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Successful Impoverished Schools: What are the Existing Conditions in
High Poverty Schools That Have a Higher
Than Average Proficiency Rate?

Mitchell Winn Nerdin

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

Successful Impoverished Schools: What are the Existing Conditions in High Poverty Schools That Have a Higher Than Average Proficiency Rate?

Mitchell Winn Nerdin
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Doctor of Education

Proficiency levels in schools often correlate with the poverty levels of schools. However, in 2018 three schools in Utah beat the state average proficiency rate on all three of Utah's end of year summative English language arts, mathematics, and science exams. These high scores provide evidence that schools are not necessarily limited by poverty in helping students succeed academically. By examining the schools that beat the state average on at least one exam, this study describes the conditions that were in play, which contributed to their students' academic achievement. A description is given of the conditions in the schools that are believed to produce high achievement. These conditions existed and these actions were taken to help a school with a high-poverty population break the perceived bond of poverty and low academic results to produce uncommonly high student achievement.

This study identified the schools in Utah with a high poverty rate (70% or above) and also have student academic proficiency rates higher than the state average on at least one of the state assessments. The data indicates there are 80 schools with a high poverty rate. While only three of those schools had student academic proficiency rates on all three tests that were above average for the state of Utah, eight schools are included in the study as they had student academic proficiency rates above the state average on at least one test. This study reveals that these schools focus attention on school structures, positive school culture, leadership of the principal and his willingness to share leadership with teachers, improving instruction, and efficacious parent engagement. These things are the levers that helped move academic success forward in these schools, even though they are schools with a high rate of students experiencing poverty.

Keywords: poverty, leadership, instruction, school culture, structures, family engagement, principal capacity, teacher capacity

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My family is now very large and much older. The eight children that have come to us have almost never known life without dad in school. They have been supportive and inspirational. It is mostly for them that this endeavor has become successfully complete. I want this to stand as a lasting example of perseverance and hard work. I hope they see that faith, hope and effort can produce success in school and life, against all odds.

My wife, Stacey Nerdin, is my greatest champion. She has been a support in all the good times and more so through all the rough times. She is always a believer and a partner. She deserves any accolades associated with my success as she is the reason for it. I owe her my life and pledge to her my eternal gratitude and love.

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DESCRIPTION OF DISSERTATION STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

This document is presented in the format of the hybrid dissertation as approved by Brigham University's McKay School of Education. The hybrid dissertation is one of several formats supported for doctoral dissertations. The hybrid dissertation focuses on producing a journal-ready manuscript that unites the Department of Educational Leadership and Foundation's requirements with those of a scholarly journal. Following the journal manuscript are appendices, which include an extended review of literature and a methodological section sufficient for the requirements of an institutional review board.

The targeted journal for this dissertation is *Educational Administration Quarterly* (EAQ). The EAQ publishes articles that pertain to the critical issues facing education currently. They focus on leadership and policy issues. EAQ focuses on research that is timely, and includes traditional and emergent themes. The journal predominantly promotes publishing works that enhance educators knowledge about scholarly research for utilization in their work as well as for policy makers and other scholarly pursuits.

Introduction

Schools are largely judged and defined as successful based on the academic test results that they produce. By government decree, education leaders in the federal government have previously proposed that no child (should be) left behind and that every student (should) succeed. These are the common names—No Child Left Behind (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) and Every Student Succeeds Act (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015)—of the two most recent reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA], 1965). Based on the acts, school officials are expected, regardless of the socioeconomics of their school communities, to produce high rates of proficiency on standardized tests. These measurements are currently the key, by Federal measures, to describing the educational success of a school.

In 1965, the federal government, as part of the Lyndon B. Johnson administration's "War on Poverty," created the ESEA (1965). As a part of this landmark legislation, legislators created the Title I school designation (i.e., schools with a high student poverty rate), thus allocating funding to higher need schools to support academic success. Title I funding is intended to provide a more equal opportunity for students who attend a school with high rates of poverty ("Title I Handbook," 2021). Using the money, school leaders are meant to provide opportunities that would be otherwise unavailable to students who attend schools with a population that has a high rate of poverty.

During this era, a landmark education and academic outcome study was conducted. This study, conducted by J. S. Coleman is commonly known as "the Coleman Report," was a look into what degree of equality was present in terms of educational opportunity (Hoxby, 2016). Coleman used the findings to purport that in general, schools play a small role, if any, in the

academic outcomes of students. Rather, Coleman associated families, communities, and out of school factors to the discrepancies found in schools in term of student achievement. This report influenced education for decades. It placed the impetus to improve academic outcomes on outside sources rather than on elements that schools could influence. Since that time, education scholars and practitioners have reconsidered believing that schools can be the impetus for improving academic outcomes (Elmore, 1995).

In the Coleman Report findings, Coleman indicates that schools have little effect on student academic outcomes. Researchers of more current and more rigorous studies have shown that schools and teachers have a measurable effect on student achievement. The Coleman Report findings were flawed because of a lack of adequate analysis (Hoxby, 2016). If the study “wanted to draw conclusions about the effects of families, schools, peers, and neighborhoods, it would have needed to conduct or locate experiments for each variable whose effect it wanted to identify” (Hoxby, 2016, p. 66). In their correlational analysis, the authors of the Coleman Report did not account adequately for the causal relationship between factors like the teacher and teaching practices on student achievement. This led them to faulty findings that misappropriates the importance of all that transpires in a school and within a classroom.

Conversely, in more recent research Hanushek (2014) found a direct link to the quality of the teacher and the amount of learning achieved by a student receiving highly effective instruction. “A good teacher will get a gain of 1.5 grade level equivalent while a bad teacher will get 0.5 year during a single academic year” (Hanushek, 2014, p. 24). This means that “family background is not fate” and “that good teachers can overcome deficits that might come from poorer learning conditions in the home” (Hanushek, 2014, p. 24). Likewise, research throughout the educational system is finding that schools play a very large role in the educational outcomes

of children. In research conducted in hundreds of schools in Chicago it was found that schools with strong indication of effectively addressing instruction, professional capacity, strong parent-community-school ties, school climate and leadership were ten times more likely to improve academic outcomes than schools who were weak at addressing these school functions (Bryk, 2010). Teachers and schools have the capacity to greatly influence student academic outcomes (Barth, 2002; Elmore, 2004; Janney et al., 2005; Spillane et al., 2011).

Schools have the capacity to impact the learning of their students regardless of the background of the students who attend there (Green, 2015; Hanushek, 2014; Knapp et al., 2010). That is not to say that the outside school factors play no part. Rather, it indicates that schools can improve their efforts and expectations and that has the potential to lead to improved student academic achievement (Elmore, 1995). Schools have the potential to positively impact student learning if they focus on improving leadership and instruction (Leithwood et al., 2010). When staff work together with a common vision and high expectations, they have the possibility of improving academic achievement by students (Spillane et al., 2011). Additionally, Slater (2008) indicates in their research that if teachers believe in their capacity to effectively improve student outcomes, they can improve student outcomes. The current research is robust and definitive. Schools and teachers have the capacity to impact students. Not only do teachers have the capacity, but if they work to improve their teaching practices with a focus on implementing the impactful practices set out in the literature, teachers' will have an even greater impact on student outcomes than they would have otherwise (Hattie, 2009).

The two most recent reauthorizations of the ESEA (referenced above) place the onus of improving academic achievement of all students entirely on schools. The financial support given to the schools is meant to improve academic outcomes for students (Leithwood et al., 2010).

During the NCLB era, federal education leaders eventually expected that 100% of students would become proficient. The expected proficiency rates in the current ESSA policy were changed and began to include “growth” or student academic improvement as a construct used to measure the success of a school. Nonetheless, a school is still expected to help all of its students attain a minimum level of proficiency in the current year’s curriculum in English language arts, mathematics, and science.

Schools serve students that live within a set of assigned geographic areas—areas that include students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Students in or near the poverty level are usually recipients of federal aid in the form of free or reduced-priced lunch. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) uses a measure of income compared to the poverty level to determine if students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Household income at 130% or less of the poverty level qualifies a student for free lunch. If a student lives in a household with income between 130%-185% of the poverty level, that student qualifies for reduced-price lunch (Snyder et al., 2016; Stallings & Taylor, 2008). The data from this program give school administrators an accessible way to identify the percentage of their students that are experiencing poverty.

The Federal Title I law allows for schools to calculate poverty rates using the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (“Title I Handbook,” 2021). Some research indicates that this method of calculating data does not always “capture” the IRS defined status of the family’s socioeconomic position (Domina et al., 2018). However, that same research indicates that free or reduced-price lunch may be a better indicator of student educational disadvantage than household income data (Domina et al., 2018):

If students enroll in free or reduced-price lunch during periods in which their household incomes dip and if these income dips have long-term consequences for student achievement, NSLP (National School Lunch Program) enrollment may provide information that IRS-reported annual household income data—even over multiple years—do not. (p. 549)

This research indicates that students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch are experiencing the effects of poverty to some degree and that this may have a lasting impact on learning. So, if 50% of the students in a given school are receiving free or reduced-price lunch, then administrators can conclude that 50% of the student population in that school is deemed to be living at or below the poverty level. Using this metric seems to be an adequate measure of poverty in an educational setting. Schools with higher percentage of students living in poverty are often closely associated with schools that report low academic achievement by students, (Green, 2015; Lytle, 2012; Noguera, 2011; Sanders, 2007; Shore, 1994; Torff, 2011).

Students living in conditions created by poverty struggle to find resources to survive. This struggle plays a large impeding role in student academic success (Reardon, 2011). Students living in poverty drastically underperform in comparison to students living in socioeconomic conditions that are above the poverty line: “The research never suggests that poor children are incapable of learning or that poverty itself is a disability” (Noguera, 2011, p. 10). The condition of poverty creates obstacles that impede students from attaining success at school.

The obstacles caused by poverty vary and are as diverse as the students. Impediments caused by poverty can be summed up by saying that a family does not have the same resources to invest in their children as wealthier families (Kaushal et al., 2011). Parental investments of time and money are the two basic resources that children need to be successful in education. This

coupled with a child's "endowments" from parents as well as their inherent characteristics are formative in molding a child's success (Becker, 1991). However, the problem is more nuanced than just saying they need more resources to be successful in school. The deficits in academic achievement results associated with poverty are associated with many conditions outside the school. "In decreasing effect, these factors include student's level of prior knowledge, time constraints, influence of parents, influence of colleagues, student's level of motivation, student's level of academic ability" (Torff, 2011, p. 23).

Students living in poverty do not have the same exposure to resources, activities, conditions, and life experiences as their wealthier counterparts, (Haveman & Wolfe, 1994). Families with higher income may be able to expend resources on after-school tutoring programs, enrichment activities such as music and art lessons, summer camp programs, family or educational travel, extracurricular activities, and, ultimately, higher education (Becker, 1991). These experiences add to a child's life experience and develop a wealth of prior knowledge that augments learning for students as the teaching and learning process of school occurs. Students without this prior knowledge are at a distinct disadvantage and this impedes their learning.

The constraint of time is a prevalent impediment that works against students living in poverty to learn and perform well academically. Parents whose income is low may have less time to invest in children and their academics because of the higher rate of single-parenthood, a nonstandard work schedule, and inflexible work assignments (Smolensky & Gootman, 2003). Parents experiencing poverty spend much more time working and trying to provide for the needs of the family in terms of basics like food and shelter, and do not have as much time to spend working with children on less pressing needs like learning. Parents are having to decide between sustaining the life of their children as opposed to improving the quality of life of their children

such as helping their children learn (Thomson et al., 2001). This can be relieved somewhat in two parent homes when each parent can have more available time to focus on other responsibilities than just providing food and shelter. Poverty impedes learning by limiting time parents have to support students at home academically.

Parental influence impacts greatly the capacity of students to learn and the support they receive to do so. For example, “Children from successful families are more likely to be successful themselves by virtue of the additional time spent on them and also [of] their superior endowments of culture and genes” (Becker, 1981, p. 179). Parents who experience poverty or are the products of poverty are not able to endow their offspring with the same advantages a child might receive if they come from a wealthier family (Becker & Tomes, 1979). Additionally, parents have choice in what they focus on. As such, the importance they place on education and the vision of the parent to consider the future alters the way parents choose to spend time and resources. These investment choices impact the student and their ability to learn (Becker, 1991; Foster, 2002). The influence of parents may work to hinder the ability of students to learn if their influence is not intentionally focused on improving academic learning for their child. Families living in poverty focus more on sustaining life more than on academic pursuits.

The impact of socialization on educational success is large. Peers affect how students view education. They alter the value students place on academic success and learning in general. This value system impacts student motivation and effort, and thus achievement (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Altonji and Mansfield (2010) found that if a student changed schools from a low achieving school (10th percentile) to a high achieving school (90th percentile), the student’s probability of enrollment in a four-year college went up by about 20 percentage points. Obviously, by changing schools, students alter their peer group, and this influences the attitude

one might have about his/her academics. This research indicates that peers help, or hinder, a student's ability to learn. Students living in poverty are in schools and associate with other peers who predominately struggle in terms of academics. This seems to create a cycle of poor peer influences, low motivation, and subsequently poor academic performance.

As mentioned previously, a child's "endowments" play a role in the academic success of the individual (Becker, 1991). Parents living in poverty provide these endowments to their children less often than wealthier parents (Becker & Tomes, 1979). If a young child is talkative and enthusiastic about learning, parents are more likely to purchase books for their child or take their child to the library (Raikes et al., 2006). This is true if the family has the resources and time to expend on this endeavor. Nonetheless, poverty plays a role in the initial capacity of students to learn and in the growth of that capacity throughout the developmental years depending on available resources. Poverty impedes the ability and the development of ability to learn in children as they grow (Becker, 1981).

Despite the impacts of poverty on learning, school leaders and teachers are charged with the responsibility of trying to overcome the correlation between poverty and low achievement while improving learning outcomes for all students:

Too many schools and school systems are failing to carry out their basic educational mission. Many of them-both in urban and rural settings (which) are overwhelmed by the social and emotional needs of children who are growing up in poverty. (Shore, 1994, p. 2)

Despite the trends of low achievement in too many schools in the country as well as in the state focused on in this study (i.e., Utah), school leaders actively design and implement programs such that every student can succeed. These leaders intend for those involved with these

programs to develop rigorous curriculum and meaningful lessons in an effort to help all students learn the curriculum while also growing along with their peers throughout the country. Teachers in these programs strive to prepare students to demonstrate their academic achievement on assessments given at the end of the academic year.

Utah Student Assessment of Growth and Excellence (SAGE) assessments is the standardized summative assessment used in Utah for students at the end of each school year. The results of this exam are used to determine the proficiency of students on the attainment of new knowledge and skills for the current academic year. Free-and-reduced-price-lunch-rates are used to determine poverty rates in Utah schools. These two metrics are used to characterize the nature (rate of impoverishment) and success (proficiency rate) of the schools in this study.

