stated, "…Not everybody wants their students ... parents didn't want

114

to see them to get a higher educational attainment than they did. You've got that type of

mentality." Several other participants went even further expressing concerns that parents were

teaching their children that they were being held down. Joseph, a teacher at Ridge High School

and pastor of a church stated it this way:

> A slave man mentality and it just bothers me so because we build up hindrances and we
>
> say the white man's trying to hold me down, nobody's going to let me do this, we can't
>
> do that, we came from this, and they instill this into their kids.

This negativity from the parents and students actively pushing this anti-education agenda results

in a lack of buy-in from a number of other students and parents has resulted in a "…culture of

indifference" (Chrissy, Next Door High School).

Lack of Security and Stability

Many of the students from the schools participating in this study have experienced long-

term intergenerational poverty. The key stakeholders reported that they are faced with the very

real challenge that they are the primary stable guiding influence to many of their students. Faced

with the challenge of educating these students, fifty-six percent of the participants identified a

lack of security and stability outside of schools as a contributing factor for improving student

learning and achievement. Many of the students attending the schools participating in this study

come from single parent homes or are being raised by their grandparents in households where

there are no adult males. Discussing this, Jackie from Buddy High School stated, "…they are

missing a family member; a mother out of the household or a father out of the household, that's

hurtful. They don't know how to deal with that. A lot of single mothers." This is further

exasperated when the guardian/caregiver is a grandparent. Jackie from Buddy High School

stated it this way:

I think sometimes when parents are not there, you have a guardian, which is usually your

grandparents in those areas. Grandparents don't know as much … they're older, so they

only know to provide, sometimes they don't have the educational background to assist

those kids.

Additionally, the harsh reality for many of the students attending the participant schools

is that "…we have a large group that doesn't have any family life, so to speak.… We have

students who when they leave school on Friday afternoon, they may not know where their next

meal is coming from" (Deborah, Next Town Stakeholder). Unfortunately, for some of the

students in the participant schools their education is not a major priority, survival is their main

focus. Some of these students do not enjoy the comfort of a stable family and the secure feeling

that a stable family provides, as one stakeholder stated,

"...if you have to live in some of the stuff that some of the kids have to live in and you

come to school and do math or do something, I mean they can't think about things like

that when they live in who knows what at home. (Dawn, Parent Next Door High School)

In addition to a lack of security and stability at home, some of these students are faced with

living in a chaotic community that does not provide the student with any sense of stability or

security. Many of these students are exposed to experiences that are foreign to most of the staff

and faculty at the school. One parent expressed their concern by stating,

It's a lot going on with the children, and all. You have to face, "I had a bad night last

night," if you're not aware, that if you never been a child, you've never experienced that,

then you're not going to see that child for what he's going through with. (Samuel, a

Parent of Buddy High School)

When the student comes to school, the staff and faculty often do not know what baggage the students are carrying from the weekend or the night before that will affect their attitude and ability to learn. A result of the lack of stability and security in these students lives is the very real issue that the schools are operating in an environment that is unfamiliar to the students and, as one stakeholder observed,

> Trying to teach them in an environment that they're not so much as accustomed to...some of them are not used to being given orders and being expected to obey. They're used to doing what they want to do, in their home or in the community or whatever. I would say the barriers are breaking them from habits that are not allowed within the school environment, as well as when a child does something out of the norm, or that's unacceptable at school. (Kathy, Next Door High School)

These participant schools have challenges to improving student learning and achievement that includes providing these students with a quality education in an environment that is stable and secure that may be vastly different from their home and communities. Respondents report that these schools are attempting to teach the state course of study and remediating both educational and social skill deficiencies all within the one-hundred-eighty day school year. Although, they appear to have been able to overcome this barrier, participants view this as a significant challenge.

Motivational Issues

A natural result of the negative environment of many of the students attending the participating schools is a culture of indifference, lack of motivation, and lack of perseverance to work at being successful academically. Motivation was identified by fifty-four percent (54%) of the participants as a major challenge. The staff and faculty of the participating schools report

117

that the students' level of indifference and lack of motivation hinders the schools ability to create a culture of learning among the students. A significant attitude of many of the students at the participant schools is one of being checked-out. Chrissy, a teacher from Next Door High School believed that "…we have the not insignificant group of those students who haven't bought in…they're not invested. They're checked out" (Chrissy, Next Door High School). Participants reported that when some of these students encounter an obstacle they just give up and they do not attempt to remove that obstruction to their progress. One teacher stated, "…they lack motivation and that perseverance, and that drive to continue to go forward. As soon as they run into an obstacle, then they quit and give up…" (Michelle, Ridge High School). This teacher expressed a concern that these students had not developed the coping mechanisms that were necessary to accept these challenges and to develop the skills necessary this lack of motivation has its roots in the fact that often when these students start school in kindergarten, they are nowhere near ready, and the deficit continues to grow throughout their educational career. Because these students start school with a skills and knowledge deficit, they develop this lack of motivation to learn and achieve as Jackie stated, "When they come through the door they don't think they can do anything" (Jackie, Buddy High School). Respondents shared their belief that once these students start thinking that they were incapable of learning, they lose their motivation to try. One teacher shared that, "…we have a small population of students that just don't see the big picture…and some of them just don't have any hope…" (Leslie, Next Door High School). Another said, "It's just that sometimes our kids come to us so far behind…sometimes they're already behind when they come to you, which if you're teaching, you only have a hundred and eighty (180) days…" (Jackie, Buddy High School). Respondents from all participant schools

reported that they struggled to reach this group of unmotivated students and create a pervasive culture of learning and achievement throughout the entire student body of their schools.

Limited Community Involvement

All of the participant schools are located in economically depressed areas that have suffered a loss of business and industry over the past several years with a corresponding increase in the level of poverty in the public schools as determined by the dramatic increase in the number of students receiving free and reduced at school. The researcher experienced some difficulty with obtaining community stakeholder input during the data gathering process. Many, certainly not all, of the governmental and community stakeholders would not return repeated attempts to schedule an interview, not a single mayor of the towns these schools are located agreed to be interviewed for this project. This is evidence of the last theme identified as a barrier to success — limited community involvement. This theme has two subthemes: divided community, and public/private schools.

Public verses private schools. In all three communities where the participant schools were located, the public schools are predominantly Black and the private schools predominantly White, resulting in fifty-four percent of the participants sharing their belief that there was a public school verses private school fissure in the community. When integration became mandatory during the early 1970s there was a dramatic increase in the number of private schools with a corresponding loss of the middle class, primarily White students. As one teacher stated, when there is a concentration of the more affluent in private schools,

Two things happen when that happens. Number one, yes, you don't get the support, because that's not where their children are going. Number two is when you concentrate

119

an element of a community all together, you're going to have certain things going on

that may be good or bad. (Zophiah, Buddy High School)

One of the teachers who was a graduate of the school stated that,

The difference in this school in 1992, when I graduated, was Vanity Fair and the

resources. Nobody was at the private school. The educated parents in this community

were here and their resources were here and their time was here and their energy was in

this school. (Chrissy, Next Door High School).

One school stakeholder expressed her frustration by saying many businesses "…send their

children and money to the private school but the entire community supports their business"

(Michelle, Ridge High School). Dawn went even further when she stated "…They'll tell us we

don't support,… your fundraising or whatever …then you know you need to get your parents on

board and say, Well look; if you can't support us then were not going to support you" (Dawn,

Parent Next Door High School).

Until recently, many of these private schools limited the ability of minority students to

attend or even visit their facilities. One school stakeholder reported, "I look at it and I say, 'Even

if you go back to just 10 years ago, they didn't want you out there.' They didn't even allow the

Black police officers to go out there for anything" (Michelle, Ridge High School). One of the

parent stakeholders is concern that these private schools are now starting to recruit minority

student athletes, "…what they have started recruiting our athletes, they're coming after athletes

and they're offering them this and that to come to school there" (Jodie, Parent from Ridge High

School). Michelle is concerned about the long-term impact of these minority students who do

transfer to the private school, "They don't recruit them as students…" (Michelle, Ridge High

School). The concern for these student athletes is the support they will receive once their athletic

time has ended and they are no longer of any value to these private schools. One parent stated

the problem very elegantly when they stated, "…it's the same old stuff [racism] from way back

that just keeps coming and never leaves…" (Jason, Parent of Buddy High School).

       Divided community. The communities of the participating schools have suffered

tremendously with the loss of the textile industry, which occurred after 1994. This loss of

employment resulted in the loss of the middle class students and families in these schools. This

loss of the middle class has changed the culture of the school with a very high percentage of

students living in poverty, something most teachers have never experienced. As a result of this

shift fifty-two percent of the participants expressed concern that their community was divided.

The most common perception of the school/parent stakeholders of the involvement and

commitment of the business and industry to the local public schools is "…standoffish…" at best

(Diandra, Support Staff, Next Door High School). However, one community stakeholder stated

"…There is involvement. There's not enough involvement, I feel like…I think it could be

better…" (Ryan, Community Stakeholder, Ridge High School). The perception of many of the

staff and faculty of the participant schools is that the majority of the businesses in these

communities are owned or managed by business people "will not step up to the plate to help the

schools out [and are hurting student achievement]" (Jason, a Parent of Buddy High School).

Some of this may be because some of these people send their children to private schools (the

next subtheme) but this lack of support has an impact on the whole community and serves to

expand the divided nature of it. Chrissy (Next Door High School) shared how this relates to the

creation of a divided community in which these business people do not see the connections

between them and their families and the community as a whole when she stated:

What they're missing is that we're educating their employees. If they want an educated, literate, vital workforce, because our kids aren't moving anywhere, they don't have the resources to move anywhere at present, these are the people that are going to come knocking on their doors. I don't know that they sometimes recognize the value of investing here as well. (Chrissy, teacher Next Door High School)

There were those school level stakeholders who added "…we don't have a good name in the community…" (Dawn, Parent of Next Door High School) while another parent believed that "…we don't have a positive image in our community and people giving good feedback…" (Jodie, Parent from Ridge High School). The perception of the lack of support for the participant school was not always echoed by the community stakeholders; however, one community stakeholder's perception was that there had been little or limited effort to bring the community stakeholders into the discussion. Deborah felt, "…it was like the schools are over here and we're over here…" (Deborah, Community stakeholder Next Door High School).   It appears the lack of community support of the participant school may not a one sided issue and both the school and community are responsible for this challenge and only through cooperation between the community and schools will this challenge be corrected.

<div align="center">**School Level Challenges**</div>

Closely following student centered issues as a major challenge to academic success, in these high-minority, high-poverty, high-achieving schools are issues within the school. These challenges manifested themselves in a variety of ways ranging from teacher attitudes, limited resources, and a lack of local (school level) control.

Lack of Local Control

A major concern identified by fifty-seven percent (57%) of the participants was the belief that there was a lack of the ability to provide programs tailored to meet the specific needs of their

student body, because schools and teachers lacked decision-making power about these programs. These challenges stem from the lack of differentiation of solutions and programs designed to solve the challenges of student learning and achievement. Many of the participants expressed concern with a one-size-fits-all mentality of many policymakers at all levels of the educational bureaucracy. Ian commented that:

> … sometimes we kind of jump on the bandwagon if this is a good program. I heard about it somewhere. We just go buy it instead of just trying it out and see if really works. What's the history behind it? Not really doing a lot of research to say okay, is this going to work with our population… Okay, does this work with this type of school? Or give us a scenario. What schools has this worked with that has the same type of population, same type of kids that we have. (Ian, Next Door High School)

Additionally, participants stated that many times the decision-makers at all levels are so far removed from the populations of these high-poverty, high-minority, high-functioning schools. One participant stated:

> … I don't necessarily think they hear the voices of the people in this area because most of the people that make the decision, their kids are in private schools but they're making decisions for public schools, because they don't care about it anyway. (Jason, a Parent of Buddy High School)

Jackie stated, "…all the schools are different and all those children are different. You have to meet the needs of the children that are in your school" (Jackie, Buddy High School). The fact that educators, always discuss the differentiation of education for the students; however, there are no allowances or differentiation for schools and classrooms. The overriding attitude of decision makers is this program, idea, or concept will work at all schools period. One teacher

123

stated it this way "…Even though we live in the Black Belt area, all the schools are different, and all those children are different. You have to meet the needs of the children that are in your school" (Jackie, Buddy High School). Many of the participants expressed a great deal of frustration with the one-size-fits-all philosophy and the lack of differentiation at the individual school level to meet the needs of their student body and community. One key stakeholder stated, "Even at the state level we're seeing, we're still kind of jumping, as they say we're flying the plane and putting it together as were flying it" (Ian, Next Door High School).

This frustration runs deep within the staff and faculty of the participant schools. Many of the school level staff and faculty believe that the individuals at the central office are too far removed from the everyday grind of educating today's students. One teacher expressed his frustration,

> but I do know there have been times that the decisions they've made, if they would have asked teacher input it would've gone a lot better, because when you're sitting in the central office and you make a decision as to what they should do as whole in the classroom you don't get the full effect of not being there. (Joseph, Ridge High School)

This educator went on to say that many decisions do not account for the different demographics of schools within the system. He stated that

> ... Our other county school has maybe nine-hundred to a thousand students, where we have two to three hundred and some decisions like that, with the numbers, and like you said, the different race and all the other things factors in, it just does not work. (Joseph, Ridge High School)

Many of the staff and faculty expressed concern with the one-size-fits-all approach to solving the educational problems, they believe that each school system and schools within the same school system have unique problems that require differentiated solutions.

Limited Resources

Fifty-seven percent (57%) of the participants identified is the lack of adequate resources to meet the needs of their students and to fulfil the expectations of the communities as a challenge, which is exasperated by the very nature of rural communities. These small rural communities have a very limited tax base and with the loss of industry since the adoption of NAFTA these communities suffered a distortional loss of employment opportunities and a subsequent loss of population. A key stakeholder from one community stated the problem as he saw it is, "…the number one issue. We don't have a lot of people paying sales tax, we don't have a lot of people paying property tax…that's why economic development is important because it effects so many things" (Ryan, Stakeholder Next Door High School).

Limited resources hinders the schools ability to provide for their students and in these high-poverty, high-minority rural schools the need is great. The State of Alabama uses a school funding formula that is based on student enrollment without considering the needs of the student body. Unlike wealthier communities which support their schools with local taxes, in addition to the taxes received from the state, these schools are almost completely dependent on state funding for providing educational opportunities to meet the needs of their students, and this funding tends to be inadequate. One teacher stated,

> Even though we are a small school and in a state our teachers are funded by our
> enrollment and our enrollment is hurting us... we do the bare minimum of what we can

offer our students. And that each teacher, like take from me, I teach six different levels. (Candace, Buddy High School)

Another teacher lamented "…the fact that we don't have the funds to hire more highly educated teachers, that's one hindrance (Joseph, Ridge High School). These schools are stretching teachers to ensure they can meet the needs of their students. These participant schools lack the ability to provide programs to enable their students, who often begin school without the basic skills necessary, to remediate educational shortfalls, as one teacher stated, "…it's just that sometimes our kids come to us so far behind… Sometimes they're already behind when they come to you, which if you're teaching, you only have a 180 days…" (Jackie, Buddy High School). Staff and faculty from all the schools expressed concern with their inability to provide after school activities. As one individual stated,

> We used to have a tutoring program a few years back that we no longer have, because of funding. In addition, when we did have that, the buses would stay over, so a lot of it, it's because of funding and transportation. (Jason, Buddy High School)

Two final concerns related to limited resources, expressed primarily by the key stakeholders from the communities in which the participant schools were located, were the condition of the facilities and along with some of the staff and faculty, the lack of adequate teaching resources. One key community stakeholder believed "We're in a county that has very aging infrastructure for our schools…" (Deborah, Community Stakeholder Next Door High School). More specifically many of the stakeholders believed that in their opinions the condition of the schools physical plant was hurting the recruitment of businesses and industry. Ryan shared, "… I would like to see new capital improvements… I don't think we have that wow factor capital improvement wise" (Ryan, Community Stakeholder of Ridge High School). The

community stakeholders were not only concerned with the physical appearance of the schools facilities they also expressed concern with the lack of funding for teaching materials and classroom supplies. One community stakeholder believed that, "…what would really help our schools …is more capital.… We have good administrators, we have good teachers, but a lot of times those teachers are pulling money out of their own pockets to supply classroom resources (Deborah, Next Town Stakeholder). One of the support personal griped "…teachers are always complaining they need more [supplies and money]" (Diandra, Support Staff Next Door High School). The limited resources were most evident in the funding system for teachers in these small rural schools. As Candace stated,

> …even though we are a small school and in a state our teachers are funded by our enrollment and our enrollment is hurting us because…we are to the bare minimum of what we can offer our students, and that each teacher, like take from me, I teach six different levels. (Candace, Buddy High School)

The lack of resources on all levels is hurting the delivery of a quality education in the participant schools.

Teacher Attitudes

Research indicated that teachers have an impact on student learning and achievement. Forty-three percent (43%) of the participants identified teacher attitudes as a contributing factor in student learning and achievement. The one recurring theme involving faculty stemmed from a pervasive sense of discouragement among some of the teachers. This perception of a sense of discouragement emerged across the spectrum of the participants. A prominent factor in this feeling was the current emphasis on measuring and publically displaying student achievement data and its connection to on teacher/school performance. Talking about this, Chrissy stated:

> There was a beat down feeling… we were trying so many different things that what am I supposed to focus on? What is it that's really important? I couldn't get a clear picture….

127

It's like you can't succeed, you're not going to be good enough. You're not, period…

(Chrissy, Next Door High School)

This sense of discouragement appears to stem, in part, from the fact that change is hard and it seems to be constant. Participates expressed the idea that any change disrupts the teacher's normal classroom routines. Leslie put it this way, "…most times once you've got in your zone, you don't want to implement anything new…because it just messes with your flow" (Leslie, Next Door High School). As Samuel points out, "sometimes it's teachers, his staff is just as worse as some of the students" (Samuel, Parent of Buddy High School). This sense of discouragement, in some cases has resulted in an attitude of complacency within the school.

This attitude of complacency results in a lack of faculty engagement and encouragement of these students. As Shauna (Ridge High School) shared, "They [teachers] don't see that their attitude towards the kids creates the attitude the kid has towards school and the teachers." Leslie agreed stating, "…we've had some teachers that are kind of just complacent, did not want to change, and even if it's not a drastic change, just a slight change…" (Leslie, Next Door High School). The student's perception of the staff and faculties attitude has an impact on student attitudes, "…some of the teachers are old school…they're stuck back there and they got to bump it up…" (Jason, Parent of Buddy High School). Even some parents interviewed expressed concern that the teacher's attitudes were having a significant negative impact on student learning and achievement. Dawn stated her concern about teachers attitudes when she shared, "…teachers that haven't put in the effort that they should. Some that are just there for the paycheck" (Dawn, Parent of Next Door High School). Another parent who volunteered at the school displayed displeasure with the attitudes of teachers by stating,

128

I have a problem with that. If I can take out most of my time, my busy schedule, to come

down and work with them (students) or if I have to work with them individually, I should

look at some of the professionals doing so as well… (Samuel, Parent of Buddy High

School)

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to determine what challenges high-achieving, high-

poverty, and high-minority rural high schools in Alabama encountered in their quest to provide a

high quality education for their students. This research identified three (3) themes, with eight (8)

sub-themes, that the stakeholders of the participant schools believed were challenges to

improving teaching, student learning, and achievement. These themes, sub-themes and the

percent of respondents who identified them are presented in Table ??. These findings are

discussed in detail in the sections that follow.

All of the participant schools, to differing degrees, faced the challenges identified during

this research. However, the research findings did not indicate that stakeholders perceived other

challenges that have been identified in the existing literature as being a problem for them. While

the existing research indicates that these schools have highly transient populations (Johnson,

Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014), demographic makeup of the three participant schools have

been relatively stable for about twenty years or longer. Likewise, while the research identifies

high teacher turnover as a difficulty (Gibbs, 2000 & Harmon, 2001), many of these three

participant schools had a very stable staff and faculty, many with tenures in excess of twenty

years. Additionally, while two of the principals were new to their positions, they had been a part

of the school staff and faculty for twenty plus years.

Finally, inadequate professional development is identified as a barrier to schools and student success in the existing literature (Williams & King, 2002) the staff and faculty did not identify this as a problem and in fact indicated they had multiple professional development opportunities, and many also discussed attending university classes and conducting book studies to supplement the professional development provided by their schools.

The fact that these elements were not identified as barriers to success may have some bearing on the fact that these schools appear to have been able to overcome the barriers they faced. This bears further examination and research.

Student Centered Issues

While the challenge of family dynamics is not new in the literature, typically low parental educational levels, unemployment/underemployment, parental apathy, and absentee parents all are extensively discussed in the existing research. However, this study identified a disturbing trend of active parental discouragement of students working to be successful in school, as well as in life beyond high school. Some of the discouragement can be very subtle, such as parents with a negative attitude and it can be as brazen. While it is true that not all, not even the majority, of the students attending these participant schools have parents expressing these blatantly anti education attitudes, the data suggest that there are a number of families who espouse this philosophy. This philosophy also spreads through peer pressure from student to student. As Kathy stated, "…because it's not the cool thing to do. Everybody's not doing it or they don't think it's cool" (Kathy, Next Door High School).

Most of the students attending these participating high schools come from economically disadvantaged families with parents working long hours and often multiple jobs, which may keep them from providing the appropriate level of parental supervision. Often there is nobody at

home when their students get out of school to help them with their studies, homework, or resolve

issues and conflicts appropriately. These participating high schools are challenged with not only

providing a basic education to their students but also teaching many of the soft skills (dress,

hygiene, courtesy, and other soft skills) necessary to be successful. The challenge of addressing

all of these student's needs, taking a "…holistic approach…" (Leslie, Next Door High School),

places additional stress on the already limited resources available for these high-poverty, high-

minority schools and places the staff and faculty in a position of taking on the roles of both

teacher and parent in many cases.

School Level Challenges

The analysis of the data involving challenges within the staff and faculty of the

participant schools indicated that the apparent laser-like focus of many key policy and decision

makers on the latest and greatest educational panacea has resulted in a high level of resistance

and confusion for the staff and faculty. The constantly shifting winds of the "fix" for all the

challenges in educating student's results in confusion, frustration, and a feeling of

discouragement for the staff and faculty. Many of the participants expressed the concern that

they really did not know what to focus on or what was really important. There was a part of the

staff and faculty of each participant school that did not want any change; they outright resisted

change for the sake of resisting. However, many of the staff and faculty expressed the concern

that many policy and decision makers simply jumped on the bandwagon of some new idea or

program they learned about at a conference or meeting. There was the belief that no one was

asking the right questions about the utility of the program for their particular school or student

population.

It is clear in the available existing research that schools can be very different, even within the same district (Stoll, 2009). This lack of differentiation can result in a lack of teacher buy in and a feeling of discouragement that results from the failure of these one-size-fits-all policy decisions that do not meet the needs of the particular schools student population.

Community

The perceptions of many of the school level stakeholders toward community involvement and support of the school is mixed at best. All three schools have businesses that are involved and support the local schools however, the greatest support and enthusiasm comes from the minority owned and operated business in the communities surrounding the school. Many of the school level stakeholders believed that some businesses failed to realize that while their children were being educated in the private schools many, if not most, of their employees are being educated in the public school they chose to ignore. Many times the school level stakeholders expressed concern that there was a level of racism in these business owners' decisions to limit their support of the public schools, one white teacher went so far as to call the private schools, racist academies.

To be sure, the challenges in all three participating school communities are not a one-sided issues. Many of the community stakeholders expressed frustration with the lack of interaction of the school level leadership with the community civic and businesses organizations. Issues can range from outright racism to a poor image of a school that resulted from mismanagement of donated funds and items by someone connected to the school, either a school employee or a booster club member. The solution to the school-community challenge will require effort by the school level leadership and the business community to resolve these challenges to benefit not only the students but also the community, business, and industry.

The most significant challenge facing the participant school is the pressure these students face, both active and passive, not to meet their educational potential. Many of the participants discussed the family environment that is a major influence on these students. There is a belief by many that they will never increase their standard of living so why are they worried about an education, when they are stuck in poverty and there is no way out.

Implications for Practice

The ability to generalize these findings is limited; however, the findings do provide some insight into how to overcome these challenges to ensure higher levels of student learning and achievement. The perceptions of the participants interviewed for this research indicated that the greatest challenge, sixty-two percent of those interviewed, they faced were student-centered challenges. While this is very difficult to overcome, the staff and faculty interviewed believed they could make a difference. Many of the stakeholders interviewed believed that the home environment was the biggest challenge for the student and school to overcome and the one thing schools could not control. The stakeholders believed that in the end the solution to combating student apathy was ensuring they put the needs, not the wants, of their students first. Placing the needs of the students at the top while acting as a successful role model provides students the example they need. Many understood that no matter how hard the staff and faculty tried or wanted students to become dedicated students it was going to take time to undo the negative attitudes and work habits. The lack of parental concern and involvement in their child's education can be a mitigating factor the schools will have difficulty overcoming. His message is celebrate the small steps forward and do not get frustrated with the slow movement forward.

Of the school-level challenges, school leadership has the challenge of molding policy directives from their central office and State Department of Education to fit their particular staff,

faculty, and student body. The real challenge is to differentiate the often one-size-fits-all policy

to fit the unique characteristics of their school. The principals participating in this study found

the sweet spot in the policies and tweaked them to meet their needs. Additionally, the challenge

of teacher attitude is tied in part to this one-size-fits-all mentally, with the constant shifting

solutions for educational challenges, teachers do not have a strong grasp on what is the best

practice of the day. Often times it appears that the foundation of our educational programs are

built on shifting sand, not a solid footing. Providing more local input into curriculum decision-

making and selecting programs to meet the needs of the local student body is imperative to

improving teaching, student learning, and achievement while improving teacher buy-in to the

programs. School leadership should work with their central office to ensure the fixes are tailored

and flexible enough to meet the needs of their particular school.

Each of the participant school existed in a divided community where most of the minority

students attended public school and most of the White students attended the local private

schools. The solution to the school-community challenge will require effort by the school level

leadership and the business community to resolve these challenges to benefit not only the

students but also the community, business, and industry. The key to creating community

involvement in the schools is a robust effort to involve community stakeholders, not just parents,

in the decision-making process. One participant school was working with the town government

in the restoration of a building that was designated to become the only local food store. It is

important for school leadership to become involve in the community helping to create an

atmosphere of acceptance and mutual respect within the entire community. It should be noted

that none of the elected officials contacted in any of the communities participated in this study.

