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FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF A HIGH-POVERTY, HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOL

By

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A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigated faculty perceptions of a high-poverty, high-performing school in a Midwestern town in Indiana. The study sought to identify practices and organizational structures that faculty perceives contributed to achieving a pass rate of 85% on the Math and 81% on the English sections of the Indiana state standardized achievement tests known as the End of Course Exam. In addition to identifying practices, the study also examined how the practices were implemented in the selected school. Faculty interviews and public documents were included in data collection. Information acquired from the study was analyzed using qualitative software. The software assisted in coding, sorting, and organizing information. Findings that emerged from the study revealed faculty perceived the school is successful as a result of implementing multiple practices. The practices identified in the findings were organized into 10 categories. The categories are adopted strategies, behavior strategies, clear and high expectations, cultural competence, changes to organizational structure, effective leadership, pedagogical strategies, positive school climate, adequate resources, and community support. The faculty was deliberate in implementing and promoting the practices as a means to increase student achievement. The findings have implications for educators, educational leaders, and education stakeholders regarding increasing student achievement in high-poverty, low-performing schools.

Keywords: high-poverty, high-performing schools, high-poverty, low-performing schools, academic performance, education stakeholders, and free and reduced lunch.
Dedication

“It takes a village to raise a child” African Proverb

This dissertation is dedicated to my proverbial village.

- Mother- My first teacher. You have invested so much in my life and my education journey. I appreciate you for laying a strong educational foundation for me. Thank you for the unconditional love, support, encouragement, and believing in me when I did not believe in myself. I would not be who I am or reached this level of education without you.

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- Brother- Roderick, you were the first generation to attend and graduate college. You always called me your shining star. Your words and high expectations have lived on in my memory. In my heart, I know you would be proud. Thank you my Angel in heaven.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Schools in high-poverty areas have historically failed to pass state standardized achievement tests throughout the United States (Barton & Coley, 2010). In the last 20 years, some high-poverty schools have begun to pass state standardized achievement tests whereas other high poverty schools continue to be unsuccessful (Chenoweth, 2007). There is an ongoing debate among educators, legislators, researchers, and other stakeholders concerning reasons for persistent low student performance in high-poverty schools.

Many educators in high-poverty, low-performing schools maintain that it is difficult to achieve passing scores on state standardized tests because of problems associated with poverty, unequal funding, and a lack of educational resources (Chenoweth, 2007). On the contrary, some legislators and education stakeholders reject socioeconomic factors and a lack of resources as an issue affecting performance in high-poverty schools (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Hanushek (1989) highlighted that research provides strong, consistent evidence that financial resources are not related to student academic achievement. In contrast, Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine (1996) supported the claim that financial resources are related to student academic achievement (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). It is apparent that education stakeholders and legislators disagree on the cause of low student performance on state standardized achievement test in high-poverty schools. It is difficult to resolve the problem because research findings have been mixed and contradictory (Biddle & Berliner, 2003). Despite the issue of no clear path to increasing student performance, federal legislation known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001
(NCLB) requires schools to meet 100% proficiency on state standardized achievement tests by 2014.

NCLB

Despite the lack of consensus between education stakeholders and legislators on the causes of low student achievement, President George W. Bush forged ahead proposing NCLB (2001). The bill was passed in the United States Congress in 2001 (NCLB, 2001). NCLB (2001) is a reauthorization of The Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965. The goal of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 was to focus on inequality in school resources (Forte, 2010). As a result of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965, the federal government has spent approximately $200 billion to increase academic achievement for students attending public schools in high-poverty districts; however, an overwhelming number of high-poverty schools continue to perform poorly on state standardized achievement tests (United States Department of Education, 2000). Research indicating funding does not matter and consistent low performance on state standardized achievement tests has resulted in more legislators embracing the perspective that financial resources are not the problem (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Many legislators have determined teacher ineffectiveness is the problem, thus, creating legislation requiring states, schools, administrators, and teachers to become more accountable for student achievement (University of Michigan, n.d.)

NCLB (2001) required teachers and paraprofessionals to fulfill various requirements to achieve highly qualified status. The purpose of requiring school staff to meet highly qualified status is to ensure students have competent instructors to teach specific subjects (Forte, 2010). Prior to the passage of NCLB, many urban and rural schools assigned
unqualified teachers and paraprofessionals to classroom instructional assignments (Forte, 2010). A major component of NCLB is the mandate for states to develop and administer annual standardized achievement tests (Forte, 2010). The purpose of the state standardized achievement tests is to ensure each school district within a state administers the same assessments (Forte, 2010). It also enables states to track schools’ annual progress (Forte, 2010). The ultimate goal of NCLB is for states to reach 100% proficiency on state standardized achievement test by the 2013-2014 school year (Forte, 2010). NCLB mandated states to establish a timeline outlining improvement goals that must increase every one to three years between the 2001-2002 school year to the 2013-2014 school year (Forte, 2010). It is incumbent upon each state to determine the acceptable rate of school improvement and monitor schools’ performance on an annual basis (Forte, 2010). The progress report is made public for legislators, parents, and other education stakeholders (Forte, 2010). The progress report is known as the adequate yearly progress (AYP) report (Forte, 2010). If schools meet the annual goals established by their state, then the school is reported to the public as making AYP. Schools failing to make AYP are subject to sanctions such as removal of administration, faculty, and ultimately state takeover (Forte, 2010). States communicate school performance to the public in various ways (Forte, 2010). For example, Indiana employs an A-F report card model (Indiana Department of Education, 2013). Schools that make AYP are assigned to the A-C category, and schools failing to make AYP are assigned to the D-F category (Indiana Department of Education, 2013). While some stakeholders and legislators support NCLB, there are others who criticize NCLB for failing to consider the impact socioeconomic factors have on student performance (Harris, 2007). Moreover, critics
also argue that NCLB fails to provide additional financial resources to address problems that are often present with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Harris, 2007). NCLB requires schools to meet 100% proficiency on state standardized achievement tests despite concerns presented by critics of the reform.

**High-Poverty, High-Performing Schools as Models**

As a result of many high-poverty schools failing to achieve 51% pass rate on state standardized achievement tests, one salient question emerged concerning high-poverty, high-performing schools: What are high-poverty, high-performing schools doing to increase student performance on state standardized academic tests? As the number of high-poverty, high-performing schools increases, greater pressure is placed on high-poverty, low-performing schools to attain at least a 51% pass rate on state standardized achievement tests (Harris, 2007). Although NCLB requires teachers to increase student performance on state standardized achievement tests and legislators highlight high-poverty, high-performing schools as model schools, there has not been significant research on high-poverty, high-performing schools (Chenoweth, 2007). Most of the research has consisted of qualitative case studies within select schools and states, which makes it difficult to transfer findings to other schools (Chenoweth, 2007). The existing research studies have focused primarily on elementary schools. Research on high-poverty, high-performing secondary schools is scarce. As a result of limited research, the education field does not have data on why some high-poverty schools are successful. Consequently, high-poverty, low-performing schools cannot glean ideas, strategies or practices from high-poverty, high-performing schools. As a result of education stakeholders holding different perspectives on the causes of the achievement gap and
underperformance on state standardized achievement tests, it has also been challenging for them to agree on improvement strategies.

Impact of NCLB on High-Poverty Schools

The mandate to reach 100% proficiency on state standardized achievement tests by 2014 has resulted in educators scurrying to find strategies to increase student performance. Dissension among educators and legislators coupled with a lack of research on high-poverty, high-performing schools left administrators and teachers to create solutions that may or may not have been extrapolated from research (Chenoweth, 2007). In general, solutions to improve high-poverty, low-performing schools have not been successful (Chenoweth, 2007).

The overarching question that emerges among educators in high-poverty, low-performing secondary schools is; what are the practices implemented in high-poverty, high-performing schools resulting in at least a 51% pass rate on state standardized achievement tests (Chenoweth, 2007)? In addition, some educators in low-performing schools are interested in discovering methods of implementation employed by high-poverty, high-performing secondary schools (Harris, 2007).

Criticism of High-Poverty, High-Performing Schools

A lack of substantial research on high-poverty, high-performing schools has also resulted in critics questioning the authenticity of high-poverty, high-performing schools (Reeves, 2003). Critics question research methodologies of existing studies (Reeves, 2003). Furthermore, critics postulated that schools labeled as high-performing do not necessarily achieve at least a 51% pass rate on state standardized achievement tests. The schools are designated high-poverty, high-performing based on significant improvement
rather than reaching a 51% pass rate. In other cases schools that do achieve a pass rate of
51% on state standardized achievement tests are accused of employing a selective
enrollment process, which allows them to deny entry to low performing students. Still
other critics accuse high-poverty, high-performing schools of cheating on state
standardized achievement tests (Reeves, 2003). Some critics question if high-poverty,
high-performing schools exclude low-performing students on state standardized
achievement test day (Reeves, 2003). Critics of high-poverty, high-performing schools
contend achieving a 51% pass rate is not a simple task; therefore they question the
legitimacy of high-poverty, high-performing schools. Nonetheless, the high-poverty,
high-performing designation has led many stakeholders and educators to support the idea
that high-poverty schools can become 100% proficient by 2014 in accordance with the
NCLB.

Race to the Top Education Reform

The emergence of high-poverty, high-performing schools has validated the position of
legislators in support of NCLB (Harris, 2007). In 2009 President Obama passed the Race
to the Top grant program. Race to the Top offered states the opportunity to apply for
competitive grants based on student performance (Winerip, 2012). Race to the Top’s
emphasis is on high stakes standardized achievement tests and teacher effectiveness
(Winerip, 2012). The Race to the Top program recommended states evaluate teachers
based on their students’ performances (Winerip, 2012). The program is designed to
encourage school districts to develop innovative education reform plans. The ultimate
goal of Race to the Top is for grant recipients to be used as a model for low-performing
schools. The rationale of Race to the Top is for high-poverty, low-performing schools to
adopt strategies employed by grant recipients, which would increase student performance on state standardized achievement tests in high-poverty school districts and reduce the achievement gap (Winerip, 2012).

Advocates for high-poverty schools argue it is difficult to raise test scores without increasing financial resources on the front end. Critics stated receiving financial resources on the front end is necessary for high-poverty, low-performing schools to provide supplemental educational resources, which would enable schools to address students’ academic deficiencies and to purchase updated instructional materials (Winerip, 2012). Without educational and financial resources to improve student academic performance, critics of NCLB contend high-poverty schools have a dismal chance of increasing students’ academic performance to become viable contenders for the grant (Winerip, 2012). Furthermore, Race to the Top critics argue competitive grants will not yield increases in student performance because the problem is not limited to teacher competence and motivation, which is the implication of the grant (Winerip, 2012). Critics argue there are numerous reasons students perform low on state standardized achievement tests as evidenced in research, and many of the reasons are independent of the teachers’ competencies (Winerip, 2012). The underlying logic of Race to the Top is that teachers will work harder to increase student performance on state standardized achievement tests if it is tied to compensation and grant opportunities (Winerip, 2012). NCLB does not consider issues related to poverty or problems associated with inequities in school funding and neither does Race to the Top (Winerip, 2012).
Context of the Problem

Schools in wealthier communities tend to pass state standardized achievement tests at a high rate, whereas schools in impoverished areas usually have fewer than 51% of students pass the state standardized achievement tests (Barton & Coley, 2010). High-poverty, low-performing schools are not a new phenomenon in the United States. America has been challenged with increasing student performance in high-poverty schools for decades with the goal of reducing the achievement gap between high-poverty and low-poverty schools (Barton & Coley, 2010). America has a long history of developing and implementing education reforms to address the aforementioned problems that educators continue to reference as obstacles that affect student achievement.

Although the federal government channels financial resources to address challenges faced by educators in impoverished areas, advocates for high-poverty, low-performing schools contend it is insufficient to address the plethora of deficiencies (Biddle & Berliner, 2003).

The discussion of the problem will be presented as follows (a) an examination of the federal government’s efforts to improve student performance and bridge the achievement gap, (b) arguments concerning the causes for the achievement gap and low student performance in high poverty areas, (c) use of property-taxes to fund education and its critics, (d) effects of a lack of financial resources, (e) efforts to reform the public schools funding system.

Brown v. Board (1954)

One of the first steps toward equalizing education was the case Brown v. Board (1954). In this decision, the United States Supreme Court ruled that state laws establishing separate public schools for African American and Caucasian students were
unconstitutional (Brown v. Board, 1954). The decision overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which permitted state-sponsored segregation (Brown v. Board, 1954). In May 1954, the Supreme Court ruled, “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (Brown v. Board, 1954, p. 495). The court also determined that racial segregation violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution (Brown v. Board, 1954). The court’s decision was a victory for the civil rights movement (Barton & Coley, 2010). Furthermore, it opened the door for integration and gave minority individuals; specifically African Americans, hope that they would receive a quality education alongside their Caucasian counterparts (Barton & Coley, 2010). *Brown v. Board* (1954) was supposed to resolve the problem of inequality; however, increasing student academic performance in high-poverty schools and reducing the achievement gap continue to be challenges for America (Barton & Coley, 2010).

**The Great Society**

Shortly after the *Brown v. Board* (1954) ruling, some education stakeholders and legislators argued that inequities in education were the reason for the achievement gap in America (Barton & Coley, 2010). By 1965, there was a major gap in the achievement of Caucasian students and African American students (Barton & Coley, 2010). President Lyndon Johnson established the Great Society, a series of programs and policies designed to reduce poverty (Darling-Hammond, 2012). These policies guaranteed housing, health care, social services, and basic income for low-income families (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Moreover, the Great Society invested financial resources in public schools in urban and rural communities (Darling-Hammond, 2012). The Great Society was instrumental in school desegregation and increased investments in teacher training.
programs that ultimately ended the teacher shortages that existed during the 1960s (Darling-Hammond, 2012).

The most prominent legislation passed by Congress during Lyndon Johnson’s administration was the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 (Education Laws, n.d.). The goal of this legislation was to provide federal dollars known as Title I funds to schools where populations were comprised of low income students in hopes of improving schools and resources available to them (Education Laws, n.d.). The aforementioned strategies led to bridging the achievement gap between the 1960s and 1980s (Darling-Hammond, 2012). During the 1960s and 1980s, the reading gap between African Americans and Caucasians decreased by two-thirds for 17-year-olds (Darling-Hammond, 2012). The percentage of minorities attending college was equivalent to Caucasians for the first time in America’s history (Darling-Hammond, 2012). In sum, Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society was comprehensive as it was designed to simultaneously address problems postulated by researchers, poverty related issues, and a lack of school resources (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Like Lyndon Johnson, there were many legislators who supported increasing financial resources to high-poverty schools as a means to increase student achievement; however, they did not necessarily support Lyndon Johnson’s stance on reducing poverty (Education Laws, 2013). Still, there were others who did not support increasing funds to high-poverty schools or reducing poverty (Education Laws, 2013).

During the 1980s, the Reagan Administration reduced funding to the Great Society, which aided education by addressing problems associated with poverty. To address poverty, the Great Society provided social services and housing (Darling-Hammond, 2012). As funding was cut, the achievement gap widened, resulting in increased
discussions about financial resources and public education (Darling-Hammond, 2012). The question of how to reduce the achievement gap and improve academic performance in high-poverty schools reemerged in America during the 1980s and continues to be a prevalent issue (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Moreover, educators and legislators continued to debate the causes of the achievement gap and solutions to improve academic performance in high-poverty schools (Darling-Hammond, 2012).

Darling-Hammond (2012) postulated the Great Society had a positive impact on education for decades. Critics argue legislators do not acknowledge the impact of socioeconomic status on student achievement despite research studies supporting it (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Education stakeholders and legislators had difficulty resolving the debate regarding whether or not there were inequities in the school funding system and the causes for the achievement gap (Chenoweth, 2007).

**Effects of Coleman’s Report**

In an effort to resolve the debate concerning the equality in education, a research study was conducted to identify causes of the achievement gap and low student academic performance in high-poverty districts (Chenoweth, 2007). The United States Department of Education commissioned a well-respected sociologist, James Coleman, to conduct a research study to determine if inequalities existed with America’s education system (Chenoweth, 2007). Coleman administered surveys to students, teachers, and principals (Chenoweth, 2007). Participants were randomly selected from several thousand schools across the nation (Biddle & Berliner, 2003).

indicated that family background had more of an effect on academic achievement than school funding (Chenoweth, 2007). More specifically, he reported that students’ family background and their peers had more of an effect on achievement than school quality and the amount of school funding received by schools (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Coleman’s report led the public belief that school funding had little effect on student achievement (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Many educators and policymakers focused on family background as a predictor of academic achievement as indicated in James Coleman’s report. Some educators and legislators embraced the concept that most impoverished students cannot achieve high levels of academic success as a result of low socioeconomic status (Chenoweth, 2007). Recognizing that socioeconomic status impacted student performance did not result in legislators re-establishing programs similar to the Great Society (Darling-Hammond, 2012).

