

Exploring Leadership for Excellence and Equity in High Performing Middle Schools

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the
School of Education.

Chapel Hill
2010

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ABSTRACT

KERRY CHISNALL: Exploring Leadership for Excellence and Equity in High Performing Middle Schools
(Under the direction of Kathleen M. Brown)

Principals for social justice typically not only are concerned for the learning needs of all students, especially those who are traditionally marginalized, but they also have positively impacted their schools to such an extent that student achievement for all students has increased (Kose, 2005). In this context, there is no social justice without student achievement. Indeed, excellence and equity no longer have to be treated as mutually exclusive goals (Skrla et al., 2001). This study focused on social justice leadership in middle schools because of the significance of the middle grades in preparing adolescents for success in the long-term (Brown, 2009).

The purpose of this research was to explore, through a lens of academic emphasis, principal leadership practices, beliefs and policies in four high performing traditional calendar 6-8 public middle schools consistently recognized as North Carolina Schools of Distinction. The four middle schools were purposefully selected as two of them (small gap schools) were abnormally successful at narrowing the achievement gap between 2005-2009. The two other (large gap) schools had gaps that exceeded the state's average achievement gap between white/affluent students and minority/economically disadvantaged students for the same period.

This study utilized a mixed method design. The qualitative phase (dominant method) of this study entailed semi-structured interviews with four principals, four

assistant principals, and 16 teachers. The initial quantitative phase entailed the use of data to first identify successful high performing middle schools and second to conduct equity audits of both sets of middle schools so that the levels of achievement equity, teacher quality equity and programmatic equity could be examined, compared and contrasted.

There were commonalities across demographics, teacher quality and programmatic equity between the LG and SG schools, yet wide discrepancies in achievement equity raised more questions than answers. However, this study uncovered descriptive and innovative policies and practices that other educational leaders who read this study will be able to reflect on and adopt, or avoid, in their own schools to facilitate more equitable schools characterized by increased student achievement and a positive school culture. Ultimately, the SG school principals favored a balanced approach, they were modest in demeanor, yet very resolute and consistent in communicating and implementing their policies, practices and beliefs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to recognize the many people that have inspired me and helped with the completion of this research project. I am forever grateful to my mother and stepfather for their confidence in my abilities, but regret deeply that they both passed away a year before completion of my doctorate. I love and miss my parents very much.

I am very grateful to my dissertation advisor, Dr. Brown, who agreed to be my advisor despite my never having been in any of her graduate classes. Her trust, positive attitude and support were invaluable. The other members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Veitch and Dr. Schainker were most helpful because of their willingness to serve on my committee and their feedback on how I could enhance my research.

A special thanks to the 24 participants in this study. I appreciate immensely the time they gave me and the priceless insight into what they do in their schools on a daily basis to support students. The participants across the four schools provided candid responses that helped reveal clear leadership policies, beliefs and practices that were common to (or absent from) the schools most successful at narrowing the achievement gap in this study.

Thank you to Dr. Tiffany Clayton. She served as an unpaid research assistant who transcribed several interviews on my behalf and edited much of my dissertation. Her support made much of the dissertation process considerably less arduous and allowed me to stay within predetermined deadlines.

Finally, I must thank two principals, Bonnie Almond and Dixie Frazier, who have been wonderful mentors and made many allowances so that I could pursue my doctorate. I was fortunate to work for both as an assistant principal before becoming a principal. Not only were they great role models but they would allow me to leave early some afternoons so I could get to my classes on time. Also, they were very patient listeners when I would trap them in their offices and enthusiastically share class information and potential dissertation topics.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|------|
| LIST OF TABLES..... | xiii |
| LIST OF FIGURES..... | xv |
| Chapter | |
| I. INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| Problem Statement..... | 4 |
| Purpose Statement..... | 7 |
| Major Research Question..... | 7 |
| Research Question 1..... | 8 |
| Research Question 2..... | 8 |
| Research Question 3..... | 8 |
| Conceptual Framework..... | 8 |
| Definitions of Related Terms..... | 9 |
| II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK..... | 12 |
| Introduction..... | 12 |
| Accountability: Access to Excellence..... | 14 |
| New Emphasis on Excellence..... | 14 |
| Mandated Equity..... | 16 |
| Systemic Equity and Barriers to Success..... | 17 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Achievement Equity..... | 18 |
| Programmatic Equity..... | 19 |
| Overrepresentation in Special Education Programs..... | 19 |
| Exclusion from Gifted Programs..... | 20 |
| Rigorous Curriculum..... | 20 |
| Discipline..... | 22 |
| Teacher Quality Equity..... | 23 |
| Certification..... | 24 |
| National Board Certified Teachers..... | 25 |
| Years of Experience..... | 25 |
| New Role of the Principal..... | 26 |
| The Principal and Student Achievement..... | 28 |
| School Districts and Student Achievement..... | 32 |
| Leadership for Excellence and Equity..... | 34 |
| Instructional Leadership and Student Achievement..... | 34 |
| Transformational Leadership and Student Achievement..... | 35 |
| Leadership for Social Justice, Equity and Excellence..... | 36 |
| Defining Social Justice..... | 36 |
| Social Justice Leadership and Student Achievement..... | 37 |
| Achieving Excellence and Equity in the Middle Grades..... | 39 |
| Accountability and Inequity..... | 44 |
| Conceptual Framework: Academic Emphasis..... | 49 |
| Academic Optimism and Student Achievement..... | 50 |

| | | |
|------|--|----|
| | Academic Emphasis..... | 51 |
| | Resisting Deficit Thinking..... | 56 |
| | Conclusion..... | 58 |
| III. | METHODOLOGY..... | 61 |
| | Introduction..... | 61 |
| | Research Purpose..... | 61 |
| | Conceptual Framework..... | 61 |
| | Major Research Question..... | 62 |
| | Research Question 1..... | 63 |
| | Research Question 2..... | 63 |
| | Research Question 3..... | 63 |
| | Rationale for Mixed Method Approach..... | 63 |
| | Role of the Researcher..... | 64 |
| | Site Selection and Participants..... | 65 |
| | Data Procedures/Collection..... | 68 |
| | Phase One: Equity Audits (Quantitative)..... | 68 |
| | Phase Two: Semi-Structured Interviews (Qualitative)..... | 76 |
| | Analysis..... | 79 |
| | Coding Schemes..... | 79 |
| | Establishing Trustworthiness..... | 80 |
| | Assumptions..... | 81 |
| | Limitations of the Study..... | 82 |
| | Significance..... | 84 |

| | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| IV. | EQUITY AUDIT (QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS)..... | 85 |
| | Audit Findings..... | 85 |
| | Audit of Demographics..... | 86 |
| | Audit of Teacher Quality..... | 87 |
| | Audit of Programmatic Issues..... | 89 |
| | Audit of Achievement Data..... | 91 |
| | Conclusion..... | 94 |
| V. | QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS..... | 96 |
| | Introduction..... | 96 |
| | Methodology..... | 96 |
| | Data Collection Methods..... | 96 |
| | Data Analysis..... | 97 |
| | Emergent Themes for Schools..... | 97 |
| | First Large Gap School..... | 97 |
| | Second Large Gap School..... | 99 |
| | First Small Gap School..... | 102 |
| | Second Small Gap School..... | 105 |
| | Emergent Themes Common Across the LG and SG Middle Schools..... | 109 |
| | Policies..... | 110 |
| | Collaborative Approach to Hiring Excellent Teachers..... | 110 |
| | Provisions made to ensure Physical, Academic and Emotional Stability of Students..... | 112 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Principals Support Teachers with Classroom Protocols and Resources..... | 113 |
| Practices..... | 115 |
| Willingness to Delegate Instructional Leadership Tasks..... | 115 |
| Steps Undertaken to Utilize Data Driven Decision Making..... | 116 |
| Additional Programs Offered to Support Struggling Students..... | 118 |
| Beliefs..... | 119 |
| Strong Expectation that State’s Curriculum is Taught..... | 119 |
| Instructional Autonomy is Respected with Parameters..... | 120 |
| Strong School Culture Supports Student Achievement..... | 120 |
| All Students can be Successful..... | 123 |
| Differences in Academic Emphasis..... | 125 |
| Policies..... | 126 |
| Consistent Implementation of Procedures and Rules..... | 126 |
| Decision Making Somewhat Limited to Administration..... | 129 |
| Strong School District and Community Support..... | 130 |
| Data Collection and Analysis is Focused..... | 132 |
| Practices..... | 136 |
| Consistent Monitoring of Instruction with Follow- through..... | 136 |

| | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| | Principals Highly Visible..... | 139 |
| | Master Schedule..... | 140 |
| | Beliefs..... | 142 |
| | Modest, Self-critical and Compassionate Approach..... | 142 |
| | High Expectations and High Accountability..... | 147 |
| | Summary..... | 149 |
| VI. | CONCLUSION: FACILITATING EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY..... | 152 |
| | Introduction..... | 152 |
| | Large Gap and Small Gap School Similarities..... | 155 |
| | Large Gap School and Small Gap School Differences..... | 158 |
| | Principal as Facilitator of Excellence and Equity..... | 160 |
| | Consistency..... | 160 |
| | Modesty..... | 167 |
| | A Balanced Approach..... | 172 |
| | Addressing the Research Questions..... | 174 |
| | Recommendations for Practice..... | 178 |
| | Recommendations for Future Research..... | 180 |
| | APPENDICES..... | 183 |
| | A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Principals..... | 183 |
| | B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Assistant Principals..... | 185 |
| | C: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Teachers..... | 187 |
| | REFERENCES..... | 189 |

LIST OF TABLES

Table

| | | |
|-----|---|----|
| 2.1 | NAEP 8 th grade Mathematics Results for NC Student Groups in 2009..... | 13 |
| 2.2 | NAEP 8 th Grade Reading Results for NC Student Groups in 2007..... | 13 |
| 2.3 | Top Eight Principal Leadership Responsibilities: Average <i>r</i> and Number of Schools and Studies..... | 29 |
| 2.4 | Academic Emphasis Scale Items on OHI-M..... | 52 |
| 2.5 | Correlations of Elements of Health and Aspects of Student Achievement (N = 86)..... | 52 |
| 3.1 | End-of-Grade Testing Achievement Data for Small Gap Schools (SGS), Large Gap Schools (LGS) and the State, with Achievement Gap Data, for 2005-2007..... | 70 |
| 3.2 | End-of-Grade Testing Achievement Data for Small Gap Schools (SGS), Large Gap Schools (LGS) and the State, with Achievement Gap Data, for 2007-2009..... | 71 |
| 3.3 | Average Achievement Gap between White and Black, Hispanic and Free/Reduced Lunch Students in Small Gap and Large Gap Schools for 2005-2009..... | 71 |
| 3.4 | Criteria for ABCs Recognition..... | 73 |
| 3.5 | Alignment of Research Questions, Interview Questions & Conceptual Framework Domains..... | 80 |
| 4.1 | Demographic Data for Large Gap Schools (LGS) and Small Gap Schools (SGS) – Average data set for 2005-2009..... | 86 |
| 4.2 | Teacher Quality Data for Large Gap Schools (LGS) and Small Gap Schools (SGS) – Average data set for 2005-2009..... | 87 |
| 4.3 | Programmatic Data for Large Gap Schools (LGS) and Small Gap Schools (SGS) – Average data set for 2005-2009..... | 90 |
| 4.4 | Teacher Working Conditions Survey Data for Large Gap Schools (LGS) and Small Gap Schools (SGS) – Average data set for 2006 & 2008..... | 90 |

| | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 4.5 | Achievement Equity Data for Large Gap Schools (LGS) and Small Gap Schools (SGS) – Average data set for 2005-2009..... | 92 |
| 4.6 | Achievement Equity Data: NC ABCs Status for 2005-2009..... | 92 |
| 5.1 | Differences in Academic Emphasis between the LG Schools and SG Schools..... | 126 |

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

| | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| 2.1 | Academic Emphasis Framework..... | 49 |
| 3.1 | Concurrent Triangulation Strategy..... | 81 |
| 4.1 | Relationship between the Three Dimensions of Educational Equity..... | 85 |
| 5.1 | Emergent Themes Common Across the LG and SG Schools..... | 109 |

I. INTRODUCTION

Children in the United States' public schools experience different levels of success that typically are distributed along social class and race lines (Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson & Koschoreck, 2001). According to Skrla et al. (2001), systemic racism is pervasive throughout the nation's public schools. The racism may not be consciously intended or seen by educators as it is systemically embedded in the assumptions, mindsets, policies, procedures and structures of schooling. Skrla et al. (2001) state,

This detrimental treatment impacts students of color in numerous ways. Throughout the USA they are consistently routinely over-assigned to special education; segregated, based on their home languages; tracked into low-level classes, over-represented in disciplinary cases; disproportionately pushed out of school and labeled 'drop-outs'; afforded differential access to resources and facilities; and immersed in negative, 'subtractive' school climates. (p. 238)

Despite tremendous resources being provided by policy makers, educational leaders, school districts, teachers, community groups and parents to offer an equitable education for all students, a persistent achievement gap remains between White students and students from lower-socioeconomic status homes and students of color (Brown, 2009). National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results reveal that, in 2007, there was no measurable difference compared with 1992 or 2005 in the reading achievement gaps for White-Hispanic or White-Black 8th grade students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). A similar trend exists for the nation's 8th grade students in mathematics where the score gaps between White-Hispanic and White-Black in 2007 are not measurably different from the gaps in 1990. Moreover, in North Carolina, Black,

White and Hispanic 8th grade students eligible for the National School Lunch Program, an indicator of lower-socio-economic status, have consistently scored lower than their ineligible peers in both reading and mathematics (2003, 2005, and 2007) on the NAEP (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009a). In addition, Black and Hispanic 8th grade students have consistently scored lower on the NAEP than their white peers in both reading and mathematics.

Such a striking and persistent achievement gap in the middle grades gives reason for concern. A 1987 California Department of Education report declared,

Middle grades represent the last substantive educational experience for hundreds of thousands of students. If students fail to achieve the integration of their personalities and the motivation required to make a commitment to academic values by the end of the middle grades, many will never do so. (p. 62)

What is more, predictive models have shown that 8th grade achievement (as measured by the four EXPLORE scores in mathematics, reading, English, and science) reveal a stronger relationship with career and college readiness than any other factor (The Education Digest, 2009). Consequently, 8th grade achievement is considered a better predictor of high school graduation and post-secondary school success than family background, high school Grade Point Average or high school course work. In this context, it is clear that middle schools have a critical role in preparing our nation's youth for later success in life: however, NAEP statistics and the persistent achievement gap suggest considerable need for improvement.

The ongoing achievement gap led to a demand for increased accountability that acquired strength in the mid-1980s and particularly with the release of a major report, *A Nation at Risk*, that declared the US system of public education was in crisis (Tyack &

Cuban, 1995). The report claimed that the United States was losing global economic clout to Japan and several European nations. The recommended solution was to promote “excellence” in our schools achieved through higher standards and a renewed focus on the “basics” particularly math and science. Increased accountability through standardized testing of student achievement, new standards for educating and compensating teachers, improved test data collection and reporting by districts were expected to decrease teacher incompetence and increase student learning.

The fervor for increased accountability peaked with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, requiring all schools receiving federal funding to close the achievement gap between majority and low performing minority students (Kim & Sunderman, 2005). NCLB mandates that states introduce annual standardized testing that measures student achievement by various subgroups in reading and mathematics. Schools must show, through their test results, that a certain percentage of each subgroup achieves grade level proficiency or Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Any public school receiving Title 1 federal aid, that fails to meet AYP over consecutive years, is held accountable through sanctions that increase in severity the longer a school is deemed to need improvement. Also, NCLB requires all schools to be achieving AYP by the year 2014.

The new accountability measures may reduce the systemic inequity in US public schools. According to Skrla et al. (2001), the introduction of accountability systems can leverage positive change for all students. As discussed previously, the passage of NCLB required states to establish accountability systems to close the achievement gap and ensure all students are well educated (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) add,

This task requires those in schools to rethink and restructure what expectations they hold for all students, how their schools are organized to support teaching and learning, what curricula will be implemented, what practices include and exclude students, and how instruction will be delivered and assessed, among other aspects of schooling. To accomplish this rethinking and restructuring of schools requires strong, focused, insightful, skilled leadership, specifically, the leadership of the school principal. Thus, the kind and quality of leadership we have will help determine, for better or for worse, the kinds of schools we have. (pp. 602-603)

Although a social justice agenda has not been at the center of efforts to improve public education in recent years, the new standards and accountability era does equip educators with tools to address the persistent inequities that have affected a variety of subgroups characterized by gender, race, class, ethnicity, and disability (Lashley, 2007). Principals can assume a critical role by making efforts in their schools to support changes that address these inequities. Skrla et al. (2001) explain,

Social justice in schooling, then, would mean that the children of all people, regardless of race, would benefit academically at uniformly high levels in school environments in which they are safe and secure. It would mean that school success would be equitable across such differences as socioeconomic status and race. (p. 240)

Principals for social justice typically not only are concerned for the learning needs of all students, especially those who are traditionally marginalized, but they also have positively impacted their schools to such an extent that student achievement for all students has increased (Kose, 2005). In this context, there is no social justice without student achievement. Indeed, excellence and equity no longer have to be treated as mutually exclusive goals (Skrla et al., 2001).

Problem Statement

There is a large body of research that indicates there is a positive relationship between school leadership and student achievement (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). The

link between strong instructional leadership and increased student achievement is well researched also (Larbi, 2003; Rodriguez, 2008; Stephens, 2004). Larbi (2003) studied factors that contributed to the success of secondary school principals in Rhode Island, and instructional leadership was found to be a critical factor. Principals with sound curriculum and instructional knowledge were found to be lead instructors in their schools and established a climate of excellence. These principals promoted excellence in teaching and learning. Finally, Larbi found the successful principals empowered their staff. In addition, Rodriguez (2008) studied a principal that turned around a failing school heavily populated with Latino and economically disadvantaged students. The study found a link between the principal's strong instructional background and the students' improved academic achievement.

Another strand of contemporary literature focuses on transformational leadership and student achievement (Johnson, 2007; Larbi, 2003; Woodruff, 2008). Transformational leaders achieve results through building relationships with others rather than simply expecting it as part of one's job description (Owens, 2004). Larbi (2003) found transformational school leaders to be more effective in improving instruction and student achievement.

There is an emerging strand of literature on social justice leadership in schools (Bruccoleri, 2008; Kose, 2005; Lust, 2005; Nowlin, 2008; Theoharris, 2004); however, there is limited research focusing on social justice leaders and student achievement (Urban, 2008). Palzet (2006) studied the success of nine Illinois principals in high performing/high poverty elementary schools through the lens of social justice. The study focused on how the principals' perspectives on social justice contributed to the success of

their students. The nine “high performing” schools used in the study were chosen because they were “Spotlight” schools, meaning at least 60% of students met or exceeded the required standards on the state test for three consecutive years. With as many as 40% of students not meeting required standards in the study’s equal mix of urban, suburban and rural schools, it would be interesting to conduct a similar study but selecting even higher performing schools and principals.

Urban (2008), Muttillio (2008) and Benkovitz (2008) conducted separate but related research that focused on elementary school leadership for excellence and equity through a lens of academic optimism. This study concluded that the most equitable and excellent schools had principals that supported the three components of academic optimism: academic emphasis, collective efficacy and faculty trust. However, the schools in the study were North Carolina Honor Schools of Excellence (label designated by state when high student growth and AYP is achieved) generally characterized by more affluent student populations and long standing cultures of success. Urban concedes,

This study also focused solely on elementary schools. It would be of great importance to replicate this study at the middle and high school level. This would provide school leaders empirical evidence and proven strategies that promote excellence and equity throughout all levels of our educational system. Understanding the differences and similarities at these three distinct levels achieving success for all students would help district leaders create and implement a synergistic plan for excellence and equity. (p. 177)

Similarly, Muttillio (2008), who focused on elementary schools of excellence through a lens of academic optimism with a strong focus on collective efficacy, recommends that his study should be replicated at the middle and high school level as the achievement gap exists beyond elementary level schools.

Consequently, even with the emerging literature on social justice leadership in schools and increased achievement for all students, there remains limited research with the principal as the unit of analysis in high performing middle schools that are abnormally successful at closing the achievement gap for traditionally disadvantaged subgroups. This study sought to address that under-investigated topic by exploring how principals in high performing middle schools, serving marginalized children, support social justice and pursue excellence and equity for all students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research was to explore principal leadership practices, beliefs and policies in four high performing middle schools recognized as North Carolina Schools of Distinction. Furthermore, the four schools were separated into two small achievement gap schools and two large achievement gap schools less successful at narrowing the achievement gap between White and Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students. The analysis will focus on teacher quality, programmatic issues, and principal leadership.

Major Research Question

The following question focused this research: How do the principals of four traditional calendar 6-8 public middle schools, consistently recognized as North Carolina “Schools of Distinction” pursue, support and advance social justice, systemic equity and excellence?

Research Questions

The following questions will guide the process of inquiry:

1. What school-wide policies do the principals promote that support student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap?
2. What leadership practices do the principals display that support student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap?
3. How are the four principals similar and/or different with respect to their beliefs about student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap?

Conceptual Framework

This study used academic emphasis, a critical component of academic optimism, as a lens to explore how school leaders in high performing middle schools pursue, support and achieve excellence and systemic equity for all students. Academic optimism consists of three interrelated components: (a) academic emphasis; (b) collective efficacy; and (c) faculty trust (Smith & Hoy, 2007). Academic emphasis (also known as academic press) is the actual display of high expectations for students and their academic performance. Collective efficacy entails faculty members believing in their own ability and the ability of their colleagues to help all children to be successful learners. Faculty trust involves teachers believing that they can build positive and supportive relationships with parents and students to improve student learning.

Each of the three components of academic optimism (and their own integral features) are defined in greater detail, with a greater focus on academic emphasis and its link to student achievement, in the literature review section of this research proposal. Finally, the role and ability of school leaders to nurture academic emphasis in their schools to increase student achievement for all students is discussed in the literature review section, also.

Definitions of Related Terms

ABCs: Public education's accountability program established by the State Board of Education in North Carolina in 1996. ABCs requires end-of-grade (EOG) testing in Math and Reading for grades 3-8 and Science for grades 5 and 8. A school receives distinct ABCs recognition subject to its overall success and its teachers may collectively earn financial bonuses based on the related student test growth. In 2002-03 the ABCs program was expanded to include accountability requirements of No Child Left Behind (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2009).

Academic Optimism: Conceptual framework for this research proposal that consists of three components (Smith & Hoy, 2007): (a) Academic emphasis (also known as academic press) is the display of high expectations for students and their academic performance; (b) Collective efficacy: entails faculty members believing in their own ability and the ability of their colleagues to help all children be successful learners; and (c) Faculty trust involves teachers believing that they can build positive and supportive relationships with parents and students to improve student learning.

Achievement Gap: This study adopted Brown's (2009) definition, "The achievement gap is the persistent disparity in academic performance between groups of students, particularly White and/or Asian and affluent students and students of color, minority, poverty and second language learners" (p. 11).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): A performance target that typically increases each school year and that states, districts and schools must achieve across specific subgroups to satisfy requirements of NCLB and avoid sanctions. In order to achieve AYP, 95% of all students must be tested, students must meet or exceed a state's annual

target for proficiency in Reading and Math, and schools must show improvement in student attendance (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2008).

Equity Audit: An analysis of district and/or school data to expose the levels of inequity and equity created by their system of schooling. Typically three main categories are explored in such an audit: Teacher Quality Equity, Programmatic Equity and Achievement Equity (Skrla, Garcia, Scheurich & Nolly, 2002).

Excellence: All children achieve academically at uniformly high levels in safe, secure and inclusive schools. Student achievement must be equitable across such differences as race and socioeconomic status (Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson & Koschoreck, 2001).

High Performing School: A school that had been designated a School of Distinction for at least three of four consecutive years during the period of 2005-2009 and had met all AYP target goals in the most recent school year (2008-2009).

Large Gap (LG) School: LG schools were those that had achievement gaps that were consistently greater than the state average for 2005-2009 of 29.3 percentage points among Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students and White students on North Carolina's End-of-Grade (EOG) testing in reading and mathematics across grades 6-8. In this study, LG schools had an achievement gap that on average exceeded 35 percentage points for the four year period under review: 2005-2009.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): Federal legislation passed in 2001 that requires 100% student proficiency by 2013-14 for all public schools receiving federal funding (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2009).

School of Distinction: A School of Distinction is a school that has between 80% and 90% of its students achieving grade-level proficiency and is classified as such according to the North Carolina's ABCs accountability model (Education First NC School Report Cards, 2009).

Small Gap (SG) School: SG schools are those that had achievement gaps that were consistently narrower than the state average for Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students when compared to the performance of White students on North Carolina's End-of-Grade (EOG) testing in reading and mathematics across grades 6-8. For the purpose of this study, SG schools had an achievement gap that, on average, did not exceed 19 percentage points for the four year period under review: 2005-2009.

Social Justice Leadership: Leadership that is concerned for the needs of all students and seeks to nurture both excellence and systemic equity.

Systemic Equity:

...The transformed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner, in whatever learning environment that learner is found, has the greatest opportunity to learn enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency for school and life (Scott, 2001, p. 1).

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

The United States' public schools continue to preside over a persistent achievement gap between marginalized groups of students and more affluent White students. Brown (2004) states, "When compared to their White middle-class counterparts, students of color and low socioeconomic status (SES) consistently experience significantly lower achievement test scores, teacher expectations, and allocation of resources. The gaps are persistent, pervasive, and significantly disparate" (p. 79).

The achievement gap between White and minority subgroups, including the economically disadvantaged, is well exemplified by the performance of North Carolina's 8th grade students on the NAEP in both reading and mathematics. Tables 2.1 and 2.2 show the performance of North Carolina 8th grade student subgroups on the NAEP for reading in 2007 and mathematics in 2009. A wide disparity in both reading and mathematics results is evident for Black, Hispanic and Free/Reduced Lunch students who all performed considerably lower in their average, basic and proficiency scores than their White, Asian and more affluent peers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009b). In 2009, the gap between White students and Black students (35 points) was very similar to the achievement gap that existed in 1990 (30 points). Similarly, the performance gap between 8th grade Free/Reduced Lunch students (29 points less) and White students in 2009 was not significantly different to the gap recorded in 1996 (27 points). Unfortunately, persistent

gaps for NC 8th grade students were revealed by the 2007 Reading NAEP results that showed gaps being similar to approximately 10 years ago on the NAEP. The 2009 NAEP

Table 2.1: NAEP 8th grade Mathematics Results for NC Student Groups in 2009 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009)

| Subgroup | Average Score | % at or above | |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------|------------|
| | | Basic | Proficient |
| White | 297 | 85 | 49 |
| Black | 262 | 53 | 12 |
| Hispanic | 274 | 67 | 24 |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 311 | 87 | 65 |
| American Indian | 256 | 45 | 14 |
| F/R Lunch Eligible | 268 | 58 | 18 |
| Not F/R Eligible | 298 | 86 | 50 |

Table 2.2: NAEP 8th Grade Reading Results for NC Student Groups in 2007 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007)

| Subgroup | Average Score | % at or above | |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------|------------|
| | | Basic | Proficient |
| White | 270 | 82 | 39 |
| Black | 241 | 53 | 10 |
| Hispanic | 246 | 56 | 16 |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 265 | 77 | 34 |
| American Indian | 236 | 45 | 15 |
| F/R Lunch Eligible | 246 | 57 | 14 |
| Not F/R Eligible | 270 | 82 | 39 |

data indicate, as revealed in Tables 2.1 and 2.2, that in reading the lowest performing student subgroups in North Carolina were Blacks, Hispanics, American Indian and Free/Reduced Lunch students. This study will focus on the reading and mathematics proficiency levels for three of those four subgroups and will exclude American Indians as they were not consistently present in the four high performing middle schools selected for further analysis.

Recent federal legislation, the No Child Left Behind Act, has mandated that all students should be grade-level proficient by 2014 (Guthrie, Springer, Rolle & Houck, 2007). Principals are now forced to pay increased attention to closing the achievement gap. This literature review will explore the leadership behaviors found to be related to increasing student achievement with a particular focus on the middle grades. The researcher intends to explore, using the construct of academic emphasis as a conceptual framework, the social justice leadership behaviors of principals that enable high performing middle schools to become both excellent and equitable.

The following review of relevant literature will focus on research related to: the new accountability era; changing role of the principal; systemic equity; importance of instructional and transformational leadership; social justice leadership; successful middle schools; and the relevance of academic optimism, particularly academic emphasis, to improving student achievement for all students.

Accountability: Access to Excellence

New Emphasis on Excellence

There have been clear value shifts over the last century regarding public education in the United States of America. Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005) note there are four key

values that can dominate education during different periods: efficiency, quality (excellence), equity and choice (democracy). For the first part of the twentieth century, the dominant value was efficiency, best exemplified by the adoption of Frederick Taylor's Scientific Management principles and the subsequent use of bureaucratic structures to organize and operate schools and the related professionalization of the principalship (Brown, 2005). In contrast, the 1960s and 1970s had a greater focus on equity in public schools as seen by federal legislation mandating increased opportunities for students with disabilities and reducing gender inequities (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005). Another shift, that is ongoing and took place with the 1983 release of a national report, *A Nation at Risk*, triggered a new and more intense focus on excellence via higher student test performance in schools as opposed to access (equity) (Guthrie et al., 2007).

In 1989 the emphasis on excellence in public education was substantially reinforced at a governor's summit at Charlottesville, Virginia, organized by President George H.W. Bush and resulted in new state and national level educational policies (Guthrie et al., 2007). Higher expectations for student performance, new accountability provisions for schools and districts drove the new policies, and expanded standardized testing at the state level. Subsequent standards based reform that took place in the 1990s included professional development for educators and new licensure requirements.

In 2001 the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was enacted, resulting in a shift from focusing on inputs to outputs via student achievement on standardized tests (Guthrie et al., 2007). NCLB is, in part, a response to a persistent achievement gap that sees White and Asian-American students outperforming Black, Latino and economically disadvantaged students on a number of academic indicators for reading and math

achievement (Education Commission of the States, 2008). Less than 60% of African-American and Latino students graduate on time versus 70% or more for White students (Graham & Perin, 2007).

Mandated Equity

Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson and Koschoreck (2001) state there are twin injustices that permeate United States society and its public schools: inequitable treatment of marginalized groups and the persistent achievement gap between such groups and their more affluent White peers. Consequently, there is a need for state and districts to implement broad policies that change schools. According to Skrla et al. (2001), NCLB is a broad impact policy that is proving excellence and equity do not have to be mutually exclusive goals. They conclude that, while accountability measures may have contradictory consequences, their research shows it is likely to improve educational equity on a broader basis and provide leverage for more just schooling for children of color and the poor. The NCLB Act requires all students to be achieving at least at minimum grade-level proficiency by 2014 (Guthrie et al., 2007). Persistently low-performing schools and districts will lose federal funding and face other adverse consequences, including informing parents that the school is failing and allowing students to transfer to higher performing schools in the same district.

Lashley (2003) notes that NCLB has changed the leadership landscape in public education. NCLB has converged with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA). IDEA requires students with disabilities to have equitable access to public education and associated resources and NCLB now requires the same students to be academically successful along with their more able peers. Principals are

now held publicly accountable for the academic performance of all their students and subsequently are more likely to collect and assess data on their performance more vigorously. Consequently, the introduction of NCLB entailed a shift from merely providing access for children to public schools and general education classrooms to one of excellence in achievement for all students (Durtschi, 2005). With the current dominance of choice and excellence (quality) in educational policy, it is necessary to consider barriers to student success, how the principalship has evolved and the leadership behaviors that will achieve both excellence and equity in this high accountability era.

Systemic Equity and Barriers to Student Success

This study seeks to explore the role of the principal in improving student achievement and pursuing systemic equity for all students. According to Scott (2001),

Systemic equity is defined as the transformed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner – in whatever learning environment that is found – has the greatest opportunity to learn, enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency for school and for life. (p. 1)

Scott (2001) named five components of systemic equity: (a) achievement equity; (b) equitable access and inclusion; (c) resource distribution equity, (d) equitable opportunity to learn; and (e) equitable treatment. However, this researcher will review a combination of Scott's equity components that reduces them to the same three types of equity used in Benkovitz (2008), Muttillio (2008) and Urban's (2008) studies: (a) achievement equity; (b) programmatic equity; and (d) teacher quality equity. The review will start with an analysis of achievement equity and show that it is possible for principals to lead schools that are excellent and equitable. Next, programmatic equity will be discussed to determine how student subgroups can be further marginalized in schools

due to the nature and implementation of certain school programs and policies. Finally, there will be a discussion of teacher quality and retention in schools and the unique challenges that confront some principals.