Future Research

While this study focused on the high-poverty, high-minority, high-achieving rural high schools in Alabama. While this research did verify some findings of previous research that focused on rural school, it also discovered some interesting areas for future study. The need to further study the phenomenon of parents actively discouraging their children's academic learning and achievement. An additional area of future study is how differentiation of policy and programs, providing more local control, to match the needs of individual schools and their student bodies could yield a significant impact on closing the achievement gap. Finally, do teachers educated in Historically Black Colleges and University have a greater impact on the student learning and achievement.

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this study was to gather the perceptions of the participant schools' key stakeholders to identify the challenges these rural high schools either have overcome or are struggling with to ensure the greatest possible level of student learning and achievement. The very nature of qualitative research makes the generalizability of these finding difficult. However, while the population and sample size is relatively small, the researcher was able to collect a great deal of thick and rich data from the participants at each school. Thus, these findings provide a window into the challenges these high-poverty, high-minority, and high-achieving rural school in Alabama are facing in their quest to close the existing achievement gap to ensure their students have the tools necessary to be successful both in school and as productive adults after they graduate.

The findings of this research suggest that it is critical for the leadership of these high-poverty, high-minority rural schools in Alabama to understand not only the educational aspects

of creating a high-achieving student body but also the dynamic forces outside of the school that impact student learning and achievement. There is a significant impact of family dynamics, the lack of a differentiated approach, and community attitude have on the ability of a school to create the appropriate environment and climate necessary to ensure students are successful. These findings suggest that the challenges facing the participant schools require a set of solutions that are tailored or differentiated to meet the needs of that particular student body and community. The findings should provide a window for thinking about these issues and for fostering future research about them beyond Alabama in order to foster greater success in rural school throughout the nation.

Bibliography

Arnold, M. L. (2000). *Rural schools: Diverse needs call for flexible policies.* Aurora: Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED441656.pdf

Bernard, H. R., & Ryan, G. W. (2010). *Analyzing qualitative data: Systematic approaches.* Loa Angeles: SAGE.

Carey, R. L. (2014, June). A cultural analysis of the achievement gap discourse: Challenging the language and labels used in the work of school reform. *Urban Education, 49*(4), 440–468. doi:10.1177/0042085913507459.

Carter, P. L. (2012). *Stubborn roots: Race culture, and inequality in the U.S. and South African schools.* New York, New York, United States: Oxford University Press.

Chapin, J. (2006). The achievement gap in social studies and science starts early: Evidence from the early childhood longitudinal study. *The Social Studies, 2*, 231–238.

Cresswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

DeCuir-Gunby, J., Marshall, P., & McCulloch, A. (2011). Developing and using a codebook for the analysis of interview data: An example from a professional development research project. *Field Methods, 23*(2), 136–155.

Gibbs, R. (2000). The challenge ahead for rural schools. *Forum for Applied Research and Public Policy*, 82–87. Retrieved November 5, 2013.

Harmon, H. L. (2001). Education issues in rural America. *ARSI Conference on Understanding Achievement in Science and Mathematics in Rural School Settings* (pp. 1–18). Lexington: ERIC.

Howley, C. (2001). Understanding the circumstances of rural schooling: The parameters of respectful research. *Understanding Achievement in Science and Mathematics in Rural Schools* (pp. 1–8). Lexington: ERIC.

Irvin, M. J., Byun, S., Meece, J. L., Farmer, T. W., & Hutchins, B. C. (2012). Educational barriers of rural youth: Relation of individual and contextual difference variables. *Journal of Career Assessment, 20*(1), 71–87. doi:10.1177/1069072711420105

Johnson, J., & Strange, M. (2009). *Why rural matters 2007: State and regional challenges and opportunities.* Arlington, VA: The Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from The Rural School and Community Trust: http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2312

Johnson, J., Showalter, D., Kein, R., & Lester, C. (2014). *Why rural matters 2013–2014: The condition of rural education in the 50 states.* Washington DC: Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/2013-14-Why-Rural-Matters.pdf

Kuel, R. A. (2012). The rhetorical presidency and "accountability" in education reform: Comparing the presidential rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. *Southern Communication Journal, 77*(4), 329–348. doi:10.1080/1041794X.2012.678926

Leithwood, K. (2010). Characteristics of school districts that are exceptionally effective in closing the achievement gap. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 9*(3), 245–291. doi:10.1080/15700761003731500.

Lewis, P., Thornhill, A., & Saunders, M. (2007). *Research methods for business students.* UK: Pearson Education.

Masumoto, M., & Brown-Welty, S. (2009). Case study of leadership practices and school-community interrelationships in high-performing, high-poverty, rural California high schools. *Jurnal of Research in Rural Education, 24*(1), 1–18.

Maxwell, G. M., Huggins, K. S., & Scheurich, J. J. (2010). How one historically underperfrming diverse rural high school achieved a successful turnaround. *Planning and Changing, 3*(4), 161–186. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ952379.pdf

Patton, M. Q. (2001). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed. ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Phillips, K. J. (2010). What does "highly qualified" mean for student achievement? Evaluating the relationships between teacher quality indicators and at-risk students' mathematics and reading achievement gains in first grade. *The Elementary School Journal, 110*(4), 464–493. Retrieved June 21, 2014, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/651192

Rosenberg, L., Christianson, M. D., Angus, M. H., & Rosenthal, E. (2014). *A focused look at rural schools receiving school improvement grants.* Washington DC: National Center for Education Evaluation. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20144013/pdf/20144013.pdf

Stoll, L. (2009, April 8). Capacity building for school improvement or capacity for learning? A changing landscape. *Journal of Educational Change, 10*(2–3), 115–127. doi:10.1007/s10833-009-9104-3

Theobald, P., & Wood, K. (2010). Learning to be rural: Identity lessons from history, schooling, and the U.S. corporate media. In K. A. Jackson (Ed.), *Rural education for the twenty-first century: Identity, place, and community in a globalizing world* (pp. 17–33). University Park, PA: Pennsylvaina State University Press.

U.S. Department of Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform.* Washington DC: The National Commission on Excellence in Education.

U.S. Department of Education. (2006). *Rural education in America.* Retrieved from National Center for Educational Statistics: https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp

U.S. Department of Education. (2015). *Rural education in America.* Retrieved from Status of Rural Education in America: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_tla.asp

Whitehurst, G. (2002). Improving teacher quality. *Journal of State Government, 75*(3), 12–15. Retrieved June 21, 2014, from http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.spot.lib.auburn.edu/ehost/ resultsadvanced?sid=b525ac56-b20d-4c66-b075-94e0bb29f8ed%40sessionmgr 4003&vid=21&hid=4210&bquery=(Improving+Teacher+Quality)+AND+(AU+(Whiteh urst))&bdata=JmRiPWFwaCZkYj1sMGgmZGI9YXdoJmRiPWFobCZkYj12dGgmZ

Wilcox, K. C., Angelis, J. I., Baker, L., & Lawson, H. A. (2014). The value of people, place and possibilities: A multiple case study of rural high school completion. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 29*(9), 1–18. Retrieved from http://jrre.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/29-9.pdf

Williams, A. (2011). A call for change: Narrowing the achievement gap between white and minority students. *The Clearing House, 84*(2), 65–71. doi:10.1080/00098655.2010.511308

Williams, D. T., & King, J. R.-E. (2002). *Rural school leadership in the deep south: The double-edged legacy of school desegregation.* Washington DC: The Rural Schools and Community Trust. Retrieved from http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/Double-Edged_Leg

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

MANUSCRIPT 2: FACILITATING FACTORS IN CREATING HIGH-STUDENT
ACHIEVEMENT IN ALABAMA'S HIGH POVERTY, HIGH MINORITY, HIGH
ACHIEVING RURAL SCHOOLS

Introduction

Historical events in the United States have resulted in the growing involvement and
intervention of the federal government into the American educational system (McNergney,
2001). This increased involvement and its corresponding massive influx of federal spending
have resulted in a demand for accountability (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), increased
attention and involvement of state governors and legislators (Groen, 2012), and the rise of the
standards movement (Hirschland & Steinmo, 2003). A major impact of the standards movement
has been moving the focus of education away from inputs and placing the emphasis on
educational outcomes, primarily measured by standardized tests (Kuel, 2012).

The accountability movement in the United States has led national recognition to the fact
that there is an identifiable achievement gap between middle class White students and minority
and low-income students. This achievement gaps grows as students' progress through their
education (Williams, 2011). Although there are many potential causes for this disparity — many
of which are rooted in the history of this nation, cultural values and social issues such as poverty
— there is no agreement about the root causes or any sustainable solution for closing the
achievement gap (Carey, 2014).

Currently the focus of the discussions and research for closing this achievement gap are centered on the schools. There are those who believe that, if the schools did a better job, the achievement gap would disappear. Although the ability of schools and schools systems to close this achievement gap, is complicated by the rapidly increasing number of minority and low socioeconomic students (Murnane & Steele, 2007), some schools are successfully meeting this challenge and there is a growing body of research about the factors inherent in their success. This study examined some of these schools in a rural setting, a population seldom examined, in order to identify how and why they were able to succeed.

Purpose of the Study

This research was part two of a three part study investigating successful high minority, high poverty rural schools in Alabama. The purpose of this phase of the study was to identify the reasons these schools were successful in fostering student achievement. This study sought to understand this phenomenon from the perceptions of some of the key stakeholders engaged in the process.

Population and Sample

Although most research about rural schools considers them as one type of school, the National Center for Educational Statics (2006) identifies three types of rural locale codes. Rural fringe is a rural school that exists in an area within five (5) miles of an urban location. Rural distant schools operate more than five (5), but less than twenty-five (25) miles from an urban area. Schools classified as rural remote are schools that exist more than twenty-five (25) miles from an urban area. The sampling for this study included all three types of schools. This was done in order to assure that the results would be representative of all types of rural schools and to

141

conduct an analysis of any differences in the perceptions within these types of schools to address the third part of this study (Manuscript 3).

Criterion sampling (Patton, 2001) was used to select the schools that met the criteria of high-poverty, high-minority, high-achieving rural high schools. A three-step process was used to select the schools for inclusion in this study. An analysis of the National Center for Educational Statics database for the school year 2003–2004 identified two hundred thirty-four (234) rural schools, with a locale code of 41, rural fringe; 42, rural distant; and 43, rural remote in Alabama. Once all the rural schools in Alabama were identified, the researcher eliminated all the schools that did not have a minimum of sixty-five percent (65%) free/reduced price lunch. This minimum of sixty-five percent (65%) free and reduced price lunch requirement ensured only the top one-third (1/3) level of poverty school were included in the study. This resulted in a pool of fifty-six (56). After the researcher identified the top thirty-three percent (33%) of the high poverty rural schools, with a minimum minority population of sixty-five percent (65%) resulting in a pool of sixteen (16) schools. Finally, schools failing to meet one-hundred percent (100%) of their Annual Yearly progress goals were eliminated resulting in a pool of twelve (12) schools. Of the twelve schools, two (2) were rural fringe schools, four (4) were rural distant schools, and six (6) were rural remote schools. Schools were contacted and asked to participate in the study.

A total of six (6) schools were contacted, one rural distant and two rural remote schools declined to participate in the study. Once the schools were selected and permission was obtained to conduct the research at the school, a combination of random purposeful and snowball sampling were used to identify the actual participants. A review of the school's website and the local phone directory, retrieved electronically, were used to identify key stakeholders. Individuals were selected for participation based on their position or knowledge of the school.

Each participant was asked to sign an Institutional Review Board Consent Form prior to the start of the interview. During each interview the participants were asked to identify others who may have an interest of knowledge useful for inclusion in this study.

Significance of the Study

Much of the research conducted related to creating high quality schools in which children from high-poverty, high-minority backgrounds succeed has been conducted at urban/suburban elementary and middle schools and it is estimated that only about six percent (6%) of all educational research is conducted in rural areas (Hardre & Sullivan, 2008). This is a significant shortcoming, as in the United States there are approximately 7,810 rural school districts, comprising about fifty-seven percent of all school districts in the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). There are approximately 9,765,385 students or about twenty-one percent (21%) of the United States student population enrolled in these schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

The traditional southern area of the United States is home to about twenty-three percent (23%) of all rural school districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). These southern rural school districts are responsible for educating nearly thirty-three percent of all the region's school students (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). The communities these schools are located in are often economically depressed with very high unemployment rates, high percentages of adults without a high school diploma or General Educational Equivalent (GED), and high minority student populations. Often these students are performing below their urban/suburban counterparts (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). These communities account for about thirty-six percent (36%) of all school dropouts (Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009).

In Alabama, where this study occurred, the rural student population is forty-two percent (42%) (Johnson, Showalter, Kein, and Lester, 2014). Many of these schools serve high minority and high poverty populations and the schools tend to be identified having low student achievement on standardized tests and low high school completion rates. However, there are some of these schools, there are being successful in fostering student achievement. This study looked at some of these schools, in settings that are not generally researched, in order to determine what they were doing to achieve this success.

Defying the Odds

There is evidence and research that indicates that schools can improve student learning and achievement by creating environments that support these students. This involves placing an emphasis on academics, collective efficacy or a desire to succeed, and faculty trust (Brown & White, 2014). The focus of academics in schools must include not only the students, but the staff and faculty as well. Shause (1995) identified three areas schools must focus on to improve achievement: an emphasis on rigor, appropriate discipline and attendance, and instructional practices. Along with increasing rigor and improving the teaching methods and strategies, the schools that have been the most successful in closing the achievement gap have placed an emphasis on celebrating student and faculty success (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillo, & Urban, 2011). Along the path of improved academic achievement, many students report significant benefit from encouragement. Many minority students identified staff and faculty encouragement as the single most important motivating factor in their improved achievement (Cooper, 2007). It is imperative that schools recognize, in a diverse student body, there are different motivating factors, and they develop and implement programs designed to support those unique motivators (Noonan, 2014). The bottom line, it is essential for schools, staff, and faculty to stop using

deficit thinking or blaming low achievement on the students (Leithwood, 2010). Porter-Magee stated it this way, "I am always fascinated by the degree to which many educators absolve themselves from all blame when students and schools fail" (2004, p. 26). In many high-achieving schools, the message of high expectations and a belief that failure is not an option is loud and clear. A part of this belief in high-expectations is an environment that encourages innovation as opposed to a mentality of "that's the way we have always done it". The use of innovative ideas and strategies can be unnerving, high-functioning schools have an environment that encourages this step with a no-harm no-foul policy, making it easier for teachers to step out of their normal comfort zone. When staff and faculty can be innovative without fear of failure or ridicule, there are significant increases in student learning and achievement. Teachers can have a significant impact of the learning and achievement of their students through a variety of ways.

Teachers impact student learning and achievement when they use an array of instructional methods and strategies, such as direct instruction, individual instruction, and constructivist methods (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). The goal of these teachers is to ensure their students develop their critical thinking, problem solving, and dialectical reasoning skills that are necessary for the students to be successful after they graduate from high school. These teachers spend more time teaching and less time on task such as classroom management (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). In addition to providing their students with the educational skills necessary, many of these successful teachers also project a genuine concern about their students and their student know they truly care. The teachers who project this concern have higher student achievement than the teachers whom the students do not believe care about their success in school or after graduation (Strange, 2011). In the end, to be successful these high-poverty, high-minority, and high achieving schools have to change the students, and parent's

145

attitudes, and create a sense of self-confidence and esteem in the students. The school had to overcome the attitude of low expectations by students, parents, staff, faculty, and community (Williams & King, 2002).

These high-achieving schools encouraged parental involvement in their effort to change the attitude of apathy and failure (Maxwell, Huggins, & Scheurich, 2010). This effort included staff and faculty participation in the community outside of the normal school day and was critical to building the necessary trusting relationships necessary to improve student learning and achievement (Carter, 2010). Building trust and relationships with the parents is more about gaining parental support than it is about their involvement (Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009). Because there is a direct connection between the level parental education and their attitudes concerning education and their children's achievement (Semke & Sheridan, 2012), it is critical that the school leadership and faculty nurture these trusting relationships and involve parents in the decision making process to the extent possible. A key ingredient in creating these trusting relationships is a pervasive culture of nurturing and supporting student learning and achievement within the school (Chance & Sequra, 2009). Within many high-achieving schools, faculty and staff make time to discuss at-risk students and provide tutoring before and after school as well as during lunch (Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014). In addition to focusing on student learning and achievement, a focus on the learning and professional development of the staff and faculty is critical to creating a school that is student focused and high-achieving (Woolley, 2006). Unfortunately, while parental involvement is critical and has a positive impact on student achievement (Jaynes, 2005, 2007). In these high-poverty, high-minority schools parental involvement tends to be very low for several reasons: poorly educated parents, working long hours often at great distances, and a plethora of other family and social issues.

Many high achieving schools and school systems not only place a high priority on student learning and achievement but also on the learning and achievement of the staff and faculty, learning is critical for everybody in the school (Savas, 2013). In many high-achieving schools professional development is the key to creating a learning organization and improving student learning and achievement. The goal of any professional development program is the identification of weak or ineffective teaching methods or strategies, replacing them with high quality research based methods, and strategies that will ensure the needs of the students are met (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). It is important that the schools create "…high-quality, locally relevant professional development…" (Williams & King, 2002, p. 23) to meet the needs of the students. Professional development must be tailored to meet the specific needs of the students, like classroom instruction it must be differentiated to the needs of the school's faculty and students (Kein & Riodan, 2009). To be effective and lasting, professional development should include, "…coaching, training, extended time devoted to learning new content and pedagogy and the opportunity for reflection with peers" (Klein & Riordan, 2009, p. 62). The process of reflection and debriefing enables the learner to transfer their new knowledge (Klein & Riordan, 2009). Learning and inquiry are critical for a school to "…improve, innovate, and react flexibly…" (Collinson, 2010, p. 206) to the changing environment. However, for the staff and faculty to be willing to innovate and work to improve their teaching there must be a no harm, no foul, and no blame policy (Leithwood, 2010). When staff and faculty are using innovative ideas school leadership must be willing to accept some failure in their quest for improved student learning and achievement.

There is no magic recipe or formula that will ensure a successful school and high-achieving students (Darling-Hammond, Ross, & Milliken, 2006). However, unless schools break

the old patterns of failure and apathy and ensure the students are encouraged and the staff and faculty understand the unique needs of the student body and develop the trusting relationships with the students, their parents, and the community, schools are doomed to continue to fail their students and the community they serve.

Methodology

An exploratory qualitative multi-case study methodology was used for this study. Case study format was chosen because the researcher was interested in developing a better understanding of the real life settings or situations (Yen, 2009) of learning and achievement in Alabama's rural schools. The exploratory case format was used because the purpose of the study was to provide a better understanding of rural schools and not to develop any final conclusions or definitive solutions (Brown, 2006).

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected for this research gleaned from primarily from interviews. School documents and websites were also examined to glean an additional understanding of the settings and to add information to the process. Data were analyzed in an iterative process, or what Cresswell (2013) called the data analysis spiral, of collecting, reviewing, analyzing, reflecting, and sense-making on the data collected. The reduction, simplification, and transformation of the data were accomplished in a multi-step process.

Each interview began with an introduction to the researcher, research purpose, and the specific reason the participant was asked for an interview. The participant was advised that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw their consent at any time. After the interview was completed, the researcher thanked each participant and informed them of the process and what they could expect from the researcher as the project progressed.

An initial reading of the data was conducted to get a feel for the information and as a refresher to develop an understanding of the data (Cresswell, 2013). During this initial reading of the data, a running commentary was made in the margins (Bernard & Ryan, 2012). The second reading was used to conduct open-ended coding, breaking the raw data down into ideas and meanings (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). It was during this process that emergent codes were developed (Berg & Lune, 2012). Finally, a pass was made through the data from an a-priori perspective. These a-priori codes were developed in advance based on our understanding of the current research using the conceptual framework (Bernard & Ryan, 2010)

Findings

During the course of this research project, the researcher identified four (4) recurring themes from the perceptions of key stakeholders about why the participant schools have been successful in improving student learning and achievement in spite of the significant challenges these schools face in their effort to provide a quality education. These major recurring themes include: student focused educators, school based strategies, administrative leadership, and curriculum delivery. Each of these four (4) major recurring themes were further broken down into two (2) or three (3) supporting concepts. It is important to note that although these themes and the factors they represent are interrelated, they are presented as separate and distinct for purposes of discussion. Although the researcher did not specifically ask respondents to identify the most and least important factors in fostering student success, the percentage of individuals identifying each factor is included in the findings and the discussion. The themes and sub-themes and the percent of responses for each of them is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

Success Perceptions and Sub-themes

Student Focused Educators (68%)	Curriculum Delivery (61%)	School Based Strategies (52%)	Administrative Leadership (44%)
Concern for Students 77%	Programs and Processes 80%	Teaching Approach 55%	Collaboration 41%
Commitment to Student Success 60%	Community and Parental Involvement 60%	School Expectations 46%	Shared Leadership 51%
	Professional Development 44%	Instructional Focus 59%	Approachable Leadership 41%

Student-Focused Educators

The perception identified as the most important contributing factor to the success of the participant schools were the student-focused educators. An analysis of the interview data indicated that sixty-eight percent (68%) of the individuals interviewed identified this theme as a factor in the school's success. This theme is broken down into a concern for students and a commitment to student success. Concern for students revolves around a holistic vision for the students and commitment to student success generally focused on academic achievement.

Concern for students. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of the individuals interviewed identified the concern school personnel had for students as essential for their success. A prominent perceived challenge facing the three participant schools is the lack of parental

engagement and support for schooling these students receive. Therefore, the faculty and staff of these schools often take it upon themselves to "…stand in the gap of parents…" (Chrissy, Next Door High School) or as another stakeholder stated, "some of them (students) come from some rough backgrounds, but we try to instill them that where you come from doesn't dictate where you end up" (Shauna, Ridge High School). The level of support and caring attitude was obvious to many of the key stakeholders as Ryan pointed out "… I know our schools provide every opportunity they can for students but they can't be there 24/7 for them unfortunately. While I do know some teachers try to be, they get attached to them and love them…" (Ryan, Community Stakeholder of Ridge High School). Many of the participants interviewed for this research held the belief that teaching was more than just about conveying knowledge and sticking to the Alabama course of study, it was about developing the caring relationship with the students. One teacher stated it this way:

> …our philosophy is not giving all the material things just giving yourself. I told them that's the most valuable thing you can give is yourself. I always tell them that once you put that relationship in sharing all that time, sharing the ups and downs. Just like having a family away from your immediate family. (Shauna, Ridge High School)

Meeting the needs of the individual students begins with developing as much background information as possible to understand students in the classroom. About this, one teacher shared, "I try my best to relate to any kid, first day I give out a sheet [asking] "Do I know enough about you to teach you?…I try to find some way that I can relate to that child" (Leslie, Next Door High School). Developing this deeper understanding of the students enables the teachers to meet the students where they are and support their learning from that point, or as one teacher pointed out,

151

"…we're just making sure that they [students] see we're concerned…" (Heather, Buddy High School).

The concept of concern for the students goes beyond just the academics and their achievement, it is about helping the students develop the skills necessary to be successful in life after graduating from high school. As TaKara (Buddy High School) stated, "I'm trying to mold them and give them tools that's going to help them survive their life…I try to give them the tools to try to manage and handle adversity, to make real life decisions…" Talking about student needs, another faculty member said that these students attending are just seeking someone who is "…willing to listen" (Tim, Ridge High School). Said another, these students just need "…words of encouragement and motivation" and someone who will help, "build their self-esteem a little higher than it already is" (Kathy, Next Door High School). Participants indicated their role is more than just teaching the students assigned. It is about meeting the needs of the students, "…we have to know what's important and we have to make time, when it comes to our kids we have to make time" (Jodie, a parent from Ridge High School). As Joseph from Ridge high noted, this concern sometimes includes advocating students to their parents. He shared, "…There have even been times that we have to advocate to their parents, because some children have a problem communicating with their parents" (Joseph, Ridge High School). Many of the staff and faculty interviewed also believe that part of this caring role includes advocating student needs to the administration, as one stated:

On the other hand, I think sometimes we have to be that advocate for the administration, "Hey, remember, I know we are really concerned about ACT scores, but for 70 percent of my kids, it doesn't matter worth a hill of beans. What are we going to do about bringing

job fairs here so that they can get a job and support a family? They're not leaving, so come on." (Chrissy, Next Door High School)

It appears that many of the parents recognize the concern school personnel have for the students. Dawn stated "I know that the teachers care about them so that they implement all of these programs to help them and they motivate them to want to do their best" (Dawn, Parent Next Door High School).

Commitment to student success. The second subtheme in the overall category of school concern is commitment to student success. There are several facets of being committed to student success and sixty percent (60%) of the participants identified this as a vital factor in student and school success.   When asked about the high level of student achievement on teacher stated, " How we've maintained staying off that school improvement, I think it had to do with, number one, the teachers whether they were forced to do what they needed to do or took that responsibility for that crop of students" (Zophiah, Buddy High School). Across the board, teachers are identified as the key factor in achieving and maintaining high levels of student learning and achievement, "I would have to say that the reason for the success is because the faculty … They would instill in our kids to always do their best. Lettin' them know that whatever you're trying to achieve you can" (Jodie, a parent from Ridge High School). One community stakeholder recognized that in the end it is the classroom teacher that has the greatest impact and responsibility for the level of student learning and achievement, he believed:

I think it's the teachers. I think they're the ones that are probably the lynch pin of it, because you can talk about the superintendent, you can talk about the board of education, and you could also talk about the parents. … but at the same time, I think the

153

teachers are the ones who have to juggle both sides of the spectrum. All of the pressure

is on them and it's not easy. (Ryan, Stakeholder Next Door High School)

Many of the parents interviewed believed the success of both the school and their

particular students was the direct responsibility of the teachers, Linda stated, "investment level of

the teachers…they cared and wanted students to succeed" (Linda, parent of Next Door High

School) and another added, "...it deals with caring about the students and wanting them to get all

the knowledge they need. Not letting kids slide…" (Julie, Ridge High School). Finally, an

underlying theme of many of the staff and faculty interviewed was, understanding the challenges

many of the students, having been raised in a similar environment, one teacher stated, "… I'm

from an impoverished area myself. Been brought up in poverty. My mom and dad didn't have a

high school education. My mom did finally get her GED. My dad doesn't have his high school

diploma" (Leslie, Next Door High School). Zophiah added "…the majority of the teachers here

understand what it takes to be successful" (Zophiah, Buddy High School). While the teachers

are the acknowledged lynchpins in ensuring the students are maximizing their opportunity to

learn, many of the staff and faculty of the participant schools established goals, personal,

professional, and for their students.