In 2018, administrators at 80 schools across Utah (7.3% of all Utah schools) reported student poverty levels of 70% or higher, rates much higher than the thresholds required to be considered a Federal Title I program (ESEA, 1965). A school with 40% poverty is Title I eligible, so to have 70% poverty is quite a stark level of poverty, especially when compared to the rest of the schools in Utah. During the 2018 school year, there were 426 schools (38.9%) out of a total 1096 schools with a poverty level that qualified them to be Title I eligible. This high rate of poverty—70% or more of the students in a school—is deemed “highly impoverished” as operationalized within this study.

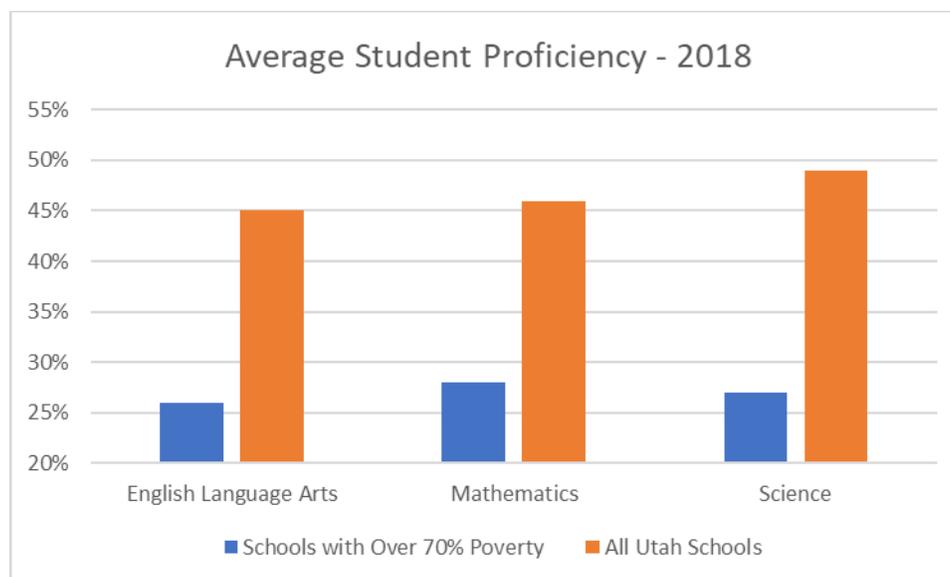
All school levels can be included in Title I. However, only elementary schools are found to have the above average achievement levels to be included as participants in the focus of this study.

In 2018, Utah schools, on average, had proficiency rates of 45%, 46%, and 49% respectively on the state standardized tests for English language arts, mathematics, and science.

Highly impoverished schools, on average, had proficiency rates of 26%, 28%, and 27% respectively on the same standardized tests (Figure 1). This data disparity illustrates the correlation between poverty and student achievement in Utah.

Figure 1

Average Student Proficiency 2018



With these 80 schools affected so adversely by poverty, is it acceptable to assume that the schools experiencing such high levels of poverty should expect low student achievement rates? The available data seem to indicate that high poverty rates often lead to low achievement rates. For the purposes of this study, the 80 schools in Utah reporting a 70% or higher poverty rate are used as a sample. Within this sample, a few schools that seem to have broken the coupling bond between high poverty and low student academic proficiency. These 80 highly impoverished schools have student proficiency rates that are 18-22 percentage points below the average of all Utah schools. However, while these 80 high-poverty schools are, on average, performing below the proficiency level of the typical Utah school, eight schools demonstrated achievement levels

that surpass the Utah state average. These highly impoverished/high achieving schools are the focus of this study.

The aim of this study is to answer the following research question: What conditions in highly impoverished schools do principals perceive to facilitate student academic achievement at rates higher than the overall state average?

Literature Review

As has been outlined above, poverty is an active impediment to learning in schools. The research already cited indicates a tight bond between poverty and low student academic achievement. Although poverty remains an intense obstacle between students and their academic performance, many other variables are involved when looking at what affects the rate of learning as students learn. Besides poverty, the vast array of concerns that affect students' learning encompasses things like school culture (Barth, 2002; Peterson, 2001), leadership (Cash, 2008; Portin, 2004), class size (Elmore, 1995; Harvey, 2013), use of paraeducators (Barth, 2001), technology uses (Schmoker, 2012), professional learning communities (Barth, 1984; DuFour et al., 2006), professional development (Bryk, 2010; Odden, 2011), positive behavior supports (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011), instruction (Barth, 2006; Knapp et al., 2010), curriculum (Schmoker, 2012), family engagement (Mapp et al., 2017; Sanders, 2007), etc. Within each of these areas of concern are actions (Barth, 2006; Ritchie, 2013), skills (Robinson et al., 2008; Spiro, 2013), and dispositions (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011; Peterson, 2001; Slater, 2008) that can further affect learning and the rate of learning a student experiences. These factors are intrinsically based in the school or within influence of internal school leaders.

Despite the existence of exterior factors, like poverty, on the student body of a school, the intent of school improvement is to help a school's educators respond and adapt as they work to

help all of their students overcome external deficiencies and become proficient with the current year's designated curriculum (Fullan, 2006; Janney et al., 2005; Spillane et al., 2011).

Many things help improve academic outcomes for students. These things are levers used by educators and are varied and overlapping. They work to organize the school via structures. Leadership is a vital lever used to improve academic outcomes for students. School culture, with its many descriptors, is also a lever that must be pulled to produce desirable student academic learning. Clearly, instruction is the most direct lever employed to produce learning. Also, as often as is possible, educators work to engage with families to produce better academic outcomes for their students. These five aspects of schools contain within them many other aspects that need to be explored to better define what is going on in schools that effectively produces high levels of student academic achievement. Particularly, these levers are capable of helping schools with high rates of poverty overcome the negative impacts of poverty on student academic achievement.

Structures

Structural changes, while being important and symbolic at the same time, are not enough to change teacher practices which have a more direct impact on student achievement. Making “good use” of the structures in a school to ensure teachers can improve instruction and better help students is important (Harvey, 2013, p. 14-15). It must be coupled with other things for there to be any realized impact.

Leadership

The principal is both a manager and an instructional leader (Cash, 2008). The principal is meant to be a motivator and the person who holds their teacher's feet to the fire (Stecher et al., 2012). They also share their leadership and build their faculty in terms of belief and skills (Spiro,

2013). They set a vision, establish a path to achieve it, and provide the means to do it (Robinson et al., 2008). The leader of a school builds leaders amongst their staff and within their broader community (Green, 2015; Slater, 2008). Leadership is the key to making a school successful.

Instructional Leadership

The principal, as an instructional leader, should be focused on aligning curriculum, instructional practices, and assessment practices (Hall et al., 2015). They provide “instructional leadership” by providing “instructional guidance” so that teachers are teaching the concepts and principles in the classroom that are aligned with state standards and requirements. Then, principals are tasked with monitoring the effectiveness of their teachers’ instruction (Lytle, 2012, p. 57; Portin, 2004). As effective principal works in this way, striving to improve instruction (Harvey, 2013). If instruction improves, the result will be an “increase (in) student achievement” (Cash, 2008, p. 23-24).

Improving student achievement by improving instruction is a powerful pathway to accomplishing a school vision that is defined by a high expectation of student academic success. Along the way, the principal will work at “planning for and creating short-term wins” as teachers work to influence positively the end of year assessments (Kotter, 1995, p. 61). The process of monitoring progress and celebrating that progress is a wise practice of “continuous reflection” for “improvement” (Janney et al., 2005, p. 9). Teachers working in this way, under the influence of an instructional leader, will strive to improve their instruction. They will try various methods and monitor their effectiveness by way of short-term, formative assessments. This practice will push teachers to increase their effectiveness as a classroom instructor and their increased ability will result in improved academic outcomes for students. Instructional leaders provide the support necessary for teachers to improve their instruction so that more students learn while at school.

School Culture

School experiences have the potential to greatly influence student academic outcomes if they are hospitable toward learning. A positive school culture that encourages the belief that all students can master academic content is necessary for that school to become successful, especially if it is located in an impoverished community. When the principal, the teachers, and the students begin to believe in the inherent capacity of students to learn, the academic prowess of students rise (Bryk, 2010; Spiro, 2013). When teachers believe that a student can learn and they believe in their own capacity to provide the instruction that can help the student to learn, outcomes improve (Elmore, 1995). Elmore is saying that when teachers and administrators create this positive school culture, they set the bar that students must reach, and because the bar is defined, students will then perform at a level that matches or exceeds the bar that has been set for them.

School culture is “a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization” (Barth, 2002, p. 8). It defines the way people approach their work and the way in which they interact with others. A school culture has to be tended to and intentionally worked on or it has the potential to devolve into a toxic environment where people feel unsafe, protective, and inhospitable to each other, making any semblance of success impossible (Peterson, 2001). A positive school culture is foremost a “professional community” (Harvey, 2013, p. 9). The people involved make these communities a “safe and orderly” climate where growth, risk, and support for one another can be encouraged (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 664). People in these communities value the history and traditions of the past while striving for a better future, (Peterson, 2001; Portin, 2004). Most importantly, a positive school culture is characterized by a “common focus”

that is concentrated on the value teachers are adding to students through effective instruction (Elmore, 1995; Green, 2015; Janney et al., 2005, p. 9). A positive school culture is the intangible support that helps everyone feel belonging and that they are valued so that they can express their self-efficacy and produce wonderful student academic outcomes.

Belief

Belief, in this context, is defined as teachers believing that all kids can learn at high levels and that they, as teachers, can help highly impoverished kids learn. This belief in students' innate ability to learn is pivotal and key to achieving success. More so, teachers must believe in their own capacity to help all students learn. "The stance toward change at higher-performing schools is to expect it, respect it, and, by continuous progress monitoring, try to cause it" (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011, p. 29). This belief is visibly present in more effective schools:

To the extent that our activities in school are dedicated to getting learning curves off the chart, what we do is a calling. To the extent that we spend most of our time doing something else in school, we are engaged in a job (Barth, 2002, p. 9).

Achieving this one condition of belief is the hinge pin from which teachers and administrators at most schools will be able to support and accomplish their goals of student academic success. As long as those teachers who believe in the capacity of their students align their work to their beliefs, academic success will follow (Ritchie, 2013). Positivity breeds this belief within a school environment. Informal discussions that are about belief in the greatness of the students, the school, the teachers, and the principal encourage the kind of needed belief. This kind of positive belief spurs on ingenuity, problem solving, and the will to keep trying amongst difficult situations or lagging student academic data.

When teachers encounter lagging student academic data, especially in a community with a low socioeconomic status, an inherent internal safety mechanism kicks in that pushes the teacher to begin to blame the students (Noguera, 2011; Torff, 2011). The message is that the instruction is fine, but the students are not fine. If the students would change, learning would improve. Teachers do this without thinking as a way to safeguard themselves from the reality that their instruction does, in fact, need to change. When teachers have this kind of blaming belief system, they are engaged in a sort of deficit thinking that pushes teachers to reduce the rigor of expectation, curriculum, and achievement in the case of both themselves and their students (Torff, 2011). Torff (2011) suggest that schools with high rates of poverty are often riddled with staff who, with the best of intentions, reduce expectations because they begin to think the disadvantaged students just cannot learn what we want them to learn. There must be a very conspicuous attack on attitudes and beliefs that stifle the potential of at-risk students in order for the school to have the success they desire to achieve (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011; DuFour et al., 2006).

Trust

Trust is a key component of school culture. Trust is built by a strong, caring, and competent leader. It is also sustained by those in the organization that value that trust and do not work to violate it:

Principals establish both respect and personal regard when they acknowledge the vulnerabilities of others, actively listen to their concerns, and eschew arbitrary actions. If principals couple this empathy with a compelling school vision, and if teachers see their behavior as advancing this vision, their personal integrity is also affirmed. Then,

assuming principals are competent at managing routine school affairs, an overall ethos conducive to building trust is likely to emerge. (Bryk, 2010, p. 27)

The power of this kind of trust is immeasurable. It inspires the teachers to risk more and try harder. It gives permission to students to feel safe and believe they are loved for who they are. It tells the community that they are welcome at their school. It also indicates that all students are safe to go to the school. They are safe to be who they are and that they will be met at where they are and guided to the highest levels of achievement. Trust is such a critical condition to helping a school with a high rate of poverty to find high levels of success.

Relationships

Education is an enterprise that is reliant on relationships. Children require more than just a conveyor of knowledge when they enter the student-teacher relationship. They need someone who cares about them personally. Teachers need colleagues who know them and are mindful of who they are as individuals. Relationships matter in schools, (Barth, 2006). The teacher-student relationship is most important. The collegial relationship is just as important for academic success to thrive in a school: “Relationships among educators within a school range from vigorously healthy to dangerously competitive. Strengthen those relationships, and you improve professional practice” (Barth, 2006, p. 9). Improving these collegial relationships is achieved by educators talking with one another about practice, sharing their craft knowledge, observing one another while they are engaged in practice, and rooting for one another's success. As teachers work together, they build trust, and in time, trust builds relationships (Cash, 2008). Relationships and trust go hand in hand, strengthening and building along the way.

Ownership

Ownership in a school is saying, “This is what we do. This is who we are. We work hard. We celebrate when we win. That is just part of the nature, the built-in environment of our school.” Teachers in effective schools do not just show up, put in their time, and then let the chips fall where they may. Rather, they work to affect outcomes because they believe they are the impetus for learning. “For some reason, occupants of schools seem to fill the place of what researchers call the ‘dependent variable.’ Restructuring invites teachers and principals to become independent variables, to initiate as well as to respond” (Barth, 1991, p. 124). Teachers in great schools take ownership of their students and responsibility for the outcomes they help their students to achieve. The learning outcomes are not a fluke, and they are not something that just happens. If tough things stand in the way of learning, effective teachers work to find solutions that help them remove the barrier. They own the situation, and they own the results. They take that ownership seriously and make the necessary improvements to practice such that student achievement rises.

Instruction

School improvement researchers indicate that focusing on improving the technical core of instruction and learning has promising hopes of positively affecting student achievement. Teachers first need to see themselves as the primary modality for students to access the curriculum. They need to believe that all students can access the curriculum and become proficient. They need to believe that improving student learning will happen as a result of their improved instruction (Elmore, 1995). Leaders in school systems that are working to improve, need to be focused on individual teachers improving their instruction ability so that students,

regardless of background, can ultimately be successful at learning the core curriculum (Harvey, 2013).

The key to improving outcomes for students is to ensure effective instruction. This is first done by defining an explicit and well-articulated vision of what effective instruction looks like, (Odden, 2011). Good instruction should, at minimum, have “a clear learning objective, anticipatory set, teaching and modeling in small bites or chunks, multiple cycles of guided practice, and checks for understanding until students are ready for independent practice” (Schmoker, 2012, p. 69). This defined version of what is effective might vary from school to school. However, it is clear that a focus on defining quality instruction is imperative and that communicating it to all teachers in the school until they begin to understand it and implement it in practice is the path to improving outcomes for students (Portin, 2004). Good instruction must be defined and attended to in earnest for it to improve.

