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An Examination Of Principals In Effective High-Poverty Middle Schools With High Achievement

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AN EXAMINATION OF PRINCIPALS IN EFFECTIVE HIGH-POVERTY MIDDLE SCHOOLS WITH HIGH ACHIEVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative, multi-site case study was to observe and examine the strategies, techniques, and leadership styles of principals in effective middle schools with high poverty and high achievement. This study focused on defining a core of specific strategies utilized by staff members in these schools. Two high-poverty middle schools in Indiana that have done an exemplary job of attaining high scores on the state's standardized test were examined. Data for this research was collected via interviews of the school's principal, leadership team, and teachers. Classroom observations and teacher department meetings were also conducted. After the staff interviews and observations were completed, all notes and tape recordings reviewed, and all obtained information was processed and analyzed, five themes emerged. These themes included the following: principal leadership, student scheduling, staff scheduling, building culture, and curriculum and professional development. Within these themes, some of the detailed strategies and techniques were similar at both schools and some were different. Based on the significant findings of the data analysis within the five themes, the following seven strategies were utilized by both principals and seemed to play a critical role in the high achievement of the students in both schools: (a) there was a strategic system in place to address the academic core; (b) the daily schedule was developed for student needs; (c) collaboration for teaching staff was invaluable and they wanted more time together; (d) teacher-led professional development was utilized; (e) data was used in a meaningful way; (f) though principal leadership styles differed, creating a strong team of teacher leaders was essential; (f) and the staff created a

relational learning environment. These five themes and seven strategies appear to be critical and essential components that could hold true value for other schools attempting to make gains in their students' academic achievement.

DEDICATION

To the two most amazing human beings I have ever known, my children ~

Megan Kallie Polanin and Keigan Tyler Mull.

Thank you for helping me fly again. I love you more.

It's as simple as that.

"And so here we go, Bluebird.

Gather your strength and rise up

Ready to fly, You and I

Here we go, Here we go."

Sara Bareilles (2011)

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Study Rationale and Foundation

Middle school is a complex and turbulent time. It is a time of immense change. Four

critical areas are involved in these changes including the biological changes of puberty, the

changes in relationships with family and peers, the changes with their identities and roles, and

the social changes that come with the transition from elementary to middle school. There are

also changes in students' confidence levels and their motivation, especially in academics.

Middle school students begin shaping their identity and making decisions about who they are and

what they want to do with their lives. They begin to make the cognitive shifts of thinking

abstractly and thinking about hypothetical situations (Wagner & Wigfield, 2005). Adolescents

experience a plethora of physical, mental, and emotional changes. Thus, the climate of a middle

school itself can be a high-risk place often challenging students' adaptive capabilities as they try

to maneuver through the turbulent waters of early adolescence (Reddy, Rhodes, & Way, 2007).

The middle school movement was founded on the concern that traditional junior high

schools were too subject-centered and not enough student-centered. In some communities,

however, well-meaning educators have interpreted becoming a middle school as becoming child-

centered instead of achievement-centered. They focus on a safe, nurturing environment instead

of on students' academic growth (Kanthak, 1996). High-achieving middle schools must be built

on the belief that all students can learn and achieve at high levels. The principal and staff must deliver a challenging curriculum and support it with instructional strategies that meet the needs of middle school students. Data on frequent student assessments must drive every decision, including curriculum, scheduling, staffing and budgeting.

Young adolescents have serious questions about themselves and the world in which we live; the middle school units of instruction must address those questions. Adolescents want to know more about the environment. Kanthak (1996) asked, "Will we have a world when we grow up?" "Will we have clean air to breathe?" "Will we continue to be at war with other countries?" "Will my mom or dad lose their job in this economy?" (p. 31). Teachers in high-achieving middle schools build comprehensive interdisciplinary units around these kinds of questions (Kanthak, 1996).

Ideally, middle-level educators would be trained to teach at the middle level before they were ever employed in a school. In reality, few have such training. Therefore, the principal has the heavy responsibility to ensure that teachers and other staff members are provided with appropriate professional development to master the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful at the middle level.

Research shows that leadership matters in improving student achievement. In fact, among school-related factors over which policy makers have some control, effective leadership practices rank second only to the quality of teaching in influencing student learning (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Quality leadership is particularly important in schools serving youngsters living in high poverty urban schools (Scheerens & Bosker, 1997).

When the factor of poverty is included in the equation of the middle school environment, along with standardized accountability measures on state and national exams, the expectation for

high performance seems almost insurmountable. More often than not, the poverty factor is not discussed in the results of these exams. One educational reaction from standardized testing has been to weed out failing students from further academic opportunities (Allison, Haas, & Haladyna, 1998). Instead of providing interventions for these students' specific learning difficulties, learning opportunities were removed.

Many students are not being well-served, and many of these are students live in poverty or lack the language skills necessary to succeed in school. In the United States over the past decade, it was fashionable among supporters of the "No Excuses" approach to school improvement to accuse anyone raising the poverty issue of letting schools off the hook—or what former President George W. Bush famously referred to as "the soft bigotry of low expectations" (Fiske & Ladd, 2011, para. 20).

Few dispute the fact that students from disadvantaged households perform less well academically, on average, than their peers living in communities with increased resources. Rather than confront this fact of life head-on, our policy makers continue to reason that, since they cannot change the backgrounds of students, they should focus on things they can control. The achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families over the last 50 years now far exceeds the gap between White and African-American students. More than 40% of the variation in average reading scores and 46% of the variation in average math scores across states is associated with variation in child poverty rates (Fiske & Ladd, 2011).

According to a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, one of eight schools was considered to be high poverty in 2000 (Aud et al., 2013). In 2011, that ratio had grown to one in five. In addition, authors earlier found that many high-poverty schools receive less than their fair share of state and local funding, leaving students in high-poverty schools with

fewer resources than schools attended by their wealthier peers (Sirota, 2013). Taken together, these studies lay a foundation for the importance of resources needed in these schools where poverty continues to rise for children who have not had adequate preparation to enable them to pass the standardized tests.

These studies illustrate the difficult question that is often avoided: Are we really expected to believe that poverty is not taken into account when we consider failing public schools (Sirota, 2013). A study in 2011 from Stanford University documents that family income is now, by far, the biggest determining and predictive factor in a student's educational achievement (Sirota, 2013).

Meta-analysts who surveyed a decade's worth of social science research concluded that the issue comes back to non-school factors like family economics and poverty. To explain the variations in student achievement, in-school factors are one-third of the total, while family characteristics fill the remaining two-thirds. Parents' education and income levels, along with *housing and health care are among the out-of-school factors involved* (Sirota, 2013).

As is evident, research within this realm illustrates that it is not the reform movement's claims that the public school system and teachers' unions are to blame for the low achievement of students in some schools. A new teacher evaluation model developed in the reform movement links individual student test scores to the teacher whose job and pay increase are partially determined by these factors (Sirota, 2013). It is poverty and economic inequality at the root of this problem, even though the conversations blame teachers and use accountability measures as the causes to keep the discussion away from the real issues (Sirota, 2013). Reducing concentrations of school poverty has been consciously ignored by policymakers, despite widespread academic publications confirming the importance of breaking up the poverty

conditions that are isolated to certain areas that then feed into a particular school (Kaufmann & Weiss, 2013). In summary, poverty makes a profound difference as an out-of-school factor.

Principals are left with the complex and difficult task of utilizing their leadership roles to make a significant difference with the in-school factors under their control. As students attend schools with high poverty, it is of the utmost importance that principals know what to do to service these students with the many academic and social needs they have. It is quite easy to simply state the many issues facing educational leaders in individual school buildings; it is quite another to provide solutions and positive actions to assist these instructional leaders in their burdening endeavors. It stands that most public school principals do not select their student populations. Thus, how are they able to affect change with the students who come through their front doors each morning?

Currently, principals are in a paradoxical position. No Child Left Behind (U.S Department of Education, 2001) admonished educators to use scientific, research-based strategies to ensure that all students learn. Likewise, Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) requires educators to use research-based school improvement models. Unfortunately, the core strategies of both of these reform initiatives largely ignore this call for practices grounded in research. Principals are being asked to improve student learning by implementing mandated reforms that have consistently proven ineffective in raising student achievement (DuFour & Mattos, 2013).

We can no longer pretend that poverty may be overlooked. Some principals, without policy mandates, understand that more must be done for these students to catch up with their peers. There is no time to waste.

One of the biggest problems in the United States is the inadequate condition of many

schools located in economically disadvantaged areas. McGee (2004) described this concern as the most crucial issue in the American educational system. Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) indicate that most schools in economically disadvantaged areas in the United States suffer from teachers and principals who are underprepared. Principals who are effective in setting standards and expectations for each teacher in the building would not allow the mediocre instruction to take place. Very often teachers with little experience or credentials take positions in poor districts and then they leave once they have gained the experience that makes them marketable for wealthier districts (Morgan, 2012). It takes an especially strong and knowledgeable leader to hire teachers, mentor them on instructional strategies, and create an environment where they will want to stay.

In contrast to the many inadequate schools serving the poor in the United States, many school systems from around the world provide the poor with a better education. Students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries outscoring the United State on international tests, such as South Korea and Singapore, perform better than their counterparts in the United State, in part, because these students get a certified teacher with strong skill sets (Paine & Schleicher, 2011). Some countries do the opposite of the United States with regard to the way the poor are educated. In contrast to the overcrowded schools in many poor districts in the United States, approximately half of OECD countries tend to provide a lower teacher / student ratio for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds based on the logic that these students need better teachers and stronger leaders (Paine & Schleicher, 2011). In Singapore, for example, a country known for its high scores, the best teachers teach the students who have the most difficulty, which is the opposite of what usually occurs in the United States (Paine & Schleicher, 2011).

Some middle school principals are accomplishing this complex and difficult work of serving high-poverty buildings where high academic achievement is attained. They are exceeding expectations despite significant barriers and ensure quality teachers for effective student learning. Researchers' findings give general ideas and broad categories for effective work such as an agreed upon vision, instructional leadership, a safe, orderly and respectful environment, timely monitoring of student progress, professional learning communities, and school and family partnerships (Wilson, 2011). However, what are specific, administrative strategies for positively influencing student learning and further realizing consistent, high achievement scores? Journalistic reporters of educational topics should be hunting down these stories and getting the information to the public. Some building principals, however scarce they may be, are getting the job done and their work needs to be distributed as widely as possible. These leaders' positive and precise work must be shared. We have no more time to wait (Barkan, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

State testing is common in our educational systems today and schools are held accountable for their results (Aud et al., 2013). In the midst of high-risk, low-socioeconomic status combined with the tumultuous middle school climate, there are a few schools attaining high academic achievement scores on these state exams. Thus, one has the opportunity to learn from successful school principals.

There is an established relationship between effective schools and the role of the principal. Principal leadership has been known to be pivotal to a school's success and particularly critical in schools that have ranked persistently as low-performing over time. The greater the challenge, the greater the impact is of the leadership on teaching and learning in the

school building. Research has demonstrated that schools rarely transform to effective and high-performing schools unless the principal has been a strong and relentless leader (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). The research identifies general categories of effective instructional leaders, but these are often overly vague and confusing (Wilson, 2011). The specific strategies employed by principals that have increased student achievement in these schools, as measured by standardized test scores, are almost non-existent (Blasé & Blasé, 1999). The literature in this domain lacks concrete examples and stories regarding this important issue.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, multi-site case study was to observe and examine the strategies, techniques, and leadership styles of principals in effective middle schools with high poverty and high achievement. This study focused on defining a core of specific strategies utilized by staff members in these schools. I examined two high-poverty schools that have done an exemplary job of attaining high scores on standardized tests.

Research Question

What specific strategies and techniques do middle school principals utilize in their leadership within high-poverty schools to achieve high academic success?

Personal Statement

This study aligned with my passion from many years of asking the same questions and yearning to find the answers. In my first year as a middle school principal in a school with 48% of the students on free or reduced lunch and low student achievement, I was searching for other principals in a similar situation who were able to attain and sustain high student achievement scores on state tests. I gained the opportunity to attend the national Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) conference and attended as many sessions as I could

possibly find on the strategies other principals were using for academic achievement in schools like mine. One session, entitled "Three Things Principals Must Do for High Academic Achievement," caught my attention. I could not wait to get there so I could find the answer and then go back to school and implement the three strategies. Here are the strategies given—alignment, alignment, alignment. I was so disappointed. I knew curricular alignment was important, but the presenter did not share any suggestions for implementation or strategies for beginning the process toward alignment and higher achievement.

Thus, I offer this study as a helpful tool to those principals hunting for a place to begin, just as I was. I pursued research that can assist in the complex educational work by sharing my story and the stories of two other middle schools. Schools must become the catalytic support system that transitions students from poverty to ways of prosperity.

Challenges and Limitations

Data for the study were collected via interviews and observations. One challenge was to use questions and guidelines for the interviews that are established to provide a consistent format for me to document responses and observations. A semi-structured technique was implemented where guiding questions are used, but flexibility of the interviewee to share information as he or she liked was incorporated. All respondents provided some level of personal bias and unique perceptions during the interview process (Gladwell, 2005).

My skillset in facilitating quality interviews and observations was also a challenge. It was important not to allow a single interview to take priority over others. Equal weight was given to each interview and I acknowledged the fact that the participants' responses may not have been completely accurate. Observations of teachers and others were conducted to see if their interview responses were actually embedded in the daily practices of the school.

I was also challenged not to allow personal bias from experience to seep into the process of the interviews and observations. Acknowledgment of the narrow sample was recognized so that the findings may not have been generalized to the population.

Delimitations

Delimitations for this qualitative study were that only public middle schools in Indiana were used. The achievement portion of the study was solely defined by student achievement on the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress (ISTEP). Schools chosen for the interview and observation phase were selected from two years of ISTEP scores and the percentage of students on free or reduced lunch in the school. A minimum percent for the free or reduced student population in each school was set at 50%. The minimum percent for the ISTEP achievement scores in math and English was set at 80% for each subject. Those were the foundational criteria used in the selection of schools involved in the study. Ethnicity of students, school enrollment, school setting, and tenure of the principal were also considered.

Although a limited number of interviews were involved, a random selection of English and math teachers was used. A combination of men and women and beginning and tenured teachers were interviewed. Observations of those teachers and others were conducted to see if their interview responses were actually embedded in the life of the school.

Definition of Terms

Concentrated poverty for the purpose of this study refers to children living in housing projects and/or government housing.

Criterion-referenced test refers to "a test designed to measure students' mastery of the standards" (Indiana Department of Education, 2014, p. 2). The Indiana Academic Standards are a criterion-referenced test on the ISTEP.

Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus (ISTEP+), according to the Indiana Department of Education (2014), is Indiana's state testing program. The purpose of the ISTEP+ program is "to measure student achievement in the subject areas of English/Language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies." (p. 1)

Instructional leadership is the ability to lead through knowledge and understanding of curriculum and student learning (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

Middle school refers to a public sixth-grade through eighth-grade institution.

Socio-economic status of the school refers to the percentage of students in that school qualifying for free or reduced lunch.

Student achievement refers to a child's ability to show mastery of grade-level standards.

Teacher refers to a certified professional employee of a middle school.

Summary and Organization of the Study

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 provided an introduction for the study, a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, research question, a definition of related terms, delimitations, and limitations. Chapter 2 reviews the literature related to principal effectiveness, the poverty factor, and student achievement. Chapter 3 describes the methodology and design. Information is presented about the population sites, instruments used, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 presents findings to answer the research question posed in Chapter 1 and shares the findings from principal and staff interviews and my observations. Chapter 5 presents a summary of the findings, conclusions, and a discussion of the implications of the study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Literature significant to the current study was examined. This literature review is divided

into two sections. The first section discusses the role of the principal in establishing a successful

school, especially in a high-poverty environment. The first section is then broken down into four

subsections capturing the four areas that appeared most often in the research. These subsections

are titled becoming instructional leaders, evaluating teachers, utilizing resources, and creating a

system. The second section reviews the research on the effects of poverty in the classroom.

Effective Principals and High Student Achievement

Effective Principals: Becoming Instructional Leaders

As recent as 10 years ago, school leadership did not seem to be an essential topic within

the school reform discussion. Even those people who viewed leadership as important to turn

around struggling schools expressed uncertainty about how to move forward when considering

principals and their leadership skills. The Wallace Foundation recently highlighted a sense of

urgency in the quest to provide students with effective teachers and quality principals (The

Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Currently, improving school leadership ranks high on the priority list and principal

leadership is now one of the most pressing matters in public school education. This issue has

become all the more essential as the U.S. Department of Education and state education agencies

have embarked on transforming the nation's 5,000 most troubled schools, a task dependent upon the skills and abilities of thousands of current and future school leaders. Researchers at the universities of Minnesota and Toronto demonstrated that there exists an empirical link between school leadership and improved student achievement (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). These researchers indicated that most school variables have a small effect on student learning. The true payoff comes when these individual school variables combine to reach a critical mass for change. The school principal is the essential factor influencing school success.