Achievement Equity

Scott (2001) contends that achievement equity entails high student achievement for all groups of students when test data are disaggregated and analyzed. Some recent studies have discovered schools that achieve both excellence and equity (Benkovitz, 2008; Brown; 2008; Mutillo, 2008; Smith & Hoy, 2007; Urban, 2008). Johnson and Asera (1999) located and studied nine excellent urban elementary schools that had had at least three years of sustained academic success and outperformed district and/or state average performance scores. The schools were located across the nation, and seven of the schools had 80% or higher low SES students. The majority of students in the study's schools were African American and/or Hispanic. Teams of researchers spent two days at each school to conduct interviews, examine documents and make observations.

The researchers found some similar trends across the schools that contributed to their success (Johnson & Asera, 1999). First, principals appealed to faculty, parents and staff to put differences aside and focus on serving the students. Consequently, a collective sense of responsibility for school improvement existed in the schools. The quantity and quality of time spent on instructional activities increased also. Finally, educators in the schools sought to win the respect and support of parents.

Brown (2008) oversaw a study of Honor Schools of Excellence that exceeded high growth goals set by the state (North Carolina) and met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets required by NCLB. The study initially considered all the honor schools

within the one school district, but, after conducting equity audits, they found 12 small gap honor schools that had reduced the achievement gap between minority and middle-class White students to 15% or less. Using a lens of academic optimism the researchers report, “Three differences between the small gap and the large gap schools were found (encouraging academic achievement, inspecting what one expects, and expecting excellence)” (Brown, 2008, p. 1).

Programmatic Equity

This section considers programmatic issues that can produce equitable or inequitable outcomes. The section focuses on three such programs: (a) Students over-represented in special education and underrepresented in gifted education; (b) Inequitable discipline policies; and (c) Exposure to a rigorous curriculum.

Overrepresentation in Special Education Programs

Theoharis (2004) claims the overrepresentation of students of color in special education amounts to systemic and institutional racism. He adds that this practice has its roots in the historic marginalization of people with disabilities. Dykes (2005) did a multi-case study of three principals, with an emphasis on the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs in schools. The researcher sought to learn how principals implemented policies to address the issue. Dykes defines overrepresentation as the percentage of minority students in special education programs being greater than the percentage of minority students in the general student population within a school (or district). The three principals, and several teachers, were interviewed along with document analysis being performed for triangulation purposes. The researcher found micro-level and macro-level racism existed in the schools. Micro-level racism

existed because the educators in the three schools generally conveyed low expectations for students and a deficit view of individuals. Dykes concluded there is a need for more culturally responsive pedagogy in such schools.

Exclusion from Gifted Programs

Harris, Brown, Ford, and Richardson (2004) agree that there is an ongoing discrepancy between the real world and rhetoric, that is, unfortunately, a deficit perspective persists in relation to culturally diverse student populations. For example, marginalized students that speak with a dialect in stark contrast to middle-class White students can compound the negative expectations that teachers may already possess. The researchers add that, although testing and assessment issues block many students of color from access to gifted education, the primary barrier is a pervasive deficit orientation held by educators. The researchers conclude that Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences offers a more culturally relevant theory of intelligence and educators need increased multicultural preparation.

Rigorous Curriculum

Traditionally schools in the United States (elementary and secondary) have tracked students into separate ability groups (Oakes, 1995). Tracking seems appropriate to most educators given that psychologists have identified and defined differences in students' aspirations, abilities and motivation. Subsequently, it seemed logical to place high ability students in more academic classes that would prepare them for college, while less academic and more vocational oriented programs/classes would prepare the lower ability children for post-secondary school technical training and/or employment.

Oakes (1995) noted that historically African American and Latino students have performed less well than their White peers on standardized assessments of ability and achievement. This has led to the disproportionate placement of minority students in less academic tracks, and remedial and special programs classes for students with perceived learning deficiencies. Research (Gamoran and Hannigan, 2002; Oakes, 1995) indicates that such placements do not benefit these students and they result in less access to diverse resources and engaging learning experiences.

Oakes' (1995) study of two school systems revealed how ability grouping and tracking systems can create segregation and discrimination within schools. Both school systems were found to have racially imbalanced classes at all three levels: elementary, middle and high school. African American and Latino students were consistently overrepresented, and Whites and Asians underrepresented, in low-ability tracks within these schools. Oakes adds that the disproportionate lower track placements were also detrimental to the minority students' achievement outcomes.

Another study, Gamoran and Hannigan (2002) looked at how students performed when placed in more rigorous math classes upon entering high school. The researchers used national survey data to analyze the performance of students who took high school algebra while considering the differences in their math ability prior to entering high school. The purpose of the research was an attempt to prove the utility of a rigorous curriculum (in this case: "algebra for everyone") rather than relying on the inequality in learning connected to tracking students. The researchers discuss how reformers are seeking to place all students in college-preparatory mathematics upon entrance in to high school because of the current inequalities in access to academic study (attributed to

tracking practices). Gamoran and Hannigan found that all students regardless of ability benefit from taking high school algebra. Those with low ability gain less but still benefit, “Hence any given student ought to enroll in algebra to maximize his or her achievement” (p. 250).

A more recent study looked at school practices and the mathematical performance of students in rural high schools and their feeder middle schools in seven states (Bottoms & Carpenter, 2003). The researchers found that there was a mathematical achievement gap between White students and African American students, but the gap narrowed when the two groups took the same high level courses and were held to the same rigorous standards. Again it is apparent that inclusion and high expectations, or an academic emphasis, can support excellence and equity.

Discipline.

One study confirmed that racial minorities (excluding Asians/Pacific Islanders) have considerably higher suspension rates than White students (Verdugo & Glenn, 2002). Zero tolerance policies that increase suspension rates appeared to be inequitably directed at students of color. Minority students were more likely to be suspended as school statistics indicated, so the application of zero tolerance policies affected minority students inequitably: especially African American male students. Verdugo and Glenn (2002) add that zero tolerance policies (such as uniforms, closed campuses, random metal detector searches and drug sweeps) are unjust and unfair. Zero tolerance policies are wide-sweeping and fail to consider the context in which behavior occurs.

Watts and Erevelles (2004), using a critical race theory lens, take a much stronger position about discipline inequity. They argue that school violence does not reflect the

aberrant behavior of a few isolated students. Instead, Watts and Erevelles contend, "...we attribute the incidence of school violence to systemic causes that lie in the oppressive conditions meted out to students oppressively marked by race, class, gender, and disability" (p. 292). They add that school violence is partly shaped both by the psychological state of students and the oppressive material conditions that shape their social behavior and identity.

Teacher Quality Equity

Research indicates that teacher quality is an important predictor of student success, thus it is critical to have quality teachers in schools when attempting to ensure systemic equity (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Richardson, 2009; Urban, 2008). Palzet (2006) found in his study of successful social justice oriented school leaders that they recruit and hire teachers that are capable of achieving their schools' respective mission and vision. Palzet notes that many high poverty and high minority schools have a disproportionate amount of under qualified teachers. For example, the US Department of Education states that on average 13% of teachers employed in low minority schools lack certification. In contrast, 27% of teachers working in high-minority schools are lacking appropriate certification. Urban (2008) contends that, based on research findings, more qualified and experienced teachers in low-SES schools would improve systemic equity. Unfortunately, low-SES schools tend to be populated by less qualified and experienced teachers.

Furthermore, Palzet (2006) points out that typically the schools where the strongest teachers are needed are challenging urban or rural schools frequently populated by minorities. However, 83% of the teaching force is White and middle-class, so most

teachers will be ill-prepared to relate appropriately to the cultural and social needs of many students in high poverty and/or high minority schools. This cultural and social gap can exacerbate deficit thinking due to teachers' lack of familiarity with such students and subsequent low expectations. Peske and Haycock (2006) state that the distribution of teacher quality is inequitable for high poverty and high minority middle schools in the USA. For example, 70 percent of middle school math classes are taught by teachers that do not have college degree majors or minors in a math related field.

Certification

A study by Darling-Hammond (1999) revealed that measures of teacher certification and preparation are the strongest correlates of student achievement in mathematics and reading when controlling for language and student poverty status. Darling-Hammond's quantitative analysis found that the most consistent predictor for student achievement was the proportion of well-qualified teachers in a state: a major in the subject they teach and full certification. Darling-Hammond adds, "The less socially advantaged the students, the less likely teachers are to hold full certification and a degree in their field and the more likely they are to have entered teaching without certification" (p. 29).

Richardson (2009) studied the impact of teacher certification and experience of student achievement. Richardson surveyed 20 middle school mathematics teachers in Alabama then compared the results with student data from the 2007 Alabama Reading and Math Test (ARMT). The study found that students of math teachers who possessed alternative certification did not perform as well on the math portion of the ARMT when compared to the students of traditionally certified math teachers who had higher results.

National Board Certified Teachers

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certifies teachers that successfully complete a rigorous one year program undertaken in their schools typically for the duration of one school year (Bundy, 2006). Teachers must provide video portfolios and other evidence of improvement in their teaching and pass content knowledge tests. In 2005, North Carolina had the largest number of National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) of all the states. Bundy (2006) conducted a statistical analysis of NC schools and found that when student demographic variables are controlled for, schools with larger numbers of NBCTs displayed moderately higher test scores. Bundy concluded that students of NBCTs outperform students of non-certified teachers. However, Goldhaber, Choi and Kramer (2004) found that NBCTs are less likely to teach in high poverty schools and high poverty districts and therefore are primarily found in affluent school districts.

Years of Experience

Peske and Haycock (2006) state there is incontrovertible evidence that the more effective teachers are the more experienced teachers. Rockoff (2004) found that the achievement gains of students of first-year teachers are significantly lower than those students being taught by teachers with 10-15 years experience. Research conducted by the Education Trust (as cited in Peske and Haycock, 2006) revealed a relationship between teacher experience and student achievement in Wisconsin schools. Peske and Heske report, "Schools that were low performers had approximately twice the percentage of novice teachers (less than three years experience) as high performing schools" (p. 4). According to Boyd (2008), the students of beginning teachers are prone to being less

successful than their peers studying under more experienced teachers. Richardson's 2009 study found that students of mathematics teachers with five or more years teaching experience performed better on the state math test (ARMT) than students of mathematics teachers with less experience.

Following the review of systemic equity, it is important to consider the evolving role of the public school principal and his/her role and leadership behaviors that support school programs conducive to attaining excellence and equity.

New Role of the Principal

The role of the school principal has constantly been evolving due to changing demographics, expectations and different societal values, but what has remained a constant over the last century is that the role continues to become increasingly more complex (Brown, 2005). Expectations of principals have evolved from viewing them as building and staff managers to instructional and transformational leaders focused on excellence and equity for all students via improved student achievement.

The position of school principal started to emerge, in the period between 1840 and 1900, as head teachers evolved into principals who were responsible for ensuring that teachers were providing children a common religious and political education. Nevertheless, the principalship during that period was unprofessionalized, lacked bureaucratic structure and there were no specific preparation requirements in place (Brown, 2005).

Between 1900 and 1940, the principalship began to emerge as a formal profession owed in part to the Industrial Revolution and arrival of the corporate sector in United States society. Brown (2005) states, "The role of the principal shifted from evangelical

missionary and values broker to scientific manager and dignified social leader” (p. 114). Indeed, the advent of Frederick Taylor’s Scientific Management principles, rooted in modernism, dramatically changed the role of the school administrator. According to Scientific Management theory, the administration of an organization should use data to identify those behaviors that are most efficient and effective and then replicate them by training workers so that they can reproduce the work behaviors (Dantley, 2005). Brown (2005) adds, “Centralization, specialization, and the division of labor all reinforced the belief that the role of the principal should be separate from that of teaching” (p. 116). Increasingly, principals were seen as “experts” who were charged with improving organizational effectiveness within schools by ensuring that teachers were supervised, implemented a standardized curriculum and students progressed toward their educational goals. Consequently, a more formal hierarchy had been established and schools were now bureaucratized.

With the separation of teaching and administration into two vocations, the role of principal became more complex and various professional organizations successfully lobbied state legislators to pass laws requiring principals to be certified (Brown, 2005). By 1932, almost half of the states in the United States required principals to be certified. The professionalization of the principalship led to the emergence of university preparation programs for principals. A 1964 study found that 42 of 47 tertiary institutions offered majors in educational administration. Culbertson (as cited in Brown, 2005) states, “Program content was consistent with prevailing emphases of science on fact gathering, inductive reasoning, and empirical generalizations” (p. 119). By 1988, almost every state

required principals to have a master's degree in school administration in order to receive certification.

The Principal and Student Achievement

Along with the increasingly complex role of being a principal, a commonly held definition of a “successful” principal has evolved from being a manager that runs a “smooth ship” to include responsibility for raising student achievement (Aderhold, 2005). Traditionally the focus has been on classroom factors when it comes to improving student achievement, but there is now a new and more intense focus on principals and their role in improving student achievement in their schools (Nettles & Herrington, 2007). Perhaps high expectations of principals are warranted given the quantity of research linking principals to academic achievement. A 2004 Rand Corporation report found student achievement linked to the behaviors and characteristics of principals (Bradley, 2006).

What is more, a meta-analysis by Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2003) of 70 contemporary studies examining the effects of school leadership on student achievement found that the principal can have a positive affect on student achievement. The data from the study demonstrated there was a substantial relationship between leadership and student achievement. Marzano, Waters and McNulty stated, “We found that the average effect size (expressed as a correlation) between leadership and student achievement is .25” (p. 3). In fact, the meta-analysis found 21 distinct elements of principal leadership that are significantly correlated to student achievement. Some of the specific leadership responsibilities linked to student achievement include: school culture, curriculum and instruction, discipline, flexibility, visibility, focus, change agent, and monitoring/evaluating. The same study found that should a principal of a school (school

Table 2.3: Top Eight Principal Leadership Responsibilities: Average r and Number of Schools and Studies

| Responsibility | Definition: The extent to which the principal... | Avg r | N schools | N studies |
|--------------------------|--|---------|--------------|--------------|
| Situational Awareness | ...is aware of the details and undercurrents in the in the running of the school and uses this info to address current & potential problems | .33 | 91 | 5 |
| Intellectual | ...ensures that faculty & staff are aware of the most current theories & practices & makes the discussion of these a regular aspect of school's culture | .32 | 321 | 5 |
| Change Agent | ...is willing to and actively challenges the status quo | .30 | 479 | 7 |
| Input | ...involves teachers in the design & implementation of important decisions & policies | .30 | 504 | 13 |
| Culture | ...fosters shared beliefs & a sense of community & cooperation | .29 | 709 | 13 |
| Monitors/ Evaluates | ...monitors the effectiveness of school practices & their impact on student learning | .28 | 1071 | 30 |
| Outreach | ...is an advocate & spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders | .28 | 478 | 14 |
| Order | ...establishes a set of standard operating procedures & routines | .26 | 570 | 17 |

A) improve in her abilities across all 21 responsibilities by one standard deviation, then this would translate into the mean student achievement being 10 points higher than in the other school (school B). Marzano, Waters and McNulty added, “Expressed differently a one standard deviation improvement in leadership practices is associated with an increase in average student achievement from the 50th percentile to the 60th percentile. This represents a statistically significant difference in achievement” (p. 3). Table 2.3 shows the top eight leadership responsibilities that Marzano’s meta-analysis found to be linked to student achievement.

Herrington and Wells (2005) note it is difficult to define a successful principal because such a definition is typically obscure and has been changing regularly over the last 20 years, hence there is no firm definition. However, Herrington and Wells do provide an additional sweeping definition for a successful principal: a school leader that is strong, effective and aids improvement in student achievement. Indeed, “successful” and “effective” are used interchangeably. Nettles and Herrington (2007) describe an effective school leader as one that “makes a difference in improving learning; there is nothing new or especially controversial about this idea” (p. 725). Brumley (2007) states an effective school principal is an “instructional leader that develops relationships to help produce desirable results” (p. 19).

The majority of studies that were analyzed for this literature review indicated that a successful principal is one with strong relationships with staff and improves student achievement, typically is creative (Goetz, 2000; Larbi, 2003; Towns, Cole-Henderson & Serpell, 2001), has a strong grounding in curriculum and instruction, and is a transformational leader (Brumley, 2007; Johnson, 2007; Larbi, 2003; Malone & Caddell,

2000; Rodriguez, 2008; Stephens, 2004; Thompson, 2002; Woodruff, 2008). Goetz' (2000) study of four successful principals found that their self-reports conveyed they were highly creative leaders as exemplified by the following traits that they shared: originality, flexibility and enthusiasm (motivation). Goetz concluded that creative leaders serve others and are highly effective.

Furthermore, a study focused on four high performing and high poverty urban schools with high African American populations sought to identify the reasons for their success when many similar schools fail (Towns, Cole-Henderson, & Serpell, 2001). The schools were from different parts of the nation and had at least 50% of their students at grade level for at least two consecutive years based on their performance on state and/or district mandated tests. The study found the principals had high expectations for students and staff, political savvy and the courage to be creative with resources and curricula. Instructional leadership was demonstrated with the principals frequently volunteering to teach classes and modeling expected behavior. Also, the principals saw no barriers to student success so no deficit thinking was evident. Towns et al. (2001) add that previous research on effective schools had ignored minorities. It should be noted that the period of sustained success used in this study was not very lengthy at just two years and there may have been variation in the quality of standardized testing and proficiency criteria that students were exposed to given the schools studied were in different states.

Larbi (2003) studied factors that contributed to the success of secondary school principals in Rhode Island and found they displayed technical and artful leadership, overall were very creative and promoted excellence. Larbi (2003) states,

It is quite clear that a multiplicity of factors lead to successful principalships, and this study examined the factors that led to such

successes. Apart from being creative, the successful principal is viewed as the lead instructor at that school. This is because the principal should be able to establish a climate for excellence by modeling that behavior. He or she promotes excellence in teaching and learning...(p. 3)

A recent study by Wahlstrom et al. (2010), investigated leadership at the school, district and state levels and how it can improve student achievement. The researchers surveyed more than 8,000 administrators and teachers in nine states, and 43 school districts over a six-year period. The study found that school leaders are more likely to affect student outcomes than other factors such as geography and poverty. Instructional and shared leadership practices were found to be most beneficial to student learning. However, the study's researchers conceded that the scope of their study did not include focusing on leadership effects that were actually supporting the closing of the achievement gap.

School Districts and Student Achievement

Several studies, in recent years, have documented how school districts in conjunction with principals can have a profound impact on student achievement (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Wenglinsky, 1997). There are at least three distinct ways in which school districts can influence the accomplishment of students: (a) district spending (Wenglinsky, 1997); (b) the effects of superintendent leadership on student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006); and (c) building principals' sense of efficacy for student achievement (Louis, et al., 2010).

Wenglinsky (1997) found that "per pupil expenditures for instruction and the administration of school districts are associated with achievement because both result in reduced class size, which raises achievement" (p. 221). By increasing the ratio of teachers hired to students, class sizes are reduced, and more cohesive learning and social

environments are promoted. More cohesive learning environments can significantly raise mathematics achievement for students including economically disadvantaged students. In addition, Wenglinsky found a similar correlation when school district spending is used positively on central office administration.

What is more, Waters and Marzano (2006) found a strong association between school district leaders and student achievement. Waters and Marzano found the following to be true: (a) effective superintendents focus on creating goal-oriented districts; (b) district level leadership does matter; (c) the length of superintendent tenure is positively associated with student achievement; and (d) “defined autonomy”. Effective superintendents focus on non-negotiable goals in relation to classroom instruction and student achievement (goals that everyone is expected to follow). Moreover, effective superintendents ensure that all the necessary resources, including money, time, materials and personnel are allocated to schools to achieve a district’s goals. Also, superintendents use continuous monitoring to ensure the district goals remain the impetus for the district’s actions. In this study, Waters and Marzano found that effective superintendents provide “defined autonomy”, where they set clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, but give principals the autonomy for determining how to meet the set goals.

Principal efficacy is the third way that districts can support student achievement. Louis, et al. (2010) state,

One of the most powerful ways in which districts influence teaching and learning is through the contribution they make to feelings of professional efficacy on the part of school principals. Principal efficacy provides a crucial link between district initiatives, school conditions, and student learning. (p. 129)

The Louis et al. study revealed several ways in which districts develop principals’ efficacy: (a) ensuring access to quality professional development; (b) investing in the

development of their instructional leadership skills; (c) emphasizing the need for teamwork and professional learning communities; and (d) giving priority to improving instruction and student achievement. Clearly Louis et al. acknowledge the relevance of principals in school districts' efforts to improve student achievement. It appears school districts can affect student learning and this in part can be achieved by their supporting and developing principal efficacy.

Leadership for Excellence and Equity

Instructional Leadership and Student Achievement

As discussed previously, albeit briefly, successful principals are managers and instructional leaders. It is critical to discuss this aspect of school leadership in greater detail as it appears to be closely related to the leadership behavior of successful principals. Several studies have found a successful principal is a manager and a leader (Aderhold, 2005; Glasspool, 2007; Johnson, 2004; Larbi, 2003). Blase and Kirby (as cited in Thompson, 2002) concur as they found “successful principals” are managers (create orderly environments) and leaders (support effective instruction).

Noting the increased pluralism and complexity in society today Sybouts and Wendel (as cited in Larbi, 2003) state, “A gradual transition has taken place as schools have grown in size and complexity, and the principalship has gone from a position in management and control to one that demands instructional leadership” (p. 6).

Additionally, Stevens (2004) found that the personal qualities of principals seem to make a difference in schools and those in high achieving schools tend to be instructional leaders that effectively convey a vision of learning and shape educational programs in their schools accordingly. Woodruff (2008) found principals strong in instructional

management skills were linked to greater student achievement by minority and economically disadvantaged students. She notes this is particularly pertinent as the minority population increases in the United States.

Rodriguez (2008) studied the leadership of an elementary school that had had three consecutive years of low student performance before showing considerable improvement after just a year with a new principal. The school was heavily populated by Latino and economically disadvantaged students. The study found a link between improved student achievement with the principal having a strong background in curriculum and instruction and being a transformational leader that inspired and empowered her staff.

Transformational Leadership and Student Achievement

The transformational leader seeks to discover what motivates and satisfies followers and attempts to engage the follower (Owens, 2004). Consequently, transformational leadership invokes a relationship of mutual stimulation with followers and in the process turns followers into leaders ultimately converting leaders into moral agents. This is in contrast to transactional leadership, which is based simply on “quid pro quo transactions” between leader and follower (Owens, 2004, p. 269). The transactional leader is able to garner follower compliance, support and work toward goals, through providing them job tenure, financial rewards, and so on. In schools, transformational leadership typically entails: (a) communicating and establishing a shared vision; (b) promoting high expectations and modeling excellence; (c) collaborative decision making; (d) cooperating to achieve group goals; and (e) providing opportunities for professional development (Woodruff, 2008).

Several recent studies have found that successful principals are transformational leaders. Malone and Caddell (2000) suggest that, in order for principals to be successful, it is critical the principal has a vision and passion for education. They add that principals should be teachers that transform their classrooms. A Canadian study found transformational leadership behaviors more effective than their transactional counterparts in improving instruction and student achievement (Larbi, 2003). Another study found schools with teachers who reported principals that were both instructional and transformational leaders had higher test performance levels than those schools with teachers reporting low instructional and transformational leadership (Johnson, 2007). Transformational leadership was found to increase “teacher engagement” and the data showed it was significantly related to student achievement.

Leadership for Social Justice, Equity and Excellence

Defining Social Justice

Theoharis (2004) notes that social justice in schools exists when “principals advocate, lead and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing factors in the United States” (p. 8). Next, Goldfarb and Grinberg (as cited in Kose, 2005) define social justice as the act of amending hegemonic practices and policies that benefit a few at the expense of others by “actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions, among other forms of relationships” (p. 12).

Bogotch (as cited in Kose, 2005) argues there can be no firm definition of social justice as it is a social construction and has “no fixed or predictable meaning” (p. 16).

Instead, Bogotch sees social justice as a constantly evolving subject and ongoing struggle because it is impossible to predict changes in economic, social and political conditions.

Bogotch states (as cited in Palzet, 2006),

Educational leadership must continuously confront the issue of social justice in all guises and to deliberately make social justice a central part of education leadership discourse and actions while, at the same time, vigilantly critique such actions and motives such that when the material conditions change, we have to start all over again. (p. 44)

Brucocoleri (2008) declares, “Educational leadership for social justice has its basis that schooling must be democratic and its practices must represent equity for all. Social justice is seen as a kind of prequalification, a precondition for excellence in schools” (p. 7). Principals are the primary enablers of social justice in their schools because of their position. However, principals will enable other stakeholders and facilitate social justice through distributed leadership or transformational leadership.

Social Justice Leadership and Student Achievement

McKenzie, et al. (2008) suggest educational leadership programs should be structured to prepare principals for social justice work. Social justice leaders are educational leaders who become activist leaders focused on promoting and ensuring equity in schools. Moreover, social justice leaders should have three goals: increase achievement for all children, promote inclusiveness (in classrooms), and prepare critical thinking citizens. These social justice goals are needed to make schools more successful. Research exists that indicates social justice leadership has resulted in increased student achievement for minority students, students from economically disadvantaged homes and children with disabilities. McKenzie, et al. (2008) add, “From these studies, we now

know some of the perspectives, knowledge, and skills that leaders for social justice need for equitable achievement” (p. 113).

What is more, administration program candidates should show multicultural competencies if they are going to be able to go on and become successful social justice leaders (McKenzie et al., 2008). Ladson-Billings (1995) conducted a study into why eight teachers working with African-American students in a low performing district were able to have their students outperform their counterparts in the district’s other schools. Ladson-Billings found the exemplary teachers implemented culturally relevant pedagogy that emphasized the need for academic excellence, maintenance of cultural integrity and the ability to recognize, understand and critique social inequities. Indeed, Trotter (2007) conducted a study that focused on three principals in schools with 50% plus Black enrollment yet achieved three consecutive years of growth in reading and math. Trotter found that effective leaders understand how culturally responsive teaching can improve instruction and student achievement.

One study entailed principal candidates having to conduct equity audits as part of their university coursework (Harris & Hopson, 2008). The study found that the educational leadership program increased the social justice orientation of the participants as reported by the principal candidates. In fact, the principal candidates actually went on to use their equity audit results to make actual changes in their schools that were more socially just and equitable.

Another study focused on strategies Black women school leaders used to seek equity and justice within their schools (Nowlin, 2008). Common strategies these principals implemented for social justice included: ensuring racial groups as represented

in their communities are also represented on school advisory groups, decision-making groups and staff membership at different levels in their schools; stakeholders celebrate their own culture as well as those represented in the schools; and, lastly, seeking to eliminate the achievement gap among and between all groups of students in their schools.

Palzet (2006) conducted a qualitative study that sought to identify the social justice leadership qualities of nine principals in high poverty elementary schools in Illinois that achieved at least three years of sustained academic success according to state recognized standards. All the principals were interviewed using semi-structured protocol and for triangulation purposes some teachers and parents (PTA members) completed open-ended surveys also. Palzet selected principals that had only been in their schools for four years or more so as to ensure none of them simply inherited high-performing schools. Three schools were urban, three suburban and three rural.

Palzet (2006) found that the principals in the High Performing/High Poverty schools were both educational leaders and agents of change that were social justice oriented. The principals all facilitated positive relationships that were critical to their schools' success, while not expecting miracles, held high expectations of students, oversaw strong vision and mission statements, and had a sense of social justice that they could articulate. Finally, these principals recruited and hired quality teachers that they felt could implement the schools' visions for success.

Achieving Excellence and Equity in the Middle Grades

There is considerable research focusing on the importance of early childhood education and high school as critical periods to support students, however, less attention is paid to the middle grades (Ambrose, 2008; Brown, 2009). Increased scrutiny of the

middle grades is necessary, as the middle grades frequently represent the last chance for many students to be successful (Brown, 2009). It is in the middle grades for many high poverty students that achievement gaps in mathematics evolve into achievement chasms (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006). There are some studies that seek to buck the trend of focusing purely on elementary schools and put the spotlight on middle schools that have high poverty, and in many instances high minority, student populations that have been successful in closing the achievement gap.

A one year study conducted by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2000) sought to learn how five elementary schools and four middle schools, serving large numbers of students in poverty and minority students, had become so successful in closing the achievement gap between White and Black students faster than the state average. The middle schools varied between 44% and 83% of students eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch and student populations varying between 33% to 93% Black. Finally, enrollment in the four middle schools varied between 361 to 881 students.

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) staff, in conjunction with university faculty and local school district staff visited each of the nine schools between the Spring of 1999 and the Spring of 2000 (NCDPI, 2000). Research team members interviewed school district staff, school principals, teachers, and parents, observed instruction in classrooms, and reviewed school documents to help identify the school practices and instructional strategies contributing to the schools' academic success.

Several common themes were identified by the NCDPI (2000) study as being important for schools seeking to close the achievement gap for minority students and

students of poverty. First, teachers often mentioned leadership being critical to their success. In particular, teachers lauded school leaders that tolerated different teaching styles as long as the students demonstrated success and provided training and resources that enable effective instruction. Second, instruction was focused on helping students master basic competencies in writing, mathematics and reading. Third, most of the schools visited were engaged in periodic assessments (typically district wide testing in reading and math) and data disaggregation. Next, typically the schools displayed a culture of achievement where high expectations were communicated to teachers, students and parents. Principals laid the foundation for success by setting high goals for schools and teachers that filtered through to students and parents. Finally, other common themes were: targeted use of technology; one-on-one tutoring and small group programs for struggling students; and homogenous grouping of students.

Unfortunately, the NCDPI study of high poverty/high minority schools closing the achievement gap does not differentiate the results or common themes by school type: elementary versus middle. In addition, the middle schools in the study varied greatly in enrollment size and percentage of minority students and students of poverty. This researcher seeks to conduct similar research, but will focus only on middle schools in an attempt to identify common themes peculiar to achieving excellence and equity in the middle grades. Moreover, the NCDPI (2000) noted,

The fact that these schools are employing particular strategies for raising achievement does not mean that those strategies are necessarily responsible for their success. For example, schools that are not making similar progress might very well be engaging in some of these same activities. (p. 9)

For that reason, this researcher will compare and contrast two successful small achievement gap middle schools with two large achievement gap schools. This approach will allow the researcher to explore any similarities and differences in leadership, teacher quality and programmatic issues in the two sets of schools.

Brown (2009) focused exclusively on the middle grades with his case study of a high minority/high poverty urban middle school in California that has been very successful in advancing student achievement for the last five years. Mid-Valley Intermediate School consists of a student population that is 96% Hispanic and 81% economically disadvantaged, yet the school has shown significant and consistent academic growth for both groups. The school earned recognition as a “School to Watch” Model Middle School from the State of California.

The purpose of Brown’s (2009) study was to identify and analyze the programs, strategies and practices that were utilized at the middle school to successfully close the achievement gap. The study included the use of interviews and observations, surveys and examination of school documents and records. A combination of factors were found to have contributed to the significant academic success at Mid-Valley. Academic excellence was one important factor and entailed the principal nurturing and maintaining a laser like focus on developing and supporting programs and practices that enhance staff skills and promote high student achievement. Similar to the NCDPI study, Brown found that school culture was a critical factor also with the maintenance of a culture of high expectations for student behavior and academic performance being important.

What is more, Mid-Valley did not adhere to a “one size fits all” approach; instead, the school displayed structured autonomy (Brown, 2009). Programs, practices and

strategies at the school were tailored to meet the unique needs of the students. The design and implementation of such programs and policies were not restricted exclusively to the administration of the school but instead a leadership team consisting of teacher leaders and administration. Finally, other critical factors found to drive the success at Mid-Valley included data driven decision making, zero ambiguity with respect to the school's goals and objectives (mission) and staff collaboration.

A limitation of the Brown (2009) study is that it involved a single school. Brown concedes that future research should expand the number of schools to further assess the impact of school policies, programs and strategies on student achievement. This researcher included four middle schools in the study to allow for the cross-case synthesis that could not be accomplished with Brown's study.

