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Successful Title One Schools: What Works and Why? An Exploratory Case Study of a Distinguished Title One School in South Carolina

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SUCCESSFUL TITLE ONE SCHOOLS: WHAT WORKS AND WHY? AN
EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF A DISTINGUISHED TITLE ONE SCHOOL IN
SOUTH CAROLINA

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, especially...

to Andy for his patience, understanding, and support;

to Kinley, Lathem, and Sophie, may all your dreams come true.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Though only my name appears on the cover of this dissertation, a great many people have contributed to its production. I owe my gratitude to my committee members, friends and family. Because of their involvement, this dissertation was possible, and this journey was an experience I will cherish forever.

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ABSTRACT

The amount of research on successful Title One Schools is woefully inadequate. Because so much money has been allocated for this program, more in depth research is imperative. A qualitative exploratory case study of one school and seven participants, including a principal, an assistant principal, a math coach and four teachers, focuses on the journey of one Title One school to becoming a Distinguished Title One School. The theoretical framework constructed to examine the experiences of these seven participants relied on the findings of an educational reform expert, Michael Fullan (2007) and his theory of Educational Change, along with Marzano's research on making schools more effective at every level. The researcher's own experience and subjectivity also play a major role in the conclusions drawn from this study.

Analysis of three in-depth interviews conducted with the principal, three in-depth interviews conducted with the assistant principal, interviews with two focus groups, and one observation revealed three major themes, including the critical role of school principals, the significance of leadership qualities, and the value of a positive school culture. Implicit in the study is the importance of placing the right person in the role of leadership at a Title One school. Recognizing the qualities shared by leaders who are successful in Title One schools will help school districts to identify those who would be effective in creating a climate of success within such challenging environments.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

The nation's economy has always had periods of stability and instability, each period having a direct impact on the economic welfare of Americans. When the economy began to falter yet again in the final decade of the 20th century, unemployment began to rise. With the rising unemployment came a renewed focus on the impact of joblessness on children. In fact, the National Center for Children in Poverty (2012) offered this bleak appraisal:

Nearly 15 million children in the United States – 21% of all children – live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level – \$22,350 a year for a family of four. Research shows that, on average, families need an income of about twice that level to cover basic expenses. Using this standard, 44% of children live in low-income families. (para.1)

The socioeconomic gap has always existed. In 1965, Congress passed Title One Legislation to address the achievement gap that is partly due to the socioeconomic gap. The United States Department of Education (2012) stated the act's rationale:

The purpose of this title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a

minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments. (sec. 1001)

Despite the good intentions, Reardon (2011) asserts that the socio economic achievement gap still exists. The income achievement gap has widened to “roughly 30 to 40 percent larger for children born in 2001 than those born twenty-five years earlier” (p. 1). Additionally Reardon (2013) mentions, the college completion rate has grown for higher income families without changing significantly for low income families. The gap in the mastery of soft skills and participation in extracurricular activities continues to widen as well. Especially alarming to Jenson (2009) is the number of rural children in poverty: “The rural rate is growing and has exceeded the urban rate every year since data collection began in the 1960’s” (p. 6).

Children from low socio economic backgrounds often struggle in school. Rothstein (2008) states, “Poor children are, in general, not read to aloud as often or exposed to complex language and large vocabularies” (p. 1). This lack of early exposure to strong language skills puts poorer children at an immediate disadvantage in school. In a report conducted by the National School Boards Association (2000), researchers found that “poor children achieve at a lower level, are twice as likely to be retained in grade, and are one-third less likely to attend college than their more advantaged peers” (p.1).

The goal of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), renamed as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), is for every student to be proficient in reading and math by 2014. Each school is expected to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). AYP is an evaluation of an individual school’s performance in several categories. Schools that underperform are placed on a Needs Improvement list. Schools in South Carolina that

continue to underperform are placed in Corrective Action, a designation that could ultimately lead to the state's taking action within the district and in the specific schools. In addition to coping with the possibility of Corrective Action, schools must meet the accountability requirements established in the 2012 federal report card. Implementation of the Common Core State Standards, which correlate state and national standards, must be implemented by 2013-2014. This implementation is a key element in a school's report card grade, along with the results of a high stakes standardized assessment. The assessment currently in use is the PASS test, which will be replaced by the Smarter Balanced Test in 2014-2015.

The study's purpose was to determine which components the participants believe made the difference at this school and the effects, if any, those components had on the school's ability to win this prestigious award. In studying the school's journey, I hope to identify components needed for schools to become Distinguished Title One Schools and explain the impact, if any, those components have on the school's overall success as defined by the South Carolina rating system in closing the socio economic achievement gap. At the time this elementary school won the South Carolina Distinguished Title One School, they had to meet the following requirements to be considered:

- School must make AYP in the two most recent school years assessed
- The school's free/reduced lunch count must be greater than 50%
- School's enrollment for White and African-American student subgroups must be equal to or greater than 40 students for ELA and math

- The school’s White and African-American ELA and math student subgroups weighted averages must be equal to or greater than its previous year’s White and African-American ELA and math student subgroups weighted averages

The social conditions poor rural children endure ultimately make their way into schools and classrooms, making education even more challenging for the students. Now, more than ever, it is important for educators to find specific ways to close the rural socio economic achievement gap between underprivileged and working class students and upper and middle class student populations. Payne (2008) explained the importance of this research. “Educators can be a huge gift to students living in poverty. In many instances, education is the tool that gives a child life choices” (p. 52). Sociologist Alan Sadovnik (2007) contends that students will benefit if researchers can seek to “understand why students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do less well in school and to provide pragmatic policy recommendations for successful school reform and to reduce the achievement gap” (p. 17).

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide this study:

1. What components do Johnson Elementary School administrators believe supported their transition from a Title One school to a Distinguished Title One School?
2. What components do Johnson Elementary School teachers believe supported their transition from a Title One school to a Distinguished Title One School?

Significance

Learning the reasons for the success experienced by some schools is essential to helping all schools improve to meet their students’ needs. Stillwell-Parvensky (2011)

claims that Title One funding has not closed the achievement gap, and disadvantaged students are not acquiring the skills they need to be successful in education and life:

...despite 45 years of Title 1 investments and the sustained hard work of teachers, principals and school leaders, Title I has not accomplished its aspiration of closing the achievement gap and the U.S. public education system continues to fail to ensure that our most disadvantaged students have the opportunity and preparation to succeed in school and in life (p. i).

The study's purpose was to determine which components the participants believe made the difference at this school and the effects, if any, those components had on the school's ability to win this prestigious award. Each individual school has the autonomy that allows for analysis of students' needs and the ability to make decisions and plans that will be of the most benefit to the students themselves. The National School Boards Association (2000) contends "...the ultimate success of Title One depends upon the ability of local school administrators to determine how to best use limited program funds to serve the needs of children who are struggling to achieve academic success" (p.2). African American students and white students in the ELA and math subgroups attending the school at the heart of this study were able to reach and maintain high test scores over a two year period. All decisions made by school administrators, leadership, and teachers in this two year period will be studied and analyzed. The objective of the study is to examine and evaluate the successes of Johnson Elementary School and contribute to the literature on the achievement gap. This study will give under performing schools information that could help them make similar progress and help to ensure that Title One is fulfilling its intended purpose.

Limitations

As suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2011), no research study is perfect. Researchers gather data to inform their audience about specific topics, but certain necessary constraints can impose limitations on the quality and amount of the information. An understanding of how a study is limited is necessary to help readers to know the extent of its usefulness to them (p. 77). The study's purpose was to determine which components the participants believe made the difference at this school and the effects, if any, those components had on the school ability to win this prestigious award. The following limitations need to be considered when reading this study:

The study was framed by Fullan's Educational Change Theory and Marzano's theories on school leadership and effective school level, teacher level and student level components. Therefore, this study is seen through those two specific lenses. The school in this study attained Distinguished Title One School status in 2011, based on the South Carolina accountability system. This study is limited to the descriptions and explanations given by individuals within the school during the two year period that led up to the award. Therefore, the findings from this study are specific to only the data and conclusions described. As the researcher, I wanted to enable the reader to "understand the phenomena from the participant's perspective." (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 77).

Delimitations

This study is only conducted in South Carolina, in one school district, and in one school. This narrow focus is deliberate so that I can gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena. As suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2011), "one chooses a qualitative approach to understand the phenomena... in depth and in context" (p. 77). The very

complexity of the achievement gap problem is also the primary reason the problem has persisted. Because the issue is so complex, this study will not provide a prescriptive approach to the process of closing the achievement gap completely. Additional studies will need to be conducted to further examine the intricacies of the achievement gap.

Definition of Terms

Accountability: Being held responsible and answerable for specified results or outcomes of an activity over which one has authority (Education.com, 2013).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is one of the main components of the current reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in March 2010. Under the current ESEA legislation for school report cards, schools will receive a letter grade from A-F, and penalties will be enforced for schools that score a D or F. To receive a high grade, schools may have to meet over 77 objectives. A subgroup for male and female was added, and the size of a subgroup has been reduced to 30 students. On the overall ESEA report card, ELA and math scores will now account for 10% each; science and social studies scores will now account for 5% each (Hamm, Potts, & Elmore, 2013).

ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act): According to a report out of the state of Washington in 2012, The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was passed in 1965 as a part of the "War on Poverty." ESEA emphasizes equal access to education and establishes high standards and accountability. The law authorizes federally funded education programs that are administered by the states. In 2002, Congress amended ESEA and renamed it as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Because of the negative connotations associated with NCLB, the Obama administration reworked some

of the law's requirements, reverted back to the name ESEA and has yet to complete the necessary work for reauthorization (State of Washington, 2012).

Title I: Title I, Part A (Title I) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended (ESEA) provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children can meet challenging state academic standards. Federal funds are currently allocated through four statutory formulas that are based primarily on census poverty estimates and the cost of education in each state (United States Department of Education, 2011).

Title I Distinguished School: From 1996-2011, the National Title I Distinguished School Program honored schools across the country for their innovation in helping Title I populations achieve high educational standards. Selected from each state by members of the National Title I Association, these schools represented examples of superior Title I programs in one of two categories:

1. Demonstrating exceptional student performance for two or more consecutive years; or
2. Closing the achievement gap between student groups. (National Title 1 Association, n.d.).

PASS (Palmetto Assessment of State Standards): As mandated in Chapter 18, Title 59 of the 1976 Code, the Education Accountability Act was amended (May 2008) to provide for the development of a new statewide assessment program. This program, known as the Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS), was first administered in

the spring of 2009. The PASS is administered to South Carolina public and charter school students in grades three through eight (South Carolina Department of Education, 2012a).

Poverty: The three most common measures of poverty are income, assets (meaning accumulated wealth in the form of money, securities, and real estate), and socioeconomic metrics. Measures in the last category go beyond financial data to account for health, nutrition, infant mortality, sanitation, and other aspects of human well-being (infoplease.com, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

Fullan (2007) explains the complexity of educational change.

Thus, on the one hand, we need to keep in mind the values and goals and the consequences associated with specific educational changes; and on the other hand, we need to comprehend the dynamics of educational change as a sociopolitical process involving all kinds of individual, classroom, school, local, regional, and national factors at work in interactive ways. (p. 9)

He further explains the two ways to view educational reform. One of these ways is identified as the innovation-focused approach. This approach is designed to "... examine and trace specific innovations to see how they fare, and to determine which factors are associated with success" (p. 65). The premise of educational change theory is that four phases comprise the change process: initiation, implementation, and continuation. A fourth phase, outcome, is an expected result of the other three.

Educational change theory is comprised of four processes. Each of the processes is comprised of factors. Within the first process, initiation, there are five factors. These

factors include existence and quality of innovation, access to innovations, advocacy from central administration, teacher advocacy and external change agents. The second process, implementation, consists of three areas, which are then broken into specific factors.

(Fullan, 2007) These three areas are characteristics of change, local factors, and external factors. The third process is continuation, which entails making a decision between continuing with the implemented change or beginning the process over. The decision to continue with or change the process is based on three conditions: whether the change is embedded into the structure, whether there are enough skilled workers for the initiative, and whether continuing assistance for the change will be provided. Finally, the outcome of the change can only be successful under certain conditions. First, leaders and teachers must accept that change is evolutionary and that complacency would inhibit their ability to build on their success. The change agents who first initiated the efforts to change must continue to press for improvement, support those in the school who make the change work, and be willing to negotiate and compromise with each other for the well-being of the students. Last, all involved in the process must realize that ownership of the students' success belongs to everyone and work with each other to maintain their achievements (Fullan, 2007).

The complexity of the change process requires the cooperation of all participants if the change is to be successful. Educators, however, often have difficulty understanding the necessity of change. Their reluctance can hinder the successful implementation of strategies that would benefit both students and teachers. The first step in initiating change is to recognize that the need for a new direction is urgent. According to Fullan (2007), "The first thing is to realize that decreasing the gap between high and low performers-

boys, girls; ethnic groups, poor, rich; special education-is crucial because it has so many social consequences” (p. 45). Fullan (2007) also asserts that educators have a moral responsibility to students. In the final analysis, the educators’ most important mission is to help students experience success. Without making a firm commitment to helping each student reach his or her potential, we as educators cannot truly say we are doing our jobs. Given the above considerations, Dr. Bill Daggett’s statement about the achievement gap indicates this issue is more than just a concern within one state; it has grown to be a global concern:

This issue is far bigger than us, it is a global concern. There are 13 million people unemployed and 3.8 million jobs available right now which do not have workers to fill them because our students do not possess the skills which are needed to complete these jobs. (W. Daggett, personal communication, August 1, 2013)

He contends that other countries are poised to surpass the United States economically. Within this, the richest country in the world, more and more of our own citizens are struggling to survive. Unable to make a living wage, a growing number of people are turning to public assistance to subsidize their meager incomes. Only adequate education for all students can ultimately reverse this trend.

Marzano (2003) believes effective education depends on the involvement of everyone at every level. Within the school, five factors are crucial: a guaranteed and viable curriculum, challenging goals accompanied by effective feedback, parent and community involvement, a safe and orderly environment, and collegiality and professionalism. The faculty must practice sound instructional strategies, demonstrate effective classroom management, and create a challenging curriculum. Strong and fair

leadership is critical to success; without effective leadership, the efforts of students and teachers will be less successful.

To be effective, administrators and teachers must create a curriculum that centers not only on basic skills but on critical thinking skills as well. Allowing teachers sufficient time to teach the material in depth is also important so that learning is not superficial. Developing clear goals and fostering a spirit of teamwork among the staff make a difference in achievement. Faculties and administrators who do not share the same vision are less likely to convey the importance of learning to their students. High expectations are meaningless, however, unless other contributing factors are present. Feedback from teachers and positive parental involvement help children know that caring adults are invested in their futures. For parents, a few school events scattered throughout the year are insufficient. They need the kind of ongoing communication with teachers that builds a kind of partnership to improve the children's welfare. Since poverty often fosters an unstable and even unsafe home environment, school can serve as a sanctuary for troubled children. Students should be able to see their teachers as caretakers who value them as people. Sometimes a school provides the only real stability in a child's life. A teacher can help students thrive academically, emotionally, and socially, greatly enhancing their chances for success in the future.

Innovative instructional strategies and the ability to deliver information clearly enable children to process and remember information better and longer. When students can comprehend rather than simply memorize information, they can transfer what they have learned to situations outside the classroom. Effective teachers can also impart useful life lessons by helping students recognize the importance of rules and by teaching

students that actions have consequences. When creating an instructional plan for the year, good teachers are able to integrate a number of practices into their instruction. They make distinctions between necessary and unnecessary information, reinforce discipline, and address multiple learning styles. Teachers also realize that theirs is not a solitary job; the best schools have teachers and administrators who collaborate and cooperate for the benefit of the students in their care.

Overview of Methodology

Yin (2003) defines a case study as “reports of research on a specific organization, program, or process (or some set of these)” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 267). This study will focus on an organizational process: the journey of a school from a Title One school to a South Carolina Distinguished Title One School. An exploratory case study will be used to examine this process. Glesne (2011) asserts that a case study should “...focus on the complexity within the case, on its uniqueness, and its linkages to the social context of which it is a part” (p. 22).