The principal remains the central source of leadership influence. No longer is a principal the "overseer of buses, boilers, and books" (Whyte, 1956, p. 41). Today's instructional leader draws from contemporary corporate life that focuses on greater clarity for the organization with an emphasis on what is essential and how to get it done (Collins, 2001).

Making a case for clarity and keeping things simple in a complex educational setting is not an easy task, yet it may well be the most important piece. There appears to be a natural tendency among leaders to add unnecessary complexity to situations, problems, descriptions and solutions. As a result, plans do not come to fruition, employees get confused, and leaders often become disappointed (Lencioni, 2013). Many school improvement plans are complex, wordy, and almost impossible to implement because the strategies are not clear, concise, and sensible. Much of the plan does not focus on curricular and instructional strategies that could positively impact student learning.

Principals are in a key position to fix these issues. Principals must be able to keep the goals simple and provide clarity for the entire school followed by each individual teacher. Administrators cannot be enamored with sophistication but must find simple and effective

solutions to the complex problems of education. These reasonable solutions require discipline and hard work over time and successful leaders must work to provide the clarity and support teachers need so that student learning is paramount in the school.

As principals set these clear priorities, they must become leaders of learning who possess the ability to develop a team delivering effective instruction. This entails five key responsibilities: shaping a vision of academic success; creating a climate hospitable to education; cultivating leadership in others; improving instruction; and managing people, data, and processes.

Characteristics of an effective administrator are clear. Harris (1997) found that highly-effective and well-qualified teachers must be distributed across school districts equitably. And students, especially those in high-need schools, must have strong principals. Together, these teachers and their principals are the single most important in-school factor affecting student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

The U.S. Department of Education (2013) found that principals must ensure that teachers have professional development, time, collaboration, and resources to understand each student's learning needs in order to match instruction and attention on these specific and timely interventions. Strong leaders must be in place to support each teacher's growth and to organize the school's resources in ways that enable the teachers to work together. Schools with the highest needs require principals who are capable of recruiting, training, observing, developing, evaluating, and then continuing to improve the teachers in that school facility.

Discouragingly, across states school finance suits have challenged the fact that schools serving low-income and minority students have disproportionately high numbers of teachers who are inexperienced, untrained and teaching in subjects for which they have little or no training.

This drives extraordinarily high rates of teacher turnover, producing instability and chaos in the instructional program where we need stability most. Far too little is done to ensure that schools in poor communities are staffed with teachers who can be effective with the toughest challenges (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). It takes a strong, determined principal with the skills to develop each and every teacher in these complex, learning environments.

Some studies have suggested that a principal's particular leadership style is less important than his or her ability to be an instructional leader who is capable of building a culture of trust throughout the building (Jesse, Davis, & Pokorny, 2004). Others have suggested that a collaborative approach is best (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). Either way, trust and respect between the principal and the staff was a thread running through most all research studies. Support for teachers and a climate of mutual respect between principals and teachers must exist in the school settings. This climate can occur with principals of diverse leadership styles–some hierarchical in their approach and others with a more collaborative style. Thus, emulating a particular style is less important than principals maintaining focus and pulling the school staff together through the priorities set, through their comments at meetings, and through their daily behavior and interactions with staff and community (Jesse et al., 2004).

Whitaker, Whitaker, and Lumpa (2000) wrote about specific strategies incorporated by effective leaders. Principals work hard to be visible role models and to build a shared vision for their buildings. They utilize teacher leaders and make certain to stay in tune with their thoughts, listen to their advice, and consider recommendations for the building. Each school committee and team has a unique purpose and is often included in decision-making and finding solutions. School leaders develop the strengths of each staff member and utilize professional development

as a growing experience for needs in the building. A positive student and staff climate is established and based on relationships of trust and mutual respect.

DuFour (1999) stated that principals must work to develop professional learning communities in order to create environments of exceptional adult and student learning. Professional learning communities are places in which all stakeholders have a responsibility to participate in making the organization cohesive and aligned. DuFour shared five critical principal qualities that are essential for leading a professional learning community: (a) principal leaders do not simply share policies and mandates, they develop a sense of shared beliefs and set goals alongside their staff members; (b) principals focus on learning; (c) they work hard to build a collaborative environment; (d) principal leaders involve staff in the decision-making process by providing worthy professional development and time for collaborative discussion; and (e) these principals look at the student achievement results and make decisions based on that data.

In addition to these principal components, there are four essential questions of a professional learning community involving curriculum, assessment, and follow-up strategies for students who still need assistance or enrichment. Student data discussions are essential components of the principal's work. Reviewing student data, discussing areas of strength, finding ways to accelerate student learning through timely and specific feedback, and continually keeping the school's goal in front of the staff are all part of the effective principal's requirements (DuFour, 1999).

Effective Principals: Evaluating Teachers

Principals must be effective in their responsibility to assess teachers' performances by using a sound method for evaluating and dismissing ineffective ones. Ineffective teachers who cannot perform should lose their jobs. Many school reformers talk a lot about how the due

process system does not work, but never share strategies to help repair it (Barkan, 2011). Effective principals have a clear understanding of what effective teachers look like and have a clear process for evaluating them. "Evaluating teachers is not rocket science and it shouldn't be" (Barkan, 2011, p. 8). Teacher performance systems that work take the approach of administrators and teachers designing an evaluation together, including meaningful professional development for teachers to improve their craft, and utilizing consulting teachers as coaches.

Marshall (2013) acknowledged that the common practice of sending principals to off-site training to improve their teacher evaluation skills can be helpful but argued that there are no shortcuts to superintendents and corporations taking care of the five key items within their districts. These key elements include getting principals to make enough classroom visits to see daily reality, ensuring that every principal has a good eye for instruction, polishing principals' skills at giving feedback to teachers, deciding how and when to use the district's teacher evaluation rubric, and keeping student learning at the center of supervisory conversations.

Effective teacher evaluation by effective principals is stated as a need, time and again, as states look for ways to find federal aid for this educational need. Several areas must be addressed in the grant requirements, but these three components are essential requirements for financial incentives:

- *Investing in building strong principals* by improving the pipeline to include more experience with building capacity and organizing time and structures to facilitate adult and student learning. This effort regarding principals should include a close look at preparation, performance and compensation, especially in high-need schools and districts. We are intentional about creating good leaders in business and the military. We must do better in education.

- *Redesigning teacher evaluation and professional development* to promote individual and collaborative efforts of teaching teams to produce continuous improvement in results for students most in need.

- *Encouraging effective teachers to teach in high-need schools* and communities with incentives and critical improvements in working conditions and reverse the disincentives to take on the biggest educational challenges facing students with the most needs. (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 26)

There are schools scattered across the country where teachers and principals have created successful models. Each school has its own story, but the following seem to be essential components throughout the programs:

- A talented principal

- A teaching staff that signs on and helps design a plan that fits their students' needs

- Experienced teachers in the school who coach colleagues

- Regular meetings to collaborate, assess and revise the school plan

- A concerted effort to engage parents

- Teacher union cooperation

- A clear understanding that improvement is an ongoing process (U.S. Department of Education, 2013)

There is much to learn about principal leadership, but it is clear that now is the time to strengthen efforts so that schools will be strengthened through school leadership. Without effective principals, the national goal that has been set of transforming failing schools will be next to impossible to achieve. But with an effective principal in every school—one who is

capable of supervising and coaching teachers—comes the critical promise of leadership that educational institutions must have (Wallace Foundation, 2013).

As an instructional leader, the principal must not be reluctant to take action against teachers whose performance is unsatisfactory. Although many teachers in the public school system work tremendously hard, unfortunately not all do. Often these teachers are not removed even when principals receive complaints of inadequate performance or inappropriate conduct. Some teachers receive their third or fourth contract without serious evaluation (Chenoweth, 2010). This is one of the main issues in the public school system today and is a contributing factor for the organization of charter schools. Programs like Knowledge is Power Program have organized successful inner-city schools that outperform the public schools. Many upper-middle-class parents send their children to expensive private institutions to avoid schools with problems, but for working-class families, this is not a feasible alternative (Morgan, 2012). Strong, effective middle school principals in high-poverty schools who organize, coach and maintain high-quality instruction in each classroom cannot be neglected.

Effective Principals: Utilizing Resources

Although classroom observations and teacher evaluations can be meaningful and beneficial to some extent, DuFour and Mattos (2013) stressed that principals should not use them as their key strategy for improving their schools. They warned of using a single rubric or template to gauge what teachers are doing in the classroom. The checklist approach to providing feedback to teachers usually does not enhance their pedagogical expertise or student learning.

Instead, the precious resource of *time* during the school day to create a collaborative culture is paramount. But simply providing this time for educators to meet together will have no effect on student learning unless the meetings are focused on the right work. Principals and

teachers must engage in collective inquiry to decide on the work that will most benefit their students. Team members should base their work and discussions on the following questions:

- What knowledge, skills and dispositions should all students acquire as a result of the unit we're about to teach?

- How much time will we devote to this unit?

- How will we gather evidence of student learning throughout the unit?

- How can we use this evidence of learning to improve our individual practice and our team's collective capacity to help students learn what they need and to help enrich the learning for others? (DuFour & Mattos, 2013, p. 38)

A second vital resource that should be addressed from the research literature involves the strategies for grouping students and scheduling practices that principals must utilize. More specifically, successful schools appeared to be organized by teacher teams where each team shared a planning period and had time to discuss curriculum and student growth on assessments. Students needing more time for specific skill sets were given additional periods for specific instruction. Professional development was embedded in the school day for teachers. Some schools in the studies did use the strategies of looping, cross-age peer tutoring, or advisory programs where students are assigned to an advisor who maintains contact throughout the middle school experience (Jesse et al., 2004).

School principals must have a clear vision of where they want the school to go and the ability to communicate that vision to others. This is a vital resource so principals must create a compelling vision, using all resources available to them, which take the school to a new place. These leaders must be risk takers. They cannot accept defeat and then cannot dwell on failure. Often, principals in high-achieving schools are much like the great tightrope walker Karl

Wallenda, who once said, "The only time I feel truly alive is when I walk the tightrope" (as cited in Kanthak, 1996, p. 32). These principals thrive on the challenge of leadership. They are willing to take the necessary risks and find every resource available for their staff and facility.

Effective Principals: Creating a System

Despite Ash and D'Auria's (2013) claim that most school districts provide the best education their school systems are designed to produce, school districts cannot produce very high levels of student achievement with an archaically designed system in place. These four keys for high-functioning systems are suggested for high student achievement: trust, collaboration, capacity-building system, and leaders at all levels of the organization.

Trust is a vital ingredient for a principal to establish within the school building. Principals can foster this by genuinely caring about teachers' professional growth and success in the classroom, by modeling vulnerability and showing openness to continuous learning, by working through conflict to achieve common goals, and by showing a willingness to make unpopular political decisions that address student needs. Trust is seen as the basic building block of creating systems that work (Lencioni, 2002). If there is an absence of trust within the school teams, or the organization as a whole, the other components cannot be established. Building trust appears to be the biggest barrier in overcoming the higher layers of the system. When there is an absence of trust, there most often will be a fear of conflict, a lack of commitment, an avoidance of accountability and an inattention to results. A school leader must work to ensure a system where teams are cohesively working together to drive the results for the school.

Collaboration is the second component of high-functioning systems. Professional learning communities within schools are an essential starting point, but teamwork must extend

beyond the school. It must reach students, other schools, central office leaders, parents and the broader educational community through social media (DuFour, 1999).

The school must be designed to promote the capacity-building of each teacher. Principals must provide continuous adult learning that is likely to increase student learning. A committee made up of kindergarten through senior teachers should be organized and then should conduct a thorough needs assessment and oversee development of in-district courses and multi-day workshops aligned with the school and district's goals. Teachers must be supported in becoming continuous learners about their own teaching (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

For systematic improvement, principals must shift their leadership from "I" to "we" and promote a constant flow of new ideas and inventive thinking from everyone. Mistakes should be welcomed as learning opportunities and teachers must feel safe to learn, re-learn, and explore new ways of working with students and with each other.

Many schools are choosing the wrong drivers for whole system reform. School leaders often choose strategies that have face-value appeal and are silver bullets. These wrong drivers do not produce the results needed and sometimes make matters worse. Effective drivers for school leaders to implement are based on whole system improvement, are measurable in their practice and results, and can show that strategy X produces result Y (Fullan, 2011). Often school principals allow other areas to lead the building and place too much emphasis in these non-driver components. Many principals are using test results to reward or punish teachers and schools instead of building capacity. Individual teachers are promoted instead of utilizing and encouraging group solutions (Fullan, 2011). Technology has become a quick investment without thoughtful implementation and a clear link to support instruction in the classroom.

It can take six years to build a system of effective drivers but the instruction-assessment core should be the initial foundation. First of all, a relentless development of capacity building in curriculum and its instruction and assessment, is paramount. Second, groups must be used to accomplish the learning-instruction culture. The culture should be built within a school and across schools in the district. Third, technology must be viewed as making the instruction and assessment easier and in support of the system. And finally, the use of fragmented strategies must be replaced with a clear and conscious system of reform (Fullan, 2011).

Socioeconomic Status and High Student Achievement

There seems to be broad popular opinion that teachers are the problem with public schools today. Most political groups agree that teachers, protected by their unions, deserve primary blame for the failure of 15.6 million children living in low-income communities and their lack of success in school. They also bear much responsibility for the decline of K-12 education overall (about 85% of all children attend public schools), to the point that the United States is floundering in the global economy (Barkan, 2011). Policy makers and political people often make statements, placing blame on the classroom teacher. Fiske and Ladd (2011) provided four reasons as to why policy makers ignore the correlations of poverty and student achievement:

- They believe that schools are capable of offsetting the effect of poverty with no additional resources.

- They do not want to set lower expectations for some groups of students for fear that those expectations will be self-fulfilling.

- They believe some schools have managed to "beat the odds," so all schools should be capable.

- They believe that requiring all schools to meet the same high standards for all students, regardless of family income, will inevitably lead either to large numbers of failing schools or to a dramatic lowering of state standards. Both serve to discredit the public education system and lead to privatization.

Many of the problems our schools face begin elsewhere: inadequate financial resources; lack of familial, peer, and community support; insufficient medical and mental health care; community violence; significant familial responsibilities; discrimination based on race/ethnicity; and negative societal messages. These external factors are influential, but do not constitute excuses. "Students from high-poverty backgrounds are at greater risk of academic failure, are more likely to be suspended from school and are more likely to drop out of school than are middle income students" (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p. 30).

Achievement on standardized tests is not the only area where there is a difference between students of poverty and students of wealth. The college completion rate among children from high-income families has grown sharply in the last few decades, whereas the completion rate for students from low-income families has barely moved. Within the most selective colleges and universities, high-income students account for a high percentage of the total enrollment. The income gap also appears to affect the rate at rich, low-income students are involved in extracurricular activities and community initiatives (Reardon, 2013).

Chenoweth (2009) mentioned that successful schools in low-income communities assess students well by accurately evaluating what the students know and do not know. In one of the schools, teachers review each test with each student to find out which questions or problems were most difficult. In another case, the teachers discovered that students had weak vocabulary

skills, a very common deficiency among low-income students. Principals make certain the teachers develop vocabulary strategies for these students.

High-performing, high-poverty schools in Wisconsin tend to have certain common characteristics (McGee, 2004) that include proactive administrative leadership at the top. Student-centered instruction, more interaction between teachers, parental involvement, small class size and staff-initiated professional development were other common traits of these successful schools.

This review of literature must include the research that highlights the need to reduce concentrations of school poverty. Concentrated poverty plays a key role in explaining why poor, White students perform better on tests on average, than African-American students with similar family incomes. Not only are White children much less likely than their Black peers to live in poverty (12.5% versus 37%), among those who are poor, only 12% of White children live in concentrated poverty, while nearly half of poor African-American children do (Kaufmann & Weiss, 2013).