Aiea Intermediate School in Hawaii is a Title 1 middle school serving many students from low-income homes and was once performing very poorly, but now outperforms most middle schools in the state (Moreno, 2009). The school was once overwhelmed with student behavioral problems, a high level of truancy and, overall, lacked academic rigor. However, over recent years a new principal has adopted a philosophy that all students can learn, regardless of the challenges that they confront at home. At Aiea, success is not defined strictly as test performance in reading and math, but also in access to opportunities to be successful with drama, visual arts, robotics, graphic arts and media production. Tom Kurashige, the principal at Aiea Intermediate, states (as cited in Moreno, 2009),

Our magazine, our drama production, every year we have a student represent the state in National History Day, the fact that we score high in the state essay contest...to me these are more powerful indicators of success than what the test scores say. (¶ 10)

For Kurashige the key to student success is students being engaged (Moreno, 2009). Certainly the approach of letting kids be kids first and academic achievement being a consequence appears to be working at Aiea Intermediate. In the 2008-2009 school year, 81% of Aiea's students were proficient in reading compared with the state average of 65% and 58% were proficient in math versus the state average of 45%.

Aiea Intermediate School's success should be considered in context. The middle school has received several large grants to fund the exceptional technology programs and resources at the school (Moreno, 2009). In fact, there is a one-to-one student/computer ratio at the school, which is very uncommon for most public schools. However, this case, atypical student access to outstanding resources aside, serves as a powerful example of a school leader and staff setting high expectations and nurturing student success without having to focus exclusively on mathematics, reading and writing at the expense of diverse learning opportunities for students of low-income homes. This researcher in part seeks to explore how successful small achievement gap middle schools differ from successful large achievement gap middle schools with respect to school programs and policies that promote diverse opportunities for all students.

Accountability and Inequity

Despite the attention increased accountability has brought to the achievement gap, it does have its opponents, and there is a body of literature and research that suggests it is detrimental for students and education (Skrla, 2001). McNeil (as cited in Skrla, 2001) states, "Educational standardization harms teaching and learning and over the long term restratifies education by race and class" (p. 15). Lupton (2005) is critical of the new focus on accountability as she states it largely sees public school improvement through a

managerialist paradigm promoted by a “context-blind school effectiveness movement” (p.591). In disadvantaged areas, problems within schools are seen as managerial with the roots residing in staff and their need for better training and monitoring.

Lupton (2005) researched the impact of context on school improvement by interviewing teachers from four secondary schools in England that served neighborhoods with very high levels of poverty. Lupton found the schools shared characteristics such as pupils’ having very low prior attainment, pervasive material poverty, charged emotional environments, low student attendance and unpredictable work environments. Teachers reported such conditions impacted school quality by making staff recruitment difficult, difficulty maintaining high expectations, excess pressure on school management/administration, and lack of resources for complex problems. Lupton concludes excellence is still possible in such schools, but much more difficult; and, while part of the problem with quality may reside in staff and management, a larger part of the problem resides in context.

The Center on Education Policy’s (CEP) annual review of NCLB revealed 10 effects leaving a mixed overall impression of the legislation (Jennings & Rentner, 2006). The CEP survey was given to state departments of education and nationally representative samples of districts and schools. The survey found student achievement is improving according to states, but the level of improvement is still not completely clear owed to states being able to determine their own proficiency standards. Schools reported in the CEP survey results that they are spending more time on reading and mathematics. School districts reported 71% of their elementary schools are spending less time on other subjects, especially Social Studies, 97% of poor districts set required time for reading and

math compared to 55-59% for districts with lower levels of poverty. In addition, confirming the fears of some critics, students are taking many more tests. However, Jennings and Rentner (2006) conclude, increased standardization aside, that the new focus on the achievement gap and performance of subgroups attributed to NCLB has shone a light on the poor performance of students that otherwise would have gone unnoticed.

Smyth (2008) contends that “colorblind racism” ensues under NCLB. In particular, Smyth claims that the new emphasis on testing is destructive and has many teachers behaving like drill sergeants instead of coaches and comforters. Research indicates increased testing is causing angst and anxiety – particularly among elementary students. One study that considered teachers’ perspectives of high-stakes testing found teachers have observed adverse effects of testing on children that are manifested emotionally, physically and psychologically. Smyth states, “High-stakes testing is forcing instruction to change from exploratory, lifelong learning to teaching to the test through drill and kill...Drilling students on specific methods to achieve high scores on standardized tests is ethically inappropriate conduct for teachers” (p. 134). Emery and Ohanian (2004) in their critique of the business sector’s attack on public education add,

...by conflating high test scores with civil rights and co-opting those who raise alarms about the growing segregation of US schools, ‘high standards for all’ rhetoric hides the fact that minority and poor students are being ghettoized into dead-end, under financed, drill-and-kill low-performing schools. (p. 91)

However, many state and local officials oppose NCLB’s reliance on tests, but acknowledge it has directed attention to low achieving students and low performing schools (Jennings & Rentner, 2006). Skrla (2001) adds that it is dangerous and

counterproductive to oppose the new focus on accountability if you are pro-social justice, as the status quo has a “miserable record” when it comes to achieving academic success for marginalized groups (p. 18). Accountability and standardized testing have contributed positively for minority students because schools and principals now use data for school improvement and must attempt to extinguish embedded assumptions about them having no chance at success. According to Skrla, principals and schools can choose to react to accountability in a number of ways: become test factories; make counterproductive choices; simply flounder; apply a Christmas tree approach (adopt every new fad touting how to improve student success); or use it in positive and powerful ways to pursue equity and excellence.

Castagno (2008) conducted a case study of a principal that turned around an urban middle school previously plagued with poor academic achievement and poor recognition in both the community and school district. One of the essential issues that Castagno sought to explore was the cost attached to dramatically improved student achievement. Birch Middle School had a student population that was 86% African-American and 96% Free/Reduced Lunch. However, in just two years the new principal, an experienced White administrator, had the school meeting AYP and posting higher test scores than many other schools in the district when, prior to his arrival, the school had failed to meet AYP for three consecutive years and was considered the worst middle school in the district. Castagno found that the principal, in collaboration with staff, had established a strong academic culture with an intense emphasis on reading, mathematics and writing. However, Castagno found that language arts, mathematics and science classes were routinized, strictly followed the core curriculum, and students were tested frequently. In

addition, the principal focused considerable time and resources on a small group of students that with considerable effort had a realistic chance of passing district and state testing. Such a focus contrasts with Benkovitz's (2008) finding that principals and staff in excellent and equitable schools, albeit at the elementary level, focus on the needs of all students and not just certain subgroups.

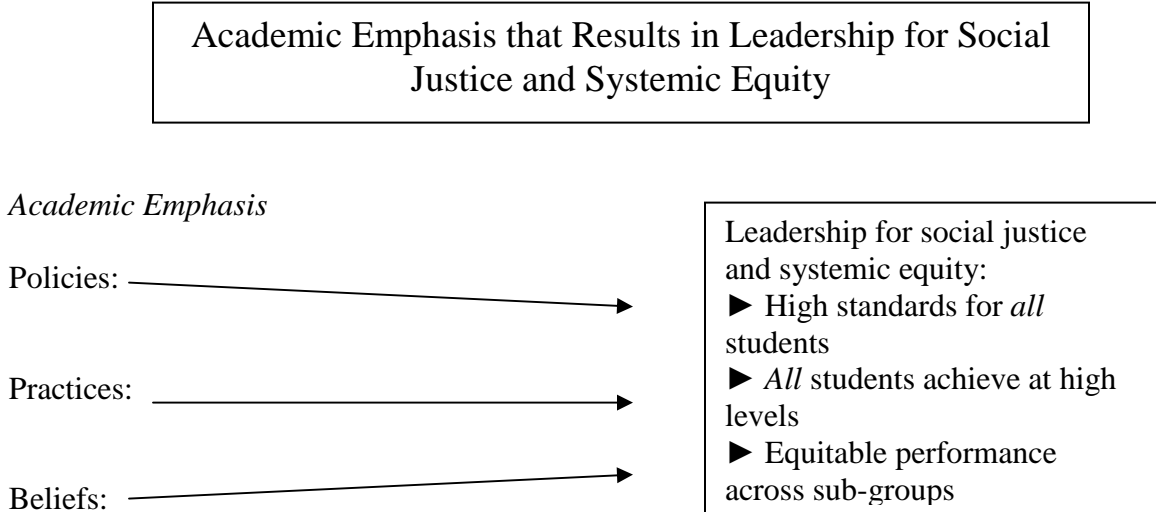
A mathematics teacher at Birch Middle School, Ms. Forest, reveals the cost of improved academic excellence. Forest said that, while she supports the use of disaggregated data, Birch had gone too far, and, while test scores had been raised, other areas were compromised to achieve those results (Castagno, 2008). Forest points out that the intense focus on accountability measures at Birch made it difficult to implement critical pedagogy and multicultural education. Forest concludes that the academic focus was necessary but should not have been the sole focus. Castagno (2008) posited, "Whereas some believe that NCLB type approaches that center on reading, math standardization, and accountability are the path to greater social justice, others maintain that these approaches simply continue the legacy of injustice and inequity" (p. 7).

Critics of accountability do bring to the surface a concern that this research will in part consider: At what expense is excellence and equity being achieved? If low-SES students are increasingly being exposed to teaching to the test and losing exposure time to non-tested curricula, as some critics and studies suggest, then as this study intends it would be helpful to explore the manner in which some high performing middle schools pursue excellence and equity.

Conceptual Framework: Academic Emphasis

This study used Academic Emphasis, one of three components that make-up the latent construct of Academic Optimism, as a lens to explore how school leaders in four high performing middle schools pursue, support and achieve excellence and systemic equity for all students. This researcher's conceptual framework as seen in Figure 1 is based on the same framework utilized by Benkovitz (2008) in her study of elementary Honor Schools of Excellence using a lens of academic emphasis.

Figure 2.1: Academic Emphasis Framework



Note. From "Schools of excellence and equity: Closing achievement gaps through academic emphasis," by J. Benkovitz, 2008, *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 69 (06), p. 74. (UMI No. 331 0962).

Academic emphasis is a major component of academic optimism, identified and developed by Hoy, Tarter and Woolfolk Hoy, as a general construct grounded in theory and research into effective leadership and schools that raise student achievement even controlling for socioeconomic status (SES), and other demographic variables (as cited in

Brown, 2008). Academic optimism consists of three interrelated components: (a) academic emphasis; (b) collective efficacy; and (c) faculty trust (Smith & Hoy, 2007). Academic emphasis (also known as academic press) is the actual display of high expectations for students and their academic performance. Collective efficacy originates from Bandura's work in social cognitive theory; academic emphasis evolves from Hoy and Tarter's research of the organizational health of schools with theoretical connections to Parsons (1953); and trust is a critical concept in Coleman's study of social interaction (Smith & Hoy, 2007). Collective efficacy entails faculty members believing in their own ability and the ability of their colleagues to help all children to be successful learners. Finally, faculty trust involves teachers believing that they can build positive and supportive relationships with parents and students to improve student learning.

Academic Optimism and Student Achievement

There are several recent studies that have used academic optimism as a lens to explore how principals and schools enhance the learning of all students (Benkovitz, 2008; Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006; Muttillio, 2008; Smith & Hoy, 2007). A recent quantitative study by Smith and Hoy (2007) sought to establish if academic optimism can boost student achievement in urban elementary schools. The study surveyed teachers in 99 schools in Texas that had student populations that were 55% to 92% low SES. The researchers found that academic optimism, even controlling for SES, is a school characteristic that predicts increased student achievement. The researchers chose not to survey principals, but they noted,

School leaders need to lead by example and supply their faculties with the confidence and resources necessary for cultivating a culture of academic optimism that persuades teachers as well as students to believe that they

can achieve regardless of their circumstances. Academic optimism can be learned in the same way as individual optimism is learned. (p. 566)

Given principals have been linked to student achievement and the effectiveness of schools it is surprising that the above study did not interview or survey principals also.

Academic Emphasis

Academic emphasis, the principal component of academic optimism, has been found to be strongly related to higher student achievement (Brown, 2008; Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006; Shouse, 1995; Smith & Hoy, 2007). Hoy, Tarter and Kottkamp (1991) developed a tool, the Organizational Health Inventory (OHI), to measure the degree to which five dimensions, including academic emphasis, contribute to a healthy school climate. According to Hoy, Tarter and Kottkamp effective schools have positive and open (healthy) school climates. The researchers defined school climate as the school environment as experienced by participants and its effects of their behavior. The five dimensions of the OHI were: Institutional Integrity, Collegial Leadership, Resource Influence, Teacher Affiliation, and Academic Emphasis. Hoy, Tarter and Kottkamp stated, “Academic emphasis refers to the school’s press for achievement. The expectation of high achievement is met by students who work hard, are cooperative, seek extra work, and respect other students who get good grades” (p. 96).

Hoy and Sabo (1998) recognized the distinct nature of the middle grades and revised the OHI to measure school climate, a school’s “personality” in middle schools. The new instrument, the Organizational Health Inventory for Middle Schools (OHI-M) measured the impact of six dimensions on school climate and student achievement. The additional dimension was Principal Influence. The study found a significant and positive

Table 2.4: Academic Emphasis Scale Items on OHI-M

| Academic Emphasis Items | Questionnaire number |
|---|----------------------|
| 1. Students make provisions to acquire extra help from teachers | 2 |
| *2. Students neglect to complete homework | 7 |
| 3. Students respect other who get good grades | 16 |
| 4. Good grades are important to the students of this school | 17 |
| 5. Students seek extra help so they can get good grades | 22 |
| 6. Students try hard to improve on previous work | 27 |
| 7. The learning environment is orderly and serious | 29 |
| 8. Teachers in this school believe that their students have the ability to achieve academically | 38 |
| *9. Academically oriented students in this school are ridiculed by their peers | 44 |

* = scored in reverse.

Note. From “*Quality Middle Schools: Open and Healthy*,” by W.K. Hoy and D.J. Sabo, 1998, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 150.

Table 2.5: Correlations of Elements of Health and Aspects of Student Achievement (N = 86)

| Elements of Health in Organizational Climate | Measures of Student Achievement: | | |
|--|----------------------------------|---------|---------|
| | Math | Reading | Writing |
| Academic Emphasis | .73** | .70** | .64** |
| Teacher Affiliation | .53** | .51** | .51** |
| Collegial Leadership | .28** | .28** | .25* |
| Resource Support | .50** | .50** | .46** |
| Principal Influence | .17 | .13 | .15 |
| Institutional Integrity | -.36** | -.36** | -.35** |

*p<.05; **p<.01 (one-tailed tests)

Note. From “*Quality Middle Schools: Open and Healthy*,” by W.K. Hoy and D.J. Sabo, 1998, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 89.

relationship between school climate and student achievement with academic emphasis being one of the critical elements of a healthy school climate that fosters student achievement. Table 2.4 shows the scale items used on the OHI-M instrument to measure the extent of academic emphasis in a middle school. Table 2.5 shows that academic emphasis had a very strong and positive relationship with student achievement in math, reading and writing in middle schools. Principal Influence as a dimension in the OHI-M refers to the principal’s ability to persuade and influence the actions of superiors and work through a school system’s hierarchy to gain additional resources (Hoy & Sabo, 1998). The researchers added their results suggest that middle school principals perceived as collegial and supportive should be linked to positive student outcomes.

Goddard, Sweetland & Hoy (2000) used the 8-item academic emphasis scale of the OHI to assess the association of academic emphasis with student achievement in 45 elementary schools in one large Midwestern school district. The researchers found that academic emphasis was a significant predictor of student achievement in math and reading for minority and lower SES students. The study found that schools that had a higher academic emphasis had higher academic achievement.

Our multilevel analysis demonstrates that a 1-unit increase in a school’s academic emphasis score is associated with a 16.53-point average gain in reading achievement. In other words, an increase in academic emphasis of 1 standard deviation is associated with a gain of nearly 40% of a standard deviation in student achievement in mathematics and more than one third of a standard deviation in reading achievement. (Goddard, Sweetland & Hoy, 2000, p. 698)

The results of this study indicate that academic emphasis in any school, regardless of demographic variables such as the race and socioeconomic status of students, can enable teachers and students to be successful in teaching and learning.

Muttillio (2008) notes that the research emphasizing the significance of academic emphasis focuses on a positive and collegial school climate where student achievement flourishes regardless of race or socioeconomic status. Muttillio adds that in that context academic emphasis appears to be synonymous with a school's climate. Goddard, Sweetland and Hoy (2000) state, "We conceive of academic emphasis as an important feature of school climate that fosters academic success" (p. 687). Consequently, the norms of schools with strong academic emphasis are critical for any analysis of factors contributing to student achievement, hence the relevance of a principal's policies, practices and beliefs when researching how leadership may support student achievement and the narrowing of achievement gaps.

Shouse's (1995) study addressed the perceived dilemma of focusing too much on academic excellence (academic press) at the expense of a positive school atmosphere. Shouse analyzed results from a national survey consisting of teacher and student questionnaires and found that academic press is significantly linked to student achievement across all levels. More importantly, Shouse found that the most effective schools in his study developed a positive sense of community as a result of having a strong and effective focus on academic excellence. Subsequently, when the students are successful because of a school's academic emphasis, then the school will in turn develop a more positive school climate. Shouse states, "Overall, the evidence presented here suggests that educational equity is advanced as low-SES (socio-economic status) schools

marshal their human and social capital in more academically focused ways” (p. 19). The study seems to dispel concerns that an over-emphasis on academic excellence will breed a negative school climate.

Another study by Alig-Mielcarek and Hoy in 2005 compared the influence of academic press and the principal’s instructional leadership. The study found academic press, controlling for SES, to have the greater direct impact on student achievement, while instructional leadership was found to be indirectly influential through academic press. It is interesting to note that numerous contemporary studies show instructional leadership is linked to effective schools and successful schools, yet it may not be as important as academic emphasis. However, instructional leadership may still be instrumental in establishing academic emphasis.

A study by Roney, Coleman and Schlichting (2007) focused on the relationship between organizational health and student achievement in five middle grades schools. The study found a moderately positive relationship between the OHI-M’s index scores and reading scores in the five middle schools. The researchers looked at reading scores for the 2005 and 2006 school years. They found the only middle school to increase its reading scores in 2006 displayed an increase in academic emphasis while other OHI-M indicators decreased. The researchers noted successful principals have a bias towards academic emphasis and a facilitative rather than dictatorial approach. Similarly, a majority of staff in schools with strong academic emphasis believed all students can succeed academically.

Benkovitz’s (2008) study of high performing elementary schools successful at narrowing the achievement gap, using academic emphasis as a conceptual framework,

found a number of sub-themes emerged under her three main themes of policies, practices and beliefs. Principals were found to be key in setting the stage for policies that were categorized into three sub-themes: (a) Student achievement results from a collective and collaborative effort; (b) Recruitment of highly qualified teachers who shared the principal's vision; and (c) Ensuring a safe and orderly learning environment. Second, principals successful at narrowing the achievement gap closely monitored teaching and learning in their schools and this practice consisted of three sub-themes: (a) Recognition, encouragement and celebration of students' academic achievement; (b) Promoting and overseeing data driven decision-making; and (c) The principals offer instructional support and feedback. Finally, the principals in the high performing small achievement gap schools shared high expectations for all students and two sub-themes emerged under this belief: (a) Excellence was expected of staff and students; and (b) The state's curriculum is non-negotiable.

Resisting Deficit Thinking

The existence of high expectations for all students and expecting excellence in high performing schools successful at narrowing the achievement gap is in stark contrast to Deficit Thinking. Deficit thinking is relevant to discussion about Academic Emphasis in that it is a potential barrier that leaders for social justice must confront (Urban, 2008). Valencia (1997) refers to deficit thinking as an influential paradigm that impacts the perspectives of educators regarding the persistent achievement gap between marginalized groups and middle class White students. The deficit-thinking model relates the persistent failure of certain types of students to their economic and/or social shortcomings or cognitive and emotional delays. Valencia adds that to blame minority and poor students

for their “deficiencies” is to blame the victim, and educators need to look for solutions rather than scapegoats.

Scribner and Scribner (2001) researched high performing schools (three elementary schools, three middle schools and three high schools) serving Mexican Americans on the Texas/Mexico border. The nine schools were at least 68% Hispanic and had above average student test scores on the state’s standardized test. A significant finding of the study, that supports academic emphasis, is that these successful schools ignored potential barriers often associated with deficit thinking. Also, the principals of these schools nurtured close relationships with their communities (conducive to establishing faculty trust).

McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) connect deficit thinking to *equity traps*. Equity traps are “the conscious and unconscious thinking patterns and behaviors that trap teachers, administrators, and others, preventing them from creating schools that are equitable, particularly for students of color” (p. 601). The researchers add that the ability to understand and identify equity traps may make it easier for principals to improve student achievement for minorities. McKenzie and Scheurich’s study of eight White teachers in an urban elementary school with 95% African American students established four types of equity traps: (1) deficit view; (2) racial erasure; (3) avoidance and employment of the gaze; and (4) paralogical beliefs and behaviors (involves false reasoning that leads to self-deception).

Theoharis (2004) researched school leaders oriented toward social justice and their responses to resistance to their stances and initiatives. Theoharis found that social justice leaders established inclusive communities that clearly rejected the deficit-thinking

model. Theoharis used purposeful sampling to identify and study seven principals in public schools that had an orientation to (concern for) social justice. These public school leaders encountered much resistance in their schools as they sought to transform them and make them more equitable and caring for all students. Theoharis found that the leaders demonstrated three types of leadership behaviors: tenacious commitment to justice, passionate leadership, and arrogant humility (a combination of arrogance and humility). However, this study largely neglected a focus on the relationship between the school/social justice leader and student achievement. Instead, as mentioned earlier the focus was on the seven school leaders, their critical thinking and attempts to overcome resistance to create more inclusive schools rather than how the leadership behaviors boosted achievement.

Conclusion

There has been a mandated transition from simply providing all students access to a public education to ensuring equal access and excellence, that is, academic success for all students as demonstrated via performance on standardized tests (Guthrie et al., 2007). Consequently, the role of the principal has continued to evolve to meet the needs of educational policy and societal expectations (Brown, 2005). Contemporary studies indicate that principals most successful in leading effective schools and improving student achievement are strong instructional leaders and also transformational leaders that collaborate with, and empower, others (Rodriguez, 2008; Woodruff, 2008).

NCLB holds principals accountable for meeting the needs of all students and this has increased the intensity with which school leaders monitor and use data to improve school programs (Durtschi, 2005). Systemic equity entails principals supporting and

attempting to implement programmatic equity, achievement equity and teacher equity (Brown, 2008). Studies reveal that when systemic equity exists, for example, students are exposed to high expectations (Brown, 2008), a rigorous curriculum (Gamoran & Hannigan, 2002), experienced and qualified teachers with an awareness of multicultural perspectives (Palzet, 2006), and not blocked from gifted education (Harris et al., 2004), then student achievement increases.

Social justice school leaders both acknowledge the need for systemic equity, even in challenging contexts, and take actual steps to ensure excellence and equity for all students. Academic optimism provides a lens to explore how principals' actions and behaviors are fundamentally changing their schools to achieve equity and excellence. While academic optimism supports previous research of effective principals and schools, it must be noted that it also extends it (Smith & Hoy, 2007). For example, studies have shown that parental involvement aids student achievement, but academic optimism takes this concept further and draws attention to how it actually improves student achievement, that is, the trust that exists among parents, staff and students.

Brown (2008) has overseen a study showing how principals use the three components of Academic Optimism to achieve excellence and equity in North Carolina's "Honor Schools of Excellence". Benkovitz (2008) was a researcher involved in Brown's research project, and she specifically found academic emphasis had a critical role in high performing elementary schools. These schools (typically characterized by high-SES student populations) were more equitable through the presence of smaller achievement gaps between White and typically marginalized subgroups when compared to similar

high achieving schools that equity audits found to have larger achievement gaps and to be more inequitable overall.

This study adds to the developing research in the field of academic optimism, and, more specifically, builds upon Benkovitz's (2008) research through a focus on leadership for equity and excellence in high performing middle schools in North Carolina that have been consistently successful at serving disadvantaged subgroups of students. Indeed, Smith and Hoy (2007) state that good schools are a function of effective principals. This literature review discussed how some principals may respond to mandated accountability by converting their schools to test factories while others may make positive changes that have powerful outcomes (Skrla, 2001). This study explored the attention the principals gave to each of the three sub-components of academic emphasis in the two sets of successful middle schools. While academic emphasis is well established in research literature, there is limited literature that has the principal as the unit of analysis in relation to social justice or leading for excellence and equity (Benkovitz, 2008) and at the middle school level (Mutttillo, 2008). This study may give greater insight into how all three sub-components of academic emphasis are supported by school leaders in middle schools consistently successful at narrowing the achievement gap between Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students and more affluent White students.

III. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter will reiterate the purpose of the study, its conceptual framework and research questions, then shift to site and participant selection, data collection methods and discuss data analysis. Next, the study's mixed method design will be described: an initial quantitative phase with a second phase (qualitative data collection) being the dominant method. Finally, method triangulation will be discussed along with the limitations of the study.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore principal leadership practices, beliefs and policies in four high performing middle schools recognized as Schools of Distinction. Furthermore, the four schools were separated into two small achievement gap schools and two large achievement gap schools less successful at narrowing the achievement gap among White and Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students. The analysis focused on teacher quality, programmatic issues, and principal leadership.

Conceptual Framework

This study utilized academic emphasis, a significant component of academic optimism, as a lens to explore how school leaders in high performing middle schools pursue, support and achieve excellence and systemic equity for all students. Academic optimism consists of three interrelated components: (a) academic emphasis; (b) collective efficacy; and (c) faculty trust (Smith & Hoy, 2007). Academic emphasis (also known as

academic press) is the actual display of high expectations for students and their academic performance. Collective efficacy entails faculty members believing in their own ability and the ability of their colleagues to help all children to be successful learners. Faculty trust involves teachers believing that they can build positive and supportive relationships with parents and students to improve student learning.

Academic emphasis consists of the policies, practices and beliefs that promote and maintain academic excellence for all students (Benkovitz, 2008). Murphy et al., (1982) emphasize that the belief structure of the principal and teachers within a school will determine the degree of staff responsibility for student learning and, in turn, school policies and classroom practices that promote academic press. Important policies can include: school purpose, student grouping, ensuring an orderly environment, protection of instructional time, retention/promotion, homework, monitoring of student progress and grading practices. This study considered the role of principals in supporting academic emphasis via their beliefs, leadership behaviors, school policies, programs, and the classroom practices that they promoted in their schools.

Major Research Question

The following question focused this research: How do the principals of four traditional calendar 6-8 public middle schools, consistently recognized as North Carolina “Schools of Distinction” pursue, support and advance social justice, systemic equity and excellence?

Research Questions

The following questions guided the process of inquiry:

1. What school-wide policies do the principals promote that support student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap?
2. What leadership practices do the principals display that support student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap?
3. How are the four principals similar and/or different with respect to their beliefs about student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap?

Rationale for Mixed Method Approach

Mixed methods research employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches and continues to grow in popularity (Creswell, 2003). All methods have limitations, and the use of more than one can cancel or neutralize biases inherent in the other method. Quantitative research frequently requires the researcher to be removed from subjects to avoid any bias or unintended behavior that may influence their behavior (Glesne, 2006). In addition, the quantitative researcher is frequently confined to statistical analysis of data purely in the form of numerical indices or other quantifiable bits of information, with the purpose of being able to make generalizations about a study's participants or study group to other places and/or persons.

In contrast, qualitative research seeks richer detail as the researcher interacts with subjects in an attempt to understand and interpret how they construct the world in which they live and work. Qualitative research does look for patterns, but is more descriptive in nature than dependent on numerical indices. However, such an approach typically means that qualitative findings cannot be reduced to generalizations capable of being applied to wider groups with statistical significance. Moreover, the use of two methods allows one method to be used to help support or develop findings from the other method. Yin (2009)

adds, "...Mixed methods research can permit investigators to address more complicated research questions and collect a richer and stronger array of evidence than can be accomplished by any single method alone" (p. 63).

This study generally replicated the dominant-less mixed method research design that was utilized by Benkovitz (2008) through a lens of academic emphasis to explore leadership for excellence and equity in Honor Schools of Excellence. The dominant-less method entails one research method (quantitative or qualitative) being "less-dominant" than the other due to the researcher placing greater priority on one of the two approaches (Cresswell, 2003). Cresswell states, "Having a major form of data collection and analysis and a minor form is well suited for studies undertaken by graduate students" (p. 212).

In this study, the dominant method was the qualitative approach. The qualitative phase of this study entailed semi-structured interviews with principals, assistant principals, and teachers. The initial quantitative phase entailed the use of data to first identify successful high performing middle schools and second to conduct equity audits of both sets of middle schools so that the levels of achievement equity, teacher quality equity and programmatic equity could be examined, compared and contrasted.

Role of the Researcher

Marshall and Rossman (2006) stress the importance of researchers "situating the self" in a study along with considering issues of entry, personal biography and ethics. This researcher was a public school administrator and doctoral candidate in educational leadership at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The researcher did have a vested interest, and genuine concern, for supporting and improving public education. However, the researcher did not conduct research in his own school and did not include

any schools from his own district in this study. In addition, the schools in the study were purposefully selected based on their meeting pre-established criteria and not because the principals or other personnel in the schools were known or unknown to this researcher.

The researcher did anticipate that his role as a public educator and the nature of the study itself (seeking to identify how and why certain principals/schools are successful in promoting academic excellence and systemic equity) would make negotiating entry to schools less difficult. Nevertheless, the researcher still had to acquire formal approval to interview school employees from central office personnel in the different school systems where selected schools were located. Informed consent was sought from all participants, and a commitment to confidentiality was provided by the researcher.

What is more, the researcher had to be cognizant of being perceived as an expert by research participants given his role as a school administrator. Such a perception would have been detrimental to accessing quality information because interview participants may have been inclined to be cautious in what they shared or assumed that the researcher already knew relevant information. Glesne (2006) stresses,

As a researcher, you are a curious student who comes to learn from and with research participants. You do not come as an expert or authority. If you are so perceived, then your respondents will not feel encouraged to be as forthcoming as they can be. (p. 46)

Site Selection and Participants

Through purposeful sampling this study initially focused on two North Carolina small achievement gap middle schools that had Free/Reduced Lunch student populations exceeding 20% (ranging between 21% to 51%), had both met AYP and been deemed Schools of Distinction for at least three of the four school years in the period of 2005-2009. Creswell (2009) notes, “The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully

select participants or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and research question” (p. 178). These two middle schools were selected because an analysis of NCDPI data revealed they were among the highest performing traditional (grades 6-8) calendar public middle schools in North Carolina with Free/Reduced Lunch populations exceeding 20% and having had the same principal for at least four consecutive years. The researcher determined that focusing on middle schools that had been successful under the same principal for a prolonged period of time was critical. Rotation of principals may make it difficult to pin point whom really nurtured any school improvement. In addition, in his study of a highly successful high poverty/high minority middle school, Brown (2009) notes, “Continuity in the school leadership role is essential to providing not only direction for the school, but in helping to maintain the focus for continual improvement over time” (p. 100).

The student subgroups that were examined for this study were those that fall under the following NCLB subgroups: White, African-American; Hispanic American; and economically disadvantaged (Free/Reduced Lunch). The researcher’s rationale for selecting schools with at least 20% and as high as 51% F/R Lunch was to satisfy this study’s purpose of exploring principal leadership in successful middle schools with mid-to-high levels of economically disadvantaged students. This criteria distinguished this study from Benkovitz’s (2008) study that focused on principal leadership, using a lens of academic emphasis, in successful schools with economically disadvantaged populations as low as 13%.

Rossell and Hawley (1983) note that the benchmark for critical minority mass for the purpose of effective integration in public schools requires minority students to

comprise 15% to 20% of the total student population. This study easily exceeded that critical mass target for a school to be considered representative of a typical integrated public school: One small achievement gap school had an average critical minority mass of 18% for 2005-2009, and the other had an average critical mass of 29%. In addition, the separate set of two middle schools with larger achievement gaps had comparable critical minority masses. One LG school averaged 26% and the other LG school averaged 32%. Note the averages provided exclude any Asian and/or Pacific Island students.