 Each of the participant schools along with many of the staff and faculty established

yearly goals and objective for themselves and their students. These goals range from the very

broad and general, such as:

> While our long-term goals are to ensure academic achievement, our staff is also
>
> committed to ensuring that the transition from high school to successful citizenship is
>
> highly attainable, (Ridge High School CIP)

These goals are often more personal and focused on goals the individual teacher sets, such as "I have always given myself a goal of something that I want to do that particular year as far as the student body is concerned…" (Leslie, Next Door High School). Often these individual goals are oriented toward student learning and achievement, such as setting the bar high within a classroom, "If you set the bar high kids will usually measure up" (Deborah, Next Door Stakeholder). Julie believes that most of the teachers had a "…common goal and everybody's striving to reach it" (Julie, Ridge High School).

Reaching the students attending these participant schools has required a drastic shift in providing educational services to students who, for the most part, do not have the supportive home environment that is conducive to ensuring high levels of student learning and achievement. One principal stated it very eloquently:

> It's more [about] student engagement, getting them involved. Allowing the teachers to expand their knowledge and use whatever it takes to get the kid where he needs to be. We can't just continue to go in a structured line. … We've got to reach them where they are. (Tim, Ridge High School)

It is evident that in these schools a great effort is made by the staff and faculty to ensure students have what is needed for them to be successful. These participants are, "…trying to mold them and give them the tools that's going to help them survive their life…to manage and handle adversity, to make real life decisions…" (TaKara, Buddy High School). The faculty and staff of the participant schools have "a genuine and sincere concern for the student to be successful" (Kathy, stakeholder of Next Door High School).

Curriculum Delivery

Curriculum delivery was identified as the second most important factor in participant schools successes in fostering student learning and achievement. Sixty-seven percent of the individuals interviewed identified curriculum delivery as a key reason for the schools high level of achievement. Curriculum delivery is broken down into three sub-themes: programs and processes; community and parental involvement; and professional development.

Programs and processes. Programs and processes were identified by eighty percent (80%) of the individuals interviewed as the reason for the participant schools' high level of student learning and achievement. In many of these high-poverty and high-minority communities, getting students to come to school at all was a major problem so incentive programs were implemented to get them there. This factor thus had the highest number of people sharing it as being important in school success. As one teacher noted, "even though we would love intrinsic motivation, extrinsic is where it's at, so (we created) incentive programs" (to get them here) (Chrissy, Next Door High School). These participant schools developed incentive programs to ensure the students were "…excited to come to school…" (Heather, Buddy High School). Teachers shared that students knew that the incentive programs rewarded them for doing the right thing, whether it was academics, behavior, or achievement and they appreciated the programs. Shauna believed that, "…we feel a sense of accomplishment together because we celebrate the kids and they celebrate with us…" (Shauna, Ridge High School). These incentives could be as small as the students having their name or picture on the wall, their name in the local newspaper, student of the week, or a free snack during break, but the kids "…look forward to it…it's something to take pride in" (Tim, Ridge High School). However, incentive programs are only one-type innovative programs to support and foster student success.

156

Each of the schools offered a variety of credit recovery and tutoring type programs to help the struggling students, the purpose of these programs "…we've had kids that have come in who are behind and that we've not been able to let these kids catch up…" (Ian, Next Door High School). Many of these programs were conducted during the normal school day rather than after school. This increased the number of students participating and reduced the hardship on the parents. One principal explained:

> The very first thing I did was, okay, we're taking everything off the table. Mom and Dad you don't have a say so in this here, students you don't have a say so in this here. You are in a PE class for year number four and you need one credit for PE, so now we're taking you out of this PE elective and we're putting you into a remediation course during the school day and you will stay in this remediation course until you are able to pass this course. (Ian, Next Door High School)

Another example of these type programs is having an on-site access teacher, an ACCESS classroom has computer-based courses, which enable students to make-up courses they either failed or did not take in a standard classroom for a variety of reasons. The ACCESS teacher explained his role, "I am the ACCESS teacher here, which means I do many subjects. I may be doing English 10, English 9, Geometry, whatever the ACCESS class calls for is what I do" (Joseph, Ridge High School). As the State of Alabama has transitioned, the ACT schools have used tutoring programs to help the students prepare for the exam. The participant schools have created or purchased programs to help prepare the students, "We have a new program called Ingenuity, and it assists us with the ACT prep because it has it, and the kids have the laptops that the school provides" (Julie, Ridge High School). This approach is common in all the participant schools, in many high-poverty and high-minority communities the parents are not available, at

157

home, to provide the necessary support or structure and according to Jason, "when you have that sense of structure in a school system it really helps the child" (Jason, Buddy High School).

A final program that was implemented in many schools involved mentoring students. The idea that many of the students in these participating school were in need of mentoring was pervasive. Each school's principal expressed how important mentoring was for students' personal lives and academic development. One principal believed that it was part of the role of a teacher to "…help these kids be successful in life, because that's the key. …The academic part is number one, but still you got to put those mentoring things in their minds too, to let them know they can succeed" (Tim, Ridge High School). The common thread in all three schools of these mentoring programs is the idea of developing their self-esteem:

> Instilling in children that they can. There's no such thing as "can't". Once you give
> them that self-confidence… It's about creating an environment where they can participate
> not just in sports, but in other things, where they can see that, 'Oh wow, I can do this.'
> (Jackie, Buddy High School)

The goals of these mentoring programs stressed that the students could overcome any obstacle in their way and to use the resources they had to ensure they were successful, "…no matter what you can make it. With all the drawbacks, and not having this and not having that, take what you do have and use it. Use it to the best of your ability and you can achieve" (Jodie, Parent of Ridge High School). One teacher was very forceful in his message to the students, "I don't care where you come from, I don't care what your mom and dad did or did not do, it can start right here with you right now… You can break the chain" (Joseph, Ridge High School). The leadership of these schools are actively seeking to increase the number of their staff and faculty that believe in the holistic view of educating the students "…we've been trying to bring more faculty and staff in

158

that embody the whole student, not just the academic side" (Leslie, Next Door High School).

The impact of these mentoring efforts is the realization by many students that the staff and

faculty have a genuine concern, "…somebody is watching me. Somebody cares about me…"

(Jackie, Buddy High School).

Community and Parental Involvement

While participants indicated that community and parental involvement is a serious

challenge for these high-achieving, high-poverty, and high-minority schools (Manuscript 1),

sixty percent of the individuals interviewed identified important contributions of both the

community and parents in the high level of student learning and achievement. The benefit of

living in a small rural community was recognized as a key component in this contribution

Matthew, a teacher from Ridge High School stated, "Our kids feel really supported by the

community.…" In the communities surrounding the participant schools there are community

groups such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters that have had an impact on the lives of the students.

"The Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs that we've implemented over the past couple of

years…have improved grades by like a grade…" (Ryan Community Stakeholder of Next Door

High School). One of the participant schools was being supported by several fraternity and

sorority auxiliary organizations who were involved with the high school students. Shauna stated,

"…this is a community based school where a lot of parents get involved and they're concerned

about what's going on with the kids" (Shauna, Ridge High School).

A final supportive factor, related to community support, was the familiarity many of the

staff and faculty had with the students' families. One teacher stated "We know their parents, we

know their grandparents, we know just about everything about that child" (Jackie, Buddy High

School). These participant schools have an in-depth knowledge of their students' families that

enable them to better support the students' needs, "It's just like a family like I said. It's the only

school in the area, sisters and brothers and mothers we're here, their children and their

grandchildren and then when their children have children they'll come" (Heather, Buddy High

School). This connection with their students provides these participant schools an ability to

connect with the students in a way that few suburban or urban school can and is recognized as a

factor in student and school success.

Professional Development

The data indicate that forty-four percent of the schools stakeholders believe professional

development played a role in ensuring a high level of student learning and achievement. The

required professional develop mandated by the participant schools and the school systems

seemed to be diverse, almost like a cafeteria style buffet, allowing staff and faculty the

opportunity to attend professional development that met their professional needs. One faculty

member stated, "…they do a very, I think, excellent job, because we have a lot of options to

choose from to fit what our individual needs are…" (Joseph, Ridge High School). This

sentiment was echoed by another stakeholder from Next Door High School, "…They keep us

afloat as far as they invest in the PD necessary so that we can teach at a high level…" (Leslie,

Next Door High School). These successful schools enabled their staff and faculty the access to

professional development that matched their individual and school needs. The stakeholders

indicated that the most valuable professional development provided not only a classroom-

learning component but also what amounted to a coaching session. For example, some teachers

shared about a PD experience in which about a week or so after the professional development the

instructors came to the school to observe the teachers implementing what they learned.

Following this observation the instructor and faculty member discussed the implementation of

the professional development in the classroom. Chrissy stated, "…they taught us and then a week later they came back and wanted to see it in action…" (Chrissy, Next Door High School). This process was important to ensure that the professional development was implemented in the classroom, as one teacher stated, "…'Oh, my goodness.' I probably wouldn't have gone back and tried it, had I not had my hand forced. I think that was important, teacher awareness, teacher training and then making us put it in practice" (Chrissy, Next Door High School). Teachers agreed that the most effective professional development was "…tweaked to match our population" (Leslie, Next Door High School) and included "…doing turnaround training and letting them see one of their peers actually go up there and do that" (Ian, Next Door High School).

It is important to note that the participating stakeholders discussed not only the professional development provided by the school and school system, but also the professional development activities they participated in outside of those required, which they engaged in to meet their personal needs. As one stakeholder stated, "…I try to emphasize that a lot of our teachers go back and get additional degrees and they're doing a lot of different things to enhance themselves because they want to be successful as well…" (Tim, Ridge High School). A stakeholder from Ridge High School, Michelle, believed that as a result of the combination of the required professional development and the individual professional learning there was new culture developing. A final aspect of professional development was a professional reading program, as Candace stated, "…I do book studies, I try to keep up…" (Candace, Buddy High School). A central commonality across these schools is a culture of learning amongst the staff and faculty enabling them to remain current and relevant in their teaching craft.

161

School-Based Strategies

School based strategies were identified by forty-nine percent (49%) of the stakeholders interviewed as a key factor in the level of student learning and achievement in their schools. School based strategies were organized into three sub-themes: teaching approach, school expectations, and instructional focus.

Teaching approach. Fifty-five percent (55%) of the respondents shared the importance of the way teachers approached their students and the content they taught. Teaching approach included innovation, meeting the students were they are and moving them forward, and making class relevant for the students. A key to reaching these students requires the staff and faculty of these participant schools to be innovative in their approach to providing a quality education. Stakeholder believe that the school has to be innovative, "They [schools] almost have to, [be innovative] to continue to be successful" (Gavan, Civic Club member/parent). Another community stakeholder shared, "…innovation and risk taking is a big deal. I know it's encouraged…" (Ryan, Community Stakeholder of Ridge High School). Many of the faculty and staff believed they had the freedom to "…customize the instruction for the kids…" (Shauna, Ridge High School). One stakeholder stated,

> We have a free hand to implement anything that we feel will enhance the learning
> process. We've always had a free hand to do that, to improvise, improve, bring in new
> ideas, attend workshops to give us more knowledge to how to get to things, how to
> encourage the kids, how to motivate them, how to have them to excel, and things of this
> nature. (Michelle, Ridge High School)

The stakeholders also caution that their freedom to customize and innovation is tempered by the state course of study, common core standards, and the limited time available. Zophiah

stated it this way, "I have total autonomy. I teach to the state course of student. How I do that nobody is micromanaging…" (Zophiah, Buddy High School). The stakeholders from all three participant schools indicate that when they are innovative and trying new ideas and methods that may not be as successful as anticipated or they outright fail, there are no negative consequences from the school leadership, "I would say that I think that our administration is pretty forgiving when you're trying. I think they're a lot less forgiving when you're not trying" (Chrissy, Next Door HS). However, one stakeholder went further and stated that while there may not be any consequences from the administration, "I have consequences from myself.… Sometimes when those things don't work, we talk about it. Talking about just gives light and we see what we did right, what we did wrong" (Leslie, Next Door High School). In addition to being innovative, many of the stakeholders discussed teaching styles of the classroom teachers as an important ingredient in student learning and achievement.

The classroom teachers teaching philosophy and core beliefs are critical in their effort to reach their students. A key core belief in many of the stakeholders interviewed is that what is making these schools successful is more than a focus on academics. One stakeholder stated,

What is working is that the majority of the teachers here understand what it takes to be successful; it's a combination of academics, the content, and not skipping over foundation material and having experiences, both in school and out of school experiences. (Zophiah, Buddy High School)

The stakeholders discussed at great length how they worked to reach their students where they were and move them forward from that point. One stakeholder explained, "…I try to find some way that I can relate to that child" (Leslie, Next Door HS). These stakeholders believe that they

163

had to discover where their students were academically first than work from that point forward toward a goal of bringing them up closer to grade level. Heather explained,

> … academics is first, but you have to find a way where each child knows that if they're not doing what they are supposed to do, we're going to stay on top of them because we know they can do better … (Heather, Buddy High School)

The staff and faculty of these participant schools have a strong belief that an important part of their job is ensuring their students get what it takes to be successful. As one stakeholder said, "…as a teacher, How am I going to make sure that these kids get the skills they need emotionally and academically? You've got be prepared for that. Sometimes that is a disconnect" (Jackie, Buddy High School). A part of reaching these students is making the content relevant to the students. Most teachers have been asked the question, "Why do I need to know this?" As Chrissy stated, "I try to let them know the relevance of what we're learning. "This has significance." I think teachers have to do that. It has to be relevant. I think all of that helps them…" (Chrissy, Next Door HS). This philosophy is echoed by another teacher who stated, "…based on skills you need to have in order to be successful. It's not all the facts in the world. It's certain skills like how to do basic math, manipulate variables, understand graphing and how that all works" (Zophiah, Buddy High School). The stakeholders interviewed discussed, at length, the importance of connecting the content to the lived lives of their students.

School expectations. Forty-six percent (46%) of the stakeholders interviewed expressed the importance of establishing high expectations for students, both in the classroom and throughout the school. In one of the school's *Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP)*, a key statement established the importance of high expectations, "Excellence is an expectation in everything we do at Ridge High School. Ridge High School's Mission Statement reflects the

164

commitment to excellence…" (Ridge High School CIP). High expectations were established in the school's CIP. An administrator described his focus on high expectations during the hiring process, "I always tell teachers that I interview…I want somebody that's going to care about the kids, going to put the kids first. Try to help these kids be successful in life, because that's the key" (Shauna, Ridge High School). The culture of high expectations permeates the entire school. Teachers express their belief in not only establishing high expectations and "let(ting) them [the students] know my expectations" (Kathy, Next Door High School). Many of these teachers believe that the failure to have high expectations is detrimental to their students. Joseph explained, "…even though they're from poor homes, he still expects you as a teacher and the kids to achieve the standard. We're not going to cut any slack" (Joseph, Ridge High School). A community stakeholder believes that the schools are encouraging students and teachers to try. It was his belief that "it's ok to fail in some things: it's not ok to not try" (Ryan, Stakeholder of Ridge High School). Ryan went on to say that he believes the schools were "just raising the expectations." Another stakeholder reported, "I would have to say that the reason for the success is because the faculty … They would instill in our kids to always do their best. Letting them know that whatever you're trying to achieve you can" (Jodie, a parent from Ridge High School).

Instructional focus. A common commitment of all the participant schools was a strong and consistent instructional focus. The stakeholders discussed how the schools and faculty used many different data sources to identify strengths and weaknesses of not only student learning and achievement, but also in the schools programs and teaching. In all, forty-six percent (46%) of those interviewed identified the instructional focus as a key reason for the level of student learning and achievement. This instructional focus included leadership conducting

165

walkthroughs, leaders and teachers analyzing data to identify strengths and weaknesses, protecting instructional time, and being student centered.

The use of data to determine student weaknesses is often formalized in CIP documents, continuous improvement plans and noted in accreditation reports. One example comes from the Next Door High School Accreditation Report as follows,

> School leaders and teachers use data from assessments to monitor and adjust the curriculum and instruction based on the needs of the students. Assessments are used to drive instruction, provide remediation for students in need, formulate needs and goals for the CIP, and enrollment in college-preparatory courses. (Next Door High School Accreditation Report, page ??)

The stakeholders discussed the use of data in making instructional decisions within their classrooms, "We identify what is causing the students not to reach that benchmark. Then once we identify it, we correct it by remediation, repeating the things that they're not doing well on" (Michelle, Ridge High School), or as Chrissy observed, "…he (the principal) is trying to identify where the holes are, so that we can plug the holes" (Chrissy, Next Door High School). While analyzing data was an important part of the instructional focus, the monitoring of classroom teaching and learning through walkthroughs, a "…walk-through is a brief, non-evaluative classroom observation and feedback by an administrator…walk-throughs can provide both principal and teacher with valuable information about the status of the school's instructional program (Jerald, 2007), by school administrators was also viewed as a critical aspect of ensuring this instructional focus. The data did reveal that teachers believed that if conducted properly, these walkthroughs could be strong predictor of the progress and achievement. One teacher stated, "You already know from the observations what data is going to look like. Most of the

time it's observation, trying to figure to why this class is not performing at the levels that they can" (Jackie, Buddy High School). The vast majority of the educators interviewed and the schools continuous improvement plans and accreditation reports identify the walk-through program is a key to maintaining this instructional focus. Part of the walk-through program includes teachers receiving feedback, "…Feedback is given on instructional strategies and research-based tools that can be used to support and increase student success" (Next Door High School Accreditation Report). TaKara stated that, in her school, after an administrator finishes a walk-through, "…at some point in time during the day he'll let you know what needs to be done or what he observed" (TaKara, Buddy High School). The feedback is perceived as being critical in ensuring that student learning and achievement improves. As one teacher stated, "We try to take our evaluations, our walk-throughs and try to use those as how we want to attain or get better academically. We try to use our data from all of our assessments and different tests" (Leslie, Next Door HS).

Administrative Leadership

The data revealed that forty-four percent (44%) of the stakeholders believed that the leadership of the participant schools created an environment that enabled the staff and faculty to focus on student learning and achievement. There were three sub-themes within this leadership approach: shared leadership: collaboration, and being approachable. Two of these principals were in the first few years as the school principal; however, all three had been a faculty member of their respective school for more than twenty years and they are an integral part of the local communities. All three principals appeared to be well respected by the community and school stakeholders.

Shared Leadership

A key trait of the school leaders in all three schools, according to fifty-one percent (51%) of the stakeholders interviewed, was the use of a shared leadership style. This sharing included not only included the staff and faculty, but the parents, community stakeholders and at times the students themselves. A review of the data indicated individuals from all key stakeholders groups believed they had a real voice in the decision-making. One parent stated, "… he really [has an] open the door for people to come in and talk and share their opinion. He make[s] the community feel like they have a voice within the school…" (Jodie, a parent from Ridge High School). Jodie went on to say that this principal "…goes out into the community, and he talks to people. He, he says, you know if you see something that we can do that will make it better, come on let's talk" (Jodie, Parent from Ridge High School). A key to creating this climate of shared leadership is making the stakeholders feel welcome, as Dawn stated, "He [The Principal] involves you in everything. Like I said I'm at the school all the time and he welcomes you, encourages involvement I mean in everything. It's like he has an open door" (Dawn, Parent Next Door HS). The principals also acknowledge the importance of creating a climate of shared-leadership. He talked about the need "…to bring those people [stakeholders] in ... (to) "sit down, discuss this, (ask) "what can we do to make this better? Give me some ideas, what are your thoughts on this?" (Ian, Next Door High School). Finally, this concept of shared leadership is often extended to the students in the participant schools. One administrator stated,

> I always tell my students, I say hey, if you're in a class and you don't like the way the class is going, as an administrator, come tell us so we can try to help the teacher help you. … this is your school. (Leslie, Next Door High School)

A teacher from Ridge High School explained, "…He also asks for the students input certain things and certain classes … He asks for feedback from the parents in the community at PTA meeting every month" (Michelle, Ridge High School).

The belief in the opportunity to participate in decision-making was not as universally accepted by the staff and faculty as it was by the parents and communities. However, there is a great deal of evidence that shared leadership was the norm in the participant schools. The majority of the principals interviewed believed that they faithfully practiced shared decision-making, one principal stated, "That's the way, in my opinion, things should work because I don't want to dictate and make all the decisions. We are in this thing together and we have got to work together" (Tim, Ridge High School). The decision-making process is often multi-layered starting at the classroom and moving out to include more individuals until a solution is found, one teacher described the shared decision-making process:

> …we'll come as a team and we'll try to work on it to see if it's something we can solve,
> if by any chance we can't ...when I talk to other people in the community that may be a
> resource or another school… (Heather, Buddy High School)

Another teacher explained that the current principal has made an effort to include the staff and faculty in the decision-making process, "...since [the current principal arrived] there has been a whole lot more, 'let's bring people to the table, the faculty have a real level of input of what goes on…" (Chrissy, Next door High School).

The data suggest that most of the staff and faculty have real input to decisions that affect the classroom and that problem solving is "…a group effort…" (Julie, Ridge High School). The data suggest that the schools have a culture of shared decision-making. The shared decision-

making appears to increase teacher buy-in and creates an attitude of "We're in this thing together and we got to work together" (Tim, Ridge High School).

Collaboration

A second major leadership theme that emerged and dove tailed with the shared leadership was the high degree of collaboration practiced within these participant schools. Forty-one percent (41%) of the stakeholders interviewed believed that collaboration was important in the level of student learning and achievement. The primary focus of this collaboration was between the staff and faculty of the individual participant schools for the purpose of improving student learning and achievement. Joseph stated it this way, "We as educators, we talk to each other a lot and collaborate and we just try to have some different times to where we can make sure we're giving them [the students] that positive input that they need" (Joseph, Ridge High School). Jackie believes that, "…what is working to help improve achievement is you have to have teamwork among your faculty and staff" (Jackie, Buddy High School). One stakeholder believed that the key benefit of collaboration was the belief that, "…we have the same purpose… we work together because all of us want the same thing: The student success..." (Julie, Ridge High School). Collaboration is also used as a problem solving method.

These successful participant schools also use collaboration as a problem-solving method. One teacher from Buddy High School remarked, "Once we communicate with each other and find out what's the best way to do it" (Jackie, Buddy High School) they can then formulate a corrective action plan. Another teacher explained, "…collaboration piece is pretty good. Teachers, they talk amongst themselves about different things... what they're doing in their classrooms. If a particular student is having some sort of problem in their classroom…" (Kathy, Next Door High School). Leslie explained that her school collaborated a lot and Chrissy added

170

that collaboration really helped with improving teaching and learning. The collaboration process

the schools, staff, and faculty provided a feedback loop to ensure they are being successful. One

teacher stated, "…collaborating amongst ourselves and keeping in contact, that's pretty much

how we get a lot of feedback" (Shauna, Ridge High School). Collaboration was identified as a

useful tool for the staff and faculty and enabled better instructional decision-making.

Approachable Leadership

Forty-one percent (41%) of the stakeholders interviewed indicated that an important

contributing factor to the level of student learning and achievement was that the school's

leadership was approachable to all the stakeholders. Gavan shared, "He has an open door policy.

If you ever have a concern about anything you may hear, see, about anything at all involved with

the school, his door is open, always open" (Gavan, Civic Club member/parent Next Door High

School). Many of the stakeholders interviewed believed that their principals had created a

family atmosphere, "…he has that atmosphere of family and they know they can talk to him and

when you in an environment where you feel that people care about you, then you strive…"

(Jodie, a parent from Ridge High School). For the stakeholders interviewed, this family climate

was important for the school's level of success and it often extended outside the school building.

One teacher stated,

> ...he's always made it very clear that anyone can come to him with any concerns and, like
>
> I say, it's not like you have to come and schedule an appointment with him. If you find
>
> him in the Dollar Store or in a laundromat, he's always made his self available, wherever
>
> he is. As long as it's within reason. (Kathi, Parent Next Door HS)

In general, the stakeholders view their school leadership as open, accessible, and

approachable and they view this approachability as a key factor in the high level of teaching,

learning, and achievement. The school leadership teams of these participant schools were strong

believers in the importance of being approachable to their staff, faculty, and other stakeholders.

Tim viewed his approachability as a sign of respect, "…I guess you might say, a sense of respect

to that fact that hey, I'm here for you but still I may be over you, but I'm still here. I'm part of

this, that we're here for the kids" (Tim, Ridge High School). The participating school leadership

teams believed that their open door or approachability was also a great conflict resolution format.

It was believed that an open and frank discussion could be used to resolve issues and make better

decisions. Ian stated,

> I have an open door to allow them to come in and talk to me at any time. I've called
>
> them in when I even feel like they don't agree with something. I'll say "Okay, let's sit
>
> down and we can talk it out here. Tell me how you feel about it. Be honest." (Ian, Next
>
> Door High School)

The participating schools leadership teams were considered approachable and they used their

approachability as an asset to improve teaching, learning, and student achievement.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this research was to collect the perceptions of all the key stakeholders of

the three (3) participant schools, to identify the reasons these high-poverty, high-minority rural

high schools were being successful in obtaining a high level of student learning and achievement

with a student population that typically underperforms in comparison to their counterparts from

the urban and suburban schools and from other rural schools. Due to the nature of qualitative

research, the ability to generalize these findings is difficult. In spite of the limited population

and the small sample size, the researcher did collect a lot of thick and rich data from stakeholders

of each school. It is believed that the findings provide a glimpse into the reasons for the high-

achieving nature and their ability to narrow the achievement gap of these high-poverty and high-minority rural schools in Alabama, which should be of value to practitioners and researcher's.

