

ACCADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL TITLE I MIDDLE GRADE CAMPUSES:
THREE CASE STUDIES

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My second career began with a new master's degree in education.

I do not remember any professor or instructor using the term economically disadvantaged during my formal education, but I completed a two-week internship in a second grade classroom taking responsibility for one student the teacher called "needy."

My student teaching experience was at an elementary school with only one economically disadvantaged student. However, in my first teaching assignment one-third of my class was considered economically disadvantaged. I was ill-prepared to meet the challenges. What do you do about students without supplies?

What do you do about the students who never bring anything back signed or completed? What do you do about the students who seemed to be without medication or arrive too ill or tired to function? What do you do about the deficits in background knowledge in the content areas? Thus began my search for what to do to meet the needs and improve the academic performances of students from low socioeconomic families.

Background of the Problem

In a report prepared for the RAND Corporation, Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, and Constant (2004) reported that poor middle school academic achievement

was associated with school climate, discipline, and lack of teacher expertise. Juvonen and associates concluded that the scientific rationale for establishing middle schools was weak and this transition had a negative effect on some students. The researchers' analysis showed that a great challenges to middle schools was in raising the success of African-American and Latino students. Disparity between different demographic groups remains a major challenge, including groups whose parents did not graduate from high school or whose homes are economically disadvantaged. Juvonen and associates related poor academic performance to discipline problems, school safety, physical conflict and bullying at middle schools.

Another challenge facing middle schools is dealing successfully with adolescents who have been described as being moody, critical, anxious, confused, sarcastic and volatile (Caissy, 1994). During this age, 10 to 15 year olds, students are going through changes and they require sympathy and understanding according to Caissey (1994). Middle grade campuses are inhabited by these changing students and the adults who deal with them. Caissy described the role and importance of successful middle grade teachers in building relationships with these students. She suggested that achievement depends on an ability to relate to the students and build rapport.

The original purpose of Title I, according to the U.S. Department of Education, was to “ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 1). The expectation originally was that the cycle of poverty could be

broken and students would move from poverty into middle class (Jennings, 2000).

According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the purpose for Title I was providing

“supplemental funding to state and Local Education Agencies (LEA) for the resources to help schools with high concentrations of students from low-income families provide a high quality education that will enable all children to meet the state’s student performance standards” (Texas Education Agency, 2006, p. 1).

There has been notable success in improving schooling and raising achievement levels in some Title I schools (Borman, 2002/2003).

In 1989, Slavin and Madden published a research synthesis for at risk students. They described those at risk as being in danger of failing to complete their education with an adequate level of skills. At that time they found that one of the most frequently used strategies was retention, because it appeared to have negative long term affects. Pullout programs were also reported as ineffective by Slavin and Madden because effectiveness was limited to earlier grades. In order to be rated effective, programs had to be subject to replication, evaluated for at least a semester and show a reading and/or mathematics gain of at least 25% of an individual standard deviation. The effective programs identified by these researchers fell into three categories: prevention, classroom change, and remediation. Slavin and Madden found that prevention programs were developed for early childhood, kindergarten, and first grade. The researchers also described effective changes in classrooms as open classroom and using cooperative learning. Remediation took the form of tutoring and computer-assisted instruction. Since this synthesis of

research was published access to technology and commercial programs have expanded and changes have begun (Barr & Parrett 2007, Haberman 2005).

In Texas, during the 1995-1996 school year, 1,777,946 students were reported as economically disadvantaged, 46.8% of the student population, 10 years later the percentage reached 55.5% making that population 2,509,179. (TEA, 2007). The percentages of family households in poverty are projected to increase in every category: family households, married couple, male householder, female householder, non-family households and total households (Murdock, 2007).

Theoretical Grounding

This paper uses the following theorists as the groundwork for the critical areas addressed in this case study research framework. The researcher began developing critical areas from the issues of underachieving children of poverty at all levels as identified by Barr and Parrett (2007) in their synthesis of research describing effective practices in high-poverty schools. Barr and Parrett examined the changes in education and how schools have failed the children of poverty. They looked at critical research findings at schools where children of poverty were accelerating and succeeding. The pattern of school improvement they presented addressed the following areas:

- 1) effective district and school leadership,
- 2) engagement of parents, communities and schools as partners,
- 3) targeting low performing students and schools,
- 4) aligning, monitoring and managing curriculum,
- 5) creating a culture of data and assessment literacy, and
- 6) building and sustaining instructional capacity.

Other theorists included Maslow, Kozol, Henderson, Milstein, Delpit, Noddings and Blankstein.

Abraham Maslow synthesized a large body of research related to human motivation in the development of a hierarchy of needs in which he proposed that the needs at each level must be met before moving on to the next level (Huitt, 2004). Motivation became an important consideration in the actions of students, school staff and parents. Maslow began with physical needs being addressed, and proceeded through emotional needs that must be met before subjects can move to higher levels and deal with needs that address cognition, aesthetics, self-fulfillment, and connecting to something beyond ego (Eggen & Kauchak 2004).

Jonathan Kozol (1985, 1991, 2000) observed the school where he began teaching in Boston. He subsequently described a number of districts, schools and students in environments of over-crowding, mismanagement and abuse. Kozol examines resiliency in teachers and students who survive and demonstrate remarkable achievement these circumstances. Kozol also agrees that resiliency is the basis of rags to riches that inspire teachers to keep trying. Henderson and Milstein (2003) described six strategies for fostering resiliency in schools:

- 1) Increase prosocial bonding,
- 2) Set clear and consistent boundaries,
- 3) Teach “Life Skills,”
- 4) Provide caring and support,
- 5) Set and communicate high expectations, and
- 6) Provide opportunities for meaningful participation,

(page 12).

Lisa Delpit's mission is to help teachers and students better understand each other (2005). She advocates for teacher training that will stop educators from expecting less of certain children. In the diverse populations that are often served by Title I schools many of the academic problems are attributed to children of color and are actually the result of miscommunication by the school. Delpit reported that the possible imbalance and inequality of the school became an important consideration in the engagement of parents, communities and schools as partners.