Professional Development

Teachers need to grow and develop throughout the entirety of their career. They need to become what the learners need, (Barth, 1984). The work of developing the skills, dispositions, and knowledge to be more effective does not happen by accident or by simply attending a professional development meeting. The idea that many attend, few internalize, and even fewer learn is the reality of most professional development experiences (Barth, 2001). That is because teachers must be intentional about their efforts to develop these competencies. “When the school focused attention on instruction and teachers took responsibility for student performance, teacher empowerment seemed to lead to significant changes in pedagogy and changes in pedagogy seemed related to changes in student learning” (Elmore, 1995, p. 25).

Data

Student academic achievement data, in all its forms, are key information points that help educators measure the effectiveness of their work. Many education reform efforts are thwarted because they are not tightly coupled with intended, measurable outcomes. Rather, they focus on actions people will take and measure success as boxes marked off indicating that certain actions are completed:

A significant gulf exists between classroom practices that are “changed” and practices that actually lead to greater pupil learning; the potency of leadership for increasing student learning hinges on the specific classroom practices that leaders stimulate, encourage, and promote. In the context of goal setting, this means that what leaders and leadership researchers need to focus on is not just leaders’ motivational and direction-setting activities but on the educational content of those activities and their alignment with desired student outcomes. (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 660)

Data help to describe the effects of instruction on learning or, better said, the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. Formative data are used to help teachers take a pulse on how well students are learning (DuFour et al., 2006). It is considered formative because it helps to inform decisions of what next steps teachers and students should take during the process of learning. Summative data measure the end result of learning and should indicate how much learning occurred in a given period of time. The success of teachers or the school, in total, is measured and communicated based on summative data.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is a concept that many educators have claimed to embrace. It is an over-arching process that defines the professional practices of the

educators. It guides their preparation, their instruction, and the analysis of the effectiveness of that instruction. It guides the actions after analysis that continue to support student learning.

Interventions and extensions are determined by the teachers who engage and are part of a PLC.

DuFour et al. (2006) defined PLC practices with four questions:

“What do we want all students to know and be able to do?; How will we know if they learn it?; How will we respond when some students have not learned it?; How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient? (p. 59)

Many successful schools promote the process of answering these questions in an effort to improve the teaching and learning process as defined by student academic outcomes. PLCs, and the teachers who engage in them, take it a bit further. The whole professional culture amongst the staff is defined by working together in professional learning.

Organizational learning is facilitated when there is openness and mutual trust that allows people to embrace change and experimentation without feeling personally threatened. It also helps if the culture supports widespread participation in decision making, an entrepreneurial ethic, and a diversity of skills and viewpoints. But most of all, a learning organization needs plenty of feedback, which can only be obtained through careful monitoring and tracking of the progress toward the mission and vision (Nanus, 1992).

The practice of evaluating the degree to which students successfully attain learning empowers teachers to make adjustments to their practice until more students learn the requisite material and can demonstrate it on an assessment. This work happens student by student and content standard by content standard (DuFour et al., 2006); provide instruction, change instruction, and provide individual interventions until each student becomes proficient. That is how members of a professional learning community improve student outcomes overtime.

Family/Community Engagement

Much has been said about all the things that can be done inside school walls. Of course, instruction matters, but social context matters too (Bryk, 2010). According to Shore, “[s]chools need additional resources to successfully educate all students, and these resources, both human and material, are housed in students’ communities” (1994, p. 2). Shore indicates that the school must work to partner with the community and the parents of their students if they wish to maximize the success of their students. The school, especially the teachers, must work while at school as though all learning is a result of their work. However, they also must recognize the impact families have.

Harnessing the family and involving them in the efforts to improve the school will speed up and sustain the improvement efforts (Noguera, 2011). Researchers have claimed that if teachers help parents understand the school, understand the goals and action steps as well as their potential role in the process, then parents can assist in accelerating the establishment of a new norm of academic excellence (Jeynes, 2011). Effective schools work so that families know they are welcome and that their students are being treated fairly. They know that the teachers have high expectations and will offer plenty of support for their students. They learn from the school how to help be part of the school efforts to improve learning (Ishimaru, 2013).

Involving families in an effective way can be achieved in a number of ways. One of the most effective methods, though, is for teachers to conduct home visits in order to gain a better understanding of their students' interests and home lives, talk with parents about their hopes and dreams for their children, and establish a partnership around learning (Mapp et al., 2017). This broad inclusion of families and the community into the process proves successful in schools that

work with the families instead of parallel or perpendicular to them (Cattanach, 2013; Green, 2015).

Research Context

Student academic achievement in schools all over the United States of America remain relatively low for school populations who experience poverty at any significant rate when compared to other schools (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011; Becker, 1981, 1991; Cash, 2008; Ritchie, 2013; Robinson et al., 2008; Shore, 1994). Noguera (2011) described this situation by bringing attention to the fact that

Research suggests that poor children encounter obstacles that often adversely affect their development and learning outcomes. To ignore this reality and make bold assertions that all children can achieve while doing nothing to address the outside-of-school challenges they face is neither fair nor a sound basis for developing public policy. (p. 10)

This notion is rational given that the available data show us that there is a strong bond between poverty and student academic success. It also makes sense to address the “outside-of-school” challenges. Unfortunately, schools are not designed to take on those issues. Instead, schools are equipped to provide an educational environment with the right conditions to encourage learning for all students. These conditions, have the potential to be so impactful that with the right focus, schools can serve to overcome the negative impacts of poverty on learning and produce above-average, student success rates (Barth, 2006; Bryk, 2010; Elmore, 1995; Leithwood et al., 2010; Slater, 2008; Spillane et al., 2011).

Methods

Setting

The State of Utah has more than a thousand public schools across the socioeconomic spectrum. The administrative data used for this study comes from statistics generated in 2018 by the Utah State Board of Education. These data are used to identify schools with high rates of poverty and to determine the academic achievement rates the students demonstrate in these schools. Some of these schools have a large portion of the student body living in poverty as characterized by the Federal Free or Reduced-Lunch program eligibility requirements. Four hundred and twenty six schools (38.9% of all schools in Utah) have a rate of poverty that is more than 40%, which qualifies these schools for the Federal Title I Grant program. Among those 426 schools, 80 (7.3% of all schools in Utah) of them have an extremely high rate of poverty (70% or higher). This rate of poverty (70% or higher) is the threshold set by Title I regulations that mandates a school to receive part of the funding that has been set aside for qualifying schools. This is a much higher threshold than the 40% that can make a school eligible for the Title I program. For this study, these schools will be called “highly impoverished.”

Participants

In 2018, eight highly impoverished schools produced SAGE assessment student proficiency rates better than the Utah state average. The SAGE test consisted of three administered exams in English language arts, mathematics, and science. Every student was required to take these exams as their end-of-level, standardized tests. A state proficiency average was later calculated for each test using data gathered from schools across the entire state (see Table 1). The proficiency rate for each school was also calculated for each test. Schools were identified for inclusion in this study using these rates, specifically, by having a student

proficiency rate higher than the state average on at least one of the three exams. Eight of the highly impoverished schools in the state had at least one exam with a student proficiency rate higher than the state average. Pseudonyms have been created to replace the actual names of the schools involved in the study. See Table 1 for a breakdown of these eight schools and their average rates.

Table 1

2018 Utah SAGE Student Proficiency Rates for Highly Impoverished Schools With Above Average Rates

Schools	Poverty Rate	English Language Arts	Mathematics	Science
A School	75.23%	46%	42%	56%
B School	71.20%	46%	49%	49%
C School	83.10%	36%	55%	61%
D School	70.48%	46%	42%	42%
E School	83.99%	46%	51%	47%
F School	71.79%	48%	56%	48%
G School	83.00%	45%	51%	50%
H School	82.63%	47%	58%	57%
State Proficiency Averages		45%	46%	49%

Note. Bolded percentages indicate on which tests each school received an above Utah state average score.

Two schools were eliminated due to their remote location and relative size: C School and F School. The remaining six schools are urban schools. The building principal for each of the schools was identified and asked to participate in the study. Additionally, the director, the district supervisor for that school, was also identified and asked to participate. Nine of the approached

administrators agreed to participate in the study. All six school principals were interviewed and three of the directors/supervisors.

Data Collection

Approach and Procedures

All participants from the identified schools were contacted via telephone and invited to participate. Interviews were conducted with each participant.

The interviews were conducted by a fellow school administrator in Utah. Open-ended questions were asked, which allowed each respondent to tell the story about their school's success. Questions were designed to encourage participants to remember aspects of their schools that addressed the diverse areas of focus that current research has indicated might have an effect on student achievement data. Each interview was recorded, later transcribed, and each administrator's responses were analyzed in order to generate data that helped answer the research question of this study. A list of the questions used can be found in Appendix B.

Research Design

In line with the constructivist paradigm, this research applies a multiple-case study approach, which intends to explain the meaning and the reality of successful school leaders and their experiences. The defined "case" is operationalized as high-poverty schools performing at above-average levels. This approach seeks to uncover the conditions that are believed to be relevant precursors to the success of the schools

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were coded using open coding, utilizing NVivo software (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018). The analytical procedure applied a combination of open coding and axial coding, both of which resulted in emergent themes from across the multiple study sites. For

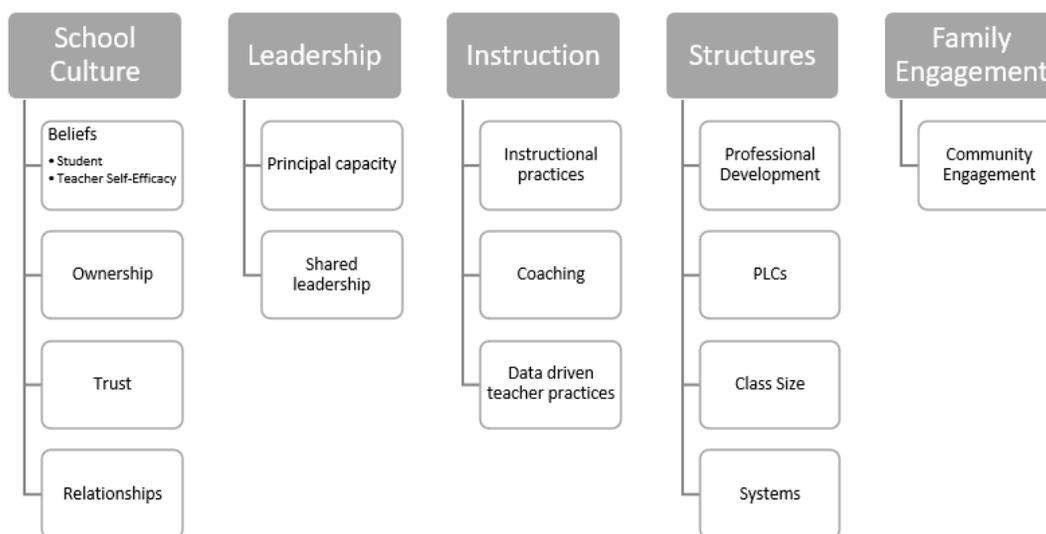
example, during the process of open coding, the following common themes were identified: Principal, Instructional Leader, Teacher Leader, Shared Leadership, and Goals. Axial coding helped to define aspects of schooling that seemed to affect each administrator's school. Concepts or themes with an identification threshold of over 50%, (i.e., more than half of the participants mentioned a concept or theme) were considered and either added to or rejected from the list of relevant and identifiable conditions.

Findings and Discussion

This study was conducted to determine what conditions were created or in operation at the identified highly impoverished schools that helped produce their high levels of student academic achievement. Though many conditions are present, they can be summarized into five themes (see Figure 2). These themed areas of focus are school culture, leadership, instruction, structures, and family engagement. While these are aspects that all schools have, the participants in the study indicated that they specifically focused on developing the conditions in these themed areas to a point where student achievement could flourish.

Figure 2

Findings



School culture is comprised of conditions like beliefs held by staff, ownership, trust, and relationships. Leadership is a theme found in these schools and encompasses both principal capacity and shared leadership. Instruction comprises teacher self-efficacy, coaching, data, decision making, and teacher practices. Structures include systems, professional learning communities, class size, and professional development. Family engagement involves community engagement.

School Culture

One of the overarching findings was that school culture matters and is seen as having a large impact on student academic achievement. A school culture is often characterized by the phrase, “This is the way we do things around here” (Schein, 2010, p. 235). When a school is dominated by a belief that all students can learn and that the teachers are capable of helping all students learn, these schools indicate that many more students learn. The positive school culture identified in these schools is characterized by ownership of the results. The teachers feel responsible for the good results as well as the results that need to improve the school’s culture is also characterized by trust. They trust in the safety and care the school provides as well in the methods of instruction employed by teachers. This makes the belief in teacher ability just mentioned possible. Additionally, these school leaders identify relationships between colleagues and between teachers and students as paramount. All of these things combine to create the school culture that positively impacts student achievement.

Belief

Belief, in this context, is defined as teachers believing that all kids can learn at high levels, and that they can help highly impoverished kids learn. Principal from D school described this when they said that, “It is the highest effect size of any adults who think they can make a

difference in kids and know how to do it.” This belief in students’ innate ability to learn is pivotal and key to achieving success. More so, these teachers believed in the capacity to help all students learn. This belief is visible in all these schools. “I feel like there is a sense of competitiveness for that child. Let’s see how far I can get this student to excel. It is fun to be a part of it,” said the principal from A School. The respondents in the interviews all spoke enthusiastically about the never-ending belief in students that exists in their schools amongst their faculties: “There is a huge collective efficacy in this building. Ground-up. Everybody knows our vision and why we do it and what we are doing it for” said the H School principal.

“We are in it together, for every single kid, no matter what grade they are in, or who they are, or where they come from,” said the principal at A school. “I think that it is, there are no excuses,” said the principal from E School. “Our vision is, continuous progress for all,” said the principal of G School.

Teacher Self-Efficacy

The psychologist Ginott (1972) wrote,

I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. (p. 15)

This is believed and emboldened within the minds of the principals in these schools. They truly believe that their teachers are the key to the success of their students. It is the capacity of teachers to meet the demands of the students in these schools that is making the teaching and learning a success in terms of the student academic proficiency scores. H School principal said,

“It is instruction. It is not about intervening our way out of a problem. It is about (teaching) our way out of a problem.”

Many factors are at play when we are talking about the success of one school compared to the success of another. In this study, socioeconomics plays a huge part in defining the barriers to learning. The teachers in these schools believe their instruction is capable of doing a great deal to overcome whatever barriers exist that inhibit learning. “We just have to look at our circle of influence. We are going to make that so quality that it can supersede whatever does or doesn’t happen outside these walls,” said a principal about the capacity of teachers to impact learning. The D School principal said, “We are trying to (place with students) the most gifted adult (with) the kids because they can do it better.” These schools have teachers with high capacity to problem solve and produce. “They have this unique way, like you give them one thing and they run with it, and the next time I am back they have all of these results,” said the principal from A School. Their instructional skills are such that other barriers are diminished. “You and I both know that teachers that do that (Instruction) well don’t really have any discipline issues,” said the D School principal.