The researcher identified four (4) major recurring perceptions of the stakeholders of the participant schools: student focused educators, school based strategies, administrative leadership, and curriculum delivery.

Student-Centered Educators

There is research that indicates the potential to make drastic improvements in student learning and achievement include changing the climate of the school to ensure the school has a supportive learning environment that guides and supports the students (Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014). The research also recommends increasing rigor, establishing high academic expectations (Brown & White, 2014). The perceptions of sixty-eight percent (68%) of the participants interviewed for this project verified this research. The findings indicate that in their schools, student focused educators were perceived of as being very important in fostering student success. Seventy-seven percent of them shared thoughts that emphasized the importance of the concern these professionals had for students and that they had a commitment to their students' success that included setting high expectations for them, but also providing support to help their achieve their goals. The professionals in these schools focused on developing a climate within the school that was supportive of the whole student, they took a holistic approach to educating the students. They understood that their students often did not have the parental support and structure necessary for high levels of student learning and achievement. These student-focused educators had a genuine concern for their students and they, the staff and faculty, took ownership of their responsibility to not only ensure they provided the student with the instruction required, they also worked to motivate the student to want to learn and be successful.

173

Many of the staff and faculty held the attitude that teaching is more than just conveying knowledge, facts, and figures; it is about viewing their students holistically. These professionals focused not only on helping the students succeed academically and building their self-esteem, but also advocating for the students to their parents when students had problems communicating with their parents. Additionally, many of these teachers were advocates for the students with the administration. Teachers believed it was their responsibility to speak up to the schools leadership to ensure the students' needs and concerns were addressed. The advocacy role, for many of the staff and faculty in the participant schools, was much more than just about student academic learning and achievement, it was about ensuring the students had the skills and were prepared for life after graduation.

These high-achieving schools were mentoring their students, creating an attitude that they may not have all the best resources that other schools do, but they could still be successful. The participant schools are ensuring their students have the positive attitude that they can be successful despite where they come from and where they attend school.

The literature is full of data concerning how teachers impact student learning and achievement, the research indicates that it is the quality of the teacher that has the most significant impact on the achievement levels of the students (Ward, & Grant, 2011). However, typically, the research describes the quality of the teacher based on their years of teaching experience, the college or university they graduated from, the score on their ACT/SAT as indicators of their quality. While there was no indication about these factors in terms of the quality of these teachers, it appears that, to these participants, the quality of a teacher must also include having a focus on students, caring about them as students and people and investing in students' success.

174

There are many implications for practice that flow from these findings. First, while it is essential that administrators seek teachers who have high skill levels and good academic backgrounds, these findings suggest that it is also vital that teachers in these schools have empathy for their students, have a deep concern for their welfare and are willing to reach out to the students in any way possible to help ensure their success. They must also be willing to set high expectations and hold students to those expectations in a caring way. Those preparing teachers should consider these elements of their personality, incorporate the importance of demonstrating a concern for students into the curriculum, and assure that preservice teachers are placed with other teachers who demonstrate these characteristics. Those in rural settings who are working with the type of student population examined should engage in conversations about this issue. Additionally, schools should engage teachers in professional development activities that foster their capacity to operate in this manner.

Curriculum Delivery

Sixty-seven percent of the respondents noted that elements of curriculum delivery implemented in their schools fostered student success. The single most often noted factor identified in foster student success, mentioned by 80% of the respondents, were the program and practices put into place to meet student needs and foster their learning. The development of these programs included fostering parental and community involvement in the process. It also was dependent upon effective professional development.

This findings are consistent with the literature which identified changing instructional practices as the route to improving student learning and achievement as essential to fostering student achievement (Brown & White, 2014) and with the importance of professional development in fostering high quality teaching and student learning. Staff and faculty operated

175

in an environment that encouraged innovation and risk taking in determining teaching strategies and methods. The ability to be innovative and take risks was imperative in these resource poor schools and communities that were competing with the local private schools for support from the local business communities. Innovation and risk taking took many different courses and included not only teaching strategies and methods but in professional development, and encouraging community and parental participation

The innovative programs could be as simple as reorganization of high student achievement, a picture on the wall, name in the local newspaper, or a simple pat of the back for doing well. The universal breakfast program intended to ensure the students had a nutritional breakfast had the unintended consequence of improving attendance and reducing tardiness to school. The academic innovations included a variety of programs designed to improve student academic performance. However, in rural schools many of the students cannot remain after school due to transportation, family needs, or the lack of family support and structure. These schools created time within the normal school day to ensure students got the academic help necessary. These incentive programs typically used elective class time to support students' academic needs. These type programs increased the participation rate, reduced the hardships on the families, and increased student learning and achievement. It appears that similar schools may benefit from implementing such programs.

Professional development is a key part of improving teaching, student learning, and achievement. However, for professional development to be effective it must be high quality, locally relevant, and research based (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009), and differentiated to the needs, circumstances, and experiences levels of the participants (Klein & Riordan, 2009). Additionally, the faculty and staff need to be a part of the professional development decision-

making process (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; it is important to note that all of these schools had the required professional development mandated by their central offices, but they reported that the most effective professional development were activities tailored to their specific needs and students. This verifies the need for professional development activities to be differentiated and focused on student learning. The professional development in these schools followed these guidelines. This verifies the research on this topic. An interesting element of this finding is that professional development was not mentioned as often as other elements. Yet, it is questionable whether the programs and processes that were identified as being essential to student success could have been as successful as they were without the professional development that was provided.

While it is true that all of these participant schools faced issues involving the community and parents in the school, the community stakeholders discussed the importance of being extended the opportunity to participate in the schools. Parental involvement, while limited, is important for the participant schools in developing their programs and processes to improve teaching, student learning and achievement (Jaynes, 2005, 2007). Rural schools often serve sparsely populated areas and high-poverty families that have difficultly attending school meetings and conferences. The home visits conducted by some of these schools helped parents remain informed of their students' progress and school activities. Many members of the school's leadership, faculty, and staff participate in local organizations and activities. This is consistent with research on successful rural schools (Meyer & Mann, 2006). Many of the community stakeholders expressed an interest in making their local school better and a willingness to participate in quality discussions and decision-making for improving student learning, achievement, and employability.

In these high poverty area parental involvement tends to be lacking for several reasons, low parental educational level, working long hours to support the family and a number of other family issues, (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014). Based on the data developed during this study, many community stakeholders are willing to participate and help the schools. However, the school needs to extend the invitation. Many of the community stakeholders held a mistaken opinion of the status and condition of the schools, until they became involved in the planning and decision-making process. Then, they developed a deeper understanding of the needs of the school. Additionally, the schools benefited from the participation of the community stakeholders in that they developed a better understanding of the skills and knowledge their students needed to increase their employability with the local community businesses and industry.

The principals in all three-participant schools were long-term or lifelong residents of the communities where their schools were located. The parents report that they were approachable and accessible. These leaders were willing to listen to parental concerns and to allow real parental input into the decision-making process. Finally, these rural school had a history with many of their students extended families, for generations these families have been attending these schools and the students' parents were, more likely than not, taught by the same teachers or they attended school with their child's teacher. This level knowledge, understanding, and contact with school staff and faculty is an important ingredient in what is making these school successful. A final implication of these findings is that, the leaders in these schools stressed the need to meet student needs and provided flexibility for teachers to adapt their materials and teacher approaches to meet student needs, even if they might fail. However, doing so requires that teacher have the skills to implement innovative programs and the models to follow. It

178

appears that in order to involve parents and the community in this process, school personnel must be willing to reach out to parents and the community, recognize the realities within which they and their children live and design programs and processes that will engage them in the school, in fostering their students' learning and in supporting the school as a whole.

School-Based Strategies

Wallach (2010) found that the critical factor to ensure improved student achievement and outcomes was the quality of the student/teacher relationships. The research indicates that schools provide students with an environment that encourages students and teachers to develop an understanding of the needs of each student and develop a strong almost family type relationship with their students, parents, and the community (Armstead, Bessett, Sembiante, & Plaza, 2010). The advantage of this type of student/teacher relationship is the ability of the teacher to know the strengths and weaknesses of their students, to individualize student learning, and adopt teaching methods/strategies that best meet the needs of their students.

The predominate philosophy of the staff and faculty at the participant schools was to meet their student were they were and move them forward academically while making the class relevant to the students. Additionally, the stakeholders believed that the students success was also the result of the core belief of many of the schools staff and faculty that a significant part of their job was to ensure the whole child was addressed in their classroom not just the academic needs to ensure they were successful outside of school and after they graduated. The participants it is important for teachers to establish high expectations and away from low-level memorization (Collinson, 2010). The most successful schools have a culture of high expectations and they demand everyone, staff, faculty, and students to work hard in reaching this high level of expectations (Collinson, 2010). Finally, this culture of high expectations must be communicated

179

to the students and their parents (Chance & Sequra, 2009). This culture of high expectations extends into the classroom, many of the teachers held the belief that a failure to have high expectations was detrimental for the students and it amounts to a life sentence for low skill and low paying jobs for the students. Many of the stakeholders stressed the importance of teaching the students that despite their current circumstances they could be successful and break the mold.

Shause (1995) identified instructional practices as a key ingredient to improving student learning and achievement. The existing research indicated the need for a wide variety of instruction methods to include, individual instruction and constructivist methods (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). A key factor in the success of the students attending the participant schools was the instructional focus of the staff and faculty of the schools. The current buzzword in education if data driven instruction. These schools take data analysis to a new level, not only are they looking at student weaknesses but also strengths and weaknesses of school programs and teaching. Analyzing the all the data to identify where teachers are the strongest, with what population and grade level. The key was placing teachers and students together using data to identify where the greatest potential for success lies. The philosophy is using data to inform their instructional decisions. A critical aspect of maintaining this instructional focus is a quality walk-through program.

All three (3) participant schools developed a monitoring program that included walk-throughs and feedback to teachers. It was evident from the data that these school conducted walk-throughs constantly to monitor the classrooms, instruction, and student learning and achievement. This monitoring included feedback to the faculty concerning their performance in the classroom. The feedback often included both positive feedback and suggestions to improve their effectiveness. The most effective feedback came when the faculty was asked how they

thought they were doing, this required them to self-evaluate and reflect on their teaching while allowing the administrator some insight into the teacher's perspective.

One of the implications of these findings are that the teachers and leaders in these schools must believe in their students and view them as people of value. They must be willing to try new approaches to teaching and learning based on student needs. Additionally, these new approaches require the schools to be innovative in their search for methods and strategies while avoiding the one-size-fits-all approach to solving an achievement gap issue. The need for administrators, staff, and faculty to understand the importance of data to inform their instructional decisions is critical. The ability to read, interrupt, and use data is an important skill for all educators. A final key to creating a high achieving school is the monitoring of instruction, student learning and achievement, inspect what you expect, is a valuable tool in creating a high achieving school.

Administrative Leadership

The research clearly indicates that the schools leadership has a significant impact on student learning and achievement through programs, such as participatory decision-making, collaboration, professional development, innovation, and mentoring (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttile & Urban 2011). The more active the school leadership is in using shared-decision-making the higher the level of student achievement (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). All three of the schools participating in this study were implementing these strategies, to varying degrees, successfully. While all the key stakeholder groups believed they had a real voice in the decision-making process and school leaderships willingness to listen to their concerns, it appears that there were some of the staff and faculty who were not as convenience. One of the interesting findings of this research was the extension of shared decision-making into the classrooms to include the students. This pervasive shared decision-making philosophy has increased all key

181

stakeholder buy in and has created an attitude of we are all in this together resulting in greater student learning and achievement. An important part of the shared decision-making was the approachability of the leadership. Research indicates that an important tool for improving student learning and achievement is a leadership team that is open to new ideas, collaboration and innovations (Chance & Sequra, 2009). The successful school leaders allow the free flow of information and allow a free debate within their schools (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). The stakeholders all agreed that a critical aspect of these successful schools was the approachability of the schools leadership, especially its principal. The ability of anyone to feel comfortable talking to the school's principal to address a concern, without fear of reprisal was an important factor in the students learning and achievement. In addition to the stakeholders believing the principal and other school leaders were approachable the schools principals also believed it was important to create an atmosphere conducive to open, frank, and respectful discussion to improve the teaching, student learning, and achievement within their schools. The shared decision-making and approachability of the leadership team lead to a climate of collaborations within the schools.

The existing research indicated a key trait of successful schools is a high level of collaboration amongst the staff and faculty (Chance & Sequra, 2009). The spirit of collaboration must extend past the staff and faculty to include the students, their parents, and other key stakeholders (Finnigan & Daly, 2012). This high level of collaboration extends to decision-making and problem solving (Wilcox, Angelis, Baker, & Lawson, 2014). A direct result of the participant schools leadership's belief in shared decision-making is a high level of collaboration between the staff and faculty within these schools. This stems from the decision-making

182

process, the staff and faculty clearly use the decision-making process to identify areas of concern and determine, as a group, the best solutions to solve their problems.

Some of the implications of these findings are using collaboration, as a problem solving method, to identify issues, formulate a corrective course of action, and to ensure there is a feedback loop ensuring their solution worked is an essential part of creating a successful school. Shared decision-making and approachability of the school leadership team is indispensable in the creation of a positive and supportive culture within the school. Finally, shared decision-making must be authentic, stakeholders know when their participation in shared decision-making is nothing more than a smoke screen.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study focused on the facilitators of success in rural schools in Alabama. While this study confirmed some of the findings in the existing literature, it uncovered other interesting perceptions of why these rural schools were successful. It is important to conduct additional research to determine if the findings in this study can be replicated and to what extent in other schools in Alabama, the Southeast, and throughout the nation.

Concern for the students was the most often cited perception of why these rural schools in Alabama were successfully educating students when schools with similar demographics were failing to meet the educational standards established by the state. Additional research needs to be conducted into the specific traits this particular group of teachers possessed that influenced their students to be more successful than their counterparts in other schools. Programs and processes and concern for students were the most often identified facilitating factors. Professional development, high expectations, collaboration, and approachable leadership were the elements least mentioned. The issue of whether the percent of responses for each indicator

183

delineates of importance for each of the identified factors should be further investigated.

Research on rural schools indicates that one of the difficulties in fostering success in high teacher

and leader turnover. In these school systems, this was not the case. The fact that school

personnel were long term residents of the community helped to foster student success and

parental involvement. Why and how this longevity was fostered should be investigated and

shared with other school systems which may profit from this knowledge.

Conclusion

Despite all the road blocks in the way these three (3) high-poverty and high-minority high

schools have managed to be successful in breaking the trend of low achievement in this

population of students, while other schools remain mired in poor student learning and

achievement resulting in the communities surrounding these schools continuing to spiral down

economically and struggle to attract business and industry.

These findings indicate that it is imperative that all the policy-makers and decision-

makers learn differentiate their policies, programs and professional development to ensure the

schools have the tools necessary to meet the needs of their particular student population,

environment, and climate. It is clear that one-size-does-not-fit all and until educational policy

recognizes the need for differentiation, schools and students will continue to face challenges and

struggle to improve student learning and achievement.

Bibliography

Armstead, C. L., Bessett, A. G., Sembiante, S., & Plaza, M. P. (2010). What students need, what students say they want: Student perspectives on the promise of smaller learning communities. *Peabody Journal of Education, 85*(3), 365–374. doi:10.1080/0161956X.2010.491706

Berg, B. L., & Lune, H. (2012). *Qualitative research methods for social sciences.* Boston: Pearson.

Bernard, H. R., & Ryan, G. W. (2010). *Analyzing qualitative data: Systematic approaches.* Loa Angeles: SAGE.

Brown, D. F. (2006). It's the curriculum, stupid: There's something wrong with it. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *87*(10), 777–783.

Brown, D. F., & White, M. (2014). Connecting community and culture. *Journal of Education and Learning, 3(1), 134*.

Brown, K. M., Benkovitz, J., Muttillo, A. J., & Urban, T. (2011). Leading schools of excellence and equity: Documenting effective strategies in closing achievement gaps. *Teachers College Record,, 113*(1), 57–96.

Carey, R. L. (2014). A cultural analysis of the achievement gap discourse: Challenging the language and labels used in the work of school reform. *Urban Education. , 49*(4), 440–468. doi:10.1177/0042085913507459.

Carter, G., Lee, L., & Sweatt, O. (2009). *Lessons learned from rural schools.* Montgomery: The Center for Rural Alabama. Retrieved July 14, 2014, from http://larrycuban.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/lessonslearnedruralschools2009-1.pdf

Carter, P. L. (2010). Cultural flexibility among students in different racial and ethnic school contexts. *Teachers College Record, 112*(6), 1529–1574.

Chance, P. L., & Sequra, S. N. (2009). A rural high school's collaborative approach to school improvement. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 24*(5), 1–12.

Collinson, V. (2010). To learn or not to learn: A potential organizational learning gap among school systems? *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 9*(2), 190–219. doi:10.1080/15700760903342368.

Cooper, L. A. (2007). Why closing the research-practice gap is critical to closing student achievement gap. *Theory into Practice, 46*(4), 317–324. doi:10.1080/00405840701593907.

Cresswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Darling-Hammond, L., Ross, P., & Milliken, M. (2006). High school size, organization, and context: What matters for student success. *Brookings Papers on Educaional Policy*, 163–203. doi:10.1353/pep.2007.0001.

DeCuir-Gunby, J., Marshall, P., & McCulloch, A. (2011). Developing and using a codebook for the analysis of interview data: An example from a professional development research project. *Field Methods, 23*(2), 136–155.

Finnigan, K. S. (2010). Principal leadership and teacher motivation under high-stakes accountability policies. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 9*(2), 161–189. doi:10.1080/15700760903216174.

Groen, M. (2012). NCLB–The educational accountability paradigm in historical perspective. *American Educational History Journal, 39*(1), 1–14. Retrieved May 22, 2014.

Hardre`, P. L., & Sullivan, D. W. (2008). Student differences and environment perceptions: How they contribute to student otivation in rural high schools. *Learning and Individual Differences, 18*(4), 3–14. doi:10.1016/j.lindif.2007.11.010.

Hirschland, M., & Steinmo, S. (2003). Correcting the record: Understanding the history of federal intervention and failure in securing U.S. educational reform. *Educational Policy, 17*(3), 343–364. doi:10.1177/0895904803254484.

Jerald, C. D. (2007). Believing and achieving. Issue brief. *Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement*.

Jeynes, W. H. (2005). A meta-analysis of the relation of parental involvement to urban elementary school student academic achievement. *Urban Education*, *40*(3), 237–269.

Jeynes, W. H. (2007). The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary school student academic achievement a meta-analysis. *Urban Education*, *42*(1), 82–110.

Johnson, J., Showalter, D., Kein, R., & Lester, C. (2014). *Why rural matters 2013-2014: The condition of rural education in the 50 states.* Washington DC: Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/2013-14-Why-Rural-Matters.pdf

Stronge, J. H., Ward, T. J., & Grant, L. W. (2011). What makes good teachers good? A cross-case analysis of the connection between teacher effectiveness and student achievement. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *62*(4), 339–355.

Kein, E. J., & Riordan, M. (2009). Putting professional development into practice: A framework for how teachers in expeditionary learning schools implement professional development.

Teacher Education Quarterly, 36(4), 61–80. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/23479284

Kuel, R. A. (2012). The rhetorical presidency and "accountability" in education reform: Comparing the presidential rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. *Southern Communication Journal, 77*(4), 329–348. doi:10.1080/1041794X.2012.678926.

Leithwood, K. (2010). Characteristics of school districts that are exceptionally effective in closing the achievement gap. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 9*(3), 245–291. doi:10.1080/15700761003731500.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2008). Seven strong claims about successfull school leadership. *School Leadership and Management, 28*(1), 27–42. doi:10.1080/13632430701800060.

Masumoto, M., & Brown-Welty, S. (2009). Case study of leadership practices and school-community interrelationships in high-performing, high-poverty, rural California high schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 24*(1), 1–18.

Maxwell, G. M., Huggins, K. S., & Scheurich, J. J. (2010). How one historically underperforming diverse rural high school achieved a successful turnaround. *Planning and Changing, 3*(4), 161–186. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ952379.pdf

McNergney, R., & Herbert, J. (2001). *Foundations of education: The challenge of professional practice.* Boston, MA, USA: Allyn and Bacon.

Meyer, J. A., & Mann, M. B. (2006). Teachers' perceptions of the benefits of home visits for early elementary children. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 34*(1), 93–97.

Murnane, R., & Steele, J. (2007). What Is the Problem? The challenge of providing effective teachers for all children. *Future of Children*, 15–43. Retrieved June 21, 2014, from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ795873.pdf

Noonan, J. (2014). In here, out there: Professional learning and the process of school improvement. *Harvard Educational Review, 84*(2), 145–161. Retrieved July 19, 2014, from http://her.hepg.org/content/3qh5661426wn4356/fulltext.pdf

Rosenberg, L., Christianson, M. D., Angus, M. H., & Rosenthal, E. (2014). *A focused look at rural schools receiving school improvement grants.* Washington DC: National Center for Education Evaluation. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20144013/pdf/20144013.pdf

Savas, A. C. (2013). A new school paradigm: "Learning school" from teachers perspective. *International Journal of Academic Research, 5*(3), 247–252. doi:10.7813/2075-4124.2013/5-3/B.38.

Semke, C. A., & Sheridan, S. M. (2012). Family-school connections in rural educational settings: A systematic review of the emperical literature. *School Community Journal, 22*(1), 21–47. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ974684.pdf

Shouse, R. (1995). Academic press and school sense of community: Sources of friction, prospoects for synthesis. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association* (pp. 1–35). San Francisco. Retrieved June 12, 2014, from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED387868.pdf

Strange, M. (2011). *Paying teachers for performance: Issues and dilemmas for rural schools.* Washington DC: Rural Schools and Community Trust.

Stronge, J. H., Ward, T. J., & Grant, L. W. (2011). What makes good teachers good? A cross-case analysis of the connection between teacher effectivness and student achievement. *Journal of Teacher Education, 62*(4), 339–355. doi:10.1177/0022487111404241.

U.S. Department of Education. (2008). *A nation accountable: Twenty-five years after a nation at risk.* Washington DC: Department of Education. Retrieved May 24, 2014, from http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/accountable/

U.S. Department of Education. (2006). *Rural education in America.* Retrieved from National Center for Educational Statics : https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp

Wallach, C. A., & Lear, R. (2005). *A foot in two worlds: The second report on comprehensive high school conversions.* Seattle, WA: Small Schools Project.

Wilcox, K. C., Angelis, J. I., Baker, L., & Lawson, H. A. (2014). The value of people, place and possibilities: A multiple case study of rural high school completion. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 29*(9), 1–18. Retrieved from http://jrre.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/29-9.pdf

Williams, A. (2011). A call for change: Narrowing the achievement gap between white and minority students. *The Clearing House, 84*(2), 65–71. doi:10.1080/00098655.2010.511308.

Williams, D. T., & King, J. R.-E. (2002). *Rural school leadership in the deep south: The double-edged legacy of school desegregation.* Washington DC: The Rural Schools and Community Trust. Retrieved from http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/Double-Edged_Leg

Woolley, M. (2006). Advancing a positive school climate for students, family, and staff. In C. Franklin, M. Harris, & P. Allen-Meares (Eds.), *The school services sourcebook: A guide for school-based professionals* (pp. 777–783). New York: Oxford University Press.

Yang, Y. (2014). Principals' transformational leadership in school improvement. *International Journal of Educational Management, 28*(3), 279–288. doi:10.1108/IJEM-04-2013-0063.

Yen, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

MANUSCRIPT 3 – DIFFERENCES IN STAKEHOLDERS PERCEPTIONS OF FACTORS

THAT HINDER AND FACILITATE STUDENT SUCCESS IN THREE TYPES OF

RURAL SCHOOLS: FRINGE, DISTANT AND REMOTE

Introduction

The modern era of accountability has shined a very bright light on the achievement gap between middle-class white students and the minority and low-income minority students in the United States. This gap is identifiable when children enter kindergarten and it continues to grow throughout their educational life (Williams 2011). Currently researchers cannot agree on the root causes of this achievement gap (Carey, 2014; Williams, 2011) or how to close it. However, there is agreement that closing the achievement gap will take a coordinated effort from all stakeholders involved in a student's education (Books, 2007).

There are those who suggest that it is imperative that governmental officials, researchers and the general public recognize that part of this achievement gap is grounded in social and cultural causes which should be addressed (Carter, 2012; Carey, 2013). The existing research points to a variety of these potential causes including: a lack of parental involvement – especially in the poor communities; lower educational level of low socio-economic parents; greater amount of time spent on non-educational functions; and high levels of poverty (Carey, 2014). Additionally, schools serving high-poverty minority students tend to be staffed with younger, more inexperienced teachers, and often employ and keep effective teachers (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011**).**

Although the social and cultural and social elements within which a child exists can influence his or her capacity to achieve in school, there are schools in which children from high poverty backgrounds are achieving (Carey, 2014). There is also research that identifies strategies and procedures these schools employ that foster this success. However, most of this research has been done in urban and suburban schools.

Purpose of the Study

This research was part three of a three part study investigating successful high minority, high poverty rural schools in Alabama. The purpose of this phase of study was to identify what if any differences exist in the perspectives of the stakeholders of the three types of rural schools, rural fringe, rural distant, and rural remote. This study sought to understand these differences from the perceptions of some of the key stakeholders engaged in educating high poverty and high minority students in each type of rural school in Alabama.

Population and Sample

Although most research about rural schools considers them as one type of school, the National Center for Educational Statics (2006) identifies three types of rural locale codes. Rural fringe is a rural school that exists in an area within five (5) miles of an urban location. Rural distant schools operate more than five (5), but less than twenty-five (25) miles from an urban area. Schools classified as rural remote are schools that exist more than twenty-five (25) miles from an urban area. The sampling for this study included all three types of schools. This was done in order to assure that the results would be representative of all types of rural schools and to conduct an analysis of any differences in the perceptions within these types of schools to address this part of this study.

