

EXAMINING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PRINCIPALS  
WHO USE LITERACY AS AN INTENTIONAL  
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORT

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## **DEDICATION**

To my husband, Robert, for being so thoughtful and supportive throughout this process. Your patience, encouragement, and unwavering love have made this possible.

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**ABSTRACT**

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Texas State University-San Marcos

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SUPERVISING PROFESSOR: SARAH W. NELSON

Leaders of high-poverty elementary schools seeking to improve student achievement must determine which programs and supports best meet the needs of their students and provide the greatest impact on learning, instruction, and school culture. This study examined the lived experiences of successful principals of high performance, high poverty schools, who used literacy development as an intentional school improvement focus while simultaneously improving other measures of school success. The inquiry sought to understand how these successful principals instilled changes to teaching, learning, and school culture while developing literate students. An interpretative phenomenological analysis approach was employed to investigate, analyze, examine, and

elicit the principals' leadership and individual experiences as they implemented structures and supports to empower their teachers and struggling learners.

The findings of the study suggest that principals, particularly those serving in underserved communities, can focus on high quality literacy instruction and be successful in the accountability system. Also, districts should consider creating professional learning groups to build the capacity of school leaders who work, or choose to work, in schools in underserved communities. Similarly, districts should consider creating a coordinated, relevant, and differentiated system of support to address the contextual needs of the students and communities served by such principals and to advance the capacity of others to lead throughout the district.

Implications of the research are discussed in this study including a call for additional study in the area of how leaders address the cultural gap that exists between staff and the students they serve in underserved communities.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

Leaders of high-poverty elementary schools seeking to improve student achievement are often inundated with programs and support from the district, state, and special interest groups. Determining which programs and supports best meet the needs of students and provide the greatest impact on learning, instruction, and school culture can be a substantial undertaking for a school principal. This study examined the lived experiences of principals of high performance, high poverty schools, who used literacy as the basis for successful school improvement.

#### **Background for the Study**

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson articulated his vision of a Great Society and declared a war on poverty (Hanna, 2005). In April of that year, Congress passed legislation, known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), that allocated funds to primary and secondary schools to address the achievement gaps among student groups by providing fair and equal educational opportunities for all children (Jorgensen & Hoffman, 2003). Additionally, the act mandated that all schools receiving federal funds be held accountable for accomplishing certain educational goals; the schools were required to submit educational test results as proof of their success in reaching those goals (Jorgensen & Hoffman). In 1969, the National Assessment of

Educational Progress (NAEP), a criterion-referenced test, was administered for the first time to measure the academic development of students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011a). A decade later, the authors of *A Nation at Risk*, a report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), suggested that the educational competence of contemporary students had not advanced in comparison to that of their parents. The report described this trend as one of “regress, not progress” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p.14), indicating a need to reform public education due to its continued move toward mediocrity (Tyack & Cuban; U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education).

The ESEA has been reauthorized every five years since its inception in 1965. In 2001, the essence of ESEA was extensively revised, and the statute became known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (Jorgensen & Hoffman, 2003). With NCLB, policymakers intended to improve student performance at public schools that received federal funds through increased accountability measures based primarily on results from state standardized assessments. The NCLB Act significantly increased federal regulation, requiring public school systems to administer state mathematics and reading assessments annually, and to meet increasingly higher targets in each of the tested subject areas (Conley & Hinchman, 2004). Most states already required some form of standardized assessment, and many had accountability systems in place prior to NCLB. However, the 2001 legislation significantly increased use of state-mandated standardized assessments in public schools throughout the United States, particularly for measuring the performance of each school and district, in addition to student performance (Fletcher, 2009). Thus, the NCLB Act and states’ accountability systems became a mechanism to

stimulate school improvement by measuring the progress of public schools and districts and ranking them by quality. Ironically, the use of high-stakes test scores to rank and measure the quality of schools has not eliminated barriers for teachers and students so that teaching and learning could be transformed and improved (Afflerbach, 2005; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Instead, high-stakes accountability has sanctioned and overburdened the lowest performing schools with more rules and regulations, engendered changes to instruction and encouraged significant portions of the instructional day to be spent on test preparation (Afflerbach; McNeil, 2000).

The focus on high-stakes testing has created an environment in which measures of student progress are based on minimum proficiency standards and skills. In addition, test results are frequently used in ways that have led to negative outcomes for schools, students, and staff (Afflerbach, 2005; French, 2003; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; McNeil, 2000; Neuman, 2008; Schmoker, 2006). For example, high-stakes test results have been used to determine students' grade-level promotion or retention and, in some instances, as the sole basis for making school funding decisions. In addition, high-stakes testing has led to placing students who do not meet proficiency targets into leveled groups and labeling schools that do not meet targets as unsuccessful or failing (Afflerbach; French; Hargreaves & Shirley; McNeil; Murphy & Myers, 2008). Such consequences have inevitably influenced the degree of support a school receives from its larger community. Furthermore, when schools are perceived as failures because they did not meet certain criteria of state assessments, staff, students, parents, and communities in which the schools are located may be vilified as well (Afflerbach; French; Hargreaves & Shirley; McGhee & Nelson, 2005; McNeil; Murphy & Myers).

## **Comprehensive School Reform**

The Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) Program was incorporated into NCLB as Title I, Part F; the CSR program advocates increasing student achievement through the utilization of methods, strategies, and effective practices that are based on scientific research (Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, 2006). Through the CSR program, states provide competitive grants to districts in support of schools committed to employing comprehensive reform efforts that include nearly all aspects of a school's operations, rather than using fragmented approaches to reform (Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center). Reform models adopted by districts and schools must help all students meet rigorous state academic content and achievement standards. Hence, many districts and schools choose programs already identified by CSR as being research based and proven successful in other schools. Whether districts and public schools choose to use a nationally available reform model or develop their own program locally, they must integrate required components of the CSR model into their chosen approach.

The CSR program contains eleven components that must be included in a reform model:

- employ scientifically based research approaches and strategies for instruction
- provide an integrated and aligned instructional program
- provide continuous, high-quality professional development for school staff
- include measurable student achievement goals
- receive internal support from staff and administrators
- support staff in fulfilling their responsibilities

- involve parents and community in developing, implementing, and evaluating the improvement work
- enlist external partners experienced in schoolwide improvement for technical assistance
- evaluate the implementation of the reform model and student results annually
- identify resources to sustain the reform effort
- show that the model has led to significant improvement in student achievement or has strong evidence that it will improve student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Reform models identified by the CSR program incorporate predetermined content-focused reforms—such as Break Through Literacy, National Writing Project, Literacy Collaborative, and Early Literacy Learning—that target literacy development (Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, 2006). Models such as Accelerated Plus, Coalition of Essential Schools, and Onward to Excellence provide district staff and school teachers with instructional as well as classroom management strategies (Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center). Schools also have the option to choose models such as Different Ways of Knowing, Core Knowledge or the Comer Development that provide schools and communities with strategies to support the holistic development of the child—socially, emotionally, psychologically, physically, and cognitively (Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center). Districts and schools are not limited to choosing from such structured reform models as those found in the CSR program, however. For example, they can also meet federal requirements by: a) ensuring that all teachers are highly qualified by credentials to teach in their content areas; b)

engaging in deep alignment of the curriculum to state standards; and, c) providing remedial and accelerated instruction to struggling students.

Datnow (2002) and Durden (2008) point out that to meet the mandated federal requirements, and to advance school improvement efforts, many districts and schools choose to employ predetermined and prescriptive CSR approaches, marking a shift from “the belief that the best way to reform schools is through grass roots, local school efforts” (Datnow p. 215). Durden also articulates that districts and schools implementing CSR models are predominantly high-poverty and low-performing ones that serve students of color. Although such models have been implemented successfully in some settings, effectively replicating the success in other school contexts has proven to be problematic (Datnow; Elmore, 1996, Hargreaves & Fink, 2000). Datnow stresses that to replicate the success of the CSR models, districts and schools must have the flexibility to modify the chosen approach to fit the diverse student needs in their school culture and context and must be adaptable to the conditions and local setting of the district and school. At the same time, sustaining CSR approaches has proven to be difficult due to frequent staffing changes and lack of funds at the state, district, and school levels (Datnow).

#### NCLB Reauthorization

To date, although the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (NCLB Act) was due to be reauthorized in 2010, no such action has taken place. However, the U.S. Department of Education developed *A Blueprint for Reform, The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* to serve as a guide for school improvement work at the federal, state, and local levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The blueprint included five areas to address: educating students so they are ready for college

and/or a career, improving teacher and principal effectiveness, providing equity and opportunity for all students, promote innovation and raise the bar and reward excellence (U.S. Department of Education). In 2011, states were provided the opportunity to request an ESEA flexibility waiver for relief from specific No Child Left Behind mandates (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). To qualify for the waiver, a state must agree to undertake change that will result in closing the achievement gaps, promoting an accountability system that holds all to high standards, and ensuring that all students are on a path to graduate ready for college or a career (U.S. Department of Education). If granted waivers, which include ten required provisions, states can exercise flexibility on several NCLB mandates. The most notable reprieve would allow state education agencies (SEAs) to forego the NCLB procedures for setting annual measurable objectives (AMOs) to determine AYP. Instead, states would be allowed to set their own rigorous AMOs in reading/language arts and mathematics to guide school improvement at the regional and local levels (U.S. Department of Education). To receive such flexibility, a state must submit a plan that includes a timeline and addresses four required principles for improving student academic achievement and increasing the quality of instruction (U.S. Department of Education). At this point, the flexibility waivers are the most current federal reform approach that is available to states.

### **Authentic Reforms for Changing Classroom Practice**

Despite the implementation of reform models such as CSR, and the use of high-stakes assessments as efforts to transform practice and raise student achievement, Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) and Schmoker (2004) posit that educational standardization and prescriptive school reform models have had little influence on

educators' ability to nurture changes and practices in schools and classrooms. Schmoker (2004) further argued that such reform approaches do little to promote an organization's understanding of its current situation and often cause educators to drift from focusing on fundamental areas, such as authentic literacy development, that can impact teaching and learning (Schmoker, 2004, 2006). By focusing on literacy development, districts and schools can scale up the opportunity for improving the school culture and “transform and enliven learning for both students and teachers—in every subject area” (Schmoker, 2006). Students' literacy skills can have a profound impact on many areas including: a) their ability to think; b) opportunities to further their education; c) intellectual engagement with others in the community; d) career and life opportunities; and, e) understanding how society and the world function (Allington, 2001; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Klein & Knitzer, 2007; Neuman, 2008; Schmoker, 2006). Schmoker states that authentic literacy education in schools has been minimized and that literacy strategies such as purposeful reading, rereading, writing, and talking

... are the foundation for [developing] a trained powerful mind—and a promising future. They are the way up and out—of boredom, poverty, and intellectual inadequacy. ... the ticket to ensuring the record numbers of minority and disadvantaged youngsters attend and graduate from college.

(p. 53)

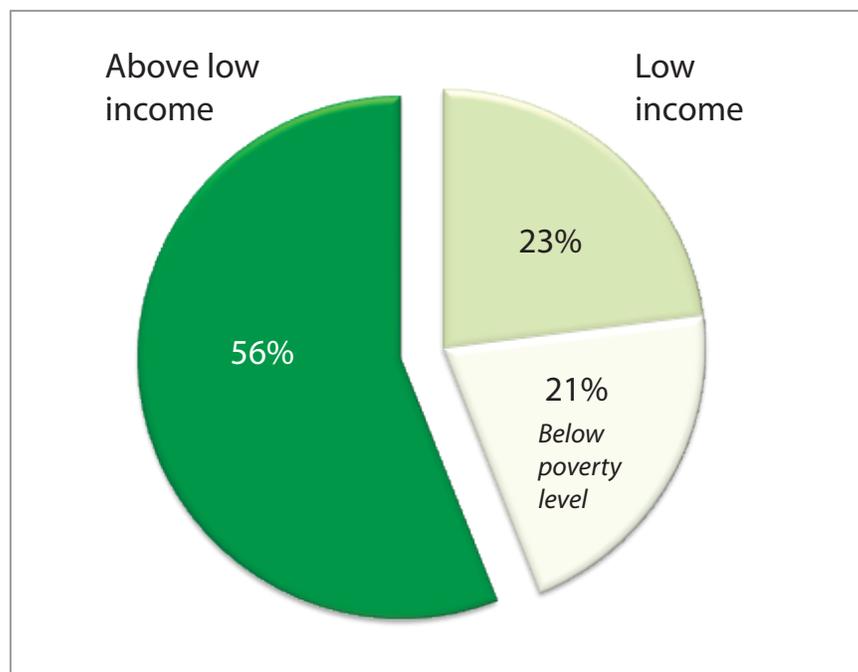
Schools must recognize that literacy development, as an intentional school improvement effort, can transform schools “into intellectually vibrant places that prepare students for college, for life and the life of the mind” (Schmoker, 2006, p. 50) while simultaneously improving other measures of school success.

### Statement of Problem

In the early 1990s, Texas developed a reform model that focused on individual students rather than groups of students and on outcomes instead of inputs with the goal of achieving educational equity (Nelson, McGhee, Meno, & Slater, 2007). Because the Texas reform model was envisioned as having the capacity to rectify the inequitable nature of public schools, the approach was later used as a model for NCLB. The components of this reform effort consisted of a curriculum that communicated what should be learned, a state assessment system to measure student mastery of the curriculum, a monitoring system to allow educators and public stakeholders to access data regarding school performance, and providing support systems and interventions to improve student achievement (Nelson et al.). Although the focus on the components of the Texas model did much to improve education, there were also unanticipated consequences stemming from the NCLB reform legislation. Among these was the launch of districts and schools throughout the United States into a period of high-stakes testing in which students were frequently tested to measure their progress in specific core-area content. Students who failed to meet proficiency standards faced retention at certain grade levels and the possibility of not graduating. In addition, schools and districts were rated on their performance and results were publicized, leading to community denigration of schools, staff, and students who did not meet the federal or state achievement targets. (Afflerbach, 2005; French, 2003; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Harris, 2000; McNeil, 2000; Murphy & Myers, 2008). Numerous researchers (e.g., Allington, 1994; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Eamon, 2001; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, Neuman, 2008; Tyack & Cuban, 1995) corroborate Olsen's (2007) assertion that high-stakes assessments

create “lost opportunities for students to learn and participate in more robust, student-centered ... practices [and for leaders to analyze] ... the effectiveness of the everyday practices that happen in schools and classrooms” (p. 121). This barrage of high-stakes testing and proficiency requirements left behind the very students whose success the legislation was intended to promote (French). It also failed to engage policy makers and educators in discourse regarding how a diminished economy and increased poverty in the nation affects some students’ academic achievement, specifically literacy development (Adler & Fisher, 2001; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Hemphill & Tivnan, 2008; Klein & Knitzer, 2007; Lee & Burkam, 2002; Neuman, 2008).

The National Center for Children of Poverty (NCCP) data reveal that in 2010, the United States population of children under the age of 18 was over 72 million (Addy & Wright, 2012). Of those children, nearly 32 million lived in low-income families (\$44,700 or less for a family of four), with over 15 million living in families whose income was below the federal poverty level of \$22,350 a year for a family of four (Addy & Wright). Figure 1 illustrates the percentages of children whose family income was considered low (44%) and those who were above low income (56%); it also shows the percentage of children whose family income was below the poverty level (21%).



*Figure 1.* Classification of children based on family income.

Poverty has been linked to students' academic development—those living in poverty tend to show lower student achievement. This link is particularly evident in reading, writing, and language development (Neuman, 2008). Because literacy development is a predictor of a child's success in school (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; NCCP, 2011; Neuman, 2008), literacy development in high-poverty schools is crucial for their students' academic success and future well-being (Richardson, 2011).

Students in some high-poverty elementary schools have consistently performed better than would be predicted for their school (Adler & Fisher, 2001). While the success of these schools has been documented, more descriptive studies are needed to determine what these high-poverty schools do to develop high-performing students (Adler & Fisher). There is also a need to understand what successful literacy-focused school improvement efforts look like, how they are sustained, and what structures are in place to support staff and students (Richardson, 2011). Further, because school leadership in all

areas of the school (e.g., leadership at the school and classroom levels; collective accountability for student success; ongoing, job-embedded professional development; professional teaming approach; and a cohesive schoolwide focus on early reading achievement), plays a central role in school improvement efforts, there is a need to understand how school leaders work to enhance students' literacy development in a high-stakes accountability context.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study sought to understand and document the lived experiences of successful principals of high-poverty schools that focused on developing the literacy skills of struggling students. The selected principals who were the focus of this study promoted and supported a culturally relevant learning environment that promoted academic excellence and, at the same time, fostered students' pride in their diverse cultural heritage. Ladson-Billings, describes such an environment, one where students

were part of a more collective effort designed to encourage academic and cultural excellence, expectations were clearly expressed, skills taught, and interpersonal relations were exhibited. Students behaved like members of an extended family—assisting, supporting, and encouraging each other. Students were held accountable as part of a larger group, and it was everyone's task to make certain that each...member of the group was successful (1994, p. 17).

Understanding how such principals instilled changes to teaching, learning, and school culture and deliberately chose to use literacy development, as a school improvement focus, was vital to this study. The study highlighted the voices of those who have successfully implemented change through purposeful focus on literacy improvement and

have sustained student achievement without playing the system, or using loopholes within the system, to advance their students and school academic status on high-stakes tests (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009). In particular, this study sought to reveal the structures and supports that school leaders leveraged in order to ensure a quality education was provided for students living in poverty and that struggling readers were proficient by third grade so their lives and future prospects would be improved.

Although NAEP data indicates that students' reading progress in the United States has remained virtually the same since 2009 for 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students (U.S. Department of Education, 2011b), an onerous trend exists. Literacy development for struggling readers and some children placed at risk by poverty has not been fully addressed in schools, thus limiting such students' life outcomes (Adler & Fisher, 2001; Allington, 2001; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Neuman, 2008). Increasing the literacy skills of such students is critical to their success in school and essential to closing the achievement gap between them and their more advantaged peers (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2010). Additionally, to address the needs of struggling readers more effectively, principals must reflect on and analyze the school improvement efforts at their school and enhance the teaching practices taking place on a daily basis in the classrooms. Therefore, this qualitative study aimed to elicit what Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 79–80), referred to as “understandings and lived experiences” and perceptions of structures and supports that such leaders intentionally use to lead and sustain a literacy initiative to support struggling readers in high-poverty schools.

Literacy in this study is defined as the approaches and interactive performances that literate students use to engage in various social and academic circumstances and

discourse they encounter (Pearson & Raphael, 1999). Additionally it is viewed as more “culturally related and specific, opening the possibility of multiple literacies [thereby acknowledging that] discourses around literacy in different cultural settings are associated with language patterns and internally accepted meaning and ways of behaving” (Rueda, 2011, p. 84). Thus, this study focused on the work of high performance, high poverty school principals who used literacy development as an intentional school improvement effort to develop literate students.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Sociocultural Theoretical Framework to Learning and Development**

Sociocultural theory is centered on how others such as parents and peers influence individuals’ learning, as well as how cultural contexts, beliefs, and attitudes influence how instruction and learning transpire (Vygotsky 1978, 1986). Vygotsky made significant contributions to the understanding of learning and human development (Crawford, 1996; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996) through his theories, which connected socialization and cognitive development (Vygotsky 1978). He systematized and delineated a more integrated view of sociocultural approaches to learning and development in the 1920s and 1930s. However, at the time Vygotsky’s work was considered radical and was not made widely available until the late 1950s and early 1960s (Crawford; John-Steiner & Mahn). Vygotsky focused on the connections between people and the sociocultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences (Crawford). His sociocultural theory of human learning and development advocates that human activities or “levels of personal involvement, meaningfulness and intent” (Crawford, p. 50) are located in context; knowledge is shaped by past experiences; and

culturally relevant artifacts determine multiple interpretations and structures to be developed (Crawford; John-Steiner & Mahn). Vygotsky also proposed that learning and development are mediated by language and other symbol systems, which in today's culture include the many technology tools that are used to enhance learning. Most importantly, Vygotsky considered learning and human development to be best understood when attention is paid to the individual's and group's history of an activity and the sociocultural context in which it occurs (Crawford; John-Steiner & Mahn). Thus, the Vygotsky sociocultural theory of human learning and development espouses that all individuals learn through interaction with others and then the learning that takes place forms their conceptual structures. To emphasize this, Vygotsky (1978) noted,

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals (p. 57).

A second theme of Vygotsky's theory (1978) is that cognition is limited to a zone of proximal development that in current sociocultural theory emphasizes what John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) refer to as "co-participation, cooperating learning, and joint discovery (p. 199). According to John-Steiner and Mahn, teachers implementing these practices "bring existing knowledge to students by co-constructing it with them" (p. 199). In classrooms where such teacher and student activities exist, learning environments are created that enable students to build upon the culturally shaped knowledge and value

systems that they bring to school each day (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; John-Steiner & Mahn). For example, a teacher provides the learner with collaborative learning opportunities, discourse, modeling, and scaffolding to support the student's development and understanding of knowledge and skills and facilitate intentional learning.

The expansions and interpretations of Vygotsky's approach led to diverse perspectives on sociocultural theory in the last half-century (Crawford, 1996). John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) note that human development begins with a child's reliance on caregivers for mostly useful strategies and crucial knowledge whereas developing individuals rely on the coffers of transmitted experiences of others. Such relationships between individuals form a basis for learning and human development activities that are culturally situated; take place in the classroom or elsewhere; and include "transmission, construction, transaction, and transformation [of knowledge] in a continuing, complex interplay" (p. 192).

### **Teaching and Cultural Competence**

Cummins (1986) concurs with Crawford, John-Steiner and Mahn, and Vygotsky's sociocultural approach to learning and development. He notes that many costly school improvement reforms (e.g., preschool compensatory programs, bilingual education programs, hiring of additional remedial personnel, and the establishment of protection against discriminatory assessment procedures) have been implemented in high-poverty schools in underserved communities to turn around school failure. Yet teacher and student relationships have remained unchanged, specifically, in the way school staff interacts with their students and communities in which they teach and serve. As Crawford (1996) notes, schools are institutions that should acknowledge the multiple perspectives

and experiences that students bring to the classroom; students and educators are influenced by multiple cultures and should engage in the co-creation of knowledge. Cummins declares that change in low-performing schools is also dependent upon the extent to which educators, both collectively and individually, reassess and redefine their roles with respect to how they interact with their students and the extent to which they recognize the funds of knowledge students bring to the classroom. Educators must familiarize themselves with the community and its culture and address the power relationships that exist between administrators, teachers, and students. Cummins strongly emphasizes that educators' classroom positioning, attitudes, and power relationships with the students they teach on a daily basis, must be addressed, eradicated, and rectified. Freire (1998) asserts that no belief or ideology is above question and challenge, and he further argues "... all teachers should have, or at least be exposed to ... teaching that requires a recognition that education is ideological" (1998, p. xiii). He states that educators should provide students with socially rich learning environments that allow discourse, discussions, collaborative learning, and problem solving; support students' evolving learning and development; and empower students "rather than reflect society by disabling them" (p. 34).

Other scholars (e.g., Diller & Moule, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Richards, Brown & Forde, 2006; Rueda, 2011) also suggest it is imperative that educators, especially those working in underserved communities, become culturally competent to succeed in teaching students who come from cultures that are different from their own. Furthermore, in light of the continued global economic and social expansion and increased diversification of student populations that schools are experiencing, educators

must realize, as noted in a sociocultural perspective of literacy, that culture is central to student learning and every student brings a unique cultural experience to the classroom (Diller & Moule; Ladson-Billings; Richards et al.; Rueda). For these reasons, it is essential that educators 1) become learners and learn about their students' cultures and 2) develop practices and skills to promote effective cross-cultural teaching that values diversity and respects the students' cultural backgrounds and customs (Diller & Moule; Ladson-Billings; Richards et al.; Rueda).

To become culturally responsive, teachers must be given time to self-reflect on and confront their attitudes, beliefs, and biases about themselves, the students they teach, and the communities in which they work (Richards et al., 2006). Such self-reflection requires that educators have the time, a risk-free environment, and a peer support group to resolve and come to terms with their ideology, "negative feelings towards any cultural, language or ethnic groups" (Richards, et al., p.5), and values that impact their teaching practices and relationships with students, their families, and colleagues. Educators must not only take the time to understand themselves and the impact their values and beliefs have on their practice, but they must also become learners and explore their students' experiences and families and the community's cultural histories (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Richards et al. note that once teachers understand themselves and others, acknowledge and value others' differences and similarities, validate students' cultural identity in classroom practice, educate all students about the diverse world, and free their instructional practices and view of others from biases, they can be culturally responsive to the needs of their students and become a part of reforming the practices in their school and district. Hence, this study focuses on the sociocultural approach that emphasizes

learning and human development as interconnected and as Vygotsky (1978) describes,

Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Learning is not development; however, properly organized learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning. Thus learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human, psychological functions (p. 90).

### **Research Question**

Some principals of high-poverty elementary schools have succeeded in enhancing the literacy development of their students and continue to meet the state's accountability requirements despite barriers encountered (Adler & Fisher, 2001). This research focused on investigating and examining the effective structures and supports these principals of such high performance, high poverty (HHP) elementary schools used to advance literacy for struggling readers. The following questions guided the study:

1. What informed principals of HHP schools to choose literacy as an intentional focus for school improvement?
2. What structures have such principals put in place to support struggling readers and to develop further the literacy skills of all their students?
3. What supports have such principals put in place to help teachers improve their pedagogy, work collaboratively, and develop care-centered classrooms?
4. What strategies do such principals use to meet state and federal accountability

requirements while sustaining their focus on developing literate students?

5. What challenges do such principals face in meeting state and federal accountability requirements while sustaining their focus on developing literate students?

### **Significance of the Study**

Gorski (2008) addresses the myth of a culture of poverty that is still a part of some educators' belief systems: "... the idea that poor people share more or less monolithic and predictable beliefs, values, and behaviors" (p. 32). Educators often use myths to rationalize why public schools that serve less privileged students are not able to demonstrate similar achievement gains as schools that serve more advantaged students (Gorski). Embedded in these myths are excuses for poor instructions and "demands for social and economic reform that 'let schools off the hook' for raising student achievement" (Rothstein, 2008, p. 8). This deficit model of thinking perpetuates lower expectations for disenfranchised students and the idea that poor people are less motivated, do not value education, choose to live in such impoverished environments, and are more likely to engage in detrimental habits (Gorski). As Adler and Fisher (2001) note, there are some high-poverty schools that beat the odds and their student performance exceeds in reading while also improving other measures of school success.

Adler and Fisher (2001) contend that more research is needed to understand the frameworks such principals use to promote literacy development and how they have sustained their schools on a path of continuous learning and improvement that has enabled them to outperform other schools and districts that serve similar populations of students. This research gathered the voices and experiences of such leaders and examined

how they used an intentional school improvement effort to produce significant achievement gains among students as they transformed their schools into high-performing organizations.

### **Brief Summary of the Literature**

Learning to read is one of the most important and exciting achievements for students during their early years of schooling. Literacy is so important that for over a century it has been the cornerstone of elementary school instruction, and most children learn to read by the time they leave elementary school (Adler & Fisher, 2001). National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data show that the American school system successfully teaches a diverse population of students to read, when looked at as a whole group (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). However, the NCES report points out that certain populations of students, such as Hispanic students and children of poverty, do not achieve literacy development at the same rate as their White, middle class and affluent peers (Perie et al.) For example, when 35 countries, including the U.S., assessed the reading literacy of students in fourth and ninth grades as a whole group, U.S. students performed as well or better than students in 29 other countries participating in the study and fourth-grade students in the U.S. were outperformed only by students in Finland (Perie et al).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed a number of facts about the reading performance of U.S. children:

- The 2011 average reading score at grade 4 was unchanged from 2009 but was 4 points higher than in 1992.
- At grade 8, the average reading score was 1 point higher than in 2009, and 5

points higher than in 1992.

- Reading scores were higher in 2011 than in 2009 for students from both higher-income families (i.e., students not eligible for the National School Lunch Program) and lower-income families (i.e., students eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch).
- Reading scores were higher in 2011 than in 2009 for White, Black, and Hispanic students but did not change significantly for Asian/Pacific Islander or American Indian/Alaska Native students.
- While the White–Hispanic score gap was smaller in 2011 than in 2009, there was no significant change in the White–Black gap over the same period (Perie et al., (2005).

Nevertheless, while children in the United States read as well as children in other countries, literacy development for struggling readers and children at risk due to factors related to poverty has been slow (Allington, 2001; Adler & Fisher, 2001). The wave of high-stakes school reform efforts has created an environment in which educators ignore much of what is known about effective design and delivery of literacy instruction for struggling readers (Allington).

Afflerbach (2005) posits that for reading, “the uses and misuses of high-stakes tests ... are accompanied by numerous liabilities” (p. 151). Researchers (e.g., Afflerbach; Allington, 1994; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1992; Neuman, 2008) further note that such liabilities include: a) increasing the frequency of high-stakes test administration even though there is no research linking increased testing with increased reading achievement; b) the inability of high stakes tests to provide a full understanding of

students' reading achievement; c) possible harm to students' self-esteem, motivation, and perseverance as a result of being labeled as a low-achieving student and reader; and, d) school staff lowering expectations and varying treatment of students based on high-stake assessment results. Afflerbach maintains that high-stakes tests have resulted in a limited reading curriculum because the assessments represent an "over-simplified view of reading and have a narrow focus on particular reading skills" and strategies (p. 156). The assessments also alienate teachers, especially when they have more useful and current formative assessments to measure student progress and when teaching and learning is interrupted by having to administer practice tests instead of implementing instructional reading strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners. Allington (2005) and Neuman (2008) also agree that high-stakes assessments require a significant amount of funds and instructional time that could otherwise be used to increase reading achievement and that the results are increasingly used to "characterize and label young children who are in early developmental stages of reading" (Afflerbach, p. 157).