The study’s purpose was to determine which components the participants believe made the difference at this school and the effects, if any, those components had on the school ability to win this prestigious award over a two year period. The two year period is necessary because to be eligible to receive this award, the school must have had high test scores in the white and African American subgroups for this length of time. Glesne (2011) states, “The study of the case...tends to involve in-depth and often longitudinal examinations with data gathered through participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and document collection and analysis” (p. 22). Therefore, the data collection methods that will be used are a series of three semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and

participant observations. A criterion sampling method was used to select participants. The principal, assistant principal, math coach and reading coach were selected as participants based on their roles as leaders within the school. A criterion sampling method was also used to select the teachers, chosen based on their length of employment at the school.

Chapter Three is a detailed explanation of the methodology of this study. Included are a description and rationale for the qualitative study, as well as the design of the data collection method. Most importantly, the chapter illustrates the two components most necessary to good research: the validity of the study and the academic integrity of the researcher.

Organization of the Study

In Chapter One, I explain the theoretical framework for this study. Chapter Three would usually explain the theoretical framework. I chose, however, to put it in Chapter One because I believed it necessary to set up the study and clarify the purpose of the Title One Legislation.

In Chapter Two, an overview of Title One and its purpose are explained. Then, the history behind the rural achievement gap is provided, along with current data for where the rural achievement gap exists. The chapter concludes with a look at literature on specific strategies which have been proven to work in closing the achievement gap in both Title One and Non-Title One schools. Strong emphasis is placed on explaining which components have been studied and subsequently put into practice within successful schools.

Chapter Three begins with the research framework and continues with the approach and rationale of the methods used within the study. I explain the data collection methods and describe the data analysis design. I also explain my role as the researcher and my ethical approach to the research. Finally, I explain my conceptual framework and how I connect to the study both personally and professionally.

In Chapter Four I present data derived from the research. I focus on categories and themes that are actively constructed during the data analysis of the in depth interviews, focus groups, and observations. It was during this data analysis that I began to discern the categories and themes that were so prevalent in the in-depth interviews, focus groups, and observations.

In Chapter Five I answer the two research questions that were proposed at the beginning of the study. I describe connections made between the categories and themes and the theoretical framework of Fullan's Educational Change Theory and Marzano's school level and teacher level factors. Chapter Five explains conclusions drawn from the data collected and connects those conclusions to theory. Chapter Five will conclude with implications of the findings for educational leaders, and this chapter will end with suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Title One: Definition and History

In an effort to meet the educational needs of America's most disadvantaged students, Congress passed Title One legislation in 1965, and it was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Its goal was ambitious: to close the achievement gap between children in poverty and their more fortunate peers. In its forty year existence, the Act has undergone some changes, but its core mission has been consistent as McClure, Wiener, Roza, and Hill (2007) explains:

...in recognition of the special educational needs of children of low-income families and the impact that concentrations of low-income families have on the ability of local education agencies to support adequate educational programs, the Congress hereby declares it to be the policy of the United States to provide financial assistance... to local educational agencies serving areas with concentrations of children from low-income families to expand and improve their educational programs...to meet the special educational needs of educationally deprived children. (p. 12)

The Title One legislation is comprised of five parts: Part A, Part B, Part C, Part D, and Part E. Part A deals specifically with standards and assessments. According to the United States Department of Education (2012, sec. 1111), Part A, the improvement of basic programs operated by local educational agencies, requires schools to provide

professional development for teachers. This professional development would help ensure effective implementation of content standards as well as higher achievement on content assessments. Title One Part A can also provide additional teachers, additional teaching time, and strategies for better parental involvement. Two types of improvement plans are eligible to receive Title One Part A funds, School Wide and Targeted Assistance Plans.

Part B funding designates money for schools that design and implement reading programs that work. Like Part A, these schools enhance instruction by offering professional development to teachers and creating reading assessments that help teachers evaluate their students' comprehension skills. To assist in increasing reading proficiency, these schools also offer supplementary reading materials for those who need them, as well as early literacy instruction to give students every possible chance to succeed (United States Department of Education, 2004, sec.1201).

Part C funding of Title One legislation is used for MEP (Migrant Education Program). These funds may be used for the following as explained specifically by the Florida Department of Education:

Identification of migrant children and youth for MEP eligibility, recruitment of migrant children and youth for MEP services, school placement assistance, identification and recruitment (ID & R) training, interstate and intrastate coordination, advocacy, family support, and determining the eligibility of migratory children and youth for Migrant Education Program services. (2005-2013, p. 1)

Title One Part D funding goes to schools which establish intervention programs for neglected, delinquent, or at risk students. The National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center (NDTAC) (2013) explains Part D has three goals:

(1) improve educational services for these children so they have the opportunity to meet challenging state academic content and achievement standards; (2) provide them with services to successfully transition from institutionalization to further schooling or employment; and (3) prevent at-risk youth from dropping out of school, and to provide dropouts and children and youth returning from correctional facilities with a support system to ensure their continued education.
(pg. 1)

Finally, Title One Part E, National Assessment of Title One, allows the federal government to assess the progress of states, districts, and schools which receive Title One funding. States must prove competence in several specific areas in order to retain the funding (United States Department of Education, 2012, sec. 1501). The State of New Jersey Department of Education (2010) explains:

The National Assessment of Title I (NATI) is a coordinated set of evaluation studies that collect information on the implementation and impact of Title I. The law directs the NATI to examine a number of specific issues, including the impact of Title I programs on student achievement; state standards and assessment; accountability and school improvement provisions; school choice and supplemental services; professional development and teacher quality; comprehensive school reform and improvement strategies; and the targeting of Title I funds. (sec.1501-1503)

The funding for Title One programs and requirements comes from a federal formula grant which helps local school districts and schools support the education of their economically deprived students. To receive money from this grant, each state must submit a plan which includes challenging academic standards, accountability, academic assessments, state authorization, language assessments, academic assessments of English Language Learners, and specific assurances that criteria are being met.

The Title One Grant uses the formula for Education Finance Incentive Grants. Based on census data, which reports the amount of poverty in each state, the federal funds are distributed to each state's education agency. Each state is then responsible for dispersing federal funds to the highest poverty districts within the state. School districts then allocate the federal money to schools with the highest poverty rates, calculated or dependent on free and reduced lunch percentages.

LEAs target the Title I funds they receive to public schools with the highest percentages of children from low-income families. Unless a participating school is operating a schoolwide program, the school must focus Title I services on children who are failing, or most at risk of failing, to meet State academic standards. (United States Department of Education, 2012)

Title One has distributed billions of dollars in federal aid since its inception in 1965. School systems nationwide receive over \$14 billion annually to benefit children living in poverty and at risk of failure. During the 2009-2010 school year, federal funding through this program was used by over 56,000 public schools to serve more than 21 million children. Of these students, approximately 59 % were in kindergarten through

fifth grade, 21% in grades 6-8, 17 % in grades 9-12, 3 % in preschool, and less than 1 % ungraded (United States Department of Education, 2012).

In 2011, South Carolina received over \$200 million in federal Title One funds (Federal Education Budget Project, 2012). Of those funds the district where the school of study is located received over 4 million dollars in Title One allocations. They received an additional \$821, 026 for choice related transportation and Supplemental Educational Services. In 2012, this school district received a little over \$3.6 million dollars in funding (United States Department of Education, 2012).

Revisions in Legislations

For the first fifteen years, starting in 1965, Title One was revised every couple of years. This consistent revising helped legislators with accountability of spending. Initially, the money went to schools which used the funds to pull at-risk students from their regular classes for additional instruction. However, in 1978, the plan was modified so that funds could be used to benefit the entire school, rather than a small number of selected students. This change was made in hopes that these funds would increase Title One schools' overall performance. In 1981, under the Reagan administration, the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA) was passed. Title One was renamed Chapter One in 1981. Along with the name change came some changes in the original federal regulations. With this change, the federal government gave more control to state and local agencies (National School Boards Association, 2000).

Despite the billions of dollars spent to improve education, the belief by legislators persisted that American schools were not preparing students for competition in a global market. This belief led to the publication of *A Nation at Risk* by President Reagan's

National Commission on Excellence in Education. As a result of the Commission's findings, education funding was primarily allocated to improve instructional practices and student achievement. The reauthorization of Chapter One in 1988 gave even more flexibility in the use of Title One funds. A National Assessment in 1993 of the Title One Act found that students did not improve on standardized tests; they were exposed to "watered down" curriculum; funding only provided an average of thirty minutes of extra instruction, and states and districts focused more on meeting guidelines about compliance than changing the curriculum (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). These findings indicated that the Act had fallen far short of its goals. Additionally, high school and middle schools were not served because most Title One funds were used in elementary schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

These issues were also reflected in the 1994 Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), the framework for how Title One operates today. This 1994 legislation mandated standard-based reform, school wide programs, and local flexibility. Standard based reform required high standards in mathematics and reading/language arts. Assessment in those areas had to be aligned to the state standards and to use criteria to measure adequate yearly progress (AYP). Last, states were also required to create a plan to help those schools which did not meet the criteria for AYP (United States Department of Education, 1994).

Several major policy changes were put into place because of IASA. The school wide program section of the IASA lowered the required percentage of poverty necessary to receive funding from 75% to 50%. Additionally, this act freed districts and schools to use money from other federal sources in combination with Title One funding to improve

student achievement. Asserting that all students can master higher level thinking skills, IASA required schools to increase learning time, make better use of program funds in districts, require professional development, maintain a high quality curriculum and include more parental/guardian involvement in the schools (National Schools Boards Association, 2000).

Yet another ambitious educational initiative was No Child Left Behind (NCLB), signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2001. It brought added attention to Title One Legislation that focused on four specific areas: increased accountability for districts and schools, greater control of federal funds given to states and districts, increased funding to programs proven to be effective, and more choice for parents whose children were enrolled in failing schools. The goal of this act was to close the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children. Another goal was that students in the third grade would be 100% proficient in reading by the 2013-2014 school year, and that all teachers would be “highly qualified.” NCLB helped states receive 40% more federal education funding if they adhered to specific requirements:

- Annual testing of all students against the states' reading and math standards in grades 3 through 8 and in science three times within a student's school career (including once in high school);
- Verification of each state's assessment system via assessment of selected state districts every other year in the NAEP test;
- The complete analysis and reporting of student achievement results;

- A state definition and timeline for determining whether a school, its district, and the state are making adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward the goal of 100 percent proficiency by the 2013 – 2014 school year;
- Technical assistance followed by sanctions for schools, districts, and the state for failure to meet AYP;
- Status of “highly qualified” for teachers of the core academic subjects by 2005 – 2006;
- State and school employment of highly-qualified aides or paraprofessionals;
- Support provided for students not meeting the state standards and / or for those with special needs (e.g., homeless, limited-English proficiency); and
- The use of scientifically-based educational programs and strategies (Carleton College, 2008).

NCLB was up for reauthorization in 2007. In 2008, the Obama administration proposed 19 changes to the legislation, which included differentiated accountability, clarification on how student achievement should be measured, and a general restructuring of the accountability system (Carleton College, 2008).

On March 13, 2010, the Department of Education released the Obama administration’s blueprint for reauthorizing ESEA, Elementary and Secondary Education Act:

The blueprint challenges the nation to embrace education standards that would put America on a path to global leadership. It provides incentives for states to adopt academic standards that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace, and create accountability systems that measure

student growth toward meeting the goal that all children graduate and succeed in college. (African American Voices in Congress, n.d., p.3)

The blueprint has five main objectives and is still being challenged and discussed within the United States Senate:

1. Produce college and career-ready students through higher standards for all students, improved assessments, and a broader academic program;
2. Develop and foster more effective teachers and principals by "recognizing, encouraging, and rewarding excellence," making equitable educational opportunities more accessible to effective teachers, and improving preparation, recruitment, and support for teachers and principals with a focus on improving the effectiveness of teachers and leaders;
3. Foster equality and opportunity for all students through "rigorous and fair accountability," providing rewards for improving student outcomes; and supporting programs to better meet the needs of all students, including ELL and disabled students;
4. Raise standards and rewarding excellence through "innovative" reforms via President Obama's Race to the Top program; expanding public school options through institutions such as charter schools and "other autonomous public schools"; and improving access to accelerated courses, including university courses;
5. Promote improvements and innovations continuously through federal programs such as the Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) and other means (Nagel, 2010, p. 1).

In summary, this revised legislation retains its focus on teacher, student, and parent accountability, performance ratings, standardized testing, teacher quality, academic standards and equity for the poor. A new focus has emerged from this legislation as well: incentive based pay for teachers. The legislation's main objective in relation to Title One is the benefit of lowering subgroups to 30 students in order to have more accountability for students who are at risk of not meeting state standards.

Politicians of both major parties would like to see even more control of educational decision making go back to the individual states to help meet the specific needs of each state's citizens. The progress of this reauthorization, however, has stalled. President Obama challenged Congress to reauthorize ESEA by September 2012. Since February 2012, Representative John Kline, Chair of the House Education Committee, has scheduled five meetings in an unsuccessful attempt to make progress on the legislation. Because Congress has failed to pass a reauthorization of ESEA, the Obama administration has offered states the right to request waivers that would give them greater autonomy at the state level. As of December 2012, thirty-four states and the District of Columbia have written waivers which have been approved (United States Department of Education, 2012).

On February 28, 2012, Dr. Mick Zais, the Superintendent of Education for South Carolina, submitted a request for a waiver which would grant flexibility on certain provisions of NCLB, including some Title One requirements. Some of the key components of this waiver included the following:

- A new system of federal accountability that awards letter grades to schools and school districts based upon student achievement in English/language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and high school graduation rates.
- Increased transparency of student achievement by student subgroups.
- Elimination of the all-or-nothing approach of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) by giving schools and school districts credit for progress and student growth.
- Establishment of a new educator evaluation system for full implementation in 2014-2015 that incorporates measures of student growth and student achievement as a component (South Carolina Department of Education, 2012a).

Each of these components plays a crucial role in the Title One legislation. Schools must show some success with all students, including their subgroups. Any school failing to demonstrate progress for all student subgroups will lose 20% of its Title One money. That money will be allocated in such a way that parents whose children attend the failing school may choose to send them to a different one.

In July 2012, the South Carolina Department of Education waiver was accepted by the United States Department of Education. This waiver is good for two years and may be extended for a third year. However, if ESEA is reauthorized and signed into law, ESEA legislation will override any state waiver accepted by the United States Department of Education. The waiver specifically addressed the issues of subgroups, letter grades for schools and districts, and more rigorous consequences for schools with a score of D or F (Ham, Potts, & Elmore, 2013).

Under this new waiver, several Title One changes are now in effect. Title One schools will now be categorized as Focus, Priority, or Reward Schools based on

performance. The bottom five percent of Title One schools will be identified as Priority Schools. These schools will be required to create a turnaround plan with input from school stakeholders. This plan must also “adhere to Turnaround Principles set by the US Department of Education and respond to the specific needs of the students in the school” (South Carolina Department of Education, 2012b, p. 2). These schools will continue to be classed as Priority Schools for three years and will be required to set aside 20% of their school wide budget to fund activities related to the turnaround plans.

The next 10 % of Title One schools will be identified as Focus Schools. Focus schools will work with stakeholders and SCDE to create a plan to help improve the performance of low achieving subgroups. These schools will be designated as Focus Schools for three years, and the district LEA will be required to set aside 20% of their school wide plan budget to fund activities related to their improvement plan. Priority and Focus Schools must provide Supplemental Educational Services, or free tutoring, to their student populations.

The top 15% of Title One schools in South Carolina will be classified as Reward Schools. The two categories of Reward Schools are highest achieving, which recognizes schools with the highest overall achievement, and high progress, which recognizes schools that show the most progress from one year to the next. The top three schools in each of these two categories will receive a \$5,000 award, and the top school in each category will receive an award of \$10,000. This money must be used to pay expenses for a team of educators to attend the National Title One Conference (South Carolina Department of Education, 2012a).

Title One Legislation's Impact

From Title One's inception in 1965 to its present form in ESEA, the purpose of this legislation has been explicitly communicated:

The purpose of this title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments (United States Department of Education, 2004, sec.1001).