Ownership

“That is what we do. That’s who we are. We work hard. We celebrate. That is just part of the nature, the built-in environment of the school,” the B school principal said. Teachers in these schools do not just show up and put in their time and then let the chips fall where they may. Rather, the respondents indicate that teachers work to effect outcomes because they believe they are the impetus for learning. The principal from D School indicated that his teachers, “got real focused on what they needed to do for the kids. Their whole thing was to be a super competitive group that wanted to outperform other wealthier schools.” They do not work alone, they work

together. “It isn’t my classroom or your classroom, the school is collectively ours,” said the principal of H School. “We have an awesome team. They work hard. They want kids to succeed,” said the G School principal. Teachers in these schools take ownership of their students and the outcomes they help them to achieve. The learning outcomes are not a fluke, and they are not something that just happens. If tough things stand in the way of learning, these teachers work to find solutions to remove the barrier. “There is no excuse-making – this is what we do. We do hard things. If it didn’t work the first time, we try again tomorrow,” said the principal of H School. The principal at A School said,

I just had a teacher this morning tell me that one reason she really likes (the school) is that she has liberty, that freedom and autonomy to do what works in her classroom for the kids that she has at that given time instead of being forced to use a certain program or forced to do it a certain way.

Trust

The vast majority of people interviewed articulated that trust was a key factor in helping to produce the outcomes they had enjoyed. “They are able to do it because I think they know that they are supported and people are surrounding them to help them with whatever they need,” the A School principal said describing the level of trust in that school. Trust is built from a reciprocal relationship where everyone is on the same page. The B School principal said, “They are invested in each other. They support each other very well,” as she spoke about her faculty. It also is described by the safety they feel to just try. “The culture here is outstanding. It is a very safe, welcoming place,” said a principal about the trust in her school. It is also sustained by those in the organization that values that trust and does not work to violate it. “They know the expectation and I trust them,” said the principal at G School.

Relationships

The A School principal describes relationships in the school:

From the minute they [teachers/students] walk into the door, we know them by name, we (help them) know they are cared about, we feel like you have a place and a sense of belonging. That has really led into the instruction being powerful in that tier 1 and mutual respect happening.

This kind of caring and meaningful relationship between teachers and students is found in these schools. One of the directors said, “Every teacher knows every kid.” “They care a lot about the kids here, too. They are very caring. We have some really hard kid situations here and they don’t judge the kids from their background. They just love the kids,” said the E School principal about her teachers.

Students who live with poverty need the school to feel safe. The principal of B School believes,

If kids do not feel psychological safety, they do not feel that they are loved, they do not feel that they are cared about then they are not going to learn anything. A lot of our kids don’t feel that way when they leave home, so we have to create that here.

To do this, the schools take on the role of teaching social skills mostly by modeling. The principal at H School said, “I try to do a lot of social building.” The principal from A School sums it up:

I think our culture is one that is focused on learning, but we focus on learning by caring about the kids and taking care of the needs of the kids and then the learning just kind of comes with that.

School Culture is the theme that seems to determine the success of all other conditions. Every school has a culture. The school culture that is found in the schools in this study makes it possible for the other conditions to have a positive impact on student learning. While the findings are not causal, it is obvious that without the right school culture characterized by positive beliefs in student ability and teacher self-efficacy, ownership of the results, high degrees of trust and strong relationships the school could not produce the results these schools produce.

Leadership

Leadership is clearly talking about the role of the principal, amongst other things. His/her role is critical, and determinant of the outcomes achieved at these schools. Previous research indicates that next to classroom instruction, leadership is the most important school-related influence on student learning. In fact, it is so important, research indicates a school has not achieved high results without a strong leader, (Louis et al., 2010). The vision, goals and action steps that put these schools on the track to achieving high academic success is accomplished in part by the efforts of the principal. These principals influence instruction directly and indirectly. They coach teachers and facilitate instructional coaching. They are the instructional leader. They are also the school manager. They seemingly have high skills and can create a system that allows for safety and order as well as academic excellence:

Principals have two major responsibilities. One is to increase student achievement. The second is to support and promote a positive and safe culture. I maintain that you can't have one without the other. (Cash, 2008, p. 23-24)

Therefore, there must be a link between the capacity of the principal to be an effective instructional leader and how effective teachers are as instructors.

The broader concept of leadership as a theme determined by this research is more than just the principal. These principals have built teacher leaders and they are confident enough in themselves and their teachers to share the role of leadership amongst many on the staff.

Leadership based on expertise that is broadly shared across a number of team members and focused on negotiated goals holds the greatest chance for sustaining schools as learning communities focused on student learning and achievement. (Kennedy et al., 2011, p. 24)

Shared leadership empowers ownership. No one implements someone else's vision well. However, teachers will move heaven and earth to bring to fruition their own vision. Reportedly, the teachers in these schools feel empowered to help bring to fruition the collective vision of high student academic achievement. Their overall effectiveness rises because they have increased self-efficacy as a result of being valued enough to lead. Teachers who realize this level of self-efficacy are so much more capable of providing experiences for students that result in high rates of academic proficiency.

Principal Capacity

Principal capacity speaks to the knowledge and experience needed to be a successful school leader. Principals have to know their people and know their craft. "I just needed to build enough relationships with the people and be here long enough with them," said one of the principals.

An area of leadership capacity needed for a principal to be effective is their willingness to adjust their style to meet the situation. A principal said, "if you don't take care of your people, you can't enforce policy and procedure (because) you don't have anybody to lead." Principals must juggle it all and be fun, kind, tough, uncompromising, and dynamic while doing it. The G

School principal said, “I learned to step-back and that push is not always the right tool.” Another said, “I can be intense.” These two quotes demonstrate that the skills have to be varied and many. The skills necessary must be demonstrated. “I do it myself, to be honest first. Anything that I have asked of them that is difficult, I model for them. So, when we are doing some of the PD, I teach. I am the instructor in the classroom in the PD setting,” said the principal from H School. She described her efforts to model good practices, “This is what I want to see from you. We are going to do a peer observation form and you are going to use it on me first.”

The principals built their expertise over many years in the profession. The D School principal said, “I had 20 years under my belt before I walked in the door, which helped.” “I taught for 20 years before becoming an administrator, which I think, gave me a lot of insight into what teachers have to do every day,” said the A School principal. “I have been an administrator for the past 10 now.” Experience is more than just tenure. The activities the principals did before helped to build their capacity. “I became an instructional coach and then became a principal,” the principal at E School said. “I started my career in special education and have that foundational feeling or concept if you would ‘all children can learn, all children need the opportunity to show what they can do,’” said the H School principal. The G School principal said, “I was a Title I coordinator where I got a lot of experience with interventions and differentiated instruction and looking at the instruction that covered all kids.”

Shared Leadership

The schools involved in this study did not have a single leader that was the linchpin of the success of the school. “A school should be a community of leaders—not just a principal and a lot of followers” (Barth, 2013). The H School principal said, “I expect them all to step up and do their job. Leaders wherever they are at.” “We share governance which sure helps me a little

bit because we all have a buy into what we do. I ask for their voice in all that we do,” said a principal. Shared leadership and building teacher leaders is a common theme in a majority of these schools. “Every grade level has a team leader, and that team leader is on the school leadership team,” said the principal at D School. A director said about the principal, “Shared leadership. He is so good at delegating and getting the right people in the right place and then letting them just go.” The G School principal said, “I can’t do this work without them,” when talking about the teacher leaders in her building. The collective story being told is that teacher leaders helped drive the success they were able to achieve.

The principal is the person who ensures that the conditions are present and leveraged appropriately to produce desired outcomes. It is the principal that ensures teachers share in the leadership and work together to produce the other conditions in such a way that the results follow. Without effective leadership, these school could not produce the amazing results they did.

Instruction

Students learn in school via instruction. There really is no other effective way for a student to learn in school. It seems obvious then to say that a school can improve student achievement if they focus on improving instruction. Improving instruction is a constant effort to try and try again based on student achievement data. When instruction is good, it has the power to overcome all hurdles that seem to impede student learning. Schools, like these in our study, that treat learning as the constant and everything else as the variable do not make excuses for low student academic achievement. They expect all students to excel, and they work at providing instruction that accomplishes the goal:

Effective (schools) work relentlessly to improve achievement by focusing on the quality of instruction. They help define and promote high expectations; they attack teacher isolation and fragmented effort; and they connect directly with teachers and the classroom, effective (schools) also encourage continual professional learning. They emphasize research-based strategies to improve teaching and learning and initiate discussions about instructional approaches, both in teams and with individual teachers. They pursue these strategies despite the preference of many teachers to be left alone. In practice this all means that (schools) must become intimately familiar with the ‘technical core’ of schooling – what is required to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Harvey, 2013, p.14).

This technical core is the direct link to student academic performance. It is reasonable to connect the high rates of student proficiency in these schools with the notion that the instruction is excellent.

Good instruction is planned instruction. Teachers spend a great deal of time learning about their content, the curriculum as well as effective pedagogical methods. This expertise is then artfully designed into effective lesson plans. The practices the teachers employ are transparent such that they can be viewed by others and understood by students. This transparency in teacher practices helps the teachers to self-evaluate their effectiveness by the student achievement data. Data are used as a measurement of how well the teachers taught. Student learning is viewed as a direct result of teacher actions. First-time instruction, interventions, extensions, and all other classroom experiences are evaluated by the teacher themselves for effectiveness as defined by student achievement data. The entire self-reflective process of

working to improve student academic outcomes via instruction is a powerfully effective endeavor in these schools.

Instructional Practices Teachers Employ

Teachers work together to improve their instruction to the point that it will result in more students achieving success as defined by proficiency on the state assessment. “The team can provide evidence that results of the common formative assessment were used to provide additional time and support for the students who did not achieve mastery,” said the principal of D School about the practices of teachers. This work adjustment is a contributing factor to these schools accomplishing their success. They do this in a very positive and proactive way. The A school principal described teacher practices by saying, “We try to make it very positive. We are really promoting positive action between students and (students), teacher and students and celebrating those times. Just making it hopefully a fun place to be for adults and kids.” “They are doing things here I wish other teachers I have worked with before would do,” said the principal of B School. “Our instruction was very explicit,” described principal A. The principal from H School furthers this point of teacher practices when they said, “Because we hold every student accountable for what they do in every classroom. The teaching practices that they use are impactful for how many students are there.” He also indicated that, “We do a lot of self-monitoring here.” The focus in these schools is to concentrate on the practices that yield success. They monitor for success and change as needed. “We have a big push for Tier 1 instruction, to improve it,” said the principal of G School.

Instructional Coaching

The respondents from these schools indicate that they embrace the practice of instructional coaching. “Full-time literacy coach and a full-time math coach,” said a principal,

are on staff in some of these schools. Teachers do not view that working with a coach is a sign of weakness or a display of a problem in their practice. Rather, they view it as a mechanism where they can try new things. “I just think in some of the things like (coaching), maybe we are all really willing to risk and try, and students are willing to risk and try; great learning comes with that,” said a principal about coaching. One reason is the caliber of the people asked to coach. The principal at H School said, “my (instructional) coach is absolutely beyond amazing.” Coaching works to build capacity. “She is training them on how to do it themselves and how to look at the data and how to use that effectively,” said the A School principal. The D School principal claims, “nobody is doing great without an instructional coach.”

Data Drives Teaching Practice

The schools in the study were able to tightly couple their goals, actions, and measurement, both formative and summative, to progress on their intended outcomes. “I found it interesting the way the teachers here use the data. They use it to drive instruction more than I have seen in other places,” one principal said. This comment indicates a trend among these schools where teachers measure their effectiveness more on what they affect than on what they do. “When test scores start rolling out, they start to see some variance and then they are like, ‘what did you do different,’” said the principal from D School, i.e., these teachers focused on the data that calculated how much students were learning. “They are good at data and analyzing that data,” said the principal from E School. They only discuss teaching as a way to improve learning. “The data drives all of their discussions,” said a principal about teachers’ efforts in one of these schools. Data were a powerful tool in producing high student achievement in these schools. The principal from H School indicated, “We do a really good job at looking at student academic data.” They use the data to define success and the next steps to take.

These schools believe that their instruction can change or be adapted so that all students can learn. This belief, as mentioned before, empowers teachers to look at their instruction and employ practices that might work. If the data determine that changes are necessary, then through coaching or PLCs, the teachers make improvements to their instruction. Instruction is intentionally designed and implemented to affect improved learning that is measurably explained using some metric of data. This intentionality, found at these schools, ensures that instruction is being attended to such that it is effective at producing the desired student academic achievement results.

Structures

The master schedule is a powerful structure that these schools use to ensure the resources of the school are tied to the action steps that will help the school reach their goals for academic success. Professional development is planned for and intentional. Built into the day is time allocated for PLCs and interventions. Part of the plan is also to dedicate resources to ensuring that paraprofessionals also have the necessary training and support to be effective. Instructional coaching is established and viable for all teachers to utilize to improve. The class sizes are defined such that each class has a smaller number to ensure instruction is able to be the focus and not management. “Altering structures can create the necessary conditions for teachers to learn to improve their instruction, but structures alone are unlikely to create desired school-wide changes,” (Neumerski, 2013, p. 333). It is so important that the structures help to align resources to the actions that will produce desired results. Leadership in these schools pay attention to the systemic approach of school improvement and specifically work to establish the structures to help accomplish the goal of high student academic achievement.

Professional Development

The professionalism of anyone in an actual professional career is defined by their willingness to continue to work to improve their knowledge and skills (Barth, 2001). Educators become effective as they strive to enhance their knowledge of the content, their students and the pedagogy that will enhance the teacher's abilities to reach their students. "They know their core [curriculum or standard] extremely well," said the H School principal. "Usually, it starts off with data that causes us to ask questions and then we go and learn about new practices and then come up with an implementation plan," said the A School principal. These six schools all indicate that their teachers work extensively in honing their craft and building their knowledge base to meet the demands of their students.

Many benefits are associated with the process of professional development. "I really think that this is the key for my school. I think we could do a 4-day week and score better than we are scoring but the 5th day we are here getting ready for next week," said the principal from D School. This comment indicates that he believes so much in PD that he would be willing to give up 20% of instructional time to enhance the skills of his teachers so that they were better equipped for the remaining 80% of the week. These schools indicate that their faculties have realized these benefits from professional development and are anxious to continue to participate in on-going professional development. "They always feel like they have gone to grad school when they come to (our school) with the PD they get," said the principal of D School. The art and science of teaching is so complex that it takes constant refinement, increased knowledge, and never-ending self-analysis. To develop professionally does take commitment and some time. "Everyone was the same whether you were the paraprofessional, the teacher, or the principal, there was an expectation for everyone to use those practices," said one of the Directors.

However, effective professional learning in these schools is more job imbedded. “Through the month you would get a little mini-PD to keep us focused on goals because we have goals in each (of the many) areas. I think it really helped. I call them drive-by PDs,” said the principal from G School.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities are a practice that educators in these schools have embraced. It is an over-arching process that defines the professional practices of the educators. It guides their preparation, their instruction, and the analysis of the effectiveness of that instruction. It guides the actions after analysis that continue to support student learning. Interventions and extensions are determined by the teachers who engage and are part of a PLC. DuFour et al. (2006) defined PLC practices using four questions. These four questions are:

What do we want all students to learn?; How will we know if each student has learned it?; How will we respond when some students do not learn it?; How can we extend and enrich the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency? (p. 119)

All of the schools in this study promote the process of answering these questions in an effort to improve the teaching and learning process as defined by student academic outcomes. The schools do more than just that; the whole professional culture amongst their staff is defined by working together in professional learning.