Criterion sampling (Patton, 2001) was used to select the schools that met the criteria of high-poverty, high-minority, high-achieving rural high schools. A three-step process was used to select the schools for inclusion in this study. An analysis of the National Center for Educational Statics database for the school year 2003-2004 identified two-hundred-thirty-four (234) rural schools, with a locale code of 41, rural fringe; 42, rural distant; and 43, rural remote in Alabama. Once all the rural schools in Alabama were identified, the researcher eliminated all the schools that did not have a minimum of sixty-five percent (65%) free/reduced price lunch. This minimum of sixty-five percent (65%) free and reduced price lunch requirement ensured only the top one-third (1/3) level of poverty school were included in the study. This resulted in a pool of fifty-six (56). After the researcher identified the top thirty-three percent (33%) of the high poverty rural schools, with a minimum minority population of sixty-five percent (65%) resulting in a pool of sixteen (16) schools. Finally, schools failing to meet one-hundred percent (100%) of their Annual Yearly progress goals were eliminated resulting a pool of twelve (12) schools. Of the twelve schools, two (2) were rural fringe schools, four (4) were rural distant schools, and six (6) were rural remote schools. Schools were contacted and asked to participate in the study.

Once the potential participant pool was identified the researcher contacted the school via Email explaining the purpose of the research project, why that particular was selected as a potential participant, and a request that they participate in the project. This Email was followed up by a phone call about five days later. A total of six (6) schools were contacted; one rural distant and two rural remote schools declined to participate in the study. Once the schools were selected and permission was obtained to conduct the research at each school, a combination of random purposeful and snowball sampling were used to identify the actual participants. A review of the school's website and the local phone directory, retrieved electronically, were used

to identify key stakeholders. Individuals were selected for participation based on their position or knowledge of the school. Each participant was asked to sign an Institutional Review Board Consent Form prior to the start of the interview. During each interview the participants were asked to identify others who may have an interest of knowledge useful for inclusion in this study.

Significance of the Study

Much of the research conducted related to creating high quality schools in which children from high poverty, high minority backgrounds succeed has been conducted at urban/suburban elementary and middle schools and it is estimated that only about six percent (6%) of all educational research is conducted in rural areas (Hardre & Sullivan, 2008). This is a significant shortcoming, as in the United States there are approximately 7,810 rural school districts, comprising about fifty-seven percent of all school districts in the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). There are approximately 9,765,385 students or about twenty-one percent (21%) of the United States student population enrolled in these schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

The traditional southern area of the United States is home to about twenty-three percent (23%) of all rural school districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). These southern rural school districts are responsible for educating nearly thirty-three percent of all the region's school students. (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). In Alabama, where this study occurred, the rural student population is forty-two percent (42%) (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Many of these schools serve high minority and high poverty populations and the schools tend to be identified having low student achievement on standardized tests and low high school completion rates. Additionally, much of the existing rural school research is conducted as if rural school were a monolithic entity and there is a great deal of diversity within the rural

population in the United States (Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012). The National Center for Educational Statistics in 2006 working with the United States Census Bureau changed the school identification locale codes to an urban centric system. The locale codes for rural schools include locale code 41 – rural fringe which is defined as five (5) miles or less from an urban area, locale code 42 – rural distant which is defined as between five (5) and twenty-five (25) miles from an urban area, and locale code 43 – rural remote which is greater than twenty-five (25) miles from an urban area.

Review of the Literature

An analysis of the existing literature provides a clear course of action to creating high achieving schools, high quality teachers and administrators, high quality professional development, high self-efficacy for both the students and teachers, collaboration, a culture of high expectations for students and educators, inclusion of community and parents, not only in the students' academic achievement but also in decision-making, and stressing the importance of high school (Chance & Sequra, 2009). As previously noted, while these factors may be the key traits of high achieving schools, the vast majority of this research on this topic, is designed and conducted in suburban and urban elementary and middle schools, with their larger populations. Rural schools often are the center of community life in their local communities. Often the rural schools are the largest employer for the local community. They often serve as the meeting location for many of the local organizations and clubs, the voting locations, and emergency and disaster shelter and relief facility. Rural schools are the hub of the community (Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009).

The Rural School and Community Trust (2001) found that rural schools tend to have smaller classes, which enables teachers to spend more time with their students, learning their

academic strengths and weakness. Along with developing a greater understanding of the students' academic needs, teachers and school staff have the ability to create a deeper understanding of the student's non-academic needs and their family life. This deeper understanding of the whole student enables the rural school faculty and staff to better meet the needs of each student (Johnson, Howley, & Howley, 2002). However, rural schools also face a myriad of challenges not typically faced in their suburban and urban counterparts.

Rural schools also tend to be hampered by a resource poor environment and a weak tax-base that make it difficult for them to compete with the wealthier urban/suburban schools in compensation for teachers, administrators, and staff which, in turn, results in a high turnover rate. This high turnover rate means that these rural schools have, in general, less experienced teachers/administrators educating students. Rural school also tend have high levels of persistent, intergenerational poverty (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014), increasing diversity in their student populations in terms of poverty and minority populations (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009) and transient populations, the transient nature of rural population results in a significant interruption of the education of their children and result in a lower level of achievement for the student (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014).

Although there are some elements in rural communities that support schools and their purposes, rural schools face an uphill battle in providing a high quality education for their students and there is evidence that, in many settings, they may be failing to prepare rural students for a productive and successful future in the increasingly diverse and global economy. Gibbs (2000) reports that urban/suburban students are more likely to take calculus (93% to 64%) and physics (64% to 34%) than are rural students. Rural students tend to have fewer career opportunities, limited ability or chance of attending college or a post-secondary trade school

(Hardre`, 2007). Additionally, rural students are less likely to have access to advance placement and college credit courses or take calculus (Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012). A Government Accounting Office Report recommended that the United States Department of Education provide targeted assistance to rural schools that will help them meet the unique challenges they face (Arnold, 2005).

The decision-makers often ignore or leave out the input of rural schools during the discourse about education issues and reform in the United States (Williams & King, 2002). Often the solutions to educational problems are approached in a one-size-fits-all, and this approach does not work with rural schools due their diversity and differing needs (Starr & White, 2008). Many scholars make the assumption that they know what the "best practices" are and that they are the same everywhere (Howley, 2001). The United States Department of Education continues, "…Talking about rural communities as small cities…" (Arnold, 2005, p. 3), this philosophy forces the rural schools to implement policies and reforms that were developed for suburban/urban schools. The generalizability of studies conducted in suburban/urban schools to rural schools is difficult (Hardre` & Sullivan, 2008). The United States Department of Education tends to fund programs designed to help rural schools solve issues that are unique to rural schools that in reality are appropriate to solving issues and problems at suburban/urban schools as well (Arnold, 2005).

The available studies on what makes rural high schools successful have identified several common traits. The creation of a culture of high expectations (Carter, Lee, & Sweatt, 2009; Chance & Sequra, 2009), including the community and parents (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004; Chance & Sequra, 2009), a focus on the importance of high school (Bottoms, Presson, & Han, 2004), rigorous and focused professional development (Chance & Sequra, 2009), and high

quality teachers, and school culture have a significant impact on the success of rural schools and rural student achievement (Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005). The most often implemented improvement strategy of successful rural schools is increased learning time, the use of professional learning communities for professional development, and an increase in the use of instructional technology (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014). Along with these findings, strong leadership, supporting teacher quality and developing supportive policies for the school, is important for creating successful rural schools (Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005).

In addition to strong school level leadership, a critical element to the transformation of a rural school is the support of the central office leadership of the school's improvement efforts (Chance & Sequra, 2009). As a part of transforming a school, the leadership must be mindful that change, even change that is slow and deliberate can upset the dynamics and culture of the school (Chance & Sequra, 2009). Finally, a critical, but often overlooked element of high-performing high schools is a well prepared student starting with the elementary school (Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2005). There is a prevailing belief that rural students are not well prepared as the suburban/urban counterparts (Gibbs, 2000). The key challenge for rural high schools is to maintain the benefits of being a small rural community while improving the student's education and abilities to compete for the high-tech high-skill employment or college (Gibbs, 2000).

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach, qualitative research is used when the researcher is interested in the process or context of the phenomena rather than a generalization about the phenomena (Yusuke, 2013). This study used a multiple case study design as it was believed that

197

it would enable the researcher to develop insight and understanding into why these high-achieving, high-poverty, high-minority rural high schools in Alabama have increased student achievement in the face of the present and potential challenges to success that so many other similar schools failed to overcome. The multiple case study approach enabled the researcher to study the individual cases to determine the key stakeholder's perceptions of the elements of the school's success and the impact of potential present and potential challenges to that success. This study is designed to identify if the perceptions of stakeholders about high achievement in rural schools are consistent across these three (3) types of schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected for this research was primarily from interviews. School documents and websites, were also examined to glean an additional understanding of the settings and to add information to the process. Data were analyzed in an iterative process, or what Cresswell (2013) called the data analysis spiral, of collecting, reviewing, analyzing, reflecting, and sense-making on the data collected. The reduction, simplification, and transformation of the data were accomplished in a multi-step process.

Each interview began with an introduction to the researcher, research purpose, and the specific reason the participant was asked for an interview. The participant was advised that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw their consent at any time. After the interview was completed, the researcher thanked each participant and informed them of the process and what they could expect from the researcher as the project progressed.

An initial reading of the data was conducted to get a feel for the information and as a refresher to develop an understanding of the data (Cresswell, 2013). During this initial reading of the data, a running commentary was made in the margins (Bernard & Ryan, 2012). The

second reading was used to conduct open-ended coding, breaking the raw data down into ideas and meanings (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). It was during this process that emergent codes were developed (Berg & Lune, 2012; DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). Finally, a pass was made through the data from an a-priori perspective. These a-priori codes were developed in advance based on our understanding of the current research using the conceptual framework (Bernard & Ryan, 2010)

Findings

An analysis of the data identified several area were there as noticeable differences in the stakeholder perception of the three difference types of rural schools, rural fringe, rural distant. These differences in perceptions range from the programs and processes within the schools to a lack of stability within the students home life. While some of these differences in perceptions are outside the effective control of the school to have an ability to make significant changes, most of the perceptions differences are based in the areas the school has the ability to impact such as the programs and processes, instructional focus, teaching approach, and collaboration.

Programs and Processes

The stakeholder perception most often referenced and with a twenty-two point swing is programs and processes, the rural distant school (89%) and the rural remote school (86%) were very close in their perception of the importance of this area; however, the rural fringe school only referenced this area sixty-seven percent of the time as the reason for the schools high level of student learning and achievement. The participant schools all had a myriad of programs and process designed to remediate educational shortcomings, provide incentives, and prepare the students for the required standardized exams for their students. These schools worked to address any weakness they identified in the teaching, student learning, and achievement. However, in

the rural distant and rural remote school the schools leadership had a focus on ensuring the

school and students overcome any obstacle they encountered. These schools have a culture that

they are trying to teach their students that it does not matter where they start or come from what

matters is to try and better themselves. One stakeholder stated, "some of them [the students]

they come from some rough backgrounds, but we try to instill them that where you come from

doesn't dictate where you end up" (Tim, Ridge High School). Finally, Tim concluded that he

believed that part of the job of the educators was to mentor and mold students into thoughtful

and productive citizens, "…we can't control what we get, but we can take what we get and mold

it and shape it into what we want it to be…" (Tim, Ridge High School). The key is making the

children aware that they can be successful in school as one stakeholder commented, "Instilling in

children that they can. There's no such thing as "can't." Once you give them that self-

confidence… It's about creating an environment where they can participate not just in sports, but

in other things, where they can see that, 'Oh wow, I can do this1'" (Jackie, Buddy High School).

The stakeholders agreed that creating an environment that is caring and conducive to learning

and providing the students with a legitimate opportunity at a quality education and to be a

productive citizen was an importance factor in the level of student learning and achievement.

The stakeholders of the participant schools credit the success of the programs and process

that have been developed and designed to specific issues or concerns with in the schools. It is

important that the students recognize the intent and benefit of the programs and processes, one

stakeholder discussed an incentive program and how much the students look forward to having

their picture placed on the wall for making a twenty or higher on their ACT. Julie stated that she

believed the greatest benefit for the schools programs and processes for the students was the

feeling that someone cared, she commented, "…knowing that somebody cares whether or not

they succeed; it helps them…" (Julie, Ridge High School). As the students begin to see others become successful it provides motivation and incentive for improvement. One participant school invited their most successful alumni back for homecoming each year as an example of the opportunities available for the students. One parent stated, "…look at the people who have left Lafayette High School and look how successful they are…" (Jodie, a parent from Ridge High School). These schools are using data to identify strengths and weaknesses of not only the students but also the teachers to ensure everyone was working to improve teaching, student learning and achievement.

Community and Parental Involvement

A key component for each school level of student achievement was the community and parental involvement. While community and parental involvement was concern for all of the participant schools it was a perception of seventy-eight percent of the stakeholders for the rural distant school. The perceptions of community and parental involvement were not mentioned as often in the rural fringe, fifty-eight percent, and the rural remote, forty-three percent, schools. The researcher's analysis of the data indicated several potential causes for the rural distant schools higher level of concern for community and parental involvement.

The rural distant school is located in a community that has been much more racially divided historically then either the rural fringe or rural remote schools. One of the participates related the story of playing on a corporate softball team in the early 1980s and being told by the team captain, "…they told me, you didn't tell me you were going to let her come out here and practice with you, so you've got to find somewhere else to practice" (Joseph, Ridge High School). Another stakeholder lamented, "Even if you go back to just 10 years ago, they didn't want you out there. They didn't even allow the Black police officers to go out there for

anything" (Michelle, Ridge High School). Additionally, many of the stakeholders of the school

relayed that the vast majority of the community support they receive comes from the Black

owned business. However, there are White-owned business that do support Ridge High School.

This rural distant school is part of a county school system that has a sister school that is

larger and more diverse. Many of the stakeholders believe that this sister high school receives

more of the available resources and attention, one parent commented that there were, "…two

high schools in this county. They look at the other high school they start to feel like we the step

child at the other high school, 'Cause some of the things they get, we don't have here" (Jodie, a

parent from Ridge High School). A teacher at the rural distant stated, "…this High School is the

step-child of all the schools in the County, simply because you have a High School right down

the road" (Michelle, Ridge High School). The perception that this rural distant school is the

step-child of the system is not just a perception of the school level stakeholders and parents. One

stakeholder from the community held the perception that, "…I think often Ridge High School

often gets left out because they are a high minority, rural school" (Ryan , Community

Stakeholder of Ridge High School). This belief, that the school is the stepchild of the system,

plays a significant part in the school higher perception level of the role community and parental

involvement plays in their success. One parent expressed pride in the fact that the school uses

this frustration as a rallying point to encourage more community and parental involvement, one

stakeholder stated, "…they take the attitude well, they may not give it to us, we may not have but

we gonna show 'em we can make it with what we have..." (Shauna, Ridge High School).

Professional Development

The analysis of the perceptions of importance of professional development suggest that it

is not as important at the rural fringe school, thirty-three percent as it was for the rural distant,

fifty-six percent, or the rural remote school forty-three percent. The principal of the rural fringe

schools discussed professional development as two distinct programs, both based in the available

data, school-wide issues and individual teachers' shortcomings. A portion of this difference can

be attributed to the use of student achievement data by the principal to identify common

weaknesses in the teaching, student learning and achievement within the school and focus on

those weaknesses during faculty meetings. Professional development in this rural fringe high

school was often conducted in such a way that many did not realize they were participating in

professional development, one teacher stated, "…I'm sure if there was stuff that needed to be

addressed ... also in faculty meetings, in a general sense, 'I need to see these things,' so that

happens…" (Chrissy, Next Door High School). Another teacher discussed some professional

develop as an open discussion during their faculty meetings, "…when we have faculty meetings,

we have it based on some type of PD that we're working on at that time. …Hey, give me your

idea on this..." (Leslie, Next Door High School).

In addition to using achievement data to identify school wide weaknesses the principal of

the rural fringe high school also uses data from EducateAlabama observations, walk-throughs,

classroom discipline referrals, parental/student statements, and achievement data to identify

individual teacher professional development needs. Individual teacher professional development

to address weaknesses or shortcomings were addressed individually by employing the 'I do, we

do, and you do' teaching concept. The principal explained that his first step in helping one of his

teachers improve was to have another teacher model a lesson, "First I started off pulling them out

and letting them go see another teacher in the school building" (Ian, Next Door High School).

The principal believed that often times simply exposing a teacher to the implementation of a new

idea or concept was important. However the rural fringe principal also stated that when this exposure was not enough:

"…Okay, now this is still not working, we're not getting anywhere. Then I brought in the central office person who went in and did a class for them. Then turned back around and then they did the class together. Then I let them do the class on their own. Then I came in and I observed what was going on. (Ian, Next Door High School)

The principal did say that he still that after this process he still had a small percentage of his teachers who used the new teaching method they had learned from this process in every class every day and they never changed.

The staff and faculty of the rural fringe school had a culture of being career learners, according to the school's principal, "…, we're all career learners…" (Ian, Next Door High School), neither of the other schools, rural distant or rural remote, discussed being career learners nor did they address any professional development developed based on an analysis of all the available student achievement data. A major difference in the perceptions of professional develop for the rural distant and rural remotes school was the dependence on the professional development activates scheduled by their central office or professional learning undertaken by individual teachers, there was no discussion of identify individual teacher weaknesses or professional learning needs. One of the stakeholders was concerned that many of the teachers graduated from college with their teaching certificate and never went back to school as a student, she stated, "…they've never done anything but what the county does for professional development; just enough to keep their certificate…" (Julie, Ridge High School).

The rural distant school's principal summed up the focus of the vast majority of the professional development planning for his school,

204

There's some directional development opportunities that are put out there and we allow

them to choose. Then there's some we do during our pre planning in which I would

dictate hey we need to do this, it's benefiting for all of us. (Tim, Ridge High School)

One of his teachers expressed the opinion that their professional development program was

outstanding, "…I think, excellent job, because it's very broad, so we have a lot of options to

choose from to fit what our individual needs are" (Joseph, Ridge High School); however, there is

no discussion of identifying individual needs and develop professional learning needs for

individual teachers. Jackie summed up the process for both and rural distant and rural remote

schools very succinctly when she stated, "…everybody's doing the same thing…" (Jackie,

Buddy High School). The difference in the perceptions of professional development between the

rural fringe school and the other types of rural schools is, in part, a result of how professional

development is planned and implemented. The data driven focused nature of the professional

development in the rural fringe school does not subject every teacher to enduring set time

necessary to address needs of another teacher(s). While the rural fringe school does have some

school-wide professional development, the majority is being differentiated to meet the needs of

the individual teachers and is the result of a higher level of local control, as the principal stated,

"I can make those changes to try and do something different, the system kind of works for us,

they don't buck you on that. They do try and work with you" (Ian, Next Door High School).

Shared Leadership and Approachable Leadership

Shared leadership was considered very important in both the rural fringe schools, fifty-

eight percent, and rural remote schools, sixty-seven percent, while in the rural remote school

only twenty-nine percent of the stakeholders held this perception. The principal of the rural

remote school has been in that position for twenty plus years and he is the only administrator

205

assigned to the school. The principals of the rural fringe and rural distant were in their second or

third years as the principal of their schools. The rural remote principal is the only administrator

in the school who declined to be interviewed for this research; he did, however, ensure the

researcher had full access to the teachers, parents, and documents necessary for this project.

Many of the stakeholders interviewed at the rural remote school discussed the principals open

door policy, "He just pretty much has an open door policy, if we need to come to talk to him

about something, we can" (TaKara, Buddy High School). However, stakeholders expressed

doubt about the level of input they were truly having in decision-making. The stakeholder

perspectives concerning shared decision-making were less than flattering. One teacher

commented when asked about her participation in decision-making, "He listens most of the time.

There are those times when he throws that brick wall up, depending on what it is, but most of the

time, he listens" (Julie, Buddy High School). One parent, trying to justify the principal's

reluctance to use shared decision-making stated, "…over the past, he had tried, tried and tried. It

doesn't always work. It's not effective. Dealing with the community, here…he tries, sometimes

and it just doesn't work" (Samuel, a Parent of Buddy High School). Another stakeholder, a

parent, was more direct with what he believed the reason to be, "He's a little slow on the uptake,

but once we kick an idea and keep kicking it to him, he picks up. He's a real traditionalist"

(Jason, a Parent of Buddy High School). Finally, one of his teachers lamented that she was

struggling to get him to understand that "They need to feel like they are part of the process, and

that they can do something. They have to be a part of it…" (Heather, Buddy High School).

The rural fringe and rural distant schools principals were much more receptive to shared

decision-making and were known for being very approachable, across the spectrum of

stakeholders the perceptions of these two principals is very positive. The principal of the rural

distant school was adamant that being approachable and practicing shared decision-making was important, he stated, "…no, they are very much involved in it because I want them to be a part of it because they are in there in the mix with the kids they're part of that decision making process" (Tim, Ridge High School). A parent of the rural fringe high also echoed this school believed that the principal wanted input from a wide range of stakeholders, "…He involves you in everything, like I said I'm at the school all the time and he welcomes you, encourages involvement I mean in everything. It's like he has an open door" (Dawn, Parent Next Door High School). The parental stakeholders are especially appreciative of this involvement in the decision-making process, "…I feel like we have a pretty good influence because we can come in, me personally, if something's happening I come in and sit down and talk with the principal and he'll listen" (Jodie, a parent from Ridge High School), while another stated, "I think they have a lot especially if their own children were attending the school" (Gavan, civic club/parent of Next Door High School). The prevailing attitude and philosophy of the principals of the rural fringe, and rural remote schools were best expressed by the principal of the rural fringe school, he stated,

> Just to bring those people in, let's sit down, let's discuss this, what can we do to make this better? Give me some ideas, what are your thoughts on this? What's the best thing that we can do? What would be the best thing for us at this time? (Ian, Next Door High School)

Many of the stakeholders believed that these principals believed that the best decisions were made only when they had consulted with the concerned stakeholders and once the decision was made there was a greater likelihood of genuine buy-in from the staff, faculty, and other stakeholders.

Instructional Focus

An analysis of the interview data indicated that there was a major difference in the stakeholder's perceptions of instructional focus. The rural remote school instructional focus was identified by seventy-one percent of the participant stakeholders while it was mentioned fifty-six percent of the time in the rural distant school and fifty percent of the time in the rural fringe school. However, this analysis also identified that the rural remote school discussed instructional focus more in terms of the mechanics or practice of instruction, teaching bell to bell, walk-throughs, and having the required information on the board. One teacher lamented that the leadership seemed more interested in their checklist, she stated,

> With a walkthrough... They have developed a checklist of things they go around and check at points. 'Okay, everybody needs to have this done, this done, this done.' There'll be mock walkthroughs to help you understand if you've got that done, that done, that done, that kind of thing. (Zophiah, Buddy High School)

Another teacher complained that, "…at the beginning of class to see if you've got your essential questions up, and then at the end he'd want to see how you collaborate with your students…" (Heather, Buddy High School). However, all of the teachers at the rural remote school did agree that their principal is good to provide them feedback, "After he comes out or whatever [Walkthroughs], at some point in time during the day he'll let you know what needs to be done or what he observed" (TaKara, Buddy High School). This instructional focus is very different in the rural fringe and rural distant school.

The stakeholder perceptions of the instructional focus of the rural fringe and rural distant high schools was more about the data, identification of issues, shortfalls, and taking corrective action. The rural fringe high school has concentrated on using data to inform their instruction,

the principal discussed the time they invest in reviewing the data, "…we have to have data meetings, quarterly data meetings we bring in each department and we go over your data…" (Ian, Next Door High School). However, one of the teachers at this rural fringe high school explained,

> …we've been forced to look at data and we realize there's a problem. Okay, we know that this is what's coming, so we think ahead of the curve, instead of behind it, and saying, Okay, this is where we're now needing to push… What will make our scores better on the front end and try to organize our schedule, try to put teachers in place that can best address. (Chrissy, Next Door High School)

This school has a data driven instructional focus that is placed squarely on the students, the critical question is "…what do our students need…" (Leslie, Next Door High School). Much like the rural fringe high school the rural distant high school uses data to inform their instructional focus, "We identify what is causing the students not to reach that benchmark. Then once we identify it, we correct it by remediation, repeating the things that they're not doing well on…" (Michelle, Ridge High School). The rural fringe and rural distant high schools have an instructional focus aimed at ensuring the students' needs are met.

Teaching Approach

Closely related to instructional focus the perceptions of the participating stakeholders present a different philosophy and approach to teaching their students. Teaching approach was mentioned as important in sixty-seven percent in the rural distant stakeholder's comments, fifty-seven percent in the rural remote stakeholders and forty-two percent of the stakeholder's comments. The rural distant school's stakeholder's viewed teaching approach from a very different perspective, there is a culture meeting the students of the rural distant school where they

are and then moving them forward. The principal of the rural distant school believes that the

school and teachers must "…use whatever it takes to get the kid where he needs to be. We can't

just continue to go in a structured line. … We've got to reach them to where they are" (Tim,

Ridge High School). Many of the students that struggle in school have difficulty reading, one

teacher at the rural distant school believed that this is the result of not having been read to as

toddlers. A faculty member of the rural distant school summed up the culture by saying,

> We move our students forward no matter where they come from, because these students
>
> aren't at the same starting position as students in their state… And we have to figure out
>
> a way, during the same amount of time, not extra time, not extra time, taking their
>
> summer and making them go to school, not extending the date. (Matthew, Ridge High
>
> School)

In addition to a culture of meeting the students at their current academic level and

moving them forward, the rural distant school also work to ensure students in need of assistance

were identified, one stakeholder stated, "…to make sure that we identify low students and not let

them fall through the cracks and things of this nature…" (Michelle, Ridge High School). The

culture of the rural distant school was to ensure student's educational needs were met and

academic growth was achieved no matter how far behind a student appeared to be at the start of

the school year.