Nel Noddings (1992) has envisioned school systems built on the various strengths of different people with caring, not competition. She observed that current liberal education structure is misguided. She addressed the practical and theoretical questions for reorganizing areas of study around themes of care in the current educational system. Noddings themes for caring included the self, the inner circle, strangers, distant others, plants, and the world.

Alan M. Blankstein (2004) examined high-performing schools and developed six principles that lead to success – common mission, ensuring achievement for all, collaborative teaming, using data to guide, gaining active engagement, and building sustainable leadership capacity. He noted that leadership must continually develop the resources of the school community in order to make success last. The growing accountability of academic achievement for economically disadvantaged students has increased the urgency to study successful schools to determine effective practices.

Problem Statement

In the face of tightening budgets and legislation such as No Child Left Behind and Adequate Yearly Progress reports it becomes critical to use strategies that build success in all schools. The increasing percentages of economically disadvantaged students make it urgent to understand and use the strategies that contribute to the success of schools with high percentages of economically disadvantaged students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine characteristics of high achieving sixth, seventh, and eighth grade middle school campuses with high percentages of economically disadvantaged students that have achieved Recognized status on the 2006 and 2007 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) tests. The three resulting case studies identify factors that appear to positively influence economically disadvantaged middle school student performance in the state of Texas.

Research Questions

This study will investigate the following questions:

1. What strategies or actions contribute to the success of economically disadvantaged students on middle grade Title I campuses?
2. What observable characteristics to the success of economically disadvantaged students on middle grade Title I campuses?

Definitions

Operational definitions for concepts and terms in this study follow:

[*Academic Excellence Indicator System Reports \(AEIS\)*](#). The AEIS reports compile a wide range of information on the performance of students in each school and district in Texas every year (TEA 2007).

Accountability Ratings. Texas annually rates its public schools and districts on the academic performance of their students and posts these ratings on-line. For this research, a school's rating depends on the fraction of students who pass the spring administration of the TAKS exam in reading, mathematics, and writing and the performance of all students and subgroups (AEIS Glossary 2005).

Adequate Yearly Progress. The accountability provisions in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) require that states set a time line for improving student achievement with emphasis on closing the achievement gap. The states must publish the formula detailing how they will achieve this (US Department of Education 2002).

Characteristic. Observable , documented feature.

Economically disadvantaged. Students coded as eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This may also be based on eligibility for other public assistance (AEIS Glossary, 2005).

Strategy. An act or intervention.

Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). A comprehensive testing program for grades 3-11 in public schools, designed to measure learning, understanding and ability to apply concepts and skills expected at each grade level tested (AEIS Glossary 2005).

Title I. A program developed to ensure that all children have fair and equal opportunity to obtain an education and reach proficiency, established grants to Local Education Agencies (US Department of Education 2002).

Rationale/Significance of the Study

In the region chosen for this study there are 12 middle grade campuses in six districts that have achieved Recognized status for the 2006 and 2007 years. A study of middle grade Title I campuses that are achieving Recognized state rankings are important in the face of increasing percentages of students facing the challenges of poverty. This important study could demonstrate what administrators and teachers have found that works, what was necessary to put this in place, what supports have sustained the success, and what parents and other community members contribute to academic success.

Assumptions

The interviews in this study of schools chosen from successful Title I middle grade in a southeastern Texas region are assumed to be accurate. The researcher assumed that administrators and teacher know and will be able to communicate their perceptions of what was necessary to achieve their Recognized standing and how that standing has been maintained.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

The sample is limited in size, only 12 Title I middle grade schools achieved Recognized status in 2006 and 2007 in this region. Campus visits were limited in time and by the schedules on those campuses. The area is limited by the region chosen by the researcher and being in the state of Texas. The researcher chose to begin school visits with administrative interviews.

Summary/Organization of the Study

Chapter I developed the background of the problem, theoretical ground, problem statement, purpose, research questions, definitions, rational, assumptions, and limits for this study. Chapter II reviews related literature that provides current findings on the

impact of leadership, expectations, communications, assessments, characteristics of special populations and curriculum issues in urban schools with high percentages of economically disadvantaged students. Chapter III outlines the design of the study, the participants and the settings, the role of the researcher, data collection, treatment of data and the provisions for trustworthiness used in the study. Chapters IV-VI include descriptions of the data gathered by the researcher through a campus visit to at each school. Chapter VII includes the major findings and themes that emerged from the research questions. Chapter VIII presents the summary, conclusions, implications, recommendations for future research and concluding remarks.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

With heightened accountability the performance of each student becomes increasingly important. As a result, educators have become more concerned with the performance of student subgroups. Issues faced by economically disadvantaged students have been examined in the literature, ranging from studies that considered a few issues to books that synthesized research addressing many issues. With the growing emphasis on fostering student achievement in economically disadvantaged populations, the need for continued study of successful practices is apparent. The topics of interest are school leadership, high expectations, engaging the parents and community, using assessment data, targeting special populations, and managing the curriculum.

The purpose of this study is to examine characteristics of high achieving sixth, seventh, and eighth grade middle school campuses with high percentages of economically disadvantaged students that have achieved Recognized status on the 2006 and 2007 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) tests. The three resulting case studies identify factors that appear to positively influence economically disadvantaged middle school student performance in the state of Texas.

School Leadership

Leadership on a school level has been examined in several ways. Literature reviewed includes an international study, examinations of qualities of leadership, and change leadership. This section closes with a study which deals with a culture of building relationships for effective leadership.

School Level

On the school or campus level researchers have examined the qualities of leadership. The literature has also examined managing change and the influence of school culture.