The E School principal explained how they use the four questions from DuFour et al. (2006) by saying,

Teachers meet with their grade-level team. They (answer) the four questions: 1) What do we want kids to learn?, 2) How are we going to do it?, 3) they plan their CFA (Common

Formative Assessment) for the following week. Then they bring the data back the following week. They look at how the students did. Make adjustments.

Clearly this description is not verbatim from DuFour. However, it expresses the workflow that teachers engage in professionally together to improve. The principal from A School said,

I really think that this is one of the keys to this success here - they are really able to look at data, to dig down deep to the individual and say, 'ok, this individual needs this', 'this individual needs this' and let's plan on how you are going to do it.

The reflective practice of evaluating the successful attainment of student learning empowers these teachers to make adjustments to their practice until more students learn the requisite material and can demonstrate it on an assessment. The principal of D School described how they enacted this self-reflective process in their own school by saying:

So, they are saying that these are the things they think are important as a team. Out of all this, most important are these four things. The team can provide evidence that results of a common formative assessment were used to identify students that require additional supports. The work is student by student and content standard by content standard.

The H School principal explains the process with this example:

So they might say, 'I am going to take these three you are going to take these three and we are going to identify this skill-set, review and reteach. We set out next goal. We set our next vision. We create our next CFA (Common Formative Assessment) together so again we have identified scores, what we are going to do, when we are going to give it, when we are going to look at it again.'

They provide instruction and individual interventions until each student becomes proficient. The teachers rely on this process to refine their instruction so that it is most effective.

The principal of G School added that

They would choose an instructional strategy they wanted to work on. They would say to their team what they were going to work on, they would go back, and they would work on it, and they would come back to the next meeting and report out. This is how it went.

This was a success. This was the challenge.

Class Size

In Utah, education funding is very low in comparison to other states. This low funding creates class sizes that are quite high compared to other class sizes in many other states. All of these schools believed that one of the structural changes necessary to produce above average student academic achievement was to keep class size relatively lower. In these schools, credit is given to this change in structures made possible by the Title I money they receive from the federal government for the outcomes they were able to accomplish. One principal said, “We do a ton to reduce class size. I pay for 1 ½ FTE out of my (Title I) budget plus my science person. We do all that we can to reduce class size.” A common theme amongst principals is characterized in this quote from the G school principal, “My money goes to keeping classes around 20.” The B School principal said, “My biggest class is 19.” The principal from D School said, “I have a couple of 24s right now in one of my grades, but most of our early childhood grades have hovered right around 18-19.” The E School principal said, “I like the classes 20 or under.”

Systems

The structures in these schools support the teaching and learning process. They provide time for professional learning, intervention, as well as the requisite amount of instruction. These

leaders manage the resources to provide structures that enhance learning for students. When describing how systems are used to create success, the E School principal said,

It is an administrative master schedule thing you create in the schedule; this is the time we are going to push in. The whole department, all the teachers and all these aides would divide up the students and do groups.

“What they did is they put systems in place,” said G School principal as she describes the way grade level teams supported all learners. Systems in these schools ensure intervention is organized and effective. “They do have a little bit higher percentage of aides at their school. There is a lot of intervention. A lot of paraprofessional support in the school,” indicated by a director. The systems in place benefit from lower class size as indicated from the principal at A School, “One of the benefits of the smaller class sizes is that we are able to have more devices per student.” The systems ensure sufficient time for collaboration. “We have weekly instructional team meetings, so we have scheduled it,” said the D School principal. Systems ensure proper focus on student learning. “If you came into my office, you would see what we are looking each month for each kid,” remarked the principal from A School. Systems in these schools also organize the work of paraprofessionals to support learning. The principal from G School describes the use of classroom aides, “They are part of the intervention system.” The effective use of FTE and paraeducators (aides), the proper use of the schedule, the effective coupling of technology, supplies to learning are all examples of how these schools used the system to support their teachers and their students.

The principals in the schools in this study have paid attention to the structures used to organize schooling. They have organized these structures to intentionally impact student learning. Class size is purposely reduced to help teachers create the right culture and provide

instruction in more effective ways. PLCs and professional development are effectuated to help teachers become more effective at improving learning outcomes for students. The systems set up at the school for intervention, collaboration and overall school improvement specifically create the right time and proper resources to ensure that the other conditions are able to be impactful on improving student learning outcomes.

Family Engagement

Families who experience poverty have so much going on just to maintain life that focusing on improving life or lifestyle is tough. They need to trust that the school can handle its responsibility without a heavy reliance on the home for its success. According to Jeynes (2011), “[l]ow income and minority parents often perceive teachers and principals as demanding a great deal from them and offering little in return” (p. 38). When the principals of these schools speak about their community it is with high regard and esteem. This is valuable because they do not spend time blaming the families or community for the problems the teachers encounter when working to provide a meaningful learning experience. Schools that have this kind of success do get the support from their larger community and the families of their students because the schools reciprocate when building the relationship. The school views parents as an asset and people from which they can learn. This “dual-capacity building framework” is key to the successful integration of families into the improvement of learning for students (Mapp et al., 2017).

Community Engagement

The schools in the study are invested in their community. “These teachers are heavily invested in that community,” said a director about the teachers in the school. These teachers strive to meet the families where they are and see them as equal partners in the process. Families

know they are welcome and that their students will be treated fairly. The D School principal said, “I hire a home-school liaison one that speaks Spanish.” This effort to meet the needs of the families is demonstrated by this effort. The families know that the teachers have high expectations and plenty of support for their students. “Teachers promise to use effective, proven strategies and programs to teach these skills, and parents promise to do whatever they can to help their kids practice these skills. So that is this idea of promising,” the principal of G School said about engaging their school community.

The work of improving learning outcomes for students will always be affected by family engagement as the students return to their families every day after school. Wisely, these schools have chosen to work with their community to engage them in ways that will augment the results for students. This condition is impactful when the people in the school look at their community as an asset and try to garner as much knowledge and support from them as possible.

Conclusion

Out of the 80 schools in Utah that have a poverty level over 70%, only 8 are producing outcomes that are above average on any of the standardized tests used to measure success. This is only 10 percent of highly impoverished schools. The existing literature already supports all of the conditions identified in this study. Additionally, many more schools than just these eight would probably indicate that they too have these conditions in their school. Why have so few schools been able to produce these remarkable outcomes?

This study does not answer any causal relationship between conditions and results. It only describes which conditions are believed to have helped the teachers and administration to produce their fantastic results. Educators from other schools, with similar poverty levels, might

read this study and think, “My school has many of these conditions. Why aren’t we able to produce results similarly?”

The conditions identified are not quantitative. Someone with a clipboard will not be able to enter one of these schools and be able to count all the elements of the school culture. They cannot measure how much leadership exists. They cannot quantify an effective instructional strategy in real time. Leadership, culture, instruction, structures, and family engagement are conditions that exist in all schools. So, the real art of producing excellent outcomes for students is how they exist. The science may indicate that they need to be addressed. The effectiveness of how they are addressed is where science and art meet to produce outstanding academic student outcomes that students need and deserve.

This research indicates that there are specific conditions that are found active in schools that have student academic achievement higher than what might be expected given the high poverty rates existent in the school community. Many schools with high rates of poverty feel pressure to improve outcomes for students:

An emphasis on accountability by itself produces negative pressure: pressure that doesn’t motivate and that doesn’t get to capacity building. Positive pressure is pressure that does motivate, that is palpably fair and reasonable and does come accompanied by resources for capacity building. (Fullan, 2006, p. 9)

Positive pressure is a result of a culture that has been created over a long period of time. A culture that establishes high student success and the steps to attain it as the norm. Schools can focus on improving these conditions and will probably see student academic results rise as a result. To make the needed changes requires a certain dedication of time:

The change process goes through a series of phases that, in total, usually require a considerable length of time. Skipping steps creates the illusion of speed and never produces a satisfying result. (Kotter, 1995, p. 59)

The schools in this study had leadership that specifically worked on these conditions. They evaluated themselves and the success of the school by the outcomes of students. They knew it was critical to create conditions whereby teachers could be successful at helping students become proficient. The phase that is so critical is the phase of culture building. Fullan warns, “If theories of action do not include the harder questions – Under what conditions will continuous improvement happen?” and, correspondingly, “How do we change cultures?” – they are bound to fail (Fullan, 2006, p. 4). With the right school culture established and modeled through the effective leadership of the principal, with the school structures organized to empower the other conditions to impact learning outcomes, with a concerted focus on continuous instructional improvements and development of impactful family engagement, these schools in this study have been able to produce results that prove they should be models for others to follow who wish to produce similar student academic achievement.

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APPENDIX A

Literature Review

For a school to be deemed effective according to the state measurement systems in Utah, students must learn the material associated with a specific course of study for that school year and be able to demonstrate that they have acquired the new knowledge. However, not all students come and start school at the same level. Poverty has a negative impact on learning for most students (Noguera, 2011; Shore, 1994; Torff, 2011). Despite exterior factors on the student body of a school, the intent of school improvement is to help a school's educators respond as they work in order to help all of their students overcome external deficiencies and become proficient with the current year's designated curriculum (Fullan, 2006; Janney et al., 2005; Spillane et al., 2011).

There are many levers that help improve academic outcomes for students. These levers are varied and overlapping. They work to organize the school via structures. Leadership is a vital lever used to improve academic outcomes for students. School culture, with its many descriptors, is also a lever that must be pulled to produce desirable student academic learning. Clearly, instruction is the lever employed to produce learning. Also, as much as is possible, educators work to engage with families to produce better academic outcomes for their students. These five aspects of schools contain within them many other aspects that need to be explored to better define what is going on in schools that most effectively produces high levels of student academic achievement.

Structures

School structures can be established or re-imagined so that time and resources are available for teachers and students to have what is necessary for them to be successful. School structures can include systems, routines, communication, compliance, evaluation, etc.

Reformers like to change structures, in other words, because structures are important and disrupting important established patterns communicates that they are serious about change. Structural change has high symbolic value. Second, reformers like to change structures because, as difficult as they are to change, they are easier than most other candidates for change. Third, reformers like to change structures because they believe that structures exercise a strong influence over their work and that structures often constrain their ability to do things they think are good for students. (Elmore, 1995, p. 24)

Systems

Leaders of schools make structural changes because sometimes managing the policies of a school district is like pushing a boulder that is way too big up a very large and slippery mountain. “The mountain is the accumulated rules and regulations, policies and practices, contracts and cultures that exhaust educators and leaders” (Hess, 2013, p. 24). The structures in schools support the teaching and learning process or they do not. They can provide the time for professional learning, intervention as well as the requisite amount of instruction. They can create hoops for students to overcome to access supports. Systems can be a help or a hindrance to learning. “Surely structural change in schools is intended to produce changes in teaching and learning. Why else would we go to the effort and expense of changing structures?” (Elmore, 1995, p. 23). Elmore (1995) argues that shifts in structures are almost meaningless if the actual teaching practices do not change. However, making structural changes can create the impetus for

teachers to improve instruction (Neumerski, 2013). So, structural changes, while being important and symbolic at the same time, are not enough to change teacher practices which have a more direct impact on student achievement. Making “good use” of the structures to ensure teachers can improve instruction and better help students is important (Harvey, 2013, p. 14-15). It must be coupled with other things for there to be any realized impact.

Routines

Routines are the connection between policy and implementation. If the leadership of a school will make policy part of the school vision, it becomes a mechanism for improvement rather than an obstacle.

To selectively couple classroom instruction with government regulation, school leaders transformed their formal structure by designing organizational routines in order to standardize their instructional program, set and maintain direction, and monitor progress by making classroom instruction more transparent. (Spillane et al., 2011, pp. 614-615)

Establishing routines that will improve outcomes is important.

Communication

Educators rely on various communication skills and strategies to create relationships that lead to better outcomes for students.

Because administrators typically spend more than three-quarters of their time communicating, communication systems, skills and strategies are an integral part of building leadership capacity within a school. Trust develops when an administrator uses effective communication to engage others in personal interaction. Trust decreases organizational fear and encourages the risk-taking that provides the opportunities for others to be leaders.” (Slater, 2008, p. 62)

Good communication is a critical condition in schools. Good communication is frequent, timely, uses multiple modalities and is authentic (Sanders, 2007; Spiro, 2013).

Evaluation

There remains an intense need to differentiate between good and great teachers. “Advocates argue that teachers are the most important school input, so school systems must get better at assessing teacher effectiveness,” (Stecher et al., 2012, p. 40). The culture of the educators in a system needs to be geared toward and active use of evaluation to lead toward improvement of student outcomes. When teacher evaluations are targeted at improving instruction as measured by student achievement results, the desired outcome of raising student achievement is possible. To do this right, every teacher will need different levels of support in order to improve. “Measures of effectiveness can be used to tailor supports to the specific needs of each teacher” (Odden, 2011, p. 9). This articulates the need to bond Human Resources management to instruction. If the leaders can articulate well what good instruction looks like, the evaluation system can be used by administrators to more accurately measure the benefits of an individual teacher’s instruction on overall student achievement. “Human capital management” systems must ensure evaluation works to “place the most effective teachers with students who have the greatest needs, reward and retain the best teachers, and eliminate those who remain ineffective” (Odden, 2011, p. 10).

Compliance

Abbate argues that being a leader in an educational setting, or better said a school, is quite demanding because of the many constituents who are often competing for the focus of the principal. The day-to-day operations of the school are extremely demanding, while also being large in scope and frequency.

First, there is the stress factor: The pressures of the day-to-day problems administrators and teachers face seem to leave little, if any, room for thinking like the leaders of other organizations. Second, there is the politics of the process: The varying, intense, and sometimes contradictory demands of numerous stakeholders in education seem to make leading in a clear direction take a back seat to improvised intervention. Third, and perhaps the most critical, is that the burden of state and federal regulation makes the entire business a huge nightmare for education leaders. These are, of course, legitimate concerns for education leaders.” (Abbate, 2010, p. 1-2).

Becoming a good principal or leader is difficult. Those who can rise to the challenges of the principalship are able to balance priorities. They know when compliance is key and when it needs to take a backseat. With the increasing demands for outcomes as well as compliance, the principal is in the middle trying to keep a good balance. Too often “compliance becomes a surrogate for quality,” (Abbate, 2010, p. 2). Again, a good principal is able to ensure that quality outcomes for students has the highest priority.

Leadership

The research is consistent in the claim that the principal is the most influential variable in the success of school improvement (Bryk, 2010; Cash, 2008; Fullan, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2010; Nanus, 1992; Robinson et al., 2008). The leadership that a principal offers is multi-faceted. The principal is both a manager and an instructional leader (Cash, 2008). The principal is meant to be a motivator and the person who holds people’s feet to the fire (Stecher et al., 2012). They also share their leadership and build their faculty in terms of belief and skills (Spiro, 2013). They set a vision, establish a path to achieve it, and provide the means to do it (Robinson et al., 2008). The leader of a school builds leaders amongst their staff and within their broader community,

(Green, 2015; Slater, 2008). Leadership is the key to making a school a success. When the principal uses their leadership and they believe that success is possible and they have the skills to build the capacity of those they lead, others will follow and the student achievement for their school will rise (Lytle, 2012). “To date, we have not found a single case of school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 9).