While some educators, liberal politicians, and advocates for disadvantaged children disagreed with the findings, there were others who accepted the notion that family background was the only factor that contributed to underachievement (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Thus, many educators accepted the “demographic excuse” as the reason for low academic performance in high-poverty districts (Chenoweth, 2007). The demographic excuse means students from high-poverty areas are not capable of achieving high levels of academic success because of problems associated with poverty (Chenoweth, 2007). Some of the problems included: absenteeism, transience, developmental delays, family violence, disengaged parents, and community violence (Chenoweth, 2007). Moreover, some students from high-poverty environments presented with social, emotional, and learning deficiencies that can affect learning environments in a negative manner.
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(Chenoweth, 2007). In sum, many legislators acknowledged low socioeconomic status attributed to low student performance; however federal, state, and local governments have not re-established the Great Society or similar programs (Darling-Hammond, 2012).

**Property Taxes and Educational Funding**

Researchers contended that inequities exist in the way America funds education, and concluded that inequalities are a major hindrance in students’ ability to pass state standardized achievement tests (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Public schools are funded through a combination of federal, state, and local dollars (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). State funds are generated through income tax, corporate tax, sales tax, and fees (Education Week, 2004). The funds generated from taxes provide approximately 48% of the budget for public schools (Education Week, 2002). States have the authority to develop the formulas and systems for distributing the funds to local school districts (Biddle & Berliner, 2003). In most instances across the country, local districts contribute approximately 44%, which is generated from local property taxes (Education Week, 2004).

Property taxes are based on property value; therefore, schools in wealthy communities generate more money than those in impoverished communities (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Amounts that school districts receive vary from state to state and even within districts (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). The remaining 8% is funded by the federal government (Education Week, 2004). Funds are added together and distributed to school districts on a per-pupil basis (Education Week, 2004). The goal is to make sure that there are adequate financial resources to pay for each child’s education (Education Week, 2004). Again, each state has its own formulas and property taxes resulting in variances in
funding to school districts (Education Week, 2004). The property tax discrepancy causes education stakeholders and some legislators to argue wealthy communities have more financial resources than their urban and rural counterparts; therefore, schools in wealthier communities are more successful (Biddle & Berliner, 2002).

Extensive research has been conducted on inadequate funding to high-poverty schools and the impact it has on student achievement. A lack of adequate financial resources usually leads to inferior instructional resources, dilapidated school buildings, and overcrowded classrooms (Kozol, 1991).

Lack of Educational Resources

A lack of financial resources prevents districts from purchasing educational resources (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). It is common for teachers in high-poverty areas to lack resources such as maps, globes, textbooks, calculators, paper, pens, pencils, technology, audio visual equipment, and many other essential teaching tools (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). While some teachers purchase these items from personal resources, not every teacher can use personal resources to secure adequate teaching materials (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Educators argue it is difficult to provide a quality education without adequate resources.

Dilapidated School Buildings

As a result of a lack of financial resources, many urban school buildings across the country are in poor condition (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). For example, many urban schools have decayed interiors, including leaking roofs, inoperative heating and cooling systems, broken lights, peeling paint, and a lack of hot water (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Subpar buildings have a negative impact on teacher and student
performance as well as morale (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). A number of studies have revealed that many schools in high-poverty areas are negatively impacted by decaying buildings (Frazier, 1993).

Good facilities appear to be an important precondition for students to learn (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). A growing body of research has linked student achievement and behavior to the physical building conditions and overcrowding (Frazier, 1993). The Washington D.C. public school system conducted a study on building conditions and student performance. The findings revealed that after controlling for other variables, such as students’ socioeconomic status, students’ standardized achievement scores were lower in schools with poor building conditions than in schools with adequate conditions (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Students in subpar school buildings had achievement measures 6% below students in schools in fair condition and 11% below students in schools in excellent condition (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

**Overcrowding**

Overcrowding is another issue that urban school districts face because of scarce financial resources (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). A study of overcrowded schools in New York City found that students scored significantly lower on both mathematics and reading examinations than did similar students in underutilized schools (U. S. Department of Education, 2000). Despite research that indicated students in smaller classes achieve at a much higher rate than students in larger classes, many urban schools increase rather than reduce class size because of a lack of financial resources to hire additional instructors (Barton & Coley, 2010). The U.S. Department of Education (2000) reported that crowded classroom conditions make it difficult for students to focus
on instruction. It is difficult for teachers to implement innovative teaching strategies, such as group work and cooperative learning activities; this tends not to be a problem in wealthier districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Furthermore, in overcrowded classrooms, teachers spend more time maintaining order than teaching (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

**Efforts to Reform the Inequities in Funding**

Most state constitutions have mandates requiring equal opportunities in education (Biddle & Berliner, 2003). Lawsuits have been filed in approximately three-fourths of the 50 states to challenge the legality of unequal funding based on district property taxes (Kenyon, 2007). By 1989, lawsuits regarding school finance evolved from a focus on equity to adequacy (Hart & Teeter, 2004). An equitable education requires that an equal amount of money be spent on each child, whereas an adequate education ensures that each school receives financial resources that will result in student success (Hart & Teeter, 2004). The adequacy model focuses on student outcomes rather than what is spent per child (Hart & Teeter, 2004).

During the shift from equity to adequacy lawsuits, the judicial system reevaluated its capability to reform school finance systems (Hart & Teeter, 2004). For example, Illinois made numerous attempts to reform the current funding formula (Secter, 2010). Illinois voters came close to defeating a proposed constitutional amendment that would have required the state to fund more than half of all budgets of schools in the state (Secter, 2010). Four years later, the Illinois Supreme Court determined that it was “unwise, undesirable or unenlightened” for it to get involved in the school funding debate (Secter, 2010). Furthermore, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that it was up to the state
legislature to resolve funding issues (Secter, 2010). The state legislature has failed to resolve funding because it has rejected several proposals that would have increased income taxes and lowered property taxes while appropriating more state funds to schools (Secter, 2010). Consequently, this is still an issue in Illinois (Kenyon, 2007). The Supreme Courts of New York, Texas, and Massachusetts limited support for plaintiffs of adequacy cases relieving judges of the heavy burden of solving problems that exist in low-performing schools (Hart & Teeter, 2004).

In sum, there are many theories to explain the achievement gap and low student performance in high-poverty schools. Two of the most prevalent theories were presented in this section. One body of research supports low socioeconomic status having a negative impact on student learning. Other research focuses on the inequities in how property taxes are used to fund education. The inequities results in a lack of resources in high-poverty schools, which ultimately affects student learning (Biddle & Berliner, 2002).

**Purpose of the Study**

Debates concerning reasons for the achievement gap between high-poverty and low-poverty schools and low student performance in high-poverty schools have occurred for decades. Research studies on the topic have been mixed and contradictory. The purpose of this study is not to continue the debate. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to identify common practices present in a high-poverty, high-performing secondary school in a Midwestern town. The goal is to determine the practices contributing to the achievement of a pass rate of at least 51% or greater on state standardized achievement tests.
The literature on high-poverty, high-performing schools points to varied pedagogical strategies to increase student achievement. Although pedagogical strategies differed among high-poverty, high-performing schools, a positive school environment, positive relationships with students and cultural competence were highlighted in the literature as essential for students to learn. Because of the social and cultural implication to student achievement, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory will be the theoretical framework for this study.

Learning is not an isolated event (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) posited student learning is rooted within social interactions and occurs as students engage with people, objects, and events in the environment. Vygotsky (1978) further postulated connections must be made to students’ culture and social environments for them to learn.

Research Questions

The following is a list of research questions guiding the study:

- What are the practices and organizational structures that faculty perceives contributes to high-poverty schools achieving at least a 51% pass rate on state standardized achievement test?
- What strategies are used to implement the perceived effective practices and organizational structures in a high-poverty, high-performing school?

Method Overview

To explore faculty perceptions of a high-poverty, high-performing secondary school, the researcher employed a single-case study method. A high-poverty, high-performing school in a Midwest town in Indiana was selected to participate in the study. The criteria for the school was as follows (a) at least 51% of the student
population was minority, (b) at least 51% of the student population was enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program, (c) at least 51% of the students passed Indiana’s state achievement tests. After selecting and securing the school, criterion sampling was employed to select participants for the study. The faculty had to meet the following criteria to participate in the study (a) at least three years of experience working at the selected school, (b) possession of a valid teacher, administrator, or support personnel license in the state of Indiana. Participation in the study was voluntary.

The data were gathered by conducting interviews at the selected school. Rev.com transcribed the interviews verbatim. The data were analyzed with the assistance of NVivo 10 qualitative software.

**Definition of Terms**

The following section has been included to provide operational definitions to terms that are associated with education and specifically to America’s public school system.

**Achievement gap:** The disparities that exist in public education. For example, the gaps between high-poverty and low-poverty students as it relates to academic performance (Barton & Coley, 2010).

**Culture:** The customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; also: the characteristic features of everyday existence shared by people in a place or time (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2013).

**Demographic excuse:** The idea that issues associated with poverty are the reasons for failure to meet state academic standards (Chenoweth, 2007).
**Educational resources:** Paper, pens, pencils, furniture, textbooks, library books, technology, and equipment such as copy machines (Biddle & Berliner, 2003).

**Education stakeholders:** Parents, teachers, school administrators, school support staff, community partners, and others concerned with student achievement.

**Free and reduced lunch:** A National Lunch Program (NSLP), which is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential childcare institutions (United States Department of Agriculture, 2013).

**High-poverty, high-performing schools:** Schools where at least 51% of the student population receives free or reduced lunch, 51% are minority, and at least 51% pass state standardized achievement tests (Chenoweth, 2007).

**High-poverty, low-performing schools:** Schools where at least 51% of the student population receives free or reduced lunch, at least 51% are minority, and less than 51% meet or exceed state standards (Chenoweth, 2007).

**School climate:** The sum of values, cultures, safety practices, and organizational structures within a school that cause it to function and react in particular ways. Teaching practices, diversity, and relationships among administrators, teachers, parents, and students contribute to school climate. Furthermore, it refers mostly to schools’ effects on students (Brand, 2011).

**Socioeconomic:** Involves both economic and social factors (Chenoweth, 2007).

**State academic standards:** The benchmarks of quality and excellence in education, such as the rigor of curricula and the difficulty of examinations.
Academic standards are not uniform across the country because academic standards vary from state to state (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2014)

**Title I funds**- Title I refers to the component of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that provides financial assistance to schools with high percentages of children from low-income families. The purpose of allocating funds to schools serving high number of disadvantaged students is to ensure schools have resources to help children meet state proficiency standards on state standardized achievement tests. Title I funds are a supplement to state and district funds. Federal funds are allocated through formulas that are generated from data on census poverty estimates and the cost of education in each state (U.S. Department of Education).

**90/90/90 schools:** Schools where 90% of the student population receives free or reduced lunch, 90% are minority, and 90% meet or exceed minimum standards on state academic achievement tests (Reeves, 2003).

**Assumptions**

One assumption of this study is that it will be possible to identify common practices in a high-poverty, high-performing secondary school. Another assumption is faculty members have insight into elements that contribute to the success of their school. It is also assumed that participants will be candid about the success and failures of the school.

**Limitations**

It is common for research studies to have limitations. This qualitative case study is not an exception as it also has limitations. One limitation is that participants may not
always provide accurate information. Some participants may deceive the researcher by purposely or unintentionally providing false information. Selective memory, telescoping, and embellishing can yield false information (Brutus, Aguinis, & Wassmer, 2013).

Selective memory is described as recalling specific experiences or events and failing to remember others from the past (Brutus, et al., 2013). Schools that have at least a two-year history of meeting state academic standards may have faculty members who do not recall each practice that led to the success (Brutus, et al., 2013). Telescoping can also occur during data collection. Telescoping is described as individuals displacing events (Brutus, et al., 2013). The participant may recall events to have occurred at one time, when the event happened at another time. In the case of this study, participants may report a practice was implemented prior to achieving success, but the reality may be that it was implemented after the school already met and achieved a 51% pass rate on state standardized test. Consequently, the practice may not be responsible for achieving success. Embellishing events as more significant than evident in data and artifacts is termed exaggeration (Brutus, et al, 2013). In regard to this study, participants may give significant credit to a practice that may not be directly or indirectly responsible for the outcomes.

Another limitation is that school administration set boundaries for accessing faculty. Participation was voluntary; therefore, interviews were limited to individuals who were willing to participate in the study. The administration did not allow access to faculty members who did not agree to participate in the study. One participant recommended speaking with the diversity coordinator. Because the diversity coordinator did not respond to the email requesting participants for the study, the researcher could not access
interview the individual. The single case study design is also a limitation. A multi-case study would provide data from various schools. The data could be aggregated to develop a substantive theory.

**Delimitations**

Data collection was limited to one high-poverty, high-performing school in a Midwest town, which is a small sample size. Although the sample size is small, the school was information rich with the phenomenon necessary to complete this study. As a result of a small sample size, it is difficult for the researcher to transfer findings to other high-poverty schools. Because each state has different academic standards, the practices that impact high-performance in high-poverty schools in a specific state may not be transferable to other states. In addition, states revise their standards periodically, so increasing or lowering the state standards may impact results. Rich, thick data provides the reader with detailed descriptions of the setting under study so the reader can make decisions about transferability (Creswell, 2013). The high-poverty, high-performing school has approximately 156 teachers. Out of 156 teachers, 10 were interviewed. Although the data were collected to saturation, it is possible the remaining teachers may have perspectives that differed from the participants.

**Significance of Study**

Even though research exists that reveals poverty and lack of educational resources have a negative impact on student performance, educators have been charged with substantially increasing student performance on state standardized achievement tests without consideration to those issues (Biddle & Berliner, 2003). NCLB requires 100% proficiency by 2014. Many high-poverty schools continue to have difficulty making
adequate progress toward 100% proficiency in 2014 (Chenoweth, 2007). Educational leaders are seeking ways to increase student performance. Identifying common practices of high-poverty, high-performing secondary schools has the potential to provide high-poverty, low-performing secondary schools with practices and organizational structures that could assist in improving the pass rate on state standardized achievement tests. The findings of the study also have implications for teacher education programs.

The majority of existing research on high-poverty, a high-performing school has been limited to elementary schools. Research studies on high-poverty, high-performing secondary schools are limited. Previous researchers also recommended that future investigators conduct research in schools and states that have not been studied. The school selected to participate in this study has not been involved in any previous research study. Previous researchers recommend that future studies should be conducted in schools throughout the country to aggregate the data. As a result of aggregating data, a theory could be developed, which could help shape future education reforms.

Summary

Historically, high-poverty schools have performed considerably lower than their low-poverty counterparts resulting in an achievement gap in America’s public education system. There has been a plethora of studies conducted to identify the causes of low student performance in high-poverty schools. The research findings have been incongruent, which has led to an ongoing debate among education stakeholders and legislators on the causes of the problem. Moreover, there have been many unsuccessful attempts to reform public education. NCLB requires schools to reach 100% proficiency on state standardized achievement tests by 2014, which results in an urgent need to find
effective practices to increase student performance. Although there are high-poverty, high-performing schools throughout the country, few studies have been conducted on them. Existing studies have primarily focused on elementary schools. If America’s goal is to bridge the achievement gap by increasing student performance in high-poverty schools, practices employed by high-poverty, high-performing schools could have positive implications for high-poverty, low-performing schools.

Before investigating faculty perceptions of effective practices employed in a high-poverty, high-performing school, an examination of the literature on high-poverty, high-performing schools is necessary. Chapter two will further discuss the theoretical framework that is the basis for the study. This chapter will also examine existing research on effective practices and organizational structures that yield at least a 51% pass rate on state standardized achievement tests. Chapter two will also highlight what is missing in the research, which will justify the need for this study.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In light of NCLB requiring 100% student proficiency by 2014, school system leaders are intensely searching for practices that will increase student academic performance on state standardized academic assessments. In the absence of a theory of practice and limited research on successful high-poverty schools, some district and school leaders continue to implement traditional pedagogical strategies. Some districts have attempted to develop their own practices that may or may not be evidence-based. Still, others have hired education consultants who often charge millions of dollars to assist in increasing student achievement. This chapter will examine literature on effective practices of high-poverty, high-performing schools.

The chapter organization is as follows (a) discussion of the theoretical framework guiding the study, (b) a review of three of the largest groundbreaking studies conducted by organizations on effective practices of high-poverty, high-performing schools, (c) a review of more recent research conducted by individual researchers rather than organizations that highlighted effective practices of high-poverty, high-performing schools, (d) discussion of research that focused on single practices related to increasing student achievement in high-poverty schools, (e) identification of areas missing in the literature and opportunities for further research.

Theoretical Framework

The foundation for the study is grounded in a sociocultural framework. The literature on high-poverty, high-performing schools points to the importance of connecting to students and building positive student-teacher relationships, establishing a positive and safe school climate, setting clear and high expectations and implementing programs that
will compensate for deficiencies in the home environment and community. Scholars and education stakeholders who criticize NCLB often cite the fact that it does not consider social and cultural factors as it relates to student academic achievement.