### **Brief Summary of the Methods**

This qualitative study drew upon the lived experiences of principals of high-performing, high-poverty schools that used literacy as a school improvement focus. This approach investigated, analyzed, examined, and elicited their leadership and individual experiences as they implemented structures and supports for developing literate students.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is an approach to qualitative analysis that is informed by "three areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre are leading figures ... relevant to interpretative phenomenological analysis

research” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21). The phenomenology aspect is influenced by Husserl’s work in which he first ascertained the “importance and relevance of a focus on experience and its perception” (Smith et al., p. 21). Heidegger (1962), Merleau-Ponty (2012), and Sartre (1956) also emphasized a belief that the person is “embedded and immersed in a world of objects and relationships, language and culture, projects and concerns” (Smith et al., p. 21). Smith et al. describe interpretative phenomenological analysis as a

complex understanding of ‘experience’ [that] invokes a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and meanings, which are unique to the person’s embodied and situated relationship to the world. [Therefore the researcher’s] ... attempts to understand other people’s relationship to the world are necessarily *interpretative*, and will focus upon their attempts to make *meanings* out of their activities and to the thing happening to them (p. 21).

Hermeneutics is the second supporting structure of interpretative phenomenological analysis. It offers insight to the interpretation of how a phenomenon emerges and can guide “dynamic descriptions of the relationship between the fore-understanding and the new phenomenon being attended to” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29). Ideography, the third influence, is committed to understanding the “particular ... details ... that have been ... understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context. [Thus] interpretative phenomenological analysis utilizes small, purposively selected and carefully situated samples [for analysis]” (Smith et al., pp. 28–29). For such an analysis of data collected, IPA uses an approach of moving from “single cases to more

general statements, but which still allow one to retrieve particular claims for any individuals involved” (Smith et al., p. 32). The human lived experience is at the core of interpretative phenomenological analysis in which the researcher conducts a detailed examination that enables the informant to reveal the experience “in its own terms, rather [than] according to pre-defined category systems...offering detailed, nuanced analyses of *particular* instances of lived experiences” (Smith et al., pp. 32-38).

Because interpretative phenomenological analysis is situated in examining “the experience ... expressed in its own terms” (Smith et al., p. 32), this is an appropriate method for investigating the lived experiences, perceptions, and structures and supports that successful principals of high performance, high poverty (HHP) elementary schools use to lead and sustain a literacy initiative that helps struggling readers while simultaneously improving other measures of school success.

Through the use of extensive interviews with the principals; spending time in the setting of the study; and reviewing documents, field notes, and artifacts, this approach permitted the full disclosure of “how they perceive [the world], describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Additionally, as Merriam (1998) asserts, it is important that the researcher's “prior beliefs about this phenomenon ... are temporarily put aside, or bracketed, so as not to interfere with seeing or intuiting the elements of structure of the phenomenon” (p. 16). The sample selection of principals was small and purposeful, and informants’ data was used to investigate the structures and supports that promoted development of literate students.

### Definitions of Terms

Being—Being of something is to inquire into the nature or meaning of that phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990, p. 175).

Being-in-the-world—Heideggerian phrase that refers to the way human beings exist, act, or are involved in the world, for example, as a parent, a teacher, as man, as woman, or as child (Van Manen, 1990 p. 175).

High-stakes tests—Assessments that have a high level of consequences for students, teachers, and schools if state developed targets are not met (Afflerbach, 2005; French, 2003; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Harris, 2000; McNeil, 2000; Murphy & Myers, 2008).

High poverty schools—

The percentage of student eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) program provides a proxy measure for the concentration of low –income students within a school. *High-poverty schools* are defined as public schools where 76 percent or more students are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) program; and *low-poverty schools* are those schools where 25 percent or fewer students are eligible for FRPL, (Aud et al., 2012 p. 42 & 43).

Idiographic—Concerned with the particular or uniqueness (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29) yet taking into account the commonalities that are shared across the group of informants and data is analyzed through interrelated common experiences (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2008).

Income poverty—The condition of not having enough income to meet basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997, p. 57).

Literacy—In this study, literacy focuses on the approaches and interactive performances that literate students use to engage in various social and academic circumstances and discourse they encounter (Pearson & Raphael, 1999). Additionally it is viewed as more “culturally related and specific, opening the possibility of multiple literacies [thereby acknowledging that] discourses around literacy in different cultural settings are associated with language patterns and internally accepted meaning and ways of behaving” (Rueda, 2011, p. 84).

Phenomenology—The science of phenomena that offers accounts of experienced space, time, body, and human relation as we live them (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 183-184).

Poverty rate—The percentage of people and families who live below the poverty line. The NCCP states the 2010 poverty level is \$22,350 for a family of four (NCCP, 2010). Children living in families with incomes below the federal poverty level are referred to as poor, however, the NCCP suggests that families need an income of about twice the federal poverty level to meet their basic needs (NCCP, 2010).

Successful principal— One who creates an environment in which structures and supports are in place to reinforce literacy development; to promote effective cross-cultural teaching practices that value diversity and respect the students' cultural background and customs (Diller & Moule; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Richards, et al., 2006; Rueda, 2011); and supports “empower[ing] students ... by using cultural referents to impart knowledge" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 18). The principal holds unwavering expectations that all students will perform at high levels and show continuous growth in literacy, uses data to measure progress, and annually guides the school in meeting or exceeding state accountability targets and

student achievement continues to be sustained at their campus over time (See Tables 1, 2, and 3 on pages 88-89).

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It is simply not necessary that some children fail to read well. ... It is time to reject the notion that only a few children can learn to read and write well. For too long we have set arbitrary but limited literacy goals for some children, usually those children whose scores fell at the wrong end of the normal curve distribution. This design virtually ensured children would not receive instruction sufficient to develop their potential as literacy learners. (Allington, 1994, p. 15)

Despite literacy barriers inherent in high-poverty schools some principals have successfully led their schools in educating students who consistently score above their peers in similar environments. This study does not emphasize the explicit teaching of reading; rather, it explores how principals of these high performance schools came to make literacy the focus of their school improvement and the kinds of systems and structures they have in place to support literacy development that includes culturally responsive teaching. Furthermore, it looked at how such principals negotiated the pressures of accountability and avoided manipulating the system and taking advantage of loopholes at the expense of student learning (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009). This review examined several areas of related literature. First research on literacy development is discussed, including the link between poverty and literacy as well as the impact of early

literacy interventions for struggling readers and sociocultural influences on literacy. Next, literacy interventions for struggling readers and sociocultural influences on literacy development are reviewed. Also, there is a discussion of the literature around some of the issues involved in school improvement. Then, the leadership structures and supports for leading and initiating change on a campus is presented. Finally, the literature that both supports and refutes the importance of developing a care-centered learning environment is summarized.

## **Literacy Development**

### **Poverty and Literacy**

Currently there is ample research that illustrates the relationship between poverty and literacy (Adler & Fisher, 2001; Allington 2001; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Census Bureau Statistical Abstracts, 2012; Cunningham, 2007; Cushon et. al., 2011; Vu, Janzen & Muhajarine, 2011; Eamon, 2001; Farah et al., 2006; Mayer, 2010; McGee, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011b; Neuman, 2008; Strickland, 2001). These studies show that poverty itself does not affect a child's intellectual ability, functioning, or IQ and the relationship between poverty and student outcomes, such as literacy development, is not causal (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan; Farah et al.; Mayer; Neuman; Strickland). Rather, poverty-related factors and environments influence the literacy development of some children (Strickland). As Neuman affirms, environmental factors associated with poverty—such as the availability of resources and activities that promote literacy development; providing activities and opportunities to increase students' background knowledge and experiences; supporting vocabulary acquisition and modeling for appropriate and varied use; and increasing the human and social capital available in

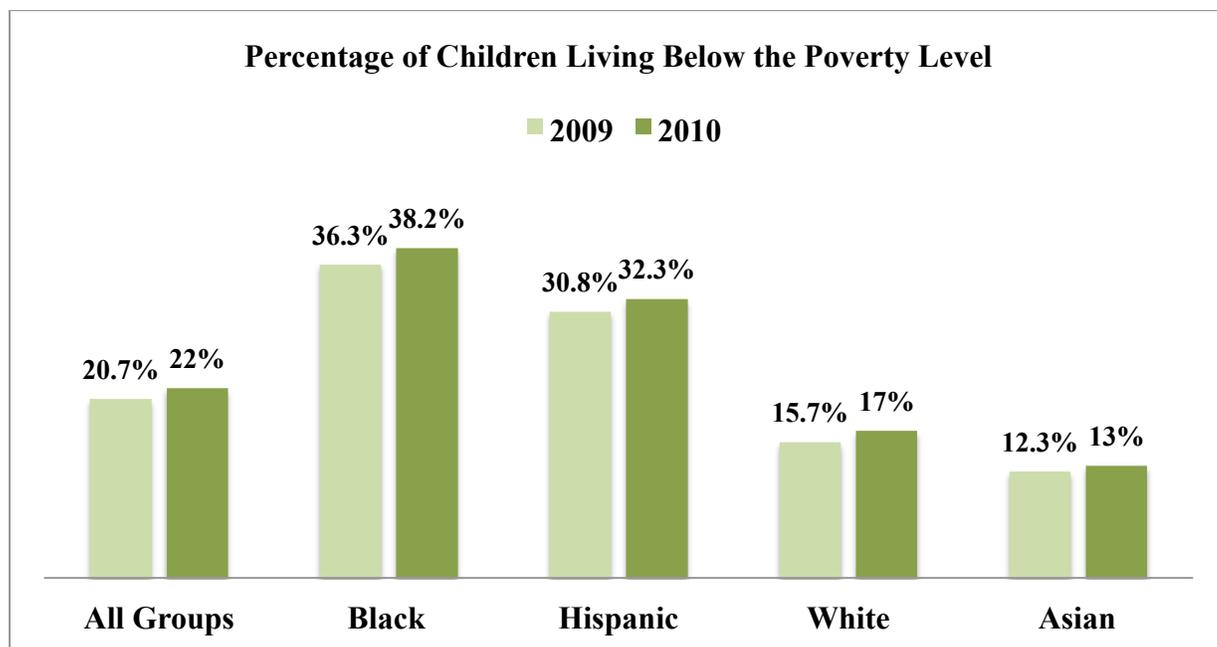
the home, school, and in the larger community—can influence a child becoming literate. Research indicates that some struggling readers from households below the poverty level are especially likely to enter school without the linguistic development and readiness skills that schools expect students to bring (Hemphill & Tivnan, 2008; Kennedy, 2010; Neuman; Strickland). Unless schools respond by providing adequate support and effective instruction, such students tend to struggle with reading throughout their school careers. Although children in high-poverty environments may enter school with differing opportunities for literacy skills, it by no means indicates that all students at risk due to poverty are destined for a life of impoverishment and illiteracy (Hemphill & Tivnan; Kennedy; Neuman; Strickland).

Factors related to poverty, such as illiteracy, can diminish struggling students' prospects for achieving significant events such as graduating from high school, attending college, entering a training program, or acquiring a job that provides adequate living wages. Such life opportunities are premised on students' ability to read, understand information, and write. As previously stated, 21% of children in the U.S. under the age of 18 live in families whose income is below the federal poverty level.

Most of such children have parents who work, but low wages and unstable employment leave their families struggling to make ends meet. Poverty can impede children's ability to learn and contribute to social, emotional, and behavioral problems. ... Risks are greatest for children who experience poverty when they are young and/or experience deep and persistent poverty. (Cauthen & Fass, 2008)

Macartney, (2011) disaggregates and compares 2009–2010 data (se) by ethnicity

of children living below the poverty level. The figures show how poverty in the United States continues to increase.



*Figure 2.* Percentages of children living below the poverty level by ethnicity.

Other data indicate that the achievement gap is more pronounced for children living in poverty than for middle class and affluent children, and is likely related to childhood issues such as low birth weight, developmental delays, emotional and behavioral issues, and perceived academic delay upon their first entry into an educational setting (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Eamon, 2001). When viewed in terms of literacy, the achievement gap can have far-reaching effects. O’Cummings, Bardack and Gonsoulin, (2010) note there is a relationship between illiteracy and incarceration of youth; many of those caught up in the juvenile justice system have limited or no literacy skills. Such youth are more likely to face economic hardships, miss or drop out of school, be retained at some grade level(s), have a higher recidivism rate, and face other adverse post-incarceration outcomes (O’Cummings et al.). The National Evaluation and

Technical Assistance Center asserts that academic achievements (e.g., learning to read) that these youths experience during detention reduce the probability they will be incarcerated again and have a positive impact on their life after release. For example, six months after release, those who earned a GED or completed a vocational program were three times more likely to have gained employment and twice as likely to be employed as their peers who did not earn a GED (O’Cummings et al.).

Numerous researchers (e.g., Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz & Fletcher, 1996; Hemphill & Tivnan, 2008; Neuman, 2008; Torgesen, 2004) have examined long-term outcomes for children living in poverty and the conditions that contribute to their limited support for developing the necessary reading skills to be productive and successful citizens. However, the struggle to address the literacy needs of these children still seems to elude educators. Neuman (2008) asserts that children living at or below the poverty level experience reading obstacles that are different from those of students who struggle due to a learning disability. Thus, poor children in urban schools may perform no better than more advantaged children with dyslexia, although their reading limitations may differ. Neuman further states,

It seems clear that some of the causes of failure to achieve for poor children must relate to impediments in the environment ... that influence reading, such as print exposure, language experiences and differential teaching strategies. Yet professionals ... have no answer to the question of what to do about healthy children who come from poor environments who fail to learn to read. The impact of this problem on children’s life opportunities cannot be overestimated. Because education is the chief

avenue for social mobility, this massive failure to learn to read reifies and intensifies social inequality. The failure to understand the causes of limited achievement of children in economically distressed environments has impeded progress in teaching [poor] students how to read successfully (p. 9).

This illustrates the need for educators to reflect on what is done—or not done—instructionally with students and to study how they go about doing their work in the classrooms. Additionally, it brings to light that educators must educate themselves about the role they play in students' limited achievement and improve teaching practices so student needs can be appropriately addressed (Joyce & Showers, 1980).

Equally important, educators must recognize and value the funds of knowledge, such as the “resources embedded in students, families, and communities” (Rios-Aguilar, Marquez-Kiyama, Gravitt & Moll, 2011, p. 179) and the “social and cultural capital” (p. 168), that students bring to school with them and must integrate those elements into daily instructional practices (Carter, et al., 2009). Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) avow that educators begin to see and acknowledge students' funds of knowledge when practitioners discard their position as the expert in the classroom, assume the role of a learner, and become familiar with the students and their families in a markedly different manner than is traditionally known to exist in the classroom. By engaging with their students' family circles—that exist in the home and extend to the community—and learning about the existing culture and cognitive resources, educators can gain insight as to how these resources and funds of knowledge may be used in the classroom to provide culturally responsive instruction and activities that support students' learning (Gonzalez,

et al.). Providing and facilitating meaningful learning opportunities that incorporate students' prior knowledge into lessons can leverage the students' diverse experiences as a way of motivating and engaging them in learning (Gonzalez, et al.). Such teaching practices can provide every student with opportunities to use their social and cultural backgrounds in early childhood learning experiences to make learning relevant and advance their school careers (Carter; Rios-Aguilar et al.).

Klein and Knitzer (2007) claim that children identified as low-income or living in poverty fall behind in early learning settings and remain very much behind their peers, especially in reading. Their research indicates that prior to entering kindergarten, "the average cognitive scores of advantaged preschool-aged children are 60 percent above the average scores of children in the lowest socioeconomic group" (p. 1). By age 4, children living below the poverty level are up to "18 months behind than what is normal for that age group" (p. 1); the gap, which still exists at age 10, is even greater for children living in the poorest families. Klein and Knitzer emphasize that third-grade children from middle-income families, with well-educated parents, know about 12,000 words. Meanwhile, third-grade children from low-income families, with undereducated parents who do not engage in conversation with their children, often have vocabularies that do not exceed 4,000 words. Students of "income poverty" (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997 p. 57) often begin their educational careers with little or no experience with books, stories, and print and tend to perform poorly on assessments such as screeners for entering school and on state assessments (Allington, 1994; McGill-Franzen, 1992; Neuman, 2008). Often these students are labeled as at risk, developmentally delayed, slow learners, or with other negative terms that indicate limited ability or potential even before they have

“experienced whatever they are supposed to learn” (McGill-Franzen, p. 56) in school.

Brooks-Gunn and Duncan uphold that

[f]or low-income children, a \$10,000 increase in mean family income between birth and age 5 was associated with nearly a full year of increase in completed school. Similar increments to family income later in childhood had no significant impact ... only income [increments] during the early childhood years matters. Family income seems to be more strongly related to children’s ability and achievement-related outcomes [than are other outcomes related to poverty] (p. 62 & 67).

McGill-Franzen (1992) remarks, “children differ in the personal literacy histories they bring to school and families differ in the resources they have to promote the educational well-being of their children” (p. 56). However, regardless of parents’ social class, they do value education and often seek to improve their children’s future economic standing, even if they have little knowledge about how the school, as an organization, works (Allington, 1994; Compton-Lilly, 2000; Francis et al., 1996; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Harris, 2002; McGill-Frazen). The influence that poverty-related factors have on students’ literacy development during their formative years is immense, and the many barriers and challenges that disadvantaged children face daily are frequently not publicized or recognized even by educators in the school they attend (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Lee and Burkam (2002) note that the influence of economic factors on the development of cognitive skills is quite convincing. For example, of the many aspects reviewed, such as “race and ethnicity, family educational expectations, access to quality child care, home reading, computer use, and television habits” (Lee & Burkam, p. 3),

factors associated with students' socioeconomic status (SES) had a greater influence on the disparity in cognitive scores. Also, low-SES children often begin kindergarten in a lower quality school more so than their more advantaged peers (Lee & Burkam). Thus, inequities in the educational system exist for children of low-income families even before they begin their school career.

### **Early Literacy Development**

In 1994, Allington claimed that schools were serving the needs of society as intended. Currently, society views public education as needing radical reform due to its perceived inability to provide a quality education and to develop literate students. To accomplish this, Allington (2005) believes that the strength of schools to develop literate students is contextual and lies in their "local capacity, ... expertise, commitment, and financial resources ... [and is] the key factor in improving schooling and thereby improving student achievement" (p. 467). He emphasizes that no single reading intervention or program exists and that no "one-size-fits-all instructional materials and methods" can increase students' capacity to read (Allington, p. 468). Educators who work in high-poverty schools must know their students and the context of their community and environment and must develop an understanding of the factors that can make learning to read a challenging endeavor for some children (Strickland, 2001). To address struggling readers' needs, especially for students in grades PK–4, educators must work toward providing early and purposeful interventions instead of prolonged remediation in reading. They must also enhance learning opportunities and literacy activities for all students, employ instructional best practice and strategies, implement a whole home-reading support system, and continually monitor students' reading development and share the

progress with the students (Washington, 2001; Neuman, 2008; Strickland). Additionally, it is essential for educators to engage in professional development related to supporting struggling readers that attend high-poverty schools (Neuman; Strickland).

Adler and Fisher (2001) indicate that not enough evidence exists to “generate a compelling theory or framework” (p. 617) of reliable interventions that boosts students early reading achievement in high-poverty schools. However, Adler and Fisher, Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu and Easton (2010), Cunningham (2001), Neuman (2008), and Strickland (2001) identify practices that some high performance, high poverty schools have implemented in their early reading programs to address struggling readers’ needs. Adler and Fisher, Cunningham, and Neuman found that to develop literate students, schools must remain focused on student learning outcomes and employ multiple reading programs in every classroom so students are not limited by a one-size-fits-all reading program. They also maintain that all staff should be expected to share the responsibility for all students being successful; that it is important to develop leaders among staff at all levels of the school, including the classroom; and that schools must employ staff who are knowledgeable, experienced, and committed to improving their own teaching and the learning opportunities for all students (Adler & Fisher; Bryk et al.; Cunningham).

### **A Sociocultural Perspective of Literacy**

A sociocultural perspective of literacy focuses on situated literacy practices and places—both formal and informal contexts—where such activities occur (Razfar & Gutiérrez, 2003). This perspective of literacy recognizes that literacy is centered in culture; it is a social practice with others and artifacts, rather than just a cognitive process

(Gee, 1991), and, thus, has associated ideological dimensions (Street, 1995). Some may view literacy experiences that take place outside of the school walls as inferior compared to literacy practices that take place within the school (Street). Razfar and Gutiérrez believe that such deficit views of experiences outside the school and in the homes of linguistic and racial minority students, can promote a narrow view of literacy and culture. This can devalue the literacy activities and practices of students living in underserved communities when compared to the dominant literacy practices of the white, middle class communities. Undervaluing home literacy practices of linguistic and racial minority students often leads others to believe that matching the students' home literacy practices to those valued by schools "would solve the chronic underachievement" of students living in underserved communities (Razfar & Gutiérrez, p. 40). However, a sociocultural view of literacy asserts that it is not independent of a community's culture, history, and values. Such a view of literacy "seeks to understand the cultural context within which children have grown and developed. It seeks to understand how children interpret who they are in relation to others, and how children have learned to process, interpret, and encode their world" (Pérez, 2004, p. 4).

A sociocultural view of literacy development emphasizes that humans become members of groups through the use of particular language practices and language itself, and this group membership allows novice members to gain knowledge and skills by being members of that group (Razfar & Gutiérrez, 2003). An understanding by educators of the informal literacy practices that occur in the home is crucial to the success of students in underserved communities. Langer (1991) posits that literacy is the ability to "think and reason like a literate person *within a particular society*" (p. 11). She further

argues,

It is the culturally appropriate way of thinking, not the act of reading or writing that is most important in the development of literacy. Literacy manifests itself in different ways in oral and written language in different societies, and educators need to understand these ways of thinking if they are to build bridges and facilitate transition among ways of thinking (p. 13).

Within a sociocultural view literacy is culturally based, involves the higher intellectual skills, and is learned by children through interactive activities with their family and community members (Langer, 1991). Furthermore, cognitive behaviors are influenced by the situated contexts, and they affect the sense making that learners produce (Langer). Using this perspective draws attention to how cognition is shaped by culture, context, and social interactions (Hull & Moje, 2012), all of which have implications for educators' practice.

Hull and Moje (2012) articulate that a sociocultural perspective of literacy involves issues of equity and diversity and provides "second chance" (p. 4) opportunities for struggling students or those who do not meet the school's achievement goals. Interventions that bridge out-of-school literacy practices to in-school literacy practices are implemented for individual students to build upon the "student's existing knowledge and cultural practices; demystifying academic language and literacy; and situating literacy learning within a larger motivating activity and/or purpose" (p. 4). This actively uses students' funds of knowledge to make explicit connections between the collected and culturally developed knowledge and skills that the family and community resources

provide, and it is critical to literacy development (Hull & Moje).

## **School Improvement**

### **The Impact of High-Stakes Testing on School Leadership**

Comer (2009) describes the trend of using high-stakes assessments as a “dysfunctional system [that] was as much or more of the problem” (p. 61) than a solution for addressing the achievement gap between student groups and for providing fair and equalizing educational opportunities for all children (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2002). Other consequences are also associated with high-stakes assessments, such as the growth of a system for improving education that is hierarchical, prescriptive, and promotes a one-size-fits-all approach. The resulting environment has led to alienation and diminished trust among teachers, administrators, and other school leaders (McNeil, 2000). High-stakes tests have also resulted in rigid procedures and rules that must be met to comply with mandates, moved teaching from an engaging, intellectual activity to skill-based activities in which students’ opportunities to engage in classroom discourse has been reduced by the need to cover curriculum set forth by the district and state (McNeil). High-stakes tests have also promoted the use of aggregated student test scores to measure the quality of schools, and to evaluate teachers’ and principals’ performance, and they have narrowed the depth of teachers’ practice and students’ learning opportunities (McNeil). Some principals who have felt pressured to improve test scores report “how they standardized and used the curriculum by focusing instruction on the skill-based lessons and tasks from the district curriculum, instead of [providing] more robust, student-centered activities” (Olson, 2007, pp. 126 and 137). The emphasis on high-stakes testing has pressured leaders to base their school improvement

efforts around these state assessments (Adler & Fisher, 2001; Allington, 1994; Neuman, 2008).

### **Reform Models**

Although the Comprehensive School Reform program is available as a choice of developed school improvement models, Marzano, Waters and McNulty, (2005) express that schools must be careful about being both flexible and inflexible when implementing such models because improving student achievement with one or more of the models is not guaranteed. Cowan, Joyner, and Beckwith (2012), Harris, (2002) and Marzano et al. further suggest that schools should seek to improve student achievement by determining best practice, strategies, and interventions that address the needs of the students. Since all schools are different and no predetermined approach can address the contextual challenges that each school faces, it is best to design an intervention model that is tailored to meet the identified needs of a specific school (Cowan et al., Harris, Marzano et al). To begin this process, researchers articulate factors necessary to help schools focus on the improvement process.

### **School Improvement Factors at the Organizational Level**

Marzano et al. (2005) note that a guaranteed and viable curriculum is crucial to school improvement. He indicates a curriculum becomes guaranteed when teachers are able to use the allotted instructional timeframe to teach the curriculum. Additionally, schools must develop goals they hope to achieve and a means and timeframe for continuously communicating to all stakeholders the progress being made toward meeting the goals (Bryk et al., 2010; Cowan et al., 2012). Teachers have autonomy to create specific goals for individual students to push their learning further (Marzano et al.).

Parent and community involvement must become routine and include communication to and from parents and community members via newsletters, phone calls, home visits, e-mail, and parent conferences (Bryk et al.; Marzano et al.). Also, inviting parents to participate in the day-to-day functions within the school is imperative to gaining their support and building trust. It is important to provide all stakeholders with meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions related to school procedures (Bryk et al.; Marzano et al.). A safe and orderly environment is a necessary condition that requires putting into place systems and supports for running an effective school (Marzano et al.). Just as important is maintaining a positive organizational climate; collaboratively developing norms of how staff will interact and collaborate with each other, both individually and as a group; growing staffs' capacity to lead and make decisions; and providing meaningful and purposeful staff development activities (Bryk et al.; Cowan et al.; Lambert et al., 1995; Marzano et al.; Showers & Joyce, 1996). The collegiality and professionalism that the organization espouses and models are critical to advancing a positive organizational climate that promotes how staff interacts on a social and professional level (Marzano et al.; Showers & Joyce, 1996).

### **School Improvement Factors at the Teacher Level**

Implementing instructional and intervention strategies will vary from school-to-school, however, organizing them into an instructional framework can be helpful to staff (Bryk et al., 2010). These instructional practices must be systemic throughout the school, reinforce continuous monitoring of student progress, attend to balancing individual work with groups of students, reinforce student engagement and effort, and celebrate successes (Bryk et al.; Cowan et al., 2012; Harris, 2002; Marzano et al., 2005). Teachers providing

instruction that includes strategies to help students understand, synthesize, and apply new information gained should also be included in the instructional framework (Marzano et al.). Just as vital is developing a classroom management system that entails establishing classroom rules and procedures with appropriate consequences; cultivating teacher and student relationships based on cooperation, care and respect; using appropriate strategies to prevent potential disruptions from occurring; and maintaining an impartial demeanor when managing classroom issues (Lambert et al., 1995; Noddings, 2005a; Marzano et al.). The element of classroom curriculum design and delivery is also essential to teachers' adapting lessons to engage students in meaningful lessons and activities so that they can understand and apply the information and meet the student and school improvement goals (Cowan et al.; Marzano et al.).

### **School Improvement Factors at the Student Level**

Bryk et al. (2010) convey the importance of schools providing training and support to parents around strategies to increase their skills in communicating expectations to their children as students and to learn how to support their children at home with what they are learning at school. Teachers and parents must also develop their students' background knowledge by providing opportunities for enhancing their experiences either virtually, through reading; extended programs; or through direct field experiences (Neuman, 2008). Building their knowledge base and academic language will be helpful with the subjects they encounter in school (Marzano et al., 2005; Neuman). Teachers must also become familiar with students' families and their community so that they can tap into their students' areas of interests and provide immediate and relevant feedback to the students about their progress, ideas, understandings, and questions (Goldenberg,

2002; Harris, 2002; Marzano et al.; Neuman). Whether a school decides to use a CSR model or designs their own model, it is vital to determine the right work to focus on to improve student achievement for that particular school and especially its students (Cowan et al., 2012; Marzano et al.).

Lezotte and Snyder (2011) surveyed practitioners in the field to gather their voices regarding the Effective Schools Correlates and suggestions for how to use them for improving schools. The effective schools concept has evolved since the early research in the late 1960s (Lezotte & Snyder). Since that initial research, factors such as No Child Left Behind have changed the focus of education, and thus, the correlates have also evolved (Lezotte & Snyder). The researchers also espouse, “disaggregation [of student performance data] originated with effective schools’ researchers decades ago” (Lezotte & Snyder, p. 13) and still find this as a valid measure. Effective schools are based on three concepts that define its approach:

1) the learning-for-all mission ... where all staff and stakeholders believe everyone contributes to student achievement; 2) the focus on results ... where all leaders understand results are paramount; and 3) the twin pillars of quality and equity ... where each child in a public school must be guaranteed a quality education and equal educational opportunity” (Lezotte & Snyder, pp. 15–16).

Lezotte and Snyder (2011) further note that by implementing the components of the school correlates, educators have the capacity to “create a continuous school improvement system” (p. 131). Thus, schools using this approach will be: results-oriented; research-based, using proven research findings for practice, programs, and

strategies; data-driven for making decisions, and maintaining a management system to house the data; focused on quality and equity by disaggregating data so that all stakeholders know how various groups of students are progressing, using it to make informed decisions; collaborative in nature, using concepts such as professional learning communities as an approach for increasing collaboration; and self-renewing systems, implementing ongoing, continuous improvements that provide evidence of progress through constant monitoring with a willingness to make adjustments when necessary (Lezotte & Snyder). The correlates for effective schools encompass promoting high expectations for success where staff believes all students “can and will master the intended curriculum” (Lezotte & Snyder, p. 39), employing strong instructional leadership where principals “understand instruction and persistently communicate the mission to staff, students, parents and the larger community” (Lezotte & Snyder, p. 51), and leaders provide a clear and focused mission that emphasizes successful learning for all students through staff collaboration, shared understanding and commitment to instructional goals and priorities, common assessment procedures, and accountability for all (Lezotte & Snyder, p. 65). Additionally the opportunity to learn and time on task, “where teachers manage instructional time to ensure ... students are actively engaged in teacher-directed learning activities focused on the essential skills” (Lezotte & Snyder, p. 75), is evident; frequent monitoring of student progress “...using a variety of assessment procedures [and] ...results used to improve individual student performance and to adapt instruction...to meet student learning needs” (Lezotte & Snyder, p. 91) is routine; a safe and orderly environment “...that promotes [a] businesslike atmosphere free of threat and harm... [and] is conducive to teaching and learning” (Lezotte & Snyder, p.101) exist

throughout the school; and positive home-school relations "...[where] parents and other members of the community are familiar with the school's mission and the leadership provides...opportunities for them to support the mission" (Lezotte & Snyder, p. 115) are provided to all stakeholders. Lezotte and Snyder emphasize that for such school improvement to work, it requires personal commitment to the mission by the staff, parents, and community as well as the recognition that for everyone it is a "moral journey" (p. 142).