The Role of the Principal

Principals need, now more than ever, to develop themselves while on the job. “Rather than being completed or finished, adults learn and change and develop throughout their lives,” (Barth, 1984, p. 93). The principal is no different. The role of principal is extremely complex, (Peterson, 2001; Portin, 2004). The administrative preparation programs are not robust enough and lack the real experiential processes to adequately develop anyone for the position. Instead, and rightfully so, the principal is expected to grow into their position by working and learning along the way (Hall et al., 2015; Knapp et al., 2010; Lytle, 2012; Spiro, 2013). This is seen as valuable to the entire school and is a good example for those whom the leader portends to guide and direct toward the best outcomes for students.

When a principal is alive and growing, so are teachers, so are students, and so is the school. Indeed, there is no more potent way for a principal to create a community of learners than by engaging in and modeling learning. (Barth, 1984, p. 94)

Many researchers have worked to try to summarize the role of the principal. They create lists of duties, skills, and desired outcomes. The lists are varied in terms of length and specificity. However, there are some themes that appear when you look at a broad selection of the literature. These themes are safety, vision, instructional leadership, relationships, and collaboration.

Safety

Safety is fairly straightforward. The principal is in charge of promoting a positive and safe environment, (Cash, 2008; Ritchie, 2013; Spiro, 2013). The principal does this by developing a climate of order (Lytle, 2012). An orderly climate means that the managerial leadership is provided so that people and things are where they should be and acting the way they should (Portin, 2004). Safety also means that there is a climate of collegiality and a willingness to participate with each other (Harvey, 2013). When a school is safe, the other work can begin. The other work is the purpose of the school, i.e., increasing the learning outcomes for students.

Vision

A principal who is a visionary leader works collectively with their staff and the broader community to establish a common vision, (Hall et al., 2015; Janney et al., 2005; Kotter, 1995). This vision articulates the direction for the school, the goals that are hoped for, and the pathway to accomplish it all. When this work of “shaping a vision” is done collaboratively, the vision is better established and understood (Harvey, 2013), and more people will buy-in to the direction of the school and have ownership of the work. The teachers will work more tenaciously when the vision that is established is done with their voices included. No one implements someone else’s vision very well (Kouzes & Posner, 1987). But, when it is an idea shared by the teachers, they will move heaven and earth to accomplish it. This kind of strategic leadership is necessary to lead a school community toward achieving a collaborative vision and developing the means to reach the corresponding goals of said vision (Portin, 2004). The principal must continuously ensure that the focus of the work is consistently addressing the priorities established by the collective vision for the school (Lytle, 2012).

Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership, as a construct, originated in the late 1970's and early 80's. Edmonds (1979) conducted a study of schools in poor urban communities where students succeeded despite the odds. Now, the concept is pervasive in the literature and seen as imperative to school improvement and success. The principal, as an instructional leader, should be focused on aligning curriculum, instructional practices, and assessment practices (Hall et al., 2015). They provide "instructional leadership" by providing "instructional guidance" so that teachers are teaching the correct things that are aligned with state standards. Then, principals are tasked with monitoring the effectiveness of their teachers' instruction (Lytle, 2012, p. 57; Portin, 2004). A principal works in this way to work to improve instruction (Harvey, 2013). If instruction improves, the result will be an "increase (in) student achievement" (Cash, 2008, p. 23-24).

Improving student achievement by improving instruction is a powerful pathway to accomplishing a school vision that is defined by a high expectation of student academic success. Along the way, the principal will work at "planning for and creating short-term wins" as teachers work to influence positively the end of year assessments (Kotter, 1995, p. 61). The process of monitoring progress and celebrating that progress is a wise practice of "continuous reflection" for "improvement" (Janney et al., 2005, p. 9). Teachers working in this way, under the influence of an instructional leader, will strive to improve their instruction. They will try various methods and monitor their effectiveness by way of short-term, formative assessments. This practice will push teachers to increase their effectiveness as a classroom instructor and their increased ability will result in improved academic outcomes for students. Instructional leaders provide the support necessary for teachers to improve their instruction so that more students learn while at school.

Instructional coaching is a process that, when paired with the rest of the aspects of instructional leadership, is a powerful tool of support that enables a teacher to get feedback, along the way about how to improve their instruction. The ultimate feedback, though, is data that measure student learning. Coaching allows a teacher to get feedback on methods and pedagogy that may improve the teaching and learning process. No teacher is perfect and all of them can get better. “Good teachers, do not walk through the doors of their buildings fully formed” (Spiro, 2013, p. 31). Effective instructional leaders should be actively working with their teachers to improve, provide them with the supports and resources to improve, and set an expectation that they will improve so that student achievement can rise.

Relationships

Principals work as an “influencer” in their school and community in order to create and cultivate partnerships (Hall et al., 2015, p. 5-6). These partnerships are opportunities to build the capacity of others to trust in the principal and to improve their contributions so results also improve. This work of coming together is much more than just managing people like a good manager would for the resources at their disposal, (Harvey, 2013). It is working intensely to build trust with the teachers, families, and students in the community. A principal is able to build the capacity of others only after trust is established (Bryk, 2010; Lytle, 2012). When trust is established, a principal can “empower others” by giving them responsibilities (Kotter, 1995, p. 61). Based on the relationships of trust and the already established vision set for results, teachers and the community will work better separately and together, in terms of their effectiveness on impacting student achievement (Janney et al., 2005). Principals must pay attention to this aspect of “cultural leadership” as they build the capacity of the system to produce better results for students academically (Portin, 2004, p. 17).

Collaboration

A principal is the leader of a community of learners. To do this well, they need to be the first learner in that community. A principal must model a reflective practice for others who work with them, (Barth, 2006; Hall et al., 2015). This takes a certain level of humility, confidence, grit, and interest in continuous growth. By providing this action as a model, the principal displays the “human resource leadership” that is necessary for a school to improve in terms of effectiveness in helping students to learn (Portin, 2004, p. 17). Their teachers will follow their example and will lead their respective colleagues and students to do so as well.

The principals of successful schools rely on teachers taking larger roles of leadership to drive student success. Schools with a high level of poverty are often schools with a lack of leadership. Too often, the solution is to ask a strong leader with an iron fist to go and whip the school back into shape. “A school should be a community of leaders—not just a principal and a lot of followers” (Barth, 2013, p. 16). Allowing teachers to take on some leadership is critical to their development and critical to the improvement of the entire system, (Harvey, 2013; Lytle, 2012). Having shared leadership empowers teachers to own the process and the results, (Janney et al., 2005; Ritchie, 2013; Stecher et al., 2012). It enables more people to not accept the status quo and push outcomes, even when they are good outcomes, to become great outcomes (Robinson et al., 2008; Shields, 2010; Spiro, 2013). Principals that are successful at improving a school or at producing high student achievement rates do so because they have brought many other teachers onto a team or “guiding coalition” that is empowered to make it happen (Kotter, 1995, p. 61).

The principal plays the biggest role in leading the change toward improving academic outcomes for students. Leithwood et al. (2010) suggest that when the principal establishes a clear

vision, when learning is no longer going to be an unknown variable, the teachers, students, and community begin to act and perform differently. When the principal establishes learning as the focus, teachers view their role differently. They discard notions of content coverage and ideas that teaching a good lesson is adequate. They take on leadership roles, develop ownership of the problem and the solution, and overcome obstacles that stand in the way of success. Successful principals leave excuses behind, stop fighting the system that holds back progress, and is the leader of success, as defined by high student academic achievement (Hess, 2013).

Instruction

School improvement researchers indicate that focusing on improving the technical core of instruction and learning has promising hopes of positively affecting student achievement. Teachers first need to see themselves as the primary modality for students to access the curriculum. They need to believe that all students can access the curriculum and become proficient. They need to believe that improving student learning will happen as a result of their improved instruction (Elmore, 1995). School systems need to be focused on as each teacher improves their instruction ability so that students, regardless of background, can ultimately be successful at learning the core curriculum (Harvey, 2013).

The key to improving outcomes for students is to ensure effective instruction. This is first done by defining an explicit and well-articulated vision of what effective instruction looks like, (Odden, 2011). Good instruction should have, at minimum, “a clear learning objective, anticipatory set, teaching and modeling in small bites or chunks, multiple cycles of guided practice, and checks for understanding until students are ready for independent practice” (Schmoker, 2012, p. 69). This defined version of what is effective might vary from school to school. However, it is clear that a focus on defining quality instruction is imperative and that

communicating it to all teachers in the school until they begin to understand it and implement it in practice is the path to improving outcomes for students (Portin, 2004).

Professional Development

The professionalism of anyone in an actual professional career is defined by their willingness to continue to work and improve their job-related knowledge and skills. Educators become effective as they strive to enhance their knowledge of the content, their students, and the pedagogy that will enhance the teacher's ability to reach their students. There are many benefits associated with the process of professional development. "School-based professional development is designed to advance instructional improvement and enhance a sense of community and shared commitments among faculty" (Bryk, 2010, p. 27). Teachers need to grow and develop throughout the entirety of their career. They need to become what the learners need, (Barth, 1984). The work of developing the skills, dispositions, and knowledge to be more effective does not happen by accident or by simply attending a professional development meeting. The idea that many attend, few succumb, and even fewer learn might be the reality of most professional development experiences. That is because teachers must be intentional about their efforts to develop these competencies (Barth, 2001). "When the school focused attention on instruction and teachers took responsibility for student performance, teacher empowerment seemed to lead to significant changes in pedagogy and changes in pedagogy seemed related to changes in student learning" (Elmore, 1995, p. 25).

Teacher Practices

The requirement by the government for schools to help more students reach proficiency has been in place since the onset of the "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB, 2002) reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965). "To selectively couple classroom

instruction with government regulation, school leaders transformed their formal structure by designing organizational routines in order to standardize their instructional program, set and maintain direction, and monitor progress by making classroom instruction more transparent” (Spillane et al., 2011, p. 614). Like Spillane et al. describes, schools should tie their work to the outcomes required by federal and state legislation. They should do this in a very positive and proactive way. Teachers should work together to improve their instruction to the point that it will result in more students achieving success as defined by proficiency on the state assessment.

Teacher practices include instruction and so much more. They attend to relationships with students, colleagues, and families. They discover their curriculum through study and planning. They manage their workload through strategies in the classroom, online, and in their plan book (Bryk, 2010). They take on leadership roles, organize collaboration teams, participate on councils and committees. They become experts at behavior management. They become surrogate leaders in the community (Torff, 2011). They really are required to do so much.

The problem [is that] there is almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice(s) in the settings in which they actually work, observing and being observed by their colleagues in their own classrooms and classrooms of other teachers in other schools confronting similar problems. (Elmore, 2004, p. 11)

Teacher practices must be intentionally geared toward improving student learning or the job can easily take a teacher away from that obvious responsibility and focus their time and efforts on all of their other, and unfortunately still important, duties (Hess, 2013; Schmoker, 2012). Teachers have to ensure they juggle all that is required of them and still maintain a focus on the desired results of student academic success.

Teacher Capacity

The psychologist Ginott (1972) commented on teacher capacity:

I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. (p. 1)

This concept put forth by Ginott is both believed and emboldened by the very best teachers, teachers that truly believe that their teaching is the key to the success of their students. It is the capacity of teachers to meet the demands of the students that makes the teaching and learning process a success in terms of student academic proficiency. The first and possibly most important thing when discussing teacher capacity is to simply hire very good teachers (Lytle, 2012; Ritchie, 2013). Teachers that have an already established high capacity of ability are able to quickly adapt to the needs of their students. It is argued that teachers are the most important school input, so school system administrators must get better at bringing in and developing teachers who can quickly rise to the challenge and become effective (Stecher et al., 2012).

Relationships

Education is an enterprise that is reliant on relationships. Children require more than just a conveyor of knowledge when they enter the student-teacher relationship. They need someone who cares about them personally. Teachers need colleagues who know them and are mindful of who they are as individuals. Relationships matter in schools, (Barth, 2006). The teacher-student relationship is most important. The collegial relationship is just as important for academic success to thrive in a school. "Relationships among educators within a school range from vigorously healthy to dangerously competitive. Strengthen those relationships, and you improve

professional practice” (Barth, 2006, P. 9). Improving these collegial relationships is achieved by educators talking with one another about practice, sharing their craft knowledge, observing one another while they are engaged in practice, and rooting for one another's success. As teachers work together, they build trust, and in time, trust builds relationships (Cash, 2008).

Learning

For the teaching and learning process to be successful, there must be evidence that the latter has increased. The actual variable that matters in schools is learning. Effective teachers produce high rates of learning as a result of their instruction and teacher practices. “If teachers are going to help students to develop the skills and competencies of knowledge-creation, teachers need experience themselves in building professional knowledge” (Fullan, 2006, p. 4). Building knowledge is much more about value added than work completion. No student ever came back and congratulated a teacher for all the work the teacher got them to complete while in their class. Rather, students return to thank the teacher for the experience and the value they received via the experience. Put another way, when the experiences of the teaching and learning process results in high levels of learning for the student, they recognize it and place high value on it.

Curriculum

Curriculum is what of the content and the way the content is included into lessons in the classroom. The plan from the state is that they define the curriculum, and they leave the pedagogy to the professional educator. Teachers come prepared because they know their content, as it was the focus of their major for their post-secondary degree. However, content and curriculum are not synonyms. So, when teachers begin to prepare lessons, they may or may not provide the right curriculum based on the plan from the state. As teachers begin teaching and experiencing the difficulties or complexities of the job, they continuously work to hone the

curriculum. Done well, this looks like a curriculum that is modelled after the core curriculum prepare by the state. Too often, the curriculum a teacher employs varies from that which is prescribed.

A rigor gap emerges in which disadvantaged students are judged to require less rigorous curriculum than that afforded their more privileged peers. A self-fulfilling prophecy may result: The disadvantaged receive watered-down lessons that limit students' academic growth, resulting in additional impoverished curriculum in subsequent lessons; conversely, the advantaged receive challenging lessons that boost students' academic performance, leading to additional rigorous curriculum down the road. It's easy to see how this rigor gap could fan the flames of the achievement gap...Of course, poverty and social injustice are problematic, as are underperforming teachers and lack of accountability. But at least part of the problem lies elsewhere: in in our culture's well intended but off-target beliefs about appropriate curriculum for disadvantaged students. (Torff, 2011, p. 22-23)

It is extremely critical that teachers work to ensure they prepare a curriculum that is focused on the standards set forth by the state, and that they alter the pedagogy they employ in order to reach differing student groups (Schmoker, 2012).

Data

Student academic achievement data, in all its forms, are key information points that help educators measure the effectiveness of their work. Many education reform efforts are thwarted because they are not tightly coupled with intended, measurable outcomes. Rather, they focus on actions people will take and measure success as boxes marked off certain actions are completed.