Qualities of leadership. As the prominent leader on school campuses several studies have focused on school principals. In a study of 19 principals conducted by Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz and Levy (2007) the focus was on perceived conditions that contributed to the lack of student achievement in low-performing high poverty elementary and middle schools. The conditions associated with low performance were organized into the themes of student achievement and behavior, school programs and organizations, school staffing, school systems, and parents and community. Duke and associates observed that the severity and prevalence of these conditions argued for the use of these clusters as a foundation for organizing preparation programs. Successful principals developed skills as diagnosticians and accurately and quickly diagnosed conditions in their schools. Each of the 19 principals faced a different configuration of challenges that needed to be addressed and the ability to diagnose each situation enabled them to target these challenges with the resources they found necessary.

Characteristics of leadership appeared to be a determining factor of academic success for low-income students. Each attribute of effective leadership is represented in the five steps in a plan for effective leadership described by Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005.) The plan consisted of developing a strong leadership team, distributing responsibilities, along with selecting and identifying the right work to be effective. This plan revolved around twenty-one responsibilities of the school leader: affirmation,

change, reward, communication, culture, discipline, flexibility, focus, beliefs, input, intellectual stimulation, curriculum, knowledge of instruction and assessment, monitoring/evaluating, inspiration, order, outreach, relationships, resources, spiritual awareness, and visibility.

In a 1999 study, Haberman identified traits of successful principals in schools serving children in poverty. According to the researcher these principals produced a shared vision, put the needs of the students ahead of the adults' conveniences, invested time and energy in teacher selection followed by supporting successful teachers. Haberman reported that these principals encouraged people to evaluate and then handled the questioning that resulted. These principals were vigilant in controlling disruptions on their campuses and open to criticism and assessment.

Leadership qualities found successful at several schools were those of problem solving and shared decision making. In the study of a district in Tennessee, Anfara, Patterson, Buehler, and Gearity (2006) analyzed improvement plans for seventeen middle schools. They found that problems were identified, corresponding actions were proposed and then perceptions of teachers and administrators in this process were measured. Of these seventeen middle schools, eight were over 50% economically disadvantaged. In the resulting policy consideration there were five items: how do you make this ongoing, how do you broaden targets, what incentives would help, how to expand the use of data, and how do you incorporate best practices?

Managing change. Investing in professionalism and involving teachers and administrators in the change process increased the effectiveness of schools according to Langer (2004). She found the more effective schools involved teachers and

administrators in self-study, exploration, and evaluations of cycles as a way to create improvement. Langer reported that teachers and administrators were encouraged to stay abreast of innovations in their fields, join professional organizations and participate in local university projects. These schools supported reviews of their programs and expected comprehensive and complete changes to assure the attainment of high goals and encouraged involvement of parents and community members.

Another study examined Tennessee schools by Craig, Cairo III and Butler (2005) key features of nine schools that achieved their AYP goals to 15 that failed to reach AYP goals. All successful schools indicated that their mission statement played a role in establishing goals for change that were clear and focused. Craig and associates also reported that to some extent leadership appeared to be shared and was the function of having a strong principal who understood how to delegate responsibility and direct leadership teams that made educational decisions.

In a three-year examination of high performing, high-poverty middle schools in Georgia, Trimble (2002) found that these campuses had received grants and managed money well. They acquired supplemental staff training, additional help for students, and more time for faculty to implement and sustain change initiatives. All of the successful schools used a variety of teaming configurations on their campuses to accomplish their work. In addition to interdisciplinary teams there were administrative teams, grade level teams, school improvement teams, content area teams, and student support teams all contributing to improved performance.

School culture. Kitchen, DePree, Celedon-Pattichis, and Brinkerhoff (2007) recorded the importance of building relationships among teachers. On the campuses they

studied faculty collaborated and supported each other. Similar values were found in the teachers' relationships with their students. Kitchen and colleagues also found that school cultures had been established which placed teaching and learning as the top priority. Interruption of learning by students' behaviors was strongly discouraged by the faculty and even other students.

An international study conducted in South Africa by Sailors, Hoffman and Mathee (2007) found that schools successful with the high numbers of children in poverty had a strong central focus on language and literacy achievement. The leaders of these schools stressed the importance of a positive, orderly and disciplined environment. In all eight of the schools studied, the principal was identified as the key to the success of the school. Community members described the teachers at these schools as competent, committed and caring. In the face of a historical social struggle for equity there was a sense of pride and purpose evident at these schools according to Sailors and her colleagues.

District Support

The need for campus leadership of support from district leadership was recognized by Balfanz and MacIver (2000) as they identified lessons learned while implementing the Johns Hopkins Talent Development Middle School in four high-poverty middle schools in Philadelphia. One of the lessons the researchers noted was the need for multiple layers of sustained technical assistance and implementation support. In order to integrate their program in the school there was a need to review and introduce it to multiple audiences and they convinced them of its merits, demonstrated their ability to work in the best interest of the district.

TeacherImpact

Williams (2006) reported that teachers have had the most direct impact on student success, effective leadership has attempted to ensure effective teachers. Also, the factors that have influenced the achievement gap are economic conditions, funding, family involvement, cultural differences, expectations, groups arrangements, and English language acquisition. When the teachers' knowledge, skills, and assumptions about students in poverty were changed through professional development which introduced the study of the impact of culture and daily experiences on human learning then the assumption was that the achievement gap would close. Professional development in this study included current brain research, the role cultural experiences play in learning, support for children's resilience, and requirements for whole-school change.

TeacherExperience.

Also been found to impact the success of economically disadvantaged students is the level of teacher experience. Barton (2004) used synthesis and meta-analyses to identify factors associated with the achievement gap. Among these, he reported on teacher experience and found a positive difference in achievement with teachers having at least five years of experience. The study found that low-income students were more likely to have teachers with fewer than three years of experience. In agreement, Darling-Hammond (2003) reported that teachers who move or leave the profession particularly affect schools that serve poor and minority students. According to Ingersoll (2001), the turnover rate at these schools is 50% higher. In a 2003 report from the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future "No Dream Denied: A Pledge to America's Children" the authors addressed the high price paid by schools with high

turnover rates. They found that the lowest performing schools with the highest percentages of economically disadvantaged students often paid the highest price as teaching quality declined. This became a cycle that repeated itself. In 2004 Ingersoll investigated teacher turnover concluding that the highest percent of annual teacher turnover is 22%, occurring at urban high poverty schools.