The research goes on to show evidence of low-income, fourth-grade students given the chance to attend math classes in more-affluent schools are two years ahead of low-income students remaining in high-poverty schools. Even extra resources do not seem to trump the concentration of poverty. In a study where a high-poverty school was given $2000 more per student, the scores did not compete with the students who were simply placed in a more affluent school (Kaufmann & Weiss, 2013).

Although society and policymakers squabble over the ways to break-up poverty concentrations, principals must do what they can for the highest academic achievement of these students. The research stated that there are several things that can be implemented in schools to

assist these students and that schools must deal with these factors within their control. These factors include the following, which could require additional funding from the school district: implementing afterschool and summer programs for continued learning, hiring social workers and health services in the school system to service these students and their families, providing mentoring services, and providing an exceptional pre-kindergarten program (Fiske & Ladd, 2011). The commission's recommendations on school finance and access to high-quality early childhood education serve as a baseline for determining the needs of low-income students. States should determine additional programs, staff and services needed to address the extra academic, social and health needs of students in communities with concentrated poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

Other research (Reardon, 2013) has indicated that schools and principals have a key role in working within the school's conditions and should implement the following interventions:

- devote a great share of their resources to the earliest grades, including kindergarten and pre-school;

- extend the school day or school year/provide after-school or summer-school programs and use the timely wisely;

- create equal access to quality teachers;

- provide a stimulating curriculum and instruction; and

- assure adequate school resources (computers, libraries, etc.) for all students.

An exploration of 90/90/90 schools (those where 90% of students qualify for the free and reduced lunch program, 90% are from ethnic minorities, and 90% achieve high academic standards) indicated that an important distinction between 90/90/90 schools and other schools

with similar demographics but lower student achievement was a "laser-like focus on student achievement" with a "particular emphasis on improvement" (Reeves, 2003, p. 3).

That does not address, however, the specific strategies embedded in the school. It does not address what is actually occurring in these schools. In research from Susan Hayes of the Vermont Department of Education, five key factors are in place in these high-poverty, high-achieving schools: frequent assessment of student progress, support and interventions for struggling students, staff collaboration, an effective school leader, and parental involvement. Teachers in these schools use data a few times a week or month, rather than a few times a year, to respond to their students' learning needs. They also incorporate assessments at the district level so they can determine where students are weak and collaborate on specific and timely interventions to address those weaknesses (Hayes, 2009). Staff members in high-poverty, high-achieving schools report feeling a sense of ownership over the success of their students and their school (Johnson & Asera, 1999). That shared responsibility leads to a collaborative culture where teachers visit each other's classrooms and meet regularly in department planning times to discuss instructional approaches.

A project in Savannah, Georgia, set a target of pulling students from impoverished conditions into schools where academic achievement would be the focal point from Grades K-16. The three schools involved in this particular school system included Hodge Elementary, DeRenne Middle, and Beach High School. This concept was called the Bride Partnership for Excellence which is based on the work of Georgia's Office of the P-16 Initiatives (Brissett, Davenport, Myers-Oliver, Roland, & Tolbert, 2007). All three principals agreed that all professionals, prekindergarten through Grade 16, needed to be able to do four things in their school buildings. Each staff member must understand the role of each educational level in order

to have successful school transitions between pre-school, elementary, middle, and high school. Each staff member must understand the culture of inner-city poverty which since that condition was a reality for most of their students. Staff must also recognize and address the issue of low/minimal expectations for their students. The only option was to incorporate high expectations and standards for all students and be ready to give the support and acceleration needed to help each student achieve. And lastly, all staff members were expected to acquire and implement strategies for unmasking the giftedness of their students.

The teachers worked together in all three schools to create and implement a seamless curriculum. They immersed themselves in the Georgia Performance Standards and developed engaging work for their students. They identified skills that were deficient through data analysis at each level through common formative assessments. They tracked students' success kindergarten through postsecondary experiences (Brissett et al., 2007). Success was realized so that Hodge Elementary met AYP in 2005; DeRenne did not meet AYP but their math and language arts scores exceeded the district's and the state's averages by 12.1% and 12.3% respectively; Beach High's graduation rate moved from 38% in 2004 to 78% in 2005 (Brissett et al., 2007).

In 2005, the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning prepared a rigorous and complex report entitled "High Need Schools—What Does it Take to Beat the Odds?" (Apthorp et al., 2005). In this technical report, the overarching question was whether high-performing, high-needs schools were organized differently than low-performing high-needs schools. A total of 76 elementary high-needs schools from ten states participated in the study. High-needs schools were those where 50 percent or more of the students were eligible for free and/or

reduced lunch. High-performing schools scored well above state averages and low-performing schools scored well below the state averages (Apthorp et al., 2005).

Research has determined the critical factors for school effectiveness, but there is little to show the relationships among these factors and how specifically schools should be organized to ensure success for all students (Apthorp et al., 2005). This study identified four key components of school success including instruction, school environment, professional community, and leadership. Within each of these components, sub-components were found to be key in determining specific pieces of the effective schools.

Within the instruction component, there exist three subcomponents: the importance of a definite structure, the individualization of student learning and multiple opportunities for students to learn. In high-performing, high-needs schools, students appear to have more opportunity to engage in more challenging class work than in low-performing schools (Lauer, Palmer, Van Buhler, & Fries, 2002). Four subcomponents of an effective school environment were examined in this study: orderly climate, assessment and monitoring, parent involvement, and academic press for achievement.

The key subcomponents of professional community in effective schools include professional development, collaboration, deprivatization of practice and support for teacher influence (Apthorp et al., 2005). A recent study of high- and low-performing schools found more collaboration among teachers in schools with higher achievement (Bruner & Greenlee, 2000). Teachers saw the benefits of being in others' classrooms to interact with one another, to observe each other and to share experiences. Teachers in a professional community are empowered. A climate of respect in which leadership is shared results is support for teacher influence (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). And last, the McREL research showed that the factor

of leadership had three subcomponents of shared mission and goals, instructional guidance, and organizational change.

Guidance for principals from this research included four recommendations. First, principals must instill in students the belief that they can learn. Principals should review policy, make certain that student master basic skills, monitor student progress, and set a school-wide orientation for high academic expectations. Second, principals must create a safe and orderly environment. They must clearly articulate rules and the associated rewards and punishments. Third, principals should share the leadership responsibilities with staff so that the school's mission and goals are more likely to be a prominent part of the day-to-day operation of the school. And last, principals must implement specific learning and behavioral goals and awarding student prizes when goals are met (Apthorp et al., 2005). Explicit instruction and feedback to students on how they are doing is critical (Marzano, 2003).

Strong leaders are needed in struggling schools. High-need schools have more difficulty than others attracting highly qualified candidates to be principals (Mitgang, 2003). In Chicago for example, as few as two applicants vie for principal vacancies in the most challenging schools, whereas as many as 100 apply for posts in higher-achieving schools (Orr, King & LaPointe, 2010). Some districts are launching *strategic staffing initiatives* to attract the highly-qualified principals to its lower-performing schools. Principals are allowed to recruit their own teachers and administrators. They receive salary increases and bonuses in exchange for agreeing to stay for at least three years and producing strong student achievement growth (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013).

Coupled with the fact that high quality leaders are perceived to be in relatively short supply in school system, one needs to incorporate what is known about the passion, commitment,

and practices of successful leaders into principal preparation and district support. Through joint effort and informed action, preparation programs and principals continuing to learn and improve their schools will become the school leaders for the students who need effective leadership most (University Council for Educational Administration [UCEA], 2008).

Several issues are discussed in a series of articles in *Education Week* that reflect on the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty and its impact on the lives of children, especially those living in poverty (Blad & McNeil, 2014). It seems that the negative side of the War on Poverty is that things are re-legislated instead of looking for new ways to accomplish the difficult task of educating poor children. Initiatives seem to reflect what has already been done, even though what educators have been doing has not been very effective (Sparks, 2014).

But some research may simply not look far enough for the educational benefits of programs. For example, Head Start testing gains appeared to fade out over time. But better life outcomes after age 18, including higher rates of high school graduation and college attendance, and better health were found when these Head Start participants were compared to siblings who did not participate in the program (Sparks, 2014).

Education by itself is simply not going to lift children out of poverty. More pressure is placed on schools to attain high academic achievement goals, without looking at other policies that must be written in order to affect change. Other policies addressing the economic, health and housing concerns of poverty must be written and implemented. The federal school meal programs that were expanded during the War on Poverty in the 1960s improved poor students' overall educational attainment by a full year. This is most likely because of students' improved attendance and the reduction of malnutrition in children (Sparks, 2014).

Economically, the future of anti-poverty programs must become more regional in their grasp. In large areas of the south and southwest, a majority of public school children live in poverty. In those cases, there is no one to integrate with; the poverty is just too great and too widespread. There must be a much stronger and more creative state and federal role there to reduce the poverty in certain public schools. According to census data, nearly 29% of children live in areas with 40% or higher concentrations of poverty, and only 8.5% of those over 65% live in concentrated poverty (Sparks, 2014).

Richard J. Murnane, an education professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and co-author of the 2014 book *Restoring Opportunity: The Crisis of Inequality and the Challenge for American Education* said it best: "The lessons from those 1960s War on Poverty efforts provide existence proofs that the country can do better by low-income kids than what we are doing" (as cited in Sparks, 2014, p.15).

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research may be used as a method of uncovering the meaning of an

occurrence instead of studying the rationale or the quantifiable cause of the event as occurs in

quantitative research. The purpose of qualitative research is to give the reader a full and rich

description including meaningful details (Merriam, 2009). The decision to choose a qualitative

case study design stems from the fact that this methodology is focused on insight, discovery, and

interpretation rather than hypothesis testing. I sought to uncover the stories behind the themes

characteristic of a particular phenomenon. A basic qualitative study focuses on the meaning,

understanding and process of a given phenomenon using a purposeful sample. These data were

collected via interviews, observations, and review of documents followed by inductive and

comparative analysis. Findings are richly descriptive and presented as themes or categories

(Merriam, 2009).

One type of qualitative research is a case study. Not until the 1980s did this form of

methodology move from the "catch all" type of research, noted at the end of many textbook

chapters, into its own realm of revered research (Merriam, 2009). Case studies investigate real-

life issues in real-life contexts. A researcher utilizing a case study chooses explicitly what is to

be studied. This decision is critical as the researcher determines the single entity or unit around

which there are boundaries. Creating this bounded system helps to "fence in" what is to be

studied. It is certainly the unit of analysis and not the topic of investigation that characterizes a case study (Merriam, 2009).

Case studies are particularly useful for studying educational innovations, evaluating programs, and informing educational policy. The case study was more specifically defined by three characteristics: *particularistic, descriptive,* and *heuristic* (Merriam, 2009). A case study is *particularistic* because it focuses on a particular situation or occurrence arising from everyday practice. A case study is *descriptive* as it uses rich, thick descriptions of the situation. The analysis can include the interaction of people over time, the holistic and grounded exploration of the specific topic, and the creative use of themes and literary techniques to convey the researcher's understanding of the case (Merriam, 2009). A case study is *heuristic* because it can add a deeper understanding to the phenomenon being investigated. Readers find new meaning, answers to questions, data for further investigation, and generalizable themes that have the potential to be transferred into a new setting (Merriam, 2009). A rethinking of the phenomenon being studied can emerge and new insights can be expected as previously unknown relationships form from the case study (Stake, 1981).

Stake (1981) further expounded by claiming that knowledge learned from a case study is different from other research knowledge in four important ways:

- Case studies are more concrete because they resonate with our own experiences and can be more vivid and sensory-based.

- Case studies are more contextual because the knowledge we gain is from the context of the situation and is distinguishable from abstract research.

- Case studies are more developed by reader interpretation because readers bring their own experiences and knowledge and this leads to generalizations of the new data

presented.

- Case studies are based more on reference populations determined by the reader as the

    current research is taken from the study's site and into the reader's own population.

Bromley, Dattilio, and Edwards (1986) wrote that case studies dive into the work and get

close to the subject of interest. The direct observations in the natural setting, the interviews with

people involved in the work, and the access to their thoughts and feelings are major factors in

creating a study that relates to the readers and creates an environment for transferability.

Utilizing surveys and test results can be convenient but can also narrow the focus of the research

(Bromley et al., 1986). A case study also broadens the reach of the research and allows for new

avenues of thought to emerge.

Flyvbjerg (2006) discussed five misunderstandings about case study research. One exists

that researchers cannot generalize from a single case, so a single case does not add to scientific

development. Flyvbjerg refuted this by arguing that formal generalization is overvalued as a

source of scientific development; the force of a single example is underestimated. Another

misunderstanding is that the case study confirms the researcher's preconceived notions.

Flyvbjerg stated that there is no greater bias in case study toward confirming preconceived

notions than in other forms of research.

The current project utilized an intrinsic multi-case study design in order to explore a

bounded system over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources

of information (Stake, 2005). I was not interested in doing research to come to a better

understanding of an abstract phenomenon but instead was keenly and sincerely motivated in

talking with others, observing the educational setting, and reviewing the school's data in order to

develop a more thorough understanding of how administrators have attained marked academic

achievement against the odds. I investigated two high-achieving, high-poverty Indiana middle school sites to determine overlaps regarding strategies and implementations. The inclusion of multiple schools enhanced the external validity and the generalizability of the findings instead of simply using one school. It is up to the reader as to what may be applicable knowledge that may be transferred to one's own school context.

Throughout the course of this project, I was sensitive of my primary research role as well, acting as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Thus, the ability to conduct interviews and observations was extremely critical as it was necessary to be ever cognizant of the unusual problems of ethics (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) in selecting what was most important from all of the data and information gathered. I had the task of representing the actual things I saw, heard, and observed from the participants in the schools.

Research Question

What specific strategies and techniques do middle school principals utilize in their leadership within high-poverty schools to achieve high academic success?

Selection Process and Participants

Two levels of sampling are usually necessary in qualitative case studies. First, the case itself must be selected. In this case, two Indiana middle schools were selected for the purpose of this study. Next, a sample was selected within the school. For example, the teachers and administrators who were interviewed, observed, and involved in the focus groups were determined.

Selection of Schools

The following guidelines were used in the selection of the middle schools for this study. A data analysis was conducted by using information found on the Indiana Department of

Education's website (www.doe.in.gov) to determine all Indiana public middle schools that include seventh grade. This list did not include combination junior/senior high schools, elementary/middle high schools, or Indianapolis Public Schools magnets. The list of 282 schools was narrowed to include the 130 schools with 50% or more of their students qualifying for free and/or reduced lunch. The average ISTEP English/language arts score for these schools was 68.2%, with the average math score of 75.0%. From these averages, the list was then narrowed once again to include approximately 20 schools where the 2013 ISTEP scores were approximately at the 80 percentile or higher mark in English/language arts and mathematics. Once this list was finalized, the ISTEP results were reviewed for 2011 and 2012 to see if scores were similar for those two school years. The percentage of students passing both subjects was also taken into consideration. This percentage was most often lower than the percentage of students passing in an individual subject, such as English or math. No schools receiving Title I funding were used in this study since I was attempting to see what was occurring in these schools without the additional funding for additional resources.

After the additional ISTEP data were reviewed, the following criteria were taken into consideration for the final selection of visitation schools: the degree of poverty in each school, the tenure of the school principal, the ethnicity of the student population, the setting of the schools (urban, rural, suburban), grade configuration, and the student population size. Once the two middle schools were selected, a letter seeking permission to conduct each school visit (Appendix A) was sent to the school's principal.

Selection and Procedures for Administrators and Teachers Within the Schools

Once the selection of schools was made, the invitation format began. A letter from me, including an explanation of the purpose of the study, was sent to each school's principal. A

personal phone call from me was also made to each principal. The principal was informed of the minimal risk that was involved in this study, emphasizing the fact that the school has been selected because of the school's exemplary achievement results on ISTEP. Results from the schools in the study were shared with the principals and staff. A follow-up session for data review and questions with me was offered for each building.

Prior to the on-site visit, procedures for the school visitation were reviewed, questions answered, concerns discussed, and the Consent to Participate in the Research form was provided to the principal with his or her role and responsibilities in the research study. The on-site visitation days were two full days, including a session with the building principal taking place the afternoon or evening before the first day of visitation.

Each member of the school's leadership team was invited to participate in the research study via a letter e-mailed to each of them. The school's leadership team, consisting of the assistant principals and counselors, was asked to be interviewed on the afternoon or evening before the first day of visitation. The consent form was e-mailed to each leadership team member prior to the visit and then collected before the interview session began.