The researcher conducted an analysis of school test data as part of Phase One of the study in an attempt to discover middle schools with small achievement gaps between economically disadvantaged students, Hispanics and Black students and White students. Note this equity audit stage will be described in greater detail in the data procedures section below. This study narrowed the focus down to a maximum of two middle schools that were also Schools of Distinction, with small achievement gaps when compared to the state averages, and two successful (Schools of Distinction) middle schools that had larger achievement gaps. Yin (2009) states that having multiple cases, as opposed to a single case, is advantageous, as “you don’t have all your eggs in one basket,” and, when you have two or more cases, there are greater analytic benefits such as cross-case synthesis (p. 61). Yin adds,

To begin with, even with two cases, you have the possibility of direct replication. Analytic conclusions independently arising from two cases, as with two experiments, will be more powerful than those coming from a single case (or single experiment) alone. (p. 61)

The researcher purposefully chose two small achievement gap (SG) middle schools to focus on intensively then compare and contrast findings with those from two purposefully selected large gap (LG) schools that were successful by state definition, but

are less successful at narrowing the achievement gap. Glesne (2006) explains, “The logic and power of purposeful sampling...leads to selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (p.34). All four schools were in different school districts that vary geographically in their location across the state. One of the two SG schools was located in the western part of North Carolina while the other SG middle school was in the eastern section of the state. The two LG schools were separated also with one being in the central part of the state and the other being in the eastern section.

As stated previously, the researcher selected the LG schools based on their having comparable demographics to the SG schools and principals that had been at the head of each school for at least four consecutive years. Like the SG schools, the two LG schools had each been recognized as a School of Distinction for at least three of the four school years for the period of 2005-2009. Finally, for Phase Two of this study, the researcher contacted the appropriate central office staff in each school district to secure formal approval to proceed with interviews with school personnel in the four middle schools.

Data Procedures

Phase One: Equity Audits (Quantitative)

Quantitative data were collected, via equity audits, to locate four high performing middle schools led by the same principals for the last four years. The initial sample (all public and traditional calendar 6th - 8th grade middle schools in NC) was purposefully narrowed to a final sample of four schools that met the preset selection criteria for SG and LG schools. Equity audits are useful for identifying patterns of inequity and equity as evident in data relating to student test performance and school policies and structures (Benkovitz, 2008; Muttillio, 2008; Urban, 2008). All of the data required for this phase of

the study were public information accessible through NC School Report Cards, and the Teacher Working Conditions Survey, that are available online through the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). Additional information was available on the websites of individual schools and their school districts' websites.

The data available through NCDPI allowed the researcher to analyze information with respect to student test performance by race, socio-economic status, language proficiency, and disability. Muttillio (2008) states,

Teachers, administrators, school board members, community members, and policy makers may be aware of inequities in various aspects of their schools, but they rarely have systematically examined these areas and then devised ways to eliminate inequities. To achieve social justice and systemic equity and have a more productive orientation, one that is not deficit based or focused on issues external to schools, educators need practical tools in recognizing that there are substantial and persistent patterns of inequity internal to schools (that is, embedded within the many assumptions, beliefs, practices, procedures and policies of schools themselves). (p. 105)

Generally, the four middle schools were comparable in terms of student demographics. The four schools had similar student subgroups with respect to percentage of White, Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students. One LG school (School C) had a considerably lower percentage of White students than the other three schools, but that can be attributed to the school having a high percentage of Asian students. This allowed the other subgroups to remain comparable with the other schools. As discussed in the Literature Review, Asian students consistently outperform all other student subgroups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009b). While one SG school (School B) averaged a slightly smaller percentage of Black students (8% to 10% less) compared to the other schools it did have a considerably higher percentage (51%) of

Free/Reduced Lunch (economically disadvantaged) students. Lastly, all four schools had similar percentages of Hispanic students in their overall student populations.

Table 3.1: End-of-Grade Testing Achievement Data for Small Gap Schools (SGS), Large Gap Schools (LGS) and the state, with Achievement Gap data, for 2005- 2007

| | 2005-2006 | | | | | 2006-2007 | | | | |
|---|-------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|------|
| | Schools: | | | | | Schools: | | | | |
| | SGS | LGS | | NC | SGS | LGS | | NC | | |
| A | B | C | D | | A | B | C | | D | |
| % of each school's Students profic in BOTH Reading & Math | 78.2 | 79.0 | 80.3 | 72.9 | 61.2 | 80.7 | 81.3 | 80.3 | 77.2 | 63.9 |
| % White students Proficient | 83.1 | 81.9 | 93.6 | 81.7 | 73.5 | 85.2 | 83.4 | 94.1 | 86.4 | 75.9 |
| % of Black students profic | 62.0 | 68.1 | 43.9 | 42.6 | 40.1 | 65.0 | 72.7 | 35.9 | 45.9 | 43.5 |
| % Hispanic students profic | 76.2 | 55.3 | 54.9 | 54.3 | 49.3 | 72.0 | 73.7 | 52.9 | 48.6 | 52.5 |
| % F/R Lunch students profic | 61.0 | 71.8 | 45.1 | 47.3 | 45.1 | 70.3 | 74.0 | 44.0 | 53.0 | 48.5 |
| Mean % points gap between White student & 3 other subgroups | 16.7 | 16.9 | 45.6 | 33.6 | 28.9 | 16.1 | 10.0 | 49.8 | 37.2 | 27.7 |
| Met AYP & # of goals met | No 20/21 | No 21/23 | Yes 33/33 | No 17/21 | N/A | Yes 21/21 | Yes 21/21 | No 35/37 | No 17/21 | N/A |

Tables 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 clearly reveal both SG middle schools had consistently (composite scores) maintained a narrower achievement gap versus the two LG schools' gaps among the three subgroups and White students when compared to the state's average composite score. The SG schools averaged a disparity of 17.9 percentage points for the 2005-2006, 2006-2007, 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years. Although White

students in both schools had on average outperformed Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students the state's average achievement gap was considerably

Table 3.2: End-of-Grade Testing Achievement Data for Small Gap Schools (SGS), Large Gap Schools (LGS) and the state, with Achievement Gap data, for 2007-2009

| | 2007-2008 | | | | | 2008-2009 | | | | |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------|
| | Schools: | | | | | Schools: | | | | |
| | SGS | | LGS | | | SGS | | LGS | | |
| | A | B | C | D | NC | A | B | C | D | NC |
| % of each school's Students profic in BOTH Reading & Math | 69.2 | 69.4 | 78.1 | 68.4 | 50.9 | 79.9 | 80.7 | 84.2 | 80.0 | 63.9 |
| % White students Proficient | 73.4 | 73.2 | 92.9 | 77.4 | 64.4 | 85.0 | 84.7 | 95 | 87.0 | 76.7 |
| % of Black Students profic | 57.1 | 45.5 | 34.1 | 35.4 | 29.5 | 67.6 | 51.2 | 52.3 | 54.1 | 43.6 |
| % Hispanic Students profic | 53.8 | 50.0 | 42.0 | 43.9 | 34.6 | 58.3 | 64.1 | 56.3 | 60.5 | 48.9 |
| % F/R Lunch Students profic | 52.8 | 58.6 | 38.5 | 37.5 | 33.3 | 65.5 | 72.5 | 47.6 | 59.3 | 48.3 |
| Mean % points Gap between White students & 3 other Subgroups | 18.9 | 21.9 | 54.7 | 38.5 | 32.0 | 21.2 | 22.1 | 42.9 | 29.0 | 29.8 |
| Met AYP & # of goals met | Yes 17/17 | Yes 25/25 | Yes 37/37 | No 27/29 | | Yes 17/17 | Yes 24/24 | Yes 37/37 | Yes 29/29 | |

Table 3.3: Average Achievement Gap between White and Black, Hispanic and Free/Reduced Lunch Students in Small Gap and Large Gap Schools for 2005-2009

| | SGS | | | LGS | | State Average |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|---------------|
| | A | B | C | D | | |
| Mean % points gap between White students & 3 other subgroups | 18.2 | 17.7 | 48.1 | 34.6 | 29.6 | |

higher at 29.6 percentage points. In contrast, the LG schools had an average of 41.4 percentage points, thus more than twice that of the SG schools. However, a greater percentage of White students in the LG schools typically demonstrated proficiency than in the SG schools which contributes in part to the wider gaps for the LG schools. It is critical to note that while the White students may have outperformed their SG counterparts, traditionally marginalized students (Black, Hispanic and F/R Lunch) in the SG schools performed above average (compared to state and LG schools), which was the primary cause of a narrower achievement gap. It is conceivable that schools could *prima facie* appear to be successful at closing the achievement gap, but the reality is there is no or a limited gap because all students, including White students, are performing poorly. Clearly, the narrower achievement gaps demonstrated by the SG schools in this study cannot be attributed to a scenario where low performing White students, combined with low performing minority students, created an ambiguous achievement gap.

It is important to note that substantial changes to state testing occurred first for mathematics in 2005-06 and then for reading in 2007-08. The NC State Board of Education approved a more rigorous and challenging math curriculum and tests to measure it for the 2005-06 school year (NCDPI, 2006). State Superintendent June Atkinson explains the first changes to the 10 year-old accountability system as necessary “academic rigor to help our students be prepared for the 21st century competitive world” (as cited in NCDPI, ¶ 3). The more challenging curriculum and assessments saw student test performance results, that had been increasing steadily in prior years fall back to a level similar to those in 1996-1997, the first year that the NC ABCs accountability model was introduced.

Furthermore, the academic performance of NC’s public schools fell substantially again in the 2007-08 school year, owed to the introduction of more challenging reading end-of-grade tests for students in grades 3-8. School officials reported that 47% of elementary students failed to pass both math and reading compared to 40% the previous year (Keung Hui & Bonner, 2008). Only 10% of schools had 80% or more of students passing state exams versus 23% of schools in 2006-07. Also, fewer NC schools made AYP with only 31% of NC schools meeting federal NCLB requirements compared to 45% in 2006-2007. Table 3.1 data reveal that, while their student performance dipped in the two school years in which new and more rigorous testing were introduced both SG middle schools still clearly outperformed the state proficiency average for all subgroups and both schools were within the 31% of schools statewide that successfully met AYP in 2007-08. In fact, despite the upheaval related to curriculum and testing, Tables 3.1 and 3.2 both show that the two SG schools had been labeled Schools of Distinction and met AYP for three

Table 3.4: Criteria for ABCs Recognition (Education First NC Report Cards, 2009)

| Designation | Performance: Students at grade level |
|----------------------------|---|
| Honor School of Excellence | At least 90% of students at grade level and met AYP |
| School of Excellence | At least 90% of students at grade level |
| School of Distinction | 80 to 90% of students at grade level |
| School of Progress | 60 to 80% of students at grade level |
| No Recognition | 60 to 100% of students at grade level |
| Priority School | 50 to 60% of students at grade level |
| Low Performing | Less than 50% of students at grade level |

consecutive years. Table 3.4 shows the various labels a NC public school may receive under the ABCs model. Only 6% of NC’s public middle schools achieved School of

Distinction recognition or higher for the 2007-2008 school year, indicating that both the SG schools and LG schools chosen for this study were very high performing academically when utilizing the state's ABCs accountability model. All four schools met AYP for the 2008-2009 school year and were recognized as Schools of Distinction: a designation bestowed by the State Board of Education on only 25% of North Carolina's middle schools that school year (see Table 4.6 in Chapter 4).

Equity audits allow analysis to go beyond just test scores and serve as a practical tool to analyze the breadth of systemic equity and/or systemic inequity in schools (Benkovitz, 2008; Muttillio, 2008; Urban, 2008). This study replicated much of the methodology utilized in the Benkovitz, (2008), Muttillio (2008) and Urban (2008) studies and used four equity indicators adapted from Scott's Equity Audit in 2001: Achievement Equity; Demographic Equity; Teacher Quality Equity and Programmatic Equity. Achievement Equity (student performance on state end-of-grade testing) was the first indicator to be analyzed, as this allowed the researcher to identify two small achievement gap middle schools that satisfied the preset criteria. Using school test performance data, via NCDPI school report cards, four middle schools were separated into a set of two SG schools and a set of two LG schools. The SG schools were those that had achievement gaps that were consistently narrower than the state average for Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students and White Students on North Carolina's End-of-Grade (EOG) testing in Reading and Mathematics across grades 6-8. The NC EOG testing is aligned with NCLB requirements that require schools with any of nine identified subgroups to have 100% membership of each subgroup demonstrate grade-level proficiency in order for a school to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status

(Urban, 2008). The nine student subgroups for AYP are: (1) White; (2) Black; (3) Native American; (4) Hispanic; (5) Multiracial; (6) Asian/Pacific Islander; (7) Free/Reduced Lunch; (8) Students with Disabilities; and (9) Limited English Proficiency. Furthermore, the achievement equity audit utilized disaggregated test data in both the SG and LG middle schools in relation to:

- (a) proficiency rates for both reading and mathematics on state EOG tests; and
- (b) number of AYP goals met.

Following achievement equity audits of both the SG and LG middle schools, the remaining three equity audit measures were utilized with both school sets.

Demographic equity was explored in the SG and LG middle schools through descriptive statistics related to:

- (a) total number of students;
- (b) percentage of F/R Lunch (economically disadvantaged) students;
- (c) number of minority students that took the 6th, 7th and 8th grade EOG tests in reading and mathematics;
- (d) percentage of students with disabilities;
- (e) percentage of students identified with Limited English Proficiency (LEP); and
- (f) school's number of AYP target goals for AYP (as required by NCLB)

Teacher quality is another critical factor in schools being able to achieve systemic equity. According to Palzet (2006), social justice oriented school leaders were successful when they recruited and hired teachers that were capable of achieving their schools' respective mission and vision. This study considered four variables related to teacher quality equity:

- (a) teachers' educational background (percentage with higher/advanced degrees);
- (b) teacher credentials (percentage of fully licensed teachers, percentage of teachers that are National Board Certified, and percentage of classes taught by teachers that are highly qualified);
- (c) teacher turnover (on an annual basis); and
- (d) teacher experience (number of years teaching)

The final part of Phase One entailed a programmatic equity audit. Frequently a disproportionate amount of minority and economically disadvantaged students are over-represented in special education (Dykes, 2005), suspension rates and acts of school violence (Verdugo & Glenn, 2002; Watts & Erevelles, 2004) and under-represented in gifted education (Harris et al., 2004). In addition, minority students are too often placed on less rigorous academic tracks (Oakes, 1995). During Phase One data collection, this study gathered and analyzed programmatic data pertaining to:

- (a) student discipline (number of student suspensions per 100 students and number of acts of violence);
- (b) student access to reading materials (number of library books per student, number of students per computer and level of Internet connectivity);
- (c) resources and facilities

Phase Two: Semi-Structured Interviews (Qualitative)

Following the quantitative phase of this study, which assisted in establishing some awareness of the level of systemic equity in the two sets of middle schools, separate semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principals, assistant principals and teachers in each of the schools. Glesne (2006) explains structured interviewing as a

“...more formal orderly process that you direct to a range of intentions. You may want to learn about that which you cannot see or can no longer see” (p. 80). The principal was selected for an interview as she or he is the unit of analysis for this study. As stated previously, the researcher’s intentions were to explore the school leader’s beliefs, social justice orientation and how she or he supports academic emphasis to pursue academic excellence and systemic equity in her or his school. An assistant principal and at least four teachers in each school were interviewed to get their perceptions of the principal’s leadership beliefs, practices and policies.

The semi-structured interviews were utilized to ensure consistency across the different interviews that were conducted. This consistency made cross case study analysis easier to complete. Patton (2002) noted there are four advantages to using standardized interview questions: (a) interviews are highly focused ensuring interview times is used efficiently; (b) interview instrument can be inspected by those with an interest in the findings; (c) when there are different interviewers variation is reduced; and (d) results analysis is more easily facilitated as responses are easier to locate and compare.

Yin (2009) notes that focused interviews that follow a certain set of questions are advantageous, as it allows interviews to be conducted in a short period of time. Interviews with the school administrators averaged 60 minutes in length and the teachers’ interviews were approximately 40 to 45 minutes in length. Nevertheless, Yin notes such interviews can still be open-ended and have a conversational tone. Indeed, this researcher adapted the interview protocols used in the Benkovitz (2008), Muttillio (2008) and Urban (2008) studies and ask open-ended questions. Twenty-four semi-structured interviews

(four with principals, four with assistant principals and sixteen with teachers: four teachers in each school) were conducted.

Unlike the Benkovitz (2008), Muttillio (2008) and Urban (2008) studies, this study entailed interviews with four teachers in each school and did not include interviews with parents. Benkovitz, Muttillio and Urban, in their respective (but related) studies interviewed two teachers in each school and one parent. At least one elective and/or support teacher was asked to participate in an interview at each school to ensure access to perspectives other than those of core subject teachers. Consequently, three core subject teachers and one support or elective teacher typically made up the four teacher interviewees for each school. The core teachers interviewed in each middle school frequently represented different subject areas and generally taught different grade-levels also. After gaining district and principal approval to conduct research in their schools, the researcher recruited participants via a staff member in each of the four middle schools.

Due to this study focusing on the achievement gap in the areas of math and reading the researcher favored the inclusion of Language Arts and Math teachers in the interviews. Three schools had Language Arts and Math teachers among the teacher interviewees while one school had two core subject teachers, neither who taught Language Arts or Math, and the other two teachers were support/elective teachers.

It is apparent that, in the Benkovitz (2008), Muttillio (2008) and Urban (2008) studies the researchers were spread thinly, with each being responsible for interviewing five people in each of their four schools. Consequently, it could be argued there was inadequate representation in some instances; for example, only two teachers and one parent per school were interviewed. When you have as many as 50 to 60 teachers in a

school, with varying experience and qualifications, interviewing only two teachers does not seem very representative.

Furthermore, the parent selected for each school was chosen because of his/her active involvement in the school. This selection method may have biased the faculty trust component of the study involving the level of trust and support between home and school. When you interview only one parent and that parent is active in the school, it is possible the researcher may encounter a greater likelihood of positive feedback about communication between school and families. For that reason, to get a more broad based faculty perspective, this study interviewed four teachers in each school. This study did not seek to explore the faculty trust component of academic optimism in any of the four schools so parent involvement was not as critical in this study as it was in Urban's (2008) research.

Data Analysis

Coding Schemes

Interviews, with participant consent, were recorded using an audio device and the researcher took notes when possible. Information was coded according to the three main domains nested within academic emphasis, that is, beliefs, practices and policies. Note the interview protocols can be found in the Appendix. The interview questions on all three protocols sought to explore what principals, their assistant principals and teachers considered important with regard to the principals' leadership supporting student achievement and excellence and equity for all students.

Table 3.5: Alignment of Research Questions, Interview Questions & Conceptual Framework Domains.

| Academic Emphasis Component | Principal Interview Protocol Question # | AP Interview Protocol Question # | Teacher Interview Protocol Question # |
|-----------------------------|---|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Policies (Research Q.1) | Questions 6 – 8 | Questions 6-8 | Questions 6-8 |
| Practices (Research Q.2) | Questions 9 – 14 | Questions 9 – 14 | Questions 9 -14 |
| Beliefs (Research Q.3) | Questions 2 – 5 | Questions 2 – 5 | Questions 2 - 5 |

Table 3.5 displays the alignment between the study’s three research questions, the three domains within academic emphasis and the various questions on the three semi-structured interview protocols.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through data triangulation and method triangulation. Triangulation utilizes multiple data sources, multiple data collection methods and/or multiple theoretical approaches (Glesne, 2006). As discussed previously, this study used multiple sources of data: semi-structured interviews, along with school demographic and test performance data.

Method triangulation entails the use of two different methods in an attempt to cross-validate, verify or corroborate findings within a single study (Creswell, 2003). To ensure trustworthiness this study implemented method triangulation by incorporating both quantitative and qualitative research to identify excellence and systemic equity in

schools. Each method helped guard against potential weaknesses and/or bias in the other when reviewing and interpreting results (Benkovitz, 2008; Muttillio, 2008; Urban, 2008).

Figure 3.1: Concurrent Triangulation Strategy (Creswell, 2003, p. 214).

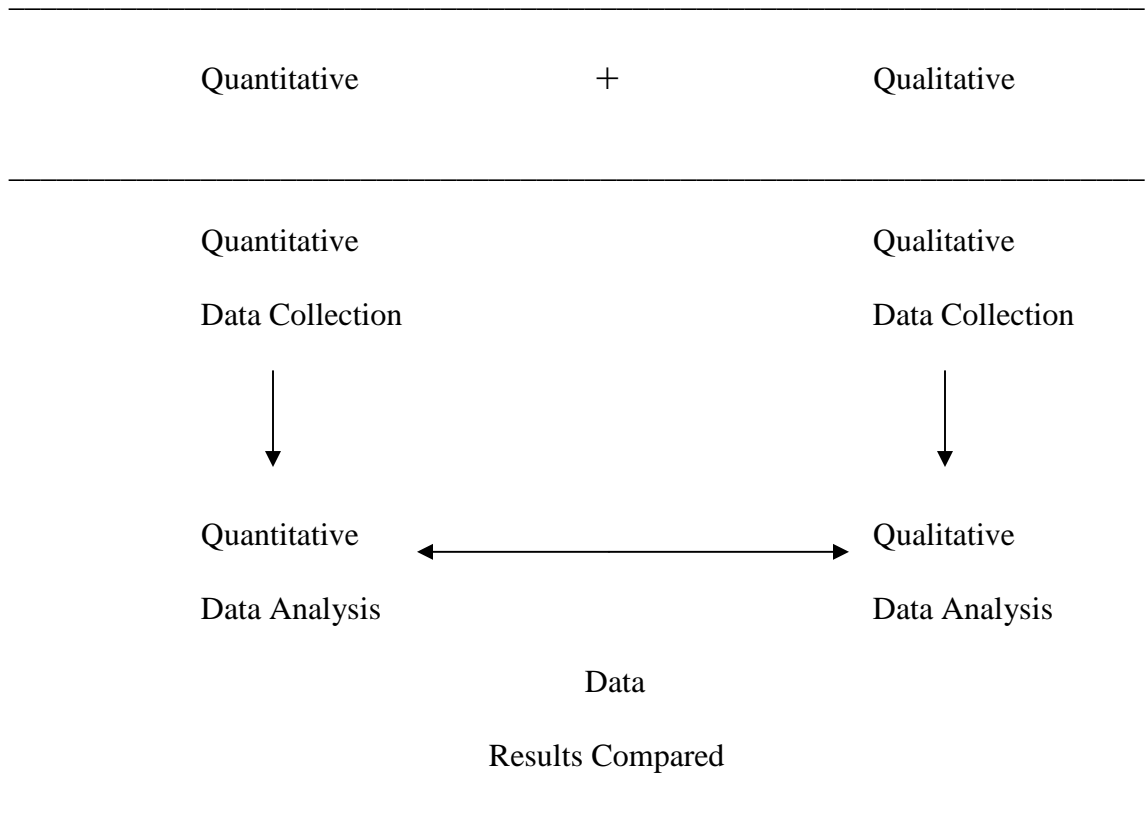


Figure 3.1 displays the advantage of mixed methods research.

Assumptions

Similar to the assumptions that Brown (2009) took into his case study of a high performing/high poverty middle school, this researcher assumes that participants in this study provided accurate information and truthful accounts in response to oral questions. In addition, it has been assumed that any observations of school programs and/or leadership practices were genuine and not orchestrated for the researcher in an attempt to create a more favorable picture of the principals or prevent an accurate portrayal of

school operations. There was the potential for principals and their staff, through their words and/or actions, to exaggerate the success of their policies, practices and beliefs. Yin (2009) warns of “reflexivity” or the interviewee responding to questions in a manner that she or he thinks the interviewer would like to hear. Any such self-reporting issues in this study were offset by the researcher considering if themes reported were consistent across at least two or more of the six interviewees in each school. Glesne (2006) advises, “What a respondent says may be reinforced or undermined by what you learn from other interviewees, as well as from other data sources such as documents and participant observation” (p. 102).

Limitations of the Study

A significant limitation of this study is the inability to generalize findings based on a small sample and the limited sites that were used. However, Yin makes a good point when he queries the strength of some quantitative research: “How can you generalize from a single experiment?” (p. 15). Yin adds that, while case study research makes it difficult to make statistical generalizations, it is still possible to make analytic generalizations (or to expand/generalize theory based on a study’s results).

In addition, this study, through its focus on excellent and equitable schools, did have an inherent limitation. The smaller achievement gap schools could be recognized as excellent and equitable because of a closing gap between White and minority/low income students even though they and other subgroups, for example, students with disabilities, were still lagging behind their White and/or more affluent peers. Moreover, grade-level proficiency was a minimum threshold and students achieving it are not necessarily overly

excelling. Subsequently, excellence and equity for ALL students still needs to be better fulfilled.

A significant limitation was that the researcher entered the four schools knowing in advance which were LG schools and which were SG schools. That knowledge could have potentially skewed the researcher's perspective. Consequently, there was greater risk of the researcher not being truly impartial when collecting and analyzing the SG and LG school data. Positive and negative findings in the schools could have been potentially exaggerated and over-emphasized because of the researcher's pre-existing knowledge of their overall performance.

Moreover, one of the four middle schools was a traditional calendar public school of choice where parents apply and students are selected randomly by lottery. A study of teacher self-reports in the Nashville Public Schools found that whole-school magnets were characterized by higher levels of external and internal community (Hausman and Goldring, 2000). According to Hausman and Goldring, "Typically parents who choose magnet schools are highly satisfied and tend to be involved in their children's education" (p. 107). Consequently, one of the school's in the study may have had many students who had involved and satisfied parents supporting them given its nature as a school of choice.

Finally, another limitation was district context. The four schools were from four different school districts across the state. The success of each of the schools could have been attributed in part to district expenditure and/or superintendent policies, practices and beliefs. Great principals and their high expectations could have potentially been hampered or enhanced depending on the level of support from the community and central office within their school district.

Significance

Despite some apparent limitations, this study sought to reveal why some schools excel and are more equitable than others. In particular, there was the opportunity to explore the role of how principals enable their schools, with diverse student populations, to excel and how they support systemic equity. Several studies and critics have linked increased efforts to close the achievement gap to increased inequity for historically marginalized children (Castagno, 2008; Emery & Ohanian, 2004; Lupton, 2005; Smyth, 2008). It was possible the study could have identified adverse consequences attached to the pursuit of excellence, that is, perhaps excellence was achieved at the expense of equity for disadvantaged students owed to an overemphasis on standardized lessons and teaching to the test. The researcher envisaged, and found, that this study ultimately uncovered descriptive and innovative policies and practices that other educational leaders who read this study will be able to reflect on and adopt, or avoid, in their own schools to facilitate more equitable schools characterized by increased student achievement and a positive school culture.

IV. EQUITY AUDIT: QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Audit Findings

Phase One of this study entailed an equity audit of both the LG schools and SG schools with a focus on programmatic issues, teacher quality and student achievement. Also, school demographics were analyzed and compared. According to Skrla, Garcia, Scheurich and Nolly (2002), the three dimensions that enable an educational equity profile are inextricably linked in schools. Consequently, when one or both of the first two dimensions are inequitable then student achievement can be adversely affected.

Figure 4.1: Relationship between the Three Dimensions of Educational Equity

| | | | | |
|---------------------------|---|------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Teacher Quality Equity | + | Programmatic Equity | = | Achievement Equity |
|---------------------------|---|------------------------|---|-----------------------|

This equity audit sought to look at each of the three dimensions and determine the level of parity between the two sets of middle schools purposefully selected for this study. Indeed, the data analyzed in this audit generally display parity across teacher quality and school programs/resources in both sets of schools, yet there is a wide discrepancy between the two sets of schools with regard to the academic achievement of white students versus the three critical subgroups chosen for this study (Hispanic, Black and economically disadvantaged).

Audit of Demographics in Large Gap Schools and Small Gap Schools

Demographic data in Table 4.1 reveal a discrepancy in school size with a difference of 239 students enrolled on average in the two sets of schools during the four school year period of 2005-2009. The LG schools were larger with an average of 777

Table 4.1: Demographic Data for Large Gap Schools (LGS) and Small Gap Schools (SGS) –Average data set for 2005-2009

| | # of students | # of tests taken by 6-8 students | % of Minority students (Excl. Asians & Am. Ind) | % of F/R students | % of LEP students | % of students with disabilities | # of AYP Goals | % of AYP Goals met |
|------------|---------------|----------------------------------|---|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| LGS | 777 | 765 | 29.8% | 26.2% | 6.5% | 9.9% | 30.5 | 93.8% |
| Range | 665-900 | 649-883 | 26-33 | 24-32 | 3-11 | 8-11 | 21-37 | 81-100 |
| SGS | 539 | 534 | 23.9% | 34.4% | 3.7% | 10.5% | 21.1 | 98.3% |
| Range | 488-570 | 478-579 | 19-32 | 21-51 | 3-4 | 6-16 | 17-25 | 91-100 |
| State | 665 | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA |
| Range | 652-679 | | | | | | | |

students versus 539 in the SG schools. This concern is offset by data in Table 4.3 that show that the average class size in both schools has been identical at 21.2 students per class for the four year period: 2005-2009. Moreover, both sets of schools were not excessively below or above the state average of 665 students per school.

Generally, both SG schools and LG schools were similar with regard to the percentage of minority, limited English proficiency, and students with disabilities making up their total student populations. It should be noted that the SG schools did record a noticeably higher percentage of economically disadvantaged (Free/Reduced Lunch) students with an average of 34.4% which was 8.2 percentage points higher than the 26.2% for the LG schools. This discrepancy is largely owed to one of the SG schools

having a Free/Reduced Lunch population hovering around 44% for the four school year period. The three remaining schools were comparable with their percentage of economically disadvantaged students hovering around 25%. If one of the LG schools had been disproportionately higher in percentage of disadvantaged students, then this may

Table 4.2: Teacher Quality Data for Large Gap Schools (LGS) and Small Gap Schools (SGS) – Average data set for 2005-2009

| | # of teachers | % of fully licensed teachers | % of classes taught by highly qual | % of teachers with advance degree | % of teachers with national board cert | % of teachers with 0-3 years exper | % of teachers with 4-10 years exper | % of teachers with 10+ years exper | % of teachers that turnover each year |
|------------|---------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| LGS | 57.6 | 97.5% | 96.3% | 34% | 20.9% | 20.3% | 31.6% | 48% | 14.9% |
| Range | 56-58 | 95-100 | 92-100 | 27-40 | 19-25 | 13-29 | 21-45 | 36-61 | 6-27 |
| SGS | 37.6 | 95% | 97.1% | 35% | 19.5% | 23.3% | 32% | 44.5% | 16.3% |
| Range | 32-44 | 91-100 | 88-100 | 22-48 | 16-24 | 9-47 | 19-42 | 22-71 | 5-29 |
| State | 46.5 | 89.5% | 95.3% | 24% | 9% | 24% | 30% | 46% | 19% |

have been a barrier to validity. However, it is one of the SG schools with the predicament of a disproportionate amount of F/R lunch students, yet it is high performing and has a narrower achievement gap for three critical subgroups than the state average and this study’s LG schools (with fewer F/R Lunch students). Typically, the LG schools had more AYP target goals to meet, but it is important to note that all four schools met those goals for the last school year considered for this study: 2008-2009.

Audit of Teacher Quality in Large Gap Schools and Small Gap Schools

According to Scheurich and Skrla (2003), teacher quality can be a prime determinant of academic success for students. Teacher quality is impacted by both teaching experience and level of education of the teacher. Consequently, it is assumed that the more experience and the higher the level of education that a teacher has, the more

effective she/he is likely to be in the classroom. Table 4.2 indicates that both sets of schools, on average, were very similar with the number of teachers holding advanced degrees, National Board Certification, and across the various categories for years of experience. Both the LG schools and the SG schools had comparable numbers of inexperienced and experienced teachers.

Teacher turnover is a critical issue, as both recruitment and retention of teachers is an ongoing national and state challenge. In North Carolina (NC), the state colleges graduate approximately 3,000 teachers each year, yet the demand for teachers statewide is as high as 20,000 (Barnett, 2008). In NC teachers are needed each year due to population growth and an increasing number of teachers becoming eligible for retirement. In fact, at present, 60% of all new teachers to the Wake County Public School System (one of the largest school districts in NC) come from out-of-state.

Nationally, according to the National Education Association (as cited in Wake Education Partnership, 2008), approximately 50% of teachers leave their jobs within the first five years and about 33% will leave within their first three years of teaching. Nationally, the teacher turnover rate averages around 16%. Table 4.2 shows that the turnover rate for NC has averaged 19% for the period of 2005-2009.

High teacher turnover is a major issue for school systems, as it exposes students to inexperienced teachers and requires major expenditure in recruitment efforts at a time when there is a global, national and state shortage of teachers in certain areas (mathematics, science, special education and languages) and when teacher retention is critical. Hill and Gillette (2005), both William Patterson University education professors, state, "A serious situation has developed in the United States...where students who need

the best prepared, most experienced, and most committed teachers are being taught by the least prepared teachers, many of whom are teaching out of certification area” (p.42). Both the LG schools (96.3%) and SG schools (97.1%) had similar high percentages of classes taught by highly qualified teachers between 2005-2009. While teacher turnover for both schools was comparable, with the SG schools averaging 14.9% and the LG schools slightly more at an average of 16.3%.