Haycock (2002/2003) reported that high poverty schools were twice as likely to have teachers with three or fewer years of experience. The recommendations made were that states collect information on where placement of inexperienced teachers. Haycock also suggested that parents be notified about inexperienced teachers and a provision be in place to use funds as incentives to provide professional development to raise the quality of teaching

A solution to better staffing schools with a significant economically disadvantaged population was presented in a report for the American Association of School Administrators prepared by Prince (2002), where the issue of financial incentives for hard-to-staff schools was examined. These incentives were designed to attract more people into the teaching field in college or to create alternative pathways for those changing careers. Incentives also reduced attrition or supported those becoming certified teachers. Incentives were used to encourage those who have retired or left the profession to return. Illustrations of programs in New York and California were included. Prince concluded that changing teachers' compensation was essential to attracting them and holding them to jobs that were more challenging.

Teacher Preparation.

Along with experience, teacher preparation was recognized as a determining factor of success by Miller, Duffy, Rohr, Gasparello and Mercier (2005) who examined a plan to close the achievement gap for students and, more importantly, the preparation gap for teachers. This gap was between the skills necessary for quality instruction and the preparation that teachers received before beginning their assignments. Miller and colleagues participated in a partnership between a university and a local school. Before the partnership, there were low academic achievement and discipline problems. Four years later, the researchers reported order in the schools and a steady improvement in achievement, in large part because of the 25 college students placed at this campus for field experiences during their junior and senior year. This partnership made it possible for the school to allow more individualized instruction and the university to provide more focused supervision of students.

In addition to experience and preparation, a teacher's own academic abilities were included in a report prepared by the Education Trust, Peske and Haycock (2006) that described several teacher characteristics that impacted student achievement. They reviewed the importance of the teacher's own academic skills, content knowledge, experience, and pedagogical skills. Less successful, challenged schools appeared to have more teachers who were weak in these areas than more successful schools.

In 2005 Presley, White, and Gong examined teacher quality in the state of Illinois using the Teacher Quality Index (TQI) developed by DeAngelis, Presley and White (2005). This index consisted of the following weighted components: teachers' average ACT composite score, teachers' average ACT English score, percent of teachers failing the Basic Skills test on the first attempt, percent of teachers with emergency or

provisional certificates, undergraduate competitiveness ranking, and percent of teachers with three or fewer years of experience. Researchers reported that schools where the teachers had more of the positive attributes and less of the negative attributes from the TCI demonstrated stronger academic outcomes.

Communicating High Expectations

The importance of high expectations was evident when Brown, Anfara and Roney (2004) conducted their study of school achievement and asked teachers if they taught a standards-based curriculum and how they perceived its effectiveness. Most of the teachers in higher performing, suburban middle schools reported that their classroom instruction reflected standards and these standards could be reached. They believed in their students' abilities to succeed. In lower performing, urban middle schools, teachers reported that curriculum standards were imposed on them and they had doubts about their students' abilities to achieve those standards.

In 2005, Gehrke reported that successful teachers believed children could learn and these teachers maintained high expectations for their students. Urban teachers observed that this was critical for children in poverty. Similarly, Judith Langer (2001) examined 25 secondary schools focusing on language arts programs. The schools chosen had been trying to increase student performance and were more successful than schools with similar demographics. In the most successful schools, Langer recorded a consistent belief in the students' abilities and an enthusiasm along with a belief that teaching could make a difference.

Other studies related instruction to expectations. In a 2006 examination of successful classrooms in schools with high concentrations of poor and minority children

Elmore found that teachers were using challenging curriculum, taking advantage of professional development, internalizing responsibility for student learning and examining themselves critically. In examining their practices if something was not working, they tried something new. They focused on conditions to create powerful learning for themselves and their students. Likewise, Balfanz and his colleagues (2000) observed that when a standards-based, instructional program was implemented schoolwide, it had a positive effect on how teachers felt about themselves and their expectations for students. Prior to implementation teachers were skeptical about their students' work. This program was developed based on the Johns Hopkins Talent Development Middle School model.

Actively Engaging Parents and Communities

Parent participation appeared as positive factor in the achievement of economically disadvantaged children in several studies. Langer (2004) found that successful schools had a culture of community. Their educational programs grew stronger through family contacts, and programs for involvement with the community grew from concern for their students and families. These schools worked to contribute to the community by providing advice and access to community resources. Langer found that through involvement with parents and use of grant funding these schools were able to offer programs such as computer training for senior citizens, parent-community reading groups, book discussions, and special speakers. The leaders of these schools observed it was important to connect, contribute and learn from their communities.

Sailors and colleagues (2007) examined successful South African schools with high poverty and reported the efforts of the principals to seek out the involvement of the community and build partnerships with the school. The efforts of parents were critical

and they visited often. Many parents were uneducated but they believed they must educate their children in hope of a brighter future for them.

In an evaluation of the impact of the *Success for All* (SFA) program, Munoz and Dossett (2004) examined the function of Family Support Teams, which encouraged parental involvement and participation. Three elementary schools in Kentucky were examined which had implemented this program over three academic years and showed an improvement in attendance and a decrease in discipline problems. Parents expressed significantly improved perceptions of the school climate in their responses when compared with three elementary schools without the SFA program.