All teachers who did not teach English or math in each school (Group 1) were invited to participate in the interview sessions on Day 1. An interview session was available during each period and before and after school. The consent forms were e-mailed to each teacher prior to the visit and then collected before each interview session began. Teachers of English (Group 2) and math (Group 3), since these were the ISTEP subject areas, were asked to participate in interview sessions on Day 2. English teachers who volunteered to participate were interviewed in a group session during first period and math teachers were interviewed together during second period. Once again, the consent forms were e-mailed to teach teacher prior to the visit and then collected

before each interview session begins.

Observations of team meetings and department meetings already scheduled to take place that particular day occurred on Day 2. Also, classroom observations as a follow-up to interview sessions from the prior day were conducted. Teachers were asked for permission to observe some of the strategies and techniques that were shared in the interview session on Day 1.

Collection of Data

Data included information collected via interviews, observations, focus group interviews, and data analysis. Patton (2002) described the data collection by stating that interviews give the opportunity to use direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge. Observations gave the detailed descriptions of people's activities, behaviors, and actions. Document extractions used excerpts of quotations or entire passages to give the clearest meaning.

Interviews

As a researcher conducting the interview process, one must enter into the world of others to find out the critical things one cannot see in observations and documents. A researcher cannot observe feelings, opinions, or intentions. One does not understand the participant's perspective until meaningful questions are asked and each participant is given the opportunity to share the important factors that bring meaning to his or her world and significance to the research (Patton, 2002).

Creswell (2007) stated that the qualitative interviewer must always be aware of the importance of reflection on the relationship that exists between the interviewer and interviewee. There were several important challenges in qualitative interviewing that needed to be anticipated. Caution was taken to be aware of the hierarchical relationship with an asymmetrical power

distribution between the interviewer and interviewee. Kvale (2006) discussed the interview as being *ruled* by the interviewer, enacting a one-way dialogue, serving the interviewer, containing hidden agendas, leading to the interviewer's monopoly over interpretations, enacting *counter control* by the interviewee who does not answer or deflect questions, and leading to a false security. Nunkoosing (2005) also discussed the importance of reflecting on the problems of power and resistance, distinguishing truth from authenticity, the impossibility of consent, and projection of the interviewer's own self into the process.

The principal of each building was interviewed on the afternoon or evening prior to the schools' visitation days. For one-on-one interviewing, I needed individuals who were not hesitant to speak and share ideas and needed to determine a setting in which that could be possible (Creswell, 2007). A recording device was used to tape each interview session so that a transcription could be used later in the analysis.

Data were collected in semi-structured interviews conducted onsite in a classroom designated by the school principal. Interviews included a mix of more- and less-structured questions where the respondents shared specific data and strategies from their classrooms and experiences. Interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes and followed the protocol of questions included in Appendix B. Creswell (2007) suggested that open-ended questions are at the core of the interview process. The opening questions bring the participant into the context of the topic and the open-ended questions allow the opportunity for the participant to expound and share meaningful information and where the researcher may go for more information.

Interview Questions

An interviewer can ask several different types of questions. Patton (2002) suggested that there are six types. Most of the questions for this study consisted of experience and behavior

questions, opinion and values questions, and feeling questions. Patton also recommended not using *why* questions since they often lead the participants to search for particular cause and effect theories. And many times, the why questions lead to dead ends with no further response or thoughts.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) offered four different types of questions that can be useful in soliciting more information from interview participants. The four major categories of questions include hypothetical, devil's advocate, ideal position, and interpretive questions. Three of these types can be found in the last three questions found in Appendix B:

- Hypothetical Question – If you could do anything to make this school even stronger in its student academic achievement, what would that be?

- Devil's Advocate Question – Some people may say that this school's high test scores are all about luck and have nothing to do with student poverty or the school's learning environment. How would you respond to such a statement?

- Ideal Question – What would be the ideal continued professional development for this school?

Some types of questions should be avoided in an interview (Merriam, 2009). There should be no multiple questions where respondents have to give answers to a series of questions embedded within one question. There should be no leading questions where the interviewer shares a bias that may not match the respondent's. And there should be no yes-or-no questions since more critical information is not gained through the simple response.

Follow-up responses, or probes, were used to elicit more information or clarify the thoughts and feelings of the participants. Follow-up comments could include, "Tell me more about that," "Give me an example of what you are talking about," and "Tell me more of what

that was like when that occurred in your teaching experience." Several questions were reviewed by a cohort of administrators on March 5, 2014, to help determine the most beneficial and most appropriate questions for this case study that made up the final list of questions in Appendix B. Questions for the interview session with the principal, leadership team, and teacher groups were asked from the list of questions in Appendix B. Interview sessions were recorded and I took notes throughout the sessions.

Observations

Permission was sought to observe actual activities in some classrooms, and to observe collaboration meetings with departments and teams of teachers. The administrative team meetings were also observed. The challenges with the mechanics of observing must be taken into serious consideration. Recording quotes accurately, taking field notes, and refraining from being overwhelmed at the site with all the information must be given constant consideration and reflection.

Observations are another way of collecting data and are one part in the triangulation of that data. Observations make it possible to record behavior as it happens. Many things discussed in the interviews were or were not observed in the classrooms and meetings. The observations also allowed me to followup with specific questions about specific things in the teacher's classroom and asked what the teacher was thinking and why certain strategies were utilized. And many times, certain tensions were felt through observations in the focus groups that were not understood in the interview sessions. During the observations, these six elements were considered during each session: the physical setting, the participants, the activities and interactions, the conversations, the subtle factors, and my own behavior.

For each school in this study, multiple observations in teacher classrooms, team and

department meetings, administrative meetings, and faculty meetings were conducted to gather data. Field notes were taken for each of these observations, including descriptive and reflective notes. In most instances, the reflective notes were completed within 36 hours of the observation. The form used for observations is presented in Appendix C.

Focus Groups

Interviews with English and math teachers were conducted using focus groups. Focus groups are advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other, when time to collect information is limited, and when individuals interviewed one-on-one may be hesitant to provide information (Krueger, 1994). The focus groups allowed the teachers and administrators to share their own opinions and beliefs and then listen to the comments made by others in the group. After listening, members were able to share more information to the responses given without having to come to any type of consensus. The main purpose of a focus group was to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of others' views (Patton, 2002). Focus groups consisted of six to 10 participants and at the conclusion of each session, participants were asked to share the main findings they felt came up during the focus group.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews, observations, and focus groups were conducted, the data analysis began. Codes were assigned to pieces of data so that categories could be constructed and themes developed. The challenge was to construct themes that captured the recurring patterns that stood out in the data. Several themes were listed in the beginning of the process, but most critical data pieces fit into broader themes that become clear in the process.

Merriam (2009) suggested the themes should meet several criteria. They should be responsive to the purpose of the research, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent. All data of importance were placed under a theme (exhaustive), each piece of data placed under one theme (exclusive), each theme was named to show specifically what type of data were included (sensitive), and the themes were created at the same level of structure (congruent).

Reliability

The terms themselves of internal validity, reliability, and external validity are being questioned as to their particular usefulness in qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested the terms of credibility, consistency, and transferability for qualitative studies. Research needs to answer the questions

- How congruent are the findings with reality? (credibility)

- If the study is repeated, will it yield the same results? (consistency)

- How generalizable are the results? (transferability)

In order to add credibility to the study, I utilized the triangulation of data. Member checks were also instituted. The data and its tentative interpretations were taken back to the people from whom they were derived to see if they were plausible. Peer reviews also facilitated where discussion with colleagues regarding the process of the study and the congruency of the emerging findings were purposefully discussed.

I was always aware of my role, biases, and prior experiences, as well as data collection and analysis procedures, throughout the process. By thoroughly examining the notes and transcripts and by continually questioning the data, the occurrence of bias was reduced. The themes that emerged from both sites were reported. All phases of this project were subject to the

research study committee's review.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

There is extensive research documenting the critical need for effective leadership in

schools of high-poverty (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Much of this research delineated

broad categories for school improvement. The purpose of this study was to explore specific

strategies and techniques that middle school principals utilize in their leadership within high-

poverty schools in order to achieve high academic success.

In this chapter, findings gleaned from interviews and observations are presented. Both

schools in the study were located in Indiana and two school days were spent at each school

facility. On the afternoon prior to the school's first visitation day, the principal of each school

was interviewed in an individual session and a tour was taken of the school's facility. Then on

that same afternoon, the school's leadership team, which consisted of the assistant principals and

counselors, was also interviewed. The duration of these interview sessions was 55 minutes to 1

hour and 25 minutes.

On one of the school's visitation days, teachers were interviewed during each period in

groups ranging from two to six participants. These interviews lasted from 35 minutes to 51

minutes. On the other day, the English department teachers were interviewed in one session that

lasted one hour and five minutes and then the math department teachers were interviewed in

separate sessions with durations of 40 minutes. Forty-two (86%) of the 49 total certified staff

members at School A chose to participate in an interview session. Thirty (73%) of the 41 total

certified staff members at School B chose to participate in an interview session. Observations of

department meetings and classrooms were conducted during open periods of each day and these

observations ranged from 15 minutes to 35 minutes.

To maintain the confidentiality of the interviewees and schools, the schools were referred

to as School A and School B. Principals were referred to as Principal A and Principal B. All

other participants were referred to as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, etc. Quotes from the interviews were

only altered for readability by imposing punctuation and removing filler words such as "well"

and "you know." Each of the schools was presented in this chapter with the following

information: (a) tables with demographic information, ethnicity percentages, principal

information, and ISTEP data; (b) a description of the school using public documents and

information gleaned from informal observations; and (c) an analysis of the themes discovered at

each school from the interviews and observations. Finally, my experience at each middle school

was described in a narrative form.

First School Visitation Site: School A

As a brief introduction to School A, Table 1 gives basic information with the percentage

of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch and other factors describing the makeup of the

student population.

Table 1

School A Demographic Data

% Poverty	Grades	School Day	Enrollment	Title I Funding
54.4% (2013)	6-8	7:30-2:45	935	No
59.0% (2014)	6.8	7:30-2:45	932	No

The ethnicity of the student population in School A included 86.3% White students, 7.2% Hispanic, 3.5% multiracial, 1.5% Asian, and 1.3% Black. Principal A's educational experience included six years as a middle school science teacher, four years as an elementary assistant principal, and three years as a middle school principal. Tables 2 and 3 detail the ISTEP+ E/La percent passing scores, the math percent passing scores, the passing both subjects percentages, and the school's AYP category or grade from the Indiana Department of Education.

Table 2

School A ISTEP+ Percent Passing Scores

Year	E/LA	Math	Passing ELA & Math	Met AYP or Grade
2014	84.6	91.8	81.8	A
2013	82.9	87.5	78.8	A
2012	83.6	86.6	77.7	Yes
2011	81.7	82.9	74.7	No (LEP participation)

Table 3

School A Main Interview Ideas by Group

Group	Idea 1	Idea 2	Idea 3	Idea 4
Principal	Data	Leaders	Staff	Literacy
Leadership team	Leader	Culture	Expectations	Teaching
Teachers	Data	Leaders	Culture	Literacy
English Dept.	Literacy	Prof. Dev.	Schedule	Data
Math Dept.	Data	Literacy	Prof. Dev.	Leader

The scenery on the drive from the interstate highway toward the school's community included scenes of corn fields, antique shops, red and white barns, colorful quilt pieces on barn signage, tractors and farm machinery, blue and white "Go Colts" lettering on the roof of a barn, and two "Baby Rabbits for Sale" signs on the side of the road. Upon passing one such cornfield, I came to the middle school facility that sits on several acres of land right beside the high school. A banner hung from the front of the facility stating the awards and honors of the school. School A was named a Schools to Watch School in 2013-14 for exceptional instructional endeavors and was also the recipient of their original Classroom Innovation Grant in 2011-12 which allowed advances with the use of iPods and iPads in the classroom.

The school was a two-story, brick facility built in 1980 that was well-maintained. The landscaping around the school was clean and maintained with precision with no garbage of any sort to be found. I stepped up to a secure entrance and was buzzed in by the school secretary who immediately taught me the procedure to check-in at the computer station on the front counter in order to receive my visitor badge for the day. The principal, Principal A, greeted me in the front office, and we toured the school facility as he shared information and data about the school.

According to the 2000 U.S. census data, there were 17,951 people, 7,307 households, and 4,654 families who resided in the city. The demographic makeup of the city was 95.2% White; 1.58% African American; 0.15% Native American; 1.16% Asian; 0.02% Pacific Islander; and 0.90% from other races.

There existed a wide variety of housing in the district, ranging from small studio apartments to grand estates. School A consisted of one large building constructed in 1981. The building was 186,000 sq. ft., with the average classroom occupying a little less than 1700 sq. ft.

The building consisted of three wings that were connected in the middle by the Learning Center (i.e., library). School A had a large gymnasium that could accommodate up to 980 people, a cafetorium that accommodated 340 students for lunch and 800 for a stage performance. The sports complex area included a swimming pool.

Before detailing themes that emerged from the interview sessions with staff members, stated below are the school's Vision, Mission and Belief Statements as these sections, in particular, of those documents were felt throughout conversations during the interviews. I was not certain if most school's vision, mission, and belief statements are truly embedded into the culture of the building, but School A's seemed to be genuinely integrated into their actions.

School A's Vision Statement – "We believe the most valuable resource our nation has is its youth. We envision students leaving our school prepared with skills necessary to complete future studies and good citizenship for the American work force. To do this, we envision providing an enriched curriculum delivered by skilled teachers in a positive climate conducive for learning."

School A's Belief Statements (3 of the 6 statements) – We must have a positive learning environment that has readily available resources including quality technology, furniture, materials and supplies; happy buildings; and students prepared to learn.

We must promote and support high student achievement in all areas by tracing our students' individual achievement, by vertical and horizontal articulation, and by living our philosophy that every child can learn.

We must have quality employees who are trained and receive continued professional development, are well compensated, are recognized for good work, and who are recruited and nurtured as new employees.

School A's Mission Statement – The administration, faculty and staff, in partnership with students, parents, and community are committed to providing a caring and positive atmosphere which strives to enhance each student's self-image. Through our curriculum, we address the unique needs of the middle school student and challenge all students to work to their full academic, physical, creative, and social potential and recognize them for doing so.

School A's Teacher Handbook title page – "Every child, every chance, every day!" No significant learning can take place, without significant relationships.

School A's Faculty Handbook title page – "Every student. Every time. No exceptions. No excuses."

After I completed the staff interviews, reviewed my notes, listened to the taped recordings of the interviews, and processed thoroughly the information obtained, I found that five themes began to emerge. The rationale is detailed concerning each of these themes, including actual quotes from participants, to ascertain how each of them assisted in answering the research question of the study.

Principal Leadership

There were several components of Principal A's leadership style that were emphasized multiple times throughout the interview sessions. These three components were his high expectations for students and staff, his emphasis on data, and his ability to develop and utilize leadership within the school.

The principal sets high expectations. A primary finding from most every interview was the high expectations of the principal for student achievement, teacher performance, and professional growth. Teachers described the high standards set by the principal in terms of

student achievement. The expectations focused on the actions that each teacher should take to ensure learning and growth are occurring for each and every student in the school.

Teacher 1 stated,

> Our principal knows exactly what the scores are in our data war rooms. He meets with us, is part of the conversation, and is not afraid to have the difficult conversations when needed. He will discuss where improvement is needed in certain areas, talk with the teacher about an action plan and then follow up with the teacher in a few days. Darn it! He sure does follow up! You can count on it. The issue will always be addressed. But he doesn't give us the answers for improvement. He'll give us the support we need, but he is clear that he expects us to be the professional and figure it out. He believes we're the expert. So we'll go to other teachers in our department and look for strategies so that when he comes back, we have answers and things we're trying in our instruction. Because, like I said, you know he'll be back. He always follows up!

As School A implemented their BYOT (bring your own technology) initiative, Principal A emphasized his expectation that the instruction in the classroom is meaningful for students.

> It's not about the experience; it's about a valuable task that leads to growth and achievement. Our teachers need to be intentional and focused. Do something meaningful on the iPad that enhances the teacher's unit for the student's understanding. I don't want our teachers to just be using technology for the sake of using technology. I want it to be purposeful and meaningful.

With the high expectations set for student learning, Teacher 2 stated that the principal's leadership was exceptionally strong. "He talks about his vision for our school; he gets people to follow and buy in; and he really does try to create a team atmosphere."

Teacher 3 believed that the principal's high expectations enhanced what former principals had done in laying the groundwork and implementing some academic programs. Then Principal A, along with the district's leadership, had continued getting positive results from his strong personal motivation for excellence.