Audit of Programmatic Issues in Large Gap Schools and Small Gap Schools

As seen in Table 4.1, both sets of schools averaged approximately 10% of their students being designated as students with disabilities. National experts suggest that 10-12% is a reasonable percentage of a school’s population to be designated as in need of special education services (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). Anything above 12% indicates overassignment of students to special education, and percentages below 10% suggest underassignment, meaning students in need are perhaps not receiving services.

In addition, programmatic issues extend beyond special education services and include access to technology, books, student attendance and discipline. Table 4.3 reveals that the number of students per internet connection and instructional computer was similar, with the SG schools having a slight resource advantage in this area. However, the SG schools did have a more clear advantage with respect to number of library books per student with an average of 17.6 books versus 12.8 books per LG school student.

The daily student attendance in both sets of schools in this study was the same as the state average of 95%. Also, as mentioned previously, both the LG and SG schools were identical in their average class size for the 2005-2009 school years. With an average class size of 21.2 students, both sets of schools were slightly higher than the state average

of 20.7 students per class. Discipline issues and school safety are reflected by the number of student out-of-school suspensions, both short-term (10 days or less) and long-term (greater than 10 days) per 100 students and number of acts of violence at the school,

Table 4.3: Programmatic Data for Large Gap Schools (LGS) and Small Gap Schools (SGS) – Average data set for 2005-2009

| | Average class size | # of acts of violence | # of student suspensions per 100 students | # of books per student | # of students per instruct computer | # of students per internet connection | % of students attending sch each day |
|------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---|------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| LGS | 21.2 | .50 | 14.1 | 12.8 | 3.2 | 3.1 | 95.8% |
| Range | 18-25.3 | 0-2 | 1-27 | 8.66-22.01 | 1.6-5.4 | 1.6-4.9 | 94-97 |
| SGS | 21.2 | .25 | 4.9 | 17.6 | 2.6 | 2.2 | 95.9% |
| Range | 20.7-22.6 | 0-1 | 1-8 | 16.2-18.78 | 2.1-2.9 | 2-2.9 | 95-97 |
| State | 20.7 | 1.0 | N/A | 18.2 | 3.1 | 3.1 | 95.3% |

Table 4.4: Teacher Working Conditions Survey Data for Large Gap Schools (LGS) and Small Gap Schools (SGS) – Average data set for 2006 & 2008

| | # of surveys completed | % of Teachers that Responded | Time (Opportunity to plan & collaborate) | Facilities & Resources | Empowerment/ Decision-making | Leadership | Professional Development |
|------------|------------------------|------------------------------|--|------------------------|------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|
| LGS | 49 | 75.9% | 3.1 | 3.7 | 3.25 | 3.43 | 3.39 |
| Range | 33-59 | 52.4-91.0 | 2.8-3.5 | 3.2-4.2 | 3.0-3.4 | 2.9-3.9 | 3.2-3.5 |
| SGS | 36 | 81.6% | 3.6 | 4.3 | 3.48 | 4.02 | 3.63 |
| Range | 24-52 | 50-100 | 3.4-3.9 | 3.9-4.6 | 2.9-3.8 | 3.6-4.4 | 3.2-3.8 |
| State | N/A | 76.3% | 3.2 | 3.8 | 3.28 | 3.71 | 3.50 |

which includes school campus, bus stops, school buses and school sponsored events. The LG schools had a considerably higher number of students suspensions per 100 students at 14.1% compared to 4.9% for the SG schools. Both the LG schools and the SG schools averaged less than one act of school violence per hundred students between 2005-2009.

Another source for assessing programmatic equity is the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions (TWC) Survey. Since 2002, the state has surveyed teachers statewide every two years to gauge their level of satisfaction with working conditions across five domains considered essential to teacher retention and student success: (a) Time; (b) Facilities and Resources; (c) Empowerment; (d) Leadership; and (e) Professional Development (Maddock, 2009). The number of questions for each of the five domains varies between 5-10 questions each, and the results in Table 4.4 represent the averages for each domain after using a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest average score and 5 being the highest score. The 2006 TWC survey was completed voluntarily by 42,209 educators in North Carolina, and the number of respondents grew to 104,000 educators for the 2008 survey.

Both sets of schools had percentages of teachers responding to the TWC survey that mirrored or exceeded the state average of 76.3% for 2006 and 2008. However, the SG schools had more teachers responding (81.6%) than the LG schools (75.9%). The LG schools averaged slightly lower than the state average on all five domains while the SG schools consistently outperformed the state average. The two domains that had the largest gap between the LG schools' average and the state average were Leadership and Professional Development. Interestingly, the SG schools had a strong average of 4.02 for the Leadership domain and exceeded the state average for Professional Development.

Audit of Achievement in Large Gap (LG) Schools and Small Gap (SG) Schools

According to Scott (2001), achievement equity entails comparably high student achievement for all recognized groups of learners when data are disaggregated and analyzed. Table 4.5 shows both the LG schools and SG schools outperformed the state

averages for percentage of Black, Hispanic, Free/Reduced Lunch, Limited English

Proficiency (LEP) and disabled students proficient in both reading and mathematics

Table 4.5: Achievement Equity Data for Large Gap Schools (LGS) and Small Gap Schools (SGS) – Average data set for 2005-2009

| | % of Black Students Profic in Read & Math | % of Hispanic Students Profic in Read & Math | % of F/R Students Profic in Read & Math | % of LEP Students Profic in Read & Math | % of students with disabilities Profic in R & M | % points difference from state average for F/R students | % points difference from state average for Black/Hisp |
|------------|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| LGS | 43.0% | 51.7% | 46.5% | 41.1% | 38.2% | 2.7 | 4.6 |
| Range | 34.1-54.1 | 42-60.5 | 37.5-59.3 | 27.8-51 | 20.3-52.3 | N/A | N/A |
| SGS | 61.2% | 62.9% | 65.8% | 49.7% | 41.2% | 22.0 | 19.3 |
| Range | 45.5-72.7 | 50-76.2 | 52.8-74 | 29.4-68 | 9.7-64.2 | N/A | N/A |
| State | 39.2% | 46.3% | 43.8% | 31.9% | 29.5% | N/A | N/A |

Table 4.6: Achievement Equity Data: NC ABCs Status for 2005-2009

| | Schools | | | | % of state mid sch with Sch of Dist Recognition | | |
|---------|-------------|-----|----------------|-------------|---|-----------------|-----|
| | A | SGS | B | C | LGS | D | |
| 2005-06 | Sch of Dist | | No Recognition | Sch of Dist | | Sch of Dist | 12% |
| 2006-07 | Sch of Dist | | Sch of Dist | Sch of Dist | | Sch of Dist | 20% |
| 2007-08 | Sch of Dist | | Sch of Dist | Sch of Dist | | Sch of Progress | 6% |
| 2008-09 | Sch of Dist | | Sch of Dist | Sch of Dist | | Sch of Dist | 25% |

for the 2005-2009 school years. However, the SG schools had conspicuously higher percentages of Black, Hispanic and F/R Lunch students proficient in both reading and mathematics when compared to the state and LG school averages. This narrower achievement gap for the three critical subgroups is well exemplified by Table 4.5, where it indicates that the LG schools averaged 2.7% more Free/Reduced Lunch students proficient than the state average, yet the SG schools averaged an impressive 22% more students proficient than the state average. In addition, the LG schools had 4.6% more Black and Hispanic students proficient in reading and mathematics than the state average, yet the SG schools outperformed the state average by 19.3%. Consequently, there is a clear difference in the performance of the SG schools and LG schools in narrowing the achievement gap for certain subgroups when compared to the state average over four school years (2005-2009).

Finally, it appears that School A, a SG school, has been exceptionally successful under NC's ABCs accountability program earning School of Distinction status for four consecutive school years between 2005-2009. School B, the second SG school, has been designated a School of Distinction for the last three consecutive school years during the same four year period. School B did receive "No Recognition" for the 2005-2006 school year but has seen considerable success under ABCs since that school year. School C, a LG school, has been a School of Distinction for four straight years also. School D, the other LG school, regressed in the 2007-2008 school year when it temporarily lost School of Distinction status and was designated a School of Progress; however, only 6% of NC middle schools received School of Distinction status that year, while that number increased to 25% in 2008-2009.

Conclusion

The quantitative phase of this study that utilized an equity audit to determine levels of educational equity across external variables, such as demographic data, and internal factors, such as teacher quality and programmatic issues, while very insightful, supported the need for further analysis. The data revealed that generally the two sets of schools are comparable in terms of student demographics, teacher quality, school programs and resources, yet very different with respect to student achievement. SG Schools A and B consistently had much narrower achievement gaps for Hispanic, Black and Free/Reduced Lunch students than both the state average and LG Schools C and D. The performance of SG schools A and B was particularly noteworthy as LG Schools C and D at first glance were high performing schools (as judged by ABCs and AYP results); however, deeper analysis of data demonstrated that student achievement was considerably more equitable for certain groups of learners in SG Schools A and B as opposed to LG Schools C and D.

There are commonalities across demographics, teacher quality and programmatic between the LG and SG schools, yet wide discrepancies in achievement equity raised more questions than answers. Why did the SG schools consistently have narrower achievement gaps for certain subgroups despite operating with similar teacher turnover, resources, students and class sizes when compared to the LG schools? How were the principals' leadership policies, practices and beliefs compare similar and/or different in the LG and SG schools? Do all four schools promote and actively pursue excellence and equity for all students?

Indeed, the equity audit established, more or less, a level playing field among the four schools, which supported the need for further exploration with a focus on the principals' leadership and how they support excellence and equity. Recent research has established that principal leadership is linked to student achievement (Johnson, 2007; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2003; Towns, Cole-Henderson, & Serpell, 2001). In addition, studies have found student achievement can be linked to principal leadership that is social justice oriented (McKenzie, 2008; Palzet, 2006; Trotter 2007). For Scheurich and Skrla (2003), principal leadership that promotes excellence and equity in schools requires abandoning deficit thinking and adopting an assets-orientation view toward all students. These principals encourage their staff to share the same belief, that is, all students can succeed regardless of culture and socio-economic status and, in many cases, such differences, or perceived barriers, can be strengths and celebrated. Phase Two of this study attempted to address the questions that remain unanswered following the equity audit by exploring the leadership behaviors and actions (policies, practices and beliefs) of the principals in the LG schools and SG schools and how they may or may not support student achievement for all students.

V. QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

This chapter provides narratives for each of the four schools before using a lens of Academic Emphasis to identify similar policies, practices and beliefs demonstrated by the principals across the four high performing middle schools. According to Goddard, Sweetland and Hoy (2000), “Academic emphasis is the extent to which the school is driven by a quest for academic excellence” (p. 686). Finally, there is a comparison of differences in policies, practices and beliefs between the SG schools and the LG schools.

Methodology

Data Collection Methods

Data for the qualitative phase of this study was gathered through six interviews in each of the four schools. The principal, an assistant principal and four teachers were interviewed in each school giving a total of 24 interviews. Typically, three teachers in each school represented core subjects on different grade-levels and the fourth teacher was in a specialist or support role, for example, Music, Spanish, English as a Second Language, Physical Education, and so on. Interviews with the principals were typically 50-60 minutes in length while the interviews with the teachers were generally 40-45 minutes in length. All interviews occurred in private locations within each school and participants agreed to be audio-taped. One participant (not a principal) was unexpectedly unavailable at the time of interviews and submitted written responses, via an email attachment, to the research questions.

Data Analysis

Following transcription of the interviews, the available data were analyzed for emerging themes in each school. For this qualitative study, analyzing the information to identify emerging “themes” in each of the schools was necessary before any comparison of similarities and differences in principal leadership beliefs, policies, and programs could be undertaken. Next, common themes that emerged across the schools were identified then reduced to themes relevant to the main research question and guiding research questions for this study. Finally, using the lens of Academic Emphasis, an additional list of the most pertinent themes was created and commonalities among the SG then the LG schools were identified. This chapter will reveal the differences and commonalities across the schools in terms of the principals’ policies, practices and beliefs that support student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap.

Emergent Themes for Schools

First Large Gap School

The most striking theme to emerge in this school was that the principal was confident and direct in his leadership style. When students are identified as failing early in the year, the principal would meet individually with students to share his expectations before approaching teachers to ask them how they will adjust their instruction to better meet the needs of failing students. Despite this accountability measure causing some minor resentment and alarm among teachers, it emerged that the principal retained staff through his personable and honest approach in dealing with teachers. Teachers would describe the principal as a hands-on leader with clear expectations, but flexible when

teachers can make a case for certain resources and/or changes. The principal made himself available to staff as much as possible and was not confined to his office.

Ironically, the principal's attempts to hold staff and students accountable were often offset by a perception of inconsistent follow through in other areas. Interviewees reported that certain committees, including an equity committee, met irregularly, walkthrough data were collected regularly, but the results were rarely shared with teachers and monitoring of the PLCs' meeting minutes and assessments had been inconsistent in the past.

Decision making existed at various levels throughout this LG school. A School Improvement Team was very representative as all staff, along with some parents, served on the main body and/or subcommittees. In addition, a group consisting of administration, counselors, and other support staff met once a week to discuss concerns about, and tertiary level interventions for, specific students. This group was consistently recognized by interviewees as the main decision making body in the school and no regular classroom teachers attended meetings. The principal was perceived as being very focused on the affective domain as he saw addressing the social, developmental and emotional growth of middle school students as critical to the students' success in their school.

The school enjoyed considerable district, community and Parent Teacher Association (PTA) support. The local school district provided transportation for students that stayed for a well coordinated after-school academic support program. In addition, the school district collaborated with a local community organization to support students with their school work when they were out-of-school suspended. College students and

community members visited the school to act as mentors for students. Finally, the PTA was well funded and was generous in providing resources for staff and students.

The school had received exemplary recognition by the state for its Positive Behavior Support (PBS) program. The staff perceived administration as being consistent with dealing with discipline issues and discipline data were shared regularly with staff. In contrast, staff analysis of achievement data was seen as being in its infancy: Math teachers were making good progress with using data to improve instruction, but other subject area teachers were having some difficulty getting on board.

The school had a large number of academically gifted (AG) students who took all four core classes together, but attended elective classes with non-AG peers. In addition, the school had a multi-cultural focus and staff had been very innovative, and well supported by the principal, in attaining grants to fund student exchange opportunities abroad for under-privileged students.

The principal and staff acknowledged that celebration and recognition of staff, and to a lesser extent students' successes, during the school year was an area needing improvement. A staff survey had revealed this concern and it had been discussed in staff meetings.

Second Large Gap School

Teachers in the other LG school consistently described their principal as a high energy cheerleader that is particularly adept at public relations. One teacher said that the principal liked and sought publicity. Nevertheless, the common perception was that the principal sought such attention to aid the reputation of her school in the community and further develop school pride.

The principal was very confident, articulate and straight-talking in describing her leadership experiences in the past and present. In fact, the principal who had been a lead administrator in a challenging urban school described herself as, “Good in the hood.” Moreover, the principal shared that she is very candid in dealing with ineffective teachers and helping them to pursue alternative options outside the classroom or at least outside her school.

All the teachers communicated that they felt supported by their principal when it comes to dealing with parents upset about classroom discipline and/or student work issues. So long as teachers had communicated their expectations in advance, then they could always be sure of her support, for example, one teacher shared that late work is not accepted from students and the principal supports that policy as the teacher had established this expectation from the start of the school year.

Furthermore, the principal, in conjunction with one of her two assistant principals had been very proactive in making many parents feel very welcome and involved in the daily life of the school. Parents volunteered to operate school stores on weekday mornings, other parents volunteered for a program that had received significant outside recognition and entailed them coming in for at least one entire day and assisting with inside and outside security patrols, lunch duty and helping in classrooms.

Several teachers did share that there had been a level of inconsistency in leadership practices and policies within their school. For example, one teacher said that expectations pertaining to staff attire and arrival times for work or duties were loosely enforced. While at least three teachers reported that there is a level of inconsistency with how discipline was handled, that is, different consequences were possible subject to

which administrator handled the referral(s). Similarly, some teachers reported seeing administration on a regular basis in their hallways and/or classrooms while others reported almost never seeing administration in their classrooms or hallways. However, it should be noted that in the most current school year, outside the last four that were analyzed in the quantitative phase of this study, the population of this school had grown by approximately 150 students.

With respect to decision making, the main body was the School Improvement Team, which consisted of teachers, administration and some parents. However, some teachers shared that they perceived the SIT as simply a place for staff to air grievances and administration had to use valuable time addressing them. The principal acknowledged that she had had to make major decisions over the summer and she would consult her “generals” or teacher leaders.

A separate but related concern that some teachers had was that the school had had a different master schedule for several consecutive years now and most recently the adopted master schedule was different from that proposed by the SIT. The principal, faced with overcrowding, was forced to adjust the master schedule to cope better with additional students. The principal acknowledged that the size of the school had made recognition ceremonies for students difficult owed to limited space. However, students were recognized on a monthly basis for their behavior and effort. At the end of the school year the principal personally recognized students that had shown the most academic growth. Little mention was made of specific instances where staff were publicly recognized for their efforts.

Despite, some recent overcrowding and concerns with inconsistent follow through in certain areas by administration, a majority of the teachers shared that the school had a strong and proud culture, which the principal had had a major part in establishing and sustaining. Teachers stated that the principal would attend recruiting sessions for rising 6th grade students and by the time she was done talking to them the parents and students believed they were the “luckiest people in the world” to have the opportunity to attend the school. Also, the students and staff frequently used an endearing nickname to refer to their school. A 6th grade team wore t-shirts conveying that second place was not acceptable. Finally, the school’s strong and proud culture was evident in the principal’s support for her minority students. For example, some of the staff referred to the principal’s, and some parents’ efforts, which had been considerable, to retain minority students that had been reassigned recently to schools closer to their neighborhoods.

First Small Gap School

What perhaps was most interesting in this school was that the principal in this school presented himself, and was described by others, as having a modest persona, being self-critical at times, and rarely content with the status quo even when the school’s performance was solid. On more than one occasion, the principal acknowledged weaknesses and the need to improve, for example, he shared he could do better with sharing decision making, and that he was a good principal, but he wanted to be great and was constantly seeking to learn and grow as a leader. Moreover, one staff member reported the principal as never happy with the status quo and wanting their school to be the highest performing school in the state.

Another standout theme that emerged in this school was the principal's use of his two assistant principals. One assistant principal was charged with handling the majority of the discipline while the other assistant principal, a former principal, handled curriculum and instruction. Both assistant principals were viewed as highly competent by all staff members interviewed.

With discipline and curriculum and instruction being handled by his assistant principals, the principal was able to be highly visible around the school. The principal would visit classrooms informally and/or formally on a daily basis. During transition times the principal was frequently in hallways talking with students and preventing discipline problems by being visible. In addition, the principal expected teachers to be visible in their doorways and near restrooms during transition times, again in an attempt to prevent fights or other discipline infractions.

Staff described administration as being very consistent and compassionate in dealing with discipline. Both the principal and assistant principal took time to discuss infractions with students and would try to get to the root of problems. They were described as non-confrontational in their approach to dealing with students. Indeed, the principal identified the need for him to model the behavior he expected of staff and students and for that reason he treated students with respect. Staff reported that students in turn felt that teachers and administration were not out to "get them" and responded appropriately to the school's policies, procedures and expectations that were repeatedly reinforced.

Interestingly, this school did not have an active PTA. The principal preferred to protect his teachers from the additional work involved with fundraising activities. Also,

the principal felt that parents can have ulterior motives for wanting to be involved in schools and by not having a PTA the staff were again protected from such pressures and/or meddling. This stance may be helped by the fact that teachers and administration reported considerable support from the local school district and county commissioners. The school was well resourced with instructional technology aids and had a modern building that was only five to six years old at the time of the interviews (early 2010). The school had three school counselors, which was impressive given that the school had less than 600 students. Its principal reported middle schools in many surrounding districts had only two counselors despite having 800 plus students. In addition, the principal reported that he secured sufficient funds for miscellaneous spending through concession stands at athletic events and holding four dances during the school year.

There was considerable accountability in place in this school. The principal was highly visible and visited classrooms frequently. The curriculum and instruction assistant principal required lesson plans to be submitted to her by all teachers every Monday. Study hall existed for students that did not complete all required assignments. All students had recently started to plan and monitor their academic progress in math and reading via goal sheets that the curriculum and instruction assistant principal compiled and then distributed for teachers and students to use. Finally, report cards were sent home every six weeks as opposed to quarterly.

Interestingly, the principal acknowledged that he liked to be in charge and saw himself as allowing teachers to focus on their students and classrooms while he addressed school-wide issues. The school did not have a leadership team of any kind, aside from the three administrators. There was a School Improvement Team, but according to staff

members, after establishing or adjusting the School Improvement Plan each year the team rarely met and most decision making was made by the principal although he would often consult staff first. The principal acknowledged that this is an area he could improve in.

The school's schedule was well planned and had a strong academic focus while offering a variety of opportunities for students. As stated previously, students that fall behind with work could go to a study hall class owed to an innovative use of an alternative classroom and teacher. Students took elective classes that operate in a wheel so that they rotate every six weeks. Mid-year the students for six weeks got to choose and participate in a variety of mini-courses that operate in the elective wheel and included broadcasting, knitting, bridge-building, exercise, and so on. During the last six weeks students that were below grade-level were provided the opportunity to opt out of their regular wheel elective classes and attend review classes in Math and Language Arts in preparation for end-of-grade standardized testing. According to the AP, up to 50% of core classroom teachers give up their planning time for the six weeks leading up to EOGs to host students during electives. Students could also request schedule changes, but first they had to put their requests in writing and give a strong rationale for the requested change, then submit it to one of the three counselors for consideration.

Second Small Gap School

Upon visiting this school, what struck the researcher immediately, were the students in uniform. In fact, several teachers viewed the school's requirement of school uniforms as having a critical role in the success of the school as they felt that the strict dress code circumvented many discipline issues. Teachers did not have to lose

instructional time haggling with students in class for wearing oversized and loose jeans or jumpers with hoods.

The school's ability to enforce such a dress code was based on it being a school of choice or a school that draws students randomly through a lottery each year. Despite being a school of choice, staff shared in their interviews that the student population reflects the diversity of the county in which it lies. It should be noted that the equity audit discussed in Chapter 4 of this paper found the student subgroups in this school to be comparable in size (as a percentage of total population) to the three other middle schools in this research study. Moreover, staff reported the school did not get additional resources from the school district, that is, it is allotted staff and other resources in the same manner as other local public schools.

Another key finding to emerge in this school was that the principal was a modest and compassionate leader that prides herself on being non-confrontational, visible and committed first to the students, and then staff and school. The principal shared that she actually moved staff's mailboxes so that they were required to pass her office in order to allow them to access their boxes. She did this so that she was more accessible and to help decrease any line of separation between staff and administration that may have existed before she became principal. Also, she made a conscious effort to be visible around the school. One teacher described the principal as a "gentle giant" that had high expectations and was consistent, but in a gentler, kinder way. The principal herself said that she was a non-confrontational leader and tried to avoid conflict. Instead, she preferred to sit down and have a conversation about an issue and she was never one to state that she was the boss and that things must be done her preferred way. When asked about the principal's

main focus, both the principal and many of the teachers, responded that first it is “the children” having high expectations for them and ensuring their success.

High expectations were evident in this SG school in a variety of ways. Students that did not complete course work were held accountable directly by administration: The assistant principal ran a study hall for students to complete homework and assignments. Teachers reported a solid school-wide discipline framework was in place that included both consequences and incentives. Staff perceived the administration’s (principal and assistant principal) consistent implementation of discipline consequences and high expectations as preventing a high number of issues. Progress reports were issued every three weeks rather than quarterly. According to the principal, new sixth grade students that entered the school were taken to the school’s cafeteria and shown the handprints of the school’s first sixth grade students, who were probably completing college in 2010, and told they would be held to even higher behavioral and academic expectations.

What is more, the principal held high expectations for instruction. The principal strongly believed that instruction should be rigorous and relevant. Teachers collaborated and implemented interdisciplinary units across the three grade levels. Eighth grade teachers taught three interdisciplinary units that lasted three weeks each while the seventh and sixth grades taught two interdisciplinary units. Both the principal and assistant principal attended each grade-level teams’ meetings held each week. The principal constantly was looking at how to improve and address weaknesses, and she was willing to think outside of the box to move the school forward. The principal utilized data in a variety of ways, but admitted her oversight of the district’s benchmark testing for math

and language arts within the school had not been rigorous as she perceived it as more testing on top of testing.

Most major decisions took place once a month at Leadership Team meetings. The Leadership Team also doubled as the School Improvement Team and included a teacher from each grade-level, two elective teachers, an Academically Gifted teacher, administration and parent representatives. A teacher shared that decisions were more collaborative in nature rather than consultative and very few decisions were not made by the team.

The school enjoyed solid parent, community and district support. There was an active PTA with a nucleus of 15-20 parents that were especially involved in the life of the school. Staff had been innovative in accessing community resources by writing and gaining several grants that had helped equip the school with additional technology resources. The principal reported the school district had been excellent in setting a vision for the district and communicating it to principals. In addition, the district had equipped the school with some of the latest instructional technology aids and they had access to a technology instructor that served three local schools and trained staff and students in the use of technology in the classroom.

Student and staff recognition occurred regularly in this school. Two students per grade level are recognized each month for good behavior and/or academics. Similarly, teachers could nominate colleagues for recognition and a small treat at monthly faculty meetings. The principal sent out bulletins via email once a week and included compliments for teachers that were doing good things in the school building.

Emergent Themes Common Across the LG and SG Middle Schools

Despite differences in performance with respect to raising the performance of certain student subgroups, the four middle schools in this research study had been exceptionally successful on a consistent basis according to state and federal accountability measures. All four schools had been recognized as a North Carolina School of Distinction at least three of the four years in the period of 2005-2009 (putting them consistently in the top 25% of the state's middle schools) and met AYP in the most recent school year analyzed in this study (2008-2009). Consequently, the principals' leadership policies, practices and beliefs common to all four schools will be discussed.

Figure 5.1: Emergent Themes Common Across the LG and SG Schools

| |
|---|
| <h3>Principals' Leadership Policies, Practices and Beliefs Common Across the Four Middle Schools</h3> |
|---|

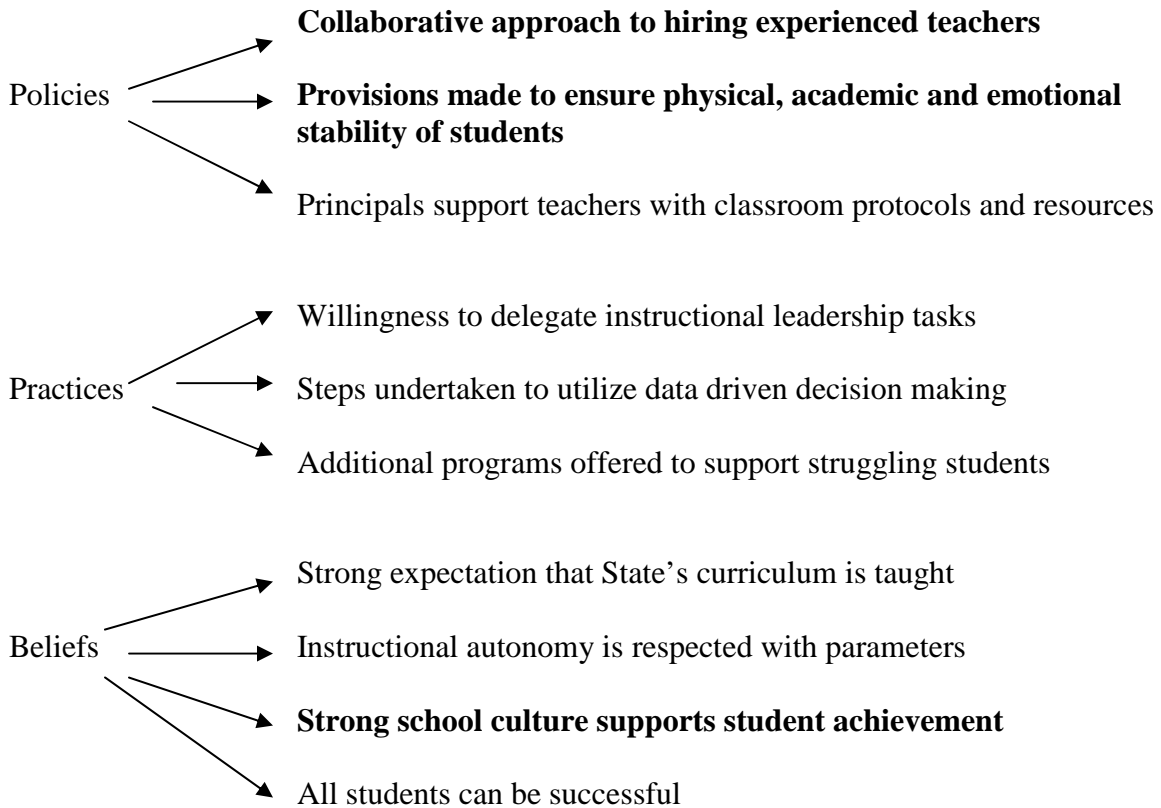


Figure 5.1 displays the policies, practices and beliefs common to principals in both the SG and LG middle schools. In bold are key findings to emerge across the four schools. The principals were very similar in their approaches to hiring staff, taking a variety of steps to ensure students are successful, and seeking to nurture strong school cultures in an effort to support student achievement. Those key themes will be addressed in detail, along with the other themes, in the following discussion of common policies, practices and beliefs.

Policies

Collaborative Approach to Hiring Excellent Teachers

All four principals took a collaborative approach to hiring new staff. As often as possible the principals would include at least one teacher from within their respective schools when interviewing candidates for teacher openings. Typically principals would include a grade-level team's leader and/or a department chair (Math, Science , and so on) to sit in on the interviews.

He has teachers sit in on the interviews...he'll have three people in on an interview...if he can't get the department chair, he'll get a teacher. It's a consensus. In the past there have been people that he liked, that I didn't like, so we've gone for somebody else. He knows we're the ones who have to work with them. (LGS, Teacher)

If I have the opportunity, I try to get teachers involved in teacher interviews, at least content teachers from the same area where the need is, so that works pretty well. We interview on site here...it was funny as last year we had two Science positions open, so we had a Science person and a person from each team and we interviewed all these folks and we eliminated some and there were two people left and it was pretty interesting just watching the dynamics because one said they're both great. I could work with both of them and I like this person and the others (teachers) said 'that's good because we like this person' and I agreed they were the top two candidates so they made the decision about what teams they were going to go on. (LGS, Principal)

She (the principal) goes to the job fair, but she takes some teachers with her, so it is not just what she thinks but it is the opinions of several people, so she definitely gets input from other staff members as far as recruiting. I have done that before and she could not meet with everyone so they would talk to me and other teachers and get a sense and we were able to give them (administration) feedback. (SGS, Teacher)

Furthermore, principals seemed to have a knack for hiring strong teachers that were suited to the cultures of their schools and committed to meeting the needs of all students. Typically, principals and their interview team members favored experienced and highly qualified teachers in the relevant content area. Relevant experience that was favored could include experience in their schools as a student teacher. The principals preferred solid teaching experience and/or familiarity with the high expectations and unique cultures that existed within their own schools.

The new teachers we have are generally teachers who have interned here. They have proven that they are top notch already. She (the principal) also likes experienced teachers, people with 2 or 3 years of experience under their belt, and have shown that they have excelled and are involved throughout the school and will come in and add something new...She makes new teachers feel just like the new 6th grade parents and new 6th graders: You're going to be the luckiest person in the world to be here! (LGS, Teacher)

Now where we get a lot of people from is we look closely at our student teachers. I have some student teachers in the building right now that I would hire right now like that, I get to observe them, they learn the protocols of the school...Content is really, ah, a good college experience. I'm thinking new teachers...um, it'd be great if someone had experience in middle school that'd be ideal. I like to see someone with two certifications because it gives us more options...Someone that is committed to 100% proficient and I believe can do this. (LGS, Principal)

As far as recruiting, we've had student teachers here that are awesome, we've used the job fair, basically gone by recommendations. If you get a good student teacher, then you certainly want to hold on to him. (SGS, Teacher)

Clearly, proven teaching experience elsewhere, or exposure to teaching and protocols within the four middle schools was highly valued. This theme emerged across all four schools.