In addition, Title One helps ensure that students who are in poverty or at risk of not meeting state standards have the opportunity to be successful academically.

In a study completed by the Rural School and Community Trust (2010), the researchers found that students from low income families enter school with less knowledge and weaker skills than their more affluent peers. These disadvantaged students could benefit from more resources and adequate funding to help close the achievement gap between the socio economically disadvantaged students and their middle class peers (2010, p. 8). The purpose of Title One funding is to help districts and schools provide these resources.

When studying or discussing the achievement gap in schools, both researchers and educators often primarily consider racial disparity. Equally significant, and for many of the same reasons, is the issue of low achievement among rural children in poverty. A research study conducted by Stanford University on the socioeconomic achievement gap concluded that the income gap for rural children has widened to "roughly 30 to 40

percent larger for children born in 2001 than those born twenty five years earlier”
(Reardon, 2011, p. 1).

Furthermore, Mississippi State University, in conjunction with *The Daily Yonder* and the Southern Rural Development Center, conducted a study on how achievement in rural America has changed in the past four decades. They found rural areas have made gains in their high school graduation rates. However, fewer of those graduates earn post-secondary degrees, and they lag behind the national average in college enrollment (Gallardo & Bishop, 2010, p. 2).

Raudenbush in Saminsky (2011) also suggests there is more evidence that children from low-income families receive a greater benefit from school. Additionally, he explains that the academic growth of low-income children keeps pace with that of other students. However, in the summer months, they lose much of what they have gained and enter school less prepared to learn than their peers. Because of the challenges of helping poor children succeed and the money spent on the effort, programs that target the achievement gap have been under scrutiny by a number of education groups and researchers (Saminsky, p.1).

A 2007 report focusing on the effectiveness of South Carolina schools was conducted by the South Carolina Oversight Committee. In this study the Committee recognized 136 elementary and middle schools for their students’ improved PACT scores. Twenty-seven schools were recognized for their progress in closing the achievement gap for five consecutive years. Thirty percent of the schools honored were high poverty schools with at least a 70% poverty rate, and 67% percent of the schools honored served a population with at least a 50% poverty rate. While these numbers are

encouraging, too many schools with high percentages of impoverished students were unable to make similar gains.

In another 2007 study, “Climate for High Achievement: A Study of Consistently Recognized Gap-Closing Schools in SC,” The Education Oversight Committee examined 26 schools that were successful in closing the achievement gap for four consecutive years. The objective was to find specific characteristics within these schools that would explain their success. The overall conclusion of the study was that a positive school climate, high teacher morale, and a working relationship with parents led to higher student achievement. Students themselves were happier with the environment at these twenty six schools. The study was not restricted to schools with high numbers of students in poverty; they served more middle-income and gifted students, and only three of these schools had more than 70% of their students in poverty (South Carolina Education Oversight Committee, 2007).

Advocating many of the same principles found in other research, Ruby Payne (2008) wrote nine practices which help raise the achievement of students in poverty. The first of these practices is to build relationships of mutual respect with students by setting high standards and through using non-verbal signals of approval. Educators must also teach beginning learners to work with other students and to become involved in the classroom culture. To maximize their ability to reach their students, teachers are also urged to help students modify their speech and writing patterns. Most students in poverty use colloquial language, imitating the language used in their homes. Teachers use more formal speech patterns when they talk to students, and tests are also written in a more formal way. Because disadvantaged students hear only 10 million words by age three,

they are poorly equipped to compete with students who would have heard three times as many words by the same age. In order to make learning more accessible, teachers must help students to overcome their language deficiencies (Payne, 2008).

As much as possible, educators must also assess and accommodate each student's resources by determining what students have access to away from school. By learning which resources are available to students, teachers can assign after school projects and homework that students can complete. Teaching students the difference in "home rules" and "school rules" is another vital part of closing the gap. Learning behavioral boundaries helps children to function more effectively at school. While it is a teacher's job to monitor all students' progress, that duty is especially important for poorer children who might require intervention to meet their educational needs. Poor children also tend to be more literal and often require extra help so that they can grasp the concept of abstract thinking and learn how to ask specific questions when they have trouble with content (Payne, 2008).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, teachers must strive to build a good working relationship with parents, helping them feel welcomed and valued. Ruby Payne (2008a) suggests, "Educators can be a huge gift to students living in poverty. In many instances education is *the* tool that gives a child life choices" (p. 52). These findings are commensurate with the wide variety of studies by researchers and educators who examined the disparity in achievement at schools of all types, not just those with high poverty levels.

Characteristics of Successful Schools

In 2005, The International Center for Leadership in Education, under the leadership of President Willard Daggett, published its evaluation of a number of studies conducted on successful school programs. Beginning with respected educator Ronald Edmonds' "effective schools model," which he created in the 1970's, the organization found that all successful schools adhered to a core group of principles. Edmonds advocated strong leadership, a focus on basic skills, high expectations for students, frequent monitoring of student performance, and a safe learning environment. A study in the 1990's by Jaap Scheerens and Roel Bosker recommended most of those principles, as well as parental involvement, a focused curriculum, and a supportive working environment. Other studies the Center examined were the U.S. State Department's "Key High School Reform Strategies," Robert J. Marzano's *What Works in Schools-Translating Research into Action*, Drs. Doris and Custer Quick's "High Poverty-High Success: Schools That Defy the Odds," which studied innovative schools and programs, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's study of secondary schools. The final study in the Center's research was the 2002 publication of *Effective Schools-Only You Can Make a Difference* by Lawrence W. Lezotte, Robert D. Skaife, and Michael D. Holstead. In his most recent book, in fact, Lezotte has gone back to Ronald Edmonds' groundbreaking work of three decades earlier to build on his original findings (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2005).

After completing their research, the Center for Leadership compiled ten common traits that "schools should use as a platform for success in their reform initiatives:"

1. Create a school culture that utilizes a strong and challenging curriculum in the belief that all students can learn;
2. Use data to help students distinguish between essential and non-essential information;
3. Make learning relevant to students' lives by teaching them to apply their knowledge to real life situations;
4. Design a curriculum that is demanding, relevant, and integrated into all grades and disciplines;
5. Use students' personal interests, learning styles, abilities and needs to create a variety of pathways to learning;
6. Set high expectations and hold students and adults accountable for student progress;
7. Provide professional development opportunities for teachers to improve the quality of instruction;
8. Involve parents and communities in student learning;
9. Establish a safe learning environment; and
10. Offer leadership development for all adults involved in helping schools achieve success (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2005).

Change in Schools

According to the Wallace Foundation (2013), "Paying attention to the principal's role has become all the more essential as the U.S. Department of Education and state education agencies embark on the nation's 5, 000 most troubled schools, a task that depends on the skills and abilities of thousands of current and future school leaders" (p.

6). Researchers for the Wallace Foundation found five key responsibilities of the building leader. The first responsibility is to develop a vision for the school that focuses on academic success for all students. School leaders have too rarely focused on setting high standards and expectations for their students. The second responsibility is to create a positive climate. A positive climate is supportive and responsive to children and has an attitude of professionalism within the community of teachers with a focus on good instruction. The third responsibility is to cultivate leadership in others; it focuses on the principal's ability to grow others to be leaders. The principal should be willing to share the leadership responsibilities. The Wallace Foundation also noted, "Principals and district leaders have the most influence on decisions in all schools; however, they do not lose influence as others gain influence" (p.10). The fourth responsibility is to improve instruction. Effective principals work endlessly to change the quality of instruction within their schools. Additionally, they encourage professional development. The fifth responsibility is to manage people, data and processes. The Wallace Foundation explains to get the full benefit of a school leader the leader must be in place five to seven years. The Foundation explains the need for a focus on cultivating effective leaders, "The point is that although in any school a range of leadership patterns exists-among principals, assistant principals, formal and informal teacher leaders, and parents-the principal remains the central source of leadership influence" (p. 6).

Principals go about changing schools in different ways. Lovely (2004), explains three phases through their first year as principal. The first phase is the anticipatory stage. This stage begins as soon as the principal accepts the position. In this stage the principal is beginning to meet new acquaintances. On the other hand, he begins to end relationships

with people at his current school. The second phase is the encounter stage. This stage begins once the keys are handed to the new principal. For first year principals this phase is generally very short. During this time, the principal finds there are many constraints and issues within the school which must be addressed. The success of this stage is gauged by how well the principal is able to handle these challenges and move to the last stage. The last stage is the insider stage. In this stage, the principal becomes a part of the new school and is accepted by faculty, students and parents. Lovely explains, “Although principals might retain their position for several years, what largely determines their long-term success is the manner in which they are socialized into the school” (p.2).

Carol Birks (n.d.), a new principal at Warren Harding High School in Connecticut, described some lessons she learned during her first year as principal. The first step she took was to evaluate the school culture. She did this by meeting with students, teachers, parents and community stakeholders. From these meetings she was able to create a needs assessment of her school and an action plan to help meet these needs. Birks also looked at the data to help guide her decision making. She analyzed data from several sources such as attendance, discipline reports, teacher observations and standardized test scores. From the data the principal was able to create a needs assessment and action plan for professional development. She was also able to contact parents about the other data and create a plan to address other areas within the school. With these steps, she was completing step three using the data. Next, she developed a new mission for the school and was able to create a plan for the school to work toward this goal. Birks was also able to find allies. These allies were teachers who supported and shared the same vision for the school. With these allies, she found refuge in their support.

The principal also felt it was important to create opportunities for ongoing professional development. Providing professional development, helped developed teachers and leaders within the school. Additionally, Birks explained how renewing oneself and keeping current on best practices helps a person become a better leader (Birks, n.d.).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Framework

This qualitative study explored a South Carolina elementary school's journey to becoming distinguished from the participant's perspectives on what led to the school winning the 2011 South Carolina Distinguished Title One School in Closing in the Achievement Gap. Due to Johnson Elementary School's success in closing the achievement gap, this school was named South Carolina's 2011 Distinguished Title One School in Closing the Achievement Gap. This case study followed the design and methods described by Yin (2009): "The essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a *decision* or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what results" (p.17). In this research study, the case centered on a decision to change the way that education was done in this particular school, how it was made, how it was implemented, and the results.

In this chapter I describe the research methodology in detail. These details include the approach and rationale used for the methodology, my selection process for participants, methods used to collect data and an explanation of how the data was analyzed. I also address my role as a researcher, the validity of the research, and my commitment to the integrity of the process.

Approach and Rationale for Methodology

This qualitative study explored the elements that comprised the journey of one elementary school in South Carolina as it went from a Title One school to a South Carolina Distinguished Title One School in the area of closing the achievement gap. At minimum, the length of this journey for a school is two years. The South Carolina State Department of Education studies data from all Title One schools in South Carolina each year to see if there is a pattern in closing the gap between the white and African American subgroups in both reading and math.

Data Collection Methods

Sampling Frame

Although each state has its own Title One Distinguished School, I chose to complete this study in the state of South Carolina where I live and work. My long range professional plans are to remain an administrator/educator within South Carolina. I believe the data gathered from this study has the potential to inform and enhance instructional leadership in South Carolina. Additionally, researching only the state of South Carolina enabled me to study the phenomenon in greater depth. The school district where the study was conducted was determined by which school won the 2011 South Carolina Distinguished Title One School Award. Both the state and district are examples of purposeful criterion sampling.

Criterion sampling was used for the site selection. This research was an example of ongoing program monitoring. I conducted an in-depth study of specific components a successful Title One school has implemented. The characteristic which

emerged was the closing of the achievement gap between the white and African American students.

The first specific criterion for the research site was a South Carolina school which meets the 50% free and reduced price lunch percentage based on the federal Title One legislation. This criterion was used because the percentage of free and reduced price lunch recipients determines if the school is identified as a Title One school. The school was also funded and identified as Title One for at least the last two years. To be considered a Distinguished Title One School in South Carolina, the school must have closed the achievement gap between the white and African American subgroups in both reading and math. The school was funded by a Title One schoolwide model. This school was identified as a Title One Distinguished School in the area of closing the achievement gap, one of two awards for Distinguished Title One Schools. I believe the value of the study was strengthened by determining the reasons for the school's overall achievement and by gathering specific data about the subgroups.

My rationale for choosing this school was that it met precise criteria, specifically having won the 2011 South Carolina Distinguished Title One School in the area of closing the achievement gap. This award is unique in that the guidelines say it must be a South Carolina Title One School which has shown growth in closing the achievement gap. No other schools in South Carolina won this award in 2011.

Participants were the following: principal, assistant principal, math coach and a selected group of four teachers, a primary teacher (K4-2), an elementary teacher (3-5), a special area teacher, and a related arts teacher, within the 2011 Distinguished Title One School. Criterion sampling was used for teacher selection. The teachers must have

worked during the specified schools years during the school's journey, at least two years prior to the school winning this award. Johnson Elementary School has changed leadership in both the principal and assistant principal positions. I contacted the current principal to help me select the teacher participants. He was able to provide a list of possible participants that met my criteria. I emailed every teacher on the list and explained my dissertation and described to the participants what part they would play in the study. I received emails back from multiple teachers. To make sure I had a cross-section of teachers for participation in the study, I decided to choose a primary teacher, elementary teacher, special area teacher and related arts teacher for the focus group. Including these different areas would give me different perspectives of the journey within the school. From the list of teachers, there were four teachers who met my criteria and were willing to participate in the study. These participants were helpful in clarifying explicit components which had a direct impact on student achievement. I used purposeful criterion sampling strategy for the selection process. This strategy used specific criteria, which I used in choosing my participants. My objective in using the sampling strategy was to find participants who were part of the phenomenon. Their experiences provided me with the in depth data needed to assess the school's success and to convey the information accurately. I took a look at the decision making process from the point of view of each of these participants. As a future school leader, I recognized the importance of knowing how and why sound decisions have been made. I am aware as well of the importance of the faculty's reactions to those decisions. Working with these participants helped me use the data analysis process to validate emerging themes, making the study more reliable.

Interviews

The purpose of this study was to explain the phenomenon of closing the achievement gap over a two year period at a Title One school in South Carolina. One data collection method used in this study was in depth interviewing. Maxwell (2005) explains how research questions and interview questions complement each other: “Your research questions formulate what you want to understand; your interview questions are what you ask people in order to gain that understanding” (p. 92). I sought to understand the components which helped this school become distinguished, and one of the most effective ways to arrive at this information was through interviewing.

A semi-structured three-series interview process designed by Seidman (1998) was used to conduct interviews with the principal and assistant principal. This process uses three distinct and specific interviews to question the participants’ experiences. The first interview focused on their personal and professional backgrounds. The second interview focused on the decision making process which correlated with Fullan’s Educational Change Theory. The third interview focused on the assessment of those decisions, an assessment which closely aligns with Fullan’s Continuation/Outcome Phase of Educational Change Theory.

Focus Groups

In addition, a second data source was the use of focus groups. I used two focus groups. The first focus group consisted of the school leadership team: principal, assistant principal and math coach. The second focus group consisted of the teachers within the school: a primary teacher (K-2), an elementary teacher (3-5), a special area teacher, and a related arts teacher.

I used focus groups because when people hear others discuss topics or ideas in which they themselves are interested, they tend to be more thoughtful about their own responses. By putting more thought into their own responses, they are also better able and willing to understand the ideas of others. Patton (2002) explains:

In a focus group participants get to hear each other's responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say. The object is to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others (p. 386).

Participant Observations

The third data collection method used in the study was participant observations. The participant observations were used to open up the areas of inquiry to collect a wider range of data, to gain intuitive understanding of the meaning of the data, to integrate the observed behavior into its physical context and to see the behavior the researcher is interested in as it happens (Glesne, 2010). Using participant observations allowed the researcher to be embedded in a certain setting to gain a deeper understanding. Participant observations also called for the researcher to play two important roles, both as the observer and as the participant.

I observed the principal; I had to get permission from the principal for a date and time to observe. The rapport with the principal was built through the three in depth interviews. I observed the principal for the majority of a regular school day. The purpose of using participant observation was to gain a deeper understanding and connection to ideas which were discussed in the interview process and in the focus groups. As I

observed, I was attentive to characteristics of the setting, took notes about participants in the setting, described events and provided information about gestures and body language (Glesne, 2011). Having an understanding of some of the ideas initially brought up in the interviews and focus groups, I was able to connect those ideas to specific actions made by the principal during the participant observation period.