Scholars assert Vygotsky’s theory has implications for teaching, schooling, and education (Picucci, Brownson, Kalbert, & Sobel, 2004). Vygotsky (1978) postulated higher order thinking skills are developed through social interaction. Vygotsky (1978) further asserted that in order to gain an understanding of children’s development, attention must be given to each child’s external social world in which they have been reared, such as the home and community environment. Vygotsky’s perspective on sociocultural and education is as follows:

Our concern is that there exist within the very nature of the educational process, within its psychological essence, the demand that there be as close an interaction, with life itself as might be wished for. Ultimately only life educates, and the deeper that life, the real world, burrows into the school, the more dynamic and the more robust will be the educational process. That the school has been locked away and walled in as if by a tall fence from life itself has been its greatest failing. Education is just as meaningless outside the real world as is a fire without oxygen, or as is breathing in a vacuum. The teacher’s educational work, therefore, must be inevitably connected with his [or her] creative, social, and life work. (Moll, 2013, pp. 120-121)

Teacher preparation programs are evaluating the need to incorporate the social aspect of teaching and learning in their curriculums (Picucci, et al., 2004). Sociocultural theories are becoming the foundation to pedagogical practices (Picucci, et al., 2004).
Early Research on High-Poverty, High-Performing Schools

Early studies conducted on high-poverty, high-performing schools focused on identifying common practices that set the schools apart from high-poverty, low-performing schools. Groundbreaking studies were conducted by the Center for Performance Excellence, the Education Trust, and the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence. The Center for Performance Excellence is composed of current and former superintendents, principals, and leading educators who serve as consultants, specialists, and facilitators. They are from various districts and schools in all 50 states and across the world. The primary goals of The Center for Performance Assessment are to help transform struggling schools and evaluate resources and the return on educational investments. The Education Trust is an advocacy organization that promotes high academic achievement for students at grade levels—pre-kindergarten through college. The goal of Education Trust is to close gaps in opportunity and achievement, especially for students from low-income minority families. The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence is a nonpartisan, nonprofit advocacy organization.

All of the aforementioned organizations identified seven to eight common practices in high-poverty, high-performing schools that did not exist to the same degree in high-poverty, low-performing schools. More recent research teams have identified practices that are consistent with the early studies conducted by the Center for Performance Excellence, Education Trust, and the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence. Still, other researchers have honed in on single practices that have shown to be common in high-poverty, high-performing school such as the middle school model, wrap-around service, data driven instruction, leadership, culture of high expectation, and building
positive relationships. In sum, investigators provide several common practices whereas other researchers focused on specific practices. Throughout the literature, researchers consistently postulated there is not one particular intervention or practice that explains achievement in high-poverty, high-performing schools.

**Successful Schools in High-Poverty Areas**

In the midst of all the discussions related to the achievement gap, low performance in high-poverty schools, and educational reforms, there are schools that have achieved success despite the aforementioned challenges (Chenoweth, 2007). The existence of these schools defies the long held belief that high-poverty schools cannot achieve a pass rate of at least 51% on state standardized achievement tests because of issues associated with poverty and systemic problems (Chenoweth, 2007). Initially, high-performing schools were referred to as 90/90/90 schools; however, high-performing schools have become more commonly known as high-poverty, high-performing schools.

The original 90/90/90 research was conducted by the Center for Performance Excellence over a four-year period, 1995-1998 (Reeves, 2003). The study included 130,000 students ranging from elementary to high school from 228 schools. The researchers did not identify the high-performing schools by name or grade level. The studies were conducted in Norfolk, Wayne Township, Milwaukee, Riverview Gardens, and Freeport (Reeves, 2003). Furthermore, participating schools included inner-city, suburban, and rural schools (Reeves, 2003). The student demographics ranged from poor to middle class (Reeves, 2003). The students in the inner-city schools were primarily minority (Reeves, 2003). The majority of students in the rural schools were Caucasian (Reeves, 2003). Although the suburban schools included minority students, the majority
of students were Caucasian American (Reeves, 2003). The Center for Performance Assessment identified five common practices of leaders and teachers in schools with a high population of impoverished, minority students who achieved high academic standards (Reeves, 2003). The following five practices are common to 90/90/90 schools:

- intense focus on academic achievement;
- clear curriculum;
- frequent assessment of student performance and remediation opportunities;
- focus on developing nonfiction writing skills;
- collaboration on evaluating students’ work (Reeves, 2003).

The Center for Performance Excellence acknowledged that poverty, linguistic differences, and culture have a bearing on student achievement, but variation in teaching, curriculum, and leadership have a greater impact on student academic achievement (Reeves, 2003). The study supported that teaching, leadership, and curriculum can outweigh the impact of poverty on student achievement on standardized tests. The successful schools in the study did not adopt any special instructional or behavioral programs to achieve 90% pass rates on state standardized tests (Reeves, 2003). The researchers contended the practices were simplistic and could be replicated without a large budget (Reeves, 2003). Although the respective schools’ methods of implementation have varied, the five common practices were effective for elementary, middle, and high school schools.

Reeves (2003) revealed that many critics questioned the research findings and demanded the names of the participating schools as well as the names of the research subjects. Reeves (2003) was clear that researchers should be open to verification and
scrutiny, but contended the demand for the information in the 90/90/90 study was beyond the research norm. Reeves (2003) speculated that critics did not believe economically disadvantaged children could attain passing scores on state achievement tests; therefore, critics demanded proof. Reeves (2003) further postulated that the disbelief demonstrates the low expectations placed on poor and minority children.

In 1999, Education Trust published “Dispelling the Myth,” which highlighted 366 elementary and secondary schools from 21 U.S. states (Barth, Haycock, Hilda Jackson, Ruiz, Robinson, & Wilkins, 1999). Barth et al. (1999) invited 1,200 schools to participate in a survey. Schools were selected based on the designation by their respective state as one of the top scoring or most improved on state standardized achievement tests. The report did not provide details on whether the schools were charter or public, nor did the report indicate if the schools engaged in open or selective enrollment. Out of the 1200 schools invited, 366 schools completed the survey. Barth et al. (1999) used a survey instrument designed to identify practices schools employed to increase student achievement on state assessments. The participating secondary schools were largely middle schools. Approximately 51% of the students were minority with a low socioeconomic status but were outperforming two-thirds of their more advantaged counterparts in their respective states (Barth et al., 1999). Each of the 10 highest performing schools fared better than suburban schools on state standardized achievement tests in reading or math and in some cases both (Barth et al., 1999). The six findings are aligned with the expectations of the No Child Left Behind. Barth et al. (1999) reported the following findings:
use state standards to develop curriculum, instruction, evaluate students and teachers;

- increase instructional time in reading and math;
- increase funds for professional development with the intent to change instructional policies;
- implement comprehensive systems to evaluate student performance and offer remediation as needed;
- increase parent involvement in helping students meet standards;
- implement state or district accountability systems for faculty.

The findings did not indicate whether schools in the study addressed issues associated with poverty. The practices centered on effective teachers and the delivery of instruction.

In 2002, Education Trust published a follow-up study, “Dispelling the Myth Revisited (Craig, 2002).” It was one of the first comprehensive studies on high-poverty, high-performing schools (Craig, 2002). The organization studied approximately 3,500 high-poverty, high-performing schools in 47 states (Craig, 2002). The researchers analyzed schools that performed in the top one-third on state standardized achievement tests in their respective states (Parrett & Budge, 2012). Data were collected through interviews of principals of high-poverty, high-performing schools to determine what practices were instrumental in improving their schools’ performance (Parrett & Budge, 2012). The seven practices consistent with all the principals interviewed determined successful schools employed:

- use of state and local standards to guide instruction and student assessment;
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- teacher evaluation;
- increased instruction time;
- professional development that emphasized best instructional practices;
- comprehensive student evaluation;
- enrichment opportunities;
- parent participation and accountability for faculty;
- data driven decisions related to instruction and resources (Parrett & Budge, 2012).

Harris (2007) criticized Education Trust’s research report citing the following problems:

- Education Trust over identifies and misidentifies high-poverty, high-performing schools;
- contradicts a pool of existing research linking student achievement to socioeconomic status;
- the findings do not address the students’ socioeconomic disadvantages (Harris, 2007).

Despite criticism of Education Trust’s findings, most subsequent studies on high-poverty, high-poverty schools have been consistent with Education Trust’s report. The seven practices identified by Education Trust have been recognized as the most relevant factors contributing to the success of high-poverty, high-performing schools (Parrett & Budge, 2012). As a result of critics contending high-poverty, high-performing schools lower standards and even cheat on state standardized achievement tests (Parrett and Budge (2012) contended that neither the states nor schools lowered standards to ensure
that outcomes were met (Parrett & Budge, 2012). The students were expected to meet high standards and become adequately prepared for college (Parrett & Budge, 2012).

Although schools in the study had a pass rate of at least 51% on state standardized achievement tests in reading or math, the schools did not necessarily have a 51% pass rate in both areas. Some of the schools included in the study made significant improvements over a two-year time span on state standardized achievement tests but had not attained the minimum pass rate for their respective states. In the end, Education Trust identified 1200 schools as high-poverty, high-performing (Parret & Budge, 2012). Critics of the Education Trust report postulated that this is a result of misidentification and over identification (Harris, 2007). Furthermore, critics also contend the findings of the Education Trust report supported the position of policymakers and school leaders who purport that high-poverty schools should pass state achievement test with at least a 51% pass rate despite the problems associated with poverty and a lack of educational resources (Harris, 2007). The Education Trust report did not discuss issues related to poverty and a lack of financial resources, which could imply the aforementioned issues were not significant and did not hinder the progress of schools selected to participate in the study. Education Trust highlighted comparisons across states could not be made because each state has the autonomy to develop state standardized achievement test and determine its rigor (Barth et al.).

In 2004, the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence launched a study, “Inside the Black Box of High Performing High Poverty Schools.” The researchers were interested in answers to two questions: (a) what do high-poverty, high-performing schools have in common? and (b) how are the practices of high-poverty, high-performing
schools different from those of high-poverty, low-performing schools (Kannapel & Clements, 2005)? In this study, the primary focus was on classroom practices of high-poverty, high-performing elementary schools. The participating schools earned a 75 state academic index for minority students and students on the free reduced lunch program (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). The researchers also sought schools that made significant progress on state standardized achievement tests over time; however, the researchers did not specify the amount of time. The report did not indicate the possible score range, so it is unclear if 75 is a passing score or considered significant progress for minority students and students on the free and reduced lunch program. Thus, high-performing is not clearly defined in the study. Although high performance was not clearly defined, high-poverty was defined as 51% of the student population of a school receiving free and reduced lunch. The report also did not indicate if the schools were public, charter, or magnet schools.

The researcher used the Kentucky Scholastic Audit Tool developed by the State Department of Education for the purposes of diagnosing schools that do not meet state academic standards. The audit process was supplemented with site visits and interviews (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). The researcher compared the data gathered from high-poverty, high-performing schools with data from schools with similar demographics but low academic performance (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). The study identified seven common practices of high-poverty, high-performing schools:

- high expectations for students, faculty, and staff;
- emphasis on academics and instruction;
- regular assessment of students;
Recent Studies on High-Poverty, High-Performing Schools

By 2007, there had been numerous studies conducted on high-poverty, high-performing school. The aim of the research on high-poverty, high-performing schools was to identify effective practices to assist high-poverty, low-performing schools improve academic performance on state standardized achievement tests (Parrett & Budge, 2012). Parrett and Budge (2012) discussed a research study that synthesized the data of 18 studies conducted on high-poverty, high-performing schools over a 20-year span in an effort to identify the major findings. The research findings revealed that the following eight practices resulted in significant improvement for high-poverty, low-performing schools:

- effective district and school leadership;
- engaging parents, communities and schools;
- high expectations for all students;
- focus on improving reading skills;
- develop a system of data collection and assessment;
- develop instructional capacity, and reorganize time, space, and transitions (Parrett & Budge, 2012).
Although eight characteristics were deemed necessary for improvement, effective leadership was considered necessary to implement the seven other aforementioned practices (Parrett & Budge, 2012).

Cunningham (2006) investigated six high-performing schools in five states across the United States. At least 51% of the students in the schools were on the free and reduced lunch program (Cunningham, 2006). In some cases as many as 98% of the study body was on the lunch program (Cunningham, 2006). The students in these schools exceeded expectations on state standardized literacy tests (Cunningham, 2006). The report indicated that 68% to 87% of students met or exceeded the minimum standard for proficiency for the state literacy test (Cunningham, 2006). The researcher did not specify the enrollment practice. It is not clear if the schools employed selective or open enrollment. Prior to conducting the research, the investigator identified 12 factors that seemed to contribute to literacy achievement:

- assessment;
- community involvement;
- comprehensive curriculum;
- engagement;
- instruction;
- leadership;
- materials;
- parent participation;
- perseverance and persistence;
- professional development;
• reading and writing;
• specialist support (Cunningham, 2006).

The professional staff was asked to identify the top four factors essential to their respective schools’ successes. Instruction, reading and writing, perseverance and persistence, and engagement were ranked the highest (Cunningham, 2006). Support services, materials, comprehensive curriculum, parent participation, and community involvement received the lowest rankings (Cunningham, 2006).

Angelis and Wilcox (2011) published an eight-year study on high-performing schools, which included elementary, middle, and high schools. The researchers identified schools in New York with similar demographics including poverty levels and per pupil expenditures (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011). Their goal was to determine how the high-poverty schools were achieving high levels of success (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011). Furthermore, the investigators were interested in learning the unique practices employed in high-performing schools not employed in low-performing schools (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011). The findings revealed:
• teachers, administrators, and staff collaborate;
• the leaders make evidence-based decisions;
• faculty hold high expectations of their students (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011).

Along with high expectations, some schools in the study created academic programs and supports to address students’ social emotional needs (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011). Saunders Trades and Technical High School addressed absenteeism by sending officials to the field to find students. South Kortright established after school tutoring programs and study halls to provide supplemental supports to students (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011).
South Kortright deemed students who fail two courses ineligible to participate in extracurricular activities unless the student participates in after-school tutoring (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011).

Utica Kennedy and Westbury Middle Schools established alternative programs to address poor behavior, attendance, and academic performance (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011). Utica and Westbury’s approach was aligned with the Great Society programs that focused on addressing issues related to poverty (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011). Utica provided door-to-door bus service to students so parents can be sure students arrive at school (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011). Students in the alternative programs receive social service and academic support (Angelis and Wilcox, 2011). Utica offered free social services support to students, such as anger management, interpersonal, and social skills training (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011). Westbury Middle School’s alternative program was staffed with a special education teacher, a content area teacher, and a social worker (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011). The first goal of the alternative program was to address social-emotional issues that interfere with academic progress and attendance (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011). Some legislators tie student success directly to teacher effectiveness and reject the “demographic excuse” as a factor hindering high student achievement. Staff members from Utica Kennedy, Westbury Middle School, Saunders Trade and Technical High School, and South Kortright School attributed student success to supplemental resources and addressing issues associated with poverty (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011). In sum, high-performing schools foster an environment conducive to students’ success (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011).
Schools in the study were deemed high-performing; however, the researchers did not disclose the pass rate of the respective schools on state standardized tests. Angelis and Wilcox (2011) were the first to discover that successful schools provided supplemental academic and social services; however, the report did not reveal the funding source that supports the programs. Low-performing schools experiencing financial difficulties in search of effective practices could benefit from knowledge related to funding supplemental services.

More recently, Wong (2011) conducted a study that included five high-poverty, high-performing schools. Fifty percent of the student population at the schools studied was enrolled in the free-reduced lunch program. Unlike some of the other studies, the selected schools also met the state performance requirement of 70% of the student population passing the state standardized test. The research findings revealed that schools must focus on:

- leadership;
- curriculum instruction;
- assessment to be successful (Wong, 2011).

The findings were aligned with previous research findings. Based on the findings, Wong developed a theoretical model of a high-poverty school that could be a resource for schools attempting to improve academic performance (Wong, 2011).

An interdisciplinary faculty research team studied seven elementary schools throughout the United States by employing a case study design (Acker-Hocevar, Cruz-Janzen, & Wilson, 2012). The participating schools’ demographics included a high minority student population, low socioeconomic status, and English language learners
The researchers set out to understand the beliefs, attitudes, and practices that resulted in high achievement despite circumstances related to high-poverty. The research revealed 10 core values necessary for low socioeconomic schools to be successful. The investigators organized the data into two categories: organizing variables and sustaining variables. The following organizing variables were the basic components of most organizations:

- personnel;
- accountability;
- information management;
- resources;
- instruction.

The sustaining variables were as follows:

- leadership;
- decision making;
- culture and climate;
- parent and community involvement;
- communication.