School improvement requires a coherent, systemic process that organizations at all levels—state departments, districts, and schools—use to implement, monitor, adjust, reflect on, and retool the school improvement initiatives to produce the desired leadership, teaching, and learning results they envision (Cowan et al., 2012). In their review of literature related to improving low-performing schools, Murphy and Meyers (2008) found two common factors across the studies—no single intervention was more successful than any other, and some were only successful half of the time. Combining and using different strategies from several reform models to develop a comprehensive approach seemed to hold promise for schools' Such approaches allowed for the development of more appropriate models that responded to a given school's context and could be tailored to address its specific concerns (Murphy & Meyers). The literature review revealed that low-performing schools that succeed with their improvement initiatives are often led by adept and exceptional principals who keep the improvement effort at the forefront, involve all stakeholders in the process, strengthen the capacity of school staff to accomplish the work required, work collaboratively toward a shared vision, and create a positive environment for teaching and learning so that school

improvement continues to move forward. Murphy and Meyers also note that studies showed teachers must be engaged at all levels of the improvement process to enhance their support for the effort needed to accomplish the reform, and the initiatives must engage parents and community. Allocation of fiscal resources should continue throughout the improvement process and not ended before it has run its course, and schools in improvement must consistently monitor and assess the progress and impact of their initiatives and celebrate their success as well as address the areas that continue to lag or be problematic (Cowan et al., Murphy & Meyers).

School improvement has generally focused on fixing the parts of a system, implementing successive new reform models, or replacing staff when desired outcomes were not produced (Cowan et al., 2012; Fullan, 2006). As Fullan argues, such efforts are flawed in that they “base all the possibilities on producing more and better *individuals* as the route to changing the system” (p. 7). This method of school improvement is incomplete because the culture and conditions in which people work remain unchanged (Fullan). In order for school improvement to be effective, relevant, and contextual to the school and community and move a school toward continuous improvement, the initiatives the school undertakes must “simultaneously focus on changing individuals and the culture of the system within which staff works” (Fullan, p. 7). The school staff must be directly involved in developing or selecting the school improvement efforts in which they will engage rather than waiting for someone to impose their will on the work that is to be implemented by staff.

Harris’ (2000) comparative analysis of highly successful school improvement programs found schools sharing some common strategies as well. Among these strategies

were deliberately focusing improvement efforts on the classroom and being explicit in the models of teaching they prescribe for implementation; applying pressure at the onset of implementing the reform efforts to ensure adherence to the improvement initiative; collecting evaluative data at all levels of the system to measure the impact of the initiatives upon schools, classrooms, and students; and mobilizing change at various levels within the organization such as at the classroom, department, and teacher level. Harris also found that generating cultural as well as structural change was equally important, as was engaging teachers in professional dialogue and development and providing external agency and support. This analysis indicates that although school improvement initiatives and projects varied in their approaches and content, their philosophical stance was similar in that the school was the heart of change and teachers were the catalysts for change in the classroom and academic development of students (Harris). To that end, all programs communicated the non-negotiable premise that teaching and learning were the focus of the improvement effort and that all staff must commit to engaging in professional development (Harris). Other factors that were common to these school improvement efforts were the presence of continual building and sharing of the vision; reciprocal leadership among staff; focus on well-defined student outcomes with clear instructional frameworks; and the use of multiple approaches to interventions at the school, classroom, and teacher levels (Harris). Just as important were the external and internal supports that helped build the school staff's capacity to undertake the improvement work and to engage in reflection on current practices to change attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. In addition, teachers must be equipped to manage classroom change and improvement, share good practices, and develop structures

to sustain and maintain improvement efforts (Harris). Cowan et al. (2012) assert that a systemic approach engages stakeholders at all levels—state, district, school, and classroom—and that providing support and necessary resources is critical for a reform effort to be successful.

Lezotte and Snyder (2011) promote conducting a “root cause analysis” to determine underlying causes of problems, warning that

like disaggregation, root cause analysis does not provide a solution to the problems. The process serves to narrow the change dialogue. Otherwise [schools] may try to solve a problem that is so general that the intended improvement may not be realized (p. 139).

Using this process, or a needs assessment, allows a school to determine where they have been, what led to their current status, where they want to be and how they will get there (Cowan et al., 2012). Clearly defining the individual and collective roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders throughout the improvement process is also crucial to its success (Cowan et al.; Fullan, 2006). “Within the process of school improvement, no one can tell people what to do. They have to be allowed to search for their own solutions and to instigate and manage change inside their own institutions” (Harris, 2002, p. 18). For school improvement initiatives to be successful, staff must believe in the school improvement efforts, their voices must be heard and their opinions considered when deciding on improvement strategies, and they must be seen as partners in the improvement process (Murphy & Meyers, 2008).

### **Monitoring Progress of School Improvement Initiatives**

Schools that are successful with school improvement efforts continuously monitor all facets of the process such as the implementation of a thoughtfully developed improvement plan, application of knowledge and skills gained from related professional development, and use of research-based practices and strategies to enhance teaching and learning for all students (Cowan et al., 2012). Murphy and Meyers (2008) note that successful schools focus less on “correcting problems than on the constant strengthening of the quality of already good work and constant improvement of already impressive results” (p. 222). They build on what is already working and seek to reinforce and solidify the effective practices taking place in classrooms. School leaders and classroom teachers use observations and data to make school-related and instructional decisions (Murphy & Meyers). Determining whether school improvement efforts are having a positive impact on teaching and learning for all students is essential. In order to sustain student progress, staff must continuously reflect on their practice and identify the conditions necessary to improve students’ growth and outcomes; they must plan for and adjust instruction and seek professional growth to meet students’ diverse needs (Cowan et al.; Murphy & Meyers). This continuous cycle of staff reflecting on teaching and learning, seeking to exceed their own limitations and performance, and gaining new knowledge and skills in order to produce quality work and increase effective practices is vital to sustaining successful school improvement efforts (Bryk et al., 2010; Cowan et al.; Fullan, 2006; Marzano et al., 2005, Murphy & Meyers; Showers & Joyce, 1996).

A report from the Center on Innovation and Improvement (2012) also supports using such an approach, noting,

... there are many factors that affect school culture and ... to reach [school improvement] goals one must change practice and know the extent to which effective practices exist in the school; and changing practice means changing culture, expecting fidelity to sound practice ... (pp. 1–2).

The report asserts that for school improvement to be successful, “the people closest to the student have the greatest impact on the students’ performance” (p. 2). It further advocates that an effective school improvement process includes ensuring that the necessary tools and resources are readily available and in the hands of staff and students. Such a school improvement process employs the structure and leadership needed while allowing school staff the autonomy to engage and wrestle with the improvement process and at the same time gaining the needed knowledge and skills to increase the probability of increasing and sustaining school improvement success (Center on Innovation and Improvement).

### **Reformed Pedagogy to Promote a Collaborative Learning Environment**

Greene (1995) examines the correlation between using the imagination and learning and educators continually seeking an “understanding of teaching, learning and the many models of education ...” (p. 1) in order to reform their pedagogy and promote a collaborative learning environment for teachers and students. According to Greene, educators must be proactive and reform their practice to promote a collaborative environment in which teachers and students work and learn together, and both have the opportunity to apply new learning. She states that teachers moving from the status quo and improving their practice can inspire and influence others to accomplish goals that will benefit all members of the school community. It is necessary for educators to step outside of the status quo and be resourceful, as opposed to teaching only from a fixed

curriculum, and to incorporate other modes of teaching. This change in practice provides students with “opened” space so that they can develop their “plurality of consciousness” (Greene, p. 198).

In her book, Greene (1995) argues that too often schools focus on accountability measures such as the No Child Left Behind law, and they tend to have a very technical view of how education in schools should function. Historically, most educators have unquestioningly adopted predetermined educational goals, which often drive what happens with students in the classroom and fail to include the voices of teachers and students (Green). Such goals often fail to consider the diverse cultures of the student populations in schools. They contribute to the oppression of students because they do not encourage teachers to provide a space or opportunities for students to use their “imaginative capacity... to look at things as if they could be otherwise” (Greene, p. 19). Greene maintains that by employing the arts as a learning tool and mode of instruction, teachers can broaden students’ prospects for revisiting their past, reflecting on their current lives, and constructing new meaning. Often students who are labeled at risk view their world from a different perspective and seek to engage in learning activities that include the arts and provide them with the opportunity to use their imagination (Greene). Using such instructional approaches allows teachers to “enter into [a student’s] world [and] to discover how it looks and feels from the vantage point of the person whose world it is” (Greene, p. 4). Greene also asserts that students participating in reflecting, sharing of experiences, and “sense making” will encourage others, including school staff, to seek justice for the oppressed and work towards improving the community (p. 3). She claims that educators’ reliance on a predetermined curriculum and standardized tests to measure

knowledge continues to marginalize certain groups of students. It is, therefore, critical that educators reform their pedagogy and use authentic instructional approaches so that they can provide students with opportunities that “allows them to tell their stories or shape their narratives or ground new learning in what they already know” (Greene, p. 111).

Greene (1995) suggests that such reform in teachers’ practice can happen in various manners. First educators must “tap their own stories, their experiences in finding projects by which to create identities” (Greene, p. 113). By conducting a self-reflective inquiry, teachers become aware of their own culture, a “set of tastes, personal inclinations and prejudices” (p. 115) that can impact their teaching and ability to relate to students. This, in turn, could stimulate the educator’s interest in learning about a different way to teach, engage students, and measure knowledge using means other than a standardized test or curriculum (Greene).

Educators must provide mutual learning environments where students and teachers engage in literature or the arts and share their interpretations with each other, encouraging students to “find their voices, to open their spaces, to reclaim their histories in all their variety and discontinuity” (Greene, p. 120). This is critical to creating a learning environment that allows teachers and students to converse about the literature or art, to begin to understand each other’s perspectives and cultures, to develop relationships, and to “create something in common among them” (Greene, p. 120).

Finally, educators must look beyond a predetermined curriculum and use the imagination and the arts to discover knowledge, create new perspectives, and to break down the barriers that separate them from the students, community, and other staff

(Greene, 1995). When teachers use their imagination and explore their own understandings about text, film, dance, or art, it can motivate students to continue searching for knowledge and view learning through another lens (Greene).

Freire's (1998) ideas align with Noddings ethic of care in that they focus on the teacher's "openness to caring for the well-being of ...students" (p. 25). He asserts that the teacher should encourage students'

dreams and hopes [that] are at times timid and at other times adventurous and whom [teachers] must respect all the more so because such dreams and hopes are being constantly bombarded by an ideology whose purpose is to destroy humanity's authentic dreams and utopias (p. 127).

Developing and implementing a caring learning environment where students are valued as individuals, treated fairly, and respected for what they already know is a chief goal for teachers according to Freire. The teacher honors the students' cultural and life experiences and their narratives. This caring environment includes building trust between the teacher and the student. Teachers do not use fear to move the learning in the classroom. They value the students' points of view and learn to see the world through the students' eyes and from their perspectives. They become aware that the

...openness to caring for the well-being of the students does not mean of course that, as a teacher, I am obliged to care for all students in the same way. What it does mean is that. ...I know how to fulfill authentically my commitment to my students in the context of a specifically mode of action (p. 125).

Freire communicates that teachers must value the students' "sentiments, emotions, and desires." (p. 48). Furthermore in order to provide an environment where students and

teachers can work together and attend to teaching and learning, the teacher and students must decide together how their democratic classroom will work so that the needs of all, including the teachers, are met. Freire asserts that discipline is a key factor in a democratic classroom. He describes the disciplined classroom as “Resulting from the harmony between authority and freedom, discipline necessarily implies respect of the one for the other. And this respect is expressed in the admission that both make regarding the limits that cannot be transgressed” (p. 83).

The teacher and learners co-ownership of the teaching and learning process is another important Freire premise. He indicates it is important that the student not become a passive learner and that teachers become acutely aware that

...teaching is not about transferring knowledge or contents. There is in fact, no teaching without learning. Socially and historically, men and women discovered that it was the process of learning that made (and makes) teaching possible. To learn, then logically precedes to teach. In other words, to teach is a part of the very fabric of learning (p. 31).

Freire (1998) believes there is a symbiotic relationship that exists between the student and the teacher where the teacher and students see themselves as both teachers and learners. This progressive teaching incorporates the “ autonomy of the students...[and] the analysis of various types of knowledge that ...[are] fundamental to educational practice” (p. 21) and it allows the teacher and learner to participate in critical questioning. The learning environment promotes the teacher and learners’ engagement in discourse, individual and collaborative problem solving activities, and the deconstruction of issues they experience in their lives or through text. They learn to listen to each other

and learn from others' perspectives and points of view. A trusting relationship is built between the teacher and learners and it bolsters the students' confidence in their ability to critically engage in problem-solving situations that they may encounter in the real world.

Freire also espoused that

the practice of [staff] engaging in critical reflection regarding their practice is most relevant to their work. I ought to think also about how I can develop an educational practice in which that respect, which I know I owe to the student, can come to fruition instead of being simply neglected and denied. Such an educational practice will demand of me permanent critical vigilance in regard to the students (p. 62-63).

Such practice of critical reflection is an invaluable tool for providing teachers and administrators with insight about whether or not we are doing the work that matters most and learning and unlearning from the insights that critical reflection provides us (Freire, 1970). It offers a platform for recognizing that we bring our own beliefs, values, life experiences, experiences as learners, assumptions about what teaching should look like, and assumptions about what students should be doing, to the classroom. Therefore teachers' critical reflections on their practice can heighten their awareness regarding what needs to improve or how one's teaching can limit or enhance the students' growth and progress. It also allows the teachers to reflect on their practice during or after the teaching process. Ideally, in order for reflection to be most powerful, teachers and students will engage in a dialogue with their peers or a mentor. The dialogue surrounding this reflection will encourage teachers to analyze their practice and help them develop new learning about their current teaching style and how to improve it. The teachers then

become the learner in order to become a better teacher. Freire (1970) also indicates that one will miss the point and see no need to grow or learn if he or she is unwilling to critically examine their ideology. It is important to recognize and admit our fallibility about our practice if we are to learn and improve. Furthermore, Freire's (1970) assertion that the influence and impact a teacher has on the life of the learner is immense is supported by Neuman's (2008) and Redding's (2012) stance.

Freire (1970) asserts teachers must be sensitive to what they say and do in the classroom when engaging with learners. They must recognize the importance of educating the whole child, valuing students' cultural identity and experiences they bring to the classroom and provide students with authentic literacy experiences that will empower the learner and diminish their vulnerability to be manipulated by the system that has power over them (1970). Freire believes that improving schools requires respecting students and teachers, teachers engaging students in rigorous learning as opposed to being dogmatic and using power, control, and fear as an educational strategy.

### **Addressing Issues of Cultural Dissonance Between Teachers and Students**

What happens in classrooms is first and foremost about the personal and collective connections that exist among the individuals who inhabit those spaces. Consequently, teachers' beliefs and values, how these are communicated to students through teaching practices and behaviors, and their impact on the lives of student ... are the factors that make teaching so consequential ... (Nieto, 1999, p. 130).

Examining how teachers' beliefs, values, and ideologies influence their practice is important to providing a high quality education for all. Teachers' assumptions and

perspectives about children and families that reside in high-poverty communities have “complicated their understandings about literacy, language, and schooling” (Lazar, 2007, p. 412) as well as prevented teachers from believing in their students’ potential and intellectual ability to be successful learners (García & Guerra, 2004; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Nelson & Guerra, 2012). McKenzie and Scheurich contend that such beliefs and assumptions often prevent educators from “seeing and believing in the possibility that all students can achieve and that we can have the ability and the will to make this happen” (p. 603). For example, if educators believe that because of factors such as poverty, ethnicity, religion, language, etc., students are not academically capable, then expectations are usually lowered, a less rigorous curriculum is provided, and student achievement and development will decline (McKenzie & Scheurich; Nelson & Guerra). Consequently, school leaders must provide educators a space and opportunities to engage in discourse about their “perceptions of their students, perceptions of themselves as ... educators” (McKenzie & Scheurich, p. 604) and how these perceptions influence their practice. This is critical to broadening their pedagogy and skills to teach responsively in diverse, underserved communities (García & Guerra, 2004). Also, providing professional development that “identifies elements of the school culture and the school climate that lead to institutional practices that systematically marginalize ... difference” (García & Guerra, p. 154) is essential to address the cultural dissonance that exists between teachers and students.

Lazar (2007) asserts that many teachers are considered “cultural outsiders” (p. 412) with respect to urban, high-poverty communities and they fail to fully recognize students’ abilities. Additionally, many teachers may not feel safe or comfortable teaching

in schools in which their own backgrounds do not match those of their students (Lazar). This can present barriers related to instruction and student-teacher relationships for educators teaching children in urban, high poverty schools (Lazar; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Nelson & Guerra, unpublished). For example, Lazar noted that pre-service teachers had developed assumptions about African American children in underserved communities that they had never met. They believed the students to be less interested in books, less proficient in acquiring language and communicating, less apt to read for pleasure and meaning, less apt to read on grade level, less able to think critically or creatively, and less apt to have favorite authors or books ... [and they] embraced a meritocratic view of children and their parents that linked literacy achievement to personal effort (Lazar, pp. 414–415).

The pre-service teachers—entering the classroom as certified, qualified teachers—believed that children in underserved communities read below grade level because their parents or caregivers did not care about developing their children’s reading ability (Lazar). Addressing the gap that results from cultural dissonance between teachers and students is crucial to improving teacher practice and has implications for organizations of higher education, as well (Lazar; Garcia & Guerra; Nelson & Guerra). Broadminded teaching practices require teachers to recognize their own set of beliefs or ideologies as well as those with power, and they must also learn to help students deconstruct others ways of thinking, as well as their own (Freire, 1970; Garcia & Guerra; Nelson & Guerra; Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011). Instructional practices such as these allow students to engage in discourse and make sense of how ideologies function from their worldview so that they

can “gain a more critical reading of the world” (Freire, 1998, p. xii). For teachers to model such instructional practices with students, they must have the opportunity and space to engage in similar discourse with their peers, coaches, or school leaders in order to broaden their own views and gain a better understanding of the view of others (Showers & Joyce, 1980; Neito, 1999). Providing such opportunities promotes teachers’ critical reflection of their own beliefs and values, and can enable them to recognize their own deficit thinking. Engaging in professional dialogue, in which teachers analyze their own practice, can heighten their awareness about their current teaching style, including what needs to improve and how their teaching limits or promotes students’ academic progress (Freire; Neito; Showers & Joyce). Teachers should not be blamed for the cultural dissonance that exists, but must provide relevant professional development as well as time and freedom to examine and evaluate their instructional challenges. Optimally this would result in increasing their instructional knowledge and skills and learning to see the world through their students’ perspectives (Freire; Neito; Showers & Joyce). Employing teaching practices that demonstrate a commitment to the students and respond to the context of their students’ culture and experiences can empower school leaders to develop a learning environment where students are valued as individuals, treated fairly, and respected for what they already know and bring to school (Lynch, 2009; Neito; Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011). Valenzuela (1999) and DeVillar (1994) agree that too often, minority students and students in underserved communities are

... seen by schools and society as lacking the linguistic, cultural, moral, and intellectual traits the assimilationist curriculum [in the U.S.] demands.

These students are perceived as requiring even more cultural assimilation

and resocialization. ... [instead of acknowledging that] the alleged 'deficiencies' of regular-track, U.S.-born youth from a low-income community are themselves symptomatic of the ways that schooling is organized to subtract resources from them (pp. 4-5).

A school's learning environment should honor students' culture, life experiences, and narratives and allow for the integration of the students' unique attributes into the curriculum and daily teaching practices (Freire, 1998; Lynch; Neito; Rios-Aguilar et al.).

### **Why Literacy Leadership?**

How do some school principals determine that it is important to develop a plan for addressing struggling readers' needs and develop literacy leadership? Taylor (2004) communicates that through analysis of assessment and disciplinary data, she was able to determine the reading gap was a factor for many of the disruptions that occurred in classrooms. She and her team noticed the struggling readers often disrupted class in order to avoid reading and writing and to hide their lack of literacy skills. Such students usually suffered from low self-esteem and did not believe they could become good readers and writers (Taylor). As they progressed through the system, their frustration over poor academic progress continued to grow (Taylor). Taylor's team found that these were usually the students who were consistently truant, had prior experiences with the juvenile justice system, and dropped out of school. She and her team researched, developed, and implemented literacy interventions and eventually created a successful literacy system to address struggling readers needs (Taylor). They later noted that truancy was down, disciplinary referrals to the office had decreased, students were staying in the classroom for instruction, and their dropout rate had decreased (Taylor).

## **Leadership Structures and Supports for Effective Literacy Development**

There is research maintains that certain programs or reading methods can produce the positive reading results for which many schools are searching. However, Allington (2001) contends that most of the reading programs, materials, and methods that are touted as being research based lack rigor and the “research available does not provide a blueprint for effective instructional programs” (p. 12). He suggests that educators must become better consumers and understand that, because all children are different there is no single program, set of materials, or method for teaching reading that will meet the literacy needs of all children. Allington and Johnston (2002), Darling-Hammond (1999), Goe and Stickler (2008), and Pressley et al. (2001) consider having effective teachers in the classroom to be more important than any curriculum resources, pedagogical approaches, or programs. They assert that effective teachers will enhance student achievement regardless of the resources, approaches, and programs used. Allington and Johnston highlighted common features found in exemplary elementary classrooms that used effective elementary literacy instruction. His staff observed that these schools supported effective elementary literacy instruction by extending the time for reading and writing instruction to as much as half of the school day, allowing for more practice reading; students engaged in guided and independent reading and teachers integrated social studies and science reading in their instruction (Allington & Johnston). Teachers had the autonomy to create multi-level, multi-sourced curricula tailored to meet the diverse needs of their students in the classroom, and they routinely demonstrated the strategies to students and modeled the kind of thinking that good readers use. In addition, teachers often engaged in active teaching that included providing demonstrations and

modeling to help struggling readers with understanding concepts and strategies (Allington & Johnston). They provided students with time for engaging in conversations with their peers around concepts, ideas, hypotheses, strategies, and responses to promote literacy development. The conversations were not scripted, and teachers exercised their expertise for facilitating, focusing, and personalizing the conversations (Allington & Johnston). Students had the autonomy to choose their own literature and texts thus creating greater ownership for their work and providing more time for teachers to observe students' progress and engage in conversations around the students' work. Finally, student work was evaluated based on effort and improvement rather than simply on test scores, thus providing them with an opportunity to earn good grades regardless of their achievement level (Allington & Johnston).

Allington (2006) asserts that what is most helpful to struggling readers is more time to read, guaranteeing "more academic time so that instruction and reading and writing are not wasted" (p.35); students need more access to books that match their interests; they need appropriately leveled tests and non-interruptive reading environments so that fluency and self-monitoring can be enhanced; and they need to develop thoughtful literacy, which includes thinking about what they have read and then explaining or describe their thinking to make connections.

### **Change Theory**

To begin the process of transforming practice in a school, educators must first expose the ineffective practices and conditions in the system's culture that pose barriers to improved teaching, learning, and student achievement (Cowan et al., 2012). Staff must investigate the structures and practices of the system in order to identify and understand

the problems they face and to identify the behaviors and beliefs that allow problems to continue to exist. This requires getting to the root causes of problems, such as patterns of behaviors, and practices that inhibit developing a powerful inclusive, diverse, and supportive environment for staff, student, and families (Fullan, 2006). Educators must clearly define staffs' roles and responsibilities in this process, identify what needs changing, determine how the changes should occur in the school context, and provide continuous support to staff and students to sustain the change process and improvements made (Fullan). Staff must collectively ensure the actions for change relate to what happens in the classroom and meet the needs of diverse learners. Once educators collectively and explicitly understand the gaps and barriers that exist—and why they exist—they can develop a plan of action to address the areas of need (Cowan et al.).

Principals and teachers must also monitor and reflect on their work frequently, measure the impact of their efforts, and use an assortment of data to adjust plans of action as needed so that diverse learners' needs are addressed and ineffective practices are adjusted or abandoned (Cowan et al., 2012). Staff members are more likely to support and undertake the change when they have a deep understanding of why it is needed, are involved in developing the plan for change, know their roles, and can articulate what the change will encompass.

Engaging staff in making decisions around pedagogy must be deliberate and must involve a plan of action to develop their capacity for improved performance and results; they need to experience learning in context and working in collaborative groups. Staff at all levels of the system must understand and implement the actions necessary for change to be successful; identify and adjust or abandon practices that are not working; and

engage in their daily work in a thoughtful manner and as a community of learners (Fullan, 2006). The process of change must continue through a recurring cycle of assessing, planning, implementing, monitoring, and assessing again—the work is never done, although incremental improvements are observed at milestones along the way.

### **Vision and Purpose**

It is important that schools develop a collective vision (Bryk et al., 2010; Cowan et al., 2012; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009) that communicates a clear sense of purpose of what is to be accomplished, addresses diverse needs of the students, and connects to teaching and learning as a means of improving the work that happens at the school. This collective vision should inspire and motivate staff and students and build a shared sense of responsibility for student learning and professional growth.

A clear vision and purpose guides change at the school-level and impacts the culture of a school. It can collectively mobilize staff towards a coordinated and cohesive school improvement effort. A school's collectively developed vision and purpose that are directly linked to teaching and learning increase staff's motivation and commitment to engage in the work; it also communicates to parents and community members what administrators, staff, and students value (Bryk et al., 2010; Cowan et al., 2012; Fullan, 2006). A purposeful vision lays the ground work for how people will work together, how they will approach the challenges they encounter, how resources will be allocated, what support systems there will be for staff and students, and how accomplishments will be celebrated (Bryk et al.; Cowan et al.; Harris, 2007). A collectively created, clear vision and purpose motivates those who work in the organization and, in turn, is reflected in their work with students and in the results that occur. "A compelling and inclusive moral

purpose steers a system, binds it together, and draws the best people to work in it. We all long for an inspiring purpose that connects us to each other and to an ideal that is greater than ourselves” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 76).

### **Effective Leadership for Driving Change**

Principals are the key levers or drivers for school-based change (Bryk et al., 2010). They balance the initiatives that make up the school improvement work, and focus on transforming attitudes and beliefs to facilitate developing a school culture that promotes a care-centered environment (Bryk et al.; Harris, 2002). They also attend to managerial tasks such as ensuring that the resources and supplies teachers need are available; instructional time is protected from interruptions; support for implementing new initiatives is provided; and purposeful communication exists with staff, students, and parents. Effective leaders ensure the teachers’ classroom work and instructional time are not overshadowed by meaningless administrative details, and they attend to the routine but important tasks that can disrupt a positive learning environment (Harris).

Effective school leaders are also instructional leaders who have the knowledge and skills to support student learning and teacher practice. They make instruction a priority, examine its delivery, and provide meaningful feedback to teachers. The principals continuously communicate high standards for student learning and provide staff with resources and support so that effective instruction and help is provided to all students so as to reach the standards and high levels of achievement (Harris, 2002). They make sure that fiscal resources are allocated to support teachers’ innovations in the classroom and ensure that teachers have the resources needed to implement the school improvement plans of action. They are willing to leverage their positions in order to

break down barriers that might impede the school improvement efforts (Harris, 2002).

Changing existing practices requires developing staff as leaders, building trust, modeling respect, giving staff responsibility, building teachers' cultural competence, seeking diversity and innovation in practice, and allowing autonomy for transforming the school. Effective leaders are aware that these are critical components for successfully implementing change. They understand that reciprocal leadership is essential to transforming practices and to sustaining the improvement efforts over time. In addition, they promote a collective sense of purpose and commitment among staff that empowers them and gives them ownership of the change that is happening in the classroom. This collective leadership motivates staff to seek continued professional improvement and encourages them to support colleagues in their own practices. It is a support system from all for all (Cowan et al., 2012; Harris, 2007; Lambert et al., 1995).

### **Effective Teacher and Leadership Teams**

Effective teachers and leadership teams are essential to the success of school improvement efforts. Building effective professional teams of educators and learning communities for students is critical for changing behaviors and practices, providing opportunities for innovative practice to be initiated and instituted, and bringing about systemic change. Collaboration within and between effective teams provides opportunities for teachers and administrators to seek and share learning, act on their learning, measure the results of their actions and practices, and engage in continuous inquiry and improvement from which all will benefit, especially the students (Cowan et al., 2012; Harris, 2002; Lambert et al., 1995).

Preparing staff for this work at the school and district level is imperative and

educational systems must deliberately ensure that effective teacher and leadership teams are established and become a part of the school and district operation. It is important that all staff work collectively to develop a common understanding regarding how engaging in this change effort will move the organization and individuals toward achieving their vision and goals. Likewise, it is important that they reflect on their practice and how the teams function. Further, leaders must clearly communicate their expectations for staff and students in this process (Cowan et al.). It is advantageous to measure the change that having effective teams brings to the organization, as well as the impact effective teaming has on student improvement and teacher practice (Fullan, 2006). Staff coming together and collaboratively planning their work develops a shared and supportive environment, motivates them to engage in the change process, and increases their commitment in working towards a positive outcome that aligns with the vision and purpose and that addresses the school's identified areas of need (Cowan et al.; Lambert et al., 1995).