There is noticeable difference in the teaching approach between in the focus of the rural

distant school and the rural fringe school, the rural fringe schools teaching approach appears to

me more focused on the mechanics while the rural distant schools focus is moving students

forward. A major concern with the rural fringe school a major perception with the stakeholders

is the need to protect instructional time. This belief is outlined in the school's accreditation

report, "Every effort is made to protect instructional time, to limit classroom interruptions and to promote effective instruction during the school day" (Next Door High School Accreditation Report). The school does inforce this protect of instructional time one teacher noted, "…because we don't want to disrupt instructional time, so we try to protect that, as well" (Melissa, next Door High School). Along with the protection of instructional time establishing high expectations is among the most important perceptions identified by the rural fringe school, Kathy stated "I let them know my expectations and what I believe in…" (Kathy, Next Door High School) and one of the community stakeholders also identified high expectations, he stated "…just raising the expectations. I think that's where you start seeing improvements…" (Ryan, Next Door High School). In addition to establishing these high expectations the staff and faculty believed in holding the students accountable for their own learning, one teacher talked about letting her students know when their performance had disappointed her and telling them they had let her down. The rural remote school stakeholders expressed concern that their teaching approach was being hampered by the limited resources. The teachers assigned to this rural remote high school are teaching a total of six different classes requiring six different preps. One teacher lamented that resources were a limiting factor when she stated, "… again you're limited with the resources that you can have. You don't have the money to do everything, like other schools" (TaKara, Buddy High School); however, this teacher also commented that she was determined to show her students, "…the teachers are so determined to show kids that you can do a lot of stuff with what you have…" (TaKara, Buddy High School). The instructional coach for this school mentioned that she spent time trying to locate the resources teachers needed in their classrooms to be more effective, she stated, "I'll try to go out and find some resources…" (Heather, Buddy High School). The main difference in the focus on instructional approach is the rural distance schools

211

awareness of taking the students as they are academically and increasing their academic achievement and the more mechanical approach outlined in the perspectives of the stakeholders of the rural fringe and the rural remote schools.

Collaboration

There is a large difference in the stakeholder's perceptions of collaboration between the rural distant high school, fifty-six percent, and the rural fringe high school, twenty-five percent. A major contributing factor for this difference is in how collaboration is applied in the schools, in the rural fringe school collaboration is often tied to professional development and problem solving while at the rural distant school it is more geared towards team building. The stakeholders of the rural fringe high school discuss collaboration in terms of creating buy-in and as a tool for problem solving. Often this collaboration is centered around some type of professional development. Leslie stated, "We collaborate a lot. Most times, when we have faculty meetings, we have it based on some type of PD that we're working on at that time. …Hey, give me your idea on this" (Leslie, Next Door High School). The collaboration at the rural fringe high school is not always centered on the professional development but also as a way to solve classroom issues, one teacher stated, "…collaboration piece is pretty good. Teachers, they talk amongst themselves about different ... what they're doing in their classrooms. If they're having, if a particular student is having some sort of problem in their classroom" (Kathy, Next Door High School). Finally, this school uses collaboration to increase the likelihood of stakeholder buy-in, "We have a lot of collaboration, we try to do that on everything because, if the teachers buy in to what you want them to do, then they're going to be successful" (Leslie, Next Door High School). The collaboration at the rural distant high school has a different focus.

The rural distant high school's collaborative focus is aimed at team building amongst the staff and faculty. Many of the stakeholders held the perspective that their school had a family atmosphere, one stakeholder phased it, "By having a regular meeting with collaborating amongst ourselves and keeping in contact" (Shauna, Ridge High School). The perception of many of the rural distant high school stakeholders has a common focus, making sure the students get what they need, "We all work together collectively because we have the same purpose… Even if there's a dislike among faculty, they work together because all of them want the same thing: The student success..." (Julie, Ridge High School). The collaboration at the rural distant school is responsible for the sense of family and teamwork the stakeholders discussed, a parent stated, "We try to be a family. Ever since I been here, we always put that first. We a family. They works good together" (Melanie, A Parent of Ridge High School). The staff and faculty of the rural distant high school are focused on building an effective team, "…we make it a point to collaborate well, talk to each other about what's going on, and you know we have the departments, you know, departmental meetings. Even outside of the departmental meetings…" (Joseph, Ridge High School) to ensure the students are prepared for life outside of high school, "…we collaborate and we just try to have some different times to where we can make sure we're giving them that positive input that they need" (Joseph, Ridge High School), it is all about helping the students become successful.

Negative Pressures on Students

The perception of negative pressure on students has the greatest difference between the first rural distance school, eighty-nine percent, the second rural distant school, eighty-six percent, and the rural fringe school, fifty percent. The root cause of these negative pressures on student stems for their home-life and the lack of support the students are receiving from their families,

213

this lack of support ranges from passive to actively encouraging the students disengage from their education. All three for the rural schools participating in this research experienced some level of these negative pressures on students. The common perception of the negative pressure these students are experiencing stems from the lifestyle they live in and observe in their everyday lives, one community stakeholder stated,

> If I see a certain type of lifestyle as a child then I'm thinking that's going to be the system, or that's what my life is going to be like, so why do I need to get an eighth grade education? Why do I need to get a high school education? By God, why do I need to learn a skill or go to college? I think those are some of the things that some of these children face, and I think that they're starting to put some things in place that they try to limit and improve those type of situations. (Ryan, Stakeholder Next Door High School)

This negative pressure also comes in the form of parental excuse making for their students, the principal of the rural fringe school stated, "My thing for the parents is 'Hey, quit trying to help them make up excuses as to why they can't do this" (Ian, Next Door High School). There is also a sense of hopelessness within these communities, "…some of them just don't have any hope, and it's hard to try to get those that don't have any hope, to pull them up and say hey, look, we got you" (Leslie, Next Door High School). While all three types of rural school experienced this type of negative pressure on students, the rural distant and rural remote schools experienced a much higher level of active parental discouragement of educational achievement for their children, a parent of the rural remote school lamented that,

> Some of the parents…are more negative than positive about the learning of the children because a lot of the parents has a great downfall, and they don't feel that child is going to

accomplish anything, and they're always saying things about this school. (Samuel, a

Parent of Buddy High School)

Many of the students attending the rural distant and rural remote school are not being

taught at home how to overcome adversity, a teacher stated, "If you're in that cycle where your

parents always looked for a handout and you've never really worked for anything, as soon as

things get tough you run into that wall and say, "Well, it's over now" (Michelle Ridge High

School). The active discourage goes to an extreme, parents are teaching their children that there

is no need to get an education because they are going to held down, as one stakeholder

suggested, "…we build up hindrances and we say the White man's trying to hold me down,

nobody's going to let me do this, we can't do that, we came from this, and they instill this into

their kids" (Joseph" Ridge High School). Another stakeholder went further stating, "…the

parents are really teaching the kids that they can't go anywhere, like the white man's keeping you

back, and that's pervasive attitude…" (Michelle, Ridge High School). The students of the rural

distant and rural remote schools are facing the active discouragement of their educational

activities while the rural fringe students are living and witnessing a life style that passively

discourages their educational activities.

Lack of Stability and Security

A major finding of this research was the impact that a lack of stability and security has on

a student's academic learning and achievement. The stakeholders in all three type rural schools

mentioned this in their interviews. However, there is a large difference in the degree this was

identified by each type school. The greatest concern appears to be in the rural remote school,

where this was mentioned by seventy-one percent of the stakeholders, followed by the rural

distant school, fifty-six percent, and the rural fringe school, forty-two percent. An analysis of the data provides insight into the differing perceptions of this issue.

The perceptions of the stakeholders in the rural remote school indicate that the root cause of this lack of stability and security is missing parent(s), being raised by a guardian, or other extended family member. Jackie was concern that "…when they are missing a family member; a mother out of the household, or a father out of the household, that's hurtful. They don't know how to deal with that. A lot of our mothers are single..." (Jackie, Buddy High School). Jackie went on to say that often times these guardians are not prepared to raise and educate these students. She worried that "…Grandparents don't know as much.... They're older, so they only know to provide. Sometimes they don't have that educational background to assist those kids…" (Jackie, Buddy High School). These stakeholder perceptions extend out into the community where there is concern that these older guardians are not familiar with the environment the students today are surviving in, they are raising high school students as if it was twenty years ago. One parent expressed this concern "You have to face, 'I had a bad night last night,' if you're not aware, if you've never been a child, you've never experienced that, then you're not going to see that child for what he's going through…" (Samuel, Parent of Buddy High School).

The rural fringe and rural distant school stakeholders' perceptions of the lack of security and stability revolves more around their students being left at home alone to take care of themselves. One parent placed the blame on the work schedules of many of these students' parents, she believed "…parents are working now, most jobs are 12 hour jobs and parents are not home a lot. Kids are home by themselves a lot because the way their parents are working" (Jodie, a parent from Ridge High School) and a stakeholder from the rural fringe school echoed this concern, "…we have a large group that doesn't have any family life, so to speak. … We have

216

students who when they leave school on Friday afternoon, they may not know where their next meal is coming from. I think that's a huge barrier (Deborah, Next Door High School Stakeholder). Finally, the rural fringe and rural distant school stakeholders discussed their efforts to overcome these issues. Tim, the principal of the rural distant school stresses the importance of teaching the students that the choice is theirs, they can give up or they can break the pattern, he encourages his teachers to "Challenge them, make them accept those challenges because the world is going to offer then challenges and they've got to deal with them as well" (Tim, Ridge High School). A similar philosophy was espoused by a stakeholder from the rural fringe high school, Leslie discussed the schools effort to make the transition from home to school a easy and smooth as possible.

Motivational Issues

The lack of motivation for the students is closely related to the negative pressure on students, the stakeholders of the rural distant school, seventy-eight percent, rated this finding much higher than the either the rural fringe, forty-two percent, or the rural remote schools, forty-three percent. The stakeholders of the rural distant school believed that the student's lack of motivation is the result of the environment they are raised in at home, these students witness significant family members give up when they encounter an obstacle, "…they lack motivation and that perseverance, and that drive to continue to go forward. As soon as they run into an obstacle, then they quit and give up" (Michelle, Ridge High School). Joseph echoes this belief when he stated, "You know we've been struggling, we've been doing this and we've always had to fight and it just irks me, but that's the mentality... I call it, it's just like a generational curse..." (Joseph, Ridge High School) and another stakeholder lamented, "…so many kids today are so unmotivated. They don't want a desire to get all the knowledge…" (Julie, Ridge High School).

217

The rural fringe and the rural remote high schools stakeholder perceptions of motivational issues are vastly different. The issue these two school seem to be facing helicopter parents who are not supportive of rigor in education, one teacher was concerned with the number of parents asking for teachers to be easy on their children, she commented, "Don't come up here and ask a teacher to be easy, because you want an A. Encourage your child to do the hard work and think and learn" (Chrissy, Next Door High School). In addition to parents making excuses for their children's lack of effort and educational achievement the principal expressed concern that parents were indulging their children's every demand, "…technology is killing us, a parent calls and texts their child during the day and says 'Hey, I'm going to bring this. What time does the bill ring?' I'm going to bring you this to the building and mom steps in the door and hands it to them and leaves" (Ian, Next Door High School). A final perspective that was mentioned was the lack of educational alternative for the students, due to the small student body these rural schools did not offer many elective classes, one stakeholder believed that "…if we had more to offer our students other than the basic classwork, I think that would show much more motivation if they can go out and do some of the other extra classes that they have, fun classes…: (Candace, Buddy High School). The issues faced by the rural fringe and rural remote schools, while complex and disruptive to the educational process paled in comparison to the active parental discouragement of education the rural distant high school was combating.

Limited Resources

Limited resources was identified as a major shortcoming for the rural remote school, eighty-six percent of the stakeholders expressed concern that school lacked the resources necessary to effectively educate the students and the rural fringe and rural distant, forty-two

percent and forty-four percent respectively of the stakeholders expressed the same concerns. There are several reasons for this disparity in perceptions: the number of teachers assigned to each school, the limited number for electives offered, the lack of business and industry, and the higher number of family farms.

An analysis of the schools' website and the interview data identified a critical shortcoming within the course offerings of the rural remote high school. There was only one teacher per subject area, each teach had to prepare for six different classes each day. The rural fringe and rural distant high school had a minimum of two teachers per subject area which required those teachers a maximum of two different classes to prepare for each day. This analysis also identified a very limited number of electives available for the students attending the rural remote school; the only electives were physical education and business education. In contrast not only did the rural fringe and rural distant school offer a great number of electives that also had a full-time instructional coach, librarian, and on-site access teacher. Finally, both of these schools had well-developed career tech programs, which the rural remote school did not have access to for their students.

The rural remote school was located in a predominantly agricultural area with no industrial development and very limited commercial development. One of the stakeholders talked about the distance they had to travel just to shop: "…even to shop for groceries, they would have to go about thirty or forty miles…" (Zophiah, Buddy High School). The rural remote school is located in a very economically depressed area of the state. The rural fringe and rural distant schools, while in economically depressed areas of the state, do have a moderate level of industrial and commercial development. The Executive Directors of the Economic Development Authority in the counties where the rural fringe and rural distant schools were

219

located were extremely helpful in providing insight into the role industry has played in helping improve the educational opportunities for the students. The workforce development conversations with the business and industry in the area of the rural fringe and rural remotes school is an important difference, one stakeholder stated, "…so I think you start seeing a lot more alignment, you start seeing a lot more conversations with business and industry, ... GP, Rocky Creek at the time, what do you all need?" (Ryan Stakeholder, Ridge High School). The rural remote school does not have industry in the general vicinity of the school to have this opportunity.

The major economic engine for the community surrounding the rural remote schools is small family farms. Many of these farms are subsistence farms providing a meager standard of living for the family. Two large commercial farms in the rural remote schools community are receiving federal subsidies to the amount of approximately forty-two thousand dollars in 2014. While there are subsistence family farms in the areas surrounding the rural fringe and rural remote schools there is also commercial and industrial development providing jobs for many of the area residents.

Discussion

The purpose of this research project was to identify if there were any differences in the challenges or facilitators of success between the high-poverty, high-minority, and high-achieving rural fringe, rural distant, and rural remote school in Alabama. An analysis of the data collected for this project identified two major themes with eleven areas with between twenty-one and forty-four percentage point difference in the frequency of the stakeholder perceptions.

Theme	Next Door High School	Ridge High School	Buddy High School
Non-School Based Difference			
Negative Pressures on Students	50%	89%	86%
Lack of Stability	42%	56%	71%
Lack of Motivation	42%	78%	43%
School-Based Differences			
Programs and Processes	67%	89%	86%
Community and Parental Involvement	58%	78%	43%
Professional Development	33%	56%	43%
Shared Leadership	58%	67%	29%
Instructional Focus	50%	56%	71%
Teaching Approach	42%	67%	57%
Collaboration	25%	56%	71%
Limited Resources	42%	44%	86%

Figure 2. Major Differences Among Schools

All three of the participant schools encountered may of the same challenges and facilitators of success, however, the stakeholder's perceptions of the importance are different. The existing research for rural school does not differentiate between the categories of rural, the research tends to place all types of rural schools into one group. This research identified some major differences between the various types of rural schools.

The major difference in the area of programs and process was due to the higher level in emphasis, in the rural distant and rural remotes schools, on overcoming any obstacle the students encounter in their academic and personal lives. The existing research does place emphasis on creating an environment where the desire to succeed along with an emphasis on academics and collective efficacy is important to improving student learning and achievement. The leadership

teams of the rural distant and rural remote schools created a culture of learning and establishing high expectations in their classrooms that challenged the students to better themselves.

In the area of community and parental involvement there was a significant difference in stakeholder perspectives, the rural distant school was thirty-five percentage points higher than the rural fringe school. The racial divide within the rural distant community was significant and much like the history of the achievement gap the issue of community and parental involvement in this community does have its roots in history. The rural distant school is in a community has a long history of deep racial divides and unlike the rural fringe school this school has always been a high-poverty and high-minority school. The rural fringe has transitioned from majority white middle class to a racially divided school slowly during the past twenty years.

Professional development is much more differentiated at the rural fringe school to meet the needs of the teachers than it is in the rural distant or rural remote school. The major focus of the rural distant and rural remotes schools is the centralized professional development programs create by the central office. The differentiation of professional development at the rural fringe school removes the stigma of being forced to sit in a one-size-fits-all class that is not meeting the individual teacher's needs, being able to focus on individual needs enables staff and faculty to focus on their weaknesses and needs.

Shared-leadership was considered important in the rural fringe and rural distant schools but was perceived as less important in the rural remote school. Essentially, the major reason for this difference was in the actual leadership style of the principals. The principals of the rural fringe and rural distant schools were actively using shared leadership within their schools. The principal of the rural remote school, who had been the principal for over twenty years appeared to only pay lip service to the concept of shared leadership and often had to be persuaded into

222

listening to stakeholders concerns. The principal of the rural remotes school was an "old-school leader. This also made him more difficult to approach when a stakeholder had a concern.

The rural remote school had perception in the importance of instructional focus than the rural fringe or rural distant schools. This increase in perception of the importance of instructional focus is the result of the number of different classes each teacher taught at the rural remote school and the old school nature of the principal. The focus within the rural remote school was on the mechanics of teaching, what was written on the board, in the lesson plans, and meeting the requirements of the checklist. The instructional focus in the rural fringe and rural distant school was much more aligned with the data analysis and what the data indicated the students needed to be successful.

Closely aligned with the instructional focus was the teaching approach, the rural distant school had a focus on moving the students forward no matter where they started the school year. The principal of the rural distant school pushed the philosophy that they had to meet the students where they were and help develop their academic ability and achievement moving them forward during the school year. The rural fringe school's focus on instructional approach is in protecting instructional time and establishing high expectations.

In the area of collaboration the major difference between the schools is in the purpose of the collaboration, at the rural distant school collaboration is used as a team building tool while in the rural fringe school it is designed as problem solving strategy and as a part of their professional development program. While the schools have a different purpose for their collaboration the ultimate goals of their collaboration efforts is to ensure the students are provided a quality education.

Negative pressures on students is closely related to community and parental involvement, the negative pressure students are being subjected to tend to come in the form of both passive and actively discouraging students from being academically successful. The rural distant and rural remote schools have a much more significant issue with parents actively discouraging their children from achieving to the best of their academic abilities while the rural fringe school students are exposed to a more passive pressure. The rural fringe student see how for generations their families has survived without obtaining much formal education or job skills and they tend to follow the family tradition. The students of the rural distant and rural remotes schools are being taught that they cannot be successful so why try.

The perceptions of a lack of stability and security has its difference at the rural remote school where the stakeholders are most concerned with absent parents and the children being raised by a guardian, most often a grandparent. While the rural fringe and rural distant schools this concern is more about the latch key student and parents not being home when the children are home from school. The school solutions are very different also, in the rural fringe and rural distant schools the solution lies in the philosophy of educating the students that they have a choice, they can either continue to pattern or they can decide to break the parent and by successful.

Motivational issues are closely related to the pressure on students and the lack of stability and security. The rural fringe and rural remote schools the problem seems to revolve around parents that are constantly making excuses while the rural distant school faces motivational issues rooted in the student home environment. All three schools identify the same end result of a lack of motivation, once the students encounter an obstacle they give up.

Limited resources is an issue for every educator, in this study the major difference at the rural remote school is the limited number of teachers and the lack of electives available for the students. Each teacher at the rural remote school teaches six different classes every day while the teachers at the rural fringe and rural distant school only teach two different classes every day. This places enormous stress on a teacher's time and resources. Additionally, the rural remote school students do not have access to vocational training at a career tech center. Finally, the tax base of the rural remote school is substantially smaller than the rural fringe and rural distant schools, due to the agricultural nature of the economy. The rural remote school has not industry and almost no commercial development to support their tax base or schools. The main economic engine for the area are small subsistence family farms that produce little economic growth for the community.

Implications

The findings of this research cannot be generalized they do indicate some important possibilities. The participants of this research project believed that the most important thing a teacher, school leader, or other school stakeholder could do to improve student learning and achievement was to have and project a genuine concern for the students. School leaders that are struggling to improve student learning and achievement must understand that their focus needs to be on what is best for the student. As a part of the focus on students the staff and faculty need to have an understanding of the environment their student live in outside of the school day, this environment often dictates the student's attitude toward their education and authority figures. A key program must include teaching the students to deal with adversity and obstacles.

Parental and community involvement is both a major concern and reason for success in all three of the participant schools. The key role of an administrator is to be approachable and

practice a shared decision-make leadership style. These principals were all well known in their communities, had an open-door policy, and had the reputation of listening than a stakeholder had a concern. These principals made a point of being active in the community outside of the school, being a true member of the community enabled them to develop the buy-in necessary to make the changed necessary to improve teaching, student learning and achievement.

Developing abilities the staff and faculty required differentiated professional development. The professional development programs of these school involved some degree of differentiated professional development, the degree of differentiation varied. The differentiation of professional development ranged from focusing on the individual needs and designing a specific program for that one teacher to a buffet style professional development where the planning was centralized but offered choices, to a very centralized professional development program with teachers conducting book studies and forming professional learning communities to address their individual and school level weaknesses. A key to creating a high-achieving school is quality differentiated professional development.

Future Research

This study focused on a very narrow population of rural schools in Alabama and it did confirm some of the findings in the existing research this project also identified some interesting findings that will require additional research. The existing research groups all rural schools into a monolithic group generalizing the findings across all types of rural schools, additional research needs to be conducted to determine if these finding can be replicated and to what degree. In this study there were identifiable differences between the three types of rural schools it is important to see if these difference are similar in other rural schools in Alabama, the southeast, and throughout the country.

226

The issue of parents actively discouraging their children from working to be successful academically was a recurring perceptions by many of the stakeholders across the spectrum of rural schools. This discouragement ranged from outright racism – White man is going to keep you down – to parents telling their children that they were not smart enough to be successful. It is important to investigate this perception more thoroughly. It is important to have a complete understanding of the phenomenon to develop strategies to effectively combat this barrier to closing the achievement gap.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to identify if there were differences in the perceptions of the stakeholders of rural fringe, rural distant, and rural remote schools in Alabama. The result of the research have indicated that there are differences and that rural schools are not a monolithic entity. It is hoped that this research will encourage increased attention to rural school research and serve as a catalyst for future research in this area.

Bibliography

Arnold, M. L. (2000). *Rural schools: Diverse needs call for flexible policies.* Aurora: Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED441656.pdf

Berg, B. L., & Lune, H. (2012). *Qualitative research methods for social sciences.* Boston: Pearson.

Bernard, H. R., & Ryan, G. W. (2010). *Analyzing qualitative data: Systematic approaches.* Los Angeles: SAGE.

Books, S. (2007). What are we talking about when we talk about "closing the achievement gap". *The International Journal of Learning, 14*(2), 11–17. Retrieved June 9, 2014, from http://www.learning-journal.com

Bottoms, G., Presson, A., & Han, L. (2004). *Rigor, relevance and relationships improve achievement in rural high schools: High school reform works when schools do the right things.* Atlanta: Southern Regional Education Board.

Carey, R. L. (2014). A cultural analysis of the achievement gap discourse: Challenging the language and labels used in the work of school reform. *Urban Education. , 49*(4), 440–468. doi:10.1177/0042085913507459

Carter, G., Lee, L., & Sweatt, O. (2009). *Lessons learned from rural schools.* Montgomery: The Center for Rural Alabama. Retrieved July 27, 2014, from http://larrycuban.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/lessonslearnedruralschools2009-1.pdf

Carter, P. L. (2012). *Stubborn roots: Race culture, and inequality in the U.S. and South African schools.* New York, NY, United States: Oxford University Press.

Chance, P. L., & Sequra, S. N. (2009). A rural high school's collaborative approach to school improvement. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 24*(5), 1–12.

Cresswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

DeCuir-Gunby, J., Marshall, P., & McCulloch, A. (2011). Developing and using a codebook for the analysis of interview data: An example from a professional development research project. *Field Methods, 23*(2), 136–155.

Gibbs, R. (2000). The challenge ahead for rural schools. *Forum for Applied Research and Public Policy*, 82–87. Retrieved November 5, 2013

Hardre`, P. L. (2007). Motivating environments: A systemic analysis of four rural high schools. *Leadershio and Policy in Schools, 6*(3), 231–265. doi:10.1080/15700760701263824.

Hardre`, P. L., & Sullivan, D. W. (2008). Student differences and environment perceptions: How they contribute to student motivation in rural high schools. *Learning and Individual Differences, 18*(4), 3–14. doi:10.1016/j.lindif.2007.11.010

Howley, C. (2001). Understanding the circumstances of rural schooling: The parameters of respectful research. *Understanding Achievement in Science and Mathematics in Rural Schools* (pp. 1–8). Lexington, KY: ERIC.

Irvin, M. J., Byun, S., Meece, J. L., Farmer, T. W., & Hutchins, B. C. (2012). Educational barriers of rural youth: Relation of individual and contextual difference variables. *Journal of Career Assessment, 20*(1), 71–87. doi:10.1177/1069072711420105

Johnson, J. D., Howley, C. B., & Howley, A. A. (2002). *Size, excellence, and equity: A report om Arkansas schools and districts.* Athens: Ohio University,Educational Studies Department. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED459987.pdf

Johnson, J., Showalter, D., Kein, R., & Lester, C. (2014). *Why rural matters 2013–2014: The condition of rural education in the 50 states.* Washington DC: Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/2013-14-Why-Rural-Matters.pdf

Leithwood, K. (2010). Characteristics of school districts that are exceptionally effective in closing the achievement gap. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 9*(3), 245–291. doi:10.1080/15700761003731500.

Masumoto, M., & Brown-Welty, S. (2009). Case study of leadership practices and school-community interrelationships in high-performing, high-poverty, rural California high schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 24*(1), 1–18.

Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning. (2005). *Final report: High-needs schools; What does it take to beat the odds.* Aurora. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED486626.pdf

National Center for Educational Statics. (2012). *Conditions in rural schools.* Retrieved from Rural Education in America: http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/

Patton, M. Q. (2001). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Rosenberg, L., Christianson, M. D., Angus, M. H., & Rosenthal, E. (2014). *A focused look at rural schools receiving school improvement grants.* Washington DC: National Center for Education Evaluation. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20144013/pdf/20144013.pdf

229

Starr, K., & White, S. (2008). The small rural school principalship: Key challenges and cross-school responses. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 23*(5), 1–12.

Stronge, J. H., Ward, T. J., & Grant, L. W. (2011). What makes good teachers good? A cross-case analysis of the connection between teacher effectivness and student achievement. *Journal of Teacher Education, 62*(4), 339–355. doi:10.1177/0022487111404241

Strange, M., Johnson, J., Showalter, D., & Kein, R. (2012). Why rural matters 2011–2012: The condition of rural education in the 50 states. 1–102. Retrieved December 1, 2013.

U.S. Department of Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform.* Washington DC: The National Commission on Excellence in Education.