Although the researchers considered the core values essential to the success of high-poverty schools, they deemed the sustaining variables to be more critical to school success.

Although some studies focused on identifying common practices of high-poverty, high-performing schools, others focused on how single practices were implemented to
achieve success. These studies investigated the middle school concept, wrap-around, data driven instruction, leadership, culture of high expectation, and building positive relationships.

**Research Studies Focused on Single Practices**

**Middle School Concept**

High-poverty schools that adopted a middle school concept typically have more student success than schools that do not implement a middle school concept (Trimble, 2002). A three-year study conducted between 1997 and 2000 investigated the policies, practices, and strategies of five high-poverty, high-performing middle schools (Trimble, 2002). All five schools had a student population that exceeded 400 and at least 51% of the student were minority and received free-reduced lunch. The participating schools were selected because they scored higher on state standardized assessments than schools with similar demographics. The schools in the study outperformed those with similar demographics; however, the schools did not have a pass rate of at least 51% on state standardized achievement tests. Nonetheless, the research revealed the common practices of the schools included:

- using grant money to supplement resources;
- focus on data-based goals;
- collaboration (Trimble, 2002).

Despite research that suggests the acquisition of additional resources is not necessary to improve student academic performance, schools in the study relied upon grants to provide supplemental resources. Grant funds made it possible for schools to provide mentors, parent training, volunteer programs, counselors, full-time enrichment specialist,
tutoring, and leadership opportunities. In addition to establishing data-based goals and collaboration, the schools attributed a large part of their successes to the provision of supplemental service (Trimble 2002).

The U.S. Department of Education commissioned the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin to conduct a study during the 2000-2001 school year to identify common practices of the middle school concept that led to high student performance (Picucci et al., 2004). The study included seven public schools with an open enrollment policy (Picucci et al., 2004). Each school had made significant improvement on math and reading state standardized achievement tests between 1997 and 2000. Many of the schools participating in the study had a history of performing below state achievement standards. The schools made significant improvement, which means many students performed average to above average on state standardized achievement tests. Moreover, some of the high-poverty schools outperformed schools in affluent communities (Picucci et al., 2004). The report did not specifically indicate the percentage of students who passed the state standardized achievement tests (Picucci et al., 2004). The study revealed that successful high-poverty middle schools share the following characteristics:

- a challenging curriculum;
- a culture of high expectation;
- collaborative environment;
- partnership with parents and the community (Picucci et al., 2004).

Although the researchers did not group the acquisition of grants with the previously mentioned characteristics, acquiring competitive grants and financial resources were
addressed in the report (Picucci et al., 2004). The schools apply for competitive grants because school officials deem it necessary for student achievement (Picucci et al., 2004). Seven of the schools used grant money to support after-school programs. The after-school programs were implemented to provide additional academic support. In addition, the after-school programs offered extracurricular activities. A grant coordinator for one of the schools reported the purpose of creating after-school programs is to create an atmosphere which fostered a sense of belonging for students (Picucci et al., 2004). After-school activities also provided a haven for students (Picucci et al., 2004). Research indicated students who become involved in school activities by middle school are more likely to graduate from high school than their inactive peers (Picucci et al., 2004).

In addition to applying for grants, schools participating in the study reported reevaluating the use of Title I funds. Many of the participating schools redistributed Title I funds to support supplemental education services such as tutoring (Picucci et al., 2004). The schools not only secured grant money to provide supplemental support services, but they were also committed to making the best decisions with existing financial resources (Picucci et al., 2004).

The researchers also concluded that faculty at the seven schools had a positive outlook about their respective schools (Picucci et al., 2004). The faculty acknowledged that issues associated with poverty hinder student performance; however, faculty did not use it as an excuse to not educate students. The faculty established programs to address academic and social emotional deficiencies (Picucci et al., 2004). The researchers highlighted that study participants did not assign blame to one another, administration, or state accountability systems (Picucci et al., 2004). Participants did not focus on a lack of
time or resources (Picucci et al., 2004). The common thread that existed among the seven schools in the study was teamwork. The faculty identified problems and worked hard to develop solutions rather than complaints (Picucci et al., 2004).

**Wrap-around Services**

Although the teachers and staff in the schools researched by Cunningham (2006) revealed support services were ranked low in terms of relevance to student success, other research indicated that it is the key factor in the success of high-poverty schools (Jensen, 2009). High-poverty, high-performing schools typically use a 360-degree wraparound student support system (Jensen, 2009). Wrap-around refers to supportive services provided by professionals that include social workers, psychologists, physicians, dentists, and nurses. Some districts may employ services from more professionals than those previously mentioned, while others may require fewer. The type of services may vary because some schools make an effort to meet all the students’ needs, while others focus on what is deemed to be the most important for their respective districts (Jensen, 2009). Jensen (2009) contended high-poverty schools that do not adapt a 360-degree wraparound service model will have a difficult time increasing student academic performance. Aligned with Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, students cannot focus on academic tasks when faced with the stresses of poverty such as food, family security, residency, health, and safety issues (Jensen, 2009).

The report highlighted Preuss School in La Jolla, California. Preuss is a public charter school with a total enrollment of 760, which included middle and high school students. The school is composed of 94% minorities, and 100% of the student body is eligible for the free-reduced lunch program. Despite the school being high-poverty, they have a high
graduation rate and 95% of the graduates attend four-year colleges (Jensen, 2009). In 2008, the school was recognized by Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report as being one of the top 10 high schools in the country (Jensen, 2009). The school achieved success by creating an environment where expectations are high and implementing a 360-degree wrap-around service system. Pruess School’s wrap-around service included: partnership with University of California’s health care department. As a result of the partnership, students had access to medical care on a referral basis (Jensen, 2009). The wrap-around service also included an on-site nurse, resource specialist for students with special education individualized plans, speech therapist, audiometrist, private psychologist, qualified university tutors, and on-campus student internships (Jensen, 2009). In order for children to focus on academic achievement, the school must address issues that affect their social and emotional health (Jensen, 2009). The supportive environment at Pruess contributed to high achievement and high attendance rates (Jensen, 2009).

Data driven instruction

In addition to providing wrap-around, some successful schools are driven by data (Jensen, 2009). Sampit Elementary School, located in rural South Carolina regularly analyzed data from state and district assessments (Jensen, 2009). The Sampit faculty used the data to determine areas that needed improvement, identifying students who needed enrichment activities (Jensen, 2009). After developing and implementing data driven strategies, the faculty met to evaluate whether they met their goals (Jensen, 2009). In sum, Sampit frequently assessed the data related to student performance, but they also analyzed how well they have met the students’ needs (Jensen, 2009).
Leadership

A study conducted by Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009) concluded that there was a direct relationship between effective leadership and student achievement in three high-poverty, high-performing schools. The researchers gathered data by employing a qualitative case study in which they analyzed documents, interviewed faculty and staff, and conducted observations (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). Chenoweth (2007) also conducted a qualitative case study on 14 high-poverty, high-performing schools and also concluded that effective leadership has a direct impact on meeting minimum pass rates on state academic achievement tests. Effective leadership in both cases was defined as leaders who share leadership responsibilities, facilitate change, focused on instructional improvement, held high expectations, and formed community partnerships to leverage resources (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). Moreover, effective leaders were visible, established an atmosphere of respect, offered professional development, and were selective in hiring teaching staff (Chenoweth, 2007).

Effective leadership is also a significant element that contributed to the success of Granger High School in Washington State and Dayton Bluff Elementary in St. Paul, Minnesota (Parrett & Budge, 2009). Both schools moved from low-performing to high-performing. One explanation for success was that the leaders made difficult decisions about appropriating resources. When faced with budget constrictions, the leaders worked collaboratively with staff to ensure that the most important needs were met. Investigators visited four other high-poverty, high-performing schools in Boise, Idaho, in New York, a reservation in northern Idaho, and in Port Chester, New York (Parrett & Budge, 2009).
Leaders in all of the schools used data systems to direct their decision making. They also promoted caring relationships (Parrett & Budge, 2009).

Principals in the schools took the lead in making sure the schools were safe. For example, students in the Port Chester school were afraid to use the restroom because they thought they would be victimized in some way (Parrett & Budge, 2009). The principal took the lead in solving the problem by assigning school staff to monitor the bathrooms and hallways to ensure safety (Parrett & Budge, 2009).

**Culture of High Expectation**

A culture of high expectation continues to emerge in the research studies. Lindahl (2012) and Chenoweth (2007) both set out to determine if teachers’ expectations played a role. Both researchers employed qualitative case studies and engaged in open-ended interviews with staff to ascertain how faculty perceived their school environments and capabilities of their students. Their findings revealed that a culture of high expectation was a common characteristic of high-poverty, high-performing schools that participated in the research studies. Kannapel and Clements (2005) also found that teachers in high-poverty, high-performing schools did not have a negative perception of the students’ socioeconomic status (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). Instead of focusing on socioeconomic status, the teachers assessed their educational deficiencies and worked to improve students’ performance (Kannapel & Clements, 2005).

**Building Positive Relationships**

Another practice employed by some high-poverty schools that contribute to a 51% pass rate on state standardized achievement tests is positive student-teacher relationships (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). Researchers have employed qualitative case studies to
determine the relationship between faculty and students in high-poverty, high-performing districts and high-poverty, low-performing districts. Kannapel and Clements (2005) and Chenoweth (2007) have engaged in document analysis, conducted in-depth interviews with students, faculty, and staff, and observed faculty-student relationships to identify characteristics of high-poverty, high-performing schools that are not present in high-poverty, low-performing schools. Both research studies revealed that caring teachers is a characteristic of high-poverty, high-performing schools. Moreover, nurturing teachers is vital to student success (Blue & Cook, 2004).

Caring teachers can be considered social capital that reduces the probability of students dropping out and is necessary for student achievement (Blue & Cook, 2004). Other research also provided evidence that a positive student-teacher relationship will yield higher levels of student achievement than a conflicted relationship (Rimm-Kaufman, 2012). If students have a good rapport with teachers and receive positive reinforcement, students are more likely to trust teachers and become more engaged in learning (Rimm-Kaufman, 2012). When students are engaged in learning, it positively impacts academic performance (Rimm-Kaufman, 2012). Furthermore, a positive student-teacher relationship can result in more appropriate student behavior (Rimm-Kaufman, 2012).

It is also important for students to have positive relationships with one another (Jensen, 2009). Students who have a rapport and trusting relationship with one another have a higher achievement rate (Jensen, 2009). In order for students to build relationships, teachers and administrators must create an atmosphere where students feel
safe, appreciated, valued, and supported (Jensen, 2009). Cooperative learning is recommended to help establish positive peer relationships (Jensen, 2009).

Building positive relationships among staff is also paramount to student academic success (Jensen, 2009). Students are observant and can determine when teachers do not cooperate with one another (Jensen, 2009). Poor relationships among staff diminish the probability of high student achievement (Jensen, 2009). Jensen (2009) stated collaboration is essential to a successful school, which is characterized by agreeing on visions, goals, methods, and scoring rubrics. Strategies to build positive relationships included social outings unrelated to school, team building activities, and grade or content level teams (Jensen, 2009). High-poverty, high-performing schools build positive relationships with students’ families and the community. The Dayton Bluff School, a high-poverty, high-performing school, in St. Paul, Minnesota, partners with Amherst H. Wilder Foundation to provide students and families with a venue for recreational activities. Like some of the other high-poverty, high-performing schools discussed, they also provided access to a nurse practitioner, dentist, and social worker free of charge (Parrett & Budge, 2009). Providing these types of services displays the school’s willingness to seek out and promote positive relationships within the community (Parrett & Budge, 2009).

**Missing Information**

Although the first major research studies on high-poverty, high-performing schools date back to 1995, the number of subsequent studies is limited. The majority of the existing research focused on elementary schools. Although limited, existing research has revealed common practices of high-poverty, high-performing schools and the studies...
have been case studies limited to specific states. This study examined a high-poverty, high-performing secondary school.

Previous researchers of high-poverty, high-performing schools have encouraged future investigators to conduct research in schools and states that have not been studied (Chenoweth, 2007). Previous researchers recommended identifying practices of high-poverty, high-performing schools to aggregate the data (Chenoweth, 2007). Aggregating the data could lead to the formulation of a theory of effective practices on high-poverty, high-performing schools.

**Summary**

Increasing pass rates to 100% proficiency on state standardized academic achievement tests is an urgent matter for America’s schools, particularly, high-poverty schools. The goal of this study is to add to the body of existing research on practices contributing to the success of high-poverty, high-performing secondary schools. Research on high-poverty, high-performing secondary schools is scarce. The existing literature on high-poverty, high-performing schools is aligned with a sociocultural perspective, which is the rationale for using sociocultural perspective in this study.

Researchers have studied high-poverty, high-performing schools in the last decade and the findings on effective practices have varied. Although findings have varied, the consistent findings are that high-poverty, high-performing schools promote relationships with students, staff collaboration, positive climate, and high expectations. Wrap-around services were not a practice utilized in every high-poverty, high-performing school; however, many of the successful school did coordinate supportive services for students.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Restatement of Purpose

Debates concerning the reasons an achievement gap exists between high-poverty and low-poverty schools and education reform have occurred for decades. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to identify common practices in a single high-poverty, high-performing secondary school, as this is a case study design. The goal is to determine the practices contributing to the achievement of a pass rate of at least 51% on state standardized achievement tests.

Research Design

Merriam (2009) defined a case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40). A bounded system refers to a case that has boundaries. The boundaries limit the study to a specific place and time (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, the boundaries limit the number of potential participants who can be interviewed or observed during data collection (Merriam, 2003). A case study investigates a current phenomenon occurring within its real-life context (Creswell, 2013). Roberts (2010) further described a case study as research conducted in a real-life setting without manipulating the environment. The goal of case study research is to gain insight into meanings people associate with activities and events in the real world. Researchers employing case study research are open to whatever findings emerge from the data (Roberts, 2010).

Case studies include a single case or multiple cases (Creswell, 2013). The unit of analysis defines a case as a person, school, or a program (Merriam, 2009). The unit of analysis must be a bounded system to meet the criteria of a case study (Merriam, 2009).
A single case study approach was employed for the purpose of this study. The bounded system was a high-poverty, high-performing Midwestern high school. Focusing on a single phenomenon, researchers can identify factors that are characteristic of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The goal of this study was to identify practices of the selected high-poverty, high-performing school that contribute to student academic success. Merriam (2009) also posited that a qualitative case study is generally selected because it is the best approach for researchers seeking insight, discovery, and interpretation as opposed to hypothesis testing. Case studies also show special features, as they can be described as particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 2009). Case studies are particularistic because they focus on specific events, programs, phenomenon, or situations (Merriam, 2009). Case studies are descriptive because the findings are rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2009). Heuristic case studies further enlighten the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon examined (Merriam, 2009). Moreover, heuristic case studies allow the researcher to discover new information, extend experience, or confirm previously held knowledge on the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The information gained from a case study could lead to a hypothesis with implications for future research (Merriam, 2009).

Merriam (2009) posited case studies are ideal for applied fields of study such as education, social work, and administration. Employing the case study approach allows for an examination of a particular field’s processes, problems, and programs to improve practice (Merriam, 2009). Case studies have also shown to be effective for studying education innovations, evaluating programs, and examining educational policy, which made case study appropriate for identifying the effective practices of a selected high-
poverty, high-performing secondary school (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) pointed out, “case studies tend to spread the net for evidence widely” (p.46). Although the literature revealed consistent practices deemed effective in high-poverty, high-performing schools, there may be other effective practices employed by the selected school. Casting the net wide lends itself to discovering new information that could be missed using standard statistical or empirical methods (Merriam, 2009). The case study approach is also useful in capturing perception and interpretation, which was also a goal of this study.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine faculty perceptions of effective practices of a selected high-poverty, high-performing secondary school. A case study focuses on a single unit, which presents more of concern about generalizability than other research designs. “Erickson (1986) argues that since the general lies in the particular, what we learn in a particular case can be transferred to similar situations” (Merriam, 2009, p. 51). Merriam relayed Stake’s (2005) point, “it is the reader, not the researcher, who determines what can apply to his or her context” (Merriam, 2009, p. 51). Designing a qualitative case study requires that consideration be given to trustworthiness.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to the research findings matching reality (Merriam, 2009). Because research findings must be interpreted and translated, there is a concern about capturing the truth or reality (Merriam, 2009). Trustworthiness becomes a question when reporting qualitative findings (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) pointed to various strategies to increase trustworthiness in qualitative research findings. Member checks, an audit trail by the dissertation committee, and adequate engagement in the data were strategies used to increase trustworthiness.
A highly utilized strategy to ensure trustworthiness is member check also referred to as respondent validation (Merriam, 2009). When employing member checks, the researcher seeks feedback on the data collected from some participants to assess if any responses have been misinterpreted by the researcher (Merriam, 2009). When the researcher paraphrases the participants’ responses, the participants should be able to recognize their experiences. The method also helps in the identification of the researcher’s personal biases. The purpose is to make sure the researcher had an accurate interpretation of the participants’ responses.