Professional learning communities provide opportunities for developing reciprocal leadership, and unpacking beliefs regarding effective leadership guides them in continuously building their capacity to lead (Lambert et al., 1995). Given that everyone brings a different perspective to leadership, teaching, and learning, it is essential that teachers and leaders together determine how they will operate in order to change teaching practices, improve student engagement and results, and increase the overall capacity of the organization so that they can break down barriers they will face on the path to improvement (Lambert et al.). This involves committing to a shared belief and practice of leadership that invites staff to participate in making decisions and builds trust and respect among staff (Harris, 2007; Lambert et al.).

District and school leaders must provide the opportunity and professional development for staff to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to carry out the improvement work (Cowan et al., 2012). Professional development must be provided on the campus where the teachers work and be ongoing, job-embedded, standards based, and results driven. Professional development activities must engage staff in reflecting on their practice to address their capacity to change and improve, which in turn will result in improved student achievement and engagement (Cowan et al.). This practice of self-reflection should become a standard mode of operation. In addition, teachers and administrators alike should routinely analyze various data to inform their practice and to make decisions regarding students' needs, keeping in mind the need to focus on results (Cowan et al.).

To lead teachers to new ways of thinking about their practice and improved results, coaches or teacher leaders must model (Showers & Joyce, 1996) effective literacy practices for their peers, ensure that staff engage in observing and providing each other with feedback, and make certain that teachers engage in inquiry and seek research on proven effective literacy practices which can be incorporated into their daily work (Neito, 1999). To ensure the success of professional learning communities and to improve student achievement, teachers and administrators must engage in meaningful professional development which leads to a deep understanding of teaching and learning, collectively talk about what is effective in their practice and what is not, measure the impact of those practices on student learning, and collaboratively work to support each other (Lambert et al., 1995; Showers & Joyce).

Showers and Joyce (1996) posit that leaders must create structures that advance

teacher collaboration, provide them with support, and allocate time and resources so “teachers learn from one another while planning instruction, developing support materials, watching one another work with students, analyzing student work, and thinking together about the impact of their behavior on their students’ learning” (p. 15).

Additionally, building staffs’ leadership capacity and school governance teams foster “common experiences [that] define the meaning, the distinct character, and the central purpose of a school community” (Redding, 1998, p. 23), one that is inclusive, responsive, and which promotes a sense of ownership in decision making and commitment to the school improvement initiatives.

### **Family and Community Engagement**

Family and community engagement are essential elements for children’s overall development—especially literacy development—and success in school (Bryk et al., 2010; Carter et al., 2009; Doyle & Zhang, 2011; Goldenberg, 2002; Lynch, 2009; Storch & Whitehurst, 2001). Districts and schools must reach out to and engage students’ families and the larger community in the process of transforming the school and developing literate students. As Bryk et al. assert, the power of the family and community should not be underestimated and should be considered as strong and viable partners and advocates of the schools school improvement initiatives. Parents want to be informed and engaged in meaningful opportunities that build their capacity in literacy strategies so they can support their children’s literacy development. Educators must understand that the print literacy skills that children from underserved communities bring to school are different from the skills their White, middle class peers bring (Carter et al.; Lynch; Storch & Whitehurst). Often, to begin their children’s early literacy development, parents use

environmental text, such as reading flyers, store advertisements, coupons, billboards, newspapers, envelopes, labels, etc., with their children (Carter et al.; Lynch). For leisure reading, parents might share text such as entertainment or gossip magazines (Carter et al.; Lynch). Therefore, teachers must engage with parents to become familiar with their family activities so that they can weave other literacy opportunities into the family's routine (Carter et al.). Teachers need to provide demonstrations for parents—appropriate literacy activities and text that integrate the social and cultural practices of the family and can be used at home to reinforce students' literacy skills (Carter et al.; Lynch). For example, teachers might hold monthly literacy meetings at which children's literature is shared, and they can demonstrate techniques parents can use with their children when sharing books (Carter et al.; Lynch). Providing continuous communication to parents about their child's reading progress and tips for how parents can continue to support their literacy development, is crucial to breaking down the barriers and gaps that might exist between the home and school (Bryk et al.; Carter et al.; Goldenberg; Lynch; Storch & Whitehurst). Families and communities want to know the positive things that are happening in their child's school and the challenges the school faces; they want to be given the opportunity to support the staff and participate in meaningful activities that support the school in meeting its improvement efforts (Bryk et al.).

### **Ethic of Care**

Developing learning environments that transcend teaching to high-stakes assessments and the power dynamics that exist among staff and between staff and students, requires a relational approach with an emphasis on care and responsiveness. Ethic of care originated from feminist theory, and the contributions of Nel Noddings

and feminists such as Gilligan, DuBois, and Menkel-Meadow have been instrumental in its development. Noddings (1989) posits that caring relations advances a paradigm shift of

teacher to students as the center of attention, openness and dialogue; student-to-student talk; increased participation of students in the choice of questions, topics, and projects; more opportunities for direct contact in the field; variable modes of evaluation; more generous and direct help in learning; and a reluctance to grade [or promote grade levels] on the basis of “natural” talent or test scores (p. 5).

An ethic of care promotes a pedagogy that makes caring and responsiveness central to teaching. However, professional competence still remains essential to teaching in such an environment, where students are seen and treated as capable people and educators attend to the personal, emotional, behavioral, and educational needs of their students as they arise during interaction with them (Noddings). Noddings strongly believes that care is fundamental to peoples’ lives, that people want to be cared for, and that caring should be the basis for making ethical decisions in schools especially those that directly relate to the care of students.

An ethic of care also espouses that people are interdependent and relational. This approach is contextual and focuses on “the lives of others, ...their specific stories and on their uniqueness” (Czobor-Lupp, 2010). Noddings (2005a) describes such caring relations as connections “between two human beings—a carer and a recipient of care, or cared for” (p. 15). For relationships to be called caring, both parties must contribute to it. Noddings asserts, “No matter how hard teachers try to care, if the caring is not received

by students, the claim ‘they don’t care’ has some validity...[but most importantly] it strongly suggests that something is very wrong” (p. 15).

### **The One Caring and the Cared-For**

To be a carer or the “one-caring” one must set aside his/her own state and fully embrace the other’s condition as though it were one’s own (Noddings, 2005a). As a carer, one is open and attuned to what the cared-for is saying or experiencing and is reflective about the situation. The carer also may feel the need to help the cared-for, which is known as motivational displacement (Noddings), and will respond by putting the cared-for’s apprehensions first and use ways that are supportive. For this to be called caring, the cared-for must recognize and know that an act of caring has taken place. These caring relations are mutual and reciprocal which means that the carer and cared-for will exchange places during different circumstances or other encounters (Noddings). Noddings (2005a) contends that caring “is the very bedrock of all successful education” (p. 27) and that it is essential that today’s schools develop such environments and relationships among educators and students. To be caring in schools, educators must be attentive, listen to the students’ needs, and respond as positively as possible or in a manner that will maintain the caring relation between the teacher and student (Noddings, 2005b).

### **Cared For**

Noddings (2003) states that in schools, the openness displayed by the one caring, does not need to lead to lowering of expectations or abandonment of responsibility for conduct and achievement. Instead, it strengthens the teacher’s effort in sustaining and growing the child’s capacity to receive and acknowledge authentic relational encounters.

Noddings holds that as a teacher works with a child in a cooperative spirit, he/she resists the temptation to use power dynamics to manipulate or mold the child, and instead establishes a climate of openness and collaboration. The teacher, the one caring, mirrors reality as he/she sees it to the student and accepts the student in the hope that he will accept himself—being reflective and seeing what is there, thinking about what might be changed and what might be. However, the decision to embrace a particular opportunity must be the child's. The teacher is committed to the student and honestly communicates with the student regarding his vision of himself, whether it is either positive or negative. The teacher is careful never to communicate a circumstance that portrays the student as being alone, abandoned, or detached from others (Noddings, 2003).

The cared-for can feel the authenticity of being openly received and cared for by others but can also sense feelings of being ignored or becoming invisible to the other. Noddings (2003) stresses that children also need one or more lasting and stable relationships to help them develop, and that makes the child the center of an infectious care. Teachers cannot provide such care to all students but they can develop a caring environment, as can principals for school staff. This creates an environment where affection and support are promoted so that children receive attention and learn to receive care honestly and also learn to be the one caring in relationship with others (Noddings, 2003).

Noddings (2005a) claims that schools have been slow to respond to the social changes that have taken place in the last 60 years. Goldstein (2002) supports Noddings stance that a caring relationship between teacher and students is important. Both Goldstein and Noddings (2005a) claim that care as a form of practice, as distinguished

from theory, is central to developing a care-centered educational environment.

### **Caring Learning Environment**

Noddings (2005a) believes that caring-about is a significant force yet to be revealed and understood in our schools, especially when working with diverse students such as struggling readers. She further asserts,

Schools today are not supportive places for children with genuine intellectual interests. With rare exceptions, they are not supportive places for students with any genuine or intrinsic interest. ... we want ... students, like all others to feel comfortable with their special interests” (pp. 60–61).

Noddings differs from the way in which Dewey (1916) addressed how students learn; he did not dispute the existing areas of study in the school curriculum but believed educators could initiate—in students who showed an interest in those disciplines—further inquiry and meaning so that they would learn to use the acquired knowledge and experience in organizations or systems. Noddings considers Dewey’s philosophy to be one of control, while she supports a philosophy of shared responsibility, with centers of care where everyone shares in nurturing each child’s individual capacity and intelligence.

The focus on centers of care and the development of capacities must be filtered through and filled out by a consideration of differences that are associated with race, sex, ethnicity, and religion [and] these various perspectives ... must be treated respectfully, critically, and regularly. Not only must we respect the various talents of our children ... but, if we are doing the work of attentive love, we must care deeply for them. We want to preserve their lives, nurture their growth, and shape them by some ideal

of acceptability (p. 62).

Noddings (2005b) and Kliebard (2001) both contend that curricula today do not provide students and teachers the opportunity to self-select areas of studies; instruction is often dominated by specific learning objectives that do not provide guidance on how to accomplish the tasks. As Kliebard asserts, “The history of education is replete with examples of educators burning down their educational houses to reach their announced goals, however trivial they may have been, or whatever the devastation created by achieving them” (p. 196). Both Noddings and Kliebard communicate that we often force students into areas of study and then struggle to motivate them to do something they do not want to do. Moreover, they recommend that the choices we make for students in schools should be guided by the same framework we use to make other ethical and moral choices in our lives that impact those we care for and love, such as our own children. To meet the challenge in schools, educators must provide students opportunities to search for connections in their self-selected areas of interests that might vary from student to student (Noddings; Kliebard) as well as develop students’ capabilities for reflection and inquiry (Kliebard). Also, there must be continuity in purpose that is centered on helping all students understand the fundamentals of caring for each other and develop their capacity to care and be cared for (Noddings). Noddings also asserts it is important that children have a consistency in school residence. In other words, students should stay in one school building long enough to develop a sense of belonging; teachers and students need to stay together, by choice, for three or more years (Noddings). Noddings and Kliebard support a curriculum that emphasizes care and respect for students, and provides a wide range of significant programs and activities in various content and art that are embedded in daily

instructional practices. Noddings (2005a) also advocates that four components such as modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation are essential for developing a positive learning environment and enhancing struggling readers' literacy skills.

Modeling promotes an environment in which “we do not tell our students to care; we show them how to care by creating caring relations with them” (Noddings, 2005a, p. 22). This also includes being responsive to students by explaining what the teacher is doing in the classroom and during instruction and why it is important.

Dialogue Freire (1970) describes it, is an open-ended conversation that is genuine, and neither party knows the outcome or decisions that might be made. Noddings (2005a) describes it as a “common search for understanding, empathy or appreciation. [The dialogue may be] playful or serious, logical or imaginative, goal or process oriented, but it is always a genuine quest for something undetermined at the beginning” (p. 23). It engages us in talk with our students about what we are trying to show. It invites students to ask why and to share their perspectives. It is a desired approach and attitude that is also at the center of a caring learning environment.

Practice is essential to transforming our praxis of providing support and care to all students, especially to struggling readers. This encompasses providing opportunities for students and staff to emulate caring relations and take time to reflect on such practice and its significance (Noddings, 2005a).

Confirmation, as Noddings (2005a) describes, “lifts us toward our vision of a better self” (p. 25). It is grounded in a relational trust, is genuine, and addresses human mistakes lovingly and with a cared-for emphasis that is vital to creating a care-centered learning environment.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents an overview of the methods used to conduct this qualitative study, the theoretical framework that directed the study, the sampling process used for informant selection, and the data collection and analysis procedures. As stated earlier, the study examined the understandings and interpretations of meaning related to the lived experiences of principals in high performance, high poverty (HPHP) schools—more specifically, those who intentionally chose literacy as a school improvement focus for supporting struggling learners. Of particular interest was how these principals developed a school culture and learning environment that promoted effective teaching practices to encourage and support the cultural differences and knowledge students bring to the classroom. The inquiry also focused on exploring, identifying, analyzing, and understanding the effective structures and supports principals of HPHP schools use to assist struggling learners and advance literacy development for students considered to be at risk due to poverty. The following questions guided the study:

Q1. What informed the principals to choose literacy as an intentional focus for school improvement?

Q2. What systems did the school have in place to support struggling learners and advance literacy development of all students?

- Q3. What support systems helped teachers improve their pedagogy, to work collaboratively, and develop caring and effective classroom practices?
- Q4. How did these principals meet state and federal accountability requirements while sustaining their focus on developing literate students?
- Q5. What barriers do such principals face even though they continue to be successful with developing literate students and sustaining other measures of school success?

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research emphasizes understanding a phenomenon, process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the participants involved. Patton (1985) asserts that qualitative research is

... an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting—what it means for participants to be in the setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting—and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to other who are interested in that setting (p. 1).

The important factor is to understand “the phenomenon ... from the participants’ (insiders) perspective and not the researcher’s” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6).

Qualitative researchers tend to view social phenomena as parts intimately interconnected and relate the parts to the whole. They continuously reflect on their roles as researchers and also reflect on who they are in relation to the inquiry. They must

continually be aware of their personal biographies and how those shape the study and “use complex reasoning that is multifaceted and iterative” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 3). Marshall and Rossman (2011) also point out that qualitative research happens in real life settings, uses a variety of methods that are interactive and humanistic, focuses on the circumstances in which actions happen, is developing rather than rigidly predetermined, and is primarily interpretive.

This qualitative study used an interpretative phenomenological analysis to interpret the meaning of lived experiences of principals of HPHP schools who utilized literacy as an intentional focus for school improvement. Interpretative phenomenological analysis research considers school as a lived experience (Merriam, 1998), and understanding the meaning of the experience reveals the knowledge to be gained.

### **Methodology**

Creswell (2007) asserts that an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach to qualitative research involves making “interpretations of what [researchers] see, hear, and understand” (p. 39). It allows for investigation of the informants’ “idiographic subjective experiences ... [and] acknowledges that the researcher’s engagement with the participant’s text has an interpretive element” (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008, p. 215). Using interpretative phenomenological analysis allowed the researcher to explore how informants ascribed meaning to their experiences in their interactions with the environment (Biggerstaff & Thompson; Reid, et al., 2005; Smith, et al., 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2008). Additionally, the approach permitted the use of the researcher’s own conceptions gained as a former principal who used literacy as an intentional school improvement focus, and it evoked the interpretations by the readers and participants;

thus, multiple views and interpretations emerged (Creswell, 2007). Merriam (1998) asserts,

Qualitative research assumes that there are multiple realities—that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perceptions. It is a highly subjective phenomenon in need of interpreting rather than measuring. Beliefs rather than facts form the basis of perception (p. 17).

This theoretical frame adhered to the interpretative phenomenological analysis approach in that it emphasized the lived experience, focusing on the informants' understanding of their experiences and the sense-making activities they employed (Smith, et al., 2009). It also enabled the researcher to understand why and how something occurred and to focus on meaning and process (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). By the same token, it encouraged the exploration and analysis of the meaning of the lived experiences and how the informants “perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). The intent of this qualitative study was to provide a voice for leaders who successfully developed literate students and sustained their school's success.

### **History of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Jonathan Smith (1996) first presented interpretative phenomenological analysis in a paper discussing the contributions that the analysis could make to the field of health psychology by gathering patients' perceptions of their experiences related to chronic illness; he argued that although psychology was experimental it could also include ideas from phenomenology and hermeneutics. Since then interpretative phenomenological

analysis has been frequently used in the health professions, where the focus is usually on particular illnesses and clinical/counseling psychology (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Researchers in healthcare use qualitative studies to develop an idiographic understanding of patients' experiences (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). Healthcare professionals focus on understanding how particular events or processes are understood from their patients' perspective (e.g., what it means in their lived world to have survived or live with such circumstances [Biggerstaff & Thompson; Smith et al.]). The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis has expanded to other disciplines, such as education, and continues to be defined by three philosophies of knowledge—phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

**Phenomenology.** An essential element of phenomenological inquiry is that experience should be—as Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology believed—examined or studied in the way that it occurred in the human experience (Crotty, 1998). Husserl felt that those in science often viewed the world through a very uniform, highly structured, positivistic framework that differed from what others experienced daily in their ever changing and uncertain world (Crotty). According to Crotty, both Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty came to believe that to see the world in its true form, one must suspend or set aside prior assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes so as not to taint the data. For Husserl, phenomenology was a descriptive method that employed modes of philosophic and human science reflection (Van Manen, 1990). In Husserl's final work, he articulated the concept of the lifeworld and how phenomena “present themselves in lived experiences, in human existence” (Van Manen, p. 184). For Merleau-Ponty,

phenomenology meant always asking what is the nature or meaning of something (Van Manen). Van Manen accordingly indicates that phenomenology “does not produce empirical or theoretical observations or accounts ... [but instead] offers accounts of experienced space, time, body, and human relations as we live them” (Van Manen, p. 184). Crotty (1998) notes that phenomenology as understood today can be attributed to how it is used in North America and that it has become a part of the “American intellectual tradition and its ‘foreignness’ has been removed” (p. 84). However, although the vocabulary (e.g., experience, phenomenon, reduction, bracketing, and intentionality) still remains a part of phenomenology, its meaning has been transformed from the original intent (Crotty, 1998).

Phenomenology is deeply embedded in interpretative phenomenological analysis (Crotty, 1995). Husserl’s work established the significance and value of focusing on the lived experience and its related perceptions (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). According to Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009), Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre moved the scholarship toward a more interpretive and lived world premise with a focus on understanding the perceptions and meaning of a person’s relationship to the everyday experiences they have in their world. Accordingly, researchers who use an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach, seek to understand the unique perspectives and understandings that participants bring to their life world, as well as how they make meaning of events and occurrences that are happening to them (Chapman & Smith, 2002; Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty & Hendry, 2011; Reid, et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2008).

**Interpretivism.** Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009; Van Manen, 1990) that can be traced back to the ancient Greeks' study of literature and to the science of interpreting biblical text and what it means (Crotty, 1998). Today it continues to be used to convey the meaning of biblical and other texts as well as human behavior, events, and practice. Language is essential to understanding human events and situations in which we find ourselves and is another structure found in interpretative phenomenological analysis. It involves a two-stage interpretation process: the participant trying to make sense of their world and the researcher trying to make sense of the participants' trying to make sense of the world—known as a double hermeneutic (Chapman & Smith, 2002; Pringle et al., 2011; Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al.; Smith & Osborne, 2008). The researcher focuses on examining how a phenomenon appears to informants and strives to understand what it is like from the participants' points of view in order to understand their perceptions more completely (Smith & Osborn). Equally important in this process is the researcher revealing the relationship between the “fore-understanding and the new phenomenon” being investigated (Smith et al., p. 29). Gaining this insight helps the researcher gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being examined (Chapman & Smith; Pringle et al.; Reid, et al.; Smith et al.; Smith & Osborne). Van Manen points out that in Husserl's last work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1970), the philosopher described the “lifeworld as the ‘world of immediate experience’, the world that is ‘already there, pregiven’, the world as experienced in the ‘natural, primordial attitude’, that of ‘original natural life’” (Van Manen, p. 182). Martin Heidegger believed that the lifeworld was more worldly and existential and was a way of studying one's “modes-of-

being or ways-of-being-in-the-world” (Van Manen, p. 183). Wilhelm Dilthey was of key importance in the history of modern hermeneutics (Crotty, 1998). He acknowledged “the lived experience is incarnate in language, literature, behavior, art, religion, law—in ... every cultural institution and structure and ... [that] objectivity and validity can be increasingly achieved as more comes to be learned about the author and the author’s world, and as the interpreter’s own beliefs and values are given less play” (Crotty, p. 95).

**Idiography.** Idiography, a third influence known to “offer detailed, nuanced analyses of *particular* instances of lived experiences” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 37).

However, although distinct experiences can be unique to an individual participant, a successful researcher moves toward taking into account the commonalities that are shared across the group of informants and analyzes how they might be interrelated by common experiences (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2008).

### **Appropriateness of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for This Study**

Using interpretative phenomenological analysis presupposes the data would reveal something about the informants’ involvement and orientation toward intentionally—in this case—using literacy as a school improvement effort (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2008). Thus, open questions that focused upon the informants’ understanding of their experiences were vital to the study. The questions centered on the process rather than the outcomes and on the “meaning or concrete causes or consequences of events” (Smith et al., p. 47). Therefore, revealing and examining the details of the informants’ lived experiences was crucial to the study.

## Participant Selection

Patton (2002) asserts that, “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 169). This study used intensity sampling because the informants were considered experts of their own experiences; they could explain and clarify how they, as successful principals of HPHP schools, used literacy as a school improvement effort. Intensity sampling is often used in heuristic research because the researcher requires samples that provide the necessary intensity to illuminate the phenomenon to be studied (Patton, 2002). Because the selected informants had experience with this phenomenon, they provided interpretations of their thoughts, feeling, responsibilities, and motivations regarding developing literate students as they conveyed their narratives in detail, revealing the meaning that the experiences and events held for them (Chapman et al., 2002; Reid et al., 2005). Additionally, informants were selected based on the particular perspectives and understandings they could provide about how they performed the work of providing structures and supports to develop literate students. Contact with such principals was made based on this researcher’s existing contacts in the educational field and by using snowball sampling (Patton, 2002, p. 243). For this, study informants were selected if they meet the following criteria:

- Served as principal of school for three of more years
- Led a high performance, high poverty school with 85% or more of the student population identified as economically disadvantaged
- Used literacy as a school improvement initiative

- Had a history of working in underserved communities
- Used data to measure their student progress in literacy
- Sustained third and fourth grade students meeting or exceeding state accountability targets annually

To determine that the informants met these criteria, the researcher selected participants based on personal knowledge of their reputations for supporting literacy development, using snowball sampling for referrals, and on available public data to verify student test performance and other relevant factors. As data were collected, the researcher looked for evidence of which criteria each informant met. All informants were selected using this process. Tables 1, 2, and 3 provide the informants' school and student data to support they met the criteria for participating in this study.

**Table 1: Data for Bea's school**

<b>Data for Bea's School</b>					
<b>Principal's Tenure at School</b>	10 years				
Reading	2011	2010	2009	2008	2007
Campus	97%	94%	94%	91%	77%
3rd Grade (Eng.)	90%	99%	99%	99%	95%
3rd Grade (Sp.)	99%	99%	99%	99%	99%
4th Grade (Eng.)	99%	92%	92%	81%	80%
4th Grade (Sp.)	99%	99%	*	*	40%
<b>Percent Free and Reduced Price Lunch</b>					
Campus	97%	97%	97%	95%	97%
<b>Student Population by Ethnicity</b>					
African American	12%	12%	7%	13%	21%
Hispanic	85%	86%	91%	86%	78%
White	2%	*	*	*	*
Other	1%	2%	2%	1%	1%

**Table 2: Data for Julius' School**

<b>Data for Julius' School</b>					
<b>Principal's Tenure at School</b>	5 years				
<b>Reading</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2007</b>
Campus	97%	94%	94%	91%	77%
3rd Grade (Eng.)	83%	77%	73%	67%	48%
4th Grade (Eng.)	80%	75%	67%	53%	50%
<b>Percent Free and Reduced Price Lunch</b>					
Campus	98%	99%	95%	92%	87%
<b>Student Population by Ethnicity</b>					
African American	85%	83%	72%	73%	71%
Hispanic	4%	*	5%	5%	5%
White	10%	13%	21%	22%	23%
Other	1%	4%	1%	*	1%

**Table 3: Data for Kevin's school**

<b>Data for Kevin's School</b>					
<b>Principal's Tenure at School</b>	5 years				
<b>Reading</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2007</b>
Campus	90%	92%	87%	73%	Not rated
3rd Grade (Eng.)	90%	95%	93%	75%	
3rd Grade (Sp.)	99%	87%	77%	90%	
4th Grade (Eng.)	79%	94%	85%	55%	
4th Grade (Sp.)	99%	81%	81%	67%	
<b>Percent Free and Reduced Price Lunch</b>					
	95%	96%	96%	94%	
<b>Student Population by Ethnicity</b>					
African American	30%	35%	34%	42%	
Hispanic	68%	65%	65%	57%	
White	*		*	*	
Other	2%		1%	1%	

These data illustrate that each of the participants served in a high-poverty, high minority school and each participant was successful by state accountability system measures.

Purposeful sampling assumes that the researcher wants to “discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). For this group of informants, the research questions were meaningful” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, pp. 47 & 51). A small sample was most suitable to this inquiry because interpretative phenomenological research aims to “ reveal something of the experience of each of those individuals...so that, within the sample [the researcher can] examine the convergence and divergence in some detail ” (p. 3). In the initial screening process, applicants were informed about what the project entailed and how the data would be gathered; they were also apprised as to how their expertise and comments about their lived experiences would inform the study. The goal was to establish rapport with the informants and to ascertain the level of enthusiasm they could bring to the project.

### **Data Collection and Procedures**

To develop more “detailed and multifaceted accounts” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 52), the informants were interviewed multiple times. The interviews were extensive and revolved around how events occurred or unfolded on a daily basis; how staff interacted with each other and with students; and the meaning that staff and students gave to actions, words, and behaviors. The aim of the interviews was to enter the informants’ life worlds and for all informants to recount their life experiences with the phenomenon. Observations were conducted on the campuses to determine the structures and supports that were in place to support struggling readers, thus requiring that some time be spent in

the natural setting of the study. Additional documents, field notes, data, and artifacts were also reviewed.

The first interviews focused on experiences before the phenomenon of study; the second interviews focused on the present and after the phenomenon experience; and the third interviews joined “the two narratives to describe the informants’ individual essential experiences with the phenomenon” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 148). A variety of questions, (e.g., descriptive, narrative, structural, contrast, evaluative, comparative) prompts, and probes were framed in such a manner to ensure the questions were “open (rather than closed), and which [did] not make too many assumptions about the [participants’ experiences or concerns, or lead them towards particular answers” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 60). The interviews were approximately 1 to 1½ hours in length. Following each interview session, which was recorded, field notes were transcribed verbatim and returned to informants for review to ensure accuracy. Additionally, a draft or summary of the informant’s case study was given to the informant for review, reaction, corrections, and other insight he/she wished to provide (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Documents and artifacts were also used for the data analysis.

**Table 4: Interview Schedule**

<b>Informants</b>	<b>First interview</b>	<b>Second interviews</b>	<b>Third interviews</b>
<b>Principal A</b>			
<b>Principal B</b>	Before phenomenon	Current/during phenomenon	Joining the pre and post experiences
<b>Principal C</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Each interview was 1 to 1½ hours in length</i></li> <li>• <i>Environmental observations were conducted and document/artifacts were reviewed after each interview.</i></li> </ul>			

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using strategies described by Smith et al., (2009) as a thorough detailed reading of the transcripts and simultaneously notations regarding the informants' assertions, understanding, and experiences. The goal was to develop a comprehensive set of notes and comments in order to identify emerging patterns and themes and move from the individual to the group, from the particular to the shared, and from the phenomenological to the interpretive (Smith et al). Taking the data to a higher level of interpretation was crucial to the study. The premise of this data analysis was to reveal the essence or basic structure of the work principals of high performance high poverty schools perform to support struggling readers. The objective was to "arrive at structural descriptions [of the principals'] lived experiences, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced ... How did the experience of the phenomenon come to be what it is?" (Merriam, 1998). The data will be reported as individual narrative cases, using the first case to begin identifying themes and the particulars. To accomplish this heuristic process data analysis was used, incorporating the strategies, processes, and flexibility of the interpretative phenomenological approach (Smith et al., 2009). This process or framework involved immersing oneself in the data and recalling the most salient, meaningful, and striking points of the interviews through active engagement with the text (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Smith et al.). This required multiple re-readings of the interviews until a structure or a sequential account began to emerge.

At the same time, notes were made on the transcripts related to how the informants expressed themselves, the language they used, and how they appeared to

understand and think about their lived experiences and matters encountered (Smith et al.). Notes were also made on the text regarding descriptive and verbatim comments to support themes and the informants' reflections, feelings, and understanding. In addition, this enabled the researcher to discern the meaning of participants' understandings (Douglass & Moustakas; Smith et al.). These interpretative notes provided additional references during the triangulation and analysis of the data.

In the next step, the notes were used to develop themes that concisely described the essence of what was deemed important and to make connections across themes. After completing this process with each individual case, observations were conducted on the campuses to provide a check on what was reported in the interviews. Document, record, and artifact analysis were also conducted. Triangulating various sources for data analysis allowed building on the strengths of the data gathered and reduced untenable points that a single approach might have produced (Patton, 2002).