Craig and associates (2005) indicated increased levels of community involvement in Corrective Action schools in Tennessee. The Tennessee Department of Education identified these schools as underperforming in 2001. This study compared nine schools that achieved their AYP goals over the next two academic years to fifteen schools that failed to achieve their AYP goals. At the schools who achieved their goals parents, prior to this program, were not typically engaged in their children's education. There were difficulties in communicating the goals of the school. Parents' surveys returned at the schools that achieved their goals found a positive attitude to newsletters, attendance at Open House and involvement in parent/teacher organizations. Communication appeared to improve when parent conferences were scheduled at times convenient for the parent and phone calls were returned promptly. Parents felt more a part of the school. Researchers observed that in parent surveys, meeting with parents and involving parents in planning and evaluation were effective ways to reach out to the communities involved.

Using Assessment Data

As high-stakes testing has become more prevalent, results of the testing has been used to increase achievement. In an investigation of reforms in four successful urban school districts Snipe and Casserly (2004) found that the districts had increased the availability of ongoing assessment data and trained teachers and administrators to use the data to understand challenges to instruction and improve practice. This effort helped in developing instructional responses that increased student learning and achievement.

In a comparison of less effective and more effective schools Langer (2004) reported that the more effective schools used assessment to enrich the curriculum. At the more effective schools, instruction focused on effective activities rather than particular test items, and teachers were encouraged to interpret results and relate them to curriculum and performance. The results of assessments were incorporated into the school's plans for self-evaluation and improvement, along with understanding test demands, students' needs, and monitoring change.

Craig and his associates (2005) indicated that student assessment both formal and informal gained timely student data. These assessments were used in making decisions to assist students. In the improving schools there were formal assessments through computers and informal assessments through questioning and observation. Each of the schools that improved in this Tennessee program used ThinkLink as one of their assessment programs. The researchers reported that the teacher surveys indicated a need for additional professional development regarding assessment and its use in planning instruction.

Targeting Special Populations

The literature reviewed in this section focuses on studies of special populations. The section on ethnic populations addresses research concerning English Language Learners and children of color. The section on low socioeconomic populations reports the impact of these circumstances on student achievement, and programs provided..

Statewide Research

Studies have addressed these topics of interest. McGee (2004) looked at Illinois schools with a record of closing the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students based on three years of state test results. Using interviews, document reviews, and visits the researcher identified common characteristics in these high performing schools. McGee listed strong and visible leadership, hard-working teachers who believed in their students, an emphasis on early literacy, extensive parent involvement, and more academic time. In a similar study conducted by the Center for the Future of Arizona and the Morrison Institute for Public Policy (2006) a set of six factors was reported that supported gains in student achievement. These factors included: having a focused principal, doing the best for every student, ongoing assessments, personalizing intervention, and sticking with a program.

In another report published in 2005, Kannapel and Clements studied schools in Kentucky that broke the usual pattern of low achievement in high-poverty schools. Eight elementary schools were chosen for this study. Researchers looked for common characteristics in those schools that were successful and then compared these characteristics with schools that were lower performing. State trained teams conducted audits at each school. Common characteristics of successful schools consisted of committed faculty, careful attention to recruiting, hiring and assigning teachers,

collaborative decision-making, respectful relationships, high expectations, student assessment, and instructional focus.

In 2004 Jess, Davis and Pokorny examined nine schools in Texas which served Latino students from low-income families and had shown strong gains on state mandated testing. The researchers reviewed interviews, focus groups and documents for evidence of characteristics of effective schools. The findings indicated that these schools were able to align their efforts around values that provided motivation and purpose. Additionally researchers found a positive climate and a positive relationship between students and teachers. The researchers also emphasized the high level of enthusiasm and pride visible in these schools.

Ethnic Populations

Ethnicity was addressed by Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, and Christian (2005) in research that indicated that English Language Learners experienced more success when they took part in programs designed to fit their needs versus mainstream English classrooms. These programs appeared to be more effective if they were consistent throughout the education of the student. Effective programs provided enrichment and challenge, and incorporated language development and appropriate assessment.

In 2001 Fuller and Johnson studied Texas in an examination of the impact of state accountability systems on the performance of children of color and children from low-income homes. They concluded that there have been important gains for these children. Fuller and Johnson reported that the state accountability system was a major force driving the efforts to improve learning.

Low Socioeconomic Populations

Literature reviewed in this section examined special populations in reference to reading and math achievement. In one section the long term effects of achievement was examined. In the other sections the impact on student behavior was examined. The last section examines the impact of programs on economically disadvantaged student populations.

Reading and math achievement. Targeting special populations has been suggested as a strategy to increase the success of economically disadvantage students (Barr, 2007). Low socioeconomic circumstances have been determined to be a factor of student success in several studies. In a discussion paper prepared for the Institute for Research on Poverty (2005), Dahl used a fixed effect instrumental variables strategy to estimate the causal effect of income on reading and mathetics scores. Using datasets from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Dahl estimates that a \$1,000 increase in income raises math and reading scores. The scholastic measure used was the Peabody Individual Achievement Tests. The financial measure used was the Earned Income Tax Credit. It appeared to the researcher that for children growing up in poverty, extra income has a positive effect on academic success.

Tajalli and Opheim (2004) reported that researchers examining student performance found socioeconomic status to be among the most reliable indicator of student success. In an earlier study Fetler (1999) analyzed test scores in relationship to teacher's experience and student demographics and found that student poverty was a strong predictor of mathematics achievement and more experienced teachers had higher achieving students. Later, Fetler (2001) examined the relationship between teacher

quality and high school mathematics. While results suggested that poverty strongly affects student achievement the quality of teacher preparation, the number of available teachers and student outcomes also appeared to be interrelated.

Boll and Berry (2005) surveyed 379 secondary teachers about factors affecting the achievement gap in mathematics. Overall, teachers attributed the gap to student characteristics such as differences in motivation, work ethic and family support. Teachers from schools with a higher population of Caucasian students were more likely to make this connection than schools with larger minority populations. Teachers surveyed suggested that professional development, changes in curriculum, community building, funding equity and smaller class size would reduce the achievement gap

Specific behavioral characteristics were found in two studies. Ackerman, Izard, Kobak, Brown, and Smith (2007) conducted a longitudinal study of 105 economically disadvantaged students from the age of eight to twelve to examine the emotional impact of serious reading problems. For these students difficulties in reading achievement tended to increase relative to their peers even though a significantly high percentage participated in reading-assistance programs. As they entered middle school, reading problems appeared to produce internalized behaviors. For these students it is likely that anxiety, sadness, and helplessness about academic tasks will influence their future achievement.