> Our principal is very driven. He wants every student to grow and get better each year. He really wants our school to be successful, and because he's driven, he instills that in this staff. So if you want to have your summer off, this probably isn't a good place for you. We keep working on things pretty much all year long, getting ready for the next group of students coming in. We're ready to go on day 1. But we work as a team.

The principal is data-driven. Teacher 4 stated it succinctly: "Our principal's strength is data and curriculum. You have to have that data-based administrator in today's schooling or you just won't be able to keep up. We have that in our principal."

Principal A played a vital role in the review of data in his building. He stated,

> You must have measurement to show growth. If we focus on growth, the achievement scores will come. We don't talk much about the end numbers that we'll get on ISTEP. We look at each student and his/her growth. ISTEP is not a surprise to us. We try to get off of achievement scores as a whole and focus on specific growth goals for each student. That's the way you get it done. It's a different test each year, but the common variable is the state average. So I look to see how far the gap is at each grade level. How far are our scores off from the state average? For instance, last year our sixth graders had an 8-9% gap above the state average as did our eighth graders. But our seventh graders only had a 2-3% gap above the state, so we began to answer the question of why the state average was catching up to us at Grade 7.

He worked with his English department closely as they reviewed SRI (Scholastic Reading Index) and SPI (Scholastic Phonics Index) scores of students in the System 44 and Read 180 classrooms. He also met regularly with teachers in the grade-level data room, commonly called the Data War Room by many teachers. In the beginning of the year, the principal met with teachers to review the scores of students and the levels they had completed the previous year. There was an organized card system that had been developed for these data rooms where each and every student's scores were monitored. There were five levels of cards:

- White card – Student is new to the building at any time during the year

- Blue card – Student scored Pass+ on most recent ISTEP

- Green card – Student scored Pass on most recent ISTEP

- Yellow card –Student scored Pass by only a few points on most recent ISTEP

- Red card – Student Did Not Pass on most recent ISTEP

Each student had a card for English and a separate card for math. Each card had the following information placed on it by the student's English teacher and math teacher:

- Most recent ISTEP score

- Indication if student's score is in the bottom 25% of students at that grade level

- English teacher or math teacher's name

- Student name

- Acuity results for Readiness Test A, B and C

- Math level (Honors, Pre-Algebra, Algebra or Geometry)

- Special Education indicator

- ESL indicator and LAS Level

These data cards and data conversations seemed to be an essential and meaningful part of the culture at this middle school. All teachers at each grade level were involved in the discussions as teachers reviewed the performance levels and then set specific targets and strategies for each student's improvement. Teacher 5 commented,

> It's all about us knowing the learning needs of our students and being held accountable to do something about it. I never had to do this in other schools where I taught. The math and English teachers come to us and tell us that kids are struggling in certain areas. They request our help. The media center specialist even got informational texts at varied Lexile levels that we needed. They trained us in the Lexile levels first so we'd have a better understanding of reading levels, gave us articles about our subject to incorporate in our lessons, and then gave us a graphic organizer to use weekly. When you have teachers working together like that, students notice and are reinforced with consistent learning methods in areas where they are struggling. So we don't just look at the data after each Acuity, we are expected to know it and then do something about it.

Another interesting piece of the data discussions was that Principal A did not talk in percentages. He talked about specific numbers of students. For example, he did not say "72% of students passed." Instead, he would say "33 of our students did not pass." Then he would turn to teachers to see exactly who those students were and discussed their exact learning needs with teachers and what new instructional strategies were going to be implemented for those students.

The principal develops leadership. Hiring the right people and getting the right people in the right place was an essential part of Principal A's responsibility. Teacher 6, a new teacher to the school remarked,

I had a very meaningful interview with Principal A. He asked me about adolescence and how I felt about this age group. He wanted to know how I could fit in, how I could address students' needs at this age and if I could influence them. He made it very clear that he was serious about the achievement of these students and that is was difficult work to get it right. He was here to provide support, but he wanted me to realize that I would be joining a very hard working staff.

Principal A had two groups with whom he worked closely. The first group was his administrative team consisting of two assistant principals and two counselors. They met weekly, but not on a certain day or scheduled time. Meetings were simply called when a need arose in the building or a couple of topics needed to be discussed as a team. One of the administrative team members stated, "Principal A has an open door as needed. He's very approachable. He'll stop what he's doing."

The second group the principal worked closely with was the school's department heads. There were five members of this group consisting of an English department teacher, a math department teacher, a science department teacher, a social studies department teacher and a humanities department teacher. This group met regularly with Principal A to discuss academic topics and any need with student learning. Teacher 7 noted,

> We meet together with the principal, then he expects us to report back to each member of our department that we represent. He trusts us to share the information and the next steps that need to be taken. He trusts us and then verifies! He always follows-up.

Student Scheduling

There were two essential components of the scheduling of students that must be mentioned because their effect on student achievement seemed to have a great impact. These two components were the literacy focus of the school and the embedded interventions.

Literacy is the primary focus of the school. The district had a goal of 90% for students to be reading at grade level and that 95% of third-grade students would pass IREAD. This focus was explicit at School A and the students' schedules reflected this literacy goal as the school created and implemented five layers of language arts/literacy.

In the sixth grade, each student received two periods of English/language arts. Each period was 53 minutes, so the student had 106 minutes of instruction each day. Literacy interventions were built into the five layers of language arts at the sixth grade. The first, and base layer, of English instruction was the Systems 44 Program that involved teacher-led instruction and some computer-based components. There was one Systems 44 teacher who had one period of mostly MiMD/Life Skills students (all three grades) and then two periods where approximately 15 students in Grades 6, 7, and 8 had the Systems 44 instruction. All of these students took the Indiana Modified Achievement Standards Test-IMAST (Indiana Department of Education, 2014) or the Indiana Standards Tool for Alternative Reporting-ISTAR (Indiana Department of Education, 2014) assessments.

The second layer of the language arts literacy layers was the Read 180 program. One teacher had approximately 18-20 students (at each grade level) for two periods that involved teacher-led instruction and the phonics/reading comprehension components on the computer. These students were measured five times each year to determine growth and the possibility of moving on to the third layer of language arts instruction. This movement and schedule change

could take place at any time during the school year. The students in Read 180 took the ISTEP assessment.

The third layer of the language arts literacy layers for sixth graders was called "Plugged." Historically, this was the title of the reading series or program used by the school district, but now this layer was a language arts course taught at grade-level standards with much scaffolding on special skills to assist students more on their reading comprehension and writing skills while building their confidence. There was one teacher for this layer and she had three different groups of sixth graders for two periods of instruction. These students took the ISTEP assessment.

The fourth layer of the language arts literacy layers was the general or regular English class and the fifth layer was the Honors English class. These layers are detailed in Table 4.

Table 4

Five Layers of Language Arts/Literacy

Layer	Language Arts/Literacy
Layer 5	Honors English Learners Two teachers 25 students each for two periods ISTEP assessment
Layer 4	General English Learners Two teachers 75 students each for two periods ISTEP assessment
Layer 3	Plugged English Learners (just below grade level) One teachers 45 6th grade students ISTEP assessment
Layer 2	Read 180 Learners (Lexile between 400-700) One teacher 15-18 sixth graders for two periods ISTEP assessment
Layer 1	System 44 Learners (Lexile below 400) One teacher 15-18 6th, 7th & 8th graders for two periods IMAST/ISTAR assessment

These layers of literacy instruction were fluid and adaptations in the student's schedule could take place at any time during the school year. Progress was monitored closely and the student was moved up a level as soon as that was possible. All teachers knew the importance of the literacy initiative. Teacher 8 shared,

If kids move from 44 to 180 and our schedules change, so be it! We flex now. It's about the best things for our students. It's not that it isn't a pain in the butt, but you must go

with it. You can gripe about if for a minute and then move on. Our teaching staff is very aware that reading is the most important thing and we must flex everything else. If our English teachers have made progress with a student and that student is ready to move to the next level, we need to celebrate that, not complain because it's a little more difficult to get a student caught up with the new class. It's fluid here. This faculty buys in.

There were four layers of language arts/literacy at the seventh and eighth grades. Just as in the sixth grade, there was the System 44 program, the Read 180 program, the General English class, and the Honors Class. There was not a plugged English class before a student moved into the general English course. Instead, the English teachers chose approximately 20 students whose reading Lexile was not at grade level or was just above. These students were scheduled into a general English class and also had an additional period of English called Methods. One semester of this course emphasized the writing skills and one semester focused on reading comprehension. There was one Methods section for seventh graders and one section for eighth graders. Some students were also placed in an intervention course called Success for an additional period. This course was taught by a special education teacher and gave needed instruction to students needing the general English course material with additional pre-teaching and re-teaching. This was a one-semester course with the second semester devoted to specific math skills needed by those students. This information is detailed in Table 5.

Table 5

Four Layers of Language Arts/Literacy for Students Not Reading at Grade Level

Layer	Language Arts/Literacy
Layer 4	Honors English Learners Two teachers 25 students each ISTEP assessment
Layer 3	General English Learners Two teachers 75 students each + 20 students also receive a period of Methods + 20 students also receive a period of Success ISTEP assessment
Layer 2	Read 180 Learners (Lexile between 400-700) One teacher 15-18 seventh graders for two periods 15-18 eighth graders for two periods ISTEP assessment
Layer 1	System 44 Learners (Lexile below 400) One teacher 15-18 6th, 7th & 8th graders for two periods IMAST/ISTAR assessment

Interventions are embedded. The Layered Literacy Program was one reading intervention embedded into the school day. All sixth graders, in an effort to make certain that reading comprehension and writing were on a solid level before the seventh grade, received two periods of language arts instruction. Students in seventh and eighth grade could also receive two periods of language arts if needed. Teacher 9 reported,

> Our instruction in General English classes is sometimes based on the results of Acuity
> and we change our instruction by period and class to make certain we are meeting the

needs of that particular group of students. But in the Methods class, the instruction is geared to individual students and their particular needs. Our students will have 8-10 specific skills that they know they struggle with and they know that I am there to help them get better. So each of them sets a goal for each skill and we start hammering away at the writing concepts.

Another teacher, Teacher 10, continued the discussion and commented,

Before that first day of school, we are expected to know our kids and their data. I see my students in color! I know their data and the color of their card in the Data War Room so I begin the school year with kids seated according to that data. They have no idea. But I know that those 'red' students are struggling with specific things and my 'yellow' students need some extra help on something else. The colors help me get the year going so that I don't lose any instructional time for specific assistance for them.

Another intervention embedded in the school day was Core+ each Wednesday. The school ran on an early release Wednesday schedule where most periods were 42 minutes each. Students were released at 2:00 instead of the normal dismissal time of 2:45. Core+ was held during 4th period from 9:58-10:28 for 30 minutes. Every student was assigned to an Acceleration Core+ or an Enrichment Core+. Once each student's data was reviewed, the teachers met together as a grade level and made the placement decisions. Teacher 11 stated,

It's like a draft and the English and math teachers get first dubs. They know which students need a little more intensive help. Then the rest of us duke it out for the students we'd like to have for enrichment. But we are all aware that if we need to teach some math or writing skills during our Core+, even though we aren't English and math

teachers, we're certainly dedicated to do that. Some of us team up and take 50 students and work together on specific things.

A third intervention was before-school tutoring by teachers from 6:30-7:20 one day each week. These tutoring classes were study sessions to review difficult material and reviewed for tests.

A fourth intervention was not embedded in the school day, but was incorporated after school each Tuesday and Thursday from January to April. By invitation only, approximately 100-120 students from all grade levels were invited to stay after school each Tuesday to work in a small group with math teachers. All math teachers had chosen to participate and hit specific skills where these students needed extra instruction. Most English teachers stayed after school on Thursdays to assist students, especially those needing help with their writing. Teacher 12, a teacher involved with the after-school Thursday instruction said,

> We decode several writing prompts and organize our thoughts and begin writing some
> pieces. Sometimes we don't complete the entire writing process, but since our students
> struggle to know where to begin and how to work through the process, this helps them
> gain confidence with their writing abilities.

Teachers were not compensated for these before-school or after-school sessions. Bus transportation was provided for students January through April for the Tuesday and Thursday after-school sessions and snacks were given to the students. The teachers sometimes used the computer labs where students could practice specific skills. Students also created graphs of skills they were working on and then graphed their results as they made progress. Teachers tried to incorporate a few prizes for students making gains. Teacher 13 said,

We don't get paid, but we do get a cheese snack and bottle of water! Actually, we are very clear by January which ones of our students will need extra attention. We know from our past work that this extra time will get many of them over the mark, so we pull together and do it. The results speak for themselves.

Results of these English and math interventions were monitored by the principal and teachers. System 44 students took the IMAST or ISTAR assessment and their growth was watched closely. Data are detailed in Table 6.

Table 6

Student Data for IMAST and/or ISTAR Assessment and Growth

English/Language Arts Intervention	ISTEP 2014 # (%)	ISTEP 2013 # (%)
6th Grade READ 180	5/29 (17%)	2/29 (7%)
6th Grade PLUGGED	26/36 (72%)	24/36 (67%)
7th Grade READ 180	3/7 (43%)	0/7 (0%)
7th Grade METHODS	12/18 (67%)	6/18 (33%)
8th Grade READ 180	1/5 (20%)	0/5 (0%)
8th Grade METHODS	12/17 (75%)	1/17 (6%)

Staff Scheduling

There were two components that existed at School A that stood out–department planning time and collaboration.

Planning time is by department, not teams. Teacher 14, who had taught in the district for many years summed it up the best by stating,

We don't team anymore, but we sure do talk more! One teacher will say, "Could you please teach this concept with me?" We take things off each other's plates and we're honestly glad to do it. You show me where a student needs help and we *will* get it done.

The principal did not give a schedule or agenda for department meetings. The clear expectation was that teachers discussed the needs of their students, reviewed the data, went to teachers in their departments at other grade levels for ideas, and reported their work to him as needed. There was a keen sense that the principal wanted teachers to use their professional judgment on what it took to reach the end goal. Teacher 15 commented,

This particular student is on a red card signifying that he is not at the acceptable mark and my name as his teacher is on that card. He's showing little growth or no growth at all. So I better be ready to have some ideas or begin the discussion with my department on things to do for this student. I'm clear that I've got to try everything for this kid. For the most part, it's my fault that he's not achieving and showing growth. It's my responsibility to figure it out. I don't know how we'd do it if we weren't off by departments. The conversations with the other teachers in my department are where I find the answers.

Collaboration time is critical. Because the departments were on planning together, they met at least once a week. Many of those meetings were held to discuss data. Teacher 16 said, "We've learned from our principal that it's only an opinion if there's no data to back it up." The principal, and many times one of the assistant principals, participated in the data discussions. At the end of the data meetings, a product was expected to be given to the principal that showed the students who needed certain skills and the action planned to make that happen.

Teacher 17 reported,

Our principal leads us to clarify data with deliberate conversations. He's not afraid to put it out there and ask the tough questions and then set expectations from the data. Then he follows-up. Darn! He follows-up every time. He holds us accountable. It's a transparent system here.

Collaboration stood out in this building. One district employee who traveled to all buildings said that collaboration was alive and well in all the schools, but communication seemed extremely evident in the middle school.

Teachers here want to learn and talk with each other to keep moving forward. I do not meet any resistance here. If I'm setting up flu shot rotations or e-pipen training, they all work together and find a way to make it work. Everybody teaches here. You can walk by any classroom at any point during the day and teachers are working hard. I can honestly say they try not to lose a minute of instruction time.

Building Culture

There was simply a different mindset by staff in this building. These staff members went the extra mile; they "seek to understand" their students' actions; they did not take things personally because they understood the circumstances of poverty that most of their students lived within; and they genuinely believed that their students could learn and could catch up!

Staff go the extra mile. There were numerous comments made by staff members that portrayed the positive attitude taken in the middle school. A few of these included the following statements, including one reported by Teacher 18:

We care. We really do. We pay for physicals, cleats, teach after school or whatever we need to in order to make certain that there are few or no obstacles for our kids. Simply put, we believe there are no exceptions. No excuses. We overcome the obstacles of

some parents not valuing or respecting education. We plan on replacing their negative

educational experiences with positive ones for their children. If we don't, that negative

mindset will be passed on to the next generation so we do everything we can to stop that

cycle. We are building a community of success.

Teacher 19 commented,

When it comes to ISTEP scores, we own our scores. We all do our part. If the English or

math teacher comes to us and needs help with a certain skill, we don't question that.

They provide materials for us and we go at it. We really do whatever it takes.