### **Researcher's Perspective**

In 2002, the school board of the district for which I worked directed the superintendent to develop a plan focused on improving the habitual low academic achievement in six underperforming schools. The improvement plan was known as the Advance Schools Initiative. I was hired to serve as principal at one of these schools, an urban, high-poverty elementary school with a toxic climate. Although the school had made gains on the state assessments, the discord among staff had deteriorated the learning environment. The school was reconstituted with only four of the original staff members remaining. At the onset of taking the position, I hired an administrative team that consisted of an assistant principal, two instructional coaches, and two instructional

specialists. Additionally, I included a key special education teacher to be a member of that team. As did all other schools that were part of the district's Advance Schools Initiative, my team and I chose to use literacy as an intentional school improvement effort. The instructional blocks for teaching reading and mathematics were deliberately increased, focusing on literacy development. Also, all six principals who participated in this effort, created a professional learning group that met weekly or biweekly to discuss successes and challenges, and share best practices. These meetings strengthened our skills to use and analyze data to make decisions, built professional networks, and allowed us to seek guidance from each other for addressing concerns. This process developed collegial, professional and trusting relationships that have endured beyond our common experiences. With the exception of one, all of our students' academic performance increased substantially and the success at each school was sustained after our departure. I believe that implementing and instituting systems and processes at each school for school improvement and building the capacity of others to lead the work once key staff exited their positions, was central to sustaining each school's success over time.

Although the state and federal accountability systems were in place during my tenure, the number of tests students are currently administered has grown substantially over the years, and so has the number of schools labeled as low performing. However, even though high-stakes assessments continue to be used for measuring student progress, some high poverty elementary schools have increased their students' academic performance by choosing to focus on literacy development for school improvement. Moreover, these successful schools have sustained their success over time despite reduced available support, resources and funds such as those provided to my school

through the Advance Schools improvement initiative. As a consequence, I sought to better understand what administrators of current high performance high poverty (HHP) schools do to develop literate students, support teachers and struggling learners, and how their students' success is sustained over time especially when the accountability ratings of public schools are perceived by the public as a key determining factors for success. Thus, this inquiry focused on exploring, identifying, analyzing, and understanding how these principals' advanced literacy development for their students.

Consequently, my experience as a former principal of a high performance high poverty school was of value to this inquiry. In accordance with Patton (2002), personal experiences, such as mine

adds credibility to the inquiry...and is part of the content for the findings. A human being is the instrument of qualitative methods. [Plus] any judgments about the significance of findings are thus inevitably connected [to my] credibility, competence, thoroughness and integrity (p. 64).

My commitment to this inquiry was to "understand the [participant's] world as it unfolds, be true to complexities and multiple perspectives as they emerge, and be balanced in reporting both confirmatory and disconfirming evidence with regard to any conclusions offered (51). Moreover, qualitative inquiry, as Patton asserts, "depends on, uses and enhances the researcher's direct experiences in the world and insights about those experiences (51). This includes learning from the informants by understanding their feelings and perspectives. Therefore, my intent was to present a balanced view of the findings that were not driven by personal opinions or perspectives.

### **Assumptions**

The intent of this qualitative study was to conduct case studies of three successful elementary school principals in order to examine and understand how the informants make sense of their lived experiences, and what meanings those experiences hold for them. An assumption of this study was that the participants were authentic in sharing their perspectives and not intentionally deceptive. Another assumption was that the inquiry was open to the scholar's dual role as researcher and participant. Yet drawing from the researchers experience as a former successful principal, who used literacy as an intentional school improvement effort, was important when interpreting the data. At the same time, the researcher had to be cautious not to impose perspectives and assumptions from previous experiences onto the informants, as the intent was to understand and learn from their experiences. Also, the study is contextual to these schools.

### **Summary**

This qualitative study focused on examining the lived world of successful elementary principals of high-poverty schools that intentionally use literacy development as a school improvement effort. An interpretative phenomenological analysis provided a detailed assessment of lived experience that focused on the interpretation of meaning and explored how successful principals who focus on developing literate students relate to their lived world. Using an interpretative lens assisted the researcher in understanding how such leaders make meaning from the events and actions they undertake while improving their schools.

## CHAPTER IV

### PRESENTATION, DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results of the study. The purpose of the study was to understand how three principals of high performance, high poverty schools came to use literacy development as an intentional school improvement focus to leverage students' knowledge, skills and capacity for increased academic performance. The study also analyses how these informants continue to sustain their schools' successes in light of a high stakes testing arena and reduced resources.

Following an interpretative phenomenological process, I used a snowball technique to identify a small, purposeful, homogeneous sample of three principals to provide a "detailed case-by-case analysis of individual transcripts...[so that] the study...say[s] something in detail about the perceptions and understandings of this particular group rather than prematurely make more general claims" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 55). The study describes the interpretation of the participants' lived experiences, beginning prior to becoming principals of their respective schools and continuing through their success in developing literate students and sustaining their schools' improvement. This study, then, seeks to understand more about how today's principals of schools in underserved communities achieve and sustain their success as the state and federal assessment requirements become more pronounced and continue to be a moving target. The data analysis for this study was based on interpretation of text and cognitive

representation in order to "make sense of that other personal world through a process of interpretative activity" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 53). The informants' narratives included their past and current experiences. This allowed the researcher to explore how informants perceived and understood their particular situations and how they made sense of their personal and social world (Smith & Osborn).

In this chapter, the informants' narratives are discussed with quotes from the interview transcripts to provide insight on how they think and reflect on their experiences and understandings. In looking across interview data and participant narratives, themes and sub-themes emerged. These are described and discussed to provide context of surrounding conditions and meaning across all informants.

### **Portraits of Informants Interviewed**

#### **Julius**

Julius is an African American male who served in the education field for 20 years with 11 of those years as an administrator at various campuses in high poverty, underserved communities. Although Julius was reluctant to share early personal life experiences that might have influenced his literacy focus or informed his practice as a school leader, he did elaborate on his experiences in college, the corporate world, teaching, and those related to his professional growth.

In college, Julius was undecided about a career track but he noticed, as did his college professors and supervisors in his other jobs, that he was good with people, strong in developing relationships, a problem solver, resourceful, and innovative. He also held a strong desire to work in education where he felt he could have the greatest impact on youth. He viewed his experiences in college and the private sector as laying the

groundwork and developing his knowledge and skills for working in the educational field. He noted his previous work also provided environments where he began to understand the importance of developing positive working relationships with others.

Julius explained

J: I started in a regular sales part time position but moved up to Assistant Manager 1. I was the second in command and ended up doing the training for staff members on product knowledge, how to approach the customers, and how to build that relationship. My outlook was that too often you get caught up in the sales, wanting that big sale and wanting that kill. You stay there all day looking to get that one big sale. But, more importantly it was really about building a relationship with someone. So, as a customer came in, I spent as much time with them until they were ready to go. I shared with the customer that it didn't matter whether or not they bought their resources from me or from someone else. They just needed to know what the heck they were buying. So it was building relationships.

As a teacher, Julius taught mostly at high poverty schools with only three of those years teaching at an affluent campus. He implied these various experiences developed his understanding of advancing literacy for students living in poverty, influenced his framework for literacy development, and eventually guided his decision to use literacy as a school improvement focus at his school. Julius spoke of how he gained all of his literacy content and training at what he considered to be one of the best districts in the state.

J: I was in a three-year study for the Stonecliff Reading Initiative. That's when I started looking at best practices for literacy development from the standpoint of how to empower teachers so that they would begin to use literacy development with their students. I knew that was going to be the key to unlock everything for our students.

He recognized this was how he first began to develop his understanding of the importance of literacy development for all learners; and, also to use literacy for improving how educators work on a daily basis with students in the classroom. He perceived that literacy development was the lifeline for students' future success, especially for struggling learners who entered school lacking literacy and vocabulary skills.

J: If students aren't able to read, then they're really not going to be successful in the future. They might be able to do computations, but if they have a word problem, they're not going to be able to figure it out.

Julius disclosed that the experiences with the reading initiative, as well as his engagement in many job-embedded professional development opportunities with experts in the field, broadened his understanding of literacy development for struggling learners in high poverty schools. He signified that these experiences expanded his knowledge and skills of how literacy development is interconnected to "all that students do academically and socially". He explained

J: Through this reading initiative, I met Brian Cambourne, Rick DuFour, Shelley Harwayne, all of the people that began writing books, Debbie Diller, Debbie Miller and that's when I was exposed to advancing literacy

development and things like the author studies. That's where literacy development began for me, and then I began to think about, okay, what does a student need to know to be able to progress to the next level?

When Julius began his tenure at his school, he felt he had the leadership skills needed to change and strengthen teaching practices, develop a collaborative school culture, improve students' academic performance, and develop literate students. He revealed that he found his school to be in dire need of improvement at many levels. His review of the trend data continued to provide evidence that it would be a wise choice to use literacy as a school improvement focus, since it appeared to be the biggest struggle for students.

J: We were fighting for last place when I came to my school. So it just made sense to focus on literacy development at the time because the data kept showing that most of our students were reading below grade level. When I look at the data, about 85% of the students who were weaker in math were also weaker in reading. So I knew there was a correlation. So the key was going to be, how do we unlock this? The math test had directions that had to be read even if it was about computation. The directions would tell students what to do, but if they didn't understand the task they weren't going to be able to do anything with it. So the focus became to unlock all of that. Science and social studies are completely reading and comprehension, so there's not one subject that you can engage in that won't have some aspect of reading.

Julius also gave the impression that the skills and knowledge acquired from his early work in the private sector and educational field influenced his leadership approach. These early experiences helped him build relationships to move the school improvement work forward at his campus. He suggested that building professional relationships with staff and students was imperative to successfully developing literate students and to improve or strengthen teachers' practice.

J: My philosophy is building a relationship with someone is most important. In my previous work, when someone came in I would assist him or her and spend as much time with them as they needed. So when I started to work in schools, building relationships was important. Letting staff, students, and parents come in and talk to me or to ask me any questions and spending time with them was valuable. It was just building those relationships. I also applied that learning to building relationships with students in the classroom. It was building relationships with students, also building a relationship and trust with teachers so that they would come back to me and talk about what they needed or how their teaching was progressing in the classroom.

Julius insists school leaders cannot make assumptions about staffs' knowledge and skill set as well as their work ethic. He asserted that leaders must become acquainted with their staff's areas of need and their strengths. He firmly believes it is important to use various leadership behaviors to address positive and negative situations. He also understands that often, individual situations need to be handled with a different set of skills. However, he stressed that one must always be professional and respectful. For

him, building relationships with staff and students helped provide him with information that he could use to target specific support for individuals, as well as groups of students or staff.

J: When building that relationship with staff, you have to meet staff where they are. So, if I have someone that is Type A, I know to be very organized and start and end meetings on time. Type B, we can have a cup of coffee; sit back and relax. I can take my time with what I need to do. So, you really have to change your leadership style to suit your teachers or your administrators.

Similarly, Julius asserted that trust among staff was vital to moving the school improvement work forward. He perceived the conversations and dialogue that take place with staff and students, as helping to establish the tone within the teaching and learning environment. He feels that being in the classrooms and having authentic conversations with teachers and students about their work, plans, innovations and dreams is not only a great model for others to emulate but also has a tendency toward moving others to see things in a different manner, confirming others' effective practices and building their effort and confidence for success. He adamantly believes principals need to venture into the classrooms frequently, and mingle among staff and students to gain their trust and to help build an environment where relations are based on trust.

J: The standard operating procedure people, they don't last. You have to have a culture of trust. Why do I need a piece of paper, a checklist to make sure things are happening? I'm not into checklists. You want to trust students and teachers so that they come back to you. I was able to get

people to trust me and engage them at being open to doing certain things differently.

He also sees himself as being very conscious about the importance of validating staff's work and providing feedback to them so that they can continue to grow and improve, become leaders, or seek other roles in the school or district.

J: Good or bad don't browbeat teachers and don't lump everyone into one smile. Don't wait until the end of the year to tell someone whether or not he or she is doing a good job. Providing no formative feedback along the way is not okay. So you have 180 days of not providing feedback and all of a sudden someone finds out they are not doing their job well. The next thing they know an improvement plan is in place. As the school leader, you didn't say a word, not one word to them every day that they were on campus. I learned not to do that. I learned about having conversations and providing feedback from my college professors, my friend who is an author, and from some of my principals that were not good leaders. I also learned that from my daughter's Montessori teacher. The last 15-20 minutes of the day she would sit all the students around her and they would all engage in a conversation that she would sometimes direct. From this, the students learned how to share, how to be patient, and she was able to provide the children a space for them to listen and share. That is what I believe we need to do as school leaders.

Julius implied he made it known that it was his job, as principal of the school, to build the staff's capacity. He felt it was important to help others move into leadership

positions either in or outside of the district. He felt it was his way of paying it forward for the opportunities and support he received from fellow colleagues.

J: I've got two teachers now that have been in the district for 14 and 16 years respectively. They constantly have the best test scores, parents requesting them, but have never been placed in a leadership position, never been asked, what are you doing, how can we share what you know and your knowledge with someone else in the district. That's a reflection of the leadership in the building and the district. It's the leaders fault because someone should have created the culture where these two ladies were used as models so others could learn from them. They could have been used as resources for professional development. The first time they ever presented was when I asked them to present this year. And, I couldn't understand why. If someone's doing something well, you need to showcase it. You're not showboating you're not playing favorites, you're saying, this is the model we need. If you don't show others the model that you want, then they have nothing to reach for, they think they are doing fine.

So I got both of them jobs in another district this year, and I'll mentor both of them through their careers. One is going to be an instructional coach, so she's going to take the coach path to maybe leadership in a district level curriculum role. The other wants to be a principal. Now she's an assistant principal in a school where she can do the most good. That feels good to be able to do that as an administrator.

I learned that the relationship building and pushing people up and opening doors for them as well as helping them make those connections with others in the field is probably one of the more lasting things that I've been able to do for staff and colleagues.

Julius also suggested he continuously engaged students in conversations about what good readers do and often modeled that behavior to his students and staff. He considered such conversations and modeling to be an approach for helping students and staff to have a clearer understanding of what great readers and writers do.

J: I wanted our students to see the connection between reading and writing. So I was intent on getting students to read, and I would watch them with a book as they engaged with text. I would talk to the students and always say you need to read like a writer, and write like a reader. I would explain that when writing a letter to a student or a teacher, my pen takes a different slant depending on whether or not I'm angry, happy or joking. I might be laughing inside because I'm imagining when the teachers read my script, the teachers are going to smile at the same points I want them to smile. I would also tell the students that when they read books, I wanted them to bring that same kind of thinking to the book. Think about what the author was saying.

Julius felt he clearly communicated to teachers that they must be intentional about their teaching practices and that nothing could be done in isolation.

J: For example, I talked to staff about the sophistication of their language and asked them to stop over-simplifying or paraphrasing their sentence

structures for students. I wanted them to speak naturally to students. Which meant teachers using complex sentence structures at times, because then, the students would learn to write using the same sentence structures. Modeling the language so that students would learn it and incorporate it into their writing. Teachers also had to anticipate what students might not know due to their limited experiences. Then, they had to find a way to expand students' knowledge and experiences in the classroom. Teachers might possibly have students take a virtual field trip and then have a discussion about it. There are so many different ways that teachers can integrate opportunities and experiences into their instruction, as opposed to stopping, teaching the lesson and moving on. That's not how life is.

He also communicated that staff needed to have the will and make an effort to get the work around developing literate students done. He felt it was also important that all staff be instructionally literate and employ best practices.

J: Staff needed to know what good instruction looked like and what good leaders and learners do. It was also important to know what best practice in a literacy environment looked like. That's where my coaches and I came in. For example, I wanted well-defined centers in every classroom, but I was willing to implement it in stages for those that had never done centers before. So I gave teachers a timeline for developing and implementing centers. Leaders need to monitor instruction and hold everyone accountable for doing their part in developing literate students.

Similarly, he asserted it was equally important to demonstrate and provide staff with events and experiences that were associated with being successful, best practices in high performing schools. He shared that he worked collaboratively with the staff to engage the community, engage families, get people excited about what they can do together, let parents know how their students were progressing academically and let students know the opportunities that were available once they graduated. He spent a lot of time engaging others in such activities, and helping staff become comfortable with engaging parents and community members who might look and think differently. He wanted staff to understand that they had to become familiar with the students' culture, community, and values. So, he immersed himself in modeling all that he asked staff to participate in, so he was the first to provide the example. Then he would have conversations with staff about their views of the experiences.

J: For example, we held events like College Day and College Week where every classroom door was decorated with a different university theme and students learned about those colleges. Each morning on the announcements we read about the different colleges or an aspect of college and tied it back to the college theme. In order to get the many activities and tasks done that we were bringing in, we used as many local people as we could including the universities. It was just letting students, staff and families know the expectations at each level. We especially wanted the students to know what to expect at the elementary school, the middle school, and the high school they would be attending prior to

college. I wanted them to understand the progression, and what they would be doing and how that would help them in the future.

Julius espoused a different view of addressing cultural gaps that exist between staff and students. He implied staff should not be held accountable for providing culturally relevant instruction if they did not have the resources and tools needed. His conversation communicated that he had a different perception and understanding of the topic.

J: Wow. Interesting. There is no defined culture in poverty; that is the culture. It is the culture of poverty. We know students lack vocabulary because research bears that out. So it's not whether schools in society see our students. I think that our children need to develop their own identities, and that's where schooling has done its job. My mother-in-law and I get into arguments when I tell her that segregation was the best thing for blacks. Let me tell you why, because education and peoples' responsibility wasn't watered down. The pride that was in the community, the village concept, that if you act up this neighbor's going to straighten you out versus parents stating what you doing disciplining my child. The advances that we used to get and hear came as a result of us being deprived and what we call being culturally assimilated and re-socialized. There is no black identity. My friends and I talk about this a lot. There is none. The social rights and civil rights movement, it's dead. It's not the same. The reason that these groups or others, in my opinion are no longer viable is because they've missed the point; education is the new civil rights. We need to look at what we need to do. So in terms of a culturally

responsive curriculum, like I said earlier instead of saying you're not doing this right. How about we just make sure there are models in the curriculum? Why is the public attacking the school system when you should be attacking the publishers? Go after the people who make the books. We have a choice of books to buy. However, there's not an infinite list of books that we need to choose from. There are only about 10 or 15 vendors, so why not go after the vendors for not making it more responsive? Because that is what schools are using. They beat us in the head for using this curriculum that's been adopted by the State Department when the argument needs to be with the elected officials. You pay their salaries, they're in office because of you, so use your collective voices to change things and make books more diverse.

Overall, Julius senses he is astute to instructional and social issues affecting the population of students that he serves. He feels his leadership is student-centered and focused on outcomes that will benefit them in the future. He also feels he is there to serve his community, and wants his students to have the same opportunities and experiences that are afforded to his own children. He notes that he chooses to work with youth who live in underserved communities because that is where he is needed the most, and he knows he can make a difference.

J: I don't want to be famous. I don't want to be rich. I just want to help and I want to help, quickly. I want to make a difference, I really do. This is the toughest work. It's the hardest work, but it's the most rewarding. If you don't have the work ethic, you won't be successful.

Julius testified he credits the school's success to a culture of being inclusive of all stakeholders, staff being accountable for all students, developing a school culture where all work as a team and focusing on developing literate students.

J: I'm a very humble person. I believe in letting my students, teachers, and their data speak for me. So my conversation about transforming my school is that what we've been able to do with literacy was a team effort. Yes, there was the instructional piece. However, I will tell you that research says that if I don't set the proper tone and climate, then the teachers aren't going to be risk takers and do the things they need to do for the students. It's been difficult, and I don't want to be put on a pedestal. I'm not that great. I think because we created such a collaborative climate, then I can help other school leaders think in the same terms and maybe other leaders can just take it further, and we can all make education better. So the question becomes what can we, as leaders, do in this whole education field to make someone else's life a little bit better? How can we pay it forward?

### **Kevin**

Kevin is a Puerto Rican male who, for the past twenty years, served as a teacher, an assistant principal and a principal at various levels of the system and only in underserved communities. He recently completed 5 years as a principal at his current high performance, high poverty school. He has been successful not only at his current school but also while serving as a teacher and assistant principal in several districts. While serving in these various roles, he provided professional development for teachers

and leaders; mentored principals of high poverty low performing schools, mentored new and novice principals and provided guidance and leadership to groups of administrators throughout his career. He perceives himself to be strong in building relationships with others, engaging in conversations with staff, students and parents, seeking professional learning opportunities for himself outside of the system, using questioning skills to help educators think about their practice in different ways, and using data to make decisions. Further, he has sustained his school's academic performance, often matching or outperforming predominantly white, middle class schools in his district.

Kevin grew up in a family that valued education and that seemed to rally around and support each other so that the opportunity to further their education always became a reality. Although his family was essentially homeless at one point and they encountered many difficult times, they had extended family members who supported them, provided them a home and always made each of them feel that they could accomplish anything. Kevin also noted that he lived and was educated in a very small community where very few people of color were in leadership positions. He explained that since he is a person of color, the expectation at his school that he would excel was not a view held by many outside of his family.

K: When I was growing up my father was gone by the time I was eight. We lived with extended family on and off all the time. We basically grew up homeless, that's what it felt like. It's not like we had a house that we went to every day and mother fixed apple pies and things like that. There was no way. My mother worked two jobs and went to school, constantly. She started out working on the ground floor, then became a manager and then

got her Bachelor's degree. I remember she got that when I was 12, and I went to her graduation. I knew then I was going to go to State University. She graduated from college, but still worked two jobs because it was just her way of taking care of us. We also had grandparents who had no education, but wanted all their kids and grandkids to have an education. All four of their children graduated from college, and that was their goal for us, as well. They would babysit us, scrape together pennies and do whatever they had to do. I started working at a very young age, fourteen as a dishwasher. I hated it with a passion because I wanted to be the busboy. I thought that was a promotion. I didn't even think about being the waiter.

So, I always had ambition and drive and wanted to have a positive influence on others. So I worked the entire time through high school, graduated salutatorian, confused a lot of people as to how I could do both because some were struggling to do one of those things.

Kevin graduated salutatorian from his school and was accepted to the university he dreamed of attending. He shared that he earned a degree and began to work in the private sector, although he always wanted to be a teacher. Interestingly, while working in the private sector, he was shocked to find that many of his co-workers and patrons could not read. He had difficulty coming to terms with that, because it was an unexpected anomaly that deviated from the lived world he experienced growing up, where everyone in his family could read.

K: Before I worked in education, I worked with kids who struggled with just reading a menu and counting money. I mean, that's numerical fluency,

that's not literacy, but I think it's loosely connected. But, reading the menu, writing the symbols and doing things that they were going to need in life was difficult for them. Reading our handbook at work was a chore for them also. I was still pretty young then but it was very obvious—it was like, so why can't you read? That's what I was thinking. I had not been exposed to very many people who couldn't read, coming from my high school academic background, because I graduated from high school at a time where everyone was segregated, not only racially, but also academically. Meaning the kids that were at my level were in one part of the school while the other level, the low level, you didn't even see them.

Kevin eventually went back to school and earned his teaching credentials. He described his previous work experiences as being “able to have the balcony view” of what happens to people who are illiterate.

K: So when I started teaching, it was obvious from the get-go that there was a connection between not being able to read a menu at a restaurant, and adults not being able to read so that they could get the things they needed. You could tell it was pretty bad.

When teaching in high needs communities, he quickly made the connection between students' lack of literacy skills and their future opportunities. He used the drive his family instilled in him to help students overcome barriers to becoming literate, and to provide a rich and supportive learning environment for his students, much like his mother and grandparents had done for him. He felt it was the moral, and right thing to do.

K: I saw the same thing right away with my students and I made the connection then too. I was still new in the world of education, so a lot of what I thought and did was intuitive. I thought there is something wrong here. Remember, I taught at an upper level school, and I did not work with young children. Therefore, I think it made the reading problems even more dramatic especially when you see it every day. It was a tragedy, and somebody said something once that I remembered about it being malpractice to let kids graduate, leave school and not be able to read. So, I used that as kind of a guiding force. I also had a very innovative principal who was way ahead of her time, cutting edge, and we were always doing something new and thinking ahead of the game regarding how we ran the school and what was important in school.

After serving successfully in several principal positions, in high poverty schools, Kevin became a part of his district's Academy Initiative. This initiative focused on strengthening the leadership skills of principals who were designated to lead historically low performing schools. During his tenure there, his students' made significant gains, performed better than or the same as some middle class, predominantly white schools and his school was used as a model for other underperforming schools in the district. After those successes, he began his tenure in a larger school in an urban, underserved community. He thought about his previous experiences and students not being able to read, and he declared his leadership would never deter, or interfere with, his students and staff reaching their full potential. He revealed that he undertook removing obstacles to success; setting up effective structures and systems of support for all students and staff.

Moreover, he perceived that the drive and ambition, inculcated in him by his family and previous experiences, helped him feel confident that he was the right person for the job.

K: My definition of being a principal is doing the right thing with regards to literacy and everything else you do in a school. That's your job as a principal, to remove barriers to success. Whatever it takes in order to diagnose what the problem is and to put systems and solutions in place so that your students can be successful. When we opened this school, we knew our students were coming from some very high poverty schools and that the kids lived in an area that had no churches, no support systems, no centers, no businesses or anything, and they were going to be losing the support from a key grant that the students had at their other schools. Then, imagine that our students would come to our school and be put into a situation with a bunch of teachers who didn't know each other, and they were still expected to be successful.

I did not expect to not be successful. I didn't go in there and say, oh, the world is falling, the sky is falling, this is not going to work. My sense of drive that I had to be successful, to take what I'd learned at other schools especially in the Academy program, and to apply that to another setting was profound. And, I really felt I had the tools that I needed in order to be successful, especially as a result of having been an Academy principal.

Kevin's extensive experiences of working in high poverty schools, becoming informed about the community in which the school was located, and analyzing data

helped him make predictions as to what the academic landscape of the school might be. Thus, he was able to make general preparations for focusing on literacy development.

K: When I looked at the reading data that we gathered, I was able to make some predictions about our student population achievement, unless there was something dramatic that might prevent it. We knew what a third grader needed to do, for example, in order to be successful with literacy. At our school, we believed that if you're not a successful reader you're going to struggle for the rest of your school career. You probably won't pass that state reading test in third grade, and this could impact students' lives and well being. So that was a big goal of ours, literacy development for all students especially struggling learners. We knew, from what our own internal research told us, ideally the students would need to be at least beyond level 20, by the time they took the test. I know that's below grade level, and they should be at 38 by the end of third grade, but using strategies we could give the students, they could be successful. If they scored lower than level 20, they were going to have a very difficult time.

From his review of the data, Kevin believed he understood the structures and systems of support he would need to have in place so that students could become literate and at the same time be successful on state assessments.

K: So the state accountability system was hard, yet important for the struggling students because they were going to have to take the test and pass it to advance to the next grade level. We knew there was nothing really dramatic that could happen in year one. Still, I didn't know what we

were really up against even though I saw the previous years scores. I was guessing as to which kids were going to actually show up and what the real skill levels of the teachers might be. Our biggest fear was compensating for not having the support of that reading grant that the students had at their former schools.

However, my excitement about leading the school really came from pulling together a community, having an opportunity to further develop that skill and to develop relationships that would eventually allow us to be very successful. So, I focused on hiring good teachers that could implement a strong balanced literacy program, using the generic district plan that we had in place. I was thinking at the time, good teaching is going to overcome everything else.

Kevin also ascribed his school's success to his participation in professional organizations. He belonged to a national professional learning group that met several times a year, and promoted strengthening principal's leadership skills. Because of his participation in this group, he was able to deconstruct and reflect on his leadership style that most often resonated with him, and its relationship to how he worked with staff. Using Goleman's (2000) six leadership styles (i.e., coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pace-setting, and coaching) to analyze his leadership approach, he found himself to be authoritative most of the time. Goleman (2000) describes this leadership style as taking

a "Come with me" approach...[giving] people the freedom to choose their own means of achieving it. This style works especially well when an

[organization] is adrift. It is less effective when the leader is working with a team of experts who are more experienced than he is (p. 1).

Kevin saw himself using this leadership style the most because he was able to develop a vision for his literacy and school improvement plan, and invite staff and others to be a part of the change. He felt this style best fit his own leadership style for instituting change at the school. Kevin added that he infrequently used affiliative behaviors that Goleman (2000) describes it as

People come first ... [and] the style is particularly useful for building team harmony or increasing morale. But, its exclusive focus on praise can allow poor performance to go uncorrected. Also, affiliative leaders rarely offer advice, which often leaves employees in a quandary (p. 1).

K: The least dominant style for me, I know, is affiliative. That's people come first...and I dislike that phraseology because what it really means is the touchy/feely thing. It's one leadership style that I need to develop more. I think that would help with the coping strategies when staff members are really stressed out or I'm stressed out. I need to think about what we are going to do to relieve stress? We've tried running and walking clubs at school, we encouraged healthy eating by bringing snacks to school for which I paid out of my pocket. Also, there is a social committee, and they have little gatherings periodically but also there are some conscious things put in place such as monthly potluck lunches.

I also talk to my teachers a lot. I'm not real good at writing notes, but I've tried so much this year to ask staff about their personal lives and I try to remember some tidbits or something that they've shared. I'm also trying to practice social perspective taking, which is coming out of my professional learning group as well. It's a body of research that really teaches you to hone in on facial expressions, body language, intonation, and things like that, to see where people are coming from, and then to react to that instead of waiting for something to happen. I've always been good at that anyway, but I think I've gotten much better at it because I'm so conscious about it. I actually tell my staff that I'm looking at that. You should be able to know what the conversation's going to be like as you're walking down the hall with a member of your staff, in my opinion.

In particular, Kevin believed that building trust among staff invites all to be part of the change process from development through implementation and to evaluating and assessing the impact of the school improvement efforts on developing literate students. He acknowledged this was not a quick and easy process, and it required him to be reflective and keep developing his leadership skills so that he could carefully apply them to every unique situation encountered. He firmly believes that an environment of trust is the glue needed to engage others in changing and adjusting practice so that students can be successful.

K That's where you use the authoritarian leadership style of come with me and trust me. Let's go along this way. And at some point in time, like Smith says in his book, they come to find it desirable. But, Rhee, during

one of our visits to her office, said two other things: 1.) you have to be courageous, that's absolutely true and 2.) you also have to ask the right questions and solve the right problems. So that's what I think is needed to advance developing literate students and school improvement.

During this part of the conversation, Kevin divulged that he often handles situations, which remain unknown to his staff, so they can focus on teaching and learning and also to avoid raising staffs' stress level. He perceived this as staff having to trust that he will do the right thing by students, as well as by staff, and that he in no way feels that staff have to acknowledge such acts of intercession for his sake. He also takes on such interventions because he sees a relationship between teachers' level of stress and its influence on students' behaviors, confidence, and academic progress.