To increase trustworthiness, member checking was used in this study. After each interview, the responses were interpreted and e-mailed to the participants. In addition, the transcripts of the interview were e-mailed to the participants. Participants were asked to review the transcripts and the researcher’s summary to identify errors and misinterpretations. Some participants failed to respond; however, 50% of the participants responded and indicated the interpretations were accurate. In a few cases, participants highlighted misspelling of names in the transcript.

An audit trail was also employed in the study. When used in qualitative studies, an audit trail provides a thorough description of methods used to collect the data (Merriam, 2009). Moreover, the researcher provides a rationale for developing categories and an explanation for decisions made during the process (Merriam, 2009). In this study, the audit trail provided details on the manner in which the study was conducted as well as details on the methods used to analyze the data. The researcher’s dissertation committee contributed to the audit trail to ensure trustworthiness in the study.
Sampling

Case studies involve two levels of sampling; the case and then the sample within the case (Merriam, 2009). Criterion sampling method was used to select the case and the sample within the case. The inclusion criterion for high-poverty, high-performing was a school wherein at least 51% of the student population was minority, 51% received free or reduced lunch and 51% met or exceeded state academic achievement standards.

To be included in the study, the participating school had to be a public school with an open enrollment policy. One high-poverty, high-performing secondary school in a Midwestern town was selected to participate in the study.

The criterion was selected based on knowledge gained from a review of the literature on high-poverty, high-performing schools. The literature revealed that the criteria for high-poverty and high-performance varied in each study. The criteria ranged from 51% to 90% of students on the free-reduced lunch program and high-performance also ranged from a 51% to 90% pass rate on state academic achievement tests for respective states. Some high-poverty schools were in rural areas and had an enrollment of less than 51% minority students. Other high-poverty schools were in urban areas with more than 51% of the student body minority. The inclusion for this study was at least 51% minority student enrollment.

Criterion sampling was also used to ensure all participants had experience working in the high-poverty, high-performing schools. Criterion sampling is primarily used when researchers seek to discover and gain an understanding from individuals who have the most experience with the unit of analysis (Merriam, 2009). In this study, participants’ criteria were a minimum of three years’ experience working in the selected school, and
possibility of a valid teacher, administrator, or support personnel license in the state of Indiana. Selecting participants with at least three years of experience ensured that they have a comprehensive understanding of the school. The participants’ experience in the selected school ranged from 3 to 15 years. One participant had three years of experience, and the remaining faculty had five years of experience or more.

**Sample size**

One high-poverty, high-performing school was selected as the case. A baseline of ten participants was selected; however, interviewing participants was terminated upon reaching theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation occurs when interviews are not yielding any new information from the participants (Creswell, 2013). Each new participant’s response echoes the previous participants’ response resulting in redundancy, which is an indication the researcher, has reached saturation (Creswell, 2013). Saturation was reached after interviewing ten participants.

**Data Collection**

Case studies do not require a specific method for data collection or data analysis (Merriam, 2009). Case study research allows for gathering data by conducting interviews, observations, and reviewing documents (Merriam, 2009). In this qualitative case study, the researcher conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews in the school setting. The interview questions focused on the faculty’s perceptions of the practices and organizational structures used to achieve a 51% or greater pass rate on state standardized achievement tests. The research questions presented to high-poverty, high-performing schools were open-ended and sought to gain thick rich data from the participants. The research questions allowed the researcher to gain insight into faculty’s perceptions about
the practices and structures utilized that have yielded success. In addition, the questions
guided participants to identify how the practices were implemented in the school. The
interview questions used for data collection is included in the Appendix.

Data collection occurred from October 2013 through November 2013. Ten faculty
members participated in the study. The participants included eight teachers, one social
worker, and one administrator. The participants selected the time, date, and location for
the interview. Six of the interviews were conducted in the teacher’s classroom during
their planning period. Three were conducted in conference rooms. The principal was
interviewed in his office. One to two interviews were conducted on a weekly basis. The
researcher recorded interviews by scripting and recording responses. The interviews
ranged from 12-40 minutes. In four instances, participants recalled more details after the
interview was completed and the audio recorder had been stopped. The researcher
continued to script the responses without the use of the recorder. The audio files were
forwarded to Rev.com, a professional transcription service. Rev.com provided verbatim
transcriptions. The participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts to
ensure accuracy and to elaborate on their responses.

The researcher gained access to a high-poverty, high-performing school by discussing
the possibility of conducting research with the principal during a visit to the school in
March 2013. The principal indicated an interest in participating in the study. In August
2013, the researcher made an appointment with the principal to engage in an in-depth
discussion about the research study. At the appointment, the principal was presented
with an invitation for the school to participate in the research study. Some school
administrators have the authority to decide if the school will participate while others may
have to seek approval from the district superintendent’s office. The principal was able to grant approval without seeking permission from the superintendent. The principal provided written consent. The signed invitation to participate was forwarded to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher and principal agreed data collection would begin in mid-September. School started in mid-August, and the principal stated mid-September would allow time for the school body to become adjusted to the new school year. As planned the researcher visited the principal in mid-September to start data collection. Teachers, administrators, and support staff with at least three years of experience in the school were invited to participate via e-mail. Participants were randomly selected from the pool of individuals who met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study. Participants were certified staff members with a minimum of three years of employment with the school.

**Bracketing**

The researcher for this study has worked in a high-poverty, low-performing school for approximately 15 years; four years as a teacher and 11 years as a social worker. The researcher does not believe that a student’s socioeconomic status dictates whether he or she passes or fails state standardized achievement tests. Furthermore, the researcher contends school success is ultimately dependent on the manner in which district leadership resolves the issues related to a lack of financial and instructional resources, which is a common problem in high-poverty, high-performing schools (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Effective leaders will not only address a lack of resources, but they will address inadequate faculty, poor infrastructure, and any other problems interfering with the schools’ success as well. In sum, the researcher postulates that financial and
educational resources along with effective district leadership are necessary for students to excel beyond 51% on state standardized achievement tests.

The existing literature reveals that there is not one practice that results in high-poverty, high-performing schools’ success as there are numerous practices that successful high-poverty schools implement to pass state standardized examinations. The researcher approached the study by bracketing the aforementioned beliefs to discover the practices that schools in the study have implemented to achieve success. The findings may not be aligned with the researcher’s beliefs on the high-poverty schools, and the findings are reported solely based on the information provided by the participants. As previously mentioned, the researcher employed member checking to verify the participants’ responses were interpreted correctly so that, the researcher did not intertwine personal viewpoints and experiences with high-poverty schools in the data finding section.

**Data Analysis**

Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) is an acceptable means to assist researchers in organizing data (Merriam, 2009). A common approach in data analysis in qualitative research is code-and-retrieve (Merriam, 2009). Coding refers to labeling passages of text according to content (Merriam, 2009). Retrieving provides a means to collect information from passages with similar labels (Merriam, 2009). CAQDAS works as an organization and categorizing tool and does not analyze the information for the researcher (2009). When using CAQDAS the researcher has to assign the codes and selects the information to align with the codes.

NVivo 10 qualitative software was used as the specific CAQDAS to assist in data analysis for this study. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by Rev.com, a
professional transcription service. Upon completing each interview, the audio recording was submitted to Rev.com. Rev.com typically provided written, verbatim transcripts within 24 hours. The researcher immediately reviewed the transcripts as soon as Rev.com completed them. The researcher completed one to two interviews per week which resulted in reviewing one to two transcripts per week. After reading and re-reading transcripts, the researcher summarized the data. The written transcript and the summary were e-mailed to the participants to determine if his or her perceptions were accurately captured by the researcher. The participant was asked to correct any misperceptions and elaborate on any response if they deemed it necessary.

Summarizing the first interview aided in developing preliminary codes. The data were read and re-read throughout the process. Throughout data analysis, new codes were added to the preliminary list. The researcher immersed herself in the data by reading and re-reading it to identify categories and patterns. Thus, themes emerged that identified common practices and organizational structures perceived by faculty as contributing to the school’s success.

**Ethical Considerations**

**Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

The topic was proposed and approved by the dissertation committee on June 19, 2013. After the dissertation committee approved the topic, an application was submitted to the IRB for approval. On July 30, 2014, the IRB approved the top under the “exempt” category, which means the project is exempt from federal policy for human subjects.
Informed Consent

The participants were informed of the purpose, procedures, and risks involved with the research study. Individuals who participated in the study were informed that participation was on a voluntary basis. Participants were also informed of the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time.

Confidentiality

Audio recording and transcripts of the interview as well as participants’ contact information, was safely stored on a password-protected computer. Once the data were analyzed and reviewed by the researcher’s dissertation committee, the tapes and transcriptions was destroyed by the researcher.

Summary

The study is a qualitative case study. The purpose of conducting the study was to identify common practices and organizational structures of the selected high-poverty, high-performing secondary school that contribute to achieving at least a 51% pass rate on state standardized achievement tests. The research questions guiding the study were:

- What are the practices and organizational structures that faculty perceives contributes to high-poverty schools achieving at least a 51% pass rate on state standardized achievement tests?
- What strategies are used to implement the perceived effective practices and organizational structures in a high-poverty, high-performing school?

One high-poverty, high-performing school in a mid-western town was selected to participate. Ten participants, including teachers, an administrator, and a support staff member were selected from the school. The data was collected through face-to-face
interviews. Member checking, adequate engagements with the data, and an audit trail were used to ensure the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretation of the interview responses. The data were transcribed by a professional service. NVivo 10 qualitative computer software was used to organize and code the data.

Chapter four will provide information on the results of this study. Before presenting the results, the purpose will be restated. Information on the Indiana academic achievement standards will be presented as well as a description of the school under study.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

It is important to include information about the school to gain a full understanding of the research findings. The chapter will be organized by (a) restating the purpose of the study, (b) reviewing the methodology, (c) reviewing the data analysis, (d) providing a brief discussion on Indiana’s state academic achievement standards, (e) describing the school, and (f) presenting the research findings.

Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify common practices of a high-poverty, high-performing secondary school that faculty perceives contributed to achieving at least a 51% pass rate on state standardized achievement tests. The selected school received at least an 80% pass rate on the math and English components of the ECA. The researcher’s goal was to discover what practices the selected school employed to achieve at least an 80% pass rate. The duration of the study was 2 months. As a result of identifying faculty perceptions contributing to the selected school achieving at least an 80% pass rate on state standardized achievement tests, the findings could aid low-performing schools reach high levels of success. The findings of this study present the faculty’s perceptions of the practices that result in the school’s success.

Review of the Methodology

A qualitative case study approach was used to collect data. The researcher relied upon participant interviews and field notes to gain insight into the perceptions of faculty members in the high-poverty, high-performing school. The interview questions were open ended and guided participants in providing rich, thick data. The overarching research questions undergirding the study are:
What are the practices and organizational structures that faculty perceives contributes to high-poverty schools achieving at least a 51% pass rate on state standardized achievement tests?

What strategies are used to implement the perceived effective practices and organizational structures in a high-poverty, high-performing school?

The researcher interviewed ten participants, which included eight teachers, one administrator, and one social worker. The interviews began in September 2013 through November 2013. The interviews ranged from 12 to 40 minutes. The researcher recorded interviews by scripting and audio recording responses. In four instances, participants recalled more details after the interview was completed and the audio recorder had been stopped. The researcher continued to script the responses without the use of the audio recorder. The audio files were forwarded to Rev.com, a professional transcription service.

**Review of Data Analysis Procedures**

Upon completing the interviews, the audio files were forwarded to Rev.com for transcription. Rev.com provided verbatim transcriptions within 24 hours. The written transcript and the summary were e-mailed to the participants to determine if his or her perceptions were accurately captured by the researcher. Summarizing the first interview aided in developing preliminary codes. The researcher immersed herself in the data by reading and re-reading it to identify categories and patterns, which resulted in the emergence of themes that revealed common practices and organizational structures perceived by faculty as contributing to the school’s success.
Indiana State Academic Achievement Standards

The state of Indiana requires school districts to administer the End of Course Assessment (ECA), the state standardized achievement test, in the areas of English and Math. Students are administered the math component in grade 9. The English section is administered in grade 10. In 2010, Indiana State Board of Education changed the labels for school performance from the terms Exemplary, Commendable, Academic Progress, Academic Watch, and Academic Probation to letter grades A, B, C, D, and F. The rationale for changing the labels was to increase education stakeholders’ understanding of the school performance. The State Department of Education postulated the previous labels did not provide a clear picture of school performance. The A-F model incorporates student academic growth on state standardized achievement tests, graduates rates, and college and career readiness as measures of success (Indiana Department of Education, 2013). The grades indicate the schools have made adequate or inadequate progress toward reaching 100% proficiency on state achievement assessments in 2013-2014 school year. The letter grades were implemented in the 2011-2012 school year.

Profile of the Selected School

The selected school was a public secondary school with enrollment open to students residing in the district. The school was located in a culturally diverse Midwest town in Indiana. The school’s student population was comprised of 81.8% minority students and of the 81.8%, 55.1% were African American. The remaining 18.3% of students were Caucasian American. The school has been referred to as a “minority majority” school, and 51.1% of the student body was enrolled in the free-reduced lunch program.
In 2013, 85% of students in the selected school passed the Math ECA and 81% passed the English ECA. The graduation rate is 90%. The selected school has received a number of awards and recognition for academic excellence. The International Center for Leadership in Education identified the school as a model for high-poverty schools. The school won an award from the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color. U.S. News and World Report bestowed the bronze rating upon the selected school, recognizing it as one of the nation’s best high schools in the country. During the course of the research study, the principal of the selected school was honored as Principal of the Year by the state of Indiana for leading the school to an “A” rating on the state’s A-F rating system for three consecutive years.

The students excelled on the ECA exams; however, they have not always reached 80%-85% pass rates on state standardized achievement tests. In 2010, 46% of students passed the English component and 55% passed the math. Between 2010 and 2013, the selected school increased student performance by 35% on the English component and 30% on the math component. Conducting research at the selected high-poverty, high-performing secondary school was necessary to determine the practices and organizational structures used to reach such high levels of success.

The student population during the study was 2,468. The school employed one building principal and six assistant principals. The instructional staff consisted of 156 teachers, which included two media specialists, one social worker, one diversity coordinator, and eight full-time counselors. The selected school was governed by a school board of trustees and a superintendent. In June, 2013, the superintendent of 20
years announced his retirement, which prompted the school district to appoint a new superintendent. The newly appointed superintendent was an internal candidate.

Approximately 85% of the staff has earned master’s degrees. The selected school also employed one director of security, one resource officer, eight security officers, one full-time and one part-time nurse, twenty-three secretaries, five teacher aides, and a study hall assistant. The school also employed an athletic director and an assistant athletic director.

In the 2009-2010 school year, a freshman center was added to the northeast corner of the school. The new facility had four computer labs and two cafeterias. A lecture hall was also included to accommodate community events. In 2012, the school implemented an In-School Suspension program, which resulted in hiring two additional teachers, two behavior therapists, and two aides. The school operated on a trimester model and had five 70-minute periods.

The selected school had a diverse population of students. While the majority of the students were African American, the remaining student body was comprised of Hispanic, Multi-race, and Caucasian students. Sixty percent of the students were enrolled on the free and reduced lunch program, and most of the remaining 40% resided in middle class homes. In sum, there was diversity in culture and socioeconomic background among the students. The student body was diverse; however, the faculty and staff was approximately 97% Caucasian American. The school received approximately $8,259 per pupil from the state department of education, which is $2,586 less than the state average per pupil expenditure. Title I was also a funding source for the school.

The school was not always a minority majority school. There has been a major demographic shift in the past 20 years. In 1988, the demographics were 1,192 Caucasian,
16 African Americans, 12 Asians, 67 Hispanics, and 4 American Indians. By 2006, minority students had become the majority with 1083 African Americans, 980 Caucasian Americans, 30 Asians, 242 Hispanic, and 4 American Indians. The African American population continues to increase while the Caucasian population continues to decrease. The Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian population has remained constant over the years. The administration and staff embraced diversity and considered the differences an advantage rather than a problem.

The school campus was nestled in a residential neighborhood. The campus was clean and well-manicured. The building was a two-story brick structure and is well maintained. Visitors to the school were buzzed in by a security attendant. Upon entry, visitors check-in at the security desk. Visitors were required to present picture identification, print and sign their name in the registry book, and include arrival time. The security attendant also provided the visitor with a nametag and assisted him or her with directions. The researcher visited the school approximately ten times and encountered three different security attendants upon entering the building. The security attendants were warm, friendly, and helpful. There were also three posters on display at the front entrance. The posters highlighted various awards the school had won. The entry-way also has a banner, which highlights the school as rated “A+” by the Indiana State Department of Education. The hallways were clean with carpeted floors throughout the building.