And Teacher 20 shared,

I get to know each one of my students and their families. Once I have a good relationship

with the kids, I'm honest with each of them. I give them the brutal facts and let them

know they're behind in these certain areas and skills. Then I tell them that I'm here to

help them and give them the support they need to get to grade level.

Relationships are developed. Teacher 21 on the leadership team commented,

We clearly understand that our role is to service students' social needs and get them back

into that classroom. We are cognizant of keeping them in class. We can't make-up the

lost instruction. So we try to be efficient, meet the students' needs and then get them into

class.

It did not appear to be about misconduct and discipline in this school. There were not

many rules posted in the classrooms and very few consequence charts. Teacher 22 stated,

"Write 'em up and send 'em to the office!" is not acceptable here anymore. There's no

more situations where teachers embarrass students or demean them in any way. We keep

them on task. We plan engaging lessons. If I have 25 kids in class, I better have 25 kids

on task . . . and it better be meaningful work.

Teacher 23 said,

We care about our students and we tell them that on the first day of school. We start

building relationships right out of the gate. We say, "We care about you. We want you

to do well. We are going to work you hard and support you in every way." And we have

stopped writing so many discipline referrals and started looking beyond the behavior to

see what's behind the face. What's the story of this kid? I want to open doors for each

one of them. You could ask any kid in this building if there is an adult where they could

go for help and they could name several of us.

Environment is safe and structured. Principal A said,

Our building will be safe. That goes without being said. I expect solid classroom

management. The mechanics and logistics of that should be consistent and all about

relationships with students. Then it's my responsibility to create that structure on a larger

level for the entire building to feel safe and run smoothly for all of us.

Students entered the building and had time together in the cafetorium each morning.

When the buzzer went off, a weekly song played over the intercom system for about three to four

minutes. On this particular school visit day, "Happy" was the song of the week. Students went

to their lockers, got into classrooms, and when the music went off, the morning announcements

began with students delivering them over the system and onto Smartboards in the classrooms.

When announcements were complete, students recited the pledge, a moment of silence was

observed, and the teacher began with instruction immediately.

Teacher 24, a new teacher to the building, commented, "It's a quiet and kind building. Structured. Stable. Clean. Kids feel safe here and I do, too."

When I asked the principal how the building was kept so clean, he said that he had a schedule where a custodian walked the building after each period. Trash was picked up, restrooms were cleaned, and lockers were wiped. If there happened to be any markings or graffiti on the restroom stalls or lockers, it was taken care of immediately.

Teacher 25, another new teacher to the school who taught in an Indianapolis district, said, There's so much more professionalism in this school. It's a great environment. You're treated like you know something and that you know how to diagnose the learning difficulties and then do something about it. The principal monitors, but trusts us to get it done the best way we know how. So the morale here is great. We work hard and give extra time to these kids, but it sure does pay off!

Miscellaneous factors. There were two other components in this building that I could not move on without mentioning. One factor was that the school worked at getting all students to achieve at their highest potential. School A incorporated many opportunities for their students to advance academically and gain high school credit and hoped to add more of these experiences. Eleven credits were currently available for students: Biology I and II, Spanish I, Algebra I, geometry, and health.

School A also had the unique opportunity of not only having a Health Wellness Center at their school for staff, but also a Community Health Center through the local hospital. This clinic could be used by any student in the district, along with his or her siblings. Students' families were charged on a sliding fee for appointments, medications, physicals, and immunizations. A middle school and high school student's parent was not required to come to the clinic with the

student. They could call the clinic, make an appointment for their student and the students were called at the time when they could be seen most quickly and return to class if possible.

Curriculum and Professional Development

As soon as I entered the school's front office, I noticed the highlighted Curriculum Wall that took up the entire space on the wall across from the front office counter. On this Curriculum Wall, there was a display for each department in the school at each grade level that exhibited the quarterly units of study for that particular quarter. The three components for each subject included the following: unit(s) of study title, significant concept(s) and performance objective(s). Table 7 contains two examples.

Table 7

Quarterly Units of Study Examples

Component	Sixth Grade Science
Unit of Study	Design Process
Significant Concept(s)	Understanding that it's important to develop a plan to solve a problem
Performance Objective(s)	• design experiments using the design process • analyze experiment results

Component	Seventh Grade Language Arts
Unit of Study	Fiction/Nonfiction, Vocabulary and Writing with Grammar Components
Significant Concept(s)	• nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, articles • story plot line • "Yes Ma'am" Extended Response • pulling significant details from text • summarizing significant details from text • personal narrative essay writing
Performance Objectives	Students will • cite at least two pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of text • analyze how a story's structure contributes to meaning and plot • write summaries that include the main & most significant details • write a narrative essay that organizes thoughts into plot sequence and includes dialogue

Several teachers mentioned that they utilized the Depths of Knowledge chart (Webb, 2005) in developing their lessons. Level 3 (strategic thinking) and Level 4 (extended thinking)

verbs, such as critique, hypothesize, differentiate, analyze, prove and synthesize were incorporated into the units.

District gives support. Teachers had pacing guides used throughout the district that were based on the current state standards and were shared on the district's Curriculum Loft. Not only was there a clear focus on literacy at School A, but the district had also set a 90% goal for students reading at grade level for each grade. The IREAD assessment for third graders had a district goal of 95%. A few teachers remarked that the superintendent met with them throughout the year to discuss achievement scores and student growth. The assistant superintendent sometimes made classroom observations to check on teachers and see ways the district could add support. One teacher also added that the district had been willing to financially support the literacy goals by purchasing needed programs like System 44, Read 180, and any materials the teachers requested for classroom instruction.

Professional development is meaningful. Teachers used 2:00-2:45 each Wednesday to meet together. A schedule was prepared by the principal approximately three to four weeks in advance so that the needs of the students could be met in a timely and specific way. This 45-minute period could be used for department meetings, data wall discussions, grade-level meetings, individual planning or full-staff learning. Teacher 26 commented,

> I'm a science teacher, but I have a reading file with strategies The English and math teachers literally go and learn and then bring things to back to us to use. Their literacy strategies make us better teachers. So we predict, use textual clues, and increase vocabulary. We make meaning for students on how we all work and fit together. You really don't ever hear "Why are you making me teach English in music or math in social studies?" We understand it takes all of us now. We let go of that a few years ago.

And Teacher 27 reported that the English teachers led professional development on Lexile scores and graphic organizers that they use for all subjects to keep things uniform. We're done with outside presenters and book talks where things never really got embedded into the classroom. It's about looking at the data here. And you have to know the data or you can't really participate in our discussions. Then we come up with strategies that will help. We know the answers. We just have to specifically give each of our students what each one of them needs.

Second School Visitation Site: School B

As a brief introduction to School B, Table 8 gives basic information with the percentage of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch and other factors describing the makeup of the student population. The ethnicity of the student population in School B included 46.5% White students, 26.6% Black, 17% Hispanic, 7.8% multiracial, and 1.3% Asian. Principal B's educational experience included three years as an elementary school teacher, three years as a middle school science and math teacher, two years as a middle school assistant principal, and five years as a middle school principal. Table 9 details the ISTEP+ E/La percent passing scores, the math percent passing scores, the passing both subjects percentages, and the school's AYP category or grade from the Indiana Department of Education. Table 10 reflects the main interview ideas by group.

Table 8

School B Demographic Data

% Poverty	Ethnicity	Grades	School Day	Enrollment	Title I Funding
64.2%	46.5 White	6.8	7:25-2:40	617	No

Table 9

School B ISTEP+ Percent Passing Scores

Year	E/LA	Math	Passing E/LA & Math	Met AYP or Grade
2014	80.8	84.9	76.5	B
2013	82.2	83.4	78.0	C
2012	83.1	85.0	74.2	Yes
2011	81.1	80.0	74.1	Yes

Table 10

School B Main Interview Ideas by Group

Group	Idea 1	Idea 2	Idea 3	Idea 4
Principal	Prof. Dev.	Collaboration	Electives	Parents
Leadership Team	Parents	High expectations	Schedule	Academic core
Teachers	Electives	Academic core	Parents	Collaboration
English Dept.	Collaboration	Interventions	Prof. Dev.	Leadership
Math Dept.	Interventions	Prof. Dev.	Leadership	

School B was located in northern Indiana. Driving from the city's downtown area to the school, the scenery included an auto body repair shop, a church with a large "Jesus Saves" sign, a large Indiana Tech campus, and many single-family homes on the block surrounding the school. The school facility was located on a main thoroughfare across the street from a small

city park and was only two miles from downtown. The school was an enclosed building with one city block of green area for outside activities.

School B did not have its own school vision, mission and belief statements, but the district's statements were displayed in the main office.

School B's District Mission Statement – Our schools educate all students to high standards enabling them to become productive, responsible citizens.

School B's District Vision Statement – Our schools will be the school system of choice and a source of community pride.

School B's District Core Values (3 of the 9 statements) – We value student achievement as the heart of our work, equity in educational opportunities, the diversity and uniqueness of our district and community and the ability to change and meet all challenges.

After completing the staff interviews, reviewing all notes, listening to the taped recordings of the interviews, and processing thoroughly the information obtained, I found the same themes from School A emerged in School B, but with a different focus in each theme, as well as unique strategies.

Principal Leadership

It was important to understand the student population at School B. In 1988, School B became a fine arts middle school. Fifty percent of the students came to School B from the feeder elementary that was also a fine arts magnet school. The other 50% of the students were required to have a parent/guardian complete an application to attend School B. Then a racially-balanced lottery system was used to determine the remaining students who would attend. Parents and their students *chose* to attend School B.

The principal understands his school's opportunities and challenges. An important quality of a school leader is to understand the make-up of his or her school and to utilize the best practices for that situation. Best practices are often research based and grounded in data that show their success. Principal B knew it was important to remember that what worked in one setting might not be the most effective practice in another setting. In School B's situation, most every student was interested in the fine arts – art, choir, band, orchestra, and foreign language studies – and Principal B embraced their interests and made certain to incorporate as many electives as possible in each student's day while keeping a firm focus on the academics.

The principal has high expectations for the academic core. Principal B did not simply trust that high achievement scores would automatically come because the students were highly interested in the fine arts. He commented,

> I try to make certain to visit every classroom every other week which is an extrinsic motivator for teachers. But I understand the most essential thing is when the motivation becomes intrinsic and our teachers are changing their instruction and strategies because they see the real value in doing so.

He also added,

> I have pushed the academic core side of things over the last few years because our school began to slip in our achievement scores a few years ago. When I came to the building, I knew that our scores should always be above the state average. I had to make certain that teachers were focused on the delivery of instruction of English and math and that they had time to plan together.

Principal B incorporated a leadership style that created a clear focus for what needed to be accomplished, but he allowed teachers to do that in the best way they saw fit for their students. Teacher 1 in School B stated,

Our leadership here empowers us. There's really no micromanaging. We are shown respect and then expected to get the work done. There's a big difference in being an authoritarian leader versus being a facilitator. Our principal facilitates. He's open to letting us do what works best.

Teacher 2 in School B commented,

We feel heard and supported with our requests and issues with kids. Principal B makes it clear that "It's not about you or me; it's about these kids." So if we are struggling as a teacher, he will get a sub and let us go see another teacher and will follow-up to see what we incorporate. He knows us and he knows our students and even tries to know each of them by name. He has an app on his phone to help him learn all the students' names!

Principal B had a small group of teachers that served as department heads that he called the Quality Improvement Team (QIT). They met regularly to discuss critical topics that needed to be addressed and then shared any other concerns in the school. All curricular areas were represented on the QIT.

Student Scheduling

Student day is extended. School B was the only middle school in the district, which consisted of 10 middle schools that had extended the school day by 20 minutes. There was no homeroom in the daily schedule. There were eight periods for seventh and eighth grades and the sixth grade ran on an entirely separate schedule.

Electives are primary focus and interventions are embedded when needed. As a fine arts magnet school, there were multiple levels of each fine arts course available to students. For example, there were six different choirs including girls' ensemble, show choir, sixth-grade choir, seventh-grade choir, eighth-grade choir and concert choir. Sixth graders had the following components in their daily schedule:

- two hours and 20 minutes of English and social students
- two hours and 20 minutes of math and science
- 30 minutes of lunch
- two-four elective courses

If a student was not performing well in math or English, the teachers utilized one of the elective slots for a learning lab where specific skills were taught. But the student still had the option of one or two electives. If the student chose a music course, like band or choir, the student attended that class each day. But the student could also select courses like art, physical education, and / or technology that were done on an A/B rotation. On Day A, the student had art for the elective and on Day B, the student had technology. So even with one elective slot, the student could experience two courses.

Seventh- and eighth-grade students were on an eight-period day with the following components: one period of math, English, social studies, science, and lunch. The remaining three periods were student electives unless that student was assigned to a learning lab for one of those periods. Health and physical education were taken at some point in the duration of a student's middle school career. Teacher 3 in School B commented,

> The Learning Labs are part of each grade level's instruction. There are two lab teachers in the sixth grade giving specific help in English and math. There is one English teacher

and one math teacher at both grades 7 and 8 to assist students. We frontload our students

into the Learning Labs. We know that we need to show growth for our strugglers, but we

also need to show growth for our advanced learners. Sometimes some of our advanced

learners will be placed in a lab to make certain we hit some gaps and review concepts

where they are struggling. It's all about building confidence, changing their attitudes

about what they can do, and helping them love math or love to write when they leave the

lab course.

Teacher 4 in School B said,

> We try to show our students where they need help. Then they set an individual goal for
>
> themselves. As soon as they reach that goal, we move on to another needed area or the
>
> student moves right back into an elective.

One critical part of the elective smorgasbord offered to students in School B was the

requirement that the student must pass all classes in order to participate in after-school activities.

And there were tons of after-school opportunities! Because the students selected their electives

and genuinely wanted to participate, the consequence of not participating in the practices and

performances after school seemed to be quite effective.

Staff Scheduling

A few changes in the teaching staff's schedules had taken place over the last few years.

One of the changes involved collaboration so that teachers could work together more

productively. The other change came as a byproduct of the teachers' schedules.

Planning is by departments, not teams. Each department had planning time together to

discuss units and instructional strategies, but Principal B noticed that teachers were teaching

singletons within the department. For instance, there were three seventh- and eighth-grade

English teachers. One staff member was teaching seventh grade, one eighth grade, and one had a split schedule of seventh and eighth grades. When planning together, only two of the three teachers had the same units to discuss, develop meaningful lessons, and prioritize interventions. So now all three teachers had a combination of classes with seventh and eighth graders. Teacher 5 in School B commented, "We want to get more cohesive here in the academics. If we become even closer together as a staff, amazing things could happen. It really helps when we're teaching the same thing." And another teacher, Teacher 6 in School B, said,

> We want to come together more often, like teachers in Japan, where professionals really work on their craft. Our assessments could be more organic and authentic. We just need to leave our ego at the door and keep pushing. Some of us collaborate three times a week, but we still wish we had more time together.

The strategy of "looping" is utilized in the school. Looping, the technique where the student continued with the same teacher for multiple years, came about by accident. It was not something the math and English teachers set out to do. But once the teachers' schedules allowed them to teach multiple grade levels, teachers began asking this question, "Wouldn't it be better if I kept this student another year?" This school year was the first year for English teachers to incorporate looping, where they had taught the students in English for seventh grade and were now continuing with many of those students for eighth grade. Teacher 7 in School B reported,

> I had them in math for sixth grade. Then I had 70% of them in seventh and eighth grade. I have built such relationships. I don't waste a minute of instruction. On the first day, they are on the same page with me and we hit the ground running. I don't have to build trust. We already have that and get moving on math!

Looping allowed teachers and students to develop strong bonds with each other and also gave teachers a real understanding of the specific learning that needed to take place at each grade level.

School Culture

There were two components in School B that I almost felt immediately. One of those was the parental involvement and the other was student engagement.

Parental involvement permeates this school. I believe most every teacher and leadership team member mentioned this in the interviews. The staff members were aware of this advantage and they embraced this aspect of their school culture. They understood that this school was a special place as a fine arts magnet school with special opportunities and they used that to their advantage. Parents were not necessarily involved through the general Parent Teacher Association; the last PTA meeting had approximately 20 members attend. But parents were significantly involved in their student's Booster Club. There was a Band Booster, Choir Booster, Dance Troup Parents, etc. The school had developed these smaller groups where parents could become involved and could establish a real sense of belonging and being there for their student. Teacher 8 in School B said,

> We get our parents involved in the special area of interest to their child. So, for instance, parents come to assist with the Band Boosters and we give them a special role like helping to set-up and things. Then we build relationships with them and we can discuss not only the music program but how their student is doing in the core academics. We have conversations to let them know if their student doesn't get to work in math or English, he won't be able to perform with us in the next event. That works! I think the parent wants to be there as much as the kid!