K: Staff at times is not aware of what you do behind the scenes so they don't always know about that which never even reaches their door. The parents you take care of before they can get to staff, the home visits that I personally conduct in a school this big in order to take care of situations on the spot. If I have a student who has just really been out of control, I go to the home and get the parent, make them come to the school so we can talk, especially if they won't answer the telephone. Or, when students do unconscionable things at school, I do the entire investigation myself including all that comes with that and sometimes I take the hit from the neighborhood activists and the school board member and all that.

On a positive note, Kevin perceives that his community and staff have developed trust among each other thus advancing their school's efforts to change teaching and learning

and move ahead with literacy development. Additionally visitors from within the district and from across the nation frequently come to his school to learn more about what his staff is doing at this high performance, high poverty school. Kevin sees this as validating that trust exists between students, staff, and community because their collaboration and support of one another has spilled over into the classrooms and created a positive school culture. He also feels that visits by others to the school strengthens the pride that everyone feels as a result of their combined efforts and sustained student achievement.

K: On the other side something that comes to mind right away is that people want to come visit our school. We have had visitors from all over the city, all over the area, all over the state, and all over the country. I mean that is a powerful sign that you're doing something right when people want to come see your school. So those people from Illinois stayed for two days, some from other states visited for a day. We've had schools from more affluent communities come to visit the school, to see what they could learn about how to work better with students from underserved communities, who attend their schools. They also wanted to learn about the strategies teachers use in the classroom during instruction, in order to meet diverse student needs. We've had one person from New York come and staff from Oklahoma also visited. It has just been amazing, the number of visitors that we've had, and then also individual schools and people that I've mentored come here. They are just in and out, in and out.

And, my teachers have been very gracious; they never once frowned in my face about it. I tell them the visits show that the staff is

wonderful at what they do, and sharing is an expectation in the teaching profession. This is one way that our staff gives back to other learning communities besides to their kids. I think that we have strong systems in place that our teachers, our students and our parents really believe in.

This year I had a group of kids who could be really trying at times. But, on the last day of school this year, several of them came up to me and gave me great big hugs. I told them you mean you are still talking to me after everything that happened this year? They said yes, you did that because you care about us. That meant a lot to me.

Kevin views such acts as validating that trust will prevail if it is authentic. His students trusted that even in hard times they could trust that their principal would be fair and respectful with them and the students appreciated that.

At his school, he is very intentional about teachers ensuring that students understand what they are learning, why they are learning it, and that they know how to advance their thinking about and application of concepts learned.

K: Teachers talk to students about what they are learning and promote students' engaging in dialogue with their peers. I think it's kind of a reader's workshop aspect of what's going on where you're sharing, you're learning, and being able to access prior knowledge and synthesize some of the information you know. That's one of the things that I try to push. Also, we make sure that your kids know their data, so if anybody asks them about it they can discuss it with that person. I think students get better at it over the course of time with continual practice. But again, it

goes back to the teacher and what their expectations are and how well they teach students that skill. You could go into Classroom A, and every kid in that room could tell you what their reading level is, where it started, where it's supposed to go, how they've gotten there, and what they're working on right now. Then you can go into Classroom B, and you can tell it is not happening. We continue to work on that piece at our school.

Kevin also noted that one of the fundamental expectations of his literacy plan is providing staff with time to meet, collaborate, engage in discourse, create common assessments, review data and student work and develop collegiality. He also integrated successful strategies and agreements, that he used in previous schools, into his literacy plan but contextualized them to fit the needs of his current students and staff.

K: I ensured that the weekly Core Content planning sessions happened, that I had good coaching going in and out of those sessions and that there were no scheduling conflicts to interrupt the planning sessions. One day a week the teachers stayed until at least 6:00 and worked with their team. The coaches rotated through each teaming session, to provide support. The teachers planned for that next week, analyzed data, created assessment, and were ready for instruction the following week. That's kind of an umbrella that it all fits under. We also had to have a clear vision in place. Our vision has always been to become exemplary. And so until we get there, and even once we get there, we strive for 100% proficiency in all that we do. But, we want the state definition of exemplary to be attached to our school, also. So the three M's is stuff that I learned from my

professional learning group, the Mission, Mindset, and Method. Mission is developing a plan for achieving proficiency for all students, and in our case, we are aiming for exemplary. Mindset is staff truly believing that all our students can achieve to their highest potential and staff must provide opportunities so that students can continue to grow—a growth mindset. Method is using data to let students know how they are progressing and what they need to work on, providing continuous feedback and support, providing strategies to help them achieve their goals.

Another thing I used from the Academy initiative is the Staff Agreement/Compact. Before we hired anyone, we shared the Staff Compact and the expectations for working at our school. We are very open about that. That's a part of the culture of our school. And obviously, if I don't put these structures in place along with the planning sessions, then nothing's going to happen with regards to developing literate students and improving teaching and learning. They're not going to do it on their own, but if teachers want to be good and become even better teachers, this is one of the things I have to offer them.

Kevin is of the opinion that his primary goal as a principal and an individual is to remove barriers to student success. He especially considers building students' confidence in their abilities and efforts, as elements that must be present for students to succeed.

K: What is it that kids, staff and the community are going to always know about you? There's a one-sentence definition for everything that we do in

education, a principal in particular, and that is that I'm here to remove barriers or obstacles to success. So you might not say, kid or teacher, I'm going to remove your obstacles or your barriers, but in your mind, you're thinking, that's what I'm going to do. I often think about what is it that's stopping teachers from being successful right now. It's my job to get it out of the way, whether it's connecting them with the right person or the right agency, whatever it happens to be. Students will not have excuses for not being successful no matter how poor they are. I've heard and read that your address, paycheck and demographic/ethnicity should not define your ability to learn and whether or not you're able to get a good education. That is absolutely right; so remove the barriers to success. It doesn't make a difference if you go to an affluent school or to this school. We shouldn't have to question whether or not this is a good school, but people ask it all the time. Every school in the district should be a good school, academically and socially. At this school, we've done some very specific things to make sure that happens. After we had our first year of trial and error and non-success/failure, we put some things in place so that it would never happen again for our students.

Kevin believes that principals have to be intentional about hiring the right people for the jobs to be done. In addition, he notes that sometimes they have to step out of the box and do things differently, in order to address the multiple needs students have to face. He divulged that he had to look at literacy development from a different perspective and

think about other interventions that might improve his students' opportunities for becoming literate, thus successful.

K: So after the first year at my school, I hired a dyslexia specialist. So I learned that if you don't have the right person in place, the plan is not even going to work. Just because someone says they can do something doesn't mean they can do it. They have to have the drive to do it too; the press and support and the desire to see kids achieve. So, I found this person who has the desire, and provides the press and support for students, and she does groups all day long, every day, using specific training she received. The struggling learners she worked with immediately became successful, and the non-readers became readers in the second year. Kids who had the bottom fall out in year one, African American kids in particular on the reading test, all of a sudden became successful. So we went from 58% passing rate for African American students the first year, to 92% the second year. I also think the Core Content planning and the Staff Compact/agreement was in place the first year, but the dyslexia specialist was not. So that's the variable that changed our performance our second year, and I know it had a positive impact.

He also surmised that hiring staff that could provide academic press and professional support would advance students' literacy skills. His perspective aligned with Lee's and Smith's (1999), view that

Only in schools with an organizational thrust toward serious academics does social support actually influence learning. Students learn more in schools that set high standards for academic performance, that use their instructional time wisely, and that use student learning criterion for making decisions (p. 937).

To support such a learning environment, Kevin indicated that monitoring of instruction was vital to student progress.

K: Now, people only do what gets monitored and what gets monitored gets done. So I as principal would be the person who would have to stay on top of that. People will waiver from what they should be doing, they forget easily. So the job of principal is very complex, and you have to work with so many issues. But you must monitor instruction if you want to develop literate students.

Kevin also accredited his participation in a professional learning group that centered on leadership with keeping him up to date with best practices. It helped him see best practices in action and helped him adjust evidence-based approaches to incorporate the staffs' internal research that they conducted at the campus.

K: Because I've had an opportunity to engage in my own professional development over the course of the years, especially the external professional learning group for principals, everything that I touch is research-based. It seems like I'm always looking for the why. Why would you use this and how will it benefit your kids? Who else has used it? I'm always asking those data-driven, decision-making questions, before we

actually put something into place. So it always has a research base. Also, some of the school visits that I have made with district personnel have had a big effect on me. I visited the Uncommon Boys' School in Brooklyn, and that had a huge impact on me. We were investigating what early college strategies look like because of the early college high school programs that are located in our feeder schools. I learned tons of things from the boys' school visit, and I've got notes all over the place from that. But the visit with Michelle Rhee, the little bit of time that we were able to spend with her, helped add to my definition of leadership. It helped me clarify my thinking about not only influencing and motivating staff and students to accomplish a goal over the long haul, but also to think about how to do what Rhee does. She was able to clearly communicate her goals, vision, and purpose at will. I think that's wonderful, because a lot of times when you're trying to get something accomplished, people don't even understand what the target looks like. When you don't have a lot of time to explain to them where you're going, or even necessarily why you're going there, that can be quite challenging. But she was able to do that.

Kevin also views himself as being strong in using guiding questions with teachers to help them think differently about what they are doing in the classroom with students, to improve pedagogy, and to implement systems so that students can be more self-directed.

K: For example, I have a teacher who stated that her centers were not working for the students and that the students were misbehaving. She couldn't get anything done. So I took the time to ask her some questions so that we could both better understand the situation, even though we had engaged in the conversation before. So I asked her what procedures she had in place to ensure that the kids are behaving while she was in guided reading group. I asked: What is the procedure that they're supposed to follow? What procedure has been taught to them? So instead of saying, let's figure out something else, it was all about her procedures and getting her to ask the right question of herself—self-reflection. So when I asked her those questions, then she was able to say, well, we need to do this, this and this, and they need to have signs where they're supposed to go. I need to have a chart posted, and I need to help them every time we get ready to rotate. I need to go over the chart with them again. Then things began to improve because we had asked the right questions. We'd solved the right problem instead of disciplining the students who were misbehaving. There wasn't a procedure that the teacher had in place. Those are some of the best practices that continue to work for me, the teachers, and in the end the students.

Kevin reported he is familiar with Dweck's (2006) research and that he relentlessly uses this approach to galvanize teachers' and students' beliefs that "growth of their own minds was under their own control" (p. 27). This was quite evident during my visits to the campus where students exuded confidence when the principals spoke to them about their

learning, or when the students responded to teachers' higher-level questions in the classroom. Kevin perceives that addressing the mindset of students and staff is a pivotal element to developing literate students and advancing school improvement efforts.

K: Before we could accomplish anything, our mindset had to change. We had to unpack what we believed about our students, and everyone had to be held accountable for all of our students. The number one thing was that there were no excuses and that our students didn't just belong to that teacher, they belonged to all of us. So, everyone was responsible for helping to mold students and to adopt a growth mindset. That's the approach that we used. In the professional learning teams, conversations for teachers and coaches revolve around: What are the students able to do? How will we know they've learned it? What will we do if they don't meet the expectation? That mindset obviously is having an effect because you believe that confidence plus effort equals achievement. Then your method for helping teachers achieve this is the PLC approach because they are always reflecting on their practice, relationships with student, strategies that support building students' confidence and growing students' literacy skills, as well as other areas of the curriculum.

Kevin shared that in the school he graduated from, there was certainly not a mindset of building confidence, and students of color were not expected to achieve.

K: This story is an example of what I am talking about and it clearly tells you the kind of school I went to. One day the principal said on the P.A. system he wanted the salutatorian and the valedictorian to come down to his

office. It was about a week before graduation, and he wanted to hear our speeches in his office. So we both went down to his office. It was a white girl and me, and we were in the same class at that time. So, we went and we sat in the outer office. He came out, and he goes, oh, Ellen, hello, Ellen, how are you doing? And he looked around and he says, I asked the salutatorian to come down, too. I was the salutatorian. He was an old, old white man. He had been my mother's principal. He had no clue, and it was the first time anything like that had happened at our school; a student of color was the salutatorian.

Kevin's sharing of his story illustrated that even as a youth he understood some adults had made the assumption that because he is of color he probably was not ambitious and did not have the potential to achieve. However, he grew up in a family that reinforced his confidence, and he believed he could achieve anything he set out to accomplish. As an adult and an educator, he was able to make a connection between one's mindset and the impact it has on students.

When Kevin spoke about addressing the cultural gaps between teachers and students, he admitted he had a lot to learn in this area. Although he could briefly speak about how he might address the gaps, his struggle with the topic was evident.

K: Well, I'm not saying that I necessarily do address the cultural gap that exists between teachers and students. How do I try to get us to do that? We talk about...I tell stories a lot when I meet with staff, whether it be in a faculty meeting, but certainly at staff development. I tell stories about myself growing up, or I might not even use my name, or I'll use an

experience from some other time. But I'm always telling a story that's meant to usually shock. I bring back information from my professional learning group about ways of looking at things that will help them to understand our kids better.

He further indicated that reflecting on what one does in the classroom every day with students is paramount. To communicate his view he referred to issues of power enacted on students every day by educators as indicated in Pollock's (2008) work.

K: Pollock wrote a book about antiracism, regarding what antiracism is and that there are little acts of racism that we commit every single day as educators and how those acts can have a very negative impact on students. She states that if we're aware of those acts of racism, then we'll stop committing them and we will have a positive impact on students and the learning environment. I think that is true and we need to build confidence and increase students' effort and achievement. Her view of racism follows a continuum from providing a little opportunity to students to providing the most exposure and the greatest opportunities possible. The opportunity is described as time on task in the classroom and the ability to be in a positive, engaging, rigorous learning environment. So, for example every minute that students are not in a learning environment actually learning, you're committing an act of racism. So, as a teacher, if you send a student out or put them outside your classroom door, boom! How many minutes have you just wasted out of that student's life that they'll never be able to get back again? You send them down to the office because you can't

handle, or won't handle them, or you don't understand them, and you aren't able to work with their fidgetiness. So you're committing an act of racism by having them sit outside the office. I as principal am committing an act of racism by letting students sit outside the office. So you can see how that continues to grow. So people don't like to think of themselves as racists, they don't like to think of themselves as committing racist acts; however, I did provide that definition to my teachers and that was an eye-opener for them, as well.

Kevin believes that some cultural dissonance exists between bilingual and non-bilingual teachers on his campus, because some non-bilingual teachers think the bilingual teachers have it easier, and they get a stipend for being bilingually certified. But he feels that is a district created problem that can be fixed. He also believes a classroom can take on the personality of the teacher, such that the teachers' ideologies may be communicated to students through their behaviors and teaching practices. He feels that teachers' behaviors may unconsciously tell a student that this is what I believe and thus imply they should believe that also.

Kevin does believe that a school environment must reflect the students' community and values. He insists that teachers must also integrate the elements of their students' lives into their instruction. However, he also sees this as an area of growth for himself.

K: I think that everybody needs to see himself or herself in what they read and what they live. So, if you are constantly reading about an older white male in every situation, then of course that's going to have an impact on

whether or not you believe that this is even for you. So I do believe culturally relevant teaching is important.

But I would say I'm not there yet in this area. I would say my focus is on efficacy, and the development of everyone in the school that's associated with the kids. Developing their proficiency to teach and to be positive advocates for kids socially. So it's academic and social. What I mean by that is our school motto now has changed as a result of focusing on efficacy and I brought people along with that view. I didn't come up and just post it and say this is our new motto. But we all believe that confidence plus effort equals achievement. If we can build the confidence of kids, they're going to try harder and then they're going to be successful. And I've got examples that can show you it works. Once you have a student that does a much better job from the beginning of the year to the middle of the year (MOY) assessments then that's like, wow! Then from the MOY to the release test, wow! The student then begins to feel that maybe he or she can pass the state test. So then they try harder to do that, and staff continues to recognize those incremental successes. That's building that achievement level by building their confidence. And the same thing goes with teachers. When teachers see the beginning of the year achievement then it continues to rise throughout the year and the principal notices it and is celebrating those successes with the entire staff; that builds their confidence, their effort level and their achievement. Also as the principal, you begin to feel good about what's going on and you try

even harder because you're pushing for that goal to be reached because you and your staff set that mission and vision at the beginning of the year. But for me cultural dissonance is all about money. Status, social status, class.

Kevin also referred to some activities that he brought back from his professional learning group to help teachers understand their students better. They do the usual bus ride through the community, but the one thing he found to be effective with teachers was Ferguson's (2008) work on closing the achievement gap and building relationships. At the beginning of his third year at his school, he selected incoming fifth graders to participate in a staff meeting. He facilitated the activity and the students were on a panel that was located on stage. Teachers in the audience had selected questions they were to ask the students. The teachers were spread throughout the audience.

K: Those brave kids went up and answered some very poignant questions like, what makes you respect a teacher in the classroom? What can a teacher do that will make you feel unimportant in a classroom? These students were not prepped. I chose kids who would obviously be able to communicate, but they were kids who were on grade level, above grade level, some slightly below grade level, Hispanic, African American, male/female, so it was a cross section. The teachers, I think, learned a lot from the panel. I also showed a video about Shaker Heights and the condition it is in. Shaker Heights is a community in Cleveland and the video is about students feeling marginalized, afraid their teacher isn't going to like them, and those sorts of things that can happen the first day

or any day of school. It shows teachers doing the right things and others doing the wrong things. Both activities set us up for a pretty good beginning to the school year because the kids shared their feelings. And as kids will be kids, they shared things that made some of the teachers cry. I guess teachers weren't aware of how some of our students felt, or maybe they saw themselves in what the kids were saying where they described the teacher that they felt didn't care about them. I just wanted to make this come alive for the teachers and have them hear the voices and feelings of our students.

Kevin stated it would be helpful if the authors of textbooks and creators of state assessments incorporated real problems that his students might encounter in their daily lives and provided relevant problems, passages, and experiences that resonated with his students.

K: If test writers would tap into what people know and the experiences that they have, then one might have a better opportunity to find out what students really know academically.

Kevin believes that instead of teaching to the state test, his goal has always been to take students and prepare them by using literacy circles and encouraging chapter books instead of using passages such as those found in the accelerated reading books that tend to have fewer words in them for a college readiness reading level. He states they focus on preparing students so they will be college and career ready thus going beyond the state test passages. He also believes that teachers' collaboratively working in teams has

strengthened their practice and the ability to service students in a more meaningful, strategic and purposeful way.

K: I also think that horizontal and vertical planning are so vitally important in the school improvement effort for reading, because you've got to know what content students should have master, what the deficits are, and know how to use the student data that are available and that you can work with. But, I don't think that's enough. It's important to have a baseline of where the student is beginning so that you can then take them a year and beyond that.

Kevin communicated that he was most proud that his school, which is located in a diverse, underserved community, has the state external label that signifies academic success. He feels the community, and his students and staff deserve the recognition, even though it hasn't been publicized enough.

K: But that's really important, especially for people who have certain perceptions of what our kids can do. It takes the state assessment scores in order for people to believe that this is a "good school." So, I'm very proud of the fact that we obtained that rating. I'm very proud of the fact that we opened the school, and though we struggled from year one, we have managed to grow every year and we have gotten to the point that we are at right now.

Kevin's pride in his school is evident in all that he does as a principal, and he views their success as social justice. However, although many people of color want their students to remain at the school, even though they might not live in the area, he is still

very much aware that in spite of their progress, white middle class parents will not send their children to his school. He notes that although certain groups of people fail to acknowledge his school's academic progress and success, he is still prideful in what they have accomplished.

K: I just think that it defines the strength of character of the people that I've had with me from day one. They have really held the school together, and now parents from similar communities want to come to our school. We also have a lot of teachers' kids from other schools that come to our school.

Of course, we still have some families, even though they have relocated to other areas of town that want to stay at our school. Some even stretch the truth about where they live because they want to keep their kids at our school. I think it's because they know their kids are going to get more support here. I think that makes us a powerful school, as well. But, unfortunately in the end, everybody judges you by the state label that you carry, and the fact that we're able to carry a preferential label, I think it's absolutely phenomenal for the community and the school. However, they still judge you by the zip code.

### **Bea**

Bea is a Hispanic female who feels that her career in education has not followed a typical linear progression. She began her career by working for a state agency, and often visited districts and schools to understand and monitor how they were using their allocated funds. She feels the visits she made across her state, allowed her to see "some

incredibly good practices” in the field. She also worked at a district central office, later was hired as a bilingual classroom teacher and finally became the principal of her high performance, high poverty school in which she has served for the past 10 years.

B: It was perfect, because when I became a principal I had a real good idea, due to my visits to other campuses, what principals in the field were doing to transform schools and I was able to see poor kids excelling. So for me, there were never any questions about whether or not this could be done.

Yeah, of course it can be done. I’ve seen many principals do it.

She is very confident and perceives herself as being able to think on her feet and not let things faze her. She is also very knowledgeable about educational research on topics related to teaching and learning and values applying the research to practice.

Bea grew up in a poor border town, and she noted that her experiences as an English language learner influenced her as a teacher and school leader. She communicated how, as a student, no one let her know how she was academically progressing or progressing in becoming proficient with the English language. As a young student, she had no idea what becoming a literate student in English might mean for her future academic success and career. She shared that it was not until she was a student at the university that she was able to deconstruct her early learning experiences as an English language learner and connect those experiences to the impact teachers and leaders can have on students’ academic progress, literacy development, and acquisition of the English language. Moreover, Bea always made a concerted effort to hire bilingual teachers at every grade level at her school, to meet the English needs of her students who were primarily Hispanic.

B: Well, you have to understand I, myself, grew up in an underserved community. I entered school as a Spanish speaker at a time when there was no bilingual education. In fact, I didn't get Pre-K or Kinder. I entered school as a first grader. So just my own personal experiences of being an English language learner and navigating that piece helped me understand my students. It wasn't until I had studied bilingual education in college that I was like; oh it takes five years to learn the language. I remember I made my first communion the summer that I was entering fourth grade. So in fourth grade I started getting these good grades, which I had never gotten before. So I just attributed it to the fact that I'd made my first communion! That's the child's perspective. No one said to me, hey you know what, you've been in this English curriculum, and so now you're starting your fourth year, and you've gained knowledge of the language, and of course now you're going to start getting A's.

Bea is very passionate about literacy development for students and is continuously reading the latest research and literature in order to keep up with best practice. She also espoused that she seeks multiple methods and opportunities to help her students succeed. She adamantly feels it is her job to make sure that she and her staff do everything possible so that their students are literate, and are not handicapped for future academic success, once they leave her school.

B: I really feel that if we don't give our children literacy skills, as I tell my teachers, it's about life and death. It really is, because if we don't do our job, I know what will happen to our students in middle school and high

school. If we haven't prepared our kids and gotten them out of the bilingual program by fifth grade, I just really feel like the middle schools and high schools either aren't equipped, or don't know how to help them, especially English language learners. And so, they end up on a path of despair and no jobs and dropping out.

Bea spoke of how she uses her school's sustained success, data, and experiences in the field, to defend the premise that students of high poverty schools, as well as all students of color, can be just as successful and even surpass white, middle class students' performance. The key is to have a strong curriculum, use best practices, work collaboratively, and build relationships. She indicated that she uses data continuously to inform the district of the school's need to leverage resources, and to support their school improvement efforts around literacy development.

B: When anybody says something bad about our school on this side of town, we can tell them, uh-uh, wait a minute because the data says it all. I tell them, wait a minute, wait a minute, we have this, we have this, we can do this, and we were number one here. So, to continue on this path of success, I'm always looking at my Title money to see if I can bring somebody in to work part time in those classrooms, with the teachers, to run some of the data for teachers, to save them time. I mean my teachers are going to need time and to have somebody be able to say, okay, here's the list of kids, boom, boom, boom. Here are their scores. So the teachers can just continue running with the kids, you know.

Bea acknowledges that her school community is located in a high-risk area. It is an inner city area, near downtown where the gentrification has not quite reached them. However, this year she has started seeing more white families moving into the neighborhood, but typically there are third generation families of color that live in that part of town.

B: I have this one woman who actually saw the school built. Yep, so we're very safety conscious at our school, yeah. That's just what we do. That's that whole thing that I was telling you about regarding literacy development, it's life or death for our students. What is at risk if students' literacy adeptness is not advanced? It's life or death for them.

Bea believes that developing staffs' capacity to lead and make decisions has been an essential element to moving literacy development for all students forward. She notes that providing such opportunities to her staff and standing by that decision has helped her build a truly collaborative and professional working environment.

B: Well, when you talk about shared leadership, I definitely have shared leadership because I tell my staff this work is so big, no one person can do it alone. Now I have teachers leading the interviews when we are hiring new staff. One of the things that I kept hearing during the interviews were my teachers saying to the interviewee, so tell me about this. They were using their teacher talk, which was really great. They would say things like, oh, no, no, we have freedom here, but the expectation is to always look at our data. But we have a lot of freedom as to how we're going to teach it, and we also have a lot of freedom as to when. Also for novice

teachers, our staff will reinforce that the expectation is that when we do assessments we better have the performance there, but how we get there is something teachers get to decide. So they, themselves, become the people who are leading other staffs' development, and also leading the discourse. That's right in line with my vision; building other leaders. So I keep pressing that.

Bea explained that she preferred to be deeply involved in providing professional development to her staff. Although she hired a reading specialist, she felt she knew her staff and students best, had a relationship with them, knew their areas of need and could best deliver the professional development to her staff that would meet their students needs and promote the expectations she had for teaching and learning.

B: Well, unlike some other campuses, I only have one reading specialist. I don't have an instructional coach or anything like that, so all of that leadership and training is up to me. So you talk about being the instructional leader; here the principal is the instructional leader. Well, I think what sometimes happens at other schools is that maybe principals might become a little too dependent on that instructional coach to provide the professional development (PD). In my case, I had to do it. Our teachers are strong in their knowledge and skills due to my providing learning opportunities for them that are contextual to our schools needs. The PD that they've been receiving, their skill set, meetings with the support staff, and helping them understand that we are really focusing on core instruction, has helped staff reach a comfort zone with the literacy

plan. We have developed a really nice scope and sequence of what we're expecting students to be able to do at every grade level. The district guides can be used as a reference, but we focus on using what the campus staff has developed.

To further develop collaborative working relationship among staff, Bea has implemented professional learning communities. She has ensured that teams of teachers receive professional development in the professional learning cycle. She has also implemented learning activities on campus to strengthen teachers' skills for engaging in effective learning groups.

B: Okay, so I'm a true believer in professional learning communities and I used Dufour's model. For four years in a row, I sent teams to the Dufour Institutes, and I went in July again, by myself, for a refresher. Sending teachers was great because they didn't see it as only my idea, and there was buy-in. They came up with the fire for why it had to happen for them and how they thought they were going to implement it. So the first three years, I structured these team projects for the science content area. They had to look at their student data and decide which areas in science students were having difficulty. They had to develop lessons, common assessments, and determine how content would be delivered to students. They also had to tell me explicitly, what they were going to do to make the lessons and activities more rigorous. Just like the Kaplan work, what are your big ideas, where do they fit into the curriculum, and what vocabulary are you going to explicitly teach students? And so what's the rubric that

you're going to use to assess the work? I gave them the whole semester to do this and then they had to present it to each other. I remember this was when teachers were still trying to grapple with the difference between a criteria chart and a rubric. So they were presenting, and I wanted them to start pressing each other, but it was still a time where faculty meetings were just really quiet, because it was always give and take. It's like I give and they take it and they walk out, right? So toward the end of the last presentation, one brave soul said, I'm a little confused because this team says they called it a rubric, but then this team called it a criteria chart, and we're using this thing, and I don't know if it's a rubric or a criteria chart. What makes one a criteria chart and what makes one a rubric?

Then staff started talking, and of course then it got all muddled, but that's what I wanted to see happen. I wanted them start talking about curriculum and instruction. And so, that was so exciting. Now, nine years later, the teachers are doing that work because they've internalized it so they're now asking those meta-cognitive kinds of questions, and so it's fabulous. PLC's work, and they helped move the work forward.

Bea perceived herself as using a variety of leadership behaviors as she leads her campus. She attributed the foundation for her relationship building to her work with a particular principal that was very astute at creating conditions for building relationships and trust among staff. She notes that she modeled her leadership style in accordance with her former principal's style.

B: I loved the way my very first principal that hired me led our school. She mentored us as principals and so I saw that in action. When I thought about what kind of principal I wanted to be, I thought of her. She created teams, she had us working with her and making decisions. We were cutting edge and she really required teachers to work cooperatively. She paid attention to a lot of details that I think in the end really helped us. She would collect our lesson plans, she would give us feedback, and she was a big bilingual education proponent. That was her legacy, and we felt very supported. I'm not kidding. This woman was using those practices that we knew led to good things. It was all focused on interdisciplinary teaching. We had the centers, and she wanted a lot of physical involvement and engagement with students.

Also, I just remember the teachers were happy. She would ask us to stay for these longer meetings and work sessions, but she was very thoughtful. She would actually have dinner catered. For the teachers who were married, she would have the husbands and children come so that they could eat dinner. She felt like, I know your wife's supposed to be home cooking, but I have her here working. So come and eat and that way you guys at least have some food.

Thus Bea internalized her former principal's leadership style and uses similar leadership behaviors that allow her to lead her campus, noting she emphatically trusts that her staff is on board and that together they will make the appropriate instructional decisions.

Bea views trust in her school as a key resource for sustaining school improvement and buy-in from staff and community. She sees herself as a facilitator, providing support and resources to staff so they can accomplish the tasks of improving their teaching practice, and for strengthening their relationships with students and parents. She also identifies one of her strengths as the ability to engage staff in respectful, professional discourse about what needs to be adjusted or strengthened to better meet student needs.

B: So there's got to be a culture of trust where staff knows, I can give this to you and you guys can make it work and then you can give me what I need to work on, too, or what I need to do to help you. I consistently tell them, my role as a principal is to make sure you have what you need to do what you do best, which is teach. That's my role. So yeah, I love this.