Long Term Effects. In an investigation published in 2002 Schoon, Bynner, Joshi, Parsons, Wiggins, and Sacker reported on the long-term effects of social disadvantage on academic achievement. Data was based on the National Child Development Study (NCDS) which was a group of 16,994 members born in 1958 and the British Cohort

Study (BCS70) which was a group of 14,229 members born in 1970. Findings indicated that the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage depended on the developmental stage of the subject and the length of time they were at a disadvantage. In the 1958 cohort the greatest risk effect was at age 5. Researchers concluded that the best predictor of social status at age 16 was academic achievement. This was true of both cohorts but the effect size tripled in the 1970 cohort.

Orther, Cook, Rose, and Randolph (2002) conducted a study to examine the relationships among academic achievement, dropout patterns, and welfare reform. They suggested that welfare reform has not translated into better educational opportunities for the children they serve. End-of-grade proficiency exams were used in this assessment and gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students have not been reduced. Orther and his associates suggested the need for strong links between welfare agencies and school systems to adopt strategies to improve outcomes for these families.

Student behavior. In an investigation of aggressive behavior Harachi, Fleming, White, Ensminger, Abbott, Catalano, and Haggerty (2006) found that girls were more likely to be in higher aggression group when depression, low income and single-parent status were present. Boys were more likely to be in the higher aggression group when the family was not involved and the parents' education level was lower. These behaviors seem to be a pattern established in elementary school. Attention problems, family conflict and low school commitment were also present in both the boys' and girls' groups.

Resiliency was addressed by Seccombe (2002) in examining the scope and consequences of poverty along with presenting strategies to improve resilience. This

term represented the capacity to recover from and cope with adversity, misfortune, and poverty. Seccombe's data revealed the income disparity between rich and poor households, and between rich and middle class were wider in 1997 than in the preceding 20 years. Children in poverty, when compared to other students, have more socioemotional and behavioral problems and are more likely to lag behind academically. Seccombe concluded that making strong and resilient families requires national economic strategies to alleviate the situation through government policy. The author also concluded that it was important to recognize that not all poor families experience negative outcomes. At least one-third of the high-risk two-year-olds in this study became stable and productive adults and were deemed successful by the researchers.

Educational resilience was reviewed in research by Waxman, Gray and Padron (2003) proposing several action strategies that foster resilience. They reported that schools and teachers should offer opportunities for students to develop attachment relationships, increase students' sense of mastery of their lives, and build social competencies and academic skills. In order to foster resiliency the researchers observed that schools and teachers also reduced the stressors student faced and generated both school and community resources to support the needs of children.

Programs. In an examination of community service, service learning experiences, academic performance and socioeconomic status (SES) Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, and Benson (2006), reported that low-SES students with community service or service learning were more successful academically than students with little or no community service or service learning opportunities. In this study, principals of high-poverty schools were positive concerning the impact of these

service programs on students' attendance, engagement, and achievement. It also appeared to the researchers that community service lessens the achievement gap between low-SES and high-SES students. This success may be a result of the feeling of value and usefulness students reported.

In an investigation of implications for designing after school programs, Shann (2001) conducted research in four inner-city middle schools with 90,9% economically disadvantaged students examining how they spent their time after school and on weekends. In an analysis of 1583 responses, 77.2% did not participate in after-school programs and 86.5% did not take lessons of any kind. Students reported spending time watching television or being with friends. Weekend patterns were similar with even more television and less homework. Very few programs were available after school and lessons were beyond the means of most of these families. Only 40% reported spending time playing sports during the week and only 41% on the weekends and 26.5% had tried volunteer work but involvement dropped off as they advanced to higher-grade levels. The researcher concluded that purposeful, structured after school programs would be successful with at-risk children building relationships with adults and involving students in positive activities.

Implications for principals in the face of changing demographics were described by Hodgkinson (2002.) Principals should be aware of local demographic trends and be prepared to deal with greater diversity. They should also expect to see fewer students coming in to school from traditional two parent families and support quality preschool programs. A study of North Carolina fourth graders by Okpala, Smith, Jones, and Ellis (2000) recommended that policy decisions should support extending to schools that serve

students with a lower socioeconomic background an opportunity to have lower class size, experienced and competent teachers, along with high quality educational and remedial services.

Aligning and Managing Curriculum

The literature examining curriculum management includes programs that address issues in reading and math.. The impact of commercial programs and locally developed initiatives are included along with one US Department of Education program. has been examined.

Mathematics and Reading Achievement

Two studies were found that reported results of specific instructional programs. Yseldyke, Bettis, Thill & Hannigan (2004) reported on Renaissance Learning's Accelerated Mathematics program used with economically disadvantaged students. This program was software that created practice assignments and helped teachers match instruction to the skill level of the learner while monitoring progress toward mastering math objectives. Results indicated a significant improvement in the students' achievements. Similarly, McKenna, Hollingsworth, and Barnes (2005) evaluated Students' Active Interdisciplinary Learning (SAIL) a program administered by Kumon to support gifted students of poverty. The results showed that mathematics abilities were enhanced by an individualized supplemental mathematics program. According to results on pretests and posttests mathematics retention levels appeared to be improving. This program was constructed in a highly sequential manner and students were allowed to move at their own pace.