Pilot Study

In the spring of 2012, I began collecting data about Title One, looking at the history of this legislation, and asking questions about its success. I began to formulate a research proposal on the topic of Distinguished Title One Schools. I continued my work into the fall of 2012. The information I found led me to revise my topic and concentrate on one particular school. I began to choose which data collection methods would be most beneficial to my discovery process.

In the fall of 2012, I planned several meetings with the principal and assistant principal of South Carolina's 2011 Distinguished Title One School in Closing the Achievement Gap. I set up three meetings to begin the in depth interviewing process. I was able to complete only one 45-60 minute interview with each of the participants. Despite the brevity of the interviews, I gained valuable insight into how to improve my questions and my interviewing technique.

Instrumentation

Data Collection Process

The data collection process includes data collected from two focus groups, six individual interviews and one observation. Participants for each of the data sources were chosen based on their affiliations and duties at the school.

Data Approach

Qualitative Research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participants' setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher's making interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2009, p. 4).

After I conducted the interviews and focus groups, I transcribed the data. Next, I coded the data from the one to one interviews and focus groups to find common themes. Creating a matrix, keeping field notes, and writing analytical memos helped me see all the themes that emerged and helped me create questions to guide my study in the interviews and focus groups. I conducted this process with the single case analysis of interviews, focus groups, and observations. I also conducted a cross case analysis with interviews, focus groups, and observations to see if the same themes emerged in each of these types of data collection.

To code this data, I used in-vivo coding and descriptive coding as my first cycle coding methods. In using in-vivo, I went through each transcript and used the participants' words to code the information. By using this coding method, I respected the participants' thoughts about education. The second coding method I used was descriptive coding, or topic coding. Using descriptive coding, I began to look at basic topics that emerged from the data collected from my participants. Using these two coding methods laid a solid groundwork about the data on which to build (Saldana, 2009).

Trustworthiness

One way I safeguarded the study was to build the mutual trust necessary to a good

working relationship. I asked the participants to review the transcripts of the interviews for accuracy and honesty. Confidentiality between the participants and me was crucial, so I talked with the participants to explain how I would ensure confidentiality. Trust was essential in making sure all participants felt comfortable and safe when sharing their experiences. I made sure this feeling of security came about through sharing my own painful background, explaining my personal connection to the study, and being open about what I plan to do with the data I gathered (Glesne, 2011).

For member checking of the transcripts, I held a follow up meeting with each participant to make sure he or she agreed that the data was accurate and clear. I also used triangulation. I had three data collection sources which informed this study: interviews, focus groups, and observations. Two theoretical perspectives informed this study: Fullan's Change Theory and Marzano's work on successful schools. Having multiple data sources and theoretical perspectives added credibility to the study. Using a peer review and debriefing of the data offered the opportunity for participants to provide and receive feedback (Glesne, 2011).

Role of Researcher, Ethics, and Reciprocity

My first role in the study was that of researcher. I was conscious of this role and made sure I recognized that, as the researcher, I could discover data that I had not anticipated. I was aware that new and interesting data may be revealed to me at any time. As a researcher I was the primary learner during this study. Not only did I learn more about the phenomenon, but about the research process itself. I had a genuine desire to learn everything I could about the impact of poverty on education so that I can help poor children achieve success (Glesne, 2011).

My personal and professional background had a strong impact on my study in several ways. When I thought about obtaining and assessing the participants, I was always mindful of my own experiences with poverty. I have lived in poverty and worked in high poverty schools. My personal knowledge of poverty and its effects may have helped the participants to be more comfortable with me. I understand the challenges and successes of all three participant groups because I have experienced all of them. Knowing the challenges and successes helped me build a real rapport and trust with my participants. Given my personal and professional background, the administrators felt more comfortable with sharing the strategies that led to the school's success. Teachers, on the other hand, may have felt a little more reluctant to share because I am an administrator. However, I hope my personal background helped them feel more at ease. I even shared my background with these participants to build relationships of trust. As an administrator, my fear about observations was that they would be staged, but I hoped my background would help the administrator understand that I was only trying to learn, not judge. I wanted him to know that I believe that educating children is our common goal, no matter our job titles. Although I think my own background has made me more effective in my job, I had to make sure I did not bring it into my study. I felt the study was authentic and honest. I wanted the participants' true stories to be the cornerstone of my research. I believe my own life stories have been an integral part of my goals and achievements. When the study was completed, I was able to utilize this information to enhance my leadership abilities.

One potential problem I could have faced was a kind of fear factor. It was possible that administrators and teachers would be less than honest if they were afraid of

retaliation for their comments. I decided the best way to minimize this fear and maintain the integrity of the study was to be honest with the participants about my plans for sharing the data. If some sort of intimidation had taken place, the study's results would have been questionable. The participants realized that only through their honesty would the study be useful to other schools. The goal of this research is to be instrumental in closing the gap that has existed for over 47 years.

My own background gave me a personal connection to the effects of poverty on education. For eleven years I lived in what I believed was a stable and loving home. My father was a respected Baptist minister; my mother was a cosmetologist, and even better, I had an identical twin sister. When my father's infidelity was discovered, our family was torn apart. My father lost his job and suffered through a bout with depression. With a reduction in income, we moved into a local trailer park. Suffering from depression, my mother left home and began to abuse drugs. My sister's decision to live with my mother was especially hard for me. Financially, my family and I were barely making it. I knew I wanted more than that kind of life could give me; I wanted to have a career, not just a job. Education gave me opportunities and saved me from living my life in poverty.

I also related to the study of poverty and education through my professional experiences. After five years of teaching, my first job out of the classroom was as an instructional coach at an identified Title One elementary school in the School District of Pickens County. As an identified school, this school was recognized as Title One but did not receive funding. It was here that I gained much of my knowledge about students living in poverty. I learned about their home lives and their often deplorable living conditions. I learned their thoughts and feelings concerning education, personal goals,

and their futures. I learned about their parents and the cycle of poverty which plagued their families. As we were immersed in the culture of poverty, our teachers and administrators studied all aspects of poverty through two texts: *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* and *Under-resourced Learners* by Ruby Payne. These texts were valuable sources of information on working with students of poverty and using teaching strategies that would help them. The school received Title One funding my second year there. My job changed to include additional job responsibilities: I completed a needs assessment for our school, began writing our schoolwide Title One plan, organized Title One paperwork, completed the Title One budget, organized Title One parent nights, and ordered supplies for teachers and students. I attended the South Carolina Department of Education Title One Conference and the South Carolina Department of Education Rules and Regulations Meeting.

Two years later, I became an assistant principal at a Title One school in the School District of Pickens County. I have continued to complete the needs assessment for our school, write our Title One school-wide plan, and help organize our Title One parent nights. Most importantly, I have made home visits to see students' living conditions first hand. I took a bus tour to learn where the pockets of poverty are located in our community. I am in constant contact with the Department of Social Services and Behavioral Health to ensure the welfare of some of our endangered students. Working with students and parents of poverty, along with assisting with the Title One program, has opened my eyes about continued educational gaps. From attending the South Carolina Title One Conference, I realized there were schools which had maintained high test scores over a three year period. The scores from the schools in our district were

considerably lower. I began to read literature about Title One legislation and students of poverty. To gain a better understanding of the situation, I also began to study data about free and reduced price lunch students. The literature from a special report from the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development explained why Title One is still ineffective after decades of implementation. The 2011 NAEP study reported that students who received free or reduced price lunch scored 23 points lower than students who were not eligible for free or reduced lunch, proving the gap still exists. The question is, how are certain schools making tremendous gains and maintaining high test scores? My hope was to discover which components were most effective and especially which components could be transferred to other Title One Schools.

Positionality Statement

There are several ways which my school and the school I studied are similar demographically. My current school has about 250 students. The school I studied has 394 students. Additionally, my school's population breaks down as follows: 0% African American, 1% Asian, 1% Hispanic, 92% Caucasian, and 6% of our population is classified in two or more races. The breakdown of the school in the study was 21% African American, 51% Caucasian, and 28% other. Our school is 75% free and reduced lunch and the school of study is 77.1% free and reduced lunch. Our teacher to student ratio is 18:1, and theirs is the same. There are 22 teachers at my current school, 100% of whom are Caucasian, and the school studied has 38. No data was given on race.

I do not have any personal relationships with anyone at the school I studied. However, as I have a position of greater authority than teachers, without a personal relationship participants might fear that an interviewer could report information

inaccurately. These participants may have also been disinclined to share their instructional practices, fearing that someone such as myself would simply steal their ideas and not give them credit. However, I felt during the study the participants were open, honest and direct with their responses.

Implications of my Positionality

The participants in my study were the administrators and teachers associated with this particular school. As an assistant principal for the last two years at a Title One school, I deal with many of the same issues as the administrator in the school I studied. I felt our similar situations allowed this group of participants to be open and honest about how they accomplished becoming a Title One Distinguished School. I felt I did a good job of conveying my background, my personal connection, my professional connection, and my intentions regarding the information I received.

I hope that my five years in the classroom helped me relate to the teachers and that they considered me to be one of them. Despite never teaching at a Title One school, as an instructional coach, I worked closely with teachers to help their students. Instructional coaches, in many cases, are seen as administration rather than faculty. Teachers may have been unwilling to share information with someone they saw as another administrator. However, the participants shared many personal experiences during data collection. I presented my background, credentials, and intentions honestly to secure their cooperation and trust.

Additionally, my race, class, gender, and academic background could have impacted this study. I felt my class, age, and academic background did not negatively impact the study with the administration because although we are not the same gender we

are the same race. I am female and the assistant principal at the school is female. The principal is male. The same is true in my school. This was a way for me to connect with this administration. I was uncertain how my race, class, gender, and academic background may impact the study with the teachers until I received more information. However, working as an instructional coach at a Title One School helped me establish rapport with the teachers. Using what I knew about working with educators in high poverty areas, these effects were minimal, if present at all.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

Johnson Elementary School is in South Carolina, in a small rural town with around 3,000 residents, including the students who reside near a local university, located just outside of the town. In 2011, Johnson Elementary School received the South Carolina Distinguished Title One School for Closing the Achievement Gap.

In 2008, Johnson Elementary School hired a new principal, and in 2009, the school hired a new assistant principal. In his first year, the principal promised the faculty he would not change anything they were doing until he had a chance to learn more about the school, staff, and community. Debbie described his approach: “And he basically just looked, supported, the whole first year, he totally left us alone, which was unbelievable and then after that, he created the climate that I think the best way to say it is we would have followed him anywhere...” As a result of his willingness to learn, a majority of the stakeholders participated in improving the school. One area in need of improvement was the PTA, which was almost completely uninvolved in school activities. The previous principal, in fact, had come close to eliminating it entirely. The assistant principal explained the situation: “... the previous principal had totally axed the PTA because it got too big and it was evidently just horrific so he was basically building from the ground up and so I think probably overall his plan was to develop that PTA and then branch out to the community...”

Johnson Elementary School has a student population of about 352 students in pre-K through fifth grades. There are twenty homeroom teachers, six related arts teachers, eight student services teachers, two reading intervention teachers, one guidance counselor and two administrators. The free and reduced price lunch percentage for Johnson Elementary School was 75.48% during the 2012-2013 school year with 238 students receiving free lunch and twenty-eight students receiving reduced price lunch.

This chapter contains information gathered through participant responses from in depth interviews, focus groups, and observations. Additional documentation was collected from the principal and assistant principal, including conference materials such as PowerPoints and videos. As key stakeholders within the school, administrators, leadership team members and teachers were selected to be participants for this study.

The study's purpose was to determine which components the participants believe made the difference at this school and the effects, if any, those components had on the school's ability to win this prestigious award. The findings about the school's success can be used to assist other Title One schools that are searching for effective ways to improve academic performance and help close the rural achievement gap. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. What components do Johnson Elementary School administrators believe supported their transition from a Title One school to a Distinguished Title One School?
2. What components do Johnson Elementary School teachers believe supported their transition from a Title One school to a Distinguished Title One School?

This chapter was organized according to three specific components revealed through analysis of participant responses. Participant responses were analyzed to reveal these components. Four components were included at the school level, three at the administrative level, and two at the faculty level.

The leadership team was comprised of the principal, assistant principal, reading coach, and math coach. The group of teacher participants included a teacher from several areas of the school: one early childhood teacher, one elementary teacher, one student services teacher, and one related arts teacher.

Findings

School Level Components

Parental Involvement

In writing the Title One application, the school's Title One Committee has to meet and discuss the needs of the school based on the school's current data. The team completes a needs assessment of the school and decides on some of the ideas that should be added in to the Title One Plan for the upcoming school year. The Title One application names eleven strategies. Each of these strategies must include an activity to make sure the needs described in this strategy are being met in the school. Strategy 7 is Increase Parental Involvement.

Both interview and teacher focus group participants mentioned how they incorporated parental involvement into their school. Workshops on a variety of topics were conducted by a parenting center unaffiliated with the school. Being away from the school allowed the presenter to talk candidly to the parent participants in the classes and to start creating relationships with them. As much as possible, classes were scheduled at

different times to accommodate parents' schedules, some before school, some during lunch, and others after school. The assistant principal believed parents felt safe in sharing ideas and concerns because meetings were not conducted by school personnel: "So I think that helped overcome the challenge of making those parents feel comfortable." Because parents were not intimidated by the presenter, they were more receptive to what she had to share about parenting. Parents felt more comfortable as a result of these workshops. "...parents have asked for instructional meetings...They were wanting instructional pieces, so they started pulling that in to help meet those needs of the parents, too."

When the principal was hired, the Parent Teacher Association was almost non-existent. He worked hard his first year on revitalizing the group and continued to work with the PTA for the next three years to increase their support within the school and the community. "They (the teachers) felt supported by their PTA, by their community, just the feeling that you had that you're supported." The PTA helped with special classroom projects by supplying the materials so teachers could focus more on instruction, and they gave teachers "extra little perks, treats. Or things like that just as a morale booster to make it fun to be there."

The community in which the school is located was described by the teacher participants as complacent or apathetic. The teachers found it difficult to motivate the students to learn, and to instill a sense of school pride in students and to improve parental involvement. By extending their efforts beyond the regular classroom environment, teachers were able to connect more effectively with both parents and children. As Tina put it, " And the strongest thing I think is that building relationships that we've talked

about, doing things and building pride in Central...so pushing them to have pride in their school and to want more for their children, is the challenge. And that building relationships and drawing them in is one of the biggest things.”

Culture of the School

Teachers attribute much of the school’s success to its “family atmosphere.” The administrators respected the teachers. The teachers supported the students, and in turn the students loved coming to school. This school culture was described by Bonnie, one of the teacher participants as follows, “It was a happy place to be for the kids, for the teachers. People wanted to be there. I mean I know I certainly enjoyed coming into work every day. I think that matters and I think that affects your job performance.” The school culture was one of schoolwide respect and support.

Teacher participants described the administration as positive, relaxed and involved in the daily workings of the school. One teacher, Allison, described the principal’s involvement, “He would be right back there with you doing it, and he was always at all of those things, and that sounds like a small thing, but as a teacher I mean it’s something to remember.” The teacher participants also described their principal as a leader who built relationships based on trust. In turn, this trust enabled teachers to motivate the students. Debbie noted that trust leads to unity of purpose, “...somehow you’ve got to build that trust with your faculty before you say we’re going to go this direction.” Bonnie agreed, “The fact that the trust was there, we were all working together for the kids.” Another of the principal’s attributes was his willingness to listen to others’ ideas and opinions. Most of all, he put the students’ interests above all else. Bonnie explained, “We needed to focus on those kids, not have to worry about our jobs,

who is going to be moving you know... this was his leadership style.” Another teacher remarked on his effective leadership, saying one of his strengths was his willingness to create a “safe environment” for teachers. He allowed them the freedom to try new ideas without fear. Even if every idea did not succeed completely, the experience allowed teachers to learn and grow professionally. His leadership qualities were best summed up by Debbie when she said, “...he created a climate that I think the best way to say it is we would have followed him anywhere.”