Bea conveyed that she used dialogue and feedback as teachable moments for her staff and students. She intentionally engaged staff in professional conversations about their students' work in order to broaden teachers' thinking about the tasks students are asked to complete. For example, she is intent on extending teachers understanding of engaging students in the writing process. She uses available resources and time to convene a group of teachers frequently, so she can walk with them throughout the school looking at displays of students' writing. As she walks with them from Pre-K to fifth grade classrooms, she has them look at the writing displays and asks teachers to reflect on what the writing tells them about that student's writing progress. Through such conversations, teachers become informed about what Pre-K—fifth grade teachers are doing at their grade levels around writing. It also helps them think about the implications for their own

work at their grade level. This is her way of communicating that this is an intentional practice that should happen in all classrooms throughout the school.

B: Pre-K - K teachers actually do dictation with their students, and they talk to the students about the sentences by saying things like, start the sentence with a capital letter, and it ends with a period. Kindergarteners and Pre-K kids can get that. So when you see these little scribbles in Pre-K classes you'll notice they have a capital letter at the beginning, and they have a period at the end, you know. So we need to give students at all grade levels time to write and give them feedback as well.

I don't have or use a pre-developed program for literacy development where I can say to my teachers, here's the box. I take them through my vision of our literacy initiative. I discuss our students' writing with them and share that if our students can't write, they are going to have difficulty with literacy and thinking skills.

Bea also reports that her staff engages students in events such as monthly Author's Tea, where every class selects a writer they want to highlight for that month. At the end of the month, they make presentations in the library before parents. She perceives this to be a perfect opportunity to engage students in conversation about literature. The teachers or librarian facilitates the program and asks guiding questions to promote more balanced and deeper discussions. Through these leadership behaviors, she is pressing teachers to provide multiple opportunities for students to participate in discourse, reflect on their interpretations of literature, and think about how the authors might have interpreted their own work.

B: Kids get to talk about the authors their classes selected. Throughout the discussions the librarian might say: So do you think this was fiction or nonfiction? Really, well tell me about the characters in this one. Well, what part did you feel was your favorite and why? You introduced some interesting words here, what were the most interesting words that you used? All that happens in public, it's a public discourse. So guess what, they are able to read in public or do public speaking. My kids are comfortable with that because there're lots of opportunities for them to stand up and talk about their work. There's not a scripted program, its authentic.

Bea deliberately has expectations in place for instructional practices that are to be consistently used by all teachers and that are aligned to the curriculum. She believes that the further one moves away from Pre-K, if the leader's attention to what is happening in the classrooms, or if monitoring is not an everyday occurrence, teachers and students can lose a lot of instructional time. So, at her school using center time is a non-negotiable, and the technology pieces are also in place. They use technology as a center while the teacher is working with students in small groups. The technology center provides individual student assessments, addresses comprehension, addresses early and advanced reading components and engages students in reading. She monitors classroom practice to make sure that students are getting those 30-45 minutes at the technology center, and that it occurs three to four times a week for each student.

B: The teachers who followed those protocols, their kids did phenomenal. They really did. They really increased their literacy skills. But just like everything else, you really have to adhere to the protocol. So I would see the teachers working in small groups with students, small groups of student would be working at the technology center, and others would be working at another center or would just be reading. I'm really trying this year to get the kids doing more sustained reading, because I think that's better than sitting around moving some little piece on a game board. I mean, it's fun, they're engaged, but I'm not really sure how much they are learning. So I also press them to continue the author studies, sort of like Junior Great Books. So eventually the students themselves become the people who are leading the events and facilitating their discourse. That's my vision. So we'll keep pressing at that. Another area we are addressing is vocabulary development, comprehension, and the inference piece. So it's like, yep, read, read, read.

And one of the other things, I'm really trying to change is getting away from those Captain Underpants books. I mean, yeah, okay, it's nice that they're reading Captain Underpants, but it's not rich literature. So, the librarian and I have been talking about, how we can bring in Caldecott winners and rich literature including non-fiction.

Since Bea has only one literacy teacher, she used her Title funds to purchase a half time literacy specialist who only works with primary students while her campus specialist works with the third, fourth, and fifth. However, she now has a person that is

trained in dyslexia at every grade level, so that every grade level has a person on their team who knows a little bit more about reading. She also uses her special education teacher, as a resource person. When the special education teacher is in the classroom doing inclusion work, she is really team teaching with the classroom teacher, too. Bea continuously espouses her belief that since their school serves diverse learners, teachers must be exposed to and implement effective instructional strategies, as promoted by research and best practice.

B: I really invest in getting my teachers trained. I also want a couple of my teachers to go through the dyslexia training so that they can become language master teachers, and take other leadership roles on campus. I make sure that struggling learners receive interventions more than one time during the day, and instruction is provided in small groups. Also, I just finished reading some research on black males' learning styles so that I can discuss with teachers how they need to differentiate their instruction, and include culturally responsive teaching. I also have an amazing group of teachers that will push student learning and English acquisition. We push it to the max. So we typically do get our English language learners ready and out of the program by fifth grade. There is also the whole idea of rigor, and how we teach, and that's where I am always aiming. This is what I tell my teachers; if you just keep aiming high, the kids are going to land somewhere between high and higher. So we always aim to teach at that high level. I've been riding a nice wave at my school, because it's like we have it down, and it's good, all we're doing is making those

adjustments, and this was a great year, in that we really focused on strengthening our Tiered support.

Bea feels that one of her strengths, as a leader, lies in her ability to put systems in place at her school for identifying students needing support, and for holding discussions about how to help them. She notes they really work hard at matching the best approach teachers can use with particular students, so that the students can progress.

B: Because of what the research says for students like ours, we need to be very explicit about what we do with them and we can't just be pulling stuff off the shelf. It really does have to become more explicit. So to me, that is the most important piece. The district and the state tell us, okay, this is what you're going to teach. But then, it's that professional judgment of how are you going to do it. Also, there is an art to doing the assessment piece, and you also have to keep in mind what you are going to do about those kids, who haven't learned the concepts?

Because her school is made up of such diverse learners with various needs, Bea believes if an instructional approach is not working it is best to make adjustments, or provide them more intervention time. She feels that her students do not have time to lose and must receive immediate support to advance their literacy development. She notes that the only way leaders will know if an intervention is working, is to be in the classroom monitoring instruction.

B: Well, we have the students with dyslexia, English language learners who have started to transition, and Special Ed students who have cognitive or processing issues so we really have to think about what they need. So one

of the things that we've done is to provide small group instruction to students. Like I mentioned before, when we have students working in small groups with the teachers, we are constantly following their progress. So monitoring, monitoring, monitoring is important. So, if I see a group of my Tier II kids, and they're getting a certain intervention but it's not working, then I make sure we triple dip them. So now they're working in small groups, with the teacher, and because we do inclusion, the special education teacher comes in, and although she's assigned to only two kids, she may actually have a group of four students. Now she is working with all four students in the group. The teacher, resource teacher, and intervention specialist provide the students support. They get triple dipped with intervention. We have to monitor that all the time to make sure we strengthen their literacy skills.

Bea and her staff also use questioning strategies to help them think more deeply about their pedagogy, and how they interact with their students. The staff also engages in action research to investigate best practices. She sees herself as a coach for her staff, and she is in the classrooms to provide support to teachers and students. She believes they have to be deliberate about the instructional practices they use with their students.

B: We use Dufour's four questions as a strategy but we made it five, to help us think more deeply about what we do with students. The questions are: What do you need to teach? We added, how are you going to teach it? How are you going to assess it? How do you know that they've learned it? What are you going to do for the students that haven't learned it and

for those that have? So we added the how are you going to teach it because for a school that has students of poverty, has a large EL population, and has African American students who also have their own cultural linguistic systems, we really have to think about how are we going to teach it. That gets into the learning style, it relates to pedagogy. You really have to think about the differentiation piece. So to me, that was one of the most important pieces. For me, the guided instruction is crucial. It's a must. It's the non-negotiable, because what does the research say? The best learning is one-on-one. Well, you're not going to get one-on-one the farther away you get from guided instruction. It then becomes least effective. So you have to provide a lot of opportunities where the teacher is working with the kids around that kidney table. That's one piece of literacy development.

Bea feels that her school's success can also be attributed to her staff's habits of mind, around providing deliberate curricular and learning activities for students, that will help close the achievement gaps that exist between populations of students.

B: It's a habit of mind. That's what we talk about; it's the habits of mind. And so, to help our students reach their highest potential we continue to use our strong practices, and we know we are able to grow students' literacy skills. This shows that our practices are so solid, and our systems are so strong that even when we have a wave come in, we're going to be able to stand tall through it. So culture building we can do, the challenge for me is going to be those habits of mind and then closing those gaps. So

that means we can't mess with core instruction, it's going to have to be really tight, and that lots of reading groups are going on and that students are reading all the time like Allington says they need to engage in.

Addressing the gaps that exist between teacher and student cultures seemed not to be fully developed for Bea. Although she could communicate how teachers approached culturally responsive teaching, address the cultural dissonance that might exist between teachers and students appeared to be an area of further study.

B: I think that we're probably in transition with this [cultural dissonance] piece, because as I mentioned to you, over time I've been adding more bilingual teachers, but that's not to say that because you're a bilingual teacher, you know how to do culturally responsive teaching. With the pressure of not knowing what was going to be in store with the new assessments, I saw behaviors emerge from teachers that were surprising to me because they weren't being culturally responsive. I think they were just stressed, and they maybe reverted back to some teaching styles that tended to be more ditto-like, except we don't use dittos. For example, for one of my Hispanic teachers the culturally responsive teaching was not there. So, over time, she started losing control over the kids, because she started using stuff that was not aligned to what she needed to be doing.

So right here, this whole thing where culturally responsive teaching is used to empower students, she didn't get that part, even though she had done it before. This is where I'm at now, especially with our male students, because when I started looking at the data this summer I noticed

that a lot of our struggling readers were boys. So that's why I started reading this book. I thought okay, what is it about boys' learning styles that we might be doing differently and getting teachers more comfortable? So, I'll give you an example of this. Teachers want to see the kids sitting down, and that's a sign that things are in control. Whereas, you could have a boy standing by his desk, and working, and for some boys, I think that's essential. But, some teachers are just not comfortable with that.

Everything has to be like, pum-pum-pum, you know. And this book was saying, boys' fine motor skills develop later. So, for teachers who want that handwriting to be perfect, it's not going to be perfect because it's not there yet.

So getting teachers to understand different learning styles. So culturally responsive teaching and the idea that it's a boy, they're going to be more active. Our children of color, boys in particular, have larger egos so we have to be aware of that because so often we want to break them down. That's not the way to get them to learn.

On a more positive side, Bea was able to provide an example of culturally responsive teaching with the cultural reference and writing included.

B: Our music teacher took songs from slavery and African American spirituals that our kids have known for a long time. So, the teachers were all given the verses, and they were instructed to select a verse that is appropriate for their grade level. The class reads the song, and then teachers have the kids talk about what it means to them, and the rest of the

students wrote a response, a reflection to that verse. So, we put all the song on the wall and took the students' reflections that were really well written pieces, and put them up also. Then that month's Author's Tea was all about the African American spirituals. So it was a way that brought the music in, it brought the literature in, it brought the writing in, and it was all about thinking about the words. The music teacher gave the teachers a little background about the song so that they could talk about when it was written, why it was written and thinking about various pieces of the song in a different way. It was just fabulous.

When it came to preparing for the state assessments, Bea's philosophy was that the best way to prepare students for the test was to make sure that they were literate. She felt that if they had a strong curriculum in place, effective and rigorous teaching was happening in every classroom every day and students had a grasp on strategies for approaching text, then they would be successful on the state assessments.

B: My approach to the state assessments was always about reading and writing. Whether it was in English language arts period or Science or Social Studies or music or P.E., it didn't matter. So, that was a commitment and agreement, where the whole school and all the staff said okay, we are on board. It was our theory of action. If we focused on literacy, whether it meant being technological or math literate; if we focused on that piece and doing that work then that becomes your core curriculum. So the stronger your core curriculum and teaching is, the fewer kids that you will need to try to catch up to their grade level. So

over time, you would expect that number would be a smaller number. I always pay attention to those classrooms where there's like a large number of kids that are in Tier Two and Tier Three interventions. So that tells me, hmmm, something's going on with the core curriculum in that instance. So your focus cannot be the test.

Bea feels, at this point in time, her school's success can be attributed to synergy. She believes it is the synergy in classrooms where teachers have really developed their knowledge and skills to teach, assess, and progress monitor. She noted that the progress monitoring piece has really come about in the last two or three years.

B: So before that time teachers could tell you oh, he's improving. The other thing that's taken awhile, but I'm very proud of, is that I no longer get teachers coming in and saying, well, he's having trouble in reading. Well, what part of reading? It's like there are a lot of components to it. So, they come very well prepared, and say well, I've noticed it's the blends, or I've noticed he's really had problems with his comprehension, or it's the inferential piece with which he's having problems. He can really do the basic strategy— somebody wanted, but so then, you know. So they are very well versed.

Yeah, it's contextual to our school, but that is our synergy. I also think it's also the fact that my administrative team is very driven by the belief that literacy is the kingpin for student success; it's the cornerstone. That is what has made our students so successful.

All three principals focused in building staffs' capacity so that they could strengthen their knowledge and skill set for developing literate students. They also were very explicit about everyone's roles and responsibilities in the improvement efforts they were undertaking. As staff began to use new ways of working together, and began to feel success, and their work was validated by their peers, they began to embrace working in professional learning teams, using data for decision-making, providing press and professional support to students that included letting them know what they needed to work on, and how to go about accomplishing the tasks. They all had a literacy plan and made sure they used their instructional leadership skills to move the school improvement work forward. All three principals were very confident, empathetic, relational conscious leaders who were very explicit, transparent and intentional about developing the conditions necessary for changing and improving teaching and learning and ensuring students left their schools as literate students.

### **Themes**

Six key themes, as shown in Table 2, emerged from the analysis of the principal experiences: Literacy as a Cornerstone to Academic Success, Leadership for Change, Caring School Culture, Intentional Efforts for School Improvement, and High –stakes State Assessments.

**Table 5: Synopsis of the Six Emergent Themes From the Data Analysis**

<b>Theme No.</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
1.	Literacy as a Cornerstone to Academic Success	a. Data
2.	Leadership for Change	a. Co-leadership b. Instructional Leadership c. Professional learning teams
3.	Caring School Culture	a. Building relationships and trust b. Dialogue and feedback
4.	Intentional Efforts for School Improvement	a. Transparency about and agreements for school improvement b. Breaking down barriers to success c. Press and support d. Monitor, monitor, monitor e. Best practice f. Mindset
5.	High-stakes State Assessments	
6.	Success and Professional Growth Barriers	

**Theme 1: Literacy as a Cornerstone to Academic Success**

The review of literature on this concept conveyed the correlation between a child's early literacy development and their future academic success (Adler & Fisher, 2001; Aud, et al., 2012; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Cunningham, 2007; Ferguson, 2008; Hemphill & Tivnan, 2008; Klein, & Knitzer, 2007; Neuman, 2008). Takanishi (2004) also unreservedly espouses that literacy development is vital to school reform and students' future outcomes. She elaborates that

...failure to address preventable problems such as...disparities in early literacy is compromising the life prospects of significant numbers of America's children from an early age. Children are not the only ones who lose. The entire society

suffers from the loss of their human capital, creativity, and productivity as family members, workers, and community members (p. 62).

The participants in this study also illustrate the centrality of literacy to academic development. They believed that developing literate students who are strong in literacy skills, writing and critical thinking skills is vital to ensuring their students' future success in school and their future employment and earning power.

K: As a person of color who lived in poverty, I was an exception to what others expect people of my background to achieve. Because everyone in my family valued education and I knew how to read, that opened up experiences for me that some of my peers probably did not have. I learned very early, the importance of being able to read well and I believe that if you don't learn how to read, you're not going to be successful in life. You have to read well, not just a little bit.

J: I learned through my early teaching experiences in underserved communities that reading was going to be the key to unlocking everything for my students. If my students weren't able to read, then they were really not going to be successful, and they would have very few opportunities available to them. I saw that as a salesperson, a teacher and a principal.

For the participants, literacy as a key linchpin for academic success emerged in three distinct ways for Julius, Kevin and Bea respectively: personal learning through job-embedded professional development, personal experiences with adolescent struggling readers and illiterate adults, and individual experiences as a diverse learner. Additionally, in their narratives all informants expressed that they used data, formative and summative,

extensively to identify literacy development as a focus area for all students especially struggling readers. Much like Taylor (2004) these principals noted that conducting a complete data analysis of their students' current and past academic progress and trends related to students' social and behavioral trends as well as teaching practices, were significant factors in their decision to intentionally use literacy development as a school improvement focus. Moreover, they also employed what they had learned from their prior experiences with literacy development and data analysis to inform their decisions to use literacy as an intentional school improvement effort. They communicated that to effectively address the disparities in literacy development of their struggling learners and to increase their students' future academic and life outcomes, they had to focus on ensuring that effective teachers were located in all classrooms (Allington and Johnston, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Goe and Strickler, 2008; Pressley et al., 2001). Consequently removing barriers to improved teaching, learning and literacy development (Cowan et al., 2012) was of essence.

### **Theme 2: Leadership for Change**

The informants cogently communicated that literacy development, and providing support and interventions for struggling learners, was the obvious and right choice for changing practices at their schools while simultaneously improving other measures of school success. Their view of leadership concurred with Bryk et al. (2010) findings that leadership as the driver for change...[is an] essential support...more specifically with principals as catalytic agents for systemic improvement. These school-based leaders build agency for change at the community level, nurture the leadership of others through a shared vision for local reform and provide the necessary

guidance over time to sustain a coherent program of schoolwide development.

Their change efforts focus on... active outreach efforts ...to parents and the community... and enhancing faculty's professional capabilities...to nurture a... student-centered learning environment...[and] cultivating schoolwide supports...to promote more ambitious academic achievement for every child (p. 45-46).

Since the majority of the informants careers have been dedicated to working in predominantly high poverty schools where students struggled with literacy development, they felt that although the extent of the problem was enormous across high poverty schools in their districts, they could make a difference in their students' lives, and they had the knowledge, skills and drive for transforming teaching and learning, and for developing literate students. They also revealed that their past experiences significantly enriched their drive to work with children in underserved communities. They expressed that their early personal circumstances, as well as their professional experiences in the field, equipped them to respond to their students' and community's needs. They disclosed that literacy was a substantial challenge at all of the feeder schools, yet they felt they had the skills to lead the change efforts at their respective schools.

K: I think it was my skill and talent of wanting to do this work that helped me change things at my school. It was my drive, initiative, influence and problem-solving ability to get things done. My leadership style tells my staff to come, go with me. We all help shape the vision, and people begin to trust you, and you build relationships with them. The staff is going to engage in the school improvement effort because you're the person that's

up there facilitating it and they trust you. That's the people that want to follow you and want to try this new initiative because you're saying it and inviting them to be a part of it. So that's my dominant style.

The data also revealed that all informants were very active in all aspects of their schools management. They saw themselves as members of a school community, and frequently jumped in and modeled tasks for students and staff and, at times, substituted for staff so they could attend professional development, or attend to other matters. They were instructional leaders, as well as managers, and no job was beneath them. Consequently they all used shared leadership as a driver to advance literacy development. Although they monitored progress, they trusted that staff would do what was right for students and adhere to the agreements and protocols that were collaboratively developed and in place. For example, as Bea explained,

B: Well, when you talk about shared leadership, I definitely have shared leadership. I tell my staff this work is so big, no one person can do it alone. So it's got to be a culture of trust where they know, I can give this to you and you guys can make it work and then you can give me what I need to work on, too.

Bea, Julius and Kevin agree that building staffs' capacity is important. Since information around teaching techniques and methods are constantly being strengthened and updated, it is essential that staff remain current in the field in order to meet the needs of all students. Also, professional development in any career is about growing as a professional. The informants were in accord about the significance of providing learning opportunities for staff to improve and refine their pedagogy, and to deepen their

understanding of using data to make decisions. They also acknowledge that their leadership roles were to make certain that teachers engage in professional development that is aligned to their schools' initiatives, and that the new skills gained are implemented with fidelity.

B: And so I think that teachers are professionals, and I've really provided a lot of professional development (PD) to them, myself. You can't do this without PD in literacy. We have also attended to a lot of trainings that has focused on some of the literacy components as a group. I think that is why we're way past the initial balance literacy training because we are all instructionally literate.

All three leaders credit professional learning teams for ensuring that instructional practices improve, collaboration among staff and students increases, relationship building is an ongoing process, trust among staff is sustained and developing literate students is at the forefront of the school improvement initiative. Schmoker (2006) affirms

There are deeply practical reasons that team based "learning communities" have become...the state of the art for improving performance. ...teachers have this capability...to begin making serious improvements...[by] pool[ing] their practical knowledge, by working in teams. ...learning communities encourage teachers to recognize and share the best of what they already know. This approach insists on the fundamental elements [for student success]: collective follow-up, assessment, and adjustment of instruction (p. 109).

Kevin explained how he uses professional learning teams on his campus.

K: Now as I said before, what I did bring from the Academy to the school was the weekly Core Content Planning. I think that's the number one thing that has made a difference. It is one of the top three things that have made us a successful school over the years, and that has been replicated time and time again by other schools in the district. However, this is our version of Core Content Planning. One day a week you agree to stay until at least 6:00 p.m. Teachers used the time to work with their team, the coaches rotate through the team meetings to provide support and facilitate if needed, and the teachers are going to plan for that next week's instruction. They will also analyze data, they create common assessment, but most importantly they are all going to be ready for their students the following week; that's a biggie.

### **Theme 3: Caring School Culture**

Noddings (2005a) posits

...school is a multipurpose institution... [and] schools cannot accomplish their goals without attending to the fundamental needs of students for continuity and care... Social changes over the last forty years have left many young people without a sense of continuity and with the feeling that no one cares. ... Schools should continue to reflect on and pursue many purposes their first—their guiding purpose—must be to establish and maintain a climate of care (p. 63-64).

The informants agreed that for school improvement to occur, an intentional effort must be made to create a supportive, risk free learning environments (Bryk, et al., 2010; Harris,

2002; and Marzano et al., 2005); one that promotes developing positive relationships among staff and students and that fosters trust. They believed that such a collective effort builds a school culture where teachers and students are co-learners and support one another (Hargreaves & Shirley; Harris).

All three principals view themselves as having a keen aptitude for developing a school culture where the reciprocity of care, learning together and support is prevalent. Through their conversations and use of strong, passionate language, they communicated their ability to create a culture of learning and support was highly related to their success in motivating, and engaging staff around the concept of developing literate students.

B: But my teachers are proud, they are so proud, and they are so invested in making sure their kids are successful, and I've created a culture where they will seek each other's help.

All three informants also noted that building relationships was key to advancing students' literacy development and school improvement. They noted that building professional relationships among staff and students was deeply connected to motivating students for effort and literacy development.

K: This one thing, building relationships, is the basis of school improvement in the end. That's what's going to drive it more than anything else. The data and all that can follow, but if you don't have a relationship with staff and students it's not going to happen.

They maintained that gaining the trust among staff, as well as students, is key to the success of school improvement efforts (Bryk et al., 2010; Harris, 2007; Lambert, 1995;

Noddings, 2005a). Harris & Lambert (2003) clearly articulate this stance as they affirm that

School improvement depends on sustaining a culture of opportunity for pupils and teachers. This depends on teachers and pupils who trust one another and work together with a common purpose. It depends on building a school community that is inclusive and values, above all, individual development and achievement (p. 34).

All three informants voiced that trust and building relationships are interconnected, and one cannot exist without the other. They also wholeheartedly communicated that relationships and trust are the foundation for making headway with school improvement efforts. Further, these elements establish the conditions for earning the mutual trust of others, as well as gaining the support of stakeholders for the improvement work at hand.

Bea, Julius, and Kevin consider themselves to be skillful instructional leaders. They feel that to build teachers' capacity for improved pedagogy, and to increase student learning and literacy skills, they must be in the classrooms, and establish a continuous feedback loop about the things that are happening there, as well as throughout the school. They indicate that such informed conversations must happen on a regular basis so that it becomes an intentional, recurring behavior where teachers and administrators are discussing data, instructional techniques, and are reflective of their practice. They note that engaging in such practice is critical for progress to be made toward developing literate students.

The informants are very proud of their school culture and attribute their schools' success to the culture that has been collaboratively built. They are all committed to

maintaining their schools as the centers of their communities, and the students and parents know they have a space to go to for help and assistance.

K: Our parents know our staff cares for their children. We have Communities in Schools, we help put clothes on their children's back, and the nurse takes care of their children when they aren't able to. All those wraparound services are available at our school, and I've actually had to fight to make sure that we keep them. Being able to provide these services just makes us stronger. My teachers and I also reinforce a school wide belief that confidence + effort = achievement. You will see staff in the classrooms focusing on the students' positive aspects and strengths to motivate them. Also every adult in the school really works with students and strives toward making it not cool to be a bully by focusing on a concept of school as a "bully-free" zone. We also make sure parents are a part of and support this initiative. My teachers are also very intent on promoting kids to take academic risks in the classroom with support from the other students. So we all work very hard in creating such an environment. Teachers are at various skill levels with this so my assistant principal, specialists and I need to make sure we constantly support them and help them understand how such environments can be created. We demonstrate and model this practice for them or have them visit other teachers in the school who are being successful with this practice. Another thing is that teachers are always prepared, which shows respect for the students and is important to developing a caring learning environment. In return, the teacher expects

students to be prepared. Additionally teachers share SOME personal information in order to build a relationship with students and they certainly engage students in sharing their own experiences with others. One strong strategy we implemented are the classroom meetings that are held daily with the teachers and students to discuss classroom climate, culture and to involve students in solving problems that might arise in and outside of the classroom.

#### **Theme 4: Intentional Efforts for School Improvement**

Julius, Kevin and Bea all perceive that building a school's capacity for improving teaching and learning, and developing literate students requires change at all levels of the school's organization, including changing the roles of everyone involved in the school improvement process (Bryk, et al., 2010; Cowan, et al., 2012, Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Harris, 2002; Harris & Lambert, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005). As Harris & Lambert contend

Otherwise, the [principal] is cast as the 'implementer', the person who must force the change on the school through evaluation, supervision or monitoring. Decisions need to be accompanied by explicit agreements about responsibilities for each aspect of the innovation or development. If meaningful and purposeful collaboration is to occur, then there has to be trust and transparency about roles and responsibilities. (p. 34)

Bea describes this best when she explains

B: I think I'm a good listener, and I really believe that teachers are professionals and smart, especially when given the opportunity to do some

action research on their own. They're going to come up with some really good stuff that makes sense for them, and then of course there's buy-in. So, when they vet ideas with me, I might say oh, that's really good, but let's tweak it this way. So ultimately, I'm not the one that's really coming up with the stuff, they are. My knowledge and skill comes into being able to direct it, to tweak it, to give resources to it. Sometimes just saying no, that's not going to work, not this time, so let's think about this other perspective, is enough to help them think differently. Or I might say, you guys aren't really thinking about this piece. That's my experience, that's where I'm helpful.

Being transparent about the literacy plans for developing literate students and the work that it entailed was fundamental for all informants. Letting staff know their roles and responsibilities for developing literate students was important. They also engaged the staff in developing agreements and protocols on how they would engage in the work, and what it would look like when they arrived at the ideal state of literacy development for all students.

Julius senses he was very transparent with all his staff about what the literacy plan looked like, and what the staff's roles and responsibilities were for developing literate students, and improving teaching and learning.

J: There wasn't one person with whom I didn't share the whole entire literacy plan. I shared my vision of the language arts block, but I didn't beat them over the head with it. I let them know the structures and support that were going to be in place. We all needed to know what we were

focusing on and what that teaching aspect would look like in the classroom. We changed the schedule to a 120-minute ELA block and added writing, which made it 150 minutes. Each grade level taught it at a different time, so that I could get in the classrooms to see it in action, as well as ensure that interventions were provided. We had some overlap time, but they all had to get the language arts block in before lunch. We knew the focus was going to be on literacy and reading while kids were fresh, in the morning, and math, science, and social studies in the afternoon.

All informants held that removing barriers that deny students' access and opportunities to engage in positive, rigorous, and collaborative experiences was imperative. These leaders are unwavering, as well as committed to providing the necessary support and guidance to staff and students, so that their confidence is strengthened for performing at their highest potential possible. They all shared a common belief that developing literate students means they must continuously ensure that staff grows professionally, to meet their diverse student needs. The principals are in classrooms continuously to monitor and provide feedback to teachers about their practice, they invite teachers to engage in discourse about how they can remove barriers and acts of power and control that are known to exist in classrooms, and they seek feedback from the staff about how they as leaders can reduce barriers to success. Bea and Kevin shared how they have provided support systems for their students, such as dyslexia intervention, that may not have been used or considered in other schools that served similar students.

Having teachers provide students with academic press and support so that students could advance their literacy development, were factors that all three principals sought in their staff (Lee & Smith, 1999). They focused on staff providing support “focused on academic rather than personal issues” (Lee & Smith, p. 937) related to the student. Such press and support is described by Bryk et al. (2010) as

Assuming that a base of safety and order is established, one moves next to how school developed norms can proactively support student learning...[T]his directs our attention to the nature of student-teacher relations, more specifically the academic expectations that teachers hold for students. Improving learning means pressing all students to engage in academic work with depth and rigor. The press for high standards typically results in more homework, extended instructional time, more difficult tests and more stringent requirements for grade promotion and graduation. In tandem with this is how teachers extend the personal care and support that many students will need as they reach for these higher standards. It is especially important... as school press disadvantaged students toward higher standards, that this be accompanied by ample social support to sustain students’ efforts. (p. 60)

Bea and Kevin clearly articulated the instructional expectations they hold for their staff and the environmental conditions that must be present for students to succeed.

K: But press and support; that is important. I am always looking for teachers who provide academic press and do good teaching. I

believed that good teaching would overcome any program that we were using. I wanted my kids to be readers, and they were going to do it. That's what I was looking for.