Provisions Made to Ensure Physical, Academic and Emotional Stability of Students

Another theme to emerge among all four schools relating to principal leadership policies was the attention given to addressing the whole child. However, policies directed at ensuring the needs of children were met in a variety of ways and were not necessarily identical across the schools. Policies varied from a SG school allowing students to request schedule changes if strong justification could be made in writing to a LG school requiring certified support staff to meet weekly with administration to discuss in detail the needs of struggling students or students with significant personal problems at home and/or school.

They (the students) know that if they need a schedule change there's an educational part to that because they have to write me a persuasive note when they want a class changed. I've got some really good ones actually. They can't just come and say I don't like so and so. They can't do that at all. The counselors have helped me with that...if they want a schedule change they have to go to the counselors first and then they explain it. (SGS, Assistant Principal)

I've never been brought into the big picture line of thinking which is something this school has afforded me. I do value the community approach to education: The betterment of a child. It's kind of been that I've made that decision in isolation and investigated to make the best decision, but I truly feel that I have the foundation to utilize other peoples' expertise. (LGS, Assistant Principal)

Another policy included SG school parents signing "contracts" that stated they were committed to supporting high standards. High standards included the requirement of school uniforms that were intended to reduce discipline problems and level the playing field in terms of student dress, that is, wealthy students no longer looked different from disadvantaged students.

Some people say you've stripped them of that creativity but in some ways it's a good thing. They come here and they're all even – nobody sticks out as the school kid, nobody sticks out as the rich kid. (SGS, Teacher)

A SG school principal required staff to be highly visible at transition times to prevent discipline issues from occurring. One LG school “hand scheduled” many students and had homogeneous grouping for Math and Language Arts classes so that academically gifted students were together. However, the school allowed students AG in Math, but weak in reading, to be in mixed ability classes so that their overall needs were best met.

One thing you may not know is that we hand schedule every child. Now that’s not 21st century, however, a kid like me, and again it all goes back to me...I’m just so selfish, I was gifted in Language Arts and ridiculous in Math, ridiculously stupid...so I know they are strong in one area, but not strong in another...so we group for reading, we group for math, we provide the support for the low level kids...kick their butts and provide the rigor: Especially the upper level kids and then we homogenously group everybody. (LGS, Principal)

The four schools’ principals shared in common a concern for recognizing and attempting to address a diverse range of needs that included, yet often extended beyond, academics. The policies supported by the different principals were not always directly comparable, for example, they varied from discipline and dress code policies to scheduling and student placement policies, but at their heart lay the objective of meeting the physical, academic and emotional needs of all their students.

Principals Support Teachers with Classroom Protocols and Resources

The willingness of the principals’ to support their teachers in relation to school and classroom policies and the provision of necessary resources to support instruction was another commonality across the four schools. Teachers at a LG school reported that so long as they had communicated rules early on, the principal was consistently a staunch supporter of staff when dealing with irate parents.

She (the principal) supports the accountability I’ve set up for my (AG) students. I don’t think those can exist for all students. I have a no late work rule. So, you’ve got the kid who did the work, their parents know they did it, but they left it at home. I’m not going to take it late...I know if a phone call goes to my principal

with a teacher complaint, I don't question for a moment what her response would be. She's going to support me 100% and that's huge...huge. As long as teacher expectations are clear, she will do that for anybody. (LGS, Teacher)

The administration in two of the SG schools had established study halls for students that failed to complete their academic work on time in class. At one of the schools, the assistant principal personally runs a study hall for unproductive students as needed. At the other SG school, the principal had creatively used an under-utilized alternative classroom for study hall, that was supervised by a teacher, for students to complete unfinished assignments and homework they would otherwise fail to do.

Kids that are not doing well and don't get their work done, rather than giving them elective classes, we may give them one elective class called 'study hall'. They go in there and do their homework because they are not doing their homework at home...we've got kids living in trailers and some bad situations and they're not going to do their homework at home, so we try to make sure they have the opportunity to get it done here. (SGS, Principal)

In addition, to supporting teachers with enforcing classroom and school rules the principals were preoccupied with ensuring the teachers had the resources available to be successful. In one LG school the principal was very supportive of staff and their efforts to secure grants to fund disadvantaged students on student exchange trips abroad.

I think he (the principal) has given me the things I need to create things, the vision that I have and supports and has trust in what I am doing. For me, I couldn't work for anybody else...it would take a long time for somebody else to trust that you can travel with 30 kids abroad and can come home okay. That I can fill out a grant...and get \$90,000 and he will sign off on it and know that I will actually do it and be successful with it. It takes a long time to build that kind of trust and he has allowed me that kind of trust and I appreciate that immensely. (LGS, teacher)

One SG school was exceptionally well equipped with instructional technology resources owed to the principal encouraging and supporting teachers' grant writing efforts.

I can't teach several hundred students so it is important to make sure all my teachers have what they need to do their job, and ease the pressure, take off what I can to help them so they don't lose it and get upset so they are happy, because if

the teachers are happy, then the kids are happy. It's very simple and it works for me. (SGS, Principal)

Practices

Willingness to Delegate Instructional Leadership Tasks

All four principals in this study were comfortable delegating professional development for staff to their assistant principals and/or teacher leaders. These schools revealed that schools were relying on in-house experts and no cost school district workshops to provide staff access to professional development due to the state withholding funds owed to the recession. While the principals were not directly leading the professional development in their schools, they were involved in recognizing areas of need, providing opportunities and support via dates and times, building space, material resources, and identifying the appropriate in-house talent to lead the sessions.

He (the Principal) generally refers that to me, but it is not done without his knowing. Like last year I did a staff development with them on motivation. We did a big talk, so I designed that and we met and he came when he could and he knew what we were doing. (SGS, Assistant Principal)

Right now there's no money for quality professional development. One of the things we've tried to do is provide that to each other. There might be a group of teachers who show some techniques at the beginning of a faculty meeting or something like that. She (the Principal) is a good disseminator of information...she's quick to get things out to people she thinks can benefit from those things. (LGS, Teacher)

Because of the budget we are taking a big hit in the county in professional development, that's why we have tried over the past two years to focus on differentiating instruction. We have done it in-house and some on line...my assistant principal has taken the lead on that, I have let her do a lot of the professional development with differentiation...(SGS, Principal)

Until the big crash of the budget it was much easier, now she has been focusing on in house talent/skills, we have been focusing on differentiation last year and this year...The assistant principal did the differentiation last year...two of our teachers are going to a differentiation seminar in Las Vegas and they will be

coming back to do the professional development continuation. I have done a lot of it for science, so we use the in-house talent also. (SGS, Teacher)

The willingness of all four principals to cede control and delegate instructional leadership to others within their buildings was interesting. According to the staff, and on occasions the principals themselves, the principals recognized that they benefited from utilizing knowledgeable and respected teachers for instructional support and a variety of other responsibilities. In describing her leadership style, one SG school principal stated, “Delegator...doing what I can and understanding that there are things that I can’t do...”

Other principals and staff made similar statements.

...we had a teacher who transferred to us this year who has actually been teaching a year longer than I have who was not being successful with her students. It was brought to my attention, to the administration’s attention. I spent some of my time mentoring, I observed, offered strategies, developed a plan...separate from administration. Part of the reason we did that was a ‘You’re not in trouble’ thing. So, the department chairs, we collect analyze and interpret that data and report back. A lot of that becomes delegated. Prior to four or five years ago, our principal would have been afraid of it not being successful (LGS, Teacher)

My assistant principal does a lot (instructional monitoring). I’m the academic leader of the school I realize that, however, having someone like her on staff, I don’t get involved as much probably as principals in some other schools because of the person I have here. (SGS, Principal)

Steps Undertaken to Utilize Data Driven Decision Making

There was a distinction in the amount and depth of data decision making between the four schools. However, it was evident that all four principals understood the importance of data driven decision making to improve student improvement. Subsequently, all four schools had some degree of data driven decision making occurring, only the extent of the practice varied. At one LG school the use of common assessments and benchmarking data was still considered in its infancy.

In some pockets of the school, they're doing it beautifully, especially in Math. The Math teachers have the content and the teachers' minds work that way so they're doing a great job. The science teachers are getting there, they're in a pretty good place. Social Studies and Language Arts, they're having more difficulty with it...we don't have an appropriate literacy program in middle schools in our district to track student growth in reading...There is an expectation that all the teachers are tracking data but we're not good at it yet in all areas. (LGS, Principal)

In a SG school, the principal and teachers commented on the principal's use of state and district provided data, which typically were analyses of the school's ABCs results and the students' growth projections. However, the principal acknowledged that district promoted benchmark testing was not always implemented across the school with fidelity and that in part rested with her lack of enthusiasm for more testing on top of testing. The principal did add that they relied on End-of-Grade testing goal summary reports to help determine what areas they needed to "zero in on". Also, this school sent home progress reports for parents every three weeks, which provided teachers and parents with helpful data on a frequent basis.

Another SG school sent report cards home frequently, every six weeks, and even involved students in the use of data by issuing growth sheets for students to predict and record their growth in math and reading. This practice was facilitated by the curriculum and instruction assistant principal with the support of the principal and had been particularly successful at motivating above-grade level students who needed additional motivation to further extend themselves.

So the kids will look at it and say they have 352 in the 4th grade, they will circle it there and see what their percentile was and in the 5th grade they will come up here and see that maybe they grew and we will say okay, what do you think you can do this year if you really give it your best try? They are doing that. So the teachers have all of that for their kids. (SGS, Assistant Principal)

The last school, a LG school, had the expectation in place for data collection and analysis, but in actual practice use of assessment data by staff was in its infancy and grade level and/or department times were not always used constructively, that is, for data analysis and discussion.

We're supposed to be using a data software program weekly, bi-weekly in the regular classrooms. The expectation is there, but not the accountability (by the principal). I'm not convinced it's quality, and it's done on the computer so its not very accessible. There are teachers who have their own assessments and get their own data to monitor progress. (LGS, Teacher)

Additional Programs Offered to Support Struggling Students

Another theme that emerged was that all four principals supported the practice of ensuring additional programs were in place to support all struggling students. One generic program across the schools was the provision of time for students to catch up on incomplete assignments, homework and receive academic assistance. The two SG schools operated study halls during the day while the two LG schools offered structured after-school programs that provided academic support and resources.

We have a very developed after-school program where course work is developed to support gaps in learning. You (a student) attend a session, do a study hall, do your homework, we have a very defined end-of-grade prep class offered. Generally speaking the program is academic in nature where the students are working academically for that whole hour-and-a-half time period. (LGS, Assistant Principal)

In addition, one LG school operated the AVID program as an elective class for students with parents who had never attended college. The students visited colleges and had college mentors visit them at their school on a regular basis. Similarly, a SG school allowed students to exit one of their electives for the last six weeks on the elective wheel so that they could spend time reviewing and preparing for the math, reading and science

(8th grade only) End-of-Grade tests. According to the AP, about 50% of core subject teachers at that school volunteered to provide the review sessions for struggling students.

Furthermore, as previously discussed, one LG school had scheduled many students so that their needs were best met, while one SG school allowed students to make written requests for schedule changes and when well substantiated such requests would be honored. Finally, in one LG school the principal had success meetings where he met with teachers that had failing students and would ask them why students were failing and how they would change their expectations to ensure the students could be successful.

The principal compiles a D and F list and talks with all the students that are struggling academically and he candidly asks teachers what interventions they are putting in place to help kids. We had a certain core area in 7th grade that had a high concentration of Ds and Fs and he put it to the teachers straight saying, ‘Why are students not living up to your expectations? What’s your stance on this?’ This is with grade level teams. (LGS, Assistant Principal)

Beliefs

Strong Expectation that State’s Curriculum is Taught

All four principals had made it clear that they expected their teachers to align lessons with the state’s curriculum: The Standard Course of Study. A SG school’s assistant principal responded that her principal’s expectation for staff was, “To teach the NC SCoS in a way that is relevant and rigorous to the students.” Administrators and staff in other schools shared comparable expectations for their school’s instructional programs.

We first align everything with the SCoS. Don’t just teach tests. Unfortunately, that’s what we need to look for, teach problem solving, get those 21st century skills in there and help those kids be tolerant of each other... (LGS, Principal)

That we meet the SCoS for sure...that’s a big emphasis. They buy (the administration) us all the books that are full of everyone’s SCoS so that we cannot only align ourselves but look at how we could work with others on their SCoS and pull things that would work across the curriculum. (SGS, Teacher)

Instructional Autonomy is Respected with Parameters

Generally, all four principals believed in instructional autonomy for all their teachers so long as they were implementing the SCoS and they had no other concerns about any specific teachers. One LG school teacher referring to their level of instructional autonomy noted, “Quite a bit, I would say...as long as we are covering the curriculum there is an expectation that we are and that we don’t veer from that.” This theme emerged in many other interviews across the schools.

We’ve got our SCoS that we’re expected to teach, I’ll break it up into a year long schedule by topics and I’ll work with my other 7th grade Science teacher, but what I do with that within my classroom is up to me unless it’s not getting the job done and then we’ll (administration and teacher) talk and have a conversation about how I need to refocus to meet the needs of the middle school student. (SGS, Teacher)

I would say they have a good amount of autonomy as long as they adhere to the SCoS with the expectation that they collaborate with their departments, the Language Arts department, the Math department, the Science department, and they need to talk about what is happening on a regular basis. So long as everyone is doing what they are expected to do there is a lot of autonomy on how they are going to address those goals in the classroom. (LGS, Assistant Principal)

I feel very free to pick my own activities and pick my own assignments...I am aware of a couple of instances where they know (administration) a good job is not being done with that and in those cases they are not given quite so much freedom. They are aware of who is not handling their freedom well and they give them a little more direction. (SGS, Teacher)

Strong School Culture Supports Student Achievement

Another theme that emerged across all four middle schools was a belief among the principals that building a strong and proud school culture with high expectations supports staff morale and student success. One LG school principal was focused on establishing a collaborative culture where there was a community approach to dealing with the affective and academic needs of students. The LG school principal noted,

I think we have a strong staff and I hope that's not unique but I think we do and I think it's a collaborative staff even to the point where many of them socialize with one and another and they care about each other.

The school's assistant principal adds,

I really think that the success of children and the decisions that are best for children permeate culture here and again with the collaborative approach I do think job descriptions are set up so staff address kids and not tasks.

The same school had a "how we do business" motto for students that they learn and are expected to adhere to in different situations, for example, how they do business in the classroom or how they do business when getting their lunch in the cafeteria. Teachers were expected to reinforce student behaviors across different settings in the school.

In one of the SG schools the principal had established a safe and positive culture where teachers felt supported, high expectations were in place and students were not afraid of making mistakes. A teacher, attributing the success of the school to its culture, noted, "I think the fact that our culture is more like a family, more like a community than a lot of schools are able to have...I think students know we care." A teacher at the same school added,

I've probably said it five or six times, but it's really been the first teaching experience here where policies, procedures and expectations are put up front and we're repeatedly reminded of what they're being expected to do. I think it's good. We really put in an effort at the beginning of the year to teach them policies and procedures of the school building and what's going to be expected. We really hold them to high standards.

Another teacher at this SG school added,

The environment here is very conducive to middle school kids. It's a very loving environment, it's a caring environment. The teachers understand everyone has issues, but it's not like they blow and go crazy: 'You (a student) messed up? Let's figure out what you did wrong, let's figure out what we can do right.'

The comments shared by the SG school's staff aligned with the principal's beliefs for the direction he wanted his school to head. The SG school principal shared, "I have this vision of the school where everybody's working together in harmony. Everybody has a say or some input into what's taking place and working for common goals in a respectful and cooperative way."

A similar theme of a positive and safe school culture emerged in the other SG school. The assistant principal in that school attributed the school's success to the positive atmosphere supported by staff and administration which had a tremendous impact on student achievement as the students felt cared for and were willing to take risks. A teacher corroborated the AP's account and attributed the school's success to the caring culture in place and the school's high standards as demonstrated by the requirement of school uniforms. Another teacher shared a letter that a student had written in her class as a mock college application and centering on a separate teacher at the same school that inspired her and challenged her with unrelenting high expectations and academic support. Like the LG school discussed previously, this SG school had a motto which was reinforced daily and the students had come to identify themselves with the school's mascot which was aligned with the school's motto. The principal shared that when students were sent to her for discipline problems she would break down the school's motto and discuss with the students if they had satisfied each of its related expectations and values.

The fourth school, a LG school, had a principal that was very focused on presenting her school in a positive light, involving parents and the community, and establishing a culture of excellence where excuses were not tolerated. As shared

previously, a 6th grade team of teachers and students wore t-shirts stating, “If at first you try and don’t succeed, then you’re not us…” This LG school principal stated,

My main goals are number one and number two: Always be everything, and if we’re not I want to know why, we have incredible opportunities in this building, a climate that reeks of pride and doing your best, it’s just a neat place that we’ve built for kids that you feel when the kids are in the building and when classes change...Once you’re embedded in that climate and the kids are too, they take it on.

All the teachers in this school shared that the principal’s strength was her willingness to support teachers with their classroom rules and expectations, particularly when dealing with difficult parents. What is more, all of the teachers referred to their principal as a “cheerleader”. The principal was described as high energy and working hard to make new students, parents and teachers feel that they were at the best school in the district. The assistant principal reported the school climate was such that students from diverse backgrounds felt accepted and were motivated to do their best.

All Students can be Successful

Interestingly, teachers across all four schools considered their principals as being focused on all students being successful. Few teachers reported their principals being focused on raising student achievement for specific student subgroups. One SG school teacher noted, “The thing we hear all the time is it’s all about the kids and they all can be successful.” A teacher in the other SG school supported this consistent theme and noted,

I know that he (the principal) definitely wants all the kids to be successful and if kids are failing in your class he wants to know why and is in talking to you about what’s going on...he definitely believes we need to be working with every kid and trying to make sure that every child is successful.

The principals focusing on, and believing that, all students could and needed to be successful was a theme prevalent in both LG middle schools, also. A LG school teacher

described the principal's main focus as, "Excellence of course...exceptional achievement for all students." In the other LG school, all four teachers interviewed made comparable comments. One teacher stated, "She (the principal) believes every child can learn and sees the best in every child." Another teacher in this LG school adds, "She believes that all students can succeed...failure is not an option. If they're breathing, we can do something for them. She is very supportive."

An exception where the focus on student success was described as being more narrow than "all students" was a LG school where a teacher reported the principal as focused on closing the achievement gap for African American students. However, the same teacher reported that the principal believed in equity across the board, that is, for both students and staff. The same teacher felt the principal's concern for equity was reflected in his shared decision making, being approachable and supporting staff. The principal, the assistant principal and one teacher talked to his belief in addressing the needs of individual students, but did not mention student subgroups, via collaboration with support staff to address those at the tertiary level or those students that school-wide practices and policies are not reaching successfully.

Nevertheless, even in that LG school both the principal and teachers all defined excellence as students either showing growth or working to their potential. No staff member related excellence to discussion of social justice and/or closing the achievement gap. Three of the LG school's teachers noted that the principal believed in success for all students and/or the school as a whole.

The belief, by both principals and their staff, that excellence is students showing academic growth and/or achieving their potential was a theme that emerged consistently

across the LG and SG schools. No research participant reported or defined excellence as raising the performance for any specific student subgroups. Instead, all participants focused on the performance of all students and/or excellence for an individual child which again was typically defined as academic and/or social growth. For example, one LG school principal defined excellence as, “It’s really providing a well-rounded program where all kids can grow and it has to involve professionalism on everybody’s part.” Similarly, a SG principal proffered, “Excellence to me is being well rounded, getting along with one another because that is just as important to me as being smart.” It was interesting to note that a student’s grade-level proficiency was rarely related to excellence. There was a widespread belief that excellence is a child showing academic and social growth or performing to the best of one’s ability.

Differences in Academic Emphasis

Despite many similarities existing with respect to the principals’ policies, practices and beliefs across the four middle schools there were profound differences that emerged. On some occasions there were differences among each set of schools, for example, one LG school had an excellent school-wide discipline framework in place that was consistently implemented while teachers in the other LG school reported administration implementing inconsistent discipline consequences. Instead, this section of the research study will address themes that emerged and were common to both schools within a set (LG schools or SG schools), but differed across the two sets. In particular, there will be a strong focus on the academic emphasis peculiar to the SG schools. Table 5.1 displays the themes that emerged and that were common to both schools within the set (LG or SG), but differed from the two schools in the other set. Where there are blank

spaces in the table for a set of schools, then that signifies the theme as not being common to both schools, thus, no common theme is noted. The common differences in academic emphasis between both sets, LG and SG, schools will be discussed next.

Table 5.1: Differences in Academic Emphasis between the LG Schools and SG Schools

| Academic Emphasis Component | Two LG Schools | Two SG Schools |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| 1) Policies | <p>Decision making somewhat limited to administration</p> <p>Strong PTA/Parent support</p> <p>Data collection and analysis is developing</p> | <p>Consistent implementation of procedures and rules</p> <p>Strong school district and community support</p> <p>Data collection and analysis is focused</p> |
| 2) Practices | <p>Inconsistent monitoring of instruction</p> | <p>Consistent monitoring of instruction with follow-through</p> <p>Principals very visible</p> <p>Master schedule stability</p> |
| 3) Beliefs | <p>Confident and direct approach</p> <p>High expectations but limited accountability</p> | <p>Modest, self-critical and compassionate approach</p> <p>High expectations and high accountability</p> |

Policies

Consistent Implementation of Procedures and Rules

A theme that emerged common to both SG schools was the principals' consistent implementation of school-wide procedures and rules. In one SG school, the

administration has established and reinforced a strong discipline framework. Students had to wear uniforms and students carried a punch card. When the card received six punches over a certain period of time then students had to serve an after-school detention, and if they cannot serve that, then they must do a day in in-school suspension (ISS).

Also, students that did not complete assignments in the same SG school were held accountable directly by administration, and the AP ran a study hall during the instructional day for those students to complete missing work. Teachers could send students to a “chill out” room if it was for the remainder of one period, and beyond that, they needed the approval of an administrator. A teacher in the school reported, “Because we have a school-wide discipline program I think it’s very helpful as they (teachers and students) know what the consequences are at each level of misbehavior.” The same teacher, referring to the administration, added, “They are very consistent, whatever the big book is with all the rules and regulations, they follow that, they will read it to the kid, and they call the parents.” In explaining the school’s success another teacher stated,

Well because we have high expectations and consistency...so here at school we set the expectation, you meet the expectation and if you don’t there are consequences and when you follow through on those consequences it makes a believer out of them. They realize the focus is on their education.

Staff in the other SG middle school reported similar strong and consistent support from their administration with respect to discipline and school policies. In discussing the management of discipline, a SG teacher in the school shared that administration responds quickly to classroom discipline issues and noted, “I think administration is very supportive of us.” The school has an in-school suspension room, silent lunch and study hall for students to complete homework and missing assignments. The principal is very proactive at being visible in hallways at class transition times to prevent discipline

infractions from occurring. Alluding to the influence of high expectations another teacher in this SG school added, “I think it’s part of why we have good kids because we expect that they’re going to behave and we treat them with respect and I do think that they respond to that.” A third teacher in the SG school stated,

Discipline is very structured here and rules are followed which makes a big difference...well, the rules are written. It’s communicated to us what is expected in our rooms at the beginning of the year and we’re reminded and it’s up to us to carry through because good discipline is an important function of the school environment. If you have an organized school discipline, then it’s just following the rules and keeping it inside that framework.

The LG schools differed in that one had a comprehensive and well supported discipline framework in place, but teachers in the other LG school reported some inconsistency in the implementation of consequences among the school’s administration. For example, one LG teacher reported,

There is a little bit of disconnect between the administrators. One of them is a little more lenient, one treats Black kids a little differently. That is the consensus I guess. They’re (the students) just crazy, there’s just a few days of school left. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but they’re pretty wild and there’s not a lot of follow through. There’s tons of announcements and signs up saying if you’re play fighting, you’re going to get in trouble, but then they don’t get in trouble. So there is a little bit of a disconnect with consistency of the disciplinary actions. This gives you ISS, but if you go to the principal, this doesn’t give you ISS.

Similarly, another teacher in the same LG school noted, “Sometimes I wish discipline would be more consistent...But sometimes it’s just not as consistent as it should be, which may lead to more discipline issues which may lead to a decrease in learning.” Very pertinent to note that that teacher feels the school’s lack of consistency on the administration’s part in handling discipline may well be detrimental for overall student achievement. An apt observation perhaps given that the school has had an

achievement gap between certain subgroups and White and affluent students that on average had exceeded the state's average over a four year period (2005-2009).

Decision Making Somewhat Limited to Administration

The two LG schools were consistent in that interviewees reported decision making as being somewhat confined to the administration. In one LG school, there was an active SIT with staff and parents well represented, yet several teachers reported, and the administration acknowledged that a special team that met weekly consisting of administration and support staff was the most influential decision making body in the school. In describing the difference between his Leadership Team consisting of administrative and support staff and the SIT the LG principal shared,

So that's really where I get my energy and identifying what needs to be addressed in the building. We have a SIT that does the school improvement plan and we hear some parent concerns there about backpacks and why we are cutting tennis and so on. Honestly, where I get my support is the mentoring (Leadership) group.

However, regular classroom teachers did not partake in those meetings. A teacher noted the group's influence over the master schedule despite no classroom teachers serving on it,

I see the (principal's leadership) team having a lot of decision making for the school and actually decision making without a teacher representative. It's where they'll initiate a plan for the school: Blocking versus non-blocking and they have continued looping in the school.

What is more, the principal in the other LG school was seen as confining decision making to a limited few also. There was an active SIT, but some teachers saw that body as ineffective as staff would simply use it as a medium to air grievances and this would hamper positive progress. As one teacher in this LG school declared, "I don't want to be on the SIT anymore because you argue and go round and round and you never really get

to a decision. If you do get to a decision, it is seldom enforced.” In addition, master schedule formats agreed upon by SIT members had been overhauled over a summer by the principal, with limited consultation, albeit owed to major student population changes.

No common theme emerged for the two SG middle schools regarding the approaches the principals took to deciding school policies. One SG school had a SIT that doubled as a Leadership Team with teachers, parents, support staff and administration represented. Teachers reported that body as being collaborative rather than merely consultative and most major decisions were made there and respected by the principal. In contrast, the other SG school had a SIT that met irregularly once the school improvement plan had been voted on and no leadership team, outside the administrators, existed. In fact, the principal in that SG school acknowledged that he saw it as his role to make most major decisions with school-wide implications so as to protect his teachers from that stress because they could then focus on what was happening solely in their classrooms. The principal noted, “Sometimes I get the impression that teachers, this is probably bad, the majority of teachers just want to teach and be left alone doing their thing and tough decisions let someone else make.” Similarly, the school had no active PTA in place and again the principal felt this was advantageous for his faculty as they did not have to be distracted with frequent and miscellaneous fundraising efforts.

Strong School District and Community Support

The SG school principal’s practice of operating without a PTA was in part attributed to strong school district and community support, which was a common theme that emerged for both SG schools. In the non-PTA SG school, the principal claimed that he acquired sufficient miscellaneous funds via hosting four student dances during the

year and sales achieved through concession stands at athletic events. In addition, the school had three counselors for approximately six hundred students. According to the SG principal, this was a generous ratio compared to nearby districts where schools could have only two counselors for 800 students. Staff reported that the superintendent would walk through the school regularly and staff felt sufficiently comfortable with him that they referred to him by his first name despite his possessing a doctorate degree. Finally, the school enjoyed excellent instructional technology resources which the principal attributed to the willingness of the local county commissioners to support the school district with ample funding despite challenging economic times.

Every room has a projector, document cameras and air slate. We've got a news room, most schools don't have that. This district is very supportive of technology. The district is really good at supplying us what we need even though money's tight. They're very good at how they spend the little money they get. (SGS, Teacher)

The principal noted, "...as I said the funding is there in this community. Everybody from the bus drivers, the bus garage, the cafeteria, we have good people here in our county."

Another teacher in the SG school attributed the unique success of the school in part to a supportive central office in conjunction with the school's administration which makes it a pleasant place to work.

In the other SG school, the principal reported the district as being very supportive in setting and communicating a vision for its schools while staff reported benefiting from considerable community support via grants for technology.

One of the great things that our county does is strategic planning process, we are very fortunate that our previous superintendent and our current superintendent along with their staff at the county office have a very good handle on how that works and the vision we want to go...that has worked its way down to building level administrators. (SGS, Principal).

Our principal is a real leader in that area too. We don't have extra money, but we have the determination to raise extra money and find the resources that will help us out. We've written grants. I've been real successful in that area, finding the grants, and writing the grants as a team and earning those. (SGS, Teacher)

The SG school had equipped a science lab, updated computers in classrooms and purchased laptops using grants from community organizations and businesses. Moreover, a teacher reported considerable benefits from a district provided technology facilitator assigned to their school and a couple of others. The technology expert was available to train teachers and students in the use of the technology resources within their school.

The extent of community and school district support that emerged among the two LG middle schools was inconsistent. Administration and teachers in one LG school did report strong support. That school had community mentors working with underprivileged students, out-of-school suspended students received academic support from a local community organization. Also, an exchange program had been the recipient of major grants and the school district provided funding and transportation for a comprehensive after-school program. In contrast, little to no mention was made by staff in the other school about district support, while parent support was reported to be very strong. One teacher conveyed a level of disdain for central office by sharing that despite being one of the larger school districts in their section of the state, other nearby but smaller districts seemed to be more progressive in terms of embracing new initiatives and programs to support students.

Data Collection and Analysis is Focused

A theme that emerged in both SG middle schools was data analysis was expected and very focused. While principals and their staff in all four schools, as discussed previously, talked about the use of data in a variety of forms in their schools, it seemed

that the principals in the SG schools were more focused in utilizing it. In one SG middle school, teachers reported the principal as being unrelenting in trying to find what was working and not working well in her school.

She is very data driven, she analyzes data that I don't even know where it comes from and she breaks it down and looks at it. The AP does also and they share that with us and they look at trends, so if there is an increase they look at what we did that year that may have led to that increase, if there is a decrease, what did we do that we need to stop doing, they are very data driven. (SGS, Teacher)

She looks at the achievement and where they (the students) are. She looks at the data a lot to see where their gaps are, for example their writing scores took a huge drop about four years ago, and the next year their focus was on writing across the curriculum and every teacher in the school, it was a team effort school-wide to focus on writing, and their scores went back up. (SGS, Teacher)

The SG school principal utilized data in a variety of ways. End-of-grade testing goal summary reports are used to identify areas of concern to address. The principal shared,

We use that to decide what things we need to work on, probability is one that comes up in math a lot, critical stance in reading is another area, so we zero in on those areas and focus on them, reading scores are not where they have been in the past, but that is the case across the state.

What is more, the SG school's AP shared that they would use EVAAS data to assist with identifying academically gifted and at-risk students. The AP added that they used intervention information and classroom assessments to identify at-risk students.

Also, progress report cards were produced every three weeks rather than quarterly.

Teachers reported utilizing district wide assessments that were available to collect data on students' reading and math performance at different stages of the school year. However, the SG principal acknowledged that she did not stringently require the implementation of that data collection method as she viewed it as excess testing and her teachers already had sufficient tools to gauge where their students were at academically.

Data collection and use was exceptionally focused at the other SG middle school. The assistant principal responsible for curriculum and instruction collected math and reading data, with school district support, that gave her the performance of each student for the previous two to three school years (standardized testing commences in the 3rd grade in North Carolina). Next the AP created goal sheets which were then distributed to teachers to use with their students. Students were expected to analyze their past performance, set goals and monitor their progress. The AP borrowed the idea from her AG teacher who had developed the approach to motivate her already high performing students to do even better. The SG school AP stated,

So the kids will look at it (goal sheet) and say they have 352 in the 4th grade, they will circle it there and see what their percentile was in the 5th grade and they will come up here and see that maybe they grew and we will say, ‘Okay, what do you think you can do this year if you really gave it your best try?’ and they are doing that. So the teachers have all that for their kids.

The administration ensured that the goal sheets were utilized via lesson plans that teachers were required to submit weekly and administration, particularly the principal, visiting classrooms regularly. Also, teachers would use the goal sheet data to help decide which students would benefit from study hall and which would attend Math or Language Arts review classes instead of regular elective classes during “wheel” time. Finally, report cards were frequent with one going home every six weeks instead of quarterly.

The use of data, particularly related to achievement and instruction, in the two LG schools was more inconsistent and very much still developing. In one LG school, the administration did regular classroom walkthroughs with an instrument to record what was observed. However, there was a lack of focus as to how to best utilize the data once

collected. Little mention was made of the use of walkthrough data and two staff members shared that general trends were not shared with staff.