The school’s atmosphere was one where morale was high and teachers were not even aware of how hard they were working because they were enjoying their jobs: “...you don’t look back at it as hard work; you look back and think that was so much fun.” Teachers described themselves as being committed to staying positive and taking an active role in student learning. The participants felt they were part of the decision making process for the school and felt genuinely appreciated as professionals. The participants described an overwhelming amount of inclusion of the teachers and faculty about the decisions made during this time. Allison said, “For me personally some of the success was to see the buy-in with the change in activity schedule or to see the buy-in to the in-house professional development we were doing.” All teacher participants felt the faculty assumed the responsibility of growing and helping each other as professionals. The assistant principal confirmed the teachers’ sentiments: “...the uniqueness of those teachers, they felt comfortable talking with one another and nobody ever took it personally, nobody ever left upset, they just felt comfortable enough with one another that they could say, ‘Is there any way you can go a minute earlier,’ or ‘Can your kids come to this side of the bleachers...’ ” Allison described this approach as a team effort,

“...they are helping one another, the team approach that comes along with that helps people.” This idea of teamwork was part of the principal’s leadership philosophy: “I feel like all of us, as a team, were there to support them along the way and I don’t know, I have a servant leaders attitude in the fact that I am not going to ask somebody to do something I haven’t done or am unwilling to do myself and be there to learn with them and support them.” Clearly, the principal’s leadership was a key element in the school’s success.

As the administration and faculty worked together to help the students, the students themselves began to feel more successful. The principal described this feeling of accomplishment: “...I think the students were feeling more successful in the classroom. They were feeling like they were accomplishing more, and the teachers were feeling that they were connecting with the students more. They felt that progress that they were making with the students, and that is certainly a success that the teachers longed to feel.”

Resources

Title One schools have access to more resources based on their students’ needs. Each Title One school must hold Title One Committee meetings to discuss the school’s data and formulate plans to address areas of weakness in the following school year. The committee gives input and creates a needs assessment of the school. Once the Title One schools find out how much funding they will receive, the needs assessment is used in completing the schools’ Title One plan. The resources discussed by the participants fell into three categories: time, material and personnel.

In the years covered in the study, additional personnel were hired to fill important roles in the school. The participants felt the decision to put people in those jobs was a

contributing factor to the school's success. "I think having the right people, right on the bus. I think that is crucial." The first of these hires was the math coach, whose position was made possible by a grant the school received. She worked directly with teachers on math instruction. She taught with teachers and modeled lessons as needed. She also answered their questions and established relationships with teachers to improve their instruction. The assistant principal explained, "She would sit down with a teacher and develop, she would sit with them, and she went through the state coaching program. So she implemented that a little bit, too. But she sat down with them. It was a collaborative meeting, and she met with the teacher, and they came up with what was needed." Another important person was the literacy specialist. The principal relied heavily on her because of her experience in the classroom and with Title One. The third hire was a Technology Resource Teacher. The TRT helped teachers use technology more effectively and to incorporate it into their lesson plans. These coaches were important because teachers could go to them and ask them questions about instruction. The coaches in turn would follow up with teachers and do whatever they could do to help and support them. .

Other important positions were the social worker and Rehabilitative Behavioral Health Services worker. The social worker completed home visits, met with student groups and helped meet the needs of students. "She did home visits daily. She was great with follow-up. But then she could also be tough and say, 'This is what we are expecting you to do.'" The RBHS worker met with students to help with behavior issues. She also provided counseling and family support services to families on Medicaid. "She had a ton of knowledge and she is great with behavioral modification."

The school also saw a need for two reading specialists: primary and intermediate. The primary reading specialist completed reading recovery for up to four students during the day in grades kindergarten and first grade. The intermediate reading specialist served the upper grades. “She fulfilled a need for those upper kids that we didn’t have. At minimal, all of her students increased 12 RIT points on MAP testing. She also went out to the shelter and served those students. She was a liaison for the school.”

Although Title One schools are allowed to hire personnel to meet their school’s needs, they are not allowed to spend all of their federal funds on personnel. They must strike a balance between new hires and other expenditures. The principal gave the teachers surveys to ask what they thought they needed most to help them in their classrooms. The overwhelming response from the teachers was more planning time. The principal decided to use Title One funds for professional development in a special way by implementing Developing Instructional Greatness days. The leadership team would use data to help them decide what to focus on during these DIG days. Once the team decided on the activity, they made plans for teachers to attend these half day staff development sessions. The principal believed these sessions were important because teachers could focus on learning to make better use of planning time while a substitute taught their students during the half day sessions. The leadership team made sure teachers were given the data and were also given a resource that could be immediately taken back to the classroom and implemented to improve instruction. One of the DIG day sessions was also a time for vertical planning. Teachers were asked to make two lists of three skills they believed students should have acquired before advancing to the next grade. They gave

these lists to teachers who taught the previous grade level and the teachers who taught the next grade level. By sharing information, they were able to teach more consistently.

Teachers received a variety of materials to aid in their instruction. Most of these materials were given to teachers following their DIG in-service days. The principal had also asked teachers to list materials they needed in their classrooms. These materials included technology, math manipulatives and other supplies. The administration was willing to supply these materials as long as the teachers explained why they needed those specific materials. “I would have the teachers give me those lists of things and have them tell me, all right if I give you this, tell me how you are going to use it in your classroom, and so I think it made folks rethink the things they wanted.” Justifying the use of the materials requested helped teachers to make better choices.

Student Needs

In an interview the principal summarized his thoughts about meeting the students’ needs: “From the beginning, we just wanted to do what was in the best interest of our kids. I think our main priority should simply be meeting the kids where they are and taking them as far as we can.” This philosophy was shared by the assistant principal, “We were really focused on meeting the needs of every child. I feel like we looked at every child individually. And whatever the needs that we felt were there we addressed, whether it was a social, emotional need or an achievement or both.” This commitment to putting the students’ needs ahead of everything else drove Johnson Elementary in its quest for success.

The assistant principal and teacher participants all shared their thoughts on what was necessary to meet the needs of their students. These needs were categorized as both academic and social/emotional needs.

Academically, the administration reviewed data and created goals with each classroom teacher. These goals, which were displayed throughout the year, could be revised as needed. Each year they assessed the data to see if students had improved and set expectations that would elevate students up to the next levels of achievement. Teachers decided to address student needs and communicate about student progress more often, an idea that was endorsed by the administration, "...based on the student needs and that teacher's strengths, I just expected them (the teachers) on a daily basis to do what was in the best interest of those students." Because of this data driven philosophy, teachers asserted that they were better able to monitor students' growth and achievements. Teachers continually communicated with one another about the progress of their students. They would talk to other teachers and staff members to help them assess the growth of certain students. As Allison said, "...without looking at numbers, without looking at data, I mean just the feel of the building and the way people communicated with one another and gain the focus on the students. People were just in touch with what they (the students) needed and were willing to do whatever it took to make sure those kids were successful." The principal agreed data is only the starting point to helping students academically. Data cannot replace what the teacher observes in the classroom. Because no instrument is perfect, the principal believed in using multiple indicators to aid the student in being successful. "Because there are some kids that can say the right things in class and look busy, and never really ask a lot of questions so the teacher thinks, oh,

they're fine. But if their MAP scores and their PASS scores are weak, there's something there. ...you use all three of those to really target instruction."

The participants felt their responsibility to their students went beyond academics. Dealing with the students' emotional needs can be equally important: "The first 30 minutes of every morning, everybody deals with something like I didn't have any breakfast because my parents didn't get up, I don't have a coat, so I can't go to recess. You are going to show them some love, a little one on one time to try to bring them in. Half the time they are not even emotionally ready to be at school, much less want to be taught." These social and emotional needs were addressed primarily by the school's social worker and school nurse. However, everyone was aware of students' situations and recognized the reality that failing to deal with these needs could hinder academic achievement.

Administrative Components

Communication

The principal and assistant principal were equally committed to the students at Johnson Elementary and consequently worked as a team. They knew they could depend on each other in whatever situation might arise. The assistant principal said, "I felt like Jack and I both, because Jack would help out with the discipline if I was tied up, he was really good about that."

The administration believed it necessary to have on going communication with teachers about topics of concern. Every Monday, faculty and staff received an update on where administrators would be on each day during the week. Once this schedule was established, the principal would determine if he needed an administrator to be on call for

the faculty and staff any of those days. If someone was needed to fill in, the principal informed the staff immediately. “You would have known at least at the beginning of the week, if not before.”

At the end of each school year, the principal gave surveys to faculty and staff for their input, seeking answers to questions such as “What were your biggest successes this year, the three biggest challenges, personally what they wished they had more time to do, what we could have taken off your plate, something they were most proud of for the school and something they would change about the school.” Having these conversations with staff members guided the administration about what changes, if any, they would make the following year.

The principal put a leadership team in place as well. This team was comprised of the principal, assistant principal, mathematics coach and Title One facilitator. They would meet at least once a month, if not more. The principal said, “We met probably informally more than anything. At the end of the day we find ourselves, the four of us, sitting there chatting or during the day we would end up in one or the other’s offices bouncing ideas off of each other.” This four person team would look at data and decide what the next steps for the school should be. They would take their ideas to the faculty and give them the chance to express their opinions.

In faculty meetings teachers shared what they were doing in their classrooms with the rest of the staff. By sharing ideas, activities, and strategies, teachers encouraged and motivated each other to put new ideas into practice. The principal wisely chose not to overwhelm his teachers with information, deciding instead to share with them only what was pertinent to their responsibilities. He talked about going to district meetings and

coming back to share the information with his staff. “You kind of had to prioritize. Here’s the wealth of information that we need to share with the teachers... you just have to decide what’s the most important and what can be shared in the allotted time.” Holding these meetings and communicating with staff members “kept us family oriented and we also gave concerns, we allowed everyone, by grade level, to bring concerns to the table.”

School committees were also created to obtain even more feedback from faculty members. One of these committees was the PBIS (Positive Behavior Invention and Supports) committee. This team met to discuss issues brought up by the faculty and decide if any changes should be made. The administrative team was also quick to respond to calls and emails from the teachers. “They were so responsive.... they were supporting the teachers.” The principal believed getting back to the teachers quickly helped them do their jobs more effectively.

Administrators talked not only with teachers but talked with students every day. When students first arrived at Johnson Elementary each day, either the principal or the assistant principal greeted them by name. The students were greeted by the administrators again when they left school each day. The principal connected with students via a daily news show as well. The principal made a daily appearance on the show, and one teacher remembered, “He would go on the news every morning. That was his main source of communicating with students.” The principal also celebrated the students’ birthdays with them at their monthly birthday parties. The principal believed in the importance of informal conversations with students: “I would ask, ‘How do you feel, do you feel like you are being successful in class?’ And you see what they are able to produce during a day, or what they are able to accomplish during a day, and those kinds of things help you

determine whether or not that initiative was successful.” They found the same process to be useful in disciplinary matters. The administration established relationships of mutual respect with students and would talk with students calmly, giving students the opportunity to explain the situation themselves. By listening to the students, administrators established a feeling of trust while also helping students to understand any consequences resulting from their behavior.

A significant part of the administration’s communication policy was to stay in touch with parents and other community members. The principal made himself available to parents and whenever possible would modify his calendar to accommodate parents who needed him unexpectedly. The assistant principal stated, “He was very approachable. He would stop what he was doing if somebody came up and they needed to meet with him. He would make unscheduled meetings and reschedule other meetings.” Because he was visible in the mornings and afternoons at car duty, he was able to speak informally with parents. Parents were comfortable in giving him notes, asking him questions or making requests, confident that they would get a response in a timely manner. The principal attended School Improvement Council meetings to help facilitate community involvement. As a member of the Title One Committee, he was receptive to community members’ ideas and would use those ideas in the Title One plan as appropriate. When invited to community events, he would attend as a representative of the school.

Leadership Qualities

The principal’s many positive attributes elicited strong praise from his faculty and staff. They understood the importance of his role and his impact on the school’s success.

Bonnie remarked, "... one person being in a leadership role can make or break the school." One of the qualities teachers valued most was being supportive of his staff. The teacher focus group participants praised his support and told of personal experiences to illustrate. Allison spoke of going to him with a new idea to use with her students. Instead of dismissing the idea, he would listen; they would talk it over with each other, and then he would make a decision on whether she should go forward. "He exhausted all efforts to be supportive before he ever moved into making a decision or taking the next step." The principal created an environment where teachers were not afraid to try to new ideas even if they sometimes failed. Bonnie was especially pleased with his reaction to an awards ceremony she held for her students. She printed the awards then sent him an e-mail inviting him to her black tie event. Both she and her students were excited by his attendance and support. "I went home and printed out certificates. One was funny and then more academic or more central skills award. And I emailed him and invited him to come and I said p.s. it is black tie. He came!" The teacher participants also described his type of leadership style as caring and receptive. Rather than forcing executive decisions onto his teachers, he listened and learned from them. He was encouraging with all who were on his staff. "He was very good at relationships; people loved him being an encourager." Debbie described his motivational skills, "Jack came and it was just like...some people are just natural born motivators, you can't pin point what it is that they do that motivates you. I felt motivated. You just wanted to work hard." The principal obviously realized that the best leaders get results through motivation rather than intimidation.

Teachers also described the principal as “hands on.” He would visit classrooms and sit down with the students and play learning games. They also admired his willingness to take part in situations that would have been far outside of his job description. Allison described his actions during an emergency: “The day before we were supposed to start we had a water main that broke. Jack rolled up his pant legs and got out there with brooms and stuff like that, and was cleaning up all the water, and I remember thinking at that moment ‘I don’t think I have ever seen a principal like that who gets in there and works with you like that.’ ”

Another of the principal’s traits was the trust he placed in his staff. In turn, the teachers trusted him to make decisions that were in the best interests of the school family. The teachers acknowledged that much of this trust was a result of his learning year when he first took the job. As Tina said, “It was about the balance that Jack brought and the trust that people had for him and for Cheryl.” The principal confirmed the importance of working for a year before beginning to make any significant changes: “The first year I was there we did not do much at all. It was an information gathering year just to kind of feel the culture out, feel the current status of the school, find out the needs of the students, the needs of the teachers.” Because of this approach, he immediately began to establish the level of trust that enables people to work as a team toward a common goal. In this situation, meeting the academic and emotional needs of the children was that goal. The principal made classroom observations a part of his routine, and teachers generally welcomed his presence there. They perceived him as helpful rather than threatening, and teachers felt able to relax and be natural with students. Bonnie explained the importance of trusting in her leader. She believed that his frequent visits to classrooms meant that he

was committed to his job and to the faculty and students. Tina explained, “But if you are in the classroom, then when you tell me I am doing a good job, you know, ‘I really like what you are doing,’ and then I know it is sincere because you are really in there.” The teachers also liked the fact that the principal did not feel the need to micromanage classroom instruction. Allison remarked, “[We liked] not only that he gave us freedom, he trusted our judgment. He was like I trust people working for me, I can trust you. I don’t have to critique, monopolize everything you do.” The teachers appreciated this administrative approach and felt he gave them autonomy within their classrooms. .

The leadership team remembers one quality they felt was extremely important, Jack’s focus on the school’s primary mission: teaching children. The district was undergoing some major changes, including a number of job cuts at the district level. Perhaps the biggest change was in hiring a new Superintendent to lead the district. The team remembered how the principal helped them stay focused on student achievement and ignore distractions. The math coach remembers, “He was really good at streamlining everything. I would say that would be a strength of the principal. We felt like we needed to take everything that we saw and implement it. And he just said we can’t, so we didn’t.” Another quality they valued was the principal’s flexibility. He would make changes if they were necessary to meet the students’ or faculty’s needs. “He was not afraid to change mid-stream if need be and I think that is important. If we get to next week and we have already accomplished that goal or it needs to look completely different, then that is okay.” Finally, they felt one of his greatest strengths was communication. As the members of the leadership team discussed ideas, the principal would listen, and together they would decide on what steps to take next. He, of course, took the lead in making the

final decision. While he understood the importance of gathering information from others, he also knew the ultimate responsibility for decisions was his. Bonnie explained the principal's impact on the school's culture. "It really was a unique culture at Johnson Elementary School that the principal and all of his leadership abilities really led the school to have the culture that it had."