U.S. Department of Education. (2008). *A nation accountable: Twenty-five years after a nation at risk.* Department of Education. Washington DC: Department of Education. Retrieved May 24, 2014, from http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/accountable/

U.S. Department of Education. (2006). *Rural education in America.* Retrieved from National Center for Educational Statistics: https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp

U.S. Department of Education. (2015). *Rural education in America.* Retrieved from National Center for Education Statistics: http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/tables/a.1.a.-1_1112.asp

Williams, A. (2011). A call for change: Narrowing the achievement gap between white and minority students. *The Clearing House, 84*(2), 65–71. doi:10.1080/00098655.2010.511308

Williams, D. T., & King, J. R.-E. (2002). *Rural school leadership in the deep south: The double-edged legacy of school desegregation.* Washington DC: The Rural Schools and Community Trust. Retrieved from http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/Double-Edged_Leg

Yen, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

REFERENCES

Agbo, S. A. (2007). Addressing school-community relations in a cross-cultural context: A collaborative action to bridge the gap between first nations and the school. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 22*(8), 1–14. Retrieved from http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/22-8.pdf

Akiba, M., & Anthorp, H. (2003). *Standards-based and individual instruction in Mathematics findings from McREL's study of high-performing, high-needs schools.* Aurora: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning.

Alabama State Department of Education. (2012). *2012 adequate yearly progress summary.* Montgomery: Alabama State Department of Education. Retrieved from http://www03.alsde.edu/accountability/preaccountability.asp

Ali, S. R., & Saunders, J. L. (2006). College expectations of rural Appalachian youth: An exploration of social cognitive career theory factors. *The Career Development Quarterly, 55*(1), 38–51. doi:10.1002/j.2161-0045.2006.tb00003.

Ali, S. R., & Saunders, J. L. (2008). The career aspirations of rural Appalachian high school students. *Journal of Career Assessment, 17*(2), 172-188. doi:10.1177/1069072708328897

Ali, S. R., McWhiter, E. H., & Chronister, K. M. (2005). Self-efficacy and vocational outcomes expectations for adolescents of lower scioeconomic status: A pilot study. *Journal of Career Assessment, 13*(1), 40–58. doi:10.1177/1069072704270273 .

Anagnostopoulos, D. (2003). The new accountability, student failure, and teacher work in urban high schools. *Educational Policy, 17*(3), 291–316. doi:10.1177/0895904803017003001

Anderson, K. (2013). Discussion technique: The twice-around. *College Teaching, 61*(2), 83. doi:10.1080/87567555.2012.688175.

Anderson, M., & White, S. (2011). Resourcing change in small schools. *Australian Journal of Education, 55*(1), 50-61. Retrieved December 22, 2014

Apthorp, H. S. (2002). *School practices for helping children meet language arts standards: Preliminary findings from McREL's study of high-performing, high-needs schools.* Aroura: Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning.

Armstead, C. L., Bessett, A. G., Sembiante, S., & Plaza, M. P. (2010). What students need, what students say they want: Student perspectives on the promise of smaller learning communities. *Peabody Journal of Education, 85*(3), 365–374. doi:10.1080/0161956X.2010.491706

Arnold, M. L. (2000). *Rural schools: Diverse needs call for flexible policies.* Aurora: Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED441656.pdf

Arnold, M. L. (2005). Rural education: A new perspective is needed at the U.S. department of education. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 20*(3), 1–3.

Arnold, M., Newman, J., Gaddy, B. B., & Dean, C. (2005). A look at the condition of rural education research: Setting a direction for future research. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 20*(6), 1–25.

Ayers, W. (2000). Simple justice: Thinking about teaching and learning equity, and the fight for small schools. In M. W. Ayers, & G. H. Lyon, *A simple justice: The challenge of small schools* (pp. 1–13). New York: Teachers College Press.

Ball, D., & Cohen, D. (1999). *Instruction, capacity, and improvement.* Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED431749.pdf

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control.* New York: W.H. Freeman.

Barley, Z. A. (2007). Rural school success: What can we learn? *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 22*(1), 1–16.

Barley, Z. A., & Beesley, A. D. (2007). Rural school success: What can we learn? *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 22*(1), 1–16.

Barth, P., Haycock, K., Jackson, H., Mora, K., Ruiz, P., Robinson, S., & & Wilkins, A. (1999). *Dispelling the myth: High-poverty schools exceeding expectations.* Washington, D.C.: Education Trust. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED445140.pdf

Bass, B. M. (1995). Theory of transformational leadershio redux. *Leadership Quarterly, 6*(4), 463-478. doi:0.1016/1048-9843(95)90021-7.

Beaulieu, L. M., & Israel, G. D. (2005). It's more than just schools: How families and communities promote student achievement. In L. B. Bibbs, *The role of education: Promoting economic and social vitality of rural America* (pp. 44–55). Mississippi State, Mississippi: Southern Rural Development Center.

Beeson, E., & Strange, M. (2000). Why rural education matters: The need for every state to take action on rural education. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 16*(2), 63–140.

Beeson, E., & Strange, M. (2003). Why rural matters 2003: The continuing need for every state to take action on rural education. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 1*(3), 3–16. Retrieved October 23, 2013.

Berg, B. L., & Lune, H. (2012). *Qualitative research methods for social sciences.* Boston: Pearson.

Bernard, H. R., & Ryan, G. W. (2010). *Analyzing qualitative data: Systematic approaches.* Los Angeles: SAGE.

Bickel, R., Howley, C., Williams, T., & Glascock, C. (2000). *Will the real "Texas miracle in education" please stand up?* Randolph: Rural School and Community Trust.

Books, S. (2007). What are we talking about when we talk about "closing the achievement gap." *The International Journal of Learning, 14*(2), 11–17. Retrieved June 9, 2014, from http://www.learning-journal.com

Bottoms, G., Presson, A., & Han, L. (2004). *Rigor, relevance and relationships improve achievement in rural high schools: High school reform works when schools do the right things.* Atlanta: Southern Regional Education Board.

Bowen, G. L., Ware, W. B., Rose, R. A., & Powers, J. D. (2007). Assessing the functioning of school as learning organizations. *Children and Schools, 29*(4), 199–208. doi:10.1093/cs/29.4.199.

Bowers-Campbell, J. (2011). Take it out of class: Exploring virtual literature circles. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 54*(8), 557–567. doi:10.1598/JAAL.54.8.1.

Brown, D. F. (2011). Curriculum integration: Meaningful learning based on students' questions. *Middle Grades Research Journal, 6*(4), 193–207.

Brown, K. M., Benkovitz, J., Muttillo, A. J., & Urban, T. (2011). Leading schools of excellence and equity: Documenting effective strategies in closing achievement gaps. *Teachers College Record,, 113*(1), 57–96.

Bruner, D. Y., & Greenlee, B. J. (2000). Measure of work culture in high and low performace schools. *Research in Schools, 7*(2), 71–76.

Byrk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement.* New York: Russell Sage.

Byrne-Jimenez, M., & Orr, M. T. (2012). Thinking in three dimensions: Leadership for capacity building, sustainability, and succession. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership, 15*(3), 33-46. doi:10.1177/1555458912447842.

Carey, R. L. (2014, June). A cultural analysis of the achievement gap discourse: Challenging the language and labels used in the work of school reform. *Urban Education. , 49*(4), 440–468. doi:10.1177/0042085913507459.

Carter, G., Lee, L., & Sweatt, O. (2009). *Lessons learned from rural schools.* Montgomery: The Center for Rural Alabama. Retrieved July 27, 2014, from http://larrycuban.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/lessonslearnedruralschools2009-1.pdf

Carter, P. L. (2012). *Stubborn roots: Race culture, and inequality in the U.S. and South African schools.* New York, NY, United States: Oxford University Press.

Chance, P. L., & Sequra, S. N. (2009). A rural high school's collaborative approach to school improvement. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 24*(5), 1–12.

Chang, J.-C., Hsiao, H.-C., & Tu, Y.-L. (2011). Besides using transformational leadership: What should schools do to achieve innovation? *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher, 20*(1), 48–20. Retrieved July 11 2014

Chapin, J. (2006). The achievement gap in social studies and science starts early: Evidence from the early childhood longitudinal study. *The Social Studies, 97*(2), 231–238.

Chen, G. (2008). Communities, students, and school crime: A confirmatory study of crime in U.S. high schools. *Urban Education, 43*(3), 301–318. doi:10.1177/0042085907311791

Chenoweth, K. (2010). Leave nothing to chance. *Educational Leadership, 68*(3), 16–21. Retrieved June 9, 2014

Clotfelter, C., Ladd, H., & Vigdor, J. (2005). Who teachers whom? Race and the distribution of novice teachers. *Economic of Education Review, 24*(4), 377–392. doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2004.06.008

Clotfelter, C., Ladd, H., & Vigdor, J. (2007). How and why do teacher credentials matter for student achievement? *Working Papers 2*. doi:10.3386/w12828

Coladarci, T. (2003). *Gallup goes to school: The importance of confidence intervals for evaluating 'adequate yearly progress' in small schools.* Washington, DC: The Rural School and Community Trust.

Coladarci, T. (2007). Improving the yield of rural education research. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 22*(3), 1–9.

Colangelo, H., Assouline, S., & New, J. (1999). *Gifted education in rural schools, A national assessment.* Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press.

Coleman, J. (1997). Output-driven schools: Principles of design. In J. Coleman, B. Schendier, S. Plank, K. Schiller, R. Shouse, & H. Wang (Eds.), *Redesigning American education* (pp. 13–38). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Collinson, V. (2010). To learn or not to learn: A potential organizational learning gap among

    school systems? *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 9*(2), 190–219.

    doi:10.1080/15700760903342368.

Collinson, V., Killeavy, M., & Stephenson, H. (1998). Exemplary teachers: Practicing an ethic of

    care in England, Ireland, and the United States. *American Educational Research*

    Association (pp. 1–26). San Diego. Retrieved June 21, 2014, from

    http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED423217.pdf

Concannon, J. P., Aulgur, L., & Langton, J. (2014). Contextual factors and the achievement gap:

    Does anyone have the recipe for education equity in the US? *Journal of Social Science*

    for Policy Implications, 2(1), 1–14.

Cooley, A. (2013). Qualitative research in education: The origins, debates, and politics of

    creating knowledge. *Educational Studies, 49*(3), 247–262.

    doi:10.1080/00131946.2013.783834

Cooper, H., Nye, B., Charlton, K., Lindsay, J., & Greathouse, S. (1996). *The effects of summer*

    vacation on achievement test scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review. Review of

    Educational Research, 66(3), 227–268.

Cooper, L. A. (2007). Why closing the research-practice gap is critical to closing student

    achievement Gap. *Theory into Practice, 46*(4), 317–324.

    doi:10.1080/00405840701593907.

Cotton, K. (1996). School size, school climate, and student performance. Portland, OR:

    Northwest Regional Educational Library (NWREL) (pp. 10–11).

Cotton, K. (2001). *New Small Learning Communities: Findings from Recent Research.* Portland,

    OR: Northwest Regional Educational Library (NWREL). Retrieved December 22, 2014.

Cresswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Crow, G. M., Hausman, C. S., & Paredes-Scribner, J. (2002). Reshaping the role of the school principal. In J. Murphy, *The educational leadership challenge: Redefining leadership for the 21st century* (pp. 189–211). Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education.

Crowe, C. C. (2013). A longitudinal investigation of parent educational involvement and student achievement: Disentangling parent socialization and child evocative effects across development. *Journal of Educational Research & Policy Studies., 13*(3), 1–32.

Daly, A. J. (2009). Rigid response in an age of accountability. *Educational Administration Quartery, 45*(2), 168–216. doi:10.1177/0013161X08330499

D'Amico, J. L., & Nelson, V. (2000). How on earth did you hear about us? A study of exemplary rural school practices in the upper midwest. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 16*(3), 182–192. Retrieved from http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/16-3_3.pdf

Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). Teacher quality and student achievement: A review of state policy evidence. *Educational Policy Analysis Archives, 8*(1), 1–50. Retrieved June 21, 2014, from http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/392/515

Darling-Hammond, L., Ross, P., & Milliken, M. (2006). High school size, organization, and context: What matters for student success. *Brookings Papers on Educaional Policy*, 163–203. doi:10.1353/pep.2007.0001

De Luca, B. M., Takano, K., & Hinshaw, S. A. (2009). Are the "best" teachers in the "neediest" schools?: An urban intradistrict equity inquiry. *Education and Urban Socirty, 41*(6), 653–671. doi:10.1177/0013124509339265

Dearing, E., Kreider, H., Simpkins, S., & Weiss, H. (2006). Family involvement in school and low-income children's literacy performance. *Family Involvement Research Digests*.

Deci, E., & Ryan, R. (2002). The paradox of achievement: The harder you push, the worse it gets. In J. Aronson, *Improving academic achievement: Contributions of social psychology* (pp. 59–85). New York: Academic Press.

Dee, T. S., Ha, W., & Jacob, B. A. (2006). The effects of school size on parental involvement and social capital: Evidence from the ELS: 2002. *Brookings Papers on Educaional Policy*, 77-97. doi:10.1353/pep.2007.0002

Demi, M. A., Coleman-Jensen, A., & Snyder, A. R. (2010). The rural context and secondary school enrollment: An ecological systems aproach. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 25*(7), 1–26. Retrieved from http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/25-7.pdf

Duncan, A. (2011). *Letter.* Retrieved June 1, 2014, from United States Department of Education: http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/secletter/110923.html

Edington, E. D., & Koehler, L. (1987). Rural student achievement: Elements for consideration. *ERIC Digest* (pp. 1-6). Las Cruces, NM: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.

Eisner, E. W. (2004). What does it mean to say a school is doing well? In D. J. Flanders, & S. J. Thornton (Eds.), *The curriculim studies reader* (2nd ed., pp. 298–304). New York, New York, United States: RoutledgeFalmer.

Elmore, R. (2004). *School reform from the inside out: Policy, practices, and performance.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Elmore, R. F. (2006). What (so-called) low-performing schools can teach (so-called) high

       performing schools. *Journal of Staff Development, 27*(2), 43–45.

Farmer, T. W., Dadis, a. K., Latendresse, S. J., Thompson, J., Irvin, M. J., & Zhang, L. (2006).

       Educating out and giving back: Adults' conceptions of successful outcomes of African-

       American high school students from improverished rural communities. *Journal of*

       Research in Rural Education, 21(10), 1–12.

Federal Educaiton Budget Project. (2014, April 24). *Federal education budget project*. Retrieved

       from New America Foundation: http://febp.newamerica.net/background-analysis/no-

       child-left-behind-funding

Feldman, J., & O'Dwyer, A. (2010). Patterns in student perceptions of start-up and conversion

       small high schools. *Peabody Journal of Education, 85*(3), 313–332.

       doi:10.1080/0161956X.2010.491689

Finnigan, K. S. (2010). Principal leadership and teacher motivation under high-stakes

       accountability policies. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 9*(2), 161–189.

       doi:10.1080/15700760903216174

Finnigan, K. S., & Daly, A. J. (2010). Learning at a system level: Ties between principals of

       low-performaing school and central office leaders. *Social Network Theory and*

       Educational Change, 179–195.

Finnigan, K. S., & Daly, A. J. (2012). Mind the gap: Organizational learning and improvement in

       an underperforming urban system. *American Journal of Education, 119*(1), 41–71.

       Retrieved July 18, 2014, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/667700

Finnigan, K. S., & Stweart, T. (2009). Leading change under pressure: An examination of principal leadership in low-performaing schools. *Journal of School Leadership, 19*(5), 586–618.

Fischetti, J., & Smith, R. (2010). Introduction to the special issue on transforming the American high school: The premise and promise of small learning communities. *Peabody Journalof Education*, 259–263. doi:10.1080/0161956X.2010.491428

Forner, M., Bierlien-Palmer, L., & Reeves, P. (2012). Leadership practices of effective rural superintendents: Connections to Waters and Marzano's leadership correlates. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 27*(8), 1–13. Retrieved from http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/27-8.pdf

Fullan, M. (2006). *Turnaround leadership.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Fusarelli, B. C., & Militello, M. (2012). Racing to the top with leaders in rural, high poverty schools. *Planning and Changing, 43*(1), 46–56.

Gardner, P. W., Riblatt, S. N., & Beatty, J. R. (2000). Academic achievement and parental school involvement as a function of high school size. *High School Journal, 83*(2), 21–27.

Gates Foundation. (2008). *All students ready for college, career, and life: Reflections on the Foundation's education investments 2000-2008.* Seattle, WA: Gates Foundation.

Gewertz, C. (2001). The breakup: Suburbs try smaller high schools. *Education Week, 20*(33), 1–16.

Gibbs, R. (2000). The challenge ahead for rural schools. *Forum for Applied Research and Public Policy*, 82–87. Retrieved November 5, 2013

Gladwell, M. (2008). *Outliers: The story of success* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Little, Brown, and Company.

Goldhaber, D., & Brewer, D. (1997). Why don't schools and teachers seem to matter? Assessing

the impact of unobservables on education productivity. *Journal of Human Resources,*

32(3), 505-523. Retrieved June 21, 2014, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/146181

Gottlieb, D. (2013). Eisners's evaluation in the age of race to the top. *Curriculum and Teaching*

Dialogue, 15(1/2), 11–25.

Government Accountability Office. (2004). *No Child Left Behind Act: Additional assistance and*

research on effective strategies would help small rural schools. Washington DC.

Greenwald, R., Hedges, L., & Laine, R. (1996). The effect of school resources on student

achievement. *Review of Educational Research, 66*(3), 361–396. Retrieved June 21, 2014,

from http://www.jstor.org/stable/1170528

Gregory, A., Skiba, R. J., & Noguera, P. A. (2010). The achievement gap and the discipline gap:

Two sides of the same coin? *Educational Researcher, 39*(1), 58–68.

doi:10.3102/0013189X09357621

Griffin, S. W., & Green, R. L. (2012). Transforming high poverty, underperforming schools:

Practices, process, and procedures. *National Forum of Applied Educational Research,*

26(1&2), 77–93. Retrieved June 11, 2014

Groen, M. (2012). NCLB-The educational accountability paradigm in historical perspective.

American Educational History Journal, 39(1), 1–14. Retrieved May 22, 2014

Gutek, L. ,. (2003). *Philosophical and ideological voices in education.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Hadded, P. D. (2000). When the school is the community: A case study of Fourche Valley

School, Briggsville, Arkansas. In C. B. (Eds.), *Small high schools that flourish: Rural*

context, case studies, and resources (pp. 113–137). Austin: Southwest Educational

Development Lab. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED447997.pdf

Hallinger, P. (2003). School leadership development. In J. K. Watanabe, *International handbook of educational research in the Asia-Pacific region* (pp. 1001–1013). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishes.

Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. (2011). Exploring the journey of school improvement: Classifying and analyzing patterns of change in school improvement processes and learning outcomes. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 22*(1), 1–27. doi:10.1080/09243453.2010.536322

Halsey, R. J. (2011). Small school, big future. *Australian Journal of Education, 55*(1), 5–13. Retrieved December 22, 2014.

Hanushek, E. (1971). Teacher charactersitics and gains in student achievement: Estimation using macro data. *American Economic Review, 61*(2), 280–288. Retrieved June 22, 2014, from http://hanushek.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Hanushek%201971%20AER%2061%282%29_0.pdf

Hanushek, E., Kain, J., & Rivkin, S. (2004). The revolving door: Factors affecting teacher turnover. In W. J. Fowler (Ed.), *Developments in school finance: 2003: Fiscal proceeding from the annual State Data Conference of July 2003, (NCES 2004–325)* (pp. 5–15). Washington DC: . U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Hardre`, P. L. (2007). Motivating environments: A systemic analysis of four rural high schools. *Leadershio and Policy in Schools, 6*(3), 231–265. doi:10.1080/15700760701263824

Hardre`, P. L., & Sullivan, D. W. (2008). Student differences and environment perceptions: How they contribute to student otivation in rural high schools. *Learning and Individual Differences, 18*(4), 3–14. doi:10.1016/j.lindif.2007.11.010

243

Hardre`, P. L., Sullivan, D., & Crowson, H. (2009). Student characterstics and motivation in

        rural high schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 24*(16), 1–19. Retrieved from

        http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/24-16.pdf

Hargrove, L., Godin, D., & Dodd, B. (2006). *College outcomes comparisons by AP and non-AP*

        high school experiences. New York: The College Board.

Harmon, H. L. (2001). Education issues in rural America. *ARSI Conference on Understanding*

        Achievement in Science and Mathematics in Rural School Settings (pp. 1–18). Lexington,

        KY: ERIC.

Hawkins, E., Stancavage, F., & Dossey, J. (1998). *School policies and practices affecting*

        instruction in mathematics (NCES 98495). National Center for Educational Statistics,

        U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: U.S. Department Printing Office.

        Retrieved June 21, 2014, from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=98495

Haynes, R. M. (1999). School improvement. In D. M. Chalker (Ed.), *Leadership for rural*

        schools: Lessons for all educators (pp. 111–134). Lanham, MD, USA: The Scarecrow

        Press, Inc.

Heck, R. (2013). Principal instructional leadership and school achievement: The application of

        discriminant techniques. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 2*(2), 115–135.

        Retrieved November 5, 2013.

Heck, R. H. (2007). Examining the relationship between teacher quality as an organizational

        property of schools and students' achievement and growth rates. *Educational*

        Administration Quarterly, 43(4), 399–432. doi:10.1177/0013161X07306452

Herzog, M. J., & Pittman, R. (2002). The nature of rural schools: Trends, perceptions and values. In D. Chalker, *Leadership for rural schools: Lessons for all educators* (pp. 11–33). Lanham,, MD, USA: Scarecrow Press, Inc.

Hill, H., & Lubienski, S. (2007). Teachers' mathematics knowledge for teaching and school context: A study of California teachers. *Educational Policy, 21*(5), 747–768. doi:10.1177/0895904807307061

Hirschland, M., & Steinmo, S. (2003). Correcting the record: Understanding the history of federal intervention and failure in securing U.S. educational reform. *Educational Policy, 17*(3), 343-364. doi:10.1177/0895904803254484

Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Walker, J. M., Sandler, H. M., Whetsel, D., Green, C. L., Wilkins, A. S., & Closson, K. E. (2005). Why do parents become involved? *Elementary School Journal, 106*(2), 105–130. doi:10.1086/499194

Hopkins, D., Stringfield, S., Harris, A., Stoll, L., & Mackay, T. (2014). School and system improvement: A narrative state-of-the art review. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 25*(2), 257–281. doi:10.1080/09243453.2014.885452

Hopkins, T. M. (2005). If you are poor, it is better to be rural: A study of mathematics achievement in Tenneesse. *The Rural Educator, 27*(1), 21–28.

Hoppey, D., & McLeskey, J. (2013). A case study of principal leadership in an effective inclusive school. *The Journal of Special Education, 46*(4), 245–256. doi:10.1177/0022466910390507

Horst, M. D., & Martin, B. N. (2007). A case study: Leadership and its effects on achievement of children from poverty in a rural setting. *The Rural Educator, 28*(3), 33–40.

Howley, C. (2001). Understanding the circumstances of rural schooling: The parameters of respectful research. *Understanding Achievement in Science and Mathematics in Rural Schools* (pp. 1–8). Lexington: ERIC.

Howley, C. B., Theobald, P., & Howley, A. (2005). What rural education research is of most worth? *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 20*(18), 1–6.

Howley, C., & Bickel, R. (1999). *The Mathew project: National report.* Randolph: Rural Challenge Policy Program Randolph. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED433174.pdf

Hoy, W. K., Tarter, C. J., & Hoy, A. W. (2006). Academic optimism of schools: A force for student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal, 43*(3), 425–446. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/4121765?uid=3739568&uid=2&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21105071115143

Hoy, W., & Tschannen-Moran, M. (2003). The conceptualization and measurement of faulty trust in schools. In W. H. Miskel (Ed.), *Studies in leading and organizing schools* (pp. 181–207). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.

Huges, M. F. (1999, Spring). Similar students-dissimilar opportunities for success: High- and - low achieving elementary schools in rural high proverty areas of West Virginia. *Journal of Research in Rural Educaion, 15*(1).

Huggins, K. S. (2010). *Professional learning communities as a leadership-initiated reform strategy for math and science teaching in urban high schools.* Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. College Station : Texas A&M University.

Hughes, M. F. (1995). *Achieving despite adversity: Why are some school successful in spite of the obstacals they face? A study of the characterstics of effective and less effective*

elementary schools in West Virginia using qualitative and quantitative methods.

Charleston: West Virginia Education Fund.

Hughes, M. F. (1999, Spring). Similar students-dissimilar opportunities for success high- and -
low achieving elementary schools in rural high proverty areas of West Virginia. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 15*(1).

Ingersoll, R. M. (2002). *Out-of-field teaching, educational inequality and the organization of schools: An exploratory analysis.* Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy. Retrieved June 21, 2014, from

https://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/OutOfField-RI-01-2002.pdf

Iron Moccasin, South Dakota. (2012, January). *A case study of two rural secondary schools in New Mexico.* Ann Arbor: ProQuest. Retrieved October 30, 2013

Irvin, M. J., Byun, S., Meece, J. L., Farmer, T. W., & Hutchins, B. C. (2012). Educational barriers of rural youth: Relation of individual and contextual difference variables. *Journal of Career Assessment, 20*(1), 71–87. doi:10.1177/1069072711420105

Jepsen, C., & Rivkin, S. (2002). *Class size reduction, teacher quality, and academic achievement in California public schools.* San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California. Retrieved June 21, 2014, from http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_602CJR.pdf

Jeynes, W. (2011). *Parent involvement and academic success.* New York: Routledge.

Jeynes, W. H. (2005). Parental involvement and student achievement: A meta-analysis. *Family Involvement Research Digests*.

Jeynes, W. H. (2007). *American educational history: School, society, and the common good.* New York: Sage Publications.

Johnson, J. D., Howley, C. B., & Howley, A. A. (2002). *Size, excellence, and equity: A report on*
Arkansas schools and districts. Athens: Ohio University,Educational Studies Department.
Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED459987.pdf

Johnson, J., & Strange, M. (2007). *Why rural matters 2007: The realities of rural education*
growth. Arlington: Rural and Community Trust.