Results

This chapter presents the results of interviews with ten participants of the selected high-poverty, high-performing school. The participants were asked eight open ended
questions. Responses to interview questions and common themes will be discussed in this section. Ten major themes that emerged from the interviews were organized into the following categories; adopted strategies, behavior strategies, clear and high expectations, cultural competence, changes to organizational structures, effective leadership, pedagogical strategies, positive school climate, adequate resources, and community support. Sub-themes also emerged from the data.

The themes and sub-themes will be presented in the next section. Participants did not perceive that one practice alone resulted in high-performance. Many of the participants pointed to multiple practices working in concert as responsible for the school’s success. The themes are not presented in any particular order. Sub-themes are categorized with their associated theme.

**Theme One: Adopted Strategies**

Adopted strategies emerged as a major theme. Sub-themes included adopting strategies from the International Center for Leadership, building relationships, and adopting practices from a model school in Brockton, MA.

**Sub-Theme: The International Center for Leadership in Education**

Fifty percent of the participants attributed the school’s success to adopting strategies from the International Center for Leadership approximately six or seven years ago. Participants shared that the organization promotes the Rigor, Relevance, and Relationship framework created by Bill Dagget. Based on information obtained from participant interviews, Bill Dagget posited schools should design a rigorous curriculum with real world applications. Bill Dagget also promoted the importance of building relationships with students. Participants explained the selected school adopted the Rigor, Relevance,
Relationship framework, but decided to add Resiliency. Resiliency was defined as helping students to understand that they may fail or face challenges, but it is possible to overcome the obstacles to achieve success. One participant stated at-risk students wait for teachers to give up on them, and they are often discouraged by problems associated with poverty. The participant believed students need to understand, “we all get hit, we all get knocked down, we all hit the ground, but we can achieve success.” The faculty referred to Bill Dagget’s model as the 4-R framework.

Sub-Theme: Building Relationships with Students

Research findings revealed the former superintendent of the school district favored the Rigor, Relevance, Relationship, and Resilience framework and heavily promoted it throughout the school district. The superintendent especially focused on the relationship component. A few participants stated that during every district meeting the superintendent took the opportunity to promote the concept of building relationships with children. One participant further stated that as a result of the superintendent’s emphasis on relationships, it became the school philosophy.

Seventy percent of participants discussed the importance of building relationships with students. The principal discussed the importance of recruiting teachers who have the capacity to build relationships with children. The principal further stated, “I have never met a teacher who didn’t know their content area. You got to have people who can attract kids.” The principal further stated, “Great leaders, great teachers find a way to make a connection. There’s no learning that will ever take place unless there is a connection.” The principal indicated that the school was one of the only “minority majority” schools in the country to have success. He stated one of the major reasons for
their success is that the teachers build relationships with children. Another participant stated that one of the problems with public education is that people not involved in education believe schools should be run like businesses. The participant stated it is important to have relationships with children and that relationship building is the cornerstone of the school’s academic success. The participant stated, “you get to know what makes them tick and then you can educate them.”

A few participants offered methods for building relationships with students. One participant shared the following anecdote. A student walked in the classroom dressed in nursing scrubs. The participant deducted the student was a nursing student at the Career Center. The participant asked the student, “Are you going into the medical field?” The participant explained that starting the conversation conveys the teacher cares about the student as a person and not just about tests or grades. The participant explained that these gestures have resulted in students interacting in a positive manner. Another participant discussed the use of icebreakers. In addition to using icebreakers, the participant shares basic information about himself with the students. The participant is a native resident of the community and an alumnus of the school. The participant shares that information to relate to the students. Another participant stated that talking with students and finding out common interest also aids in building relationships.

**Sub-theme: Model School in Brockton, MA**

Research findings in this study revealed the International Center for Leadership in Education hosts a Model Schools Conference each summer. According to the participants, the purpose of the Model Schools Conference is to highlight the achievement and successful practices of high-poverty schools. Participants stated the
purpose is also to present high-poverty, high-performing schools so they may be a resource for other high-poverty schools. Findings from this study revealed the high-poverty, high-performing school selected for the study sends a group of teachers to the conference to glean from the model schools.

Participants pointed to the adoption of practices from a high-poverty, high-performing school in Brockton, Massachusetts, a school from the Model Schools Conference, as contributing to their success. Participants noted the school in Brockton, is a 90/90/90 school. Prior to Brockton achieving 90/90/90 status, their graduation rate was in the 30% range, and their pass rates on state standardized achievement tests was in the 20% range. One participant said it was difficult to accept school improvement models presented by other schools because the demographics were usually different. According to participants, the school in Brockton had similar demographics to the school participating in this study. In addition, the school in Brockton was able to present data that revealed their practices worked. As a result, the administration from the school involved in this study invited a team from Brockton to assist them.

Brockton’s team visited the selected school and observed, evaluated, and offered recommendations to the faculty. The team focused on discipline and literacy. The Brockton team recommended resolving the literacy problem. According to the participant, Brockton’s team explained that as a result of solving the literacy problem, they were able to solve problems in other content areas, specifically, math. According to one participant, Brockton’s team pointed out many students experience difficulty with math exams because they cannot read story problems. The findings of this study revealed that Brockton’s team did not simply tell the faculty of the school in this study to focus on
literacy; the team provided a framework that taught the faculty how to incorporate it into the curriculum. Following the recommendations and training from the Brockton team, the selected school began incorporating literacy initiatives. Consequently, teachers from every content area including physical education have incorporated literacy into classroom activities.

In summarizing his position on adopting strategies form the International Center for Leadership, the model school in Brockton, Massachusetts, and the Rigor, Relevance, Relationship, and Resiliency Model, the principal stated that in order to be academically successful a school must establish a few core beliefs and practices and be willing to borrow successful strategies from others. He further stated, “You got to find some core beliefs and I believe that’s what we’ve done. We’ve found some things that work and we focus on them. Be in class every day, teach your tail off, make a difference in the kid’s life, be there for them, build relationships with them, teach relevant material, and make it rigorous so that your kids move on to the next level.”

**Theme Two: Behavior Strategies**

Sixty percent of participants reported effective implementation of behavior strategies contributed to high student performance at the high-poverty, high-performing school in this study. Sixty percent of the participants who discussed school-wide behavior strategies did not necessarily focus on the same strategies. The sub-themes that emerged revealed the following behavior strategies:

- Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies (PBIS) program;
- Intervention which includes parents, school social worker, counselors, and behavior specialist;
• Strict behavior policies;
• In-School Suspension Program.

**Sub-Theme: Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies (PBIS)**

Sixty percent of participants discussed the PBIS program. Participants described PBIS as a program designed to celebrate positive behavior and achievements in the school environment. One participant noted faculty often focuses on the 10%-15% of students with behavior problems. As a result, the remaining 85% of students feel as though they are not doing well because they are never recognized by faculty. Another participant stated students are used to negative reinforcement and PBIS promotes positive reinforcement. One participant noted that faculty implemented a point system to promote positive reinforcement. Students accumulate points for abiding by school and classroom rules; however, they lose points for misbehaving, being tardy, or exhibiting any unacceptable behavior.

In addition to accumulating points for positive behavior, administration implemented the use of “Gotcha Cards.” One of the participants stated administration randomly selects students once a week over the intercommunication system. When the student’s name is called by the principal, the student’s teacher determines if the selected pupil meets the following criteria (a) arrives on time to the class period in which his or her name was selected by the principal, (b) the student wears the required lanyard with identification badge. If the teacher determines the selected student meets the criteria, the teacher issues the student a “Gotcha Card.” The student redeems the “Gotcha Card” with the principal in exchange for a prize. The participant stated the “Gotcha Card” is a strategy to “catch” students displaying the expected behavior rather than focusing on
negative behavior. Moreover, students are given awards from teachers and faculty to show appreciation for small deeds. For example, when the participant and the researcher were walking to the conference room for an interview, the participant was carrying a few crates filled with folders. A student noticed the participant carrying crates and offered to help him. The participant stated the gesture would be rewarded with a “Gotcha Card.”

According to another participant, there are many activities such as scenarios and scripts included in the PBIS program. A scenario may include a typical problem that may occur in the hallway and students discuss appropriate methods to address the problem. Along with PBIS activities, a participant highlighted similar activities for bullying prevention. The participant revealed teachers often show videos on bullying. Teachers typically stop the video at various intervals and facilitate discussions on the content of the video. The discussions center on pointing out the inappropriate behavior and its effect on the victim. Posters are displayed throughout the building reminding students of appropriate behavior.

**Sub-Theme: Parents and Support Personnel Intervention**

Twenty percent of participants reported that contacting parents and interventions by the social worker, behavior specialist, and counselors help to alleviate behavior problems. One participant discussed having problems with a student who was failing the course. The student was also verbally aggressive and confrontational. The participant stated a question as simple as, “Where is your I.D.?” could lead to an escalated situation. The instructor stated that instead of confronting the student in front of the class about inappropriate behavior, a more subtle one-on-one approach was used. Moreover, the participant contacted the parent and discovered the student was residing in a foster care
placement. The participant involved the social worker, counselor, and behavior specialist to help address the student’s behavior. As a result, the student’s behavior improved and the course grade improved from an F to a C. The participant disclosed the student will occasionally respond negatively, but overall the teacher has developed a positive trusting student-teacher relationship.

**Sub-theme: Strict Behavior Policies**

Although the school promoted positive reinforcement, twenty percent of the participants discussed the administration’s strict behavior policies and the consequences for failing to conform to them. One participant referenced a civility policy. There are consequences for students who fail to follow the rules and do not respond to the positive rewards. For example, if students argue in the hallway, administration may assign them to In-School Suspension (ISS). One participant stated the strict policies help to keep behavior under control.

**Sub-theme: In-School Suspension**

The In-School Suspension program was established approximately two years ago. One participant stated the school had a history of excessive out-of school suspension for infractions such as, arguing and dress code violations. In-School Suspension was established to decrease the number of out-of-school suspensions while providing a consequence to inappropriate behavior. The In-School Suspension program has a teacher and a behavior specialist. Students are required to complete class assignments in In-School Suspension.

Along with developing behavior intervention strategies to reduce behavior infractions and out of school suspensions, eighty percent of the participants stated setting clear and
High behavior and academic expectations contribute to the school achieving at least an 80% pass rate on state academic achievement tests.

**Theme Three: Clear and High Expectations**

Eighty percent of the participants mentioned that the faculty of the selected school set high expectations for students. Participants contend it is important to set high expectations. One of the participants stated students will live up to the expectation. If the faculty set a low expectation, the student will not work beyond the expectation. The participant also stated the faculty expects students to do what is asked of them and further stated that is the consistent tone from faculty. The high expectations are clearly communicated on the first day of school and the first day for transfer students. Another participant stated expectations are conveyed each day from the administration and staff. The participant further stated the school conveys the message “failure is not an option.” Research findings from this study revealed the school makes an effort to drill that point to students and it is reinforced by the display of posters on the corridor walls. One participant summed up the expectations as, be at school every day; be in class when the bell rings; and take an active role in learning.

Thirty percent of participants reported the expectations are not only clear and high for students, but administration also sets high expectations for faculty. One participant stated that because administration holds high expectations of staff, it trickles down to teachers having high expectations of students. One of the teachers interviewed shared an effective approach to discuss expectations. The teacher writes the school’s accomplishments on the board and explains to students that the achievements did not happen by accident. The teacher further outlines to the class the contributions students and teachers have made to
reach such high levels of success and informs the students that the same is expected of them. A few teachers discussed setting clear and high expectations in their respective classrooms by writing classroom learning goals on the board each day.

Findings revealed the faculty does not allow students to become discouraged by their background and history. For example, a student’s relative was killed as a result of violence. The student became withdrawn and failed to fulfill school and class requirements. The participant talked with the student and referred him to the social worker, but also told the student it was not a reason to give up on his goals. The participant relayed the faculty members’ goal is to convey to students that they must meet expectations despite their circumstances. Another participant stated the following,

We try to develop a mindset that you can be successful. You will graduate. You will be a productive citizen. You will make something out of your life regardless of where you came from, regardless of what your plight may be.

Another participant stated the expectations are also high for students with disabilities. The participant stated students can often supersede the expectation of the individual education plan if there is less emphasis placed on the disability. The participant stated they do not over emphasize the individual education plan to avoid students “crutching” on it.

The participant reported teachers are aware of students with disabilities and individual education plans, and they are readily available to provide students with assistance and accommodations. The participant was clear that if a student is struggling and needs help, the teacher will provide it. If a student wants to take advantage of helpful resources, the student is permitted to do so. Consequently, the participant reported the strategy of
placing less emphasis on a student’s disability has resulted in students with disabilities meeting high expectations.

**Theme Four: Cultural Competence**

Seventy percent of participants perceived cultural competence as playing a large role in achieving 85% pass rate on the math and 81% pass rate on the English component of the Indiana state standardized achievement tests. The participants’ stated embracing diversity made a difference in student and teacher performance

**Sub-theme: Embracing Diversity**

Forty percent of participants indicated that adjusting to a dramatic shift in student demographics has also led to the high pass rate on state achievement tests. One participant noted the faculty is middle-class to upper-middle class, and a few other participants pointed out the majority of faculty are Caucasian American. The student body is predominantly minority, and the selected school is often referred to as a “minority majority” school. The majority of the students live in poverty as defined by the poverty guidelines established by the federal government. As previously mentioned, Caucasian Americans were the majority until 2006. In 2006, minorities became the majority. Participants reported it was initially difficult to adjust to the changing demographic. During the time of the change, the previous superintendent of 20 years stated the demographic may change, but the students were still theirs, and they have an obligation to teach them.

Although the superintendent promoted embracing the school’s diversity, students and teachers had difficulty adjusting to the change. A participant noted the Caucasian students who remained in the school were not accepting of the overwhelming number of
minority students entering the school, and their sentiments were often negatively conveyed to minority students. Many of the minority students met the eligibility criteria for free and reduced lunch, which indicated they were living in poverty. Teachers were not accustomed to dealing with many of the challenges related to students in poverty. One participant stated the students were not prepared to meet the high behavior or academic expectations at the selected school because many of them had transferred from high-poverty, low-performing schools. While parents of minority students were optimistic that children would receive a better education at the selected school, many of the students did not view enrollment at the school through the same lens as their parents. Participants reported the students often believed the teachers were “out to get them.”

The selected high-poverty, high-performing school took action to address the problems related to the demographic shift. The goal was to educate students and faculty to become more culturally competent. One participant credited the principal for being a unifying force. The participant stated the principal was positive about diversity and the changing demographics. One participant reported the staff was given the book *The Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby Payne to aid them in understanding the students so they can connect with them. A couple of participants discussed the administration added a diversity coordinator. The diversity coordinator provides training to staff. New staff members must complete a full day of diversity training. The participant contended the training has helped to address biases, which may have resulted in faculty having low expectation of students. Because issues surrounding race and socioeconomic background are consistently discussed by students, the diversity coordinator also organizes school-wide activities to address and prevent problems related
to diversity. Another participant indicated the administration does not focus on diversity in a negative manner and went on to report that the word “diversity” is typically only used in interviews, as they refer to it as the “advantage.” One participant stated embracing diversity has not only occurred at the selected school. The school district has also embraced diversity.

As a result of embracing and understanding diversity, participants stated teachers at the selected school treat students as individuals. Teachers do not label or place a societal judgment on students because of their socioeconomic background or culture. Teachers convey this message to students: “It’s not where you come from; it’s where you are going.” One participate stated diversity is not used as an excuse in their school; instead, they celebrate it. Moreover, the faculty empowers students. The staff wants the students to feel proud of their background and culture.

Still another participant stated that the selected school provided safety nets for students. The participant stated that prior to 2006, the demographic was comprised of predominantly affluent Caucasian students. If the students struggled academically, the parents were able to seek tutoring from private companies such as Sylvan Learning Center. The participant mentioned that private tutoring companies are expensive. Now, the school consists of students living below the poverty line, and the participant stated that families usually cannot afford private tutors. The participant stated, “If they’re going to get help it’s going to have to be here.” The participant mentioned a number of safety nets built into the selected school that required changes in the schools’ organizational structures.
Theme Five: Organizational Structure

Eighty percent of participants discussed some aspect of changes to organizational structure as contributing to the school’s success. The trimester model, Freshmen Center, Alternative School, summer school, and the assignment recovery room were all referenced as structures leading to success.

Sub-Theme: Trimester Model

According to participants that discussed the trimester, the model increases the potential for student success. The trimester allows students to take more classes than a traditional semester model. The traditional two-semester model allows students to take six credits a semester, resulting in twelve credits a year. The trimester model allows students to take five classes per semester resulting in students earning fifteen credits per year. One participant explained the model provides students who may have failed courses their first year of high school to make up courses within a regular school year. The safety net was built in because the faculty noticed many students have difficulty during their freshmen year due to maturity or other challenges in their lives. Most parents of the students enrolled in the high-poverty, high-performing schools do not have the financial resources to pay for students to make up credits; therefore, the trimester model helps student make up courses.