Goals and Expectations

The principal's goals and expectations were clear to teachers. He wanted teachers to work with students each day to help them learn as much as possible. The leader said of the principal's push toward excellence, "I think regardless of whatever we are shooting for; we need to push our kids as far as we can. And, yeah if we push them as far as this goal and we exceed that goal, great, but if we didn't push them as far as they could go, is that really success?" The teachers were expected to analyze data such as MAP, PASS and DRA to see where their students' strengths and weaknesses lay. The leadership team would compare their school with other Title One schools and other schools within the district. These data gave the leadership team ideas for professional development on their DIG days or information to share at faculty meetings.

The data was most useful to teachers, whom the principal trusted to use it effectively. If a teacher realized that a student had serious deficiencies, he or she was expected to consult with the math coach or Title One facilitator. If, however, the principal felt that the data and the teacher's assessment of student performance had discrepancies, he would discuss the situation with the teacher to determine why. The assistant principal shared the belief in the value of using the data for instructional purposes. She felt as well that teacher observations kept the administration current on classroom instructional

practices. The students were also expected to take responsibility for their own achievements by keeping notebooks where they could reflect on their own progress throughout the year. Teachers were responsible for using these notebooks in conferences and making sure they were up to date. While the leadership team had long term goals for the school, their immediate focus was on the short term goals that would help them achieve their objectives. "...what do we want to accomplish this week?" The principal was also thoughtful and careful when implementing his goals, never rushing into a program or strategy simply because it was new or trendy. The assistant principal summed up that philosophy as "[We would do] one good thing, do it well, get it established, add to it. We also upped the ante every year with what we expected. It was that process over multiple years manifested into adding up. They have got a handle on this and I feel comfortable that they are doing this well." By using this cautious and well thought out approach, he was able to ensure more effective instruction that would bring long term results.

The assistant principal explained the administration's expectations for behavior. As the lead administrator of PBIS, she said that setting these expectations gave students a sense of structure for the school day. The implementation of a strong set of behavioral standards added as well to the school's feeling of family and team spirit. The principal also set standards for the teachers to follow such as being punctual, adhering strictly to Individualized Education Programs and maintaining a focus on the students. Tina shared these thoughts, "...things were streamlined and clearly communicated. And I felt like I was supposed to be successful because teachers knew what was going on. We were all on the same page. We were all together. We were a team, everybody in there. We had a

game plan for everything.” Successful implementation of any program is only possible with careful planning.

Teacher Components

Teacher Qualities

Teachers willingly met the administration’s expectations. At the beginning of each school year, the principal gave teachers fourteen non-negotiable expectations. Teachers did not resist these mandates because they were well thought out and realistic. Although teachers were free to ask questions, they found that most of the questions were already addressed in the administration’s explanations. The assistant principal stated, “It was just put out there, and everybody had such a high respect for him they never questioned it. This goes back to him building relations with them so that this was a non-negotiable thing and we went over it as a faculty.” Whereas the term “non-negotiable” can have a negative connotation, the faculty respected the principal enough to trust in his judgment.

The first non-negotiable also succinctly summarized the school’s overall vision: “Students are our first priority.” Teachers put all of their efforts into meeting the academic and emotional needs of the students. At the start of each new year, teachers would help students set goals. Initially, they guided students in writing down the MAP score they needed to reach. Then teachers posted classroom goals which were revisited throughout the year. A chart posted beside the classroom goals enabled students to keep track of their progress. Students also set individual goals for themselves in 2011 – 2012 to foster a sense of personal achievement. The assistant principal explained the extent to which teachers worked to improve students’ lives. “The teachers worked with the kids on

developing academic goals but also behavioral goals or just a personal goal. For example, ‘I want to score one touchdown this year on the football team.’ The kids knew their teachers were interested in them past school. That was not really anything we asked them to do. It’s something the teachers did on their own.” When children arrived at school each day, they brought a host of problems with them. Many of them suffered from food insecurity; others lived with abusive families; others simply did not have adequate living conditions. The principal explained his teachers’ commitment to the students’ needs. “I think you have the basic needs of the students, making sure they are fed, making sure they have their supplies, making sure they have clothes, making sure they have a home to go to, just those general life needs. Those are different for Title One schools than other schools.” Poverty increases the challenge of teaching. Hungry, frightened, and discouraged students need reassurance and hope. The faculty worked every day to provide them with those things.

Teachers at Johnson Elementary took their jobs seriously and assumed responsibility for helping students be more successful. Allison said of herself that external pressures play no part in her determination to do a good job; the pressure is internal and a part of who she is. To her, doing less than her best would be unthinkable. Debbie also affirmed a commitment to helping students even though her area would not be measured on typical standardized tests. She explained her thinking: “You have to try to teach everything, reading, math, behavior, you know a kid comes to school with no shoes. I mean, you have to help with everything. You are not just there to teach your specific subject.” Again, the concept was one of teamwork where everyone is on the team for the sake of the children.

Because teachers respected each other, their journey toward excellence was a collaborative effort. In the focus group, the teacher participants talked of how they would meet informally with each other to discuss students they had in common. They might meet with a previous teacher, a counselor, an administrator, RBHS worker, or other staff member who might offer insight into the student's issues. Giving up on the student was not an option. Even though teachers did not always agree with each other completely, they did always listen and come to some kind of consensus, which allowed them to continue to work for the benefit of the children. Allison said of this process, "We worked so well together because number one there was respect. Then there was trust. So, we could go onto that room, and we might have to say, 'Mr. S, we have a problem.' When that door got shut, our problems got handled. And we would be very honest with one another. You would have never known from the outside because we were like friends. Honestly, those teachers made me a better teacher." Teachers made an effort never to let any personal differences interfere with their jobs. They kept their focus on the success of their students. The assistant principal explained how the teachers interacted. "I just think again, the uniqueness of those teachers, they felt comfortable talking with one another, and nobody ever took it personally. Nobody ever left upset. They just felt comfortable enough with one another that they could say it." Honesty without anger was a key element in their ability to work out their problems and move on to their real work.

Teaching Strategies

In order to achieve success, teachers used a variety of teaching strategies. The principal distributed carefully chosen articles to teachers so that they could read them, learn from them, and share the information in faculty meetings. Teachers were

encouraged to use creativity to make their presentations, which took place once a month. At times the administration would ask teachers to share strategies that had worked in their own classrooms. When administrators observed a particularly effective practice in teacher's rooms, they wanted the teachers to let others know what they had done and why and how it worked for them. He explained his decision to use teachers to enhance each other's instruction: "They might not be designated classroom leaders, but by the way they teach and the way they carried themselves, they are informal leaders. And so getting buy-in from those folks and having those folks on board with what we were doing, helped the other staff members who may have been on the fence or may not have been on the fence but helped them facilitate change." In their always present spirit of family, teachers were happy to share ideas and learn from each other.

Several types of school interventions were valuable in assisting teachers when students encountered problems. The Reading Interventionist was a Response to Intervention Tier 2 specialist who identified students who needed extra or individual help with their reading.

During the 2009-2010 school year, the upper grades of the school were departmentalized. Teachers found that departmentalization offered them a chance for genuine improvement in instruction. By teaching the subject in which they excelled, they were stronger instructors and could address students' needs with added confidence. Tina said of her colleagues, "[One teacher] was excellent in reading, and her strength is probably math, and [the principal] is putting the people with their strengths..." The principal agreed, "I think it has to do with making sure your teachers are in the right place." The teachers felt the departmental approach helped them with discipline as well.

Teachers with the same groups of students generally observed the same kinds of discipline problems. They were able to discuss the best strategies for working with the students and also to offer more credible advice when talking with parents about their children's behavior. Parents were more amenable to suggestions when teachers were able to point out that problems were consistent from class to class.

The teachers also shared their experiences with vertical planning. The principal instructed them to work with each other to discuss what they had learned about their students. First, kindergarten teachers would meet with first grade teachers. Following those meetings, first grade teachers would meet with second grade teachers. By the time the final conferences took place, most teachers had met with those who preceded them and those who would follow them. Allison shared these thoughts: "We would do a vertical planning where he had somebody from every grade level. We were able to voice to third grade, I know your students do not have to complete three paragraphs; you just have to have a beginning, middle and end. In fourth grade, we have to have five paragraphs, and we cannot complete this if your students are only completing one paragraph." By learning what was expected of students at each level, teachers developed a more unified approach to instruction.

Another way of varying students' activities was through monthly club meetings held during school. Teachers came up with a list of clubs and allowed students to pick their top three. From those choices the principal assigned students to a club which they could find enjoyable and interesting. Living in poverty significantly narrowed the students' opportunities to experience recreational activities after school; these clubs

helped fulfill that need. Another benefit of club time was the chance for students and teachers to interact with each other in a more relaxed environment.

Johnson Elementary School was a PBIS school. This model is described as a “decision making framework that guides selection, integration, and implementation of the best evidence-based academic and behavioral practices for improving important academic and behavior outcomes for all students (Positive Behavior Interventions and Support [PBIS], 2013). The school’s PBIS committee made decisions about how to implement the system school wide. They would discuss questions in these meetings and go back to their grade levels to get feedback and answers. The committee also surveyed students to get their ideas and opinions on the issues under discussion. Having this feeling of shared decision making increased the level of comfort between students and teachers.

Johnson Elementary School’s theme for the 2010-2011 school year was “What is your dream?” The Title One Conference video included displays and ideas centered on this theme. The objective was to get students to think about their long term goals and to achieve them. The students completed a series of start-up activities, including writing their academic, behavioral, and personal goals. One student wrote simply that he wanted to score one touchdown on the football team that year. Putting their goals into words and working on their strategies helped them to understand how much their teachers cared about them. Teachers compiled lists of goals and posted them around the school as daily reminders. Another teacher came up with the idea of making a quilt of dreams for the faculty and staff. In this way the teachers could share their own dreams with the students, strengthening their mutual bond.

Summary

This chapter presented findings and results on Johnson Elementary School's journey to becoming a Distinguished Title One School. The findings on school level components, the first set of components, explained how parental involvement, culture of the school, resources and meeting student needs helped the school improve their overall student achievement. Parents became increasingly involved with their students. The culture of the school began to focus on how to help students on a daily basis, down to their basic needs. Because the school was federally funded by Title One, they were able to add both material resources and personnel to help meet the needs of their student population.

The second set of components was related to the administration. These components included communication, leadership qualities and goals and expectations for faculty and students. Communication included the student news show, a written communication to the faculty and staff on Mondays and Wednesdays, faculty meetings and informal meetings that maintained the focus on student learning. Leadership qualities included support of faculty members, positive involvement with students and faculty members, and an establishment of trust between the administration and the faculty. The administration also set goals and expectations for teachers and students. The principal's goal for his faculty was clearly communicated: to work with the students each day to facilitate their academic success.

The final set of components was at the teacher level. The first of these was teacher qualities. The teachers strove to meet the expectations of the administration and shared the administrators' vision for the school. The teachers put the responsibility for the

students' success on themselves and worked as a team to help students make progress. The teachers employed diverse teaching strategies to meet their students' many needs. During professional development sessions, teachers collaborated with each other, helping each other evaluate assessments and data. By grouping students, teaching in teams, and departmentalizing by subject, teachers were able to use their strengths to maximize the quality of instruction. As a PBIS school, they were able to focus on positive behavior interventions, not just punishments, and the monthly club meetings held at the end of a school day gave students and teachers a chance to interact and learn more about each other in a non-threatening atmosphere.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter concludes the research on the academic success of one Title One Distinguished School in South Carolina. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What components do Johnson Elementary School administrators believe supported their transition from a Title One school to a Distinguished Title One School?
2. What components do Johnson Elementary School teachers believe supported their transition from a Title One school to a Distinguished Title One School?

This chapter provides a summary of the findings and conclusions according to the research questions, along with implications for practice. The final part of this chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Study

It is imperative that future leaders learn which components can lead to the academic success of students within their schools. For over forty years, the federal government has allocated millions of dollars each year to Title One schools. Despite this

financial investment, there is no concrete evidence of real improvement in those schools. Because so much money has been put into these schools, a comprehensive study of how to achieve success in high poverty schools is crucial. The best way to conduct such a study is to focus on a school that has transformed ideas and strategies into results. The study's purpose was to determine which components the participants believe made the difference at this school and the effects, if any, those components had on Johnson Elementary School's winning the 2011 South Carolina Distinguished Title One School in closing the achievement gap. We will view these components from two perspectives. The first components will be from the perspective of the administration, which includes the principal and the assistant principal. The second components will be viewed from the perspective of the teachers. The teacher participants include two classroom teachers, one special area teacher, one related arts teacher and one math coach.

Research Question #1

What components do Johnson Elementary School administrators believe supported their transition from a Title One school to a Distinguished Title One School?

Principal

Parental involvement is necessary and crucial to success. Because the previous principal did not involve the PTA in school decisions and activities, when the new principal was hired, he had to rebuild the organization. The PTA began to help teachers and support them through providing supplies and volunteering their time. The organization's revitalization was a direct result of the principal's belief in community involvement.

The teacher participants described the culture of the school as, “being part of a team.” This feeling of solidarity was also due to the principal’s leadership style. As he put it, “I feel like all of us, as a team, were there to support them (the students) along the way. I have a servant leader’s attitude in the fact that I am not going to ask somebody to do something I have not done or am unwilling to do myself. I want to be there to learn with them and support them.” This team approach, which helped shaped the school’s culture, also helped students develop more positive attitudes about themselves. The principal described the success he found;

“I think the students were feeling more successful in the classroom. They (the students) were feeling like they were accomplishing more and the teachers were feeling that they (the teachers) were connecting with the students more. They (the teachers) felt the progress that they (the students) were making with the students and that is certainly a success that the teachers longed to feel”

For children who live in poverty to be able to have good feelings about themselves and their school, by itself, is a remarkable achievement.

The principal also utilized resources, materials, and personnel to help students experience success. The principal found the expertise of the literacy specialist to be especially helpful. Because he had never been in a Title One school before, his knowledge was limited. However, the newly acquired literacy specialist had experience in Title One schools and furthered his understanding of the differences he would find in a school of predominantly very poor children. The principal also relied on the TRT to help classroom teachers incorporate technology into their lessons so their students could have some of the same advantages as students in other schools.

Recognizing that proficiency in reading provides the foundation for every other skill, the principal hired two reading specialists: one primary specialist and one intermediate specialist. The primary reading specialist instructed four students using the Reading Recovery program. She also was able to have two other reading groups, whom she taught using Leveled Literacy Intervention by Fountas and Pinnell. The intermediate specialist served the upper grades. The principal said, “She fulfilled a need for those upper kids that we did not have. At minimal, all of her students increased 12 RIT points on the MAP test. She also went out to the shelter (for homeless children) and served those students. She was a liaison between the school and the shelter.” The principal also conducted a survey of teachers to learn what they needed to do their jobs better. After compiling the results, he found that teachers wanted more time for planning. Based on this need, the principal implemented DIG days. On these days the principal designated time for the teachers to have a short professional development session followed by time to plan. The teachers would spend half of a regular school day in these meetings while substitutes took their classes. The principal also prioritized material resources. Teachers received these resources during their DIG days. The principal was willing to supply teachers with materials as long as they could justify the request. The principal explained, “I would have the teachers give me those lists of things and have them tell me, all right if I give you this tell me how you are going to use it in your classroom and so I think it made folks rethink the things they wanted.”

The principal’s overall philosophy was to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of the students in his care. He had the same expectations of his teachers; all of them faced the daily challenge of educating children who often lacked the most

basic of life's needs. Bonnie said, "I think you have the basic needs of students, making sure that they are fed, making sure they have their supplies, making sure they have clothes, making sure they have a home to go to, just those general life needs. Those are different for Title One schools than other schools." The principal had a strong but realistic commitment to meeting the children's academic needs: "From the beginning, we just wanted to do what was in the best interest of our kids. I think our main priority should simply be meeting the kids where they are and taking them as far as we can." In addition, the principal defined success by explaining, "I think regardless of whatever we are shooting for; we need to push our kids as far as we can. And, yeah if we push them as far as this goal and we exceed that goal, great, but if we did not push them as far as they could go, is that really success?" The principal's expectations for the teachers were much the same. To insure that students were receiving the best possible education, he put teachers in positions that emphasized their strengths. The principal shared, "...based on the student needs and the teacher's strengths, I just expected them (the teachers) on a daily basis to do what was in the best interest of those students." Every tenet of the principal's belief system was student oriented.