Mixed results were reported by Cabrera, Deil-Amen, Prabhu, Terenzini, Lee, and Franklin (2006) in an examination of the effectiveness of the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) designed for low-income students in middle school to enhance their awareness of and readiness for higher education. This program was designed as a comprehensive intervention program (CIP) through the U.S. Department of Education which funded partnerships of high-poverty middle schools, colleges and universities, community organizations, and businesses. This program was set up to work with an entire grade level of students beginning no later than sixth grade and going on through high school. This program integrated multiple partners to elevate awareness of college and the level of preparedness for college. Findings were based on reading and mathematics test scores and indications were that more of the program resources were devoted to math. While the program may help close the achievement gap in regards to math there was no statistical significance in students' reading achievement after two years.

Other studies proposed curriculum reforms developed by individual campuses. Greenlee and Bruner (2001) conducted a comparative analysis of Title I schools that implemented Success for All reading programs and Title I schools that developed their own reading programs. Overall, the more favorable results were achieved in the schools that did not implement Success for All. Both programs had a positive impact on disadvantaged readers and a negative impact on proficient readers. This study suggested that schools could build successful programs without relying on externally developed school wide reform models. The researchers concluded that the "one-size-fits-all" design may be the dilemma in school wide reform

Balfanz and Byrnes (2006) analyzed achievement gains and concluded that a combination of a student's behavior, attendance, efforts and a homeroom tutoring program increased the odds of catching up in mathematics achievement in middle school. They also concluded that exposure to one or more of the following: good teachers, successful instructional experiences, self-confidence in the content, increased effort and improved attendance meant large achievement gains, effectively closing the achievement gap for some students. This did not happen for the majority of the high poverty students. The researchers report that in three of the twenty-six high-poverty middle schools examined, implementing reform in classroom practice: strong schoolwide instructional mathematics program, increased teacher support and training (peer coaching), and reforms to improve student-teacher interactions (looping, learning communities, teacher teams) there were higher percentages of students who gained ground. These reforms were not present in the other twenty-three schools examined.

Professional development was a key factor in success according to some studies. Kitchen and his colleagues (2007) found five areas of strength in schools that were successful in mathematics instruction. These areas related to high expectations and sustained support for excellence: teaching and learning were a high priority, along with support for student learning, review of basic skills, making teaching resources available and teacher access to professional development.

In another study Balfanz, Byrnes and MacIver (2006) examined the first four years of mathematics reform in the Talent Development (TD) Middle School Model that combined research-based instructional materials from the University of Chicago School Mathematics Project with a teacher support system of sustained professional development

and coaching. The TD students outperformed the control schools on district and state determined measures of achievement. Researchers found that when it was possible to implement and sustain mathematics reforms, there were significant and sustainable gains in multiple schools over multiple years, however, the reforms were not enough to close all the achievement gaps that high-poverty students bring to urban middle schools.

Le Tendre and Chabrán (1998) offered suggestions for using Title I funds for mathematics education based partially on an examination of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study. Instructional materials should possess focus, depth, rigor, and meaning. Professional development plays a critical role in helping teachers who are at various points in their career, dealing with familiar or new content. Mathematics specialists and master teachers can assist through peer coaching or the use of technology.

General Instructional Strategies

Lisa Delpit (2006) encapsulated the essence of the course of action needed to close the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students. She organized information from her own teaching and research along with observations of and conversations with successful teachers in precepts that would alter what happened in urban classrooms thus changing students' lives. First, urban children in poverty often came knowing less so in order to close the gap they were taught more. Instruction ensured that students had the skills or conventions and strategies that were essential for success along with critical thinking skills to inculcate what was learned and to deal with the real world. Instruction built on children's strengths and connected to what they already knew. Second, Delpit included the need for challenging racist views that were

present in the lives of some students. In an environment of family and caring, assessment of needs and addressing those needs with strategies was necessary to influence academic achievement. Teachers connected to each student's culture while encouraging the child's connection to community and something greater than themselves.

Payne (1996, 2006) published a framework for understanding poverty and dealing successfully with students of poverty to improve academic achievement. She correlated low achievement with a lack of resources. She emphasized the importance of teaching cognitive strategies, using graphic organizers, and building relationships with children of poverty. In all content areas these students profited from the following embedded processes: sorting, question making, planning to control impulsivity, and planning backwards. Payne's most recent publication carried this into discipline strategies for the classroom (2006).

Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter related to the major areas of inquiry: leadership, expectations, communications, assessments, characteristics of special populations and curriculum issues in urban schools with high percentages of economically disadvantaged students. Chapter III outlines the design of the study, the participants and the settings, the role of the researcher, data collection, treatment of data and the provisions for trustworthiness used in the study. Chapters IV-VI include a description of the data gathered by the researcher through a campus visit to at each school. Chapter VII will include the major findings and themes that emerged from the research questions. Chapter VII presents the summary, conclusions, implications, recommendations for future research

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Kerlinger (1986) describes research design as “the plan and structure of investigation so conceived as to obtain answers to research questions” (p. 279). The plan is an overall program which may include an outline and operational implications. Kerlinger includes a description of the concept of structure as the framework or organization of the elements in the study. This study was designed and organized to address successful middle school practices.

This chapter describes the methods and strategies of inquiry utilized relative to this study. The contents of this chapter are methodology, setting and participants, role of the researcher, data collection, data analysis and provisions for trustworthiness.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine characteristics of high achieving sixth, seventh, and eighth grade middle school campuses with high percentages of economically disadvantaged students that have achieved Recognized status on the 2006 and 2007 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) tests. The three resulting case studies identify factors that appear to positively influence economically disadvantaged middle school student performance in the state of Texas.

This study investigated the following questions:

3. What strategies or actions contribute to the success of economically disadvantaged students on middle grade Title I campuses?

4. What observable characteristics to the success of economically disadvantaged students on middle grade Title I campuses?

A qualitative research method was chosen for this study. Merriam (1998) describes qualitative research as an umbrella concept which covers several systems of inquiry that examine social phenomena in a natural setting. Cresswell (1998) described qualitative research as a process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions that explore a social or human problem. The qualitative researcher builds a picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of the subject, and accomplishes the study in a natural setting. In this study the researcher developed an in-depth analysis of three cases. Multiple sources were used for data collection including documents, archival records, interviews and observations. The data were then reduced to identify critical themes and assertions.