All three informants use different approaches for developing literate students, but they are all grounded in what has been identified as evidence based practices. Two of the informants provided evidence that they are engaged in keeping up with best practices, that have been proven to work with diverse students in high poverty schools that struggle with literacy development, as well as other content areas. One has been a member of a national professional learning community, and the other informant engages in action research and seeks out research on topics that will provide insight to address her students' needs. Both then take what they have learned, incorporate what they consider to be their own in-the-field research and meshed their approaches with best practices to meet their students' needs. Schmoker (2006) notes that promoting literacy development usually comes down to "Authentic Literacy vs. Stuff"(p. 79.) He further indicates that

That the irony is that while most effective reading and writing instruction is still relatively rare, we talk as though underachievement and underdeveloped critical reasoning capacities are the result of mysterious or insurmountable social or fiscal factors. But these factors are not...the ones that keep kids down. They are a result of unfortunate practices that crept into schools and were allowed to stay there (p.78).

Bea asserts that she insists teachers use best practices.

B: We do look at what is research-based. For example, we have a program, not just for our Special Ed kids, but I've purchased it for

every grade level. And it's research-based, and it works wonderful for our EL students. So there are a couple of programs that are proven and work well with our students. I tell my teachers, if I was on a desert island and I could pack any program to teach that would get me off the island because I'm stranded; I'd take this program because it is research based and it works.

Bea, Julius and Kevin devote a lot of their administrative time in the classrooms observing teachers in action and noting students' engagement and responses to instructional practices. They also engage students in conversations about what they are learning, why it is important and how they can apply the knowledge gained in other areas related to the academics or life experiences. All three principals are very intent about monitoring what is happening in the classrooms and how all students are responding and progressing. Their beliefs mesh with Allington's (2001) when he expresses that

...children are most likely to learn what they are taught. In other word, if we observe the nature of the work that children and adolescents do during the school day, we can predict what sorts of skills, attitudes, habits, and knowledge they will be most likely to acquire. When students have few opportunities to summarize, analyze, synthesize, and discuss what they've read, we should not be surprised that they demonstrate little proficiency with such tasks. When they have not only few such opportunities but have also experienced little instruction focused on fostering thoughtful literacy, we should expect that rather few students will develop thoughtful literacy (pp. 93-94).

Bea shares that her advice to principals who work in schools similar to hers, is that they should really have

...a strong system in place for progress monitoring and your teachers really need to keep up with it, because it's so hard the teachers. But they really need to be able to do that, and then have a system in place to be able to set up and triple-service, or quadruple-service students with interventions, especially if they are struggling with mastering concepts.

*Mindset.* Dweck (2010) asserts that equitable education is more than just assuring that matching facilities and resources are made available to schools. She holds that factors such as ideologies and convictions that educators' hold can have a significant impact on students' achievement, self-confidence, capacity to learn, and intelligence (Dweck). She also notes that teachers can have the same attitudes about their own capacity to learn. She proposes that people may

...have a fixed mind-set, in which they believe that intelligence is a static trait: some students are smart and some are not, and that's that. Or they may have a growth mind-set, in which they believe that intelligence can be developed by various means—for example, through effort and instruction (p. 26).

Dweck clarifies that a growth mind-set does not mean that everyone is the same or that their intellectual ability will promptly grow substantially and for everyone, but that time, “passion and relentless effort” (p. 26) can certainly advance the possibility. In addition, she asserts that studies demonstrate that educators who press students to adopt a “growth mind-set is critical for students who are continuously associated with negative stereotype

about their capacity to learn (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Dweck, 2010).

In addition, Dweck notes that moving forward with such a growth mind-set “helps those students remain engaged and achieve well, even in the face of stereotypes” (26).

Bea agrees with Dweck’s research and feels that

- B: To help students adopt a growth mind-set, staff needs to know the students, know their needs, and know students’ linguistic development. Teachers also have to know their students’ progress on assessments so that they can provide appropriate instruction to grow their proficiency, and increase their confidence in their own abilities.

### **Theme 5: High-stakes State Assessments**

Bea, Julius and Kevin acknowledge Afflerbach’s (2002) assertion that in the current state accountability arena,

High-stakes assessments are major influences on curriculum and instruction, on teachers and their professional development, on community-school relationships, and on levels of school funding. Test results are a primary means of describing student achievement, teacher accountability, and school worth. . . . [and there] is a need to question the legitimacy of high-stakes reading tests (p. 348)

All three participants noted that they and some of their teachers were often conflicted about spending time preparing their students for state assessments, for which they held reservations about their validity, instead of using the time to develop literate students. For example Bea discussed that a new state assessment was being implemented for the first time and staffs’ unfamiliarity with the test create anxiety for some teachers.

B: The pressure I think this year of not knowing what was going to be in store with the test, I saw behaviors emerge from teachers that were surprising to me because they weren't being culturally responsive. I think they were just trying to...they were stressed, and they maybe reverted back to some teaching styles that tended to be more ditto-like, except that we don't use ditto's. But they were finding things on the internet or they wanted to use more worksheets that were more like test prep stuff...and so what happened, and I'm thinking of this one particular teacher who had always gotten 100% students passing the test. She was the A-star teacher in this case, but the culturally responsive teaching was not there. So over time it's like she started losing control over the kids because she started with that stuff really early and it wasn't even stuff that was aligned to what she needed to be doing. So right here, this whole thing where culturally responsive teaching is used to empower students, she didn't get that part, even though she had done it before. I think it was that whole thing of not knowing what to expect from the new state test that really threw her off.

Although Bea, Julius and Kevin noted that high stakes testing at their schools had become a yearly ritual for them, they felt state assessments had little or no impact on advancing their students' literacy development. They pointed out state assessments were stressful for students, teachers and administrators. Yet all participants communicated they were committed to advancing their students' academic success on state assessments and to eventually be recognized for their students' academic achievements and teachers' hard work. They also expressed that while test scores were important and they wanted their

students to do well, they would not sacrifice their students' literacy development to get those scores. They revealed that providing their students with effective teaching, strong relationships and support, and providing them the tools to successfully navigate their educational careers were matters of extreme importance and would not be compromised.

B: Like I said, I really feel like my having observed and gone to visit programs all over the state, provided me with ideas of what would work and cemented a belief that we could do well on the state tests especially by focusing on literacy. That's the foundation our kids need. Of course because of my own personal experiences I can say, we're going to do well on the test. Besides, I know I'm a rebel and it's almost like, well let me prove to you that what you say is wrong; we will do great on the test. I knew all along we were doing the right thing for our students by focusing on literacy.

### **Theme 6: Success and Professional Growth Barriers**

Ongoing professional development and support for school leaders is paramount to building their capacity to “be (or become) leaders of learning who can develop a team delivering effective instruction (The Wallace Foundation, 2012, p. 4). The Wallace Foundation further reports

Principal training programs...[must] provide the future leaders with high-quality training and internships that reflect the realities education leaders face in the field. That is to say center [district] central offices need to “re-culture” themselves so they focus less on administration and more on supporting principals to improve instruction. [Thus] districts regularly evaluate principal,

assessing the behaviors that research tells us are most closely tied to improving teaching and student achievement. Districts then provide professional development, including mentoring, that responds to what the evaluations find for each individual (p. 14).

The conversations with the informants revealed three barriers to professional growth opportunities they continuously encountered. The first challenge conveyed by the group was the lack of a strong systemic process, available intra-district, for continued leadership development of principals. They noted there was little professional development or incentives for leaders to further develop their capacity around literacy or working in high poverty schools. They expressed that their districts' methods for strengthening leaders' capacity to lead high poverty schools was usually provided using a one-size -fits all approach. Regardless of factors such as a schools academic standing, diversity of student population and location of the school, professional learning opportunities were not contextualized to strengthen the capacity of leaders for specifically leading high poverty schools.

J: Since I've been in public education, I've had no real mentors or other leaders to bounce ideas off of and no opportunities, no process in place to exchange successful ideas and challenges with other principals. Not a single person. You just have to jump in and do the best you can.

Another informant noted that he pursued his own leadership development by becoming a member of a national professional learning team for school leaders. The majority of the strategies he uses have been garnered from his involvement with the group. The

strategies and research learned have enhanced his leadership style for sustaining school improvement efforts and developing literate students.

A second challenge for the participants' was the lack of real opportunities provided by the districts, for successful leaders of high poverty schools to advance their career path and use their skills in other leadership positions throughout the district. One informant remarked that sometimes there was a feeling of being labeled as only having the capacity to work in high poverty schools, or schools that need dramatic improvement.

K: To be honest with you, I work in a district that's not colorblind. There's a tendency to try to make the principal look like the school and the student population, and so I wouldn't even qualify, in that respect, to work in school that had no students of poverty. Also, I feel that they don't want to move the principals up because replacing the campus leader is difficult. Struggling schools would benefit from meeting as a professional learning team much like we did in the Academy. Many of the school in the district are not aligned with improving teaching and learning. They have a lot of programs, a lot of money, a lot of grants and they spend too much time away from their campuses. Professional learning groups for such leaders must be innovative so that collegiality can be developed, action research on best practices can be instilled, and developing relationships with staff and students can be addressed.

A third challenge divulged by the informants was their limited capacity to appropriately address cultural dissonance that exists between teachers and

students in underserved communities. Although the principals provided some instances of how to address some situations, they acknowledged this was an area of growth for them, and they needed to investigate it further. They all appeared to struggle with communicating their point of view of cultural dissonance. Their understanding of how to address the gaps was not fully developed, and the discussions were very surface-level. They implied what they might do in the future and gave glimpses of what they were currently doing on their campuses. They acknowledged this was not a well-developed area for them even though they were seasoned administrators working in underserved communities.

Ladson-Billings (2009) submits that the

...notion of “cultural relevance” moves beyond language to include other aspects of students and school culture. Thus culturally relevant teaching uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture. The negative effects are brought about, for example, by seeing one’s history, culture, or background distorted. Or they may result from the staffing pattern in the school (when all teachers and the principal are white and only the janitors and cafeteria workers are [of color] for example) and from tracking students [of color] into the lowest-level classes. Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. ...moving between...cultures [when teaching] lays the foundation for a skill that the students will need in order to reach academic and cultural success (p. 19-20).

Although all three informants are of color and work in schools that primarily service children of color, their belief system about cultural dissonance and culturally relevant teaching was rather quiet. However, during the interviews the participants demonstrated their passion about doing whatever it takes to help all of their students experience success, and they were hopeful that they had been a positive influence on their future outcomes.

### **Summary of Findings**

In this phenomenological study, three principals reflected on their lived experiences as successful leaders of high poverty schools that used literacy development as an intentional school improvement effort, while simultaneously improving other measures of school success. Three interview sessions were held with each participant followed with an observational walk throughout the campuses. The analysis of the data generated six main themes and subsequent sub-themes. To concisely synthesize the findings for the research questions guiding this study, I have provided a summary as it relates to each research question.

#### **Literacy as an Intentional Focus for School Improvement**

The informants' early life experiences with family, college, and early career provided them with a perspective of others' struggles with literacy development, and provided insight as to what others' future outcomes might be if interventions were not provided. Their lived experiences shaped their drive, sense of doing what was right by others, leadership style, commitment to serving those in underserved communities and attitudes for moving beyond compliance and instead influencing students' and staffs' confidence in their efforts and potential for success. Having experienced success

themselves as persons of color and successful educators, they had no doubt that they could replicate such success for students, especially struggling learners, in underserved communities.

Although their leadership was a driver and a pivotal element for change occurring at their schools, they often shared and developed the capacity of others to lead using professional learning teams to support that effort. They often commented that they made it known to staff, either verbally or through actions that the work of improving teaching and learning was not a one-person job, and required a collective effort. Therefore, they felt committed and beholden as team members, to roll up their sleeves and work side by side, with the staff. As Harris and Lambert (2003) articulate, the leaders “breadth of involvement ...[and] understanding and skillfulness” (p. 14) around developing literate students, allowed these principals to “capture the imagination of [others], enable them to negotiate real changes in their own schools, and to tackle inevitable conflicts that arise from such courageous undertakings” (p. 14).

Additionally, all participants’ use of data was ongoing, and informed their decisions regarding proven and effective approaches and strategies to use, including implementing evidence-based innovations that other leaders may not have considered at other, similar campuses. They also used data to make adjustments and abandon practices that did not benefit the students’ growth and progress. They were reflective about what staff and students were, or were not, accomplishing in the classrooms, and they religiously reviewed the impact of the

overall school improvement efforts on their students' success with literacy development.

### **Systems to Support Struggling Learners and Advance Literacy Development**

Bea, Julius and Kevin created the conditions necessary for shaping a caring school environment to support all students, promote the development of positive relationships among staff and students, and to advance effective and meaningful teaching practices in classrooms every day. They also strived to ensure that trust and respect were reciprocal between adults and students, and that school staff used dialogue and feedback to help students understand how they were progressing, and what they needed to do to advance their literacy development. For struggling learners, they were emphatic that staff provides numerous opportunities for interventions for the students. Most importantly the principals were especially intent on removing any barriers to students' success that might exist. They also used various approaches and methods to strengthen their struggling students' literacy acquisition, as well as providing time for an abundance of small group instruction, and opportunities to engage in actual reading of, and conversations about, text. Another key element they employed was professional learning opportunities, continuous conversations and purposeful feedback about instruction, coaching and modeling of effective practices, and they used research to promote changing one's mindset about students' potentials and how to increase students' confidence and effort for success.

### **Support Systems to Improve Pedagogy and Develop Caring Classroom Practices**

Because the principals were very transparent about the work the teachers were about to engage in, and invited them to be a part of developing the vision and identifying

the change efforts that needed to take place to advance their students' literacy, there was buy-in from the staff, and a strong sense of accountability for all students. The principals were upfront with staff, even when hiring, about the professional development that they would collectively engage in, and that professional learning teams would be used to strengthen collaboration. They also communicated the importance of staff analyzing and using data for decision making, planning, developing common assessment, reviewing student work, sharing ideas with colleagues and to increase staffs' reflection on their practice, to increase their effectiveness in the classroom. The leaders expected that teachers would provide academic press and professional support to students while developing their literacy skills. Three things that were also critical in this process were: a) the implementation of protocols and agreements that were established collectively between the principals and staff; b) the use of evidence based practices for improvement and, c) addressing ones mindset for building students' confidence and efforts to succeed.

### **Meeting State and Federal Accountability Requirements While Developing Literate Students**

Although the informants are acutely aware that their schools will be rated according to their students' performance on the state accountability assessments, they diligently focused on developing literate students. They specified that if students could read, write, problem solve, and engage in discourse to communicate their thinking processes, then they would be successful on the state assessments. They noted that they did prepare their students for the tests and provided them with strategies to use during the test. However, they focused on strengthening teachers' practice, making sure a rigorous and coherent curriculum was being implemented. As a result, students' confidence and

effort were enhanced because interventions and supports were available to struggling students to help them reach their full potential as literate students.

### **Success as a Professional Barrier**

From the data analysis, three challenges were identified.

1. Few opportunities exist within the districts to engage principals in professional learning teams with other principals that work in similar settings and with similar students. The districts' method for strengthening leaders' capacity to lead high poverty schools was usually provided in large settings with all principals, using a one-size-fits-all approach.
2. A lack of real opportunities exists within the districts for successful leaders of high poverty schools to advance their careers, and use their skills in other leadership positions throughout the district. There was a feeling of being labeled as having the capacity to only work in high poverty schools or schools that needed dramatic improvement. Thus, the principals felt the need to seek opportunities outside of their districts, to advance their careers.
3. The leaders' capacity to address the cultural dissonance that might exist between teachers and students in underserved communities needs to be strengthened, and developed. Principals acknowledged this was an area of growth for them, and they needed to investigate the topic further. They indicated the opportunities to grow in this area were few. Although there might be some proposed readings or books made available to the leaders, authentic discourse around this topic was rare.

These barriers suggest more research is needed, focused on how districts go about using professional learning groups to continue building the capacity of successful principals of high performance high poverty schools, providing career incentives for successful principals of HPHP schools, and building the capacity of principals to address the dissonance that may exist between teachers and students in underserved communities.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **SUMMARY, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

#### **Summary of the Study**

In Chapter 4, the results of the study were presented using six emerging themes: Literacy as a cornerstone to academic success, Leadership for change, Caring school culture, Intentional efforts for school improvement, high-stakes state assessments, and Success and professional growth barriers. The themes and subthemes were discussed using direct quotes from the participants' narratives to support the ideas. Following, the findings were discussed as they related to the research questions. Through triangulation of data, the researcher's findings showed that all informants used their personal and professional lived experiences to inform their decisions to use literacy development as an intentional school improvement focus. Additionally they reviewed trend data and research to support their decisions. Additionally all principals noted that their work in other high poverty schools helped prepare them for transforming teaching and learning and to develop literate students. They also professed that it was important to remove barriers that inhibit staffs' professional growth and learning and students' literacy development and academic progress. They felt their roles were to provide the resources and tools needed to accomplish such tasks as well as provide staff with professional development for engaging in effective learning teams and for using effective teaching practices with students. The principals were very explicit with staff about what the job

of developing literate students would entail and the expectation that best practices and the use of data by all teachers was to be evident throughout the school. The principals also made it very clear that a strong curriculum, standards, and effective practices would guide their instruction, instead of using the state assessments as a guide. Their ultimate goal was to develop literate students, which they predicted would address all elements of the state assessments and advance their students' performance on the state assessments.

### **Discussion**

The three informants in this study articulated their experiences as successful principals of high performance high poverty schools that used literacy as an intentional school improvement effort while simultaneously improving other measures of success. Based on the informants' responses, their experiences centered on using literacy as a cornerstone to student academic success, and being intentional about the school improvement efforts they implemented, creating a caring school culture, and leadership for change. These three topics are the focus of this discussion.

The participants in this study perceived literacy as the basis for students' academic success. They agreed that efforts to increase literacy for struggling students required intentional efforts on their part such that aligned with Allington's (1998) assertion that

...students [must] not only read and write more but also read and write differently from students in more typical classrooms. In these classrooms, teachers and students ...make connections across texts and across conversations,...talk was more often of a problem-solving nature,...[students]

were more likely to be engaged in peer conversations about text they had read...thus the quality and quantity of classroom talk also differed. Thoughtful literacy can be fostered, but classrooms most successful in developing such proficiencies look different from traditional classrooms...[Therefore] if we want students to develop the thinking around reading and writing activity that marks thoughtful literacy, classroom instruction [must] change (p. 96).

These were the targets for which the informants were striving. To achieve this type of student engagement around literacy development, intentional communities of practice among staff needed to be the norm. Teachers' capacity to provide such instruction and to facilitate conversations needed to be strengthened and developed, students' capacity and confidence to engage in discourse with peers had to advanced and practiced. Also, students' abilities to read and write at an appropriate level for participation in collaborative group activities had to be strengthened with supports and interventions provided by staff. The informants were well aware that literate behaviors in students were much more than just reading words and required staff changing their instructional practices from what had been used in traditional approaches for developing literate students. The informants expressed it was crucial that all staff understand what the change process entailed. This required principals to be very explicit and purposeful about building staffs' capacity for increased results (Fullan, 2006), providing

...opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the settings in which they actually work, observing and being observed by their colleagues in their own classrooms and classrooms of other teachers in other schools confronting similar problems (Elmore, 2004, p. 127),

and stipulating staff reflection on their practice, collaboration and engagement in inquiry with peers, and review of student work to gather evidence of impact on students learning become the norm of their school culture (Cowan et al., 2012, Fullan, 2006).

The participants agreed that to achieve greater success around students' literacy development, professional learning teams had to be the vehicle to foster collaboration among staff so that successful practices could be shared, and teachers struggling with changing practice or understanding how to change practice, would have models on campus they could refer to and learn from. Consistent with other research (Allington, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Dweck, 2010; Fullan, 2006; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Harris, 2002; Schmoker, 2006; Showers & Joyce, 1996) Diamond found that classroom teachers were the greatest influencers on their colleagues because there were more opportunities to engage in "frequent informal interactions about instructional strategies" (2012, p. 167). Diamond also posits that opportunities for communities of practice among teachers in professional learning teams, "Inform teacher's sense of meaning of their work, ...frequent interactions among teachers [are] positive, ...demonstrates promise for improving students' [literacy] outcomes, ...[and] provides resources [and strategies] for instructional improvement" (p. 167) that has the potential to progress literacy development for struggling learners.

The participants' decision to advance literacy development, and staffs' understanding that literacy is the cornerstone to academic success and improved future life outcomes for students, centered on strengthening staffs' community of practice to move from traditional practice, to one where teachers focus on

...coaching and guiding students through their learning, seeking explanations

from students for their answers, and assessing the thinking that led to the students' answers. Students discuss and ask questions about classroom work with the teachers, as well as other students, attempt to connect knowledge to prior understanding (Diamond, 2007, p. 288).

The informants conceded that to reach a high level of success with literacy development for struggling learners from an urban, underserved community, teachers' understanding of the literacy development components had to be strengthened or changed, and teachers' mindsets and practice had to shift to providing effective evidence-based instructional practice, that involved students in learning. They all held that doing the right thing by students so that their future outcomes could be brighter was at the forefront of all of their efforts. They also express that all children had the "right to read and the right to [effective] instruction to achieve this end" (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1991, p. 89).

As part of intentionally focusing on literacy as a school improvement effort, participants pursued creating a caring school culture that promoted positive relationships among staff and students. To accomplish this, the informants focused on changing staff and students' mindsets about their potential as learners, and instituting a united effort that integrated effective, or abandoned ineffective, social and academic practices for developing literate students. They sought to remove the practice of adults using personal power and fear as an approach to learning and instead promote "human and caring relationships... [that would] serve as models for [students and other adults] for what they might become..." (Delpit, 1995, p. 122). All informants held that if relationship building was not a part of the school improvement efforts, money, resources, or other measures of school improvement were not going to be effective. This meant moving from spaces that

might be alienating to some students and even causing some to feel unseen, to creating spaces that were more personalized, endorsed a habit of genuine care, trust, and respect and valued others' diverse experiences (Noddings, 2005b; Shiller, 2009). Smeyers articulates for educators to provide such a context for learners, they must first address what they value as a person, they must deconstruct their point of view and beliefs, as related to working in underserved communities with students that have an abundance of needs, and they must determine if they have the "ability to act in a principled" (p. 249) and caring way, with integrity, as designated by the school community. Informants noted that to create such conditions, where relationships between students and teachers are developed, thereby leading to better outcomes for their students, the necessary relationships had to be defined, and models of what that might look like had to be provided (Shiller, 2009). Training and support for staff in the area of relationship building was also needed. One principal used an approach at her campus that focused on changing the mindset that staff might have about students potential and intelligence. Using Dweck's, (2010) approach that suggests students' mind-sets influences their academic performance. Thus if students' have a growth mind-set, their intelligence can be expanded "through effort and [effective] instruction" (p. 26) and by also strengthening students' confidence in their potential and celebrating their success. Dweck also contends that because students believe that their

...intellect could be developed, students with a growth mind-set focused on learning, believed in effort, and were resilient in the face of setbacks. Students with a fixed mind-set...worried more about looking smart and not making mistakes, thought that needing to make an effort to learn meant their intelligence

was deficient, and became discouraged or defensive by setbacks (26-27).

The informants also applied Dweck's approach to help teachers think about their own mind-set and what they believed about the students' intelligence that they would be teaching. For example, teachers would need to reflect on whether they believed that they could mold and strengthen their students' intelligence or if they believed their students' intelligence was fixed. The principal's intent was to help teachers' expose any negative stereotypes they might have about their students and deconstruct and understand those perceptions so they could begin to build their capacity to help their students gain confidence and achieve to their greatest potential. All participants conveyed that there is no single approach for building relationships between students and teachers and that it is a process that requires continuous attention and nurturing. Smyth (2009) indicates that

If we are sincere about wanting to minimize the amount of negative identity formation and miscommunication between schools and their students that precipitates in failure for both, then we will have to be prepared to place greater emphasis on putting relationships at the centre of everything schools do (p. 291). [Which means creating relationships] not just for a few privileged students, but also for the...young people living in poverty in the USA (p. 297).

Bryk, et al., (2010) found that leadership was the driver for change at all levels of the system that included developing the professional capacity of staff, providing instructional leadership, developing a caring school culture, and working collaboratively with parents and students, and leveraging community stakeholders for support. All participants were the drivers for change at their campuses and were very involved in all aspects of running the school facility. They were flexible about being managers when resources or other

tasks needed to be accomplished so as not to interfere or create a barrier for instruction to take place. They were all instructional leaders and believed that the important work happened in the classrooms between teachers and students when effective practices were being utilized. The principals were intent on ensuring that a framework for developing literate students was in place for teachers to use as a guide, and that how instruction would be delivered was left up to teachers' professional judgments. However, all staff was provided professional development so they could successfully implement the literacy framework. Creating the conditions to optimize student learning was also addressed. High expectations for staff and students were the norm at the schools, as was developing relationships among staff and students, intentionally creating a common practice of working in professional learning teams, and participating in core content planning, to ensure that teachers would always be prepared for their students (Bryk et al., 2010, Cowan et al., 2012; Marzano, et al., 2005). They also practiced shared leadership behaviors and helped staff advance their careers either within, or outside of, their districts. They ensured program coherence was evident throughout the school and they evaluated the extent to which the reform efforts were effective in developing literate students. They also frequently measured student progress (Bryk et al., 2010, Cowan et al., 2012; Marzano, et al., 2005).

The informants' were transparent and clear about the individual and collective roles and responsibilities of teachers and students regarding school improvement efforts and developing literate students. They were very clear about what was vital to developing literate students, the necessary school improvement efforts to address their schools' needs, what had to be accomplished in the short and long term, and how to go about

getting it done (The Wallace Foundation, 2012). Furthermore, they are “leaders of learning who can develop a team delivering effective instruction” (The Wallace Foundation, p. 4). Just as important, all participants were passionate about their work and committed to making life better for students in underserved communities. They constantly acknowledged their staffs’ roles in the success of their students and schools and they never implied that they had all of the answers or solutions for improving teaching and learning but felt they could rely on their staff for guidance and expertise, as well. They frequently engaged in self-reflection during the interviews and noted what needed further investigation to improve their leadership behaviors. Most notable, they were relentless and deeply committed on to removing barriers to students’ academic success and ensuring that all students’ become literate so that their future school careers and life outcomes could be better.

### **Reliability and Limitations of the Study**

#### **Reliability**

This qualitative study concentrated on establishing the findings “trustworthiness (Marshall and Rossman, 2011, p. 67)” and to establish the inquiry’s “credibility ... [that is] critical to an accurate representation of subjective human experience” (Krefting, 1991, p. 220). Additionally, the sample size for this inquiry was deliberately small and the criterion for selecting informants was quite purposeful in order to strengthen the transferability and utility of the findings across other similar schools serving similar populations of students. As Krefting (1991) suggests, “ It is critical that researchers provide dense background information about the informants and the research context and setting to allow others to assess how transferable the findings ” (p. 220) are to other

similar situations. My goal as a researcher was to provide sufficient and appropriate data, as provided in Tables 1, 2, and 3 to allow transferability judgments to be made by users of this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Limitations**

This qualitative study is subjective and susceptible to my role as the researcher and participant. In keeping with the interpretative phenomenological analysis approach, my role as a former principal that used literacy development as an intentional school improvement effort was important when analyzing and interpreting the data. Furthermore, this inquiry presented three principals' perspectives about the phenomenon. No attempt was made to ascertain whether these perspectives were shared by other members of the participants' school community.

### **Implications**

#### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study suggest it is possible for principals, particularly those serving in underserved communities, to focus on high quality literacy instruction and be successful in the accountability system. These principals' lived experiences illustrated that such principals do not have to resort to the isolated, decontextualized, drill and kill approaches to reading instruction in order to attain good test scores. Their sustained success demonstrated that intentionally focusing on a school improvement effort that responds to their students needs, deliberately focusing on best practice, strengthening staffs' teaching and professional learning, working collaboratively, and building strong staff and student relationships are critical elements for facilitating school improvement.

Additionally, the findings also suggested that the informants lacked avenues to

network and collaboratively meet as a learning group to learn from each other and to share strategies that were proven to be successful in working with students in underserved communities. Specifically, the principals indicated that although they were highly successful with using literacy development as a school improvement effort and their students' progress was sustained over time, options for advancing their professional learning and career paths were not readily available to them. They further implied that if a coordinated, relevant, and differentiated system of support had been available to address the contextual needs of their students and communities, it would have benefitted their leadership development and would likely have been a benefit to others.

In addition, the findings indicate school districts should consider finding ways to develop professional learning groups for leaders of like schools and provide them with opportunities to grow their capacity for effectively working in similar schools, to see what successful supports, systems and leadership looks like in high poverty schools, and to understand what collaboration among staff and effective classroom practices entail. Just as successful principals are intentional about the evidence based practices they employ as school improvement efforts, the findings suggests districts should also be as deliberate about creating professional learning groups to build the capacity of school leaders who work, or choose to work, in schools in underserved communities.

Similarly, the findings submit that school districts should consider providing incentives and intra-district career opportunities for principals of high performance, high poverty schools thereby advancing the capacity of others to lead throughout the district.

### **Implications for Research**

The findings of this research pointed out that addressing cultural dissonance between teacher and students was not fully understood by the participants. Although all informants talked about the importance of developing relationships among staff and students, there was little conversation about helping staff examine their beliefs, values, and ideologies that influence their practice and assumptions about the students they teach. Insight into how this process of helping those who work with students of color, with disabilities, and other language learners is facilitated might prove to be helpful to others who work in similar situations. This might include a qualitative study that follows participants as they go through the process of deconstructing their ideologies and their interpretations of those experiences. There is a need for more research on how school leaders can facilitate this process of examining one's ideologies so that they can better relate to the children they serve in underserved communities.

### **Conclusion**

I undertook this study to examine and understand the lived experiences of successful principals who used literacy as an intentional school improvement focus. Although this provided an in depth view of how a few successful principals manage to develop literate students and sustain their success, my hope is that using interpretative phenomenological analysis has added value to understanding how complex the work of a principal work is, and how it is possible to develop literate students in spite of all the poverty related factors faced by students in underserved communities. Conducting this study has reinforced my belief as an educator, practitioner, and researcher, that helping the voices of others to be heard is critical, especially the voices of those who are

entrusted with ensuring that every child in underserved communities is counted and provided opportunities to increase the likelihood for a better life outcome.

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## VITA

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