There is a significant gulf between classroom practices that are “changed” and practices that actually lead to greater pupil learning; the potency of leadership for increasing student learning hinges on the specific classroom practices that leaders stimulate, encourage and promote. In the context of goal setting, this means that what leaders and leadership researchers need to focus on is not just leaders’ motivational and direction-setting activities but on the educational content of those activities and their alignment with intended student outcomes. (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 660)

Data are the statistic that describe the effects on learning of instruction or the teaching and learning process. Formative data are used to help teachers take a pulse on how well students are learning (DuFour et al., 2006). It is considered formative because it helps to inform decisions of what next steps teachers and students should take during the process of learning. Summative data measure the end result of learning and should indicate how much learning occurred in a given period of time. The success of teachers or the school in total is measured and communicated based on summative data.

Experience

Education in America, throughout the world, and as a profession, values experience. Pay scales, positions of authority, and privileges are based on experience more than anything else. Experience by itself is not as valuable to the production of quality as this preferential treatment by hiring administrators in the profession suggests. “Personal reflection on our experience is how we learn from our experience” (Barth, 2001, p. 41). Experience is beneficial to improving quality when teachers take the time to learn from their experience and actively work to improve. Nothing can replace experience. No training, no book, and no workshop can replace the value experience can provide.

Culture

School experiences have the potential to influence student academic outcomes greatly if they are hospitable toward learning. A positive school culture that encourages the belief that all students can master academic content is necessary for that school to become successful especially if it is located in an impoverished community. When the principal, the teachers, and the students begin to believe in the inherent capacity of students to learn, the academic prowess of students rise (Bryk, 2010; Spiro, 2013). When teachers believe that a student can learn and they believe in their own capacity to provide the instruction that can help the student to learn, outcomes improve, (Elmore, 1995). The claim is that positive school culture sets the bar and that students will perform at whatever level the bar is set.

School culture is “a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization,” (Barth, 2002, p. 8). It defines the way people approach their work and the way in which they interact with others. A school culture has to be tended to and intentionally worked on or it has the potential to devolve into a toxic environment where people feel unsafe, protective, and inhospitable to each other, making any semblance of success impossible (Peterson, 2001). A positive school culture is foremost a “professional community,” (Harvey, 2013). It has a “safe and orderly” climate that uncourageous growth, risk and support for one another (Robinson et al., 2008). It values the history and traditions of the past while striving for a better future, (Peterson, 2001; Portin, 2004). Most importantly, a positive school culture is characterized by a common focus that is concentrated on the value added to students by effective instruction (Elmore, 1995; Green, 2015; Janney et al., 2005). A positive school culture is the intangible

support that helps everyone feel belonging and valued so that they can express their self-efficacy and produce wonderful student academic outcomes.

Belief/Deficit Thinking

Belief, in this context, is defined as teachers believing that all kids can learn at high levels and that they, as teachers, can help highly impoverished kids learn. This belief in students' innate ability to learn is pivotal and key to achieving success. More so, teachers must believe in the capacity to help all students to learn. "The stance toward change at higher-performing schools is to expect it, respect it, and, by continuous progress monitoring, try to cause it" (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011, p. 30). This belief is visible in effective schools.

To the extent that our activities in school are dedicated to getting learning curves off the chart, what we do is a calling. To the extent that we spend most of our time doing something else in school, we are engaged in a job. (Barth, 2002, p. 9)

This one condition is probably the hinge point for most schools to accomplish their goals of academic success as long as those who believe align their work to their beliefs (Ritchie, 2013). Positivity breeds belief in a school. Informal discussions are about belief in the greatness of the students, the school, the teachers, and the principal. This kind of positive belief spurs on ingenuity, problem solving, and the will to keep trying amongst difficult situations or lagging student academic data.

When teachers encounter lagging student academic data, especially in a community with a low socioeconomic status, there is an inherent internal safety mechanism that kicks in that pushes the teacher to begin to blame the students. The message is that the instruction is fine, but the students are not fine. If the students would change, learning would improve. Teachers do this without thinking as a way to safeguard themselves from the reality that their instruction does, in

fact, need to change. When teachers have this kind of blaming belief system, they are engaged in a sort of deficit thinking that pushes teachers to reduce the rigor of expectation, curriculum, and achievement (Torff, 2011). Schools with high rates of poverty are often riddled with staff who, with the best of intentions, reduce expectations because they begin to think the disadvantaged students just cannot learn the way we want them to. There must be a very conspicuous attack of attitudes and beliefs that stifle the potential of at-risk students in order for the school to have the success they desire to achieve (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011; DuFour et al., 2006).

Change/School Improvement

In order for change to be effective, or result in desired outcomes, the school culture must provide the right support and overall climate (Barth, 2002; Fullan, 2006). Culture does not get addressed in a single event or a single moment in time. Culture does not improve as a result of a professional development meeting dedicated to improving school culture. Rather, it happens over time, through much concerted effort by leaders and educators. Leaders can work to change or improve a culture by “modeling” new norms, values, and behaviors (Elmore, 2004). Teachers and others in the organization can be engaged in dialogue and inquiry in order to help them embrace a new, improved and more effective and supportive school culture (Kennedy et al., 2011). School improvement efforts must endeavor to first build a school culture for changes to teaching and learning to have the desired impact on student academic success.

Goals/Outcomes/Focus

Effective teachers are able to help all students learn at high rates. This happens because the teachers are focused on ensuring their instruction is high quality and they measure the effectiveness of their instruction by student achievement data, (Edmonds, 1979; Neumerski, 2013). Basically, these teachers set high standards for their students, and then work at ensuring

the students get there. “Setting high standards and appropriate goals for every student is an essential part of the job of effective schools,” (Spiro, 2013, p. 28). Highly successful schools set goals for student academic achievement and align the activities of the adults in the school to those goals.

In the context of goal setting, this means that what leaders and leadership researchers need to focus on is not just leaders’ motivational and direction-setting activities but on the educational content of those activities and their alignment with intended student outcomes. (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 660)

As has been stated, schools are complex with many demands placed on leaders and teachers. Successful schools do not let any of the other things that come up get in the way of student academic learning. Teachers and administrators in successful schools

spend less energy trying to stamp out fires or win permission to lead, and woo recalcitrant staff, remediate ineffective team members, or beg for resources. (Rather, they) wake up every morning focused on identifying big challenges, dreaming of big solutions, and blasting (their) way forward. (Hess, 2013, p. 26)

Trust

Trust is a key component of school culture. Trust is built by a strong, caring, and competent leader. It is also sustained by those in the organization that value that trust and do not work to violate it.

Principals establish both respect and personal regard when they acknowledge the vulnerabilities of others, actively listen to their concerns, and eschew arbitrary actions. If principals couple this empathy with a compelling school vision, and if teachers see their behavior as advancing this vision, their personal integrity is also affirmed. Then,

assuming principals are competent at managing routine school affairs, an overall ethos conducive to building trust is likely to emerge. (Bryk, 2010, p. 27)

The power of this kind of trust is immeasurable. It inspires the teachers to risk more and try harder. It gives permission to students to feel safe and believe they are loved for who they are. It tells the community that they are welcome at their school. It also indicates that all students are safe to go to the school. They are safe to be who they are and that they will be met at where they are and guided to the highest levels of achievement. Trust is such a critical condition to helping a school with a high rate of poverty to find high levels of success.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are a concept that many educators have claimed to embrace. It is an over-arching process that defines the professional practices of the educators. It guides their preparation, their instruction, and the analysis of the effectiveness of that instruction. It guides the actions after analysis that continue to support student learning. Interventions and extensions are determined by the teachers who engage and are part of a PLC. DuFour et al. (2006) defined PLC practices with four questions.

What do we want all students to know and be able to do?; How will we know if they learn it?; How will we respond when some students have not learned it?; How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient? (p. 59)

Many successful schools promote the process of answering these questions in an effort to improve the teaching and learning process as defined by student academic outcomes. PLCs, and the teacher who engage with them, take it a bit further, though. The whole professional culture amongst the staff is defined by working together in professional learning.

Organizational learning is facilitated when there is openness and mutual trust that allows people to embrace change and experimentation without feeling personally threatened. It also helps if the culture supports widespread participation in decision making, an entrepreneurial ethic, and a diversity of skills and viewpoints. But most of all, a learning organization needs plenty of feedback, which can only be obtained through careful monitoring and tracking of the vision. (Nanus, 1992, p. 20)

The reflective practice of evaluating the successful attainment of student learning empowers teachers to make adjustments to their practice until more students learn the requisite material and can demonstrate it on an assessment. The work is student by student and content standard by content standard (DuFour et al., 2006). Provide instruction, change instruction, and provide individual interventions until each student becomes proficient. That is a professional learning community.

Self-Reflection/Growth Mindset/Improvement

It is very difficult to step back and think about one's own practice. Yet, it is so important in education that teachers take the time and be disciplined enough to reflect on their work and how it can become more effective at helping students to learn. "The skill of self-reflection transcends all other skills, strategies, and teaching approaches because it can grow over the course of a teacher's career and enable the teacher to cultivate and solidify all of his or her professional learning," (Hall & Simeral, 2008, p. 38). Being a practitioner that is willing to stand back from a tough situation and try to understand it is valuable. The effort of understanding what the situation is or is not can be hard and yet, so worth it. It helps to better define reality and find solutions that are more effective. It helps teachers feel less overwhelmed and more able to provide help in school improvement efforts (Barth, 2001).

PLCs and instructional coaching are avenues whereby teachers are afforded an opportunity for self-reflection. Both of those school events allow teachers to engage with others to spur on reflection. “Conversations have the capacity to promote reflection, to create and exchange craft knowledge, and to help improve the organization. Schools, I’m afraid, deal more in meetings -in talking at and being talked at -than in conversation,” (Barth, 2001, p. 40). Very effective schools have plenty of teachers who, by whatever means necessary, find ways to reflect on their own practice and make necessary improvements (DuFour et al., 2006).

In order for a school to make the necessary changes to become effective, teachers have to be willing to change (Barth, 1991). Good teachers do not start their careers “fully formed,” (Spiro, 2013, p. 31). This process of learning from our experience by reflecting on it takes time, (Barth, 2001). Unless teachers reflect on their practice and make changes, “all innovations, high standards, and high-stakes tests” will have to fit in and around existing elements of the school, (Barth, 2002, p. 7).

Ownership

Ownership in a school is saying, “This is what we do. This is who we are. We work hard. We celebrate when we win. That is just part of the nature, the built-in environment of our school.” Teachers in effective schools do not just show up, put in their time, and then let the chips fall where they may. Rather, they work to affect outcomes because they believe they are the impetus for learning. “For some reason, occupants of schools seem to fill the place of what researchers call the ‘dependent variable.’ Restructuring invites teachers and principals to become independent variables, to initiate as well as to respond” (Barth, 1991, p. 124). Teachers in great schools take ownership of their students and the outcomes they help them to achieve. The learning outcomes are not a fluke, and they are not something that just happens. If tough things

stand in the way of learning, effective teachers work to find solutions to remove the barrier. They own the situation, and they own the results. They take that ownership seriously and make the necessary improvements to practice such that student achievement rises.

Family/Community Engagement

Much has been said about all the things that can be done inside the school walls. Of course, instruction matters, but social context matters too (Bryk, 2010). “Schools need additional resources to successfully educate all students, and these resources, both human and material, are housed in students’ communities,” (Shore, 1994, p. 2). This research says the school must work to partner with the community and the parents of their students if they wish to maximize the success of their students. The school, especially the teachers, must work while at school as though all learning is a result of their work. However, they also must recognize the impact families have. Harnessing the family and involving them in the efforts to improve the school will speed up and sustain the improvement efforts (Noguera, 2011). Studies claim that helping parents to understand the school, understand the goals and action steps and their potential role in the process promises to accelerate and establish a new norm of academic excellence (Jeynes, 2011). Effective schools work so that families know they are welcome and that their students are being treated fairly. They know that the teachers have high expectations and plenty of support for their students. They learn from the school ways to help be part of the school efforts to improve learning (Ishimaru, 2013). This can be done by way of teachers conducting home visits to gain a better understanding of their students’ interests and home lives, talk with parents about their hopes and dreams for their children, and establish a partnership around learning. This broad inclusion of families and the community into the process proves successful in schools that work with the families instead of parallel or perpendicular to them (Cattanach, 2013; Green, 2015).

Researchers have discussed many things that affect student learning. Many claim a school that strives to help all students succeed, even those who come with difficulties, will focus attention on school structures, positive school culture, leadership of the principal and their willingness to share with teachers, improving instruction, and parent engagement. The claims of the researchers of these studies is that these things are the strongest levers that can move academic success forward in any school.

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APPENDIX B

Extended Methods

Setting

The State of Utah has more than a thousand public schools across the socioeconomic spectrum. The administrative data used for this study come from statistics generated in 2018 by the Utah State Board of Education. This data are used to identify the schools with high rates of poverty and determine the academic achievement rates by students in these schools. Some of these schools have a large portion of the student body experiencing poverty as characterized by the Federal Free or Reduced-Lunch program eligibility requirements. Four hundred and twenty-six schools (38.9% of all schools in Utah) have a rate of poverty that is more than 40%, a percentage that qualifies them for the Federal Title I Grant program. Among those 426 schools, 80 (7.3% of all schools in Utah) of them have an extremely high rate of poverty (70% or higher). This rate of poverty (70% or higher) is the threshold set by Title I regulations that mandates a school to receive part of the funding that has been set aside for qualifying schools. This is a much higher threshold than the 40% that can make a school eligible for the Title I program. For this study, these schools will be called “highly impoverished.”

Participants

In 2018, eight highly impoverished schools produced SAGE assessment student proficiency rates better than the Utah state average. The SAGE test consisted of three administered exams in English language arts, mathematics, and science. Every student was required to take these exams as their end-of-level, standardized tests. A state proficiency average was later calculated for each test using data gathered from schools across the entire state (see Table 1). The proficiency rate for each school was also calculated for each test. Schools were

identified for inclusion in this study using these rates, specifically, by having a student proficiency rate higher than the state average on at least one of the three exams. Eight of the highly impoverished schools in the state had at least one exam with a student proficiency rate higher than the state average. Pseudonyms have been created to replace the actual names of the schools involved in the study. See Table B1 for a breakdown of these eight schools and their average rates.

Table B1

2018 Utah SAGE Student Proficiency Rates for Highly Impoverished Schools With Above Average Rates

Schools	Poverty Rate	English Language Arts	Mathematics	Science
A School	75.23%	46%	42%	56%
B School	71.20%	46%	49%	49%
C School	83.10%	36%	55%	61%
D School	70.48%	46%	42%	42%
E School	83.99%	46%	51%	47%
F School	71.79%	48%	56%	48%
G School	83.00%	45%	51%	50%
H School	82.63%	47%	58%	57%
State Proficiency Averages		45%	46%	49%

Note. Bolded percentages indicate on which tests each school received an above Utah state average score.

Two schools were eliminated due to their remote location and relative size: C School and F School. The remaining six schools are urban schools. The building principal for each of the schools was identified and asked to participate in the study. Additionally, the director, the district

supervisor for that school, was also identified and asked to participate. Nine of the approached administrators agreed to participate in the study. All six school principals were interviewed and three of the directors/supervisors.