Sub-Theme: Freshmen Center

The administration also opened the Freshmen Center for similar reasons. One participant explained the freshman year is the most important year statistically. If a student falls behind in his or her freshman year, he or she is more likely to drop out of school. The Freshmen Center offers more structure than the high school, allowing
students to adapt without “throwing them in the fire right away.” The Freshman Center was designed to acclimate students to the expectations at the high school level. Along with the Freshmen Center, the administration established a freshmen mentoring program. Upper-classmen serve as mentors for freshmen. The upper-classmen mentors are trained by faculty who supervise the program. The goal of the program is to provide freshmen with individuals who can serve as role models “look out” for them, reinforce school expectations, and help in general.

Sub-Theme: The Alternative School

The Alternative School was mentioned by 80% of the participants. The Alternative School was established fifteen years ago to provide assistance to students who experience problems academically and behaviorally. One of the participants stated the former superintendent recognized day school was not for everyone; however, the superintendent also understood the students may not be ready for adult education. As a result, the Alternative School for high school students was instituted.

The Alternative School currently operates from 3pm-6pm. It is staffed with teachers from the high school. They are compensated by receiving an extra stipend. The Alternative School was also staffed with a director, behavior specialists, a social worker, and special education teachers. One participant noted behaviors such as bringing weapons, drugs, or bullying peers are not negotiable infractions. Students who engaged in those behaviors are generally expelled from school. There are instances where students have engaged in extreme behavior, and they are assigned to Alternative School. Students who create chaos in the school environment are also assigned to the Alternative School. Seniors who are short on credits are also allowed to attend Alternative School to
recover credits at no cost. Seniors in need of credit recovery attend day school as well as the Alternative School in the evening. In addition to extreme behavior and academic deficiencies, students with attendance issues are assigned to Alternative School and referred to the county juvenile probation department.

The principal postulated that every school needs an alternative source of education. He posited that a school cannot run when chaos exists; however, schools cannot simply “throw everyone on the street, either.” The principal further stated that based on his research, 10% of all students need an alternative source of education. The district recuperated roughly 825 credits last year as a result of the Alternative School.

**Sub-Theme: Summer School and Assignment Recovery Room**

One participant mentioned that summer school contributes to the success of the school. Summer school allows for remediation and credit recovery. Another participant highlighted the assignment recovery room. The assignment recovery room was implemented to address students who do not complete homework assignments. Students who fail to complete homework assignments are assigned to lunch detention. After students eat lunch, they report to the assignment recovery room to complete missing homework assignments.

**Theme Six: Effective Leadership**

Many participants credited the administration for adjusting to the demographic shift, providing support for behavior and academic issues, and changes to the organizational structures. One hundred percent of participants perceived effective leadership as playing a role in the school achieving 85% math and 81% English pass rates on Indiana’s state standardized achievement tests. Although 100% of the participants cited administration
as a factor contributing to their success rate on Indiana’s state achievement tests, the participants pointed to different aspects of leadership.

The principal was described as a charismatic leader, who has the ability to gain support and buy-in from staff. The principal was also described as a leader who has the ability to rally the troops and is a cheerleader for students and staff. One participant described the principal as fair and positive. Participants agreed that the principal is supportive of teachers especially regarding discipline issues. Another participant stated the principal is visible in the hallways throughout the day. If security is called to a class or if the principal hears a problem over the radio transceiver, the principal is at the forefront of addressing the problem. He arrives at the classroom along with security to address the problem.

As a result of demographic changes and higher expectations set forth by No Child Left Behind (2001), the faculty decided to make changes to the curriculum. One participant stated being able to admit problems related to achieving adequate yearly progress is another factor contributing to the school’s success. The participant stated the school deals with problems “head on”. The administration does not pretend problems do not exist. Consequently, faculty put forth effort to resolve problems hindering success. One participant reported that often times; administrators adopt programs and initiatives just for the sake of it. The participant stated administrators sometime adopt programs simply to maintain the appearance of progress. The participant went on to state that administrators in the selected school do not fall into implementing programs without considering the feasibility of them. The principal further allows faculty to have input on decisions. Administration along with faculty realigned the curriculum. The school
administrators empowered teachers to adopt a curriculum that would best suit the student needs. Principals collaborated with teachers to create and implement a new curriculum. The principal stated, “The teachers are experts.” He further discussed the importance of empowering teachers so they realize their talents. As a result, the principal usually commissions faculty to facilitate professional development sessions instead of conducting them himself or inviting outside agencies. One participant stated the principal wants the students and staff to succeed. The participant also added that the principal’s leadership style fosters team spirit.

Many of the participants also perceived the principal’s messages as contributing to the school’s high achievement on Indiana state standardized achievement tests. One participant highlighted that when major incidents occur, such as a fight, the principal uses the incident as a teachable moment. He may address students on the intercommunication system, saying some students will not be with them due to the incident. He will further point out that the students still can be successful, but the student will experience a setback. The principal often says, “You’ll make a split second decision that’ll affect you the rest of your life.” The participant stated teaching life lessons help students realize that inappropriate actions can have a negative impact on their futures. As previously mentioned, the principal is supportive of behavior and academic issues that arise in the school. According to the participants, the principal is directly involved in addressing inappropriate behavior; however, he is not quick to give up on students. The principal encourages teachers with this message: “Don’t give up on them for one more day.” Participants report this is a statement the principal makes daily.
One participant pointed to the administration establishing a mentoring program for new teachers. The administration established a team of veteran teachers to serve as mentors for new teachers. The mentors video record new teachers as they facilitate classroom activities and lessons. The mentors critically analyze the video to identify new teachers’ strengths and weaknesses. The mentees participate by collaborating with mentors to develop more effective strategies to address academic and behavior concerns in the class.

One participant focused on the support offered by administration, particularly, during his first few years of teaching. The participant said there were times he called on administration more than he probably should have to assist with behavior problems. The instructor relayed the administration would remove the student from the class for the entire class period and address the behavior. In these instances, the administration offered suggestions to the teacher that would assist in managing classroom behavior. The participant discussed the administration exhibiting a great deal of patience with beginning teachers and providing guidance. Administrators do not limit monitoring to new teachers, they also monitor veteran teachers. The principal’s philosophy was what gets monitored, gets done. As the researcher walked the building with the administrator, the administrator would peek into classrooms and in a non-threatening tone, greet the class, ask how things were going, and ask what the objective was for the day. The students and teachers appeared to welcome the administrator and responded to the questions in a positive manner.
Theme Seven: Pedagogical Strategies

Pedagogical strategies were referenced by 100% of the participants as a factor that contributed to success on Indiana’s standardized achievement tests. The following strategies were mentioned: reading, writing, and literacy initiatives, math initiatives, response to intervention program, redesigning the curriculum, common core assessments, collaborative learning, and remediation.

Sub-Theme: Reading, Writing, and Literacy Initiatives

Upon following the recommendation of the school in Brockton, MA, the selected school emphasized literacy. Not only did the selected school incorporate a reading initiative, but they also included a writing initiative. The reading and writing initiative requires teachers irrespective of subject area to incorporate reading and writing into their lessons. One participant discussed the utilization of Fast Forward and Scholastic Reading Program. The participant stated the programs are computer-based games used to strengthen memory and phonic recognition. Furthermore, the programs improve reading and comprehension. The participant discussed using the program 30 minutes a day. Administration monitors teachers to assure the initiatives are implemented in each class. One participant included an intense focus on vocabulary as a strategy that resulted in an improvement on the English component of the ECA state academic achievement test. Teachers in every subject area have added the word of the day. A few teachers referenced the importance of sharing the learning objectives with students. One participant stated students are required to write the learning objective in their notebooks. They are also required to summarize the objectives in their own words and write questions concerning the objectives.
A few participants noted that the use of graphic organizers and interactive notebooks has also helped increase the pass rate on the ECA state achievement tests. One participant described interactive notebooks as a strategy wherein students write information presented by teachers on the right side of the notebook. The students summarize the teachers’ information in their own words on the left side. The participant stated that it helps students study the information at home, and it improves student learning.

**Sub-Theme: Math Initiatives**

To improve math scores, each department incorporated graph analysis in each class. One participant noted after implementing the graph analysis, students’ scores on the ECA skyrocketed. The approach required every teacher to incorporate graph analysis in the lesson plans, which ultimately made a significant difference in the ECA test scores. The selected school also established an afterschool math tutoring program. Students enrolled in the advanced placement program volunteer to help students who need extra assistance in math. Although the students are the primary tutors for the program, teachers also volunteer in the program.

**Sub-Theme: Response to Intervention (RTI)**

Twenty percent of the participants discussed the response to intervention (RTI) program. The RTI program is designed to provide additional academic assistance to students who are struggling with coursework. The students involved in the RTI process are generally students who are being considered for a special education evaluation. One participant stated the RTI program helps faculty differentiate between students who really need help and those who are simply “lazy.” Another participant stated the RTI process
works as follows. First, a student may be suspected of having a disability. The concern is then expressed to teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors. A team is assembled to provide strategies that will help the student excel in class. Strategies include granting the student extra time on tests and additional assistance in the classroom setting. Sometimes the interventions are sufficient to help the low-performing students excel. In other cases, the interventions do not increase student performance, which is when the special education evaluation occurs. The special education evaluation determines if the student needs an individual education plan to address deficiencies.

**Sub-Theme: Redesigning the Curriculum**

Thirty percent of the participants discussed redesigning the curriculum as a means to increasing pass rates on the ECA, Indiana’s state standardized achievement tests. The participant stated the curriculum had not been changed in years. The administrators promoted faculty collaboration on designing a new curriculum, so they worked together to create and implement the new curriculum. The curriculum was designed to prepare students for the ECA. The first step taken by the teachers was to review the school’s previous test scores on the Indiana state achievement tests. Analyzing past data helped faculty determine students’ strengths and weaknesses, which allowed them to developed curriculum instruction based on data. The participant indicated the faculty had not been in the practice of reviewing data. The participant stated instruction was a “free for all” wherein each teacher implemented strategies perceived to be effective in increasing student performance. Until recently, there was not a common plan to improve instruction. The participant further stated that functioning without data did not work for the school.
Sub-Theme: Common Core Assessments

In addition to redesigning the curriculum, teacher collaboration resulted in the decision to adopt common core assessments. Participants explained that each department covers the same information and uses the same quizzes, tests, and final exams. Teachers also sought to improve consistency in evaluating student work. Two instructors in each department grade the students’ work. One participant stated the process aided in determining student growth as sometimes grades may have been inflated due to extra credit opportunities.

Sub-Theme: Collaborative Learning

One participant credited collaborative learning with contributing to the school’s success. The teacher presents the content and facilitates students’ understanding of the material. Once students understand the information, they assemble in small groups. The students discuss the information as a group. The students are required to create skits or draw pictures to demonstrate an understanding of the material. The collaborative learning process typically ends with a presentation to the class.

Sub-Theme: Remediation

One participant stated many teachers re-test students. Teachers remediate students who have difficulty with the content of the test. There are some teachers who provide remediation in the morning before the start of school. The participant referred to morning tutoring as “going above and beyond”. After remediating a student who demonstrates problems grasping the material, the teacher allows the student to re-test. The participant further stated the provision of remediation opportunities has led to an increase in student achievement on the Indiana state standardized tests.
**Sub-Theme: Multicultural Education**

One participant contended African American culture is not typically represented in public education curriculums. The participant further postulated information is usually presented from a white, middle-class perspective in public schools. The participant believed the school under study does a better job than most schools in presenting instruction from a multicultural perspective. The participant’s postulation was evident in another participant’s English class.

The participant extended an impromptu invitation to observe her class. The researcher took advantage of the opportunity. The class was an advanced placement English course. Twenty students were in the class at the time of observation. Six students were African American, two Hispanic American, and the remaining 12 were Caucasian American. Culture was infused into the lesson. The objective of the lesson centered on developing a topic, identifying static characters and symbolism. The teacher selected the play *Fences* by August Wilson who is a bi-racial playwright. Wilson produced *Fences* in 1983. The play is set in the 1950s, and it examines the African American experience, socioeconomic status, and race relations. A Socratic seminar approach was employed to discuss the play. The discussion focused on the literary components but students also discussed the race related issues. Student respectfully took turns engaging in the discussion.

**Theme Eight: Positive School Climate**

One hundred percent of the participants discussed the selected school’s positive environment. Participants cited positive staff relationships, motivation of students, caring faculty, and recognition of student achievement as contributors to the school’s success.
Participants also shared that adopting the philosophy that student achievement is everyone’s responsibility contributes to the school’s success.

Positive relationships among staff were mentioned by 70% of the participants. Participants stated the staff works well together. One participant mentioned that visitors from other school systems have observed faculty meetings at the high-poverty, high-performing school selected for this study. The observers are generally impressed with the staff relationships. Participants stated staff conducts themselves professionally at staff meetings, and the environment is not tense. One participant described the meetings as follows:

People were enjoying being at work. The staff wasn’t sitting there in an adversarial relationship with the Administration. There wasn’t a bunch of arguing going on. We didn’t agree on everything. Staff was able to speak their mind and not be afraid that it was going to come back on them.

The participant postulated when teachers are happy, it filters to the classroom. Another participant maintained the teachers are not territorial, and they help one another. Teachers are comfortable approaching teachers of other content areas for lesson plans. Teachers share teaching resources and strategies with one another. Teachers also collaborate to resolve issues that arise. One participant stated many teachers stay after school to collaborate. He stated, “It is constant collaboration.”

**Theme Nine: Adequate Resources**

Twenty percent of participants discussed how resources play a role in student success. Both participants stated the selected school had excellent building facilities. One participant stated that every classroom has a computer and telephone for the teacher as
well as a large screen television. The building also has a Freshmen Center, two cafeterias, two libraries, and numerous computer labs. One of the participants acknowledged the following:

Brick and mortar does not teach students and bricks and mortar do not solve all your problems, but it does send a message to the community that you care about their kids. It also says, we’re serious here. We care enough that we’re going to invest an enormous amount of money in giving your child the best resources we can.

When asked if the resources were purchased out of regular funding, the participant stated the district is one of the lowest funded by the state. The participant stated, “We do the best with what we have.” The participant disclosed an awareness of technology grants offered by the state, but was not sure if the district applied for any of them. The other participant was not aware of the school securing resources beyond normal allocations from the state.

**Theme Ten: Community Support**

One participant perceived that community involvement contributes to the school’s high student performance. The participant stated business, parents, and community members volunteer by aiding in instruction or extracurricular activities. The participant further stated, “The more the community works together, the more structured the school will be.”

**Summary**

Ten themes emerged from the research study. The themes are: (a) adopted strategies, (b) behavior strategies, (c) clear and high expectations, (d) cultural competence, (e)
changes to organizational structure, (f) effective leadership, (g) pedagogical strategies, (h) positive school climate, (i) adequate resources, and (j) community support. Twenty sub-themes emerged from the research. The following diagram highlights themes and sub-themes from the research study.

Figure 1. Themes and Sub-Themes Yielding High Performance
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY

This final chapter presents a summary of the study, which includes an overview of the problem, purpose statement, research questions, review of data collection, review of data analysis, and major findings. The chapter will present findings related to the literature. Conclusions will be discussed. They include implications for practice, specifically in high-poverty, low-performing schools. Recommendations for future research studies will be discussed.

Restatement of the Purpose

The purpose of the study was to identify common practices and organizational structures that yield a 51% or greater pass rate on state standardized achievement tests. The study centered on the following research questions:

- What are the practices and organizational structures that faculty perceives contributes to high-poverty schools achieving at least a 51% pass rate on state standardized achievement tests?
- What strategies are used to implement the perceived effective practices and organizational structures in a high-poverty, high-performing school?

Review of Data Collection

A case study method was employed to seek answers to the research questions. Interviews were utilized to gain faculty’s perspective of effective practices for increasing student academic performance in a selected high-poverty, high-performing secondary school. Member checking, adequate engagement in the data, and audit trails were used to increase quality, thus adding rigor to the study.
The study was conducted over a two month time period, which included seven visits to the school. Ten interviews were conducted over seven visits. On four of the visits, the researcher interviewed one participant. On three of the visits, the researcher interviewed two participants. Five interviews were conducted in classrooms, two were held in offices, and three in conference rooms. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by Rev.com, a professional transcription service. The researcher used NVivo 10 qualitative software to assist in organizing, sorting, and coding the data.

**Review of Data Analysis**

Data analysis began upon receiving the first transcript from Rev.com. Codes were not created until reviewing the transcript from the first interview. Preliminary codes were created after a review of transcripts of the first interview, and additional codes were added throughout data analysis. The data were read numerous times in search of patterns and categories. After data collection was complete, the researcher could clearly identify themes and sub-themes that revealed faculty perceptions of common practices and organizational structures contributing to the school success.