Teacher 9 in School B discussed a situation where a parent did not want his student to be removed from an elective and placed in a learning lab, even though the data was shared with the parent demonstrating the student was in need of additional instruction for math or English. During the parent conference, the team listened to the parent's concerns and utilized the option of a Parent Contract. This enabled the student to remain in the elective class, but the student was required to come to school early on certain days to meet with the teacher and the parent was required to make certain the student was completing the assignments at home. After a three-week period where the student's work was closely monitored, a call was made to the parent to share that this intervention seemed to be working. The student was making gains. As long as the gains were progressing nicely, the student could use this option for intervention. Leadership team member Teacher 10 in School B shared,

> If a parent refuses the Learning Lab, we don't just push a student in there. We work with the parent on other options but we make it clear that the student must have additional help. The Parent Contract has worked in several situations. The contract develops a plan that parents will follow at home and the student attends an After-school Study Table before practices.

Staff members sought to understand their students and tried to understand the poverty in which they lived. They understood the stress the students and parents were under and attempted to create an atmosphere of support. Teacher 11 in School B commented,

> We have such an advantage in our school because we have poverty *with* parents! I guess you could call it a modified poverty. We have students living in Section Eight housing and professional homes, but it's a different situation of poverty. It's pervasive, but focused on a real interest that our students have. I think some of our parents see this

school as a way out of the poverty for their kid. We know we have an advantage of being a fine arts magnet and we value that and try to work with it every way possible.

The students are engaged. The research is clear that middle school students can become easily disengaged in the learning process (Reddy et al., 2007). School B knew that students were attending their school because of their interest in the fine arts. However, teachers do not count on that for engagement in other class work. They used the consequence of passing all classes in order to participate in after-school performances and activities, but they worked in collaborative teams to make meaningful and engaging units of study in English, math, social studies and science. Teacher 12 in School B said,

> We try to understand our students and support them. It's okay to be different here. It's cool to be a band geek because so many of them go here! So we need to engage them in their interests and also in the core subjects.

And many teachers also mentioned the fact that there was a culture of reading with these students. Teacher 13 in School B said,

> I'm not really sure if it's because the students enjoy reading music and that carries over into the love of reading overall, but we capitalize on that. In English, it's extremely important that I choose literature that will be relevant and meaningful to my students. I read. They read. They don't live in a print-rich environment, so we create and enhance that for them here.

Miscellaneous factors. Like School A, there were two other factors that emerged. The first factor was the lack of student transiency. In many schools of poverty, a staff deals with students enrolling and withdrawing from class many times throughout the school year. Sometimes a student withdraws one nine-weeks only to return the next quarter. In School B,

there was little to no movement. Several teachers mentioned this and said it made such a difference for instruction and once again placed the reasoning on the fact that students did not want to leave the elective courses offered at School B.

The second factor I wanted to mention was the school facility itself. As a leadership team member took me on a tour of the facility, the classrooms looked typical. Several rooms were under construction for the installation of new lighting, ceiling tiles, and air conditioning. The final part of our tour was the fine arts area located on the lower level. I was anticipating huge music and art rooms with leveled tiers for chairs, but that was not the case. The music facilities and art rooms were equipped with the basic furniture as you would find in most any other school. But what I did observe were teachers engaged with eager students in a room filled with awards for performance and excellence.

Curriculum/Professional Development

The two components that were highlighted here were the students' access to honors courses and the teacher-driven professional development.

Students have access to honors courses. Students in School B had the opportunity to earn 10 high school credits before moving on to high school—Algebra I and II, geometry, and two years of a foreign language. But the area to highlight here was the math courses that were available. Students were pushed and encouraged to take the highest level of math, many times one grade level above their actual grade. For example, 60 of 200 Grade 8 students successfully completed Grade 10 mathematics last year. This year as freshmen, those students were able to take a junior-level math course. If there was a question as to which math class to take, School B always chose the more difficult math level because they believed that students would achieve, especially if the supports and scaffolding were in place for that student.

The honors placement was not only in math, it ran throughout the school. If a student was ready to be in the Grade 8 Band as a sixth grader, that student was placed there. "If you're ready for the challenge, we're going to make a way for it to happen," said Teacher 14 (School B).

Teachers drive the professional development. Principal B shared that he used the Teacher Effectiveness Rubric to help develop the professional development topics for the Monday after-school sessions. Teachers met together as a staff from 2:50-3:30 where a member of the staff presented on specific strategies that could be helpful in all classrooms. Some of these topics included reading and math strategies. These staff-initiated topics had been helpful to most teachers. On Fridays, teachers also had embedded professional development time to work together as a department and develop lessons and review data from assessments. A few teachers shared that they used their daily planning time a few times each week to meet together with teachers in their department teaching the same grade level. The professional development time on Fridays allowed them to meet together and align the work vertically for all three grades. Teacher 15 in School B commented,

> We try to work together during our professional development and planning periods to create meaning-making in math for real life situations. We create problems where students will need to double the recipe, calculate the tip for a restaurant server, or figure out the 20% sale price. It really helps when we're all together to see what's happening at each grade level.

Teacher 16 in School B stated,

> We take time to review our district and unit assessments. We need to make certain that our students can do the Depths of Knowledge Level 1 and 2 questions that are at grade

level, but also that they are achieving the Depths of Knowledge Level 3 and 4 questions where they must apply the grade level skills. We've got work to do there.

Teacher 17 in School B commented,

We use the monthly writing prompt for work on specific writing skills. We all try to use a student example from the previous group of students to show areas of growth needed in our writing. We grade each one with students, using both state rubrics. We have good discussion on what makes a writing selection a "6" or a "5." We also work on constructed response questions with our students. They really need to understand why an answer earns the full two points possible. We must do better with growth here in School B. We must target where each student needs assistance with writing, or whatever skill, and dig in and get that improvement for each of them.

To continue the focus on the academic core and curriculum, Principal B said,

We ought to blow the roof off this place with our student population and parental involvement. As our teachers hone in on improvement for each individual student, we should be hitting the achievement scores in math and English in the 90's. I believe our teachers are on the verge of doing this!

School B's curriculum consisted of the district units that included the essential questions, vocabulary strategies, resources, and learning objectives that clearly stated what the student should be able to do at the end of the unit. In English/language arts, students were tested in August and December with the Scholastic Reading Inventory monitoring growth in reading. The school also used the state's Acuity Assessment System where students are tested three times a year for English and math. The first assessment took place each year in November. Teachers

reviewed this data in collaboration planning time to determine changes in instruction and to place students in the appropriate learning labs.

Despite the differences between School A and School B, many of the same themes emerged with nuances in each. Chapter 5 includes a few summary sentences indicating these broad themes.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to observe and examine the strategies, techniques, and leadership styles of principals in effective middle schools with high poverty and high achievement. Through this qualitative study, the interviews and observations of middle school teachers, leadership teams, and their principals were focused on, identifying a core of specific strategies utilized by staff members via the research question, What specific strategies and techniques do middle school principals utilize in their leadership within high-poverty schools to achieve high academic success?

In this qualitative study, two levels of sampling were necessary for the case studies. Two Indiana middle schools were selected and a sample of certified staff was involved in the study. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and observations. I looked for patterns and themes through the qualitative method in a descriptive and heuristic way to add a deeper understanding to the phenomenon being investigated. Readers can find new meaning, answers to questions, data for further investigation, and generalizable themes that have the potential to be transferred into a new setting (Merriam, 2009). Knowledge learned from a case study is important for several reasons. Two reasons are based on the fact that the study is more concrete and can resonate with our own experiences and can be more vivid to the reader. Also, the

research can be developed by reader interpretation because readers bring their own experiences and knowledge that can lead to generalizations of the new data (Stake, 1981).

Summary and Discussion Findings

The interviews were semi-structured to allow for better understanding and in order for personal commentary to be made evident in the qualitative data. Both of the school's leadership teams and teachers shared a plethora of information and gave many details about occurrences in their schools. Via responses to aforementioned interview questions as well as discussions with staff members during the interview sessions and observations, the following five themes arose. These are condensed, broad topics, and detailed strategies and techniques are located in Chapter 4 for each theme.

Principal Leadership

Both schools were led by principals who were clearly in charge of creating schools where teachers had both clear expectations for classroom instruction and what needed to be accomplished for struggling learners. Principal A set high expectations, was data-driven, and developed the leadership of the department heads and their cohesiveness as a team to share in the decision-making and direction of the school. Principal B also set high expectations for staff and students and was bringing a focus once again to the academic core subjects. Principal B also had a clear understanding of the school as a fine arts magnet and the opportunities and challenges that provided to its students and faculty. Both principals continuously clarified the goals of the school and kept the message clearly focused on student learning.

Student Scheduling

Both schools used the invaluable resource of time to develop a student schedule that attempted to meet each student's needs. Because of the extensive need for many students to

accelerate their literacy achievement, School A had developed a five layers of language arts system where all sixth-grade students had 106 minutes of English/language arts instruction each day. Students in seventh and eighth grades received two periods of reading assistance if needed. Interventions for struggling learners were embedded in the school day for all students. If students were still in need of additional support and instruction, School A selected those students and invited them to an after-school program during the second semester and provided transportation home. School A also had a period embedded during the school day for additional instruction if students were struggling on specific skills in math and/or English.

School B also utilized every minute in the student schedule for students. All sixth graders in this school had 220 minutes each day for language arts and social studies. Seventh and eighth grade students were on an eight-period day and could be assigned to a learning lab for one period for additional assistance in math or English. Interventions, like those learning labs, were embedded in the school day. These interventions were provided and required for all students needing extra support. School B also developed their schedule so that all students could have two to four electives daily of their choice. In order to incorporate these electives into the school day, 20 minutes were added to extend the day and homeroom was removed from the schedule. Both schools made the student schedules work for student academic needs. An extended school day, additional time for literacy instruction, additional time for fine arts electives, and embedded intervention during the day—and even after the normal school day—were essential for student achievement.

Staff Scheduling

Both schools implemented a revised schedule for staff planning time. Both School A and School B moved away from the team planning scheduling concept and incorporated a daily

department planning time for teachers. Teachers were required to meet together once a week, but many of them reported that they met together usually two or three times weekly. Because of this frequent time together to plan lessons, review data, and discuss ways to assist each other, collaboration was a key factor in both schools. Teachers at both schools reported that they were better teachers because of the collaboration and wished they had even more time together. An important factor in both schools' collaboration was that teachers were focused on the right thing. Reviewing data, finding areas where students needed specific help, and creating lessons together to respond to student needs was evident in both schools. From the collaboration efforts, some other scheduling options began to emerge for teachers. For example, School B was integrating looping into some English and math teachers' schedules.

Building Culture

Both School A and School B saw the importance of developing relationships within the school with other staff members and students. School A worked hard in meeting students' needs for things within the building, like school supplies and an adult to talk to about student concerns. In addition, this staff also worked extremely hard to meet the student needs outside of the school day like purchasing football cleats, preparing food for some families for long weekends, getting clothes for kids in need, and paying for physicals for students wanting to play on a sports team. School A valued students possessing a staff member who they could go to for whatever they might need throughout their tenure in the school.

School B developed relationships with students with an emphasis on student engagement and their involvement in the school's fine arts electives and after-school opportunities. They wanted each student to be in a program where they could "excel in their own giftedness." School B also tried to build their relationships with parents by getting them involved in the specific

booster program in which their student was participating.

Both schools also portrayed a sincere belief that their students could achieve. They understood the issue of poverty, made no excuses for it, and believed their students could catch up and move beyond average expectations. High school credits and honors courses were available and students were moved into these opportunities as often as possible.

Curriculum and Professional Development

Teachers in both schools knew what needed to be taught each quarter in their subject area. There was a clear sense of the student skills that needed to be attained. School A used quarterly units of study with significant concepts and performance objectives. School B used district units with big ideas, essential questions and "I can" statements. Professional development at both schools was teacher-driven and was embedded weekly in the school day for teachers. Some professional development sessions would be for the full staff, where teachers would share instructional strategies that could be implemented in all classrooms. Other professional development sessions were held for individual departments, where teachers could review specific data together and discuss areas of growth and areas of concern for their particular content area. Professional development was timely, specific, and led by teachers.

Implications

What can be concluded from the findings of the current study? Are there a few essential components to be gained from these schools that could possibly hold true for others? These specific strategies utilized by building principals would be critical for any school, especially a school of high poverty where students are in need of support. Though there is an achievement gap and an experience gap for these students of poverty, these strategies have shown to be effective in both schools in the research study.

There was a strategic system in place to address the academic core. Although School A had more students in need of intervention work, Principals A and B were fully aware that there must be a clear system in place in order to address the academic needs of their students. Teachers were clear on what was to be taught each quarter. An assessment system was in place to monitor student learning gaps and growth areas. Assessment data was reviewed by teachers and interventions were put into place. Students needing enrichment were given those opportunities.

These systems were precise when it came to the interventions provided. If a student was not reading at grade level, an intensive structure for assistance was in place. At School A, this involved five layers of literacy programming in order to specifically meet the needs of their students.

Teachers in both schools seemed to have an understanding that academic growth for each student was essential. They understood that even though standardized testing can have some value, it was only a limited set of questions over a limited amount of subject material. Standardized tests do not show the strengths of all students, nor do they show the growth that can be ascribed to individual teachers; and even rising scores may not be a signal that student are actually learning more. At best, a standardized test is an incomplete picture of learning (Ravitch, 2014). With this awareness of standardized testing and the fact that most students are required to take the exam and even pass it in high school in order to graduate, these teachers knew that their students needed to perform well. So teachers made certain they understood the skills that needed to be taught and worked to build a stimulating curriculum in each course. These engaging and rigorous units empowered their students to become critical thinkers and problem-solvers who can also achieve a passing score on the required state test. When asked if she ever felt like she was just teaching to the test, School B teacher Ms. Emory said,

No, I don't feel that way. We know it's our responsibility to know what's required of a

student on the test. But then we take that basic information and create meaningful units

of learning for our students. Testing is just part of the educational game we play right

now, so we try to play it the best way we can for our kids.

Simply put, teachers had a clear understanding of required standards and created a structure for

students to meet those standards. These teachers understood the research that by the end of Grade

8, minority and low socioeconomic students lag behind their peers by three grade levels. While

raising expectations, standards, and rigor of curriculum will benefit a vast majority of students,

those students lagging substantially behind their peers may only become more disengaged and

fall further behind academically (Spradlin et al., 2005). Both schools had a strategic system in

place for students' academic core.

The daily schedule was developed for student needs. Both schools in the study created a

different structure during the school day for sixth graders than for students in Grades 7 and 8.

More time, almost double the amount allotted in 7th and 8th grades, was scheduled for

English/language arts and math in sixth grade. The social studies and science curriculum for

sixth graders was woven into the reading and math lessons. Sixth grade is the entry level in

these middle schools and special attention and time were devoted to understanding students'

learning needs and meeting those needs by grouping students effectively. Extra time was seen as

essential in sixth grade. Interventions for all students were embedded into the school day. If a

struggling student needed more time to learn certain concepts, that time was required and

provided during the day. Teachers continued to provide help and give multiple attempts for

students to provide evidence that they had a clear understanding of the material. If teachers felt

even more time was necessary for assistance, they also provided before and / or after-school

interventions. School A even provided transportation for those students invited to attend the after-school sessions. If a student was struggling, assistance was given. Just as interventions were offered during the school day, student enrichment classes were also offered at both schools during the day. Because of the particular needs of its students, School A had a stronger focus on interventions being embedded in the day and School B had a stronger focus on providing as many enrichment classes a student could take. Whatever the needs of the students, both schools made certain they were addressed. Simply put, the scheduling was careful and intentional.

Collaboration for teaching staff was invaluable and they wanted more time together. Many middle schools use a team planning period model where one teacher from the core areas of English, math, social studies and science share students and have a planning period together to plan cross-curricular units, etc. Both of the schools in the study previously utilized that planning structure, but changed to a department planning period. This way all teachers in a particular subject can be off together on the same period to meet together to discuss instructional strategies, develop lessons, and review data together. Some department planning periods involved only one grade level (sixth-grade English, for example) and another period involved multiple grade levels (seventh- and eighth-grade English teachers). Departments met a minimum of once a week, but many of them chose to meet together several times a week. Rigor and relevance in their instructional units was a focus and most of their work together was about creating such lessons. These department meetings were focused on the right work and staff members used the time efficiently and effectively.