Johnson, J., & Strange, M. (2009). *Why rural matters 2007: State and regional challenges and*
opportunities. Arlington, VA: The Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from
The Rural School and Community Trust: http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2312

Johnson, J., Showalter, D., Kein, R., & Lester, C. (2014). *Why rural matters 2013–2014: The*
condition of rural education in the 50 states. Washington DC: Rural School and
Community Trust. Retrieved from http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/2013-14-
Why-Rural-Matters.pdf

Kannapel, P. J., & DeYoung, A. J. (1999). The rural school problem in 1999: A review and
critique of the literature. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 15*(2), 67–79.
Retrieved September 28, 2014.

Kannapel, P., Clements, S. K., Taylor, D., & Hibpshman, T. (2005). *Inside the black box of high-*
performing high-poverty schools: A report from the Prichard committee for academic
excellence. Lexington: Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence. Retrieved from
http://people.uncw.edu/kozloffm/highperforminghighpoverty.pdf

Kaplan, L. S., Owings, W. A., & Nunnery, J. (2005). Principal quality: A Virginia study
connecting interstate school leader licensure consortium standards with student
achievement. *NSSP Bulletin, 89*(643), 28–44. doi:10.1177/019263650508964304

Kenney, M. E., Chaves, A., Grossman, J. M., & Gallagher, L. A. (2003). The role of perceived barriers and relational support in the educational and vocational lives of urban high school students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 50*(2), 142–155. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.50.2.142

Kikoski, C., & Kikoski, J. (2004). *The inquiring organization: Tacit knowledge, conversation, and knowledge creation: Skills for the 21st organizations.* Westport, CT.: Praeger.

King, M. B., & Bouchard, K. (2011). The capacity to build organizational capacity in schools. *Journal of Educational Administration, 49*(6), 653–669. doi:10.1108/09578231111174802

Kein, E. J., & Riordan, M. (2009). Putting professional development into practice: A framework for how teachers in expeditionary learning schools implement professional development. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 36*(4), 61–80. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/23479284

Klitgaard, R. E., & Hall, G. R. (1975). Are there unusually effective schools? *Journal of Human Resources, 10*(1), 90–106. Retrieved November 5, 2013

Kuel, R. A. (2012). The rhetorical presidency and "accountability" in education reform: Comparing the presidential rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. *Southern Communication Journal, 77*(4), 329–348. doi:10.1080/1041794X.2012.678926

Kuo, V. (2010). Transforming American high schools: Possibilities for the next phase of high school reform. *Peabody Journal of Education, 85*(3), 389–401. doi:10.1080/0161956X.2010.491709

Lambertson, S. (2014). Failure is not an option: Struggling high school uses standards to guide reform. *Journal of Staff Development, 35*(1), 42–45. Retrieved from

http://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/jsd-february-2014/lambertson351.pdf?sfvrsn=2

Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2002). Teaching sorting and the plight of urban schools: A descriptive analysis. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 24*(1), 38–62. Retrieved June 21, 2014, from https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/TeacherSorting.pdf

Lapan, R. T., Tucker, B., Kim, A., & Kosciulek, J. F. (2003). Preparing rural adolscents for post-high school transitions. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 81*(3), 329–342. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6678.2003.tb00260.x

Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Lauer, P. (2001). *Preliminary findings on the charactersitics of teacher learning in high-performing, high-needs schools.* Aurora: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning.

Lawson, H. A. (2012). School leadership for authentic family and community partnerships: Research for transforming practice. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 27*(4), 1–6.

Lehman, B. M., & Berghoff, B. (2013). Small schools reform narratives. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research, 8*(1), 13–26. Retrieved December 22, 2014

Leithwood, K. (2010). Characteristics of school districts that are exceptionally effective in closing the achievement gap. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 9*(3), 245–291. doi:10.1080/15700761003731500

Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Hopkins, D., & Harris, A. (2006). *Successful school leadership: What it is and how it influences pupil learning*. Nottingham: United Kingdom Department of Eduation and Skills.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2008). Seven strong claims about successfull school leadership. *School Leadership and Management, 28*(1), 27–42. doi:10.1080/13632430701800060

Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2005). A review of transformational school leadership research 1996–2005. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 4*(3), 177–199. doi:10.1080/15700760500244769

Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., Talleyrand, R., McPartland, E. B., Davis, T., Chopra, S. B., . . . Chai, C.-M. (2002). Career choice barriers, supports, and coping stragegies: College students' experiences. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 60*(1), 61–72. doi:10.1006/jvbe.2001.1814

Levine, D. U., & Lezotte, L. W. (1990). *Unusually effective schools: A review and analysis of research and practice.* Madison, WI: The National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development.

Levine, T. H. (2010). What research tells us about the impact and challenges of smaller learning communities. *Peabody Journal of Education, 85*(3), 276–289. doi:10.1080/0161956X.2010.491431

Ley, J., Nelson, S., & Beltyukova, S. (1996). Congruence of aspirations of rural youth with experiences held by parents and school staff. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 12*(3), 133–141.

Lichter, D. T., & Johnson, K. M. (2007). The changing spatial concentration of America's rural poor population. *Rural Sociology, 72*(3), 331–358. doi:10.1526/003601107781799290

Lindahl, R. (2009). School climate differences between high-performing and low-performing schools that serve high-poverty populations. *National Council of Professors of Education Administration, 10*(1), 1–12. Retrieved June 3, 2014, from http://cnx.org/content/m19508/latest/

Lindahl, R. A. (2011). The state of education in Alabama's k–12 rural public schools. *Rural Educator, 32*(2), 1–12. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ987603.pdf

Linn, R. L., Baker, E. L., & Betebenner, D. W. (2002). Accountability systems: Implications of requirements of the no child left behind act of 2001. *Educational Researcher, 31*(6), 3–16. doi:10.3102/0013189X031006003

Little, J. W., & Bartlett, L. (2002). Career commitment in the context of comprehensive school reform. *Teachers and Teching: Theory and Practice, 8*(3/4), 345–354. doi:10.1080/135406002100000486

Lomotney, K., & Swanson, A. (1989). Urban and rural schools research: Implications for school governance. *Education and Urban Society, 21*(4), 436–454.

Loveless, T., & Hess, F. M. (2006). Introduction: What do we know about school size and class size? *Brookings Papers on Educational Policy*, 1–14. doi:10.1353/pep.2007.0005

Lrvin, M. J., Byun, S., Meece, J. L., Farmer, T. W., & Hutchins, B. C. (2012, January 12). Educational barriers of rural youth: Relation of individual and contextual difference variables. *Journal of Career Assessment, 20*(1), 71–87. doi:10.1177/1069072711420105

Luzzo, D. A., & McWhirter, E. H. (2001). Sex and ethnic differences in the perception of educational and career-related barriers and levels of coping efficacy. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 79*(1), 61–67. doi:Sex and ethnic differences in the perception of educational and career-related barriers and levels of coping efficacy

Martin, N., & Yin, Z. (1999). Beliefs regarding classroom management style: Differences between urban and rural secondary level teachers. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 12*(3), 133–141.

Martin, V., & Lazaro, L. M. (2011). The race to educational reform in the USA: The race to the top. *Language and Education, 25*(6), 479–490. doi:10.1080/09500782.2011.596280

Massachusetts Bay Colony. (1854). *Records of the governor and company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England.* (N. B.-1. Shurtleff, Ed.) Boston: W. White, printer to the commonwealth.

Masumoto, M., & Brown-Welty, S. (2009). Case study of leadership practices and school-community interrelationships in high-performing, high-poverty, rural California high schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 24*(1), 1–18.

Maxwell, G. M., Huggins, K. S., & Scheurich, J. J. (2010). How one historically underperforming diverse rural high school achieved a successful turnaround. *Planning and Changing, 3*(4), 161–186. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ952379.pdf

Mayer, A., LeChasseur, K., Morgaen, D., & Cobb, C. (2013). Organizational learning as a model for continuous transformation. *Planning and Changing, 44*(3/4), 221–236. Retrieved July 12, 2014.

McCracken, D., & Barcinas, J. (1991). High school student characteristics in rural and urban areas of Ohio. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 7*(2), 29–40.

McGrath, D. J., Swisher, R. R., Elder, G. H., & Conger, R. D. (2001). Breaking new ground: Diverse routes to college in rural America. Rural Sociology. *Rural Sociology, 66*(2), 224–267. doi:doi:10.1111/j.1549-0831.2001.tb00066.x

McNergney, R., & Herbert, J. (2001). *Foundations of education: The challenge of professional practice.* Boston, MA, USA: Allyn and Bacon.

Merrian, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Meyer, J. A., & Mann, M. B. (2006). Teachers perceptions of the benefits of home visits for early elementary children. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 34*(1), 93–97.

Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning. (2005). *Final report: High-needs schools; What does it take to beat the odds?* Aurora. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED486626.pdf

Mintrop, H. (2004). *Schools on probabation: How accountability works (and doesn't work).* New York: Teachers College Press.

Mintrop, H., & Trujillo, T. (2005). Corrective action in low-performing schools: Lessons for NCLB implementation from first-generation accountability systems. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 13*(48), 1–27. Retrieved from http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v13n48/

Mitchell, C., & Sackney, L. (2011). *Profound improvement: Building capacity for a learning community* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Moolenaar, N. M. (2010). Ties with potential: Nature, antecedents, and consequences of social networks in school terms. *Teachers College Record, 113*(9), 1983–2017.

Moore, S. D., Kochen, F. K., Kraska, M., & Reames, E. H. (2011). Professional development and student achievement in high poverty schools: Making the connection. *International Studies in Educational Administration, 39*(2), 65–79.

Murakami, Y. (2013). Rethinking a case study method in educational research: A comparative analysis method in qualitative research. *Educational Studies on Japan: International Yearbook*(7), 81–96.

Murley, L. D., Keedy, J. L., & Welsh, J. F. (2008). Examining school improvement through the lens of principal and teacher flow of influence in high-achieving, high-poverty schools. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 7*(4), 380-400. doi:10.1080/15700760701746612

Murnane, R., & Steele, J. (2007). What is the problem? The challenge of providing effective teachers for all children. *Future of Children*, 15–43. Retrieved June 21, 2014, from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ795873.pdf

Murphy, J., Elliott, S. N., Goldring, E., & Porter, A. C. (2007). Leadership for learning: A research-based model and taxonomy of behaviors. *School Leadership and Management, 27*(2), 179-201. doi:10.1080/13632430701237420

National Association of Secondary School Principals. (1996). *Breaking ranks: Changing an American institution.* Washington DC: Author.

National Center for Educational Statistics. (2012). *Conditions in rural schools.* Retrieved from Rural Education in America: http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/

National Defense Education Act (NDEA) (P.L. 85-864). (1958, September 2).

National Education Association. (2008). *Rural education.* Washington DC: NEA.

Neiman, S., & Hill, M. R. (2011). *Crime, violence, discipline, and safety in U.S. public schools: Findings from the school survey on crime and safety: 2009–10 (NCES 2011-320).* Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Newmann, F., King, M., & Young, P. (2000). Professional development that addresses school

    capacity: Lessons from urban elementary schools. *American Journal of Education,*

    108(4), 259–299.

Nicholson-Crotty, S., & Staley, T. (2012). Competitive federalism and race to the top application

    decisions in the American states. *Educational Policy, 26*(1), 160–184.

    doi:10.1177/0895904811428974

Noonan, J. (2014). In here, out there: Professional learning and the process of school

    improvement. *Harvard Educational Review, 84*(2), 145–161. Retrieved July 19, 2014,

    from http://her.hepg.org/content/3qh5661426wn4356/fulltext.pdf

Nye, B., Konstantopoulos, S., & Hedges, L. (2004). How large are teacher effects? *Educational*

    Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 26(3), 237–257. doi: 10.3102/01623737026003237

O"day, J. (2004). Complexity, accountability, and school improvement. In S. Fuhrman, & R.

    Elmore (Eds.), *Redesigning accountability systems for education.* New York: Teachers

    College Press.

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2008). Trends shaping education.

    Paris: Organization fort Economic Co-operation and Development.

Ouichi, W. (2003). *Making schools work: A revolutionary plan to get your children the*

    education they need. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Page, L., Layzer, C., Schimmenti, J., Bernstein, L., & Horst, L. (2002). *National evaluation of*

    small learning communities literature review. Cambridge: ABT Associates.

Pappano, L. (2010). *Inside school turnarounds: Urgent hopes, unfolding stories.* Cambridge:

    Harvard University Press.

Parker, S. D. (2001). Rural 2000 and beyond. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 20*(1/2), 43–52.

Patton, M. Q. (2001). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed. ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Phillippo, K. (2010). Teachers providing social and emotional support: A study of advisor role enactment in small high schools. *Teachers College Record, 112*(8), 2258–2293. Retrieved December 23, 2014.

Phillips, K. J. (2010). What does "highly qualified" mean for student achievement? Evaluating the relationships between teacher quality indicators and at-risk students' mathematics and reading achievement gains in first grade. *The Elementary School Journal, 110*(4), 464–493. Retrieved June 21, 2014, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/651192

Porter-Magee, K. (2004). Teacher quality, controversy, and NCLB. *Clearing House, 78*(1), 26-29. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/30181989

Pressley, M., McDonald, R. W., Allington, R., Block, C., & Morrow, L. (1998). *The nature of effective first grade literary instruction.* Albany.

Provasnik, S., KewalRamani, A., Coleman, M. M., Gilbertson, L., Herring, W., & Xie, Q. (2007). *Status of education on rural America (NCES 2007-040).* Washington D.C.: National Center for Educatinal Statistics.

Ravitz, J. (2010). Beyond changing culture in small high schools: Reform models and changing instruction with project-based learning. *Peabody Journal of Education, 85*(3), 290–312. doi:10.1080/0161956X.2010.491432

Reeves, D. B. (2003). *High performance in high poverty schools: 90/90/90 and beyond.* Cambridge: Center for Performance Assessment.

Rivera-McCutchen, R. L. (2012). Caring in a small urban high school: A complicated success. *Urban Education, 47*(3), 653-680. doi:10.1177/0042085911433522

Roberts, C. M. (2010). *The dissertation journey.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Robinson, S., Stempel, A., & McCree, I. (2005). *Gaining traction, gaining ground: How some high schools accelerate learning for struggling students.* Washington, DC: Education Trust.

Robinson, V. M., Lloyd, C. A., & Rowe, K. J. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 44*(5), 635–673. doi:10.1177/0013161X08321509

Roehrig, G. H., & Kruse, R. A. (2005). The role of teachers' beliefs and knowledge in the adoption of a reform-based curriculum. *School Science and Mathematics, 105*(8), 412–430.

Rosenberg, L., Christianson, M. D., Angus, M. H., & Rosenthal, E. (2014). *A focused look at rural schools receiving school improvement grants.* Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20144013/pdf/20144013.pdf

Sahlberg, P. (2010). Rethinking accountability in a knowledge society. *Journal of Educational Change, 11*(1), 45–61. doi: 10.1007/s10833-008-9098-2

Savas, A. C. (2013). A new school paradigm: "Learning school" from teachers' perspective. *International Journal of Academic Research, 5*(3), 247–252. doi:10.7813/2075-4124.2013/5-3/B.38

Schneider, B. L., Wyse, A. E., & Keesler, V. (2006). Is small really better? Testing some

assumptions about high school size. *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, 15-47.

Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/i20067273

Semke, C. A., & Sheridan, S. M. (2012). Family-school connections in rural educational settings:

A systematic review of the emperical literature. *School Community Journal, 22*(1), 21–

47. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ974684.pdf

Shamah, D. (2011). Supporting a strong sense of purpose: Lessons from a rural community. *New*

Directions for Youth Development, 132, 45–58.

Shouse, R. (1995). Academic press and school senseof community: Sources of friction, prospects

for synthesis. *Proceedings od the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research*

Association (pp. 1–35). San Francisco. Retrieved June 12, 2014, from

http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED387868.pdf

Shurtleff, N. (1853). *Records of the governor and company of the Massachusetts Bay in New*

England. Boston: William White. Retrieved May 26, 2014, from

http://books.google.com/books?id=ND8OAAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs

_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

Silins, H. C., Mulford, W. R., & Zarins, S. (2002). Organizational learning and school change.

Educational Administration Quarterly, 38(5), 613–642. doi:10.1177/0013161X02239641

Silins, H., & Mulford, B. (2002). Schools as learning organizations: The case for system, teacher,

and student learning. *Journal of Educational Administration, 40*(4/5), 425–446.

doi:10.1108/09578230210440285

Simpson, R. G., & Eaves, R. C. (1985). Do we need more qualitative research or more good

      research? A reaction to Stainback and Stainback. *Exceptional Children, 51*(4), 325–329.

      Retrieved December 12, 2014.

Singh, K., & Dika, S. (2003). The educational effects of rural adolescents' social networks.

      Journal of Reseach in Rural Education, 18(2), 114–128. Retrieved from

      http://jrre.psu.edu/

Slotta, O. D., & Fernandez, K. L. (2011). Cautions and assurances for those who would design a

      small rural high school: Bringing 20 years of research to the planning table. *The*

      Curriculum Journal, 22(1), 93–104. Retrieved December 22, 2014.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Stake, R. E. (2004). Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln. (Eds.), *The*

      SAGE handbook of qualitative research (pp. 443–466). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis.* New York: Guilford Press.

Starr, K., & White, S. (2008). The small rural school principalship: Key challenges and cross-

      school responses. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 23*(5), 1–12.

Stefl-Mabry, J., Doane, W. E., Radlick, M. S., & Theroux, P. (2007). Redefining schools as

      learning organizations: A model for trans-generational teaching and learning.

      International Journal of Teaching adn Learning in Higher Education, 19(3), 297–304.

      Retrieved July 19, 2014, from http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/

Stern, J. (1994). *The condition of education in rural school.* Washington, DC: OERI, UNited

      States Department of Education.

Stewart, L. (2009). Achievement differences between large and small schools in Texas. *The Rural Educator, 30*(2), 20–28. Retrieved December 22, 2014, from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ869305.pdf

Stoll, L. (2009). Capacity building for school improvement or capacity for learning? A changing landscape. *Journal of Educational Change, 10*(2-3), 115–127. doi:10.1007/s10833-009-9104-3

Strange, M. (2009). *Race to where?* Washington DC: Rural Schools and Community Trust.

Strange, M. (2011). *Paying teachers for performance: Issues and dilemmas for rural schools.* Washington DC: Rural Schools and Community Trust.

Strange, M., Johnson, J., Showalter, D., & Kein, R. (2012). Why rural matters 2011–2012: The condition of rural education in the 50 states. 1-102. Retrieved December 1, 2013

Stringfield, S., & Teddlie, C. (1991). School, classroom, and student level indicators of rural school effectiveness. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 7*(3), 15–28.

Stronge, J. H., Ward, T. J., & Grant, L. W. (2011). What makes good teachers good? A cross-case analysis of the connection between teacher effectivness and student achievement. *Journal of Teacher Education, 62*(4), 339–355. doi:10.1177/0022487111404241

Supovitz, J. (2009). Knowledge-based organizational learning for instructional improvement. In A. Hargreaves, A. Lieberman, M. Fullan, & D. Hopkins (Eds.), *Second international handbook of eductional change* (Vol. 23, pp. 611–629). New York. doi:10.1007/978-90-481-2660-6

Symons, C. (2005). Facing extinction: Organizational learning in a small secondary school under duress. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 4*(4), 281–309. doi:10.1080/15700760500865176

The Charles A. Dana Center. (1999). *Hope for urban education: A study of non-high-performing. high-poverty, urban elementary schools.* Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education, Planning and Evaluation Service. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED438362.pdf

Theobald, P., & Wood, K. (2010). Learning to be rural: Identity lessons from history, schooling, and the U.S. corporate media. In K. A. Jackson, *Rural education for the twenty-first century: Identity, place, and community in a globalizing world* (pp. 17–33). University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Thielman, J. (2012). School turnaround: Cristo Rey Boston high school case study. *Journal Of Catholic Education, 16*(1), 115-147. Retrieved June 14, 2014.

Thoonen, E. E., Sleegers, P. J., Oort, F. J., & Peetsma, T. (2012). Building school-wide capacity for improvement: The role of leadership, school organizational conditions, and teacher factors. *School Effevtiveness and School Improvement, 23*(4), 441–460. doi:10.1080/09243453.2012.678867

Tilley, T., Smith, S. J., & Claxton, R. (2012). Success despite economics: A case study of high-achieving, high-poverty school. *Journal of School Public Relations, 33*(4), 292–306. Retrieved May 8, 2014.

Togneri, W., & Anderson, S. (2003). Beyond islands of exellence: What districts can do to improve instruction and achievement in all schools. *A Project of the Learning First Alliance [and] A Leadership Brief.* Washington DC: ERIC. Retrieved June 18, 2014, from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED475875.pdf

U.S. Department of Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform.* Washington DC: The National Commission on Excellence in Education.

U.S. Department of Education. (2008). *A nation accountable: Twenty-five years after a nation at risk.* Department of Education. Washington DC: Department of Education. Retrieved May 24, 2014, from http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/accountable/

U.S. Department of Education. (2009). *Race to the top–Game-changing reforms.* Retrieved June 1, 2014, from U.S. Department of Education: http://www.ed.gov/open/plan/race-top-game-changing-reforms

U.S. Department of Education. (2014). *Race to the top assessment program*. Retrieved from U.S. Department of Education: http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-assessment/index.html

U.S. Department of Education (2015). *Rural education in America.* Retrieved from National Center for Education Statistics: http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/tables/a.1.a.-1_1112.asp

Viadero, D. (2001). Research: Smaller is better. *Education Week on the Web*. Retrieved from http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2001/11/28/13small.h21.html

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Cambridge: Havard University Press.

Waldon, N., & McLeskey, J. (2010). Establishing collaborative culture through comprehensive school reform. *Journal of Eductional and Psychological Consultation, 20*(1), 58–74. doi:10.1080/10474410903535364

Wallach, C. A. (2010). The complexities of operating multiple small schools in a high school conversion. *Peabody Journal of Education, 85*(3), 264–275. doi:10.1080/0161956X.2010.491429

Wallach, C. A., & Lear, R. (2005). *A foot in two worlds: The second report on comprehensive high school conversions.* Seattle, WA: Small Schools Project.

Washor, E., & Mojkowski, C. (2014). Student disengagement: It's deeper than you think. *Phi Delta Kappan, 95*(8), 8–10. doi:10.1177/003172171409500803

Waters, T., Marzano, R. J., & McNulty, B. (2003). Balanced leadership: What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement. *Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning* (pp. 1–19). Aurora. Retrieved July 18, 2014

Wayne, A. J., & Youngs, P. (2003). Teacher characteristics and student achievement gains: A review. *Review of Educational Research, 73*(1), 89–122. doi:10.3102/00346543073001089

Wei, H. H. (2002). Teachers' responses to policy implementation: Instructions of new accountability policies and culturally relevant pedagogy in urban school reform. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association.* New Orleans: ERIC Clearing House.

Wen, H. (2014). The nature, characteristics and ten strategies of learning organization. *International Journal of Educational Management, 28*(3), 289–298. doi:10.1108/IJEM-04-2013-0062

Wenglinsky, H. (2000). *How teaching matters: Bringing the classroom back into discussions of teacher quality.* Princeton: Milken Family Foundation and Edeucational Testing Service. Retrieved June 22, 2014, from http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/PICTEAMAT.pdf

Werblow, J., & Duesbert, L. (2009). The impact of high school size on math achievement and dropout rate. *The High School Journal, 92*(3), 14–23.

Whitehurst, G. (2002). Improving teacher quality. *Journal of State Government, 75*(3), 12–15.

    Retrieved June 21, 2014, from http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.spot.lib.auburn.edu/

    ehost/resultsadvanced?sid=b525ac56-b20d-4c66-b075-

    94e0bb29f8ed%40sessionmgr4003&vid=21&hid=4210&bquery=(Improving+Teacher+

    Quality)+AND+(AU+(Whitehurst))&bdata=JmRiPWFwaCZkYj1sMGgmZGI9YXdoJm

    RiPWFobCZkYj12dGgmZ

Wilcox, K. C., Angelis, J. I., Baker, L., & Lawson, H. A. (2014). The value of people, place and

    possibilities: A Multiple Case Study of Rural High School completion. *Journal of*

    Research in Rural Education, 29(9), 1–18. Retrieved from http://jrre.psu.edu/wp-

    content/uploads/2014/10/29-9.pdf

Wilfong, L. G. (2009). Textmasters: Bringing literature circles to textbook reading across the

    curriculum. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 53*(2), 164–171.

    doi:10.1598/JAAL.53.2.7

Williams, A. (2011). A call for change: Narrowing the achievement gap between white and

    minority students. *The Clearing House, 84*(2), 65–71.

    doi:10.1080/00098655.2010.511308

Williams, D. T., & King, J. (2002). *Rural school leadership in the deep south: The double-edged*

    legacy of school desegregation. Washington DC: The Rural Schools and Community

    Trust. Retrieved from http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/Double-

    Edged_Legacy.pdf

Williams, D. T., & King, J. R.-E. (2002). *Rural school leadership in the deep south: The double-*

    edged legacy of school desegregation. Washington, DC: The Rural Schools and

Community Trust. Retrieved from http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/Double-Edged_Leg

Wolk, S. (2002). *Being good: Rethinking classroom management and student discipline.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Woods, P., & Kensler, L. (2012). A nested view of democratic leadership and community. *Journal of School Leadership, 22*(4), 702–706. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/2299/13087

Woolley, M. (2006). Advancing a positive school climate for students, family, and staff. In C. Franklin, M. Harris, & P. Allen-Meares (Eds.), *The school services sourcebook: A guide for school-based professionals* (pp. 777–783). New York: Oxford University Press.

Yang, Y. (2014). Principals' transformational leadership in school improvement. *International Journal of Educational Management, 28*(3), 279–288. doi:10.1108/IJEM-04-2013-0063

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Zahorik, J., Halbach, A., Ehrle, K., & Molnar, A. (2003). Teaching practices or small classes. *Educational Leadership, 61*(1), 75-77. Retrieved June 22, 2014, from http://eds.a.ebscohost.com.spot.lib.auburn.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=afcfad6f-ea99-46ad-954a-0a678952f58a%40sessionmgr4003&hid=4210

Zhong, G. (2010). *The "fifth discipline" to a learning party and policy.* Beijing: Central Communist and Central Party School Press.