Furthermore, other staff members in the LG school reported that the use of data in general was progressing, but still very much in its infancy. While discussing the use of data to improve student achievement the principal noted,

We're heading in that direction. In some pockets of the school, they're doing it beautifully: Especially in Math. The Math teachers have the content and the teachers' minds work that way so they're doing a great job. The science teachers are getting there, they're in a pretty good place. Social studies and language arts, they're having more difficulty with it. I think the content makes it difficult and again they're more qualitative than quantitative and the other challenge is that we don't have the appropriate literacy programs in middle schools (in the district) to track student growth in reading.

On the same topic of using data to improve student achievement a teacher in the same LG school added, "Honestly, we're just starting with this." It must be noted the administration in this school was highly conscientious in the collection, analysis and distribution of discipline data. The AP reported the discipline data would be shared with staff to help them improve their day-to-day operations, for example, if the data showed ample discipline infractions at transition times and in certain locations, then the teachers and administration could address them.

A similar theme that emerged in the other LG school was that the use of data to improve student achievement was still developing and lacking focus at times. The principal and staff were using EOG results and a variety of other formative assessments to collect data and added that students were grouped and regrouped according to acquired data. With respect to one common assessment tool the principal noted, "Are we using it with fidelity, 'Not so much.' I'm not so sure everyone is as skilled as they need to be." A teacher reported that some teachers are good at using data to learn what they need to

reteach but others are having difficulty as they are “old school.” When asked about the use of data to improve student achievement another teacher in this LG school responded that it varied by teacher and added, “The expectation is there (from the principal), but not the accountability.”

Practices

Consistent Monitoring of Instruction with Follow-Through

The principal’s practice of being very active in monitoring instruction was a very strong theme to emerge common to both SG middle schools. The principal in one SG school was fortunate enough to have two assistant principals. One AP was primarily concerned with discipline while the other AP was responsible for overseeing testing, schedules and curriculum and instruction. The curriculum and instruction AP had principal experience which appeared to be of great benefit to the principal, staff and students. The principal was able to delegate considerable instructional responsibility to the AP and knew with confidence the AP would perform well given the AP’s experience and previous roles.

With discipline and instruction in competent hands the SG school principal was free to visit classrooms frequently on both a formal and informal basis. Teachers reported the principal as the main administrator they saw most in their classrooms. The principal reported his ability to get into classrooms frequently (almost daily) as one of several ways he was able to monitor the effectiveness of instruction in the school. He would look at progress reports (sent home every six weeks rather than quarterly), type honor roll sheets, and his AP reviews lesson plans. Lesson plans were required to be submitted to the AP

every Monday either electronically or hard copy form. The principal, referring to his monitoring of instruction stated,

Probably just by number one, my daily observations, then of course my formal observations. I look at progress reports, I look at everybody's report cards. I go through them. I type honor roll sheets so I look at everybody's report cards myself. Lesson plans, my AP does a lot. I'm the academic leader of the school I realize that, however, having someone like my AP on staff means I don't get involved as much as probably as principals in some other schools because of the person I have here.

One SG teacher added,

He's (the principal) out in the classrooms a lot which is important. Just the fact that he's seeing what's going on...he's showing us that what's going on in the classroom is important enough for him each week to get around.

Another teacher reported,

He likes to keep track of what's going on in the building and that's why you see him out there, and he gets to see the kids and drops into the classrooms to see what is actually going on and what they're learning right now.

Similarly, instructional monitoring was frequent in the other SG school. Progress reports were sent home every three weeks rather than quarterly. According to the principal, "Progress reports on a three week basis gives the teachers an opportunity to stay on top of grades and know where the kids are at." In addition, the principal and assistant principal met with each grade-level's teams consistently on Tuesdays. A teacher in the SG school noted, "She (the principal) stays for the entire (team) meetings, and we can address any concerns." The same teacher added, "She does a lot of walkthroughs in the classrooms, both formal and informal." Another teacher while discussing how the administration monitors instruction noted, "They do little spot observations. Of course, they do full observations...they do formal and informal walkthroughs." Another teacher

reported that she would have the AP popping into her classroom for a few minutes on average four days a week.

In addition, the SG principal was very active in using achievement data to monitor and improve instruction. As discussed previously, the principal found test scores showed the students' writing performance had dropped considerably and she responded by facilitating professional development in the area of writing and introducing a new school-wide writing program. Writing test scores bounced back promptly with the increased focus and support facilitated by the principal.

In contrast, the LG principals appeared to set expectations for instruction, but actual monitoring was not always consistent. For example, in one LG school, classroom walkthroughs were conducted in an organized manner yet the data was not utilized or shared in an organized manner. The school had a committee charged with considering equity issues such as involvement of minority parents in school and improving communication between home and school. However, a staff member reported that the committee had not been meeting regularly. When asked how often the committee meets the teacher shared, "This year not much. The person that is in charge has been in and out." Another staff member shared that the principal's monitoring of PLCs had been infrequent in the past, but had improved the most recent school year.

A similar theme emerged in the other LG school where two of four teachers reported high expectations for instruction but on occasions weak follow-through. One teacher reported the administrators rarely visited her classroom and were not even seen that frequently in her section of the school building.

Coming from me, I wouldn't mind seeing a member of our administrative team in my classroom every period, of every day, of every week. I would be comfortable

with that...I can honestly tell you that weeks will go by when I don't see a single one of them. (LGS, Teacher)

Another teacher reported that expectations are in place, but the accountability is lacking at times. The same LG teacher stated, "Our grade levels have shared planning time, our teams have shared planning time. But, more often than not, it's spent in your room grading papers or making copies. There is some planning that takes place within departments."

A clear common theme did emerge from the interviews that separated the two sets of middle schools. In the LG schools the principals often had high expectations for instruction, but in some instances the accountability or actual monitoring of those expectations in practice was absent or only partially implemented. The SG principals and their assistant principals tended to be more involved in instruction and particularly being visible in actual classrooms where instruction takes place.

Principals Highly Visible

This theme has already in part been identified and discussed, but it was a conspicuous and consistent theme for both SG schools, that is, their principals went about the practice of being highly visible throughout the school. No such consistent theme emerged across the two LG schools. One LG principal was consistently described by teachers as a high energy cheerleader that promoted the school within the community and for parents, students and new teachers, but was reported by at least one teacher as not being visible in the classrooms. The other LG principal was frequently perceived as being personable and generally very visible via formal and informal classroom visits.

Nevertheless, there was no inconsistency between the two SG schools where both principals took significant steps to make themselves visible in their respective schools.

One SG principal moved her teachers' mail boxes so that they had to walk past her office door. The principal explained that the principal before her had made her office area off limits to staff unless they had sought permission first to be in that area. The new principal responded by shifting their mail boxes so they had to go into the office area and pass her office. The SG principal explained,

It made it easier for me to see them and they know they can come by and talk to me, I will now get knocks on the door for teachers to come and talk to me. I try to be very visible in the school probably more so than a lot of other principals, a lot of that is because of the way the building is set you can't help but be visible, it is important for them to see me and for me to see them.

The same SG principal made informal and formal classroom visits on a regular basis. Moreover, the principal would substitute for teachers on occasions when they had to leave for an emergency or personal issue.

The other SG school principal prided himself on being very visible in the hallways, classrooms and being accessible to staff in his office. Each day started at the SG school with the principal doing the morning announcements with two students assisting. At transition times when students were moving between classes the principal was frequently in the hallways interacting with students and monitoring behavior. Teachers reported the same SG principal as being highly visible in their classrooms and more so than his two assistant principals.

Master Schedule Stability

An additional common theme that emerged and separated the two sets of middle schools was master schedule stability. Both the LG schools had recently had their master schedules tweaked considerably. A teacher in one LG school shared there had been considerable schedule upheaval. The teacher stated, "For example, the last four years we

have run three different schedules.” These changes had been in part an attempt by the principal to find a balance between elective versus regular classroom teachers’ concerns, budget considerations and increases in student enrolment. According to another teacher there was some teacher dissatisfaction that the school had a 90 minute block schedule for the most recent (2009-10) school year.

Schedule overhauls were not reported as being as frequent or contentious in the other LG school, but they were mentioned. The assistant principal mentioned that the master schedule for the most recent school (2009-10) school year had been adjusted and as a result many classroom teachers had less planning time.

Now I think with the development of our schedule this year, teachers have really had to adjust how they teach...it was a bit of a struggle earlier in the year...teachers pretty much taught their core classes then had three planning periods. The way it has had to work this year is that teachers teach their four core classes in most cases and they’ve had to pick up an elective class. I think this was highly connected to budget cuts last year. Pretty much classroom teachers had to come in and pick up the slack with elective opportunities. (LGS, Principal)

The staff in the two SG schools generally did not speak of any of their master schedules in a negative sense. In fact in one SG school the staff seemed to be complimentary because of the ongoing flexibility and opportunities that it provided staff and students. The principal stated, “We actually give kids their choices in the wheel (elective) classes so we’re good and they know what to do. One strong positive of our school is that we’re willing to individualize schedules.” Also, students got to take hobby electives mid-year, such as broadcast journalism and rocket building, and in the last six weeks teachers could pull students from regular electives for math and reading review classes.

The other SG school had a schedule that supported interdisciplinary units that must be taught by each grade level for three week periods. The 8th grade must do three such units while the 7th and 6th grades must plan and teach two interdisciplinary units. The units were aligned with the state's curriculum (SCoS) and were popular with staff and students. One such unit faked a crime scene with the outline of a body and blood. The math students measured angles with sliders, in science they talked about blood and how it works and in language arts they read mystery and crime stories like Sherlock Holmes. For the most recent school year, the principal and one teacher acknowledged that the school district having to tighten its purse strings had meant increased class sizes and to prevent class sizes getting too large both the AP and school's media specialist agreed to teach some classes for the school year.

Beliefs

Modest, Self-Critical and Compassionate Approach

Both SG school principals presented themselves, and were typically described by staff, as being humble and very passionate about the children in their schools. The principal in one school described her leadership style as non-confrontational. She said she did not like conflict and preferred to sit and talk through issues with people rather than talk down to them. A teacher in the same SG school described the principal as the Gentle Giant.

She prides herself on being the 'gentle giant'. At the same time if I went over there right now and said, 'Oh my gosh, my son's car broke down on the way to school this morning and we have the 8th grade dance tonight, my husband's out of town right now, is there anybody that can cover my class?' She (the principal) would cover my class...I'm sure you've come in contact with leaders that lead with an iron fist and that's not always fun. Where she's consistent and has high expectations but in a kinder, gentler way. (SGS, Teacher)

The SG principal added that she does not know everything so she is very willing to delegate and views herself as working for her staff rather than them working for her.

The principal stated,

If I can't do something I will find somebody who can, I've never been afraid to do that, one of my favorite quotes from a movie is 'a man has to know his limitations' and I think that is an important thing, you have to know what you can and cannot do.

The SG school principal was willing to be self-critical as well. At one point in her interview, when referring to her oversight and promotion of the district's benchmark testing, she acknowledged, "I feel I have not been the best principal when it comes to those types of things." In addition, during the interview, the principal got emotional while describing what the students and the school meant to her, in part due to an imminent reassignment within the school district. The principal's passion and willingness to work for others was reflected in the words of a teacher,

In nearly every conversation we have in staff meetings, she always says it's all about the kids, it's not about her, it's not about how the school is so wonderful, it's not about how wonderful the teachers are, she does support and praise us though but it's about the kids.

Similarly, the other SG principal was compassionate, modest in describing his leadership achievements, and self-critical on occasions. The principal was very soft-spoken during the interview and said that his vision involved a school in which everyone worked together in harmony. The principal added, "Everybody has a say or some input into what's taking place and working for common goals in a respectful and cooperative way." Modeling his vision and beliefs was a priority on a daily basis.

What I try to do every day, I try to lead by example, I think that's the best way, I try to be a good role model like in the morning announcements I will say, 'let's do our best today and I will do my best to be the best principal I can be and with whomever I come in contact to practice respect and dignity and do my best effort

in everything I undertake and I want you to make the same commitment and challenge.’

Moreover, the principal shared that he rarely displayed anger and avoided showing when he was upset. He believed that leading by example was powerful and a critical part of being a successful administrator. The AP and teachers shared that when dealing with discipline issues the principal was always respectful with students and did not take a “got ya” approach. A teacher in the SG school noted, “Their (the administration) idea is that these are middle school kids that are going to make mistakes and our job is to try to help them learn from the mistakes...”

The same SG principal was self-critical and quick to acknowledge that he still had ample scope for growth. The principal, referring to his tendency to micro-manage at times, stated,

I’ve wrestled with that because sometimes I feel I don’t do as good as I should and like everyone else we have a SIT and this and that, but I’m not sure sometimes. I’m really going to examine this over the summer, whether I should be doing more with that, that is, more teacher input.

The SG school principal further recognized a continuous need to improve and stated,

The day that I don’t feel I need to improve or do something new is the day that I need to retire. I would say I’m a good principal and I want to be a great principal so that’s what I’m looking to do.

In contrast, the LG principals displayed high expectations for their staff and students like their SG counterparts, but were both more direct and even outwardly confident in sharing their beliefs and/or promoting their schools. In describing her ability to work in a tough urban school and build relationships with the local community a LG school principal declared, “Put it this way: I’m good in the hood. Surprisingly enough I was the original white girl from the country, but somehow I have a little bit of the hood in

my veins.” A teacher categorized the LG principal’s leadership style, “She listens, but she is also a firm leader.”

In describing her leadership style the principal added,

So basically hire the best teachers, support them, support the ones that can’t teach as well that probably have zero teacher magic and help them understand that they need to write the Greatest American Southern novel and leave.

The same LG school principal was very confident in her ability to hire effective teachers and encourage ineffective teachers to consider alternative options.

It’s just the most interesting thing ever. We have built the kind of reputation where superstars come to me. Now I can go and look for them but when I have a whole stable of resumes and they send them over in my email file and I have one gift for sure and I can hire people (LGS, Principal)

In recognizing the principal’s ability to hire and her energetic and direct approach a teacher reported,

She’s a performer. She’s insane. Also, her ability to hire teachers: It took a while for some turnover to take place, but the quality of teachers has improved dramatically since I’ve been here. There used to be many more teacher requests when I started, ‘I want that teacher.’ There is much less of that now because you truly can’t lose.

The second LG school principal presented himself in his interview as a very strong and confident school leader as well and knew very much what he wanted and was focused on taking his staff and students in that direction.

If a teacher is helping children move forward to their fullest potential then that’s excellence...I think where we need to move is looking at a business model of professionalism because in education we have people that education is a profession and a career and are ultimate professionals then we have some people that continue going to school their whole lives and they’re more in a kid mode...(LGS, Principal)

Furthermore, the LG school principal was direct in describing the need for some of his faculty, particularly younger teachers, to develop more appreciation for the need to communicate with parents. The principal stated,

So you want to help them as they say, 'I'm not going to talk to that parent, that parent is grouchy.' You know what, you have to talk to that parent, that's what we do! So you have to put your arm around them and at the same time coach them how we do it and as an administrator. So you're holding them firm in one hand and a stick in the other beating them over the head. It's nurturing and directing at the same time, but I don't think you can do that unless you're able to build trust.

The LG school principal acknowledged building trust was an important part of teacher retention and was accomplished by being accessible, personable and honest. The principal noted,

You listen and you try to give them the resources they need. You can't give them everything they want and they know that but I think if you're fair and equitable, reasonable and you're supportive and if you see something with a teacher that is great or not so great that you be honest about that and it's in your approach.

According to a teacher in the same LG school, the principal was firm and set in his ways, but when a teacher could approach him with a plan and could support it, then he would be open to deviating from his path.

A clear theme did emerge separating the two sets of schools. The LG school principals were confident, firm and direct in setting and describing their expectations. In contrast, the SG school principals held comparable high expectations for staff and students, but were more modest in leadership style and sharing their beliefs. Both SG principals were self-critical at times, willing to delegate responsibility as they perceived themselves as life-long learners and believed strongly that respecting students and staff reaps long-term benefits for all.

High Expectations and High Accountability

All four middle school principals believed in setting high expectations for staff and students. However, what separated the two sets of schools was that the SG school principals believed in consistently monitoring the implementation of their expectations, also. In one SG school, the principal consistently was visible in hallways and classrooms to monitor behavior and instruction. Moreover, the same principal had teachers submit lesson plans to his assistant principal, facilitated a master schedule that supports flexibility for students and staff while allowing ample support for struggling students. Also, staff and students used data to set goals and monitor their progress and administration were consistent in supporting the faculty with student discipline.

Likewise, the other SG school's principal believed in the need for continuous improvement and was consistent in promoting and supporting the high expectations she held for staff and students. The SG principal consistently attended teacher meetings, made herself accessible for staff, parents and students, and in conjunction with her AP consistently supported a comprehensive school-wide discipline model. In addition, the principal was active in promoting rigorous and relevant instruction for all students and using data to improve instruction and student achievement.

A theme of high expectations, but limited accountability emerged for the two LG middle schools. According to the principals and their staff, both LG principals set high expectations, but the accountability for their actual implementation was inconsistent. One LG school had a very solid discipline framework that was consistently supported by administration yet the other LG school had staff report that administration fluctuated considerably in consequences delivered for discipline infractions. As a teacher in the

latter LG school reported, “There is a little bit of disconnect with consistency of the disciplinary actions. This gives you ISS, but if you go to the principal, this doesn’t give you ISS.” Both LG schools, as discussed previously, were inconsistent in their monitoring of instruction despite their principals setting high expectations for instruction and student learning.

Both LG school principals were preoccupied with student growth and teachers meeting the needs of all students, but there was some inconsistency in their recognition and celebration of student and staff progress. In one LG school, staff and the principal reported that the recognition and celebration of staff and students’ successes during the school year was in need of improvement. A teacher noted, “That’s actually been brought up in our staff meetings. That’s been a big thing: We feel like there hasn’t been a whole lot of celebration...that’s been kind of a struggle.” The other LG school’s principal shared that such recognition had been handicapped by the school’s growth and limited space to host recognition events for students. That LG school principal did allow a group of students on each grade level that showed the most growth on their EOG tests to throw pies at her face at an end-of-year celebration.

A LG school principal talked of a no-nonsense approach in dealing with teachers that did not give their best yet a staff member reported the principal was inconsistent in addressing certain staff indiscretions. The LG school teacher shared that the principal sets high expectations, but failed to address some young teachers that wore casual attire to work and other teachers that would be tardy for duties on a regular basis.

Gosh, I’m on time for my duty every morning, but this person is not, and no one ever says a word to him. Or the individual wears a t-shirt and shorts to teach. That would be my biggest complaint about our principal, but then again it doesn’t

affect me too much, so I don't let it bother me. It's just something I've noticed.
(LGS, Teacher)

Another teacher in the same LG school reported that while the principal had expectations in place for the use of data to improve instruction, and several measures had been in place to do so, the principal did not always ensure all teachers utilize it.

Summary

The interviews conducted for this study produced some very rich data pertaining to how school leaders in high performing middle schools attempt to pursue, support and achieve excellence and systemic equity for all students. Though the lens of Academic Emphasis and its three sub-components: policies, practices and beliefs, clear themes emerged that were common to all four schools and in some instances separated the SG schools from the LG schools.

With respect to commonalities across the four schools the most important theme to emerge was the principals' belief that all students can learn and their subsequent focus on all students rather than any particular subgroups. The common theme to emerge across the SG and LG schools, among principals and their teachers, was that excellence is a student and/or a staff member working to the best of their potential or showing growth over the course of the school year.

Another important theme to emerge across all four middle schools was that the principals were concerned with the needs of whole child and implemented policies to support that concern. Policies across the schools varied but had the same goal of supporting the emotional, physical and academic needs of their students. These policies included individualized student schedules, parent contracts, student uniforms,

homogeneous grouping for Math and Language Arts classes, and the innovative use of support staff to assist students struggling at school and/or with difficult home lives.

An important practice that emerged as common to all four schools was the provision of resources and/or interventions to support students struggling academically. Two of the four schools ran study halls to ensure students completed homework and class assignments. The other two schools had well coordinated after-school programs for remediation and students to complete school work.

Two very significant common themes emerged that separated the SG schools from the LG schools. The first critical theme to emerge entails consistency which encompassed all three sub-components of the principals' academic emphasis. The SG principals were typically very consistent in the implementation of their policies, practices and beliefs and that was not always the case with the LG principals. Both SG principals were highly visible throughout their schools, supported teachers with discipline in a consistent manner, aggressively monitored instruction, utilized in-house resources to assist in areas they may be weak in, and recognized the importance of, and utilized data in a focused manner, to improve student achievement.

The consistency in the SG schools even extended to their master schedules and community and school district support. The LG school principals often had comparable policies, practices and beliefs, but the critical difference was that their high expectations and high standards were not always implemented consistently. LG school staff, and in some instances the LG principals themselves, reported a lack of accountability at times.

The other notable theme to emerge that was common to both SG schools and differed from the LG schools was the modesty displayed by the principals. It became

clear that the LG principals could be very confident, direct and on occasions very assertive in sharing their beliefs and dealing with others. In contrast, the SG principals were more modest in persona and less direct in dealing with others. One SG principal shared that he rarely displays moodiness and values a harmonious workplace while the other described herself as “non-confrontational” and was described by a teacher as a “gentle giant.” Both principals were self-critical, unhappy with the status quo, that is, they expected even more of their staff and students, and were prepared to delegate key tasks to others that they saw better suited to accomplish the desired results.

In summary, the SG principals held high expectations of themselves, staff and students. They were generally remarkably consistent in implementing and monitoring key policies, practices and beliefs. Finally, the two SG principals were highly focused on the success of all students, believed this could be best attained through modesty, and building and sustaining relationships with staff and students that were built on a foundation of mutual respect.

VI. CONCLUSION: FACILITATING EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY

Introduction

Despite emerging literature on social justice leadership in schools (Bruccoleri, 2008; Kose, 2005; Lust, 2005; Nowlin, 2008; Theoharris, 2004) and increased achievement for all students (Benkovitz, 2008; Muttillio, 2008; Urban, 2008) there has been limited research with the principal as the unit of analysis in high performing middle schools that are unusually successful at closing the achievement gap for traditionally disadvantaged student subgroups. This study sought to address that under-investigated topic by exploring how principals in four high performing middle schools, serving marginalized children, support social justice and pursue excellence and equity for all students.

What is more, this study sought to focus on social justice leadership in middle schools because of the significance of the middle grades in preparing adolescents for success in the long-term. The middle grades make for a critical period of social, intellectual, physical and psychological development of young people (Brown, 2009). However, it is in the middle grades that achievement gaps, particularly in mathematics, can evolve into achievement chasms (Belfanz & Byrnes, 2006). Predictive models have shown that 8th grade achievement has a stronger relationship with college readiness than any other factor: including family background, high school course work or high school Grade Point Average (The Education Digest, 2009).

The four high performing middle schools were purposefully selected as two of them (SG schools) were abnormally successful at narrowing the achievement gap between 2005-2009. The two other middle schools (LG schools) had persistent achievement gaps that exceeded the state's average achievement gap between White/affluent students and minority/economically disadvantaged students for the same four school years.

Although this study concentrated on schools successful at narrowing the achievement gap it is necessary to acknowledge that there are critics (English, 2002; Hilliard, 1995) that see standardized assessments as fundamentally flawed. Hilliard states that many assessments are culturally flawed and assessments should include culturally appropriate material that is familiar to the test takers. English adds that the achievement gap is actually an artifact of a measurement process characterized by flawed tests used to assess the progress of students. English states, "Assessment tools used by many state accountability systems are based on false notions of fairness and equity" (p. 298). Socio-economic status, parent configuration, and cultural backgrounds are all considered influential on a student's performance on a standardized test. Ironically, from this stance the achievement gap can be viewed as a product of inequity as it is measured with a fundamentally flawed tool. Consequently, one must be cognizant that the tool (EOG tests) used to measure student progress in this study's four schools, and in part identify social justice leadership, may be less than perfect.

This study used Academic Emphasis, one of three components that make-up the latent construct of Academic Optimism, as a lens to explore how four high performing middle schools pursue, support and achieve excellence and systemic equity for all

students. Hoy and Sabo (1998) saw academic emphasis as one of six key dimensions related to building strong and healthy school organizations or climates in middle schools.

Hoy and Sabo state,

Schools with high student achievement have a strong internal press for academic excellence. Teachers and administrators set a tone that is serious, orderly, and focused on academics. Students respond by accepting the challenge...Principals use their influence with superiors to get necessary support resources and support for the instructional program...(p. 114)

An additional study by Goddard, Sweetland and Hoy (2000) revealed that academic emphasis had a strong and positive association with student achievement in reading and mathematics regardless of the socio-economic status and/or race of students. Roney, Coleman and Schlichting (2007) researched the organizational climate of five middle schools and noted that one school that increased reading scores had seen an increase in academic emphasis while the other healthy climate dimensions or indicators in the same school had decreased.

Other studies have found that academic emphasis, or academic press, constantly builds upon itself strengthening a school's positive climate and supporting student learning. Shouse (1995) found that schools that focus on academic excellence for all students could experience academic success and in turn a positive school climate which fuels further success. Goddard, Sweetland and Hoy (2000) reported that "if most members of the school are highly committed to academic performance, the normative and behavioral environment will pressure school members to persist in their educational efforts so the students excel" (p. 689).

Furthermore, Shouse (1995) alluded to the relationship between excellence and equity. Shouse went on to conclude that educational equity is achieved for economically

disadvantaged students when schools marshal their social and human capital to focus on academic excellence. Scheurich and Skrla (2003) described excellent and equitable schools as those where there is little discernible difference between the performance of different groups of students.

Benkovitz's (2008) study found that principals and staff in excellent and equitable schools, albeit at the elementary level, have a strong academic emphasis and focus on the needs of all students and not just certain subgroups. Benkovitz found that principals leading excellent and equitable schools displayed the following: (a) a teamwork approach; (b) a balanced approach; (c) a strong sense of purpose; and (d) an insistent disposition. This study replicated much of the Benkovitz study and found several similarities and differences between the LG and SG middle schools with respect to the principals' policies, practices and beliefs that promoted excellence and equity in public schools.

Large Gap and Small Gap School Similarities

The equity audit in Phase One of this study revealed a level of parity between the two sets of purposefully selected middle schools. Indeed, the data analyzed in the equity audit generally displayed parity across teacher quality and school programs/resources in both sets of schools. Moreover, the four middle schools in this study were all very successful on the surface as exemplified by their regular recognition as schools of distinction and all of them achieving AYP in 2008-2009. Similarities among the four middle schools extended beyond academic accolades: According to the accounts of administrators and/or teachers within the four schools there were many similarities in the leadership policies, practices, and beliefs of the four principals.

With respect to policies, the four principals took a collaborative approach to hiring new staff. The principals would include teachers certified in the same subject areas, the relevant department chairs and/or the teachers that would have to work on a team with the new candidate. All four principals promoted policies that supported the emotional, physical and academic needs of their students. The policies were not always identical but sought to have the same outcome. Those policies included: individualized scheduling, allowing student changes to schedules, and support staff having considerable input. All principals were seen as supportive of teachers when it came to implementation of classroom protocols and the provision of resources for instruction.

Benkovitz (2008) found a similar teamwork approach, at least in her SG elementary schools, where a team hiring approach existed. One difference that emerged between the Benkovitz study and the current study was the teamwork approach did not encompass shared decision making across the SG middle schools. Shared decision making was not common to both SG middle schools in this study. One SG school principal preferred to make most major decisions, his School Improvement Team had a limited role and the school had no active PTA.

There were many similarities in the leadership practices of the four principals. All four principals were willing to delegate instructional leadership when appropriate. This practice was most prevalent in the area of professional development where the principals were particularly adept at recognizing and utilizing the knowledge and experience of the assistant principals and teacher leaders to deliver staff development. This practice was perhaps in part forced also because of the state and national recession meaning reduced staff development funding for schools and principals having to rely on in-house talent.

The use of data to strengthen instruction and support student achievement was important to all four principals, but they differed in the extent to which they monitored and held others accountable for its use. All four schools had programs in place to support struggling students. The policies often included the use of community mentors, after-school programs, regular study hall, and remediation classes incorporated into elective schedules.

Finally, all four principals had comparable beliefs when it came to the curriculum, instructional autonomy, school culture and high expectations for student success. All four principals expected the state's Standard Course of Study to be taught and believed in granting considerable instructional autonomy if teachers utilized it to drive engaging instruction. The principals believed that building strong and positive school cultures benefited student learning. Of course, the principals varied in their beliefs and practices in how they actually approached developing their respective schools' cultures. Importantly, the staff and principals themselves in all four schools reported that they are focused on the success of all students and the principals were typically strong advocates for such success.

Scheurich and Skrla (2003) caution that high expectations and respect are often overused terms in education today. They note almost every school has a mission statement that includes the term: "All students can learn". However, Scheurich and Skrla note they have visited many schools that advertize they seek excellence for all students yet large numbers of students failed to meet high standards. They note that schools where students are experiencing high and equitable success truly do promote respect and high expectations which permeate many aspects of school life. High expectations and respect

did appear to permeate many aspects of the SG school principals' policies, practices and beliefs.

Large Gap School and Small Gap School Differences

While there were many similarities between the four middle schools there were some profound differences. Of course, the primary difference that separated the four schools in to two sets was below the surface and was the discrepancy in achievement equity that emerged as a result of this study's equity audit. The SG schools had consistently outperformed the state average in terms of Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students achieving proficiency in both reading and mathematics. Moreover, the SG schools had achievement gaps that for the 2005-2009 period were considerably lower than the state average. In contrast, the LG schools for the same period had the same student subgroups at times perform below the state average and their achievement gaps were larger than the state's average.

Consistency, or a lack of, was another critical difference between the LG schools and SG schools and frequently encompassed the principals' policies, practices and beliefs. The SG school principals consistently implemented school procedures and rules. That was not always the case in both LG schools where the administration in one of them was reported as being inconsistent with consequences for poor student discipline and even minor staff indiscretions such as tardiness and casual work attire. Small Gap school principals were consistent in their monitoring of instruction while a common theme to emerge for both LG schools was the inconsistent monitoring of instruction. Both SG schools had enjoyed master schedule stability. That was not the case with the LG schools

where one had had several different master schedules in recent years and the other had recently had teachers lose planning time.

Furthermore, while all four principals believed in high standards and expected student excellence there was inconsistency with their actual monitoring and accountability of the expectations. However, the SG school principals were more consistent in displaying, setting and holding their staff and students accountable for their high expectations. Interestingly, Benkovitz (2008) found in her study of excellence and equity in elementary schools that the principals most successful at closing the achievement gap accounted for “every” child. In this study both the SG and LG school principals were preoccupied with the success of all children, but what separated them were the actual steps that the SG principals and their staff took to account for the success of every child.

A separate difference to emerge between the principals in the LG schools and SG schools were their personas and how they believed they were most effective in dealing with the students, staff, parents and community. The LG school principals described themselves and/or were described by their staff as being very confident, high energy and firm. Instead, the SG school principals described themselves and/or were described as modest, non-confrontational, yet confident.

Another key theme that emerged from the data was the balanced approach undertaken by the SG school principals. The SG school principals shared concerns about excess and/or too much emphasis on testing. Both principals recognized the need for, and actively supported, a balanced approach where non-tested curricula were valued and students had diverse opportunities during the school day. A balanced approach did not

emerge as being common to *both* the LG schools. The SG principals were very clear in describing their concerns about avoiding excess testing, meeting the needs of the whole child, and ensuring diverse opportunities and learning experiences actually occurred in classrooms. This is not to say that a balanced approach was absent in both LG schools, but discussion of a balanced approach was not as frequent or as strong in the interview data. However, the LG principals did share in common a passion for students being engaged in the classroom.

The SG school principals' policies, practices and beliefs as shared in this study provide an invaluable insight into how school leaders may support the pursuit of excellence and equity as seen by the abnormal narrowing of the achievement gap in their schools. The major theme of consistency and the role of SG school principals in facilitating excellence and equity is discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Principal as Facilitator of Excellence and Equity

Goddard, Sweetland and Hoy (2000) noted, "The greater the academic emphasis of a school, the more capable is the school of facilitating student learning" (p. 687). This study found that the two SG school principals facilitated excellence and equity through their consistent press for academic excellence and modest demeanors that nurtured positive and respectful school climates. Moreover, the SG principals displayed considerable resolve to ensure all students were successful.