When these departments met together regularly, several effective strategies came from their discussions together. The five layers of language arts in School A and the looping initiative in School B are two examples. School A's language arts team had their literacy

structure down to a science attempting to meet the reading needs of their students. They were doing everything possible to assist their students in reading and writing at each grade level. School B's math department began looping students after conversations in their collaboration meetings. It is not a school-wide initiative, but teachers were pleased with the data and results in students' achievement in the situations where the looping has occurred over the last few years. Simply put, teachers used the time they had together effectively and wanted more.

Schools utilized teacher-led professional development. Both schools used a professional development model where teachers, along with the principal's input and feedback from classroom observations, led the professional development sessions with topics chosen to strengthen the system. Professional development changed from a model of fragmented strategies and book studies to a model with a clear focus and a specific goal of how to help the student learning process. There was not a feeling of something "added on" to the teachers with no clear meaning or use for their classrooms. There was a clear emphasis on reading and writing strategies that were shared by the English faculty and then immediately embedded throughout the school by other departments. A teacher in School A reported,

> The real change came when our English teachers convinced us that we were all language arts teachers. We were all accountable for teaching reading, writing, listening and speaking. It was tough. We had heard that many times before, but when the message came from our fellow teachers asking for help, we listened. It wasn't easy, but we've come a long way.

Both teaching staffs seemed to understand clearly what needed to be done and had developed a trust for one another so that the professional development was meaningful and came from within the school. Simply put, they learned from each other and coached one another.

Data was used in a meaningful way. Both schools had a system in place for student assessment. Both schools reviewed and analyzed ISTEP scores, SRI scores, Acuity scores, and unit assessments within the school and/or district. But they did not look at an overwhelming amount of data, nor did they allow themselves to become overloaded with the data. They chose the pieces of data they felt were most helpful in diagnosing student learning needs. For example, in the Acuity data there were numerous pieces of data that could be reviewed. School A narrowed the focus to one or two of the data pieces and began making decisions from that information. They did not get lost in the data or spend inordinate amounts of time deciphering the numbers and graphs. Instead, they reviewed the pertinent information and immediately began doing something with their learning. Instruction changed; students were selected for specific interventions; and interventions were focused and timely. Both principals made it a priority to keep things as simple as possible in one of the most complex processes. It is easy for staff members to become confused with the data and burdened by the time and effort it takes to figure out trends and themes in the data. So the leadership of the principals assisted in making the data clear, focused and sensible for student learning. Teachers, although uneasy at first, were not afraid to chart their students' data because they knew meaningful discussion would occur and they would get the instructional assistance they needed. Making a case for clarity and keeping things simple in a complex educational setting is not any easy task, yet it may well be the most important piece of a principal's work (Lencioni, 2013.) Simply put, these teachers used just enough data to make a real difference.

Though principal leadership styles differed, creating a strong team of teacher leaders was essential. Both Principal A and Principal B had their own leadership styles, one a bit more data-driven and one a little more hands-off. Yet both modeled vulnerability and displayed an

openness to continued learning. Both principals were focused on creating a collaborative culture with a teacher leadership team to carry out the initiatives in the schools and to assist in developing a hospitable culture. They met with their leadership teams regularly to clarify the goals of each department, to keep the focus on student learning, to involve them in the decision-making, and to build trust and respect among staff members by keeping each member of the team strategically involved. Both principals understood clearly that they needed to stay in tune with their leadership teams' thoughts, listen to their advice, and always consider their recommendations. They were focused on the right drivers (Fullan, 2011). It is easy to focus on "mediocre measures" (Chenoweth, 2007, p. 179) such as new curricular book adoptions, computer programs that offer easy solutions, or technology enhancements like Smartboards and iPads without understanding the supplemental place these measures take behind the core value of student learning.

Just as important, both principals were strategic in classroom observations and following up with critical conversations with their teaching staff. Both were not afraid to make their expectations clear for each teacher, and if improvement was needed in an area, both principals addressed the concerns and made every effort to support the teacher with specific plans to make the situation better. In other words, if there was an issue with a teacher's performance, it was addressed until the concerns were no longer there. All teachers in each building were keenly aware of this and knew the principal was not afraid to make unpopular decisions when needed. It was about building capacity in teachers, not punishing them. Principal A said, "It's okay for teachers to feel uncomfortable as long as I am giving them all the support they need." And Principal B commented, "I never forget that teachers are the ones doing the most difficult work each day. I need to support them any way I can." Both principals wanted the system to be led

by teachers with positive buy-in so that if they were to leave the school and move to another building, the efforts would continue because the essential components for student achievement were in place. These principals reinforced that the key elements of making enough classroom visits to see daily reality, ensuring that every principal has a good eye for instruction, polishing principals' skills at giving feedback to teachers, deciding how and when to use the district's teacher evaluation rubric, and keeping student learning at the center of supervisory conversations are the five key items for effective leadership (Marshall, 2013). Simply put, School A and School B had the leadership clarity that ensured the building's focus remained on the right things.

The staff created a relational learning environment. Teachers in both schools were dedicated to building relationships with their students. They reported that they felt discipline issues had become much less of a concern because of these relationships. Once they had developed relationships, students showed more respect and attempted lessons. Students were more willing to accept the challenging work and teachers knew that the place for their students was always in the classroom. They were aware they needed every minute of time possible with their students. If one teacher were having difficulty with a particular student, she would reach out to someone else in the school who had a good relationship with that student and gain support and advice.

Several themes have emerged from this research study involving middle schools. Middle school is known as the hardest level. It is where the hormones began to fluctuate during a heightened growth level for students, physically and intellectually. Students arrive in middle school as little kids and leave looking almost like grown-ups, and in between they hardly even know how to manage their own bodies, much less handle academic work. But one teacher in a

New York state middle school described the middle school years by saying that middle school kids are like dogs. If they trust you, they'll do anything for you (Chenoweth, 2007). Middle school students don't trust people unconditionally. They wait for adults especially to earn their trust. But when they do trust you, these students will "work hard and will be enthusiastic participants in school" (Chenoweth, 2007, p. 177). It seems this is occurring in Schools A and B. Teachers were working hard to earn the respect of their middle school students.

Relationship building did not stop there. School A had developed relationships among the staff that permeated the building. They supported one another, spoke highly of each other, and had a genuine team approach. One teacher said, "We really are like a family here. And I mean that with everything in me." They had created a building where trust seemed to drive the results. Mistakes were welcomed and teachers were open to learning and re-learning things. School B was continuing the work of building relationships throughout their staff, especially as they were merging eight new staff members on to the team this year. But their critical work also involved developing relationships with parents and attempting to get as many of them as possible involved in the specific fine arts support groups. All relationship efforts were paying off with high-quality instruction in the school's classrooms.

Teachers believed that each student could learn, could meet the high expectations, and could catch up. And they took full responsibility for making that happen. They worked hard. They were disciplined. They celebrated small successes and pushed each other to get better. Simply put, they cared about the people in their school family and put deliberate actions to those feelings.

This research study's findings appear to show that principals in high-poverty schools can utilize their leadership styles, along with effective strategies and techniques, to create a learning

environment where students achieve at high rates. The following five themes emerged from the study's interviews and observations: principal leadership, student scheduling, staff scheduling, building culture, and curriculum and professional development.

Within these five themes, the following seven strategies were utilized by both principals and seemed to play a critical role in the high achievement of the students in both schools: (a) there was a strategic system in place to address the academic core; (b) the daily schedule was developed for student needs; (c) collaboration for teaching staff was invaluable and they wanted more time together; (d) teacher-led professional development was utilized; (e) data was used in a meaningful way; (f) though principal leadership styles differed, creating a strong team of teacher leaders was essential; and (g) the staff created a relational learning environment. These five themes and seven strategies appear to be critical and essential components that could hold true value for other schools attempting to make gains in their students' academic achievement.

Further Research

Further research is recommended in high achieving, high poverty schools as helping these particular students is crucial. High-needs schools have more difficulty than others attracting highly qualified candidates to be principals who can then hire highly-qualified teachers for these students and their learning (Mitgang, 2003). This research study involved only two middle schools in Indiana. It would be interesting to see what strategies and techniques are being used by principals in other schools, elementary and high school levels, in the state of Indiana and across the country. Continued studies would help in isolating the components of leadership that are essential to effective students' achievement. A few ways to move forward with the research would also include looking specifically at the type of poverty in these schools to see if there is a difference between leadership strategies in rural poverty schools and urban

poverty schools. A second approach would be to complete a study comparing two high-poverty schools with similar demographics, one with high achievement and one with low achievement, and compare the leadership style and strategies being utilized in each. Another approach would be to look specifically at a large district where some of the schools were magnet schools and some were not, as in this study. Research could be conducted comparing and contrasting the strategies used in both situations and determining the ones with the most effect. A final recommendation would be to take one specific strategy used in one of these high-poverty, high-achieving schools such as looping, and research the strategy in great detail answering the research questions of best implementation plan and details of student growth, etc.

Summary/Closing Thoughts

As I look back over this research experience and consider the five emerging themes and seven strategies, I recognize that it would be easy for a school to use these as simple checklists. School leaders could feel that their schools had all of the themes in place and check them off the list. They could also look at each of the seven strategies and feel that they have these techniques embedded in their school, yet still wonder why their students are not achieving at high levels. These seven strategies are not meant to be a meaningless checklist. It goes far beyond that. There's something different at these schools; I sensed it as soon as I began speaking with staff members. Although it is difficult to articulate, I will attempt to describe the uniqueness of these schools and what is occurring inside them that seems to be missing in so many other schools. These buildings had an essence—an intentional, not by accident, caring, structured, and efficient learning organization. They had reached a new height of accomplishment, yet were very aware of the continual need to improve together.

One explanation might be that the seven strategies are capacity-building strategies. Each

strategy alone can have a positive effect on teaching and learning. But it is essential to understand that these strategies are not isolated events. They build on one another and when they are woven together and become interdependent, real change can occur. The critical conditions are set in place with each strategy. Building leaders create the conditions where all staff members and students can be successful. Teachers believe in themselves as educators and have a mindset of competence as effective educators. This competency leads to a genuine belief that their students can learn and achieve at high levels with engaging instruction.

Once this strategic system of strategies was in place and a solid academic core was established, teachers felt competent to have discussions about specific topics. Once they let go of team planning, they became a real team working together, having honest dialogue about student learning and holding each other accountable. Once they had units to discuss and enhance, they wanted more time to collaborate with one another. Once they understood their responsibility for literacy, they wanted teacher-led professional development for reading and writing techniques throughout their school. Once they found meaningful data, they wanted time as a department to discuss it in depth and then created time in the school day to give students the extra assistance they needed. Once they began having some success, they created deeper relationships with students and one another.

They took control of what was in their control. They knew what to teach so they used their resources to purchase materials that helped to created engaging lessons. They knew students needed more time in English and math, so they made certain the student schedule addressed those needs. They knew they needed more time together to discuss particular issues, so they made certain the staff schedule addressed their needs for planning and professional development.

The strategies built capacity that pushed these staff members from an extrinsic mode of operation into an intrinsic way of doing school. These teachers did not appear to be motivated by things outside their classroom, including principal evaluations. Rather, they asked for feedback from administrators, fellow staff members, and collaboration sessions in order to continually refine their teaching. They moved into an almost obligatory state where they felt truly responsible for the learning of each student. Their motivation came from within. Once the strategies were in place, teachers had the competency to reach high levels of achievement. They believed they *should* do so. It had become their responsibility to do whatever it took and they were accountable to address the issues in their building and then find solutions together. These staff members had developed their competence as effective educators who had developed a meaningful sense of purpose for students' learning.

Both schools had successfully employed the strategies and, as a result, they have created a space within their cultures that ultimately sets them apart. They have achieved the next level of effectiveness, operating at a much higher level because their system is running efficiently. These learning environments show me that all students can have the opportunity to learn at high levels. I saw it for myself.

I did not expect to be moved by this research study, but indeed I was. I have always had a passion to do the work within a school in which students and their families faced the barriers that inevitability arise in living in a low-income community. I knew that serving as a principal in such a school would be a difficult endeavor and that I would have to work within the boundaries of what was controllable within that school setting. So I envisioned a simple task of visiting two other Indiana schools to see if they were doing some similar things as our district and to try to steal a few good ideas for our administrative middle school team.

I left both of these middle schools with a determination and motivation that I haven't felt before. Although just a couple of years from official retirement, I have a renewed sense of passion to work in schools with leadership teams who may be struggling to find success for their students. This study verified that there are fundamental components to getting this work accomplished and I was honored to be in two school buildings getting it done. Principals and their leadership teams need coaching and honest conversations within the context of a trusting and non-threatening environment, more than ever before in this educational era of testing and accountability. This work can be accomplished successfully and gracefully driven by strong and competent leaders, and I am committed to continue being part of this critical movement in providing youth with a meaningful and rich education.

When I was walking into School A on the last day of the visitation, a parent was dropping his daughter off at the front entrance. The family was new to the school this year. The girl jumped out of the front seat, was opening up the back door to grab her backpack, and the father said, "Have a good day, Brittany."

"Oh, I'm going to, Dad," she replied. "These teachers are awesome here and actually help. It's not like my old school . . . and I'm going to talk to a bunch of new eighth-grade boys today!"

May each of us strive to be part of a school where each and every student can say that about teachers—"The teachers here help." We do not have a minute to waste.

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APPENDIX A: CONSENT FOR RESEARCH STUDY LETTER OF REQUEST TO

PRINCIPALS

August 5, 2014

Dear Principal:

My name is Rhonda Mull and I am a doctoral student at Indiana State University and currently beginning my research for my dissertation entitled An Examination of Principals in Effective High-Poverty Middle Schools with High Achievement. The purpose of my study is to visit and interview principals, counselors and teachers in two Indiana middle schools who are attaining high achievement scores on our ISTEP+ state assessment and have a free/reduced lunch student population of 50% or higher. As a participant in this study, I will be attempting to gain a better understanding of specific strategies and leadership styles you use in your work at the school.

I am requesting an on-site, two-day visitation this spring to _____ Middle School. If you agree to participate in the study, I would need you to write an acceptance letter showing agreement to conduct the research study and assurance for the study's procedures. On the evening before the first day of the visit, I would like to interview you for approximately one hour. I will review the purpose of the study and all components of the attached Informed Consent. After all of your questions have been answered, I will collect a signed copy of the Informed Consent. The semi-structured interview questions will be asked to gain your personal insights into the strategies and techniques that you are utilizing in the school and that you believe are strategic and essential to student learning. I will also need your assistance with determining room locations for other staff interviews. At the end of the research study, I will share the findings with you by e-mail.

I have been in education for 30 years working as a secondary English teacher, guidance counselor, principal and now director. I would certainly like to speak with you about this request and appreciate your giving it your serious consideration. Once this study is complete, I would share all of my findings with you to see what specific strategies have been used in both of the schools in the study. Hopefully this information could be shared with other principals across our state looking for specific and timely strategies to embed in their own buildings for the ultimate goal of increased student learning in schools serving students in poverty.

Please review the attached Principal's Consent to Participate in the Research form. I will review it with you before we begin the interview session and will request a signed copy. You will also be receiving a call from me in the next two days to discuss any questions or concerns you may have.

Dr. Todd Whitaker is my dissertation chair at ISU and we would both be happy to visit if you would rather discuss this in person. Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Rhonda J. Mull, Director of Middle Schools
New Albany Floyd County Schools
2010 Indiana Principal of the Year
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Dr. Todd Whitaker
Indiana State University
Professor of Educational Leadership
812.243.2267
Todd.Whitaker@indstate.edu

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

How many years teaching/ How many years at school:

Overarching Question: Why is your school of high-poverty attaining high-achievement scores?

- o Tell me about the students in your school.

- o What do you think are the most important factors that have contributed to student learning at this school?

- o Describe which experiences and activities have the greatest impact on your teaching practice.

- o Are there any significant challenges about educating your students? If so, how do you manage these?

- o Describe the types of interactions with your principal that impact your teaching practices.

- o What does teacher leadership look like in your school?

- o Share any programs/interventions in place that make a contribution to student learning in your school.

o Tell me about professional development and opportunities to grow as a teacher in your school. What would be the ideal professional development?

o Describe the types of interactions with colleagues that impact your teaching practices.

o If anything could make this school stronger, what would you suggest?

o Some people might say this school has simply been lucky in achieving high test scores. How would you respond to such a statement?