The principal recognized that using data was a valuable tool in helping students whose academic deficiencies might otherwise have gone unidentified. He explained, "There are some kids that can say the right things in class and look busy, and never really ask a lot of question so the teacher thinks, oh they are fine. But if their MAP scores and PASS scores are weak, there is something there...you use all three of those to really target instruction." The scores not only show which students need more help but also the areas in which those students are weakest. Teachers reiterated many times their gratitude

for the principal's willingness to communicate with them. He solicited their input through surveys which allowed the faculty to offer own ideas on improving the school. Teachers were able to identify their successes, challenges, and even their failures. He allowed them as well to offer their input on what they would change about the school if given the chance.

By utilizing a Leadership Team, the principal was able to meet frequently with the assistant principal, math coach and Title One facilitator. The team's goal was to meet once a month. However, the principal explained the reality of their meetings. "We met probably informally more than anything. At the end of the day we find ourselves, the four of us, sitting there chatting or during the day we would end up in one of the other's offices bouncing ideas off of each other."

Faculty meetings were another useful method of disseminating information. He did not, however, think it necessary to give them information that would not be useful to them. By choosing to give teachers only vital information from district meetings, he made sure their focus could remain where it should be, on the students. He explained, "You kind of had to prioritize. Here is the wealth of information that we need to share with the teachers...you just have to decide what's the most important and what can be shared in the allotted time." The principal felt faculty meetings "kept us family oriented and we also gave concerns, we allowed everyone, by grade level, to bring concerns to the table."

The principal found it equally important to talk informally with students. He offered some sample questions he would ask the students and spoke of how the answers could impact his decision making. "How do you feel, do you feel like you are being

successful in class? And you see what they are able to produce a day, or what they are able to accomplish during a day, and those kinds of things help you determine whether or not that initiative was successful.” If a large number of students gave similar answers, either positive or negative, he got an idea of how well they were meeting students’ needs.

The principal also shared two strategies he used to help teachers be learners. The first was to have teacher leaders share at faculty meetings. Based on teacher observations, the principal would ask teachers to share what they were doing inside their classroom. He explained this concept, “They might not be designated classroom leaders, but by the way they teach and the way they carried themselves they are informal leaders. And so getting buy-in from those folks and having those folks on board with what we were doing, helped the other staff members who may have been on the fence or may not have been on the fence but helped them (the leadership team) facilitate change.” Another strategy for creating a culture of change was to have vertical planning with teachers. The principal decided to have these meetings based on needs or concerns the teachers presented at meetings. The kindergarten and first grade teachers met together. Then, first grade met with second grade teachers and so on. This not only helped teachers work on specific academic needs for their students, it helped them work together as a team to meet the academic needs of their students.”

Assistant Principal

The assistant principal explained how the school became a Distinguished Title One School by discussing some of the same concepts as the principal but from her own perspective. The first of these contributing components was parental involvement. She felt that parents started to become more involved and willing to attend meetings

when meetings were held on site and conducted by personnel unaffiliated with the school. She explained, “So I think that helped them overcome the challenge of making those parents feel comfortable.” Parents in general felt more secure in voicing their concerns to people who would have no daily contact with their children. The parents began to ask for other sessions, such as academic sessions, to be offered. The assistant principal noted, “Parents have asked for instructional [meetings]...They were wanting instructional pieces, so they started pulling that in to help meet those needs of the parents, too.” The assistant principal also explained the principal’s role in stabilizing the PTA and increasing its involvement in school activities.

The culture of the school was also important to the assistant principal, who credited teachers with fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect and constructive advice. She stated, “...the uniqueness of those teachers, they felt comfortable talking with one another and nobody ever took it personal, nobody ever left upset; they just felt comfortable enough with one another that they could say whatever was on their minds.” Establishing this culture of collegiality and cooperation enabled the faculty to maintain that sense of family that made them special.

The assistant principal noted that several people were instrumental in furthering the school’s vision. She said of the math coach, “She would sit down with a teacher and develop, she would sit with them, and she went through the state coaching model. So she implemented that a little bit, too. But she sat down with them. It was a collaborative meeting, and she met with the teacher, and they came up with what was needed.” She also recognized the importance of the school’s social worker and the RBHS worker. The social worker “did home visits daily. She was great with follow-up. But then

she could also be tough and say, 'This is what we are expecting you to do.' The RBHS worker met with students to help with behavior issues and provided counseling and family support services to families on Medicaid. The assistant principal explained, "She had a ton of knowledge and she is great with behavioral modification." Behavior issues can easily hinder students' ability to concentrate and learn.

The assistant principal also explained how communication was important during every day school activities. "I felt like Jack and I both, Jack would help out with discipline if I was tied up, he was really good about that." She also explained the principal's policy of maintaining informal communication, usually at morning or afternoon car duty. "He was very approachable. He would stop what he was doing if somebody came up and needed to meet with him. He would make unscheduled meetings and reschedule other meetings." The assistant principal also noted that the principal would attend the SIC committee meetings and would often represent the school at community events.

The assistant principal emphasized the day to day data gathered through observations of teachers in class. Observing the interaction between teachers and students showed her how well strategies were working in the classroom. By watching the students in their academic settings, she also got a stronger grasp on how well the students were learning. She explained that teachers focused on short term goals so students would feel successful. For example, a teacher might ask, "What do we want to accomplish this week?" The school also decided to use the theme of "What is your dream?" for the 2010-2011 school year. The administration wanted students to think about their dreams, especially their long term goals. The assistant principal remembered how teachers

discussed these goals with their students. She remembered how these discussions helped the students realize how much their teachers cared about them. Another teacher also had an idea of making a quilt of dreams for the faculty and staff as a way the faculty and staff could share their dreams with the students.

The assistant principal described the expectations and goals of the administration. Two of these expectations included 14 non-negotiables for the faculty and behavior expectations for the students within the PBIS program. The 14 non-negotiable expectations were “put out there and everybody had such a high respect for him they never questioned it. This goes back to him building relationships with them so that was a non-negotiable thing and we went over it as a faculty.” These non-negotiables helped the faculty know exactly what was expected of them. Going over these expectations in detail addressed issues in advance that teachers might have questioned. They went through the questions and concerns together so that the principal did not need to revisit them later on. Following the principal’s example, the teachers voluntarily set goals in the classrooms for the students. “The teachers worked with the kids on developing academic goals but also behavioral goals or just a personal goal. For example, ‘I want to score one touchdown this year on the football team.’ The kids knew their teachers were interested in them past school. That was really not anything we asked them to do. It was something the teachers did on their own.” The principal’s strong leadership motivated teachers to set goals with students that the students could reach. The leadership team, which included the assistant principal, also remarked “the teachers and students took ownership of what was going on.”

One of the professional development strategies used by the principal helped teachers stay current on educational literature. She told how the principal would give teachers selected articles to read and share with other teachers. During faculty meetings the teachers would present the information from the articles they had read. In this way everyone had an equal responsibility to read and lead a presentation. One group of teachers would share their reading at each faculty meeting.

Because underprivileged children's lives are affected by poverty in so many negative ways, the principal instituted a monthly club program to offer the students a variety of experiences. Students would choose three clubs from a prepared list, and the principal would make the final decisions on which club a student would join. By meeting for forty-five minutes during the last part of a regular school day, the students could attend regardless of transportation issues. The assistant principal said, "The kids cannot afford to go to the recreation league and play. This was their outlet and a chance for them to show their strength in something besides academics. It helped the students to see teachers in a different way. I really saw how much the kids enjoyed it and it helped with the relationships." Outside of the traditional classroom setting, students and teachers could learn more about each other and even connect with each other more deeply.

Research Question #2

What components do Johnson Elementary School teachers believe supported their transition from a Title One school to a Distinguished Title One School?

The teachers felt supported by the reenergized PTA, which helped with special projects and gave the teachers "extra little perks treats. Or things like that just as a morale boosters to make it fun to be there." Despite the enthusiasm of the PTA, the teachers felt

the parents were generally apathetic about their community and saw a need to form relationships with parents. By forming these relationships, teachers hoped the parents would choose to be more involved and begin seeing the importance of education for their children. Tina expressed, “And the strongest thing I think is that building relationships that we have talked about, doing things and building pride in Johnson...so pushing them (the parents) to have pride in their school and to want more for their children. And that building relationships and drawing them in is one of the biggest things.” Unfortunately, children whose parents are indifferent to education are handicapped before they ever enter school. That parental indifference is one of the biggest obstacles a teacher can face.

The teacher participants felt that the family atmosphere they had created extended to the students as well, making them more eager to succeed. The teachers describe the school as “feeling like a family.” By supporting the faculty, the principal established a comfortable environment where students felt supported and loved by their teachers. Bonnie explained “It was a happy place to be for the kids, for the teachers. People wanted to be there. I mean I know I certainly enjoyed coming into work every day. I think that matters and I think that affects your job performance.” The teachers felt having positive involvement from the principal made them feel more like not just a team but a family. The teachers described this by giving an example of a parent night at a local restaurant, “He would be right back there with you doing it, and he was always at all of those things, and that sounds like a small thing, but as a teacher it is something to remember.” While he was clearly their leader, the principal wanted his teachers to know he did not feel that he was their superior.

Cultivating a feeling of mutual trust and respect was a key element of the school's culture. Teachers attested to the fact that his trust in them inspired them to do what was best for their students every day. Debbie explained, "...somehow you have to build that trust with your faculty before you say we are going in this direction.... the trust was there, we were all working together for the kids."

The principal was confident that the teachers shared his vision of putting the students ahead of everything else. Allison remembers, "We needed to focus on those kids, not have to worry about jobs, who is going to be moved...this was his leadership style." One way of helping students was to allow teachers to teach without fear. Only by trying a variety of activities could teachers find the methods that would work best in the classroom. Such latitude in teaching children is not the kind of thing every principal would allow. The teachers, however, would have been unwilling to try something new unless they felt it had the potential to help their students. The principal felt comfortable then in allowing them to use a new approach to see if it worked. Sometimes there was success; sometimes, failure, but he trusted them enough to allow the teachers to use their own judgment. Knowing they had the principal's support helped the teachers to feel better about their jobs and to enjoy teaching. Tina explained, "...you do not look back at it as hard work. You look back and think that was so much fun." Teachers also knew their opinions were valued in the decision making process. Bonnie explained, "For me personally some of the successes were to see the buy-in with the change in activity schedule or to see the buy-in to the in-house professional developments we were doing." Because of their school wide sense of purpose, a real team spirit emerged within the staff. Allison remembered, "...they (the teachers) are helping one another, the team approach

that comes along with that helps people.” This concept of school culture and the importance of a leader’s creating that culture was summarized by Debbie, “He created a climate that I think the best way to say it is we would have followed him anywhere.”

Title One funding enabled the principal to hire additional personnel, and acquire additional resources for teachers. The teachers recognized the need to have people working in positions where their strengths could be put to the best use. Tina suggested, “I think having the right people, right on the bus. I think that is crucial.” Teachers praised the math coach, who modeled lessons and worked side by side with teachers in classrooms.

Teachers were committed to meeting the academic and emotional needs of their students. The teachers remembered the communication among colleagues and the contribution these conversations made to creating a student- centered environment. Allison observed, “...without looking at numbers, without looking at data. I mean just the feel of the building and the way people communicated with one another and gained the focus on the students. People were just in touch with what they (the students) needed and were willing to do whatever it took to make sure those kids were successful.” Student success depends on more than classroom instruction. Allison also explained, “The first 30 minutes of every morning, everybody deals with something like I did not have breakfast because my parents did not get up, I do not have a coat, I cannot go to recess. You are going to show them some love, a little one on one time to try to bring them in. Half the time they are not even emotionally ready to be at school, much less want to be taught.” For poor children who are accustomed to few of life’s necessities and none of its luxuries, an emotional connection with a caring adult can be crucial.

Teacher participants also saw the need for effective communication within the school. The need to communicate to students, the need to communicate among teachers about students' needs, the need for teachers to communicate to administration about students and students' needs were all a vital part of the school's success. The administration communicated with students in two ways. The principal spoke to the student body through a daily news show, but he would also speak informally with students or in groups to ask them questions or hear their concerns.

Other than his communication skills, the teacher participants appreciated other leadership qualities. Bonnie explained the importance of leadership in any school when she stated, "...one person being in a leadership role can make or break the school." One of the principal's often praised qualities was the support he gave to teachers. In one account by a teacher participant, she remembered going to the principal about an idea. Although he had some doubts about her proposal, he listened attentively and asked questions before making a decision. "He exhausted all efforts to be supportive before he ever moved into making a decision or taking the next step for disciplinary actions." A major part of his leadership style was his willingness to listen and to encourage his teachers. The principal did not make executive decisions and force them on the teachers. The teachers also found the principal to be a motivator. Debbie explained, "...some people are just natural born motivators, you cannot pin point what it is that they do that motivates you. I felt motivated. You just wanted to work hard." The teachers also liked that he would not ask the teachers to do things that he would not do himself. He would visit classrooms and play with students, addressing them by name. His concern for each student as an individual was one of the primary reasons teachers placed such trust in him.

Bonnie explained, “It was about the balance he brought and the trust that people had for him and the assistant principal.” His frequent visits to classrooms signaled teachers that he was interested in the daily workings of the school. Tina said, “...if you are in the classroom, then when you tell me I am doing a good job, I know it is sincere because you are really in there.” Teachers felt the principal trusted them all to make professional decisions. According to Allison, “[It was] not only that he gave us freedom, he trusted our judgment. He was like I trust people working for me, I can trust you. I do not have to critique or monopolize everything you do.” The math coach remembered that the principal was adept at keeping everyone focused. “He was really good at streamlining everything. I would say that would be a strength of the principal. We felt like we needed to take everything we saw. And he said we can’t, so we didn’t.” The principal was also willing to change course if ideas were not working. More than any other factor, the principal’s leadership qualities shaped the culture at Johnson Elementary School. Bonnie clarified, “It really was a unique culture at Johnson Elementary School that the principal and all of his leadership abilities really led the school to have the culture that it had.”

The teachers set challenging yet realistic academic goals for their students. Students kept these goals in their data notebooks. The students were able to reflect on their goals throughout the year and track their progress toward them. Teachers were also responsible for discussing these goals with the students and updating their notebooks. Teachers also liked the fact that goals and expectations were clear and specific. This clarity of purpose also led to a team atmosphere so teachers felt unified. Allison expounded, “...things were streamlined and clearly communicated. And I felt like I was supposed to be successful because teachers knew what was going on. We were all on the

same page. We were all together. We were a team, everybody in there. We had a game plan for everything.” As a team, they all had the same goals and worked to achieve them.

Teachers believed in themselves in large part because the administration did. Because the administration was inherently fair, teachers believed in and adhered to the principal’s “non-negotiables,” particularly in putting students first. As much as possible, they met the academic, social, and emotional needs of their students. The teachers took their jobs seriously and took responsibility for student learning. Debbie, who took an active role in helping students succeed, said, “You have to try to teach everything, reading, math, behavior, you know a kid comes to school with no shoes. I mean you have to help with everything. You are not just there to teach your specific subject.” Even though her subject had no direct bearing on test scores, she and her colleagues worked together toward the same goals.

Teachers respected one another and respected each other’s thoughts and teaching styles. Allison expressed, “We worked so well together because number one, there was respect then there was trust. So, we could go into that room and we might have to say we have a problem. When that door shut, our problems were handled. And we would be very honest with one another. You would have never known that from the outside because we were like friends. Honestly, those teachers made me a better teacher.” Again the teachers kept the focus on their students, not their differences.