Data Collection

All participants from the identified schools were contacted via telephone. The conversation began with an explanation about the exemplary student achievement data that qualify the school for participation in the study. Next, the participants were informed of the comparison our study had made with other highly impoverished schools, as well as how rare it is that a school accomplishes such an above average proficiency rate. Finally, an invitation was extended to each of them to participate in an interview that would allow them to explain the conditions in their school that contributed to their students achieving such high academic success.

The interviews were conducted by a fellow school administrator in Utah. Open-ended questions were asked, which allowed each respondent to tell the story about their school's success. Questions were designed to encourage participants to remember aspects of their schools that addressed the diverse areas of focus that current researchers have indicated might have an effect on student achievement data: school culture (Barth, 2002; Peterson, 2001), leadership (Cash, 2008; Portin, 2004), class size (Elmore, 1995; Harvey, 2013), use of paraeducators (Barth, 2001), technology uses (Schmoker, 2012), professional learning communities (Barth, 2001; DuFour et al., 2006), professional development (Bryk, 2010; Odden, 2011), positive behavior supports (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011), instruction (Barth, 2006; Knapp et al., 2010), curriculum (Schmoker, 2012), family engagement (Mapp et al., 2017; Sanders, 2007). The administrators were invited to describe their school culture and to talk about their leadership. Each participant

was questioned to help them describe any additional resources that were provided using Title I funds and how those funds were expended. Questions were included that helped the respondent discuss the teaching and learning process. Each interview was recorded, later transcribed, and each administrator's responses were analyzed in order to generate data that helped answer the research question of this study. A list of the questions used can be found in Appendix B.

Research Design

In line with the constructivist paradigm, this multiple-case study approach intends to explain the meaning and the reality from the many points of view of the leaders of the schools and their experiences therein. While this approach does not reject objectivity completely, it is realized that the viewpoints are subjective to the "human creation of meaning" (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p. 10). A case study approach was chosen because the focus of the study is to answer the questions "why" and "how" (Yin, 2009) these schools all achieved an uncommonly high student academic proficiency rate. In this sense, the "case" is defined as high-poverty schools performing at above-average levels. Additionally, this approach seeks to uncover the conditions that are believed to be relevant precursors to the success of the schools. The study is actually a multiple-case (school) study. This allows the study to uncover the conditions within the single setting of a school and across settings as defined by the schools being studied (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The interview process was designed to minimize principals' hesitancy to respond honestly about their experiences. During the initial contact with these principals, they were assured that their involvement was anonymous, voluntary, and that discussing the success of their school's achievement would ultimately be rewarding as the results their school achieved were so successful. The interviews were conducted by me, a fellow practitioner, with extensive

experience in education involving highly impoverished communities. This shared professional experience ensured that there was a “familiarity with the culture of participating organizations and tactics to help ensure honesty in informants” (Shenton, 2004, pp. 65–66). These elements were included in the design so that this study would not only get to the heart of the research question, but also so that it would have a foundation of credibility backing the conclusions.

Limitations

The open-ended nature of the interview responses allowed for self-reflection to take a major role in the participants’ comments. This ensured that as the participants responded, they had to work to identify what was worth sharing and what aspects of their experience have value to the questions being asked. The questions, as posed in the interview, were intended to ensure that answers were genuine and unique to the respondent, so as to not have an emphasis on what “should have been” identified as valuable or important. Nonetheless, the open nature of this interview process does not guarantee that the answers get to the point or truly identify the actual reality. It only ensures that the respondent is offered the chance to describe his or her reality.

The case study approach as utilized here, does not work to create a map to or recipe for success. It delves deeply into the unique conditions and context of the setting and the actions of those working in the specific schools. The participants were able to describe in full their perspectives and their understanding of what occurred in their school and what they believed help to create the success achieved. This approach offered time for self-reflection and setting specific analysis. Self-reflection can be time sensitive, inadvertently leading to missed details that might have been influential at the time of the experiences. But this possibility of missing details and the lack of a quantitative foundation is overpowered by the benefits associated with

open discussion when identifying the actual conditions at the school that produced the desired results.

Another limitation of the study was the choice to limit to the six schools involved rather than the eight identified as qualifying. This limits the results to only these schools and the contexts found at those schools. The six involved were larger schools in mostly urban areas. The two eliminated had smaller student bodies and were located in rural towns. This choice narrowed the results and eliminated the opportunity to compare urban and rural. Three of the six directors were interviewed. After many attempts to connect with each district director/supervisor, I determined that participation by all six was not possible. I included those that were willing to participate. This obviously is a limitation as we do not know what they might have added. However, those who did participate provided little insight that was not already gleaned from the principals. Their comments seemed to overlap or run parallel to the perspectives found from the principals. We do not know if the same would have been true if the other directors had participated.

Data Analysis

Data for this study were produced from the answers participants gave to questions posed through the interview process already described. Interviews were recorded, and later transcribed for further analysis. Once the transcriptions were finished, the responses were coded using open coding, utilizing Nvivo software (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018). Responses were then categorized into a myriad of nodes that helped to further break down the responses into usable data points associated with ideas related to education, and more specifically the teaching and learning process. These data were then associated with larger themes that emerged through the axial coding process. The axial coding helped to develop broader categories as a way to better

describe the conditions that existed in each of the schools of focus in the study. This process helped to define the themes that emerged across the different cases.

The process was iterative as responses were categorized into the nodes that emerged. The axial coding helped to define aspects of schooling that seemed to affect each administrator's school. For example, during the process of open coding, the following common themes were identified: Principal, Instructional Leader, Teacher Leader, Shared Leadership, and Goals. As a result of axial coding, codes were encompassed within a theme such as Leadership. Concepts or themes with an identification threshold of over 50%, (i.e., more than half of the participants mentioned a concept or theme), were considered and either added to or rejected from the list of relevant and identifiable conditions. This work of identifying larger themes was also facilitated by the process of selective coding. After many cycles of coding, smaller codes were combined into similar codes to make the larger theme.

The qualitative analysis software, NVivo allowed for verification of the themes found during coding, as well as the accuracy of the information generated from the participant answers. This process was followed with fidelity along with the interview protocol. By being consistent in all aspects of data gathering and the analysis process, I was able to produce reliable findings.

During this process, 28 distinct conditions were identified throughout the six schools. This is obviously not an exhaustive list of conditions; however, these are the conditions that were identified by participants to help create an environment where above average student achievement could be accomplished.

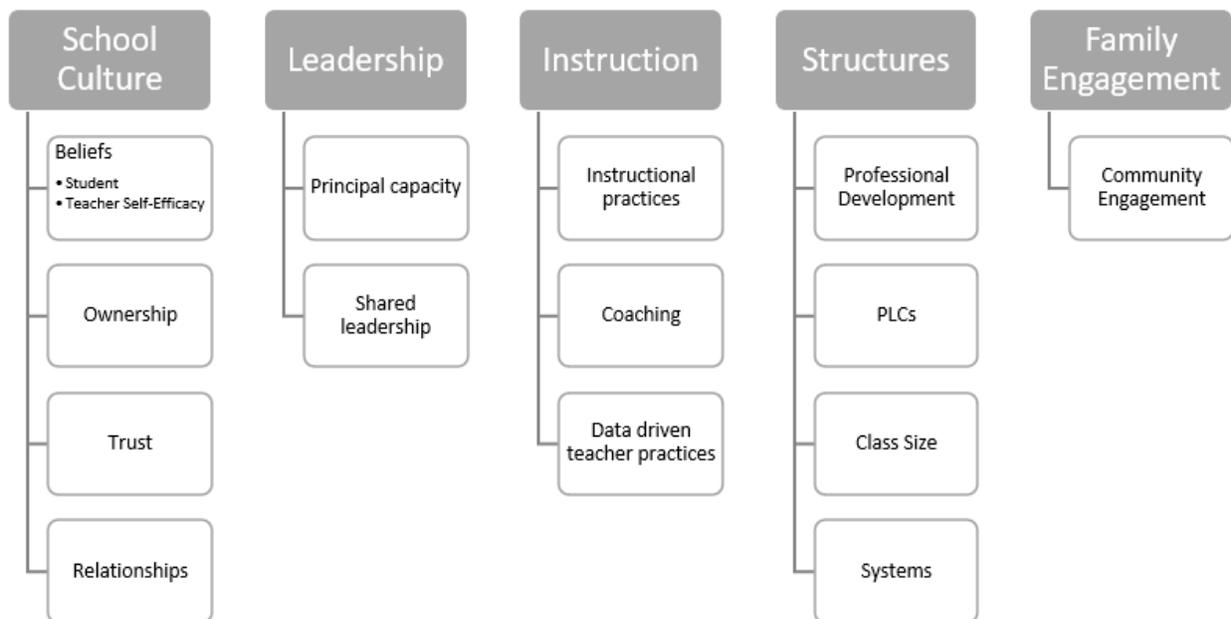
Not all 28 different conditions were observed in a majority of the schools. Fifteen distinct factors or conditions were named in over 50% of the schools, making these conditions significant to my research question. Seven of these 15 conditions were identified in all the schools. These

findings might represent a higher level of assurance that these seven conditions are coupled with high student academic achievement results.

Findings and Discussion

This study was conducted to determine what conditions were created or in operation at the identified highly impoverished schools that helped produce their high levels of student academic achievement. Though many conditions are present, they can be summarized into five themes. These themed areas of focus are school culture, leadership, instruction, structures, and family engagement. While these are aspects that all schools have, the participants in the study indicated that they specifically focused on developing the conditions in these themed areas to a point where student achievement could flourish.

School culture is comprised of conditions like beliefs held by staff, ownership, trust, and relationships. Leadership is a theme found in these schools and encompasses both principal capacity and shared leadership. Instruction comprises teacher self-efficacy, coaching, data, decision making, and teacher practices. Structures include systems, professional learning communities, class size, and professional development. Family engagement involves community engagement. See Figure B1 for a visual representation of these findings.

Figure B1*Findings*

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APPENDIX C

Interview Instrument

- Describe the nature of the school's success (recent, long-term).
- What are the other demographics of the students in the school? (State produced demographics will be used as well)
- Is the poverty characterized as situational or generational/intergenerational?
- What has been the major focus of improvement (curriculum, instruction, intervention)?
- Describe the school culture before and now; what went into creating it?
- How did the principal get to the point where he/she could lead this kind of improvement?
- What, if any, efforts have been made to reduce class size?
- What is the role of paraprofessionals in the school improvement effort?
- How have you planned for extended learning (after school – summer school) in improving academic outcomes?
- What are the increased technology usage strategies employed in the school improvement plan?
- How have PLCs been employed at the school (Structure, Process, Leadership)?
- What role has professional development played in school improvement?
- How does the school employ PBIS?
- Are there other factors that have had an important impact on your results?

APPENDIX D

Consent Form to be a Research Subject

Title of the Research Study: “What are the existing conditions in high poverty schools that have a higher than average proficiency rate?”

Principal Investigator: LeGrand Richards
IRB ID#: IRB2020-463

Introduction

This research study is being conducted by Mitch Nerdin at Brigham Young University to determine the conditions happening at your school that help produce such high student proficiency. You were invited to participate because of your role in a school with a high degree of poverty and also with a high degree of student proficiency.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- you will be interviewed for approximately sixty (60) minutes regarding your opinion about the conditions present at your school that help produce such a high percent of proficient students on the Utah state assessment
- the interview will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements
- the interview will take place in your school at a time convenient for you or it will take place at a time and location convenient for you
- the researcher may contact you later to clarify your interview answers for approximately fifteen (15) minutes
- you will guide the researcher through an informal tour of the school to show the conditions discussed in the interview for approximately 30 minutes
- total time commitment will be 105 minutes

Risks/Discomforts

- you will be asked about your leadership experience, and this may include a discussion about struggles
- you will lose time during the day of the events to be with the researcher

The researcher will maintain confidentiality at all times to safeguard your feelings about sharing struggles in leadership. The interview and tour can be interrupted if you are needed to fulfill your role on the day of the events.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefits to you. It is hoped, however, that through your participation researchers may learn about conditions, practices and beliefs that may be able to assist other schools with similar socio-economics in improving their education program such that they produce a similar high rate of student proficiency on end of level assessments.

Confidentiality

The research data will be kept on a password protected computer and only the researcher will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the study, all identifying information will be removed and the data will be kept in the researcher's locked office.

Compensation

No Incentives

Participation

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely.

Questions about the Research

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Mitch Nerdin at 801-631-3145 or mnerdin@graniteschools.org for further information.

Questions about Your Rights as Research Participants

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant contact Human Research Protection Program at (801) 422-1461; irb@byu.edu.

Statement of Consent

Name: (Printed) _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX E

Consent to Use Audio Record

“What are the existing conditions in high poverty schools that have a higher than average proficiency rate?”

Thank you for your willingness to participate as a research subject for “What are the existing conditions in high poverty schools that have a higher than average proficiency rate?” conducted by Mitch Nerdin and Brigham Young University.

During the Study, researchers will audio record you. This will only be during the interview. Your consent below allows BYU to use these recordings for purposes associated with the Study.

Participant Consent

I understand that researchers will take audio recordings of me as part of this Study. I give permission for BYU to use the Media in scientific publications, scientific conferences or meetings, educational presentations, public presentations to non-scientific groups, and other uses related to the Study so long as my name is not used. I agree that all Media will become the property of BYU, and I waive my right to inspect, approve, or be compensated for BYU’s use of the Media.

By signing below, I certify that I have read this Consent to Use Audio Recording and agree to its terms.

Name of Participant: _____
(Please Print)

Signature of Participant

Date

APPENDIX F

Institutional Review Board Approval**Memorandum**

To: Legrand Richards
Department: BYU - EDUC - Educational Leadership & Foundations
From: Sandee Aina, MPA, HRPP Associate Director
Wayne Larsen, MAcc, IRB Administrator
Date: November 25, 2020
IRB#: IRB2020-463
Title: What are the existing conditions in high poverty schools that have a higher than average proficiency rate?

Brigham Young University's IRB has approved the research study referenced in the subject heading as exempt level, category 2.

This study does not require an annual continuing review. Each year near the anniversary of the approval date, you will receive an email reminding you of your obligations as a researcher and to check on the status of the study. You will receive this email each year until you close the study.

The study is approved as of 11/25/2020. Please reference your assigned IRB identification number in any correspondence with the IRB.

Continued approval is conditional upon your compliance with the following requirements:

1. A copy of the approved informed consent statement can be found in IRIS. No other consent statement should be used. Each research subject must be provided with a copy or a way to access the consent statement.
2. Any modifications to the approved protocol must be submitted, reviewed, and approved by the IRB before modifications are incorporated in the study.
3. All recruiting tools must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to use.
4. Instructions to access approved documents, submit modifications, report adverse events, can be found on the IRB website, iRIS guide: <https://irb.byu.edu/iris-training-resources>
5. All non-serious unanticipated problems should be reported to the IRB within 2 weeks of the first awareness of the problem by the PI. Prompt reporting is important, as unanticipated problems often require some modification of study procedures, protocols, and/or informed consent processes. Such modifications require the review and approval of the IRB. Please refer to the [IRB website](#) for more information.