**Major Findings**

A thorough examination of the data from this study found that some of the faculty perceptions contributing to an 85% math and 81% English pass rate on the End of Course Assessment are aligned with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. Vygotsky (1978) postulated student learning is engrained in social interactions and occurs as children engage with people, objects, and events in their environment. Vygotsky (1978) further stated connections must be made to students’ culture and social environment for them to learn. The faculty perceived that their focus on understanding students’ socioeconomic
background and culture has increased student achievement. Faculty postulated that teaching relevant material and building positive relationships with students were also among the practices contributing to the school’s success.

In addition to determining if cultural competence and building relationships with students positively impacted student achievement, this study sought to understand the general practices faculty perceived contributed to student success on the End of Course Assessment, Indiana state achievement test. Faculty perceived multiple practices are responsible for increasing student scores on the End of Course Assessment. The multiple practices are organized under the following 10 themes:

- Strategies from the International Center for Leadership in Education (Rigor, Relevance, Relationship, and Resiliency framework);
- Behavior Strategies;
- Clear and High Expectations;
- Cultural Competence;
- Organizational Structure;
- Effective Leadership
- Pedagogical Strategies
- Positive School Climate
- Adequate Resources;
- Community Support.

The final question guiding the study sought to identify how practices were implemented in the successful school. There were multiple practices perceived by faculty that contributes to the school’s success and, each practice is implemented in a
different way. Chapter four provided a discussion on implementation methods for various practices. The findings revealed administration investigated new practices for feasibility and sought input from staff before adopting strategies. The faculty also collaborated with faculty to implement practices. In sum, collaboration among staff and administration yielded successful implementation of the various practices employed at the high-poverty, high-performing school selected for this study.

**Findings Related to Literature**

This study stands apart from most studies because it examined a high-poverty, high-performing secondary school. The majority of studies on high-poverty, high-performing schools have focused on elementary schools. Currently, research on secondary schools is limited. This study did not focus solely on practices employed by high-poverty, high-performing schools as most other studies. This study also sought to identify how practices were implemented in the selected high-poverty, high-performing school. Moreover, another goal of the study that differed from other studies was the examination of cultural competence and student achievement.

In spite of the fact that the research questions that undergirded this study were different from other studies, the findings were similar to other studies with a few exceptions. Findings from this study that aligned with aggregated data from existing research studies are as follow:

- Rigorous Curriculum;
- High Expectations;
- Community Support;
- Effective Leadership;
• Similar Pedagogical Strategies;
• Positive School Climate;
• Resources
• Building positive relationships

After a review of literature included in this study on high-poverty, high-performing schools, only two studies point to building relationships with students as a practice employed by high-poverty, high-performing school. Kannapel and Clements (2005) and Jensen (2009) are the researchers who found that building positive relationships with students contributed to the success of high-poverty, high-performing schools. Because 70% of participants for this study perceived the school-wide effort to build relationships with students as the hallmark to the school’s success, building relationships was highlighted in this section.

The selected high-poverty, high-performing school implemented school wide initiatives that focused on teaching students resiliency and relevant material, which has not been highlighted in other research studies on high-poverty, high-performing schools. The selected school adopted Bill Dagget’s model, Rigor, Relevance, and Relationship framework. The selected school added Resilience to the framework. The faculty posited students from low socioeconomic backgrounds face many obstacles that can hinder their progress; therefore, the faculty determined it was necessary to teach students skills that will help them achieve academic success despite home and environmental problems. The findings revealed teaching relevant material increases student engagement in classroom activities.
In addition, the trimester model was an organizational structure faculty in this study perceived contributed to an increase in student performance on the Indiana state standardized achievement tests. The trimester model allows students more opportunities for remediation and credit recovery.

Another finding in this study relates to managing student behavior. Schools are generally faced with behavior problems. Some schools experience more extreme problems than others. Nonetheless, there was only one study that focused on behavior modification as an effective practice in the existing research on high-poverty, high-performing school. Angelis and Wilcox’s (2011) research findings revealed Westbury and Utica Middle Schools implemented an Alternative School to modify student behavior. Angelis and Wilcox (2011) relayed the faculty at Westbury and Utica Middle School perceived that the establishment of an Alternative School contributed to improved test scores on state standardized achievement tests.

The findings in this study revealed an Alternative School was a factor contributing to the success of the high-poverty, high-performing high school. The principal stated, “Every school needs an Alternative School.” He further postulated, “10% of a high-poverty school’s student body needs an alternate source of education.” The high-poverty, high-performing school established an Alternative School to address maladaptive behavior in the school environment. Seventy percent of the participants in this study perceived the Alternative School aided in increasing student scores on the ECA, Indiana’s state standardized achievement tests. The Alternative School provides a highly structured environment for students with extreme behavior problems. Consequently, students with extreme behavior problems do not interfere with their
learning or the learning of others. The Alternative School affords students an opportunity
to participate in remediation and credit recovery, which participants stated results in
increased performance on the Indiana state standardized achievement tests, as well as a
spike in the graduation rate.

In addition to establishing an Alternative School, faculty perceived the establishment
of the Freshmen Center and transitioning as catalysts for increased student performance
on the Indiana state standardized achievement tests, which has not been identified in
previous research on high-poverty, high-performing schools. The Freshmen Center
acclimates students to their new environment by providing mentors and more structure
than the building wing serving grades 10-12. The freshmen wing employs a behavior
specialist to help students with the transition.

Previous studies did not reveal school-wide behavior modification practices as a factor
contributing to high-poverty, high-performing school’s success. Alternative School
manages behavior for students who consistently exhibit extreme behaviors. Existing
research findings do not address behavior modification methods utilized on a daily basis
to manage student behavior that may not warrant placement in the Alternative School.
This study revealed an intense focus on school-wide behavior intervention strategies as
contributors to the school’s success.

The school in this study implemented the following behavior modification programs
as practices yielding success in high-poverty schools: Positive Behavior Intervention
Strategy (PBIS), In-School Suspension, and the use of social workers, behavior
specialists, and counselors to intervene in behavior problems. The philosophy behind the
establishment of behavior strategies was that learning cannot occur in a chaotic
environment. The faculty makes a concerted effort to manage behavior in the traditional school setting before assigning a student to the Alternative School. The Alternative School is considered a last resort on the behavior modification continuum in the high-poverty, high-performing school.

Another finding of this study absent in other research on high-poverty, high-performing schools is an emphasis on embracing diversity. A diversity coordinator was hired primarily to help faculty and students with race relations. The diversity coordinator also helped teachers and students understand and become more accepting of cultures different from their own. One participant explained that teachers typically live a middle-class lifestyle and do not understand or are far removed from problems associated with poverty. The diversity coordinator had the task of helping teachers understand the aggregated challenges often faced by students from a low socioeconomic background. Faculty was encouraged to read *The Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby Payne.

As a result of diversity education, participants stated they were able to make connections with students. One participant acknowledged that gaining insight into the lives of students living in poverty prevented him from allowing biases to cause him to hold low expectations of students. The faculty does not view diversity as a problem or use it as an excuse not to educate students; they view diversity as an advantage to their school and students. Seventy percent of participants perceived that embracing diversity has contributed to their school’s increase in performance on the Indiana state achievement tests.
Although the research on high-poverty, high-performing schools does not highlight the importance of understanding diversity, Vygotsky (1978) indicated the importance of making a connection with children to improve performance. The participants in the study never referenced Vygotsky in their interviews or in informal discussions and neither did the researcher; however, findings from the study are aligned with Vygotsky (1978) regarding the importance of building relationships with students. Findings of this study further revealed that faculty perceives understanding students’ background and cultures as paramount to building relationships and making connections with them. Participants’ views were aligned with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory which can be summed up with a statement from a participant: “No significant learning will occur until a connection is made with the student.”

Findings from the research study were aligned with previous studies; however, findings revealed new information. The following figure highlights practices discovered from this research study that were not present in existing studies.
Figure 2. Orange color denotes findings that emerged from this research study that were not present in existing studies.
Surprise

Roberts (2010) said surprises are unexpected outcomes of a study. Surprises can occur in various aspects of a study, such as in the sample, data collection, results, or participant responses (Roberts, 2010). Two surprises surfaced during this study. One surprise occurred when a participant extended an invitation for the researcher to observe a class. The researcher accepted the invitation and observed the class. The researcher observed a multicultural-infused lesson, which is a practice highlighted by another participant as a factor contributing to the school’s success. One participant discussed multicultural-infused lessons, and the researcher observed its implementation in a different participant’s class.

Another surprise occurred when the researcher discovered there were many opportunities for observation. The invitation to participate in the research study extended to the school suggested meeting with participants before or after school. The researcher further suggested scheduling interviews during lunch and planning periods for participants who could not meet before or after school. Based on the recommendation to meet during the aforementioned times, the researcher did not expect to be in a position to observe daily operations. Merriam (2009) discussed four types of observations: (a) complete participant, (b) participant as observer, (c) observer as participant, and (d) complete observer. The researcher is this study was a complete observer. The method was utilized when the researcher navigated through the building to meet with participants, waited in the main office and the entry way for participants, and walked with the principal throughout the building as he monitored students and staff. Data was collected by observing the attitudes, interactions, and behavior of students and staff,
building facilities, and school climate. The researcher recorded observations in field notes. The researcher made a simple note of observations while at the school site, and completed detailed notes about the observation after leaving the site.

**Conclusions**

**Implications for Action**

Previous researchers concluded there is no one strategy, “silver bullet,” or “magic bullet” that yields success for high-poverty, high-performing schools. That conclusion is also appropriate for this study. The aggregated results from this study reveal multiple practices organized under 10 themes that faculty perceived contributed to increasing performance on the Indiana state standardized achievement tests. Many of the findings from this study are aligned with findings from existing studies; however, there are some exceptions.

Based on the findings of this research study, high-poverty, high-performing secondary schools seeking to improve their schools should consider the findings of existing studies that were also found in this study, such as designing a rigorous curriculum, setting high expectations, securing community support, hiring effective leaders, creating a positive climate, and utilizing various pedagogical strategies, specifically related to improving literacy. Faculty perceptions revealed solving the literacy problems aided in improving student performance in other content areas.

Findings based on faculty perceptions of the school in this study are practices for high-poverty school leaders to consider. Schools should look to adopt Bill Dagget’s framework, Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships, as well as Resiliency, which was added by the school that participated in this study. In order to build relationships, faculty in
high-poverty schools must make an effort to understand students’ cultures, which includes their race and socioeconomic backgrounds.

To address behavior problems that impede learning and the instructional process, schools need a plan. As the principal indicated in the study, suspension cannot always be the answer for students who consistently disrupt the learning process, especially for minor infractions because they miss out on instruction. On the other hand, he stated students with extreme behavior problems cannot be allowed to interfere with the learning of others. High-poverty schools facing challenges with students’ behavior that interferes with instruction should consider implementing the following school wide programs: Positive Behavior Intervention Strategy Program (PBIS), In-School Suspension, and an Alternative School or similar initiatives.

NCLB focuses on teacher ineffectiveness as the reason for low student achievement. Aggregated results from existing research studies along with findings from this study point to effective leadership practices as a factor contributing to a high-poverty, high-performing school’s success. One hundred percent of the participants in this study credited effective administration with the school’s success. The administration in this study was described as fair, supportive, strong, charismatic, involved in discipline and curriculum planning, visible, motivational, and respectful of students and staff. The administration includes faculty in decision making and is able to “rally the troops” and gain “buy-in” from staff on initiatives. Aggregated findings from previous studies on high-poverty, high-performing schools that highlighted effective leadership skills are aligned with the leadership skills described by the faculty in this study. School leaders and prospective school leaders can use findings that point to effective leadership as a
model for developing or refining their leadership skills. Human resources departments in high-poverty, high-performing districts should consider the skills associated with effective leadership when hiring administrators.

Schools of education that prepare teachers and administrators should also consider the practices found in this study. Schools of education need to design curriculum that will prepare effective teachers and administrators for high-poverty school districts. Teacher education programs could also benefit from a curriculum based on Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There are few studies focused on high-poverty, high-performing secondary schools. Future researchers should seek to investigate more high-poverty, high-performing secondary schools. Future researchers should also include observations in data collection to gain more in-depth knowledge on how strategies and methods are implemented on a daily basis. Observations would also increase the rigor of future studies.

Results of this study have implications for high-poverty, low-performing public school stakeholders throughout the United States, which includes administrators, legislators, and human resources department across the country. Nonetheless, future researchers should consider identifying and studying other high-poverty, high-performing schools in Indiana. The data from this study and other studies conducted in Indiana could be aggregated to identify common practices and organizational structures that have increased performance on state standardized achievement tests, specifically on the End of Course Assessment (ECA), Indiana’s State Academic Achievement Test.
References


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Appendix A

Dear ________________,

My name is Tara T. Colby, and I am a doctoral student in the College of Arts and Sciences Department at Creighton University in Omaha, NE. I am conducting a research study to fulfill the requirements of my degree in Interdisciplinary Education Leadership.

The purpose of this study is to identify common practices present in high poverty schools whose demographics include at least 51% minority students, at least 51% receive free or reduced lunch, and at least 51% pass state standardized achievement test in their respective state. You are invited to participate in the research study because XXXX High School meets the aforementioned criteria. Moreover, XXXX High School has been recognized by U.S. News and World Report as one of the top public high schools in the state and nation.

If your school agrees to participate, you will be asked to assist by providing school e-mail addresses and access to faculty school mailboxes. I would also request a private room to conduct interviews. The participants will be asked to participate in one face to face session. The first session will consist of individual interviews that take approximately 90 minutes. The participants will be asked questions about practices employed by XXXX School that result in success on the state standardized achievement test and the implementation of the practices. The researcher may follow-up with participants after the interview to ensure the researcher’s interpretation of the participants responses are aligned with their experiences. If you agree to participate, I would need permission to meet with the participants on site before and after school. Moreover, I would also request permission to meet with participants on their lunch or planning period for individuals who cannot meet before or after school.

The individual interviews will be recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. Audio recordings and transcripts of the interview will be safely stored on a password protected computer. Participants will be assigned a number to maintain confidentiality. Once the data has been analyzed the tapes and transcripts will be destroyed by the researcher. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the participants’ identity will not be revealed to anyone. The study does not pose any risk to participants.

XXXX school’s participation in the study is completely voluntary. Although the school may not directly benefit from participating in the study, the hope is that others in the field of education will benefit from learning about practices employed by XXXX that has led to high achievement. Participants may withdraw from the study at any time, and may decide not to answer uncomfortable questions without any negative consequences.

Thank you for your consideration. I will contact you within a week to inquire if you are willing to participate in the study. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me XXXX. If you have questions about research subjects’ rights, please contact the Creighton University Institutional Review Board at 402-280-2126.

With kind regards,

Tara T. Colby, Graduate Student
Email: Taracolby@Creigheton.edu
Appendix B

Informed Consent

Study Title: Faculty Perceptions of High Poverty High Performing Schools

My name is Tara T. Colby, and I am a doctoral student in the College of Arts and Sciences Department at Creighton University in Omaha, NE. I am conducting a research study to fulfill the requirements of my degree in Interdisciplinary Education Leadership.

The purpose of this study is to identify common practices present in high poverty schools, which results in at least a 51% pass rate on the state standardized achievement test.

You have been invited to participate in the research study because your school has been recognized as a high-poverty, high-performing school. You will be asked to engage in one face-to-face session and a focus group at an agreed upon time. You will be asked questions about practices employed by the school that result in success on the state standardized achievement test and the implementation of the practices. I may follow-up with participants after the interview to share summaries of your responses to ensure my interpretations are aligned with your experiences.

The individual interviews will be recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. Audio recordings and transcripts of the interview will be safely stored on a password protected computer. Once the data has been analyzed the tapes and transcriptions will be destroyed by the researcher. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed to anyone. You will be assigned a number prior to starting the interview. The researcher will use your number rather than name during transcription and data analysis.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. Although you may not directly benefit from participating in the study, the hope is that others in the education field will benefit from learning about practices employed in your school that has led to high achievement. You may withdraw from the study at any time. Moreover, you may decide not to answer uncomfortable questions without any negative consequences.

____________________________________________________  _______________________
Participant Signature                                                                                             Date
Interview Protocol: Faculty Perceptions of High Poverty High Performing Schools

Time of Interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer: Tara T. Colby
Interviewee:
Position of Interviewee:
(Briefly describe the project. Include statements of appreciation and introduction. Such as:
Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this research project on _______. I want to remind you that your comments will remain confidential and anonymous. Have them sign the consent form. Let them know they can take a break at any time and that they can ask you if they have any questions, etc.)

Questions:

1. What is your role at XXXX High School?

2. How long have you worked at XXXX High School?

3. Describe XXXX High School?
4. What has been your experience at XXXX High School?

5. What is different about XXXX High School?

6. How has the school structure influenced student learning and achieving at least a 51% pass rate on state standardized achievement test?
7. What are the practices employed at XXXX High School that result in high student achievement?

8. If there is something more you’d like to add about XXXX that I have not asked please describe that for me.