Teachers used proven strategies to help increase student achievement. One of these strategies was grouping. The students who needed additional reading instruction were identified and pulled out to attend class with the reading interventionist. Another strategy was departmentalization, a practice where the teachers’ strengths were identified,

and they were put into positions where they would be most effective. Tina explained, “[One teacher] was excellent in reading and another teacher’s strength is probably math and he (the principal) is putting the people with their strengths...” If the students saw multiple teachers throughout the day because of departmentalizing, teachers who taught the same group of students could work together to help the children overcome their problems. Allison explained why vertical planning with other teachers worked so well. “We would do a vertical planning where we had somebody from every grade level. We were able to voice to third grade, I know your students do not have to complete three paragraphs you just have to have a beginning, middle and end. In fourth grade, we have to have five paragraphs and we cannot complete this if your students are only completing one paragraph.” By discussing requirements at each grade level, teachers were able to build on the previous year’s instruction.

Problem

The issue of poverty in the United States presents problems within Title One Schools, which non-title one schools do not have to face. Most of these issues deal with the fact that students lack basic needs such as adequate food and also face the emotional upheaval that comes with poverty. Although some high poverty schools are able to equal or even surpass the performances of non-Title One schools, little evidence exists that the amount of money put into Title One schools has paid off. The achievement gap between poor rural children and their peers has not appreciably changed. It is past time to find out why the problem still exists and to address it.

Purpose Statement

The study's purpose was to determine which components the participants believe made the difference at this school and the effects, if any, those components had on the school's ability to win this prestigious award. After discovering which components work, as a future administrator, my hope is to determine which components could be transferred successfully to other schools.

Review of Methodology

This study was an exploratory case study of one elementary school in South Carolina. This school was chosen because it won the 2011 South Carolina Distinguished Title One School in Closing the Achievement Gap. Using in depth interviews, focus groups and observations with the administration, math coach and teachers, I was able to collect data. After reviewing the data, triangulating the data and coding the data, I was able to identify specific components which helped the school improve in student achievement as identified by the PASS test and consequently, win this prestigious award.

Major Findings

One finding was that strong school leadership is crucial to the success of the school. Next, the qualities of the leader shape the culture of the school; the culture has a tremendous impact on student achievement.

This conclusion about the importance of leadership on the school culture came from the teachers. The administration was aware of the camaraderie among the teachers. Neither the principal nor the assistant principal, however, commented on the tremendous impact the culture had on overall student achievement.

The data clearly shows the effects of positive and supportive leadership on the faculty and staff. By creating positive relationships among faculty and staff, the principal was able to make decisions which people trusted and which ultimately improved student achievement. Next, leadership qualities such as communication, support, trust, encouragement, commitment, motivation, flexibility, and involvement all helped shape the school's culture. The faculty and staff recognized and appreciated these qualities of the principal. Because they recognized these qualities and the principal possessed these qualities, the culture of the school began to shape due to his leadership. The principal was undoubtedly the force behind the school's positive and effective school environment.

Participants described the school as a happy place to work, where the faculty and administration shared a vision which they transmitted to the students and to the community.

Findings Related to Literature

The literature about successful high poverty schools supports the premise that the quality of leadership is more important than anything else. Fullan (2007), along with Leithwood and his team, had consolidated multiple studies for the Wallace Foundation, finding three core practices of successful leaders: setting direction, developing people and redesigning the organization. Marzano (2003) explains twenty-one behaviors of leaders that influence student learning. Using these two references, Fullan asserts that leadership is key to successful schools. However, he further contends that the difficulties of the job and the many, sometimes unrealistic, demands can be a hindrance even to the most diligent of principals.

Marzano (2003) states, “Leadership could be considered the single most important aspect of effective school reform” (Marzano, 2003, p. 172). He tells how leadership has an effect on all levels of achievement as well as school level factors: curriculum, challenging goals and effective feedback, parent and community involvement, safe and orderly environment and staff collegiality and professionalism. Leadership affects the teacher factors of instructional strategies, classroom management, and classroom curriculum design. Last leadership affects the student factors of home atmosphere, prior learning, background knowledge, and motivation. Leadership influences every aspect of any school, often being the most obvious reason behind success – or failure. To explain how leadership affects school culture, Marzano draws on Thomas Sergiovanni’s theory of educational change.

Sergiovanni (1992) asserts that to create educational change, we must look at schools as communities instead of as organizations. According to this theory, a leader would actually forfeit some of his responsibilities to “substitutes,” causing teachers to become more self-managing. Principals or leaders would then be able to spend more time on problems or matters of substance rather than personnel. This change means the responsibility for the success of the community lies with those who are most affected, faculty and staff. In my study, the principal used teachers, whom he referred to as teacher leaders, to help him with sharing instructional strategies at faculty meetings. Sergiovanni focuses on four main ideas. The first idea is a commitment to staying current about teaching, trying new approaches, and sharing learning with others. The teacher participants in this study felt safe in trying new things and felt safe even if they might fail. The second idea is a shared commitment to work towards agreed-upon values and

purposes. The principal had a strong values and beliefs system, which his teachers also ascribed to, in large part because of the relationship they had developed with him. The third idea is a commitment to teaching. Ideally then, teaching would become a collective rather than an individual endeavor. The teacher participants said they willingly shared ideas with each other, and the assistant principal commented on the collegiality among the teachers. The fourth idea is the commitment to caring and concern for children as people with feelings and needs, not just as students. By teaching the “whole child,” teachers commit to meeting a variety of needs as they help students to succeed and prepare for the future. Such was the principal’s vision, and he was confident that it was shared by everyone else on the staff (Sergiovanni, 1992).

After completing a meta-analysis of multiple studies on effective schools, The Center for Leadership compiled ten traits these schools had in common. These traits were described as traits, which “...schools should use as a platform for success in their reform initiatives.” The first of these traits was “create a school culture that utilizes a strong and challenging curriculum in the belief that all students can learn.” Likewise, Marzano (2005) notes that culture is one of the 21 responsibilities found in school leadership. Culture is explained as “The extent to which the principal fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation” (Marzano, 2005, p.42). Whitaker (2012) sums this thought up with the first of eighteen things that matter most about great principals, “Great Principals never forget that it is people, not programs that determine the quality of the school” (p.143).

The Wallace Foundation (2013) found five key responsibilities of building leaders. The first responsibility of the leader is to develop a vision for the school that

focuses on academic success. The principal in this study made his vision clear. He put the students first in his decision making, and he wanted students to be successful. The faculty and staff shared this vision. The second responsibility is to create a positive climate. Johnson Elementary School was described as a place where teachers and students wanted to be and where they had fun. Having a shared vision between the leadership and teachers helped the school create a positive climate. The students realized teachers cared about them, and the students started to cultivate a belief of success. The third responsibility given by the Wallace Foundation was the leader's ability to cultivate leadership. The principal exhibited this responsibility when he decided to create a leadership team. The leadership team met frequently to discuss different aspects of the school, and the members were trusted individuals. The fourth responsibility was to improve instruction, and the last responsibility was to manage people, data and process. The principal completed yearly needs assessments. From the data collected, the principal was able to target specific strategies to meet instructional needs within the school.

Surprises

At the onset of this study, my focus centered on instruction. I believed that math or reading programs or new ideas were responsible for the increase in student achievement. I did believe that the school leadership and the climate had some impact, but I underestimated its importance. As I got deeper into the study, however, I found that leadership was a significant explanation for the school's remarkable success. An analysis of the data offered overwhelming evidence of Whitaker's assertion that people are more important than programs to school improvement.

Conclusions

Implications for Action

The key findings of this dissertation have several implications for action at the district level and school level. In order to have an effective learning environment, a school must have a strong, caring leader. The leader's traits have the most impact on the school's culture. Some of these traits could include, but are not limited to, being a good communicator, a willing listener, a consistent motivator, and a team player, who is supportive, flexible and trusting.

1. District Level personnel must start looking at their school leaders to determine their effectiveness, especially those leaders in Title One schools where students face the kinds of challenges that make academic success more difficult to achieve. If these principals do not possess the right leadership qualities and do not establish positive school cultures, they may be unsuited to work in Title One schools.
2. District Level personnel may want to consider placing principals who have demonstrated strength in leadership and have also proven their ability in establishing a positive school culture into Title One Schools to improve student achievement.
3. The findings of this study also bring into question what type of abilities or traits successful leaders should possess. Even if a principal has been successful in a previous job, he or she might not be able to find the same kind of success in a Title One school. The challenges of

being a principal do not just vary from school to school; in Title One schools especially, they vary from day to day and from child to child.

4. At the school level, it may prove pertinent for potential administrators to assess honestly what leadership qualities they possess. This self-evaluation may alert the leaders to areas that need improvement. It may also deter some from going into administration and subsequently becoming ineffective at their jobs.

Recommendations for Further Research

Research on approaches leading to success in Title One schools is limited. The determining factors of success in this study included leadership traits and the culture of the school. Because of the nature of these findings, a replication of this study should be considered. The replication could and probably should be conducted in other counties within South Carolina and in other states. Following these other studies, the data could be compared to determine what success other schools may have experienced and why. It is definitely possible that the data will indicate that many schools have found it difficult to raise test scores and increase the chances for success among the impoverished. If so, then that information is equally important as an educational planning tool.

Once this data is analyzed, determining factors of success could be identified. If leadership and culture of the school are found to be the main reasons for success, it begs the question does the amount of student achievement differ if a school is a Title One school or non-Title One school or can any school obtain significant increases in student achievement with the proper leadership and school culture?

Concluding Thoughts

From all the research and all the interviews and observations, one fact stood out: an effective leader is very important to a school's success. The leader is crucial to developing a school culture where teachers and students feel safe and valued. The most salient comments made by teachers at Johnson Elementary School centered on the principal's ability to inspire his teachers and the teachers' commitment to the value of helping children. When a teacher made the comment that "... one person in a leadership role can make or break a school," she would seem to be speaking an obvious truth. Leaders who do not truly lead allow a school to fall into confusion and disarray. Over and over the teacher participants credited their principal for the positive environment at their school, "...the principal...really led the school to have the culture that it had." The most important part of that culture was the family feeling, which allowed teachers to feel comfortable and happy and to pass those feelings on to their students. One said, "It was a happy place to be for the kids, for the teachers. People wanted to be there." This less stressful atmosphere helped teachers to focus on what was important: the well-being and education of each child. A teacher affirmed, "From the beginning, we just wanted to do what was in the best interest of our kids." The principal spoke of the impact the teachers' commitment had on the students, "...I think the students were feeling more successful in the classroom. They were feeling like they were accomplishing more, and the teachers were feeling that they were connecting with the students more."

Trying to determine the reasons a school is successful is very difficult. Educators are not just skilled workers; the best administrators and teachers are in fact artists who have a special talent that is often hard to identify or define. In the case study of Johnson

Elementary School, the reason for the success, however, is clear; their leader was completely dedicated to his teachers and students. A teacher summed up what everyone seemed to believe, "... he created a climate that I think the best way to say it is we would have followed him anywhere."

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APPENDIX A-INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Interview One

1. How did you come to be here?

Interview Two

1. Last interview we talked about some of your personal and professional background. You talked about _____.
2. Tell me how the process of becoming a Distinguished School began for Johnson Elementary School?
3. What were the challenges the school faced? How did you overcome these challenges?
4. What were some of the successes the school experienced during this process?
5. In talking about successes and overcoming challenges, were there particular individuals in the school whom were especially helpful to you?
6. What changes would you have made about the process?
7. How could these processes be duplicated in other Title one schools?
8. What were the most rewarding aspects of this journey for Johnson Elementary School?
9. Are there any additional comments you would like to make?

Interview Three

1. During our last interview we talked about the journey of Johnson Elementary School from personnel to challenges and successes and some of the different aspects of that journey. You talked about _____.
2. Are there any additional comments you would like to make after reflecting on our second interview?
3. At the end of each school year, what steps were taken to assess the school's progress?

4. How did leadership know if a change or new initiative was successful? What were your criteria for success?
5. Based on the leadership's assessment of the school's progress in 2008, what changes did you make for the next year and each subsequent year (2009, 2010)?
6. How did you go about implementing these changes with faculty and staff?
7. What challenges did you face with implementing these changes?
8. What successes did you experience in implementing these changes?
9. In reflecting on the school's journey, what steps or initiatives would you have changed?
10. Is there any additional information you would like to provide?

APPENDIX B-FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOLS

Focus Group Leadership Team July 16, 2013

Welcome

Introductions

Our topic is ...

The results of this focus group will be used for my dissertation data.

You were selected because you were part of Johnson Elementary School's Leadership Team from 2008-2011 which led to the school receiving the South Carolina's Distinguished Title One School Award in Closing the Achievement Gap.

So far I have completed 6 interviews with participants.

Guidelines

No right or wrong answers, only differing points of view

We're tape recording; please one person speaking at a time

We're on a first name basis

You don't need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views

I ask that you turn off your phones

My role as moderator will be to guide the discussion

Opening question

1. Please tell me your name, your position and responsibilities at Johnson Elementary School from 2008-2011.
2. Tell me how the process of becoming a Distinguished School began for Johnson Elementary School?
3. Think back over the decisions that were made at Johnson Elementary School from 2008-2011. What went particularly well?
4. What were the challenges the school faced? How did you overcome these challenges?
5. What were some of the successes the school experienced from 2008-2011?
6. In talking about successes and overcoming challenges, were there particular individuals in the school whom were especially helpful to you?
7. At the end of each school year, what steps were taken to assess the school's progress?

8. How did the leadership team know if a change or new initiative was successful? What were your criteria for success?
9. How did you go about implementing changes with faculty and staff?
10. What challenges did you experience with implementing changes at Johnson Elementary School?
11. What successes did you experience with implementing changes at Johnson Elementary School?
12. During this process, did you reflect on your abilities and find out anything you wanted to change about yourself personally or professionally?
13. Suppose that you were in charge and could make one change that would make Johnson Elementary School better. What changes would you have made to the process?
14. How could these processes be duplicated in other Title One schools?
15. How would you go about implementing these processes in other Title One Schools?
16. What were the most rewarding aspects of this journey for Johnson Elementary School?
17. Of all the things we discussed, what is the most important to you?
18. Summary from Moderator. Is this an adequate summary?
19. Would you like to add anything to our discussion? Have we missed anything?

Focus Group Teachers July 23, 2013

Welcome

Introductions

Our topic is ...

The results of this focus group will be used for my dissertation data.

You were selected because you were part of Johnson Elementary School's Leadership Team from 2008-2011 which led to the school receiving the South Carolina's Distinguished Title One School Award in Closing the Achievement Gap.

So far I have completed 6 interviews with participants.

Guidelines

No right or wrong answers, only differing points of view

We're tape recording; please one person speaking at a time

We're on a first name basis

You don't need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views

I ask that you turn off your phones

My role as moderator will be to guide the discussion

Opening question

1. Please tell me your name, your position and responsibilities at Johnson Elementary School from 2008-2011.
2. Tell me how the process of becoming a Distinguished School began for Johnson Elementary School?
3. Think back over the decisions that were made at Johnson Elementary School from 2008-2011. What went particularly well?
4. What were the challenges the school faced? How did the faculty/student body overcome these challenges?
5. What were some of the successes the faculty/student body experienced from 2008-2011?
6. In talking about successes and overcoming challenges, were there particular individuals in the school whom were especially helpful to you?
7. At the end of each school year, what steps were taken to assess the progress of the students/faculty?
8. How did the faculty know if a change or new initiative was successful? What were the criteria for success?
9. How did the leadership of the school implement changes with faculty and staff?
10. What challenges did faculty/students experience with implementing changes at Johnson Elementary School?
11. What successes did faculty/students experience with implementing changes at Johnson Elementary School?
12. During this process, did you reflect on your abilities and find out anything you wanted to change about yourself personally or professionally?
13. Suppose that you were in charge and could make one change that would make Johnson Elementary School better. What changes would you have made to the process?
14. How could these processes your faculty/students experienced be duplicated in other Title One schools? How would you go about implementing these processes in other Title One Schools?
15. What were the most rewarding aspects of this journey for Johnson Elementary School?
16. Of all the things we discussed, what is the most important to you?
17. Would you like to add anything to our discussion? Have we missed anything?