Consistency

An overarching theme that separated the two SG schools from the LG schools was consistency. The two SG principals were remarkably consistent in the implementation of key policies, practices and beliefs supporting excellence and equity.

Both principals were very proactive in establishing and supporting school-wide discipline policies. According to Hoy and Sabo (1998) an emphasis on academic excellence must be accompanied by an orderly and serious learning environment. Scheurich and Skrla (2003) add, “The schools in which all students are experiencing high and equitable success truly have a climate of high expectations and respect for their students that permeates all aspects of school life” (p. 47).

Indeed, teachers in both SG schools attributed the high expectations that were clearly laid out for staff and students and their consistent enforcement as being instrumental in students generally being well behaved and successful in the classroom. As one SG teacher described,

I would say my entire faculty know what they’re expected to be doing on a daily basis academically or even job wise...your duties and when one should be doing them but even the students can. They could probably do it on a class by class basis if asked, ‘What does she expect you to accomplish today?’ ‘What are you expected to bring with you?’ I think that’s huge here as to why it’s never a question and why the kids do so well because they know where they’re supposed to be and what they’re supposed to be doing.

Similarly, referring to aspects of the school that contribute to student achievement a teacher in the other SG school noted,

We have high expectations and consistency...so here at school we set the expectation, you meet the expectation and if you don’t there are consequences and when you follow through on those consequences it makes a believer out of them. They realize the focus is on their education: the academics.

Staff in both SG schools reported that the clear and well enforced high expectations generally led to a low incidence of serious discipline infractions. Scheurich and Skrla (2003) state discipline problems, except for those few students, are infrequent in excellent and equitable schools because children respond to caring, respectful and engaging

instruction. They add when problems are prevalent, that is representative of an adult problem, a systems problem, and not a student problem.

What is more, the SG principals were consistently monitoring instruction and being focused with their use of data to improve instruction and student achievement. Brown (2009) in his study of the programs, strategies and practices used by a high minority/high poverty middle school successful at narrowing the achievement gap, found that key factors included data driven decision making and zero ambiguity. At the middle school studied by Brown, the principal maintained a laser like focus on developing and supporting programs and practices that enhanced student achievement.

The consistency that permeated the SG principals' policies, practices and beliefs both supports and extends previous research. Hoy's theoretical framework of academic optimism makes little direct mention of consistency, but it does acknowledge the importance of trust. Hoy and Sabo (1998) define the concept,

Trust is a general confidence and overall optimism in occurring events: It is believing in others in the absence of compelling reasons to disbelieve...Individuals trust others, not only to be consistent in action, but to act with good intentions. (p. 68)

Hoy and Sabo talk of faculty trust which can include teachers' trust in the principal, that is, he will act in their best interests and keep his word and teachers' trust in their colleagues or belief that colleagues will be depended on and will act with integrity.

Several studies have found faculty trust, a component of academic optimism, to be linked to open and healthy schools and/or improving student achievement (Hoy & Sabo, 1998; Hoy, Tarter & Hoy, A.W., 2004; Urban, 2008). However, in this study consistency went beyond trust. Trust was rarely mentioned by interviewees. Instead, interviewees would report directly and/or indirectly how the SG school principals were consistent in

establishing or conveying their policies, practices and beliefs in their schools. In summary, consistency rather than trust was the reoccurring theme in the SG middle schools in this study.

There are studies and/or cases that discuss the significance of leadership consistency in isolation rather than treating it as simply a factor contributing to trust. Richardson and Piper (1986) conducted an experimental study where the leadership style and behaviors were manipulated in different learning groups of adults. Seventy-one participants provided feedback on various aspects of their learning experiences. Consistency was defined as uniformity in a leader's style across learning sessions that she or he led. The study found that consistent leader behaviors opposed to inconsistent leader behavior was related to greater learning for participants.

Another study reveals the profound impact that consistency can have on the ability of groups to function effectively. Cole and Bedeian's (2007) study of 828 air force personnel across 27 occupational groups found that consistent leadership results in content employees. The study revealed that employees who share similar perceptions of their organization's leadership can be satisfied regardless of whether their leaders are terrible, ineffective or effective. Group consensus among employees acts as a buffer against poor leadership, but it is necessary for the leadership to be consistent otherwise this delicate balance will not always hold true and the consensus can be lost owed to the lack of predictability and/or consistency.

Licata and Harper's (1999) study of 38 junior high and middle schools revealed when schools are healthy and robust, academic emphasis is a dominant organizational theme. The significance of consistency in healthy and robust middle schools is indirectly

alluded to in their study. Licata and Harper reported when “academic emphasis is compromised, teacher efforts to maintain cohesion and adapt to uncertainty in the internal and external environments may displace academic goals” (p.474).

The direct relevance of consistency in an actual school context is alluded to by Principal Alexander and his success raising student achievement in a high poverty/high minority elementary school that had had four principals in four years and failed to make AYP. In his fourth year at the school as principal, Alexander had presided over substantial change and success. Sacajawea Elementary School made AYP for the two years leading up to 2010 and was named one of only three Distinguished Schools in Idaho for 2009. Alexander attributed much of the school’s success to consistency.

Alexander stated (as cited in O’Brien, 2010)

When I arrived...There was no consistency. The school needed a consistent discipline plan as well as just focus and direction, because it had been pointed in such a wide variety of directions over the years...I would also credit establishing what we are going to teach and common discipline and consistent focus towards where we are headed. (pp. 1-2)

The principal viewed a consistent approach to dealing with discipline plus consistent policies and direction pertaining to instructional programs and the direction the school wished to head as being critical to the school’s successful turn-around.

Similarly, the SG school principals in this study acknowledged the importance of setting a direction for their schools and consistently focusing on it. As one SG school principal acknowledged, his main focus is to,

...keep teachers on task and not get sidetracked, it’s easy to bird walk it, ‘let’s try to do all these different things’, but really keeping the eye on where they are heading and saying ‘no we don’t need to do that let’s keep focusing here’ and making sure that they have what they need.

While the SG principals were focused on the direction they wanted to take their schools and ensuring staff embraced their vision, both principals were not satisfied with the status quo and recognized the need for continuous academic improvement. As one SG school teacher shared,

We don't just keep spinning our wheels expecting something to change, we change if it's not working, get rid of it. If it's working, keep working at it, tweak it and adjust it, we are not doing the same thing over and over.

The consistent academic emphasis that existed in the SG schools may have offset the lack of structure and consistency that the schools' minority and economically disadvantaged students encountered outside of school. Price (2001) declared there is a "preparation gap" where parents of color and low-income parents fail to prepare their children for success at school. According to Price, the preparation gap is an external issue that must be addressed before the achievement gap can be reduced significantly. Studies have revealed that lack of structure in homes such as single-parent families and/or step-families (Pong, 1977) and economic strain (Lee & Croninger, 1994; McLoyd, 1998) can inhibit student success. McLoyd states, "Harsh, inconsistent parenting and elevated exposure to acute and chronic stressors appear to be key mediators of the link between poverty and children's socio-emotional functioning" (p. 198).

Lee and Croninger (1994) note that many minority families have high aspirations for their children, but lack the material resources to support their children. In addition, inconsistency in beliefs about success can emerge in minority homes. Many parents in minority groups discriminated against have difficulty convincing their children that considerable effort can be rewarded with social and economic success: consequently low expectations can ensue. However, Lee and Croninger found that the inequity in literacy

development for young adolescents from low-income homes could be addressed by schools. Schools with focused and well planned literacy instruction, high levels of coordination and cooperation between teachers had higher reading achievement for economically disadvantaged middle-grade students. Lee & Croninger noted, “Schools with positive social relations between students and teachers are those in which achievement is more likely to be equitably distributed” (p. 314). Staff in the SG schools frequently talked of their principals facilitating nurturing and respectful relationships between faculty and students.

Payne (2005) defines poverty as a lack of resources and identifies eight critical resources whose absence or presence influences the affect or poverty on students: financial, mental, emotional, physical support systems, spiritual, relationships and role models, and knowledge of hidden roles. Payne notes that if an individual has limited financial resources, but strong spiritual, physical and emotional support, then the burdens of poverty can be reduced. Payne concludes that although schools cannot change financial resources, they can have a positive affect on some of the other resources.

While schools can attempt to combat the low expectations that many students bring to school owed to lack of resources, structure and consistency in their lives at home, educators themselves must overcome their own deficit-thinking. Deficit-thinking entails educators having low expectations for minority and/or poor students as they perceive their economic and/or social shortcomings as a barrier to their success in the classroom (Valencia, 1997). Scheurich and Skrla (2003) counter, “Really the most important barrier is in our minds, in our beliefs: not in some external cause” (p. 24).

In this study, the SG school principals actively resisted deficit-thinking and instead set and maintained high expectations for behavior and academic excellence for all students in positive learning environments. The SG schools provided consistency and a variety of resources (food packages, access to extra counselors, study halls, diverse curricula offerings, flexible scheduling, positive relationships, respectful and safe learning environments, high expectations, and so on) that otherwise may have been lacking in the lives of their minority and economically disadvantaged students. Randy Elmore, professor of middle grades education at Piedmont College, Georgia, suggests, “With strong, consistent leadership at all levels, including national study groups, state and local officials, building administrators, and teachers, we can create the middle schools our nation’s children deserve and that we all desire” (p. 291). Barriers to high achievement for minority and economically disadvantaged students in the SG schools appeared to be significantly lessened because of their principals’ policies, practices and beliefs and the consistency that was embedded in each of them.

Modesty

Modesty was another significant theme to emerge in this study. The two SG school principals were remarkably modest in demeanor and describing their contributions to their schools’ successes. Also, both principals were very driven yet compassionate with respect to ensuring the success of their students.

The relationship between modesty and resolve and successful leadership has emerged in prior research. Collins (2001) researched companies that had gone from “good-to-great” or rather had once been insignificant competitors in their respective fields, but had gone on to achieve sustained success, that is, cumulative returns three

times the market rate over a fifteen year period. Next Collins analyzed and compared the biographies, leadership styles and behaviors of the chief executive officers (CEOs) of the good-to-great companies with comparable companies that had remained steady with less remarkable market returns or even regressed over the same 15 year period. A common theme that emerged in Collins' study was compelling modesty on the part of most of the good-to-great company leaders. The good-to-great CEOs were willing to talk about the success of their companies, but would frequently avoid talking about themselves and deflected the success on to their colleagues and employees. The CEOs typically shunned public adulation, were rarely boastful, acted with a calm and quiet determination while modeling high standards rather than relying on charisma to motivate others.

Furthermore, Collins (2001) study revealed that not only did the good-to-great leaders possess compelling modesty and humility, but they also displayed considerable resolve and determination to make their companies great. Collins coined the term "Level 5 Leadership" to describe the unique combination of compelling modesty and ferocious resolve characterized by the good-to-great leaders in his study. The professional will of the good-to-great CEOs was exemplified by their apportioning responsibility for errors on themselves, not others, setting high standards and not settling, and demonstrating unwavering commitment to long-term success.

The beliefs and leadership styles of the SG school principals could be described as Level 5 Leadership, also. Both SG school principals deflected ownership of key successes in their schools despite others making it clear that the leaders supported and/or created the successful initiatives. The principals described in considerable detail the numerous policies and practices in their schools that they supported yet they frequently

deferred ownership to others. For example, when responding to a question about instructional leadership in their schools the two SG school principals deferred to their assistant principals.

My AP does a lot. I'm the academic leader of the school I realize that. However, having someone like her on staff, I don't get involved as much probably as principals in some other schools because of the person I have, but I would say daily interactions...I'm pretty good about that. (SGS, Principal)

Not as much as I should, and that is where my AP has been valuable because she does more of it than I do, and if you ask any of the teachers the instructional person that has been driving that has probably been her more than me and she did a lot more going into classrooms...I do when I can. (SGS, Principal)

Deferring instructional leadership achievements to their APs was a prime example of how the SG school principals did not give themselves enough credit for their schools' success.

Just like Level 5 Leaders both principals were prepared to apportion blame on themselves rather than others for perceived failings. One SG principal said that she was responsible for discrepancies in the implementation of benchmark testing that the local school district recommended teachers do on a quarterly basis. The principal shared that she did not aggressively promote use of those particular tests as she saw it as excess testing. However, the same principal added, "I feel I have not been the best principal when it comes to those types of things." The other SG school principal responded that he had room to improve in sharing decision making and perhaps had to consider the creation of a leadership team that had teacher representatives on it.

Despite their modest and at times self-critical demeanor, the SG school principals, like their Level 5 counterparts, displayed considerable compassion and resolve. One principal described herself, and was described by others as being non-confrontational and laid back yet strong. The principal stated, "I would rather sit down and have a

conversation about an issue, I have never been one to say I am the boss and this is the way it goes.” The same principal made it clear that her number one focus was to do whatever it takes to ensure the kids were successful and keeping the staff focused on that goal. A staff member supported that goal by sharing,

In nearly every conversation we have in staff meetings, she always says it’s all about the kids, it’s not about her, it’s not about how our school is so wonderful, it’s not about how wonderful the teachers are, she does support and praise us though, but it’s about the kids.

Teachers discussed the principal’s generosity as shown by covering teachers’ classes in emergencies, running working lunches for students that had not completed class based assignments, being accessible, and even helping with trash collection around the school. Modesty, generosity and compassion aside, teachers still saw their principal as a strong leader. For example one teacher noted, “She is a strong leader, she has vision and she includes the staff in the decision making policy also and the goals of the school.”

Similar compassion and resolve on the principal’s part was reported in the other SG school. The principal himself talked about how he was preoccupied with establishing a caring and respectful school environment where everyone works together in harmony.

The SG principal stated,

What I try to do everyday, I try to lead by example, I think that’s the best way. I try to be a good role model like in the morning announcements I will say ‘let’s do our best today and I will do my best to be the best principal I can be and with whomever I come in contact with to practice respect and dignity and do my best effort in everything I undertake and I want you to make that same commitment and challenge.’

Teachers described the same SG principal as being very preoccupied with the success of their students while being compassionate.

He’s very hands on. He’s very caring, has a very compassionate nature with the kids, he’s definitely a very concerned principal – always looking for better ways

to do things and a better way to present things. He's very interactive with kids. He handles most of our failing students. He's the one that sits down with them and 'instead of retaining you, what's the best way we can help you' and the kids appreciate that. (SGS, Teacher)

With their combination of modesty and resolve the SG school principals seemed to have found an excellent balance between too much assertiveness and an absence of assertiveness. Assertiveness is frequently a characteristic associated with leadership. In his study of social justice leadership in schools, Theoharris (2004) found the principals demonstrated "arrogant humility." The SG school principals in this study displayed considerable humility, but arrogance was rare or even non-existent.

Ames and Flynn (2007) conducted a study that revealed being too low or too high in assertiveness was viewed by others as a leadership weakness. Instead the study found that moderate assertiveness was seen as the most effective form of leadership both in terms of social and instrumental outcomes. Nevertheless, Ames and Flynn stressed that moderate leaders should still practice situational leadership, that is, be prepared to higher or lower their assertiveness levels when a situation depends on it. This situational awareness was acknowledged by the SG school principals. A SG school principal described as non-confrontational and a team player noted that "there are times when I have to be the boss and tell them this is what they are going to do, but those times are very far and few between." The AP in the other SG school shared,

His leadership style...he is very understanding, but he knows what it means to be a principal. So whenever it's time to step up to the bar he does...like if there's something going on that needs him to be assertive about and I think we all feel that way...the administrators do.

This study supports Benkovitz's (2008) finding that the principals of schools that promoted excellence and equity shared insistent dispositions and were very determined to

do the best they could in all areas for all their students. The two SG school principals in the current study possessed considerable resolve and were described as strong leaders. However, a theme to emerge in this study, that was not discussed in Benkovitz's study, was the remarkable modesty that accompanied the resolve of both SG school principals.

A Balanced Approach

Benkovitz (2008) found that SG elementary school principals had a balanced approach across their policies, practices and beliefs that resulted in student achievement that is excellent and equitable. Benkovitz added, "...small gap principals sent clear and consistent messages about the importance of learning" (p.174). This study, like Benkovitz, found that SG principals were consistent in setting and reinforcing their expectations and took a balanced approach. However, this study found a balanced approach extended beyond an intense focus on academics, data and discipline. A balanced approach included support and diverse opportunities for students, also.

There is a body of literature and research that has suggested that increased accountability and high-stakes testing leads to inequitable outcomes for poor and minority students because of a subsequent over-emphasis on preparing students for testing in reading and mathematics (Castagno, 2008; Emery & Ohanian, 2004; Lupton, 2005; Smyth, 2008). In contrast, Skrla et al. (2001) believe that increased accountability can leverage positive change for all students and there can be no social justice without student achievement.

Hoy, Tarter and Kottkamp (1991) noted that schools with a strong academic emphasis "are not simply bleak factories" (p. 99). Indeed, both SG principals recognized the trap of over-emphasizing testing and supported balanced curricula, flexible but

consistent master schedules, and engaging instruction. A SG school principal was averse to using the district's quarterly benchmark testing for reading and math as she saw it as excess testing that other principals were quick to use and "it got jammed down their (teachers and students) throats." The principal added that the benchmark testing was not always well aligned with instruction. Consequently, the students can be tested on material that has not been covered and they can feel "stupid" when they get the results back. Similarly, the other SG principal acknowledged the need to steer clear of too much focus on testing and stated,

Like it or not when kids go to high school and beyond, test taking is part of it, but I don't want to get caught up in the test taking thing. You can have a school that has knocked the socks off the tests (EOGs) but when you look into it, it's not providing the best for kids. I guess what I'm saying is that the testing is there, we're trying to provide that for students but excellence is hopefully teaching kids to learn for intrinsic reasons rather than extrinsic and that's hard nowadays.

The two SG schools had diverse and engaging instructional activities included in their schedules. For example, one SG school mandated interdisciplinary units with very rigorous and relevant instruction and content for all three grade-levels. In the other SG school, students had six weeks in the middle of the school year where they could participate in a variety of activities that included knitting, rocket building and media broadcasting. In addition, students could request schedule changes but they had to submit such requests with a strong rationale in writing to the school's counselors before they would be considered. Finally, the SG school principal was concerned with recognizing student talent in all areas: the performing arts, academics and athletics.

We're going to have a pep rally next Thursday and we're calling it a celebration pep rally because my goal is to recognize not only your sports teams but also those that made honor chorus, the math counts team, the all district band members and in middle school especially those that are involved in the play. Middle school

can be very clickish...I think you should recognize achievement in all areas.
(SGS, Principal)

Hoy, Tarter and Hoy, A.W. (2006) state that principals seeking to move a school toward academic emphasis must do so by example, thus they celebrate the achievements of faculty and students, especially those that are academic in nature. The SG principals were deliberate in their focus on recognizing academic excellence along with athletics.

Smyth (2008) contends that the new era of accountability and the associated high-stakes testing is leading to drill and kill instruction at the expense of exploratory and lifelong learning and teaching experiences. Both SG school principals recognized the significance of state testing and were very focused on their students' success, but at the same time they advocated for diverse learning activities and opportunities for the students within their respective schools.

Addressing the Research Questions

The major research question that provided the impetus for this study was: How do the principals of four traditional 6-8 public middle schools, consistently recognized as North Carolina "Schools of Distinction" pursue, support and advance social justice, systemic equity and excellence? Three research questions were posited and used to guide the focus of this inquiry. With the data collected, analyzed and discussed, the next section will specifically address the research questions.

The first research question sought to reveal what school-wide policies promoted by the principals could be attributed to supporting student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap. A collaborative approach to hiring highly qualified teachers with teaching experience or at least some exposure to the systems and protocols within their respective schools was a policy implemented by all four principals. The LG school and

SG school principals chose to include relevant staff members when interviewing teacher candidates.

Another policy that was common to three of the four schools, and certainly appeared strong in the two SG schools, was the establishment and support of school-wide discipline policies. Almost all the staff in the two SG schools attributed the success in part to clear and high expectations being set for students' behavior and academic performance. The academic emphasis was reinforced with school-wide discipline policies that were consistently reinforced by administration in both SG schools. Moreover, the SG school principals were described as being consistently respectful yet firm in their dealings with students. Staff reported that in the middle-grades students are at a critical juncture in their young lives and their respective administrations built strong relationships with students which prevented students from being in defensive mode. Instead students, and staff, felt supported by their administrators.

All four schools had policies in place requiring the collection and analysis of data to improve instruction and student achievement. However, staff in the LG schools generally reported that data driven decision making, and use of common formative assessments, was in its infancy. The SG school principals required the use of data and were actively involved in utilizing data along with their staffs. Moreover the use of data in the SG schools was very focused and had specific goals in sight that were monitored such as improving writing scores and students setting and monitoring their own growth and reading and mathematics.

The second research question entailed an analysis of the leadership practices that the principals displayed that supported student achievement and narrowing the

achievement gap. Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2003) revealed curriculum and instruction involvement, monitoring of school practices, and visibility as three of 21 leadership responsibilities linked to student achievement. The same three leadership practices were common themes to the SG schools in this study.

Both SG school principals were actively involved in curriculum and instruction development and monitoring actual implementation. In one SG school all teachers were required to submit their lessons to administration every week and the principal frequently visited classrooms to formally and informally observe. The other SG school principal met with grade-level teams every Tuesday to discuss their instructional planning and other issues. The same principal was very involved in supporting rigorous and relevant instruction which came to fruition in the required interdisciplinary units that each grade-level taught.

Staff in both SG schools described their principals as being consistently visible and accessible in their schools. That was not a leadership practice reported as being common in both the LG schools. One LG school principal took great pride in being visible and staff shared the principal was visible around the school and in classrooms. However, in the other LG school some staff reported they very rarely saw the principal in their hallways and/or classrooms.

All four principals displayed a willingness to delegate instructional leadership to others. The four principals were adept at recognizing and utilizing their assistant principals and teacher leaders to help facilitate staff development. The need for in-house professional development had become increasingly necessary with the state withholding professional development funding owed to an economic recession.

The third and final research question sought to discover how the SG and LG school principals were similar and/or different in their beliefs with respect to student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap. There were more similarities than differences between the two sets of principals when it pertained to their beliefs about student achievement. However, when there were differences they were profound.

All four principals believed in setting and communicating high expectations for all their students. The four principals viewed excellence as all students succeeding which typically was defined as the students showing growth and/or performing to the best of their ability. Building and sustaining a strong school culture was perceived as a critical component in aiding student success.

The four principals were identical in many respects when it came to their beliefs about effective classroom instruction. All four principals saw teacher adherence to the state curriculum (SCoS) as critical. In addition, the four principals believed in instructional autonomy so long as teachers were following the SCoS and delivering engaging instruction.

Nevertheless, there were two key areas where the two sets of principals did differ in their beliefs and/or approaches. The SG school principals consistently held others accountable for the high expectations they set. That accountability extended to both students and staff. Ironically, the two SG school principals presented themselves, and were described by others, as being modest yet strong leaders. The SG school principals were self-critical at times, compassionate in nature, and would even deflect responsibility for successful programs or practices to others within their schools. Despite the two LG school principals being more outwardly assertive, the SG school principals had equal or

greater resolve and again were more consistent in ensuring their high expectations (via school policies and practices) were actually being implemented.

Recommendations for Practice

The results from this mixed methods study focusing on the principals' leadership policies, practices and beliefs in LG and SG schools point to several recommendations for creating schools that are excellent and equitable. They include: (a) clear and consistent discipline expectations and consequences; (b) collaborative hiring practices of highly qualified teachers suited to a school's culture; (c) focused data driven decision making; (d) consistent monitoring of instruction; (e) high expectations for all students with attached accountability; (f) school district and community support; and (g) a balanced and consistent approach that is child centered.

Several teachers in the SG schools attributed their success primarily to their schools having strong school-wide discipline frameworks in place that were supported consistently by their principals. Moreover, school leaders and faculty should be aware of the need to balance a consistent and firm approach with displaying a respectful manner. The schools most successful at narrowing the achievement gaps in this study had principals that were viewed as both strong and compassionate.

Principals and their teachers in all four schools viewed the inclusion of relevant teachers on interview teams for new teacher candidates. There was a consensus among the principals that some proven teaching experience and/or experience within their respective schools as student teachers familiar with their schools were preferred.

Data driven decision making was valued and advocated by all four principals in this study. Staff in the schools were expected to utilize data to improve instruction and

student achievement through targeted interventions. The SG schools stood out as both principals were active in utilizing data and requiring their staff to collect and analyze data. Also, data use was typically very focused, that is, profound and consistent.

The principals most successful at narrowing the achievement gaps in their schools set high expectations for instruction and were very active in monitoring instruction. The SG school principals met and planned instruction with their teachers, required lesson plans to be submitted and regularly visited classrooms formally and informally. High visibility was a related theme and common to both SG schools with staff reporting principals as being frequently visible in hallways and classrooms.

What is more, educators seeking to promote excellence and equity in their schools could benefit from noting that the SG school principals in this study set and maintained high expectations. All four principals believed in and advocated for the success of all their students. However, the SG school principals differed in that they actually followed through on their high expectations in a variety of ways such as their use of data, role modeling respect, modesty and resolve, consistently monitoring instruction, and being highly visible around their schools.

Principals and schools that enjoy school district and community support may be better positioned to narrow the achievement gap. Both SG principals and their staff reported enjoying school district support and it having a role in their schools' success. One SG principal reported she appreciated the clear vision that was set, communicated, and supported by consecutive superintendents. Staff in the other SG school appreciated the supply of pertinent student achievement data along with the personable approaches and accessibility of central office personnel. Likewise, staff in both SG schools reported

considerable community support. One SG school had very modern facilities and ample technology funded by county commissioners that were reported as being public school friendly owed in part to the district's schools being successful overall. The other SG school had secured instructional resources by applying for and securing grants.

Finally, social justice oriented leaders could benefit from advocating an overall balanced and consistent approach as evident by the beliefs and actions of the two SG school principals. Both SG school principals balanced modesty with strong resolve. The SG school principals were remarkably consistent in their display of key policies, practices and beliefs. In addition, the SG school principals were cognizant of the need for a strong press for academic excellence and a balanced instructional program that was child centered and steered clear of an over-emphasis on testing.

Recommendations for Future Research

A comparable study focusing on the principals' policies, practices and beliefs that support student achievement in two SG middle schools and two LG middle schools with more similar student populations could be beneficial. There are studies showing class size is related to student achievement (French, Atkinson & Rugen, 2007; Wenglinsky, 1997). The average class sizes for the four schools were very similar in this study. However, there was a discrepancy in overall school size with the LG schools averaging 231 more students than the SG schools. Some studies suggest that smaller schools can have a more positive impact on student achievement (French, Atkinson & Rugen, 2007; Green & Stevens, 1988; Meir, 1995).

Another recommendation for further research would be an exploration of the significance of school district and/or community policies, practices and beliefs in

supporting student achievement and closing the achievement gap. This study's research questions were confined to the principals; however, the significance of district policies and support was a theme that emerged and was common to both SG schools. Staff in both SG schools reported their districts were effective in setting long-term direction for their schools and/or providing resources such as extra counselors or access to technology coaches. Although the theme of district support emerged it could not be addressed in considerable detail as it was outside the main focus of this study.

In this study, both SG school principals demonstrated considerable modesty and resolve in their beliefs and leadership styles. It would be interesting to conduct a quantitative study that surveyed a large sample of principals and teachers in comparable SG schools to determine if indeed Level 5 Leadership and/or moderate assertiveness is significantly related to student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap. Such a study would make it possible to generalize results which this study could not do beyond discussion of the two SG and two LG schools in this study.

Furthermore, an additional study that would be interesting would explore in greater detail transactional versus transformational leadership in schools successful at narrowing the achievement gap. As discussed previously, many contemporary studies report schools most successful at raising student achievement have transformational leaders (Johnson, 2007; Larbi, 2003; Malone & Caddell, 2000). This study found that while the SG principals shared many policies, practices and beliefs they differed in that one SG principal demonstrated some transactional leadership traits particularly in relation to decision making. The SG principal made many decisions in isolation, or with his administrative staff only, and he had chosen to not have a PTA. In contrast, the other SG

principal in this study was more collaborative or transformational in her leadership style including decision making.

Finally, a comparable study at the high school level would be beneficial. This study supported, and built upon, the findings of Benkovitz's (2008) study of principals' policies, practices and beliefs in excellent and equitable elementary schools. A case existed for a study of social justice leadership at the middle school level as research reveals that nationwide there is a significant achievement gap in the public school middle-grades and if students cannot succeed at that level they may never succeed (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009a; The Education Digest, 2009). High schools are unique again as they tend to be large and very departmentalized, so it would be intriguing to explore the similarities and differences in SG and LG schools at that level.

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Principals

1) What administrative roles have you had up to this point in your career? How about your general background in education?

Leadership Beliefs:

2) Describe your philosophy of education. How does it impact your leadership style?

3) What is your main focus at _____ Middle School? What is your mission? How do you define excellence? What are your goals? Values?

4) Discuss your students and your expectations for their success (personal development and academic achievement). Does your staff share these expectations?

5) What specific aspects of your school's culture contribute to student achievement?

Leadership Policies:

6) How do you recruit, retain, and support good teachers and good teaching? What are your expectations for the school's curriculum?

7) How are decisions made at your school? What are some examples of collaboration at work in your school?

8) How do you see the management of discipline issues being related to the academic success of students?

Leadership Practices:

9) What are your expectations for your school's instructional program? For staff evaluations? Opportunities for all students?

10) What is your role in providing staff access to professional development? What kinds of professional development are offered to staff?

11) How do you measure the effectiveness of instructional practices in your school?

12) Do you and your staff use data to improve student achievement? How?

13) How much instructional autonomy do teachers have in your school? What are some examples of creative teachers being successful in your school?

14) How do you, and your staff, recognize and celebrate student achievement?

Miscellaneous Issues:

15) In what ways are parents/families and the community involved in your school?

16) Is there anything else I should know about _____ Middle School and what makes it successful?

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Assistant Principals

1) How long have you been in your current role at _____ Middle School? What is your administrative and teaching background?

Leadership Beliefs:

2) Describe your principal's philosophy of education. How does it impact his/her leadership style?

3) What is your principal's main focus at _____ Middle School? What is your staff's mission? How do you define excellence? What are your goals? Values?

4) Discuss your students and your expectations for their success (personal development and academic achievement). Does your principal share these expectations?

5) What specific aspects of your school's culture contribute to student achievement?

Leadership Policies:

6) How does your principal recruit, retain, and support good teachers and good teaching? What are your expectations for your school's curriculum?

7) How are decisions made at your school? What are some examples of collaboration at work in your school?

8) How do you see the management of discipline issues being related to the academic success of students?

Leadership Practices:

9) What are your principal's expectations for your school's instructional program? For staff evaluations? Opportunities for all students?

10) What role does your principal have in providing staff access to professional development? What kinds of professional development are offered to staff?

11) How do you and your principal measure the effectiveness of instructional practices in your school?

12) Do you, and your staff, use data to improve student achievement? How?

13) How much instructional autonomy do teachers have in your school? What are some examples of creative teachers being successful in your school?

14) How does your principal recognize and celebrate student achievement?

Miscellaneous Issues:

15) In what ways are parents/families and the community involved in your school?

16) Is there anything else I should know about _____ Middle School and what makes it successful?

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Teachers

1) What is your position and role in the school and how many years have you been a faculty member at _____ Middle School? How about your general background in education?

Leadership Beliefs:

2) Describe your principal's philosophy of education and his/her leadership style.

3) What is your principal's main focus at _____ Middle School? What is your school's mission? How do you define excellence? What are your school's goals? Values?

4) Discuss your students and your expectations for their success (personal development and academic achievement). Does your principal share these expectations?

5) What specific aspects of your school's culture contribute to student achievement?

Leadership Policies:

6) How does your principal recruit, retain, and support good teachers and good teaching? What are your principal's expectations for your school's curriculum?

7) How are decisions made at your school? What are some examples of collaboration at work in your school?

8) How do you see the management of discipline issues being related to the academic success of students?

Leadership Practices:

9) What are your principal's expectations for your school's instructional program? For staff evaluations? Opportunities for all students?

10) What is your principal's role in providing staff access to professional development? What kinds of professional development are offered to staff?

11) How does your principal measure the effectiveness of instructional practices in your school?

12) Do you and your colleagues use data to improve student achievement? How?

13) How much instructional autonomy do you and other teachers have in your school?

What are some examples of creative teachers being successful in your school?

14) How do you, and your principal, recognize and celebrate student achievement?

Miscellaneous Issues:

15) In what ways are parents/families and the community involved in your school?

16) Is there anything else I should know about _____ Middle School and what makes it successful?

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