Criteria for selection to participate in the study included:

- 1) School location in a southeastern region of Texas,
- 2) Sixth, seventh and eighth grade campuses were selected, representing three different school districts,
- 3) Title I schoolwide program campus designation, and
- 4) Recognized accountability rating in 2006 and 2007 according to the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

Twelve schools in six districts in a specific region of Texas met the criteria of having attained Recognized status for at least the 2006 and 2007 academic years. The three campuses chosen for this study were selected to represent three districts based on convenience including access and geographical location to the researcher.

The guiding questions for the interviews were developed based on the literature review and research questions from Chapter I. The list of questions is provided in Appendix A.

The Participants and the Setting

Crew and Dyja (2007) described middle school as “a volatile blend of childhood and adulthood that can be as frightening as they are wonderful” (p. 143). The researcher interviewed teachers and administrators in their school setting. A description of each school’s population was developed from information available on-line from both the campus and TEA websites. These descriptions included the size range of the schools and their districts, their ethnic population both students and teachers, and their historical TAKS performance ratings.

The Role of Researcher and Data Collection

Merriam (1998) described the key concern of the researcher as “understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s” (p.6). The role of the researcher is further described as “the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (p. 7). Other characteristics that Merriam described for the researcher are that “it usually involves fieldwork, primarily employs an inductive research strategy,” (p. 7) and “the product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive“ (p. 8).

Interviews with principals and teachers were conducted in the fall of 2007 with particular attention given to AEIS reports, campus improvement plans and other artifacts of these schools to develop a description of each campus. The researcher conducted the interviews using a list of guiding questions.. Questions were designed to be compatible

with the theoretical ground in chapter I and parallel the areas of literature reviewed in chapter II. Examples of these questions include:

1. What role the principal plays in promoting academic achievement?
2. How does the campus support new teachers?
3. How is parental participation facilitated in your building?
4. Describe the forms of student assessment that are used in your school.

A complete list of the guiding questions is provided in Appendix A. These interviews were digitally recorded.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and then read for emergent themes using a protocol called constant comparative as described by Cresswell (1998). Data collection was extensive, drawing on information from multiple sources including observations, interviews, researcher's notes, audiotapes and transcriptions. In holistic analysis a description of each campus emerged along with themes addressed by those interviewed along with the researcher's interpretations and assertions (Cresswell, 1998). The multiple case format Cresswell describes provides a detailed description of each case, themes within-case analysis, and a thematic analysis called a cross-case analysis across the cases. Triangulation of data was conducted as described by Cresswell (1998) to utilize multiple sources to provide corroborating evidence to shed light on the themes.

Provisions for Trustworthiness

McMillan (2000) provided criteria for evaluation of qualitative research as follows:

- 1) The researcher's background, interests, and possible bias should be clear.

- 2) The conceptual and theoretical frameworks for the study should be clear.
- 3) The method of selecting participants should be clear.
- 4) The degree of researcher involvement in the setting should be indicated.
- 5) Fieldnotes should contain detailed objective descriptions.
- 6) Descriptions should be separate from interpretations.
- 7) The researcher should use multiple methods of data collection.

(p. 275-276)

This study addressed these criteria in establishing the research methodology, describing the theoretical framework, describing the role of the researcher, maintaining fieldnotes and using multiple methods of data collection.

The reliable and trustworthy study was conducted with consistency during the research process. Anonymity protected the schools and participants and the investigator maintained this anonymity throughout the entire inquiry. The researcher used both digital recording and hand written observations in an effort to maintain objective records. Artifacts examined in this process included AEIS reports, Campus Improvement Plans, Newsletters, and parent handbooks. This information is presented with the data gathered for each case study.

Summary

Chapter III described the design of the study, the participants and the settings, the role of the researcher, data collection, treatment of data and the provisions for trustworthiness used in the study. Chapters IV-VI include descriptions of the data gathered by the researcher through a campus visit to at each school. Chapter VII includes the major findings and themes that emerged from the research questions. Chapter VIII

presents the summary, conclusions, implications, recommendations for future research and concluding remarks.

Appendix A

Case Study Guiding Questions:

School leadership:

1. What role does your principal play in promoting academic achievement?
2. Does the school have clear, focused goals that are understood by all members of the school community?
3. How does your district support your goals?

Teacher impact:

4. How does your campus support new teachers?
5. What training is available to teachers in content areas and classroom management?

Communicating high expectations:

6. How do teachers communicate expectations of success?
7. What policies does your campus have in place regarding missing assignments, homework and failing grades?
8. How does the campus culture communicate expectations of success?

Actively engaging parents and communities::

9. How is parental participation facilitated in your building?
10. In what ways are parents and community members involved and included in the mission and operation of the school?

Using assessment data:

11. Describe the forms of student assessment that are used in your school.
12. How is assessment used to drive instruction and programs on your campus?

13. Describe your professional development opportunities that deal with assessment and analysis.

Targeting special populations:

14. What services are available to students and how are they accessed:

15. How has your campus increased the awareness of cultural diversity? How has this affected instruction and teacher-student interactions?

16. What accommodations are made on your campus for low income students?

17. How does your campus address the unique academic challenges of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

Aligning and managing curriculum:

18. How do you make sure that your students have learned the content necessary to be successful on state assessments?

19. How are re-teaching and tutoring handled on your campus?

20. Describe how you plan your lessons.

21. How do you provide differentiated instruction?

22. What programs are used on your campus to supplement and facilitate mathematics and reading instruction?

Demographics:

23. How long have you taught at this school?

24. Did you teach at any other school or schools before you came here?

25. What grade/content area do you teach?

Closing:

26. Is there anything I did not ask about that I should know in order to better understand your school?

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