Teachers' and Administrators' Perceptions and Experiences of Best Practices for Success in High-Poverty Schools

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LYNN UNIVERSITY
Boca Raton, Florida

TEACHERS’ AND ADMINISTRATORS’
PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF BEST PRACTICES
FOR SUCCESS IN HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS

CHARLOTTE J. HAYES

A DISSERTATION
Submitted to the Faculty of the Ross College of Education
in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership
with a Global Perspective

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TEACHERS' AND ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF BEST PRACTICES FOR SUCCESS IN HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS

by Hayes, Charlotte J., Ph. D.

Lynn University
2003

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' and Administrators' Perceptions and Experiences of Best Practices for Success in High-Poverty Schools

by Charlotte J. Hayes

Two high-poverty secondary school teachers and administrators in South Florida participated in this research. This dual-case study examined administrators' and teachers' perceptions of the challenges, successes, and school features essential to promote students' academic success in a high-poverty school as they correspond with best practices identified in educational literature. School 1 is a high-poverty school with a Florida school grade of an F. School 2 is a high-poverty school with a Florida school grade of C.

Teachers and administrators filled out a demographic questionnaire describing their educational, professional, and ethnic backgrounds. They responded to a Likert-like scale rating the importance levels of items identified as best practices in the literature in successful programs in high-poverty schools. Additionally, the participants rated the identified essential school features of best practice from successful high poverty schools in terms of how satisfied they were that the feature was successfully in place in their respective schools. The researcher conducted interviews with both the administrators and teachers at School 1 and School 2 to identify the participants' experiences and perceptions of challenges, successes and essential features that promote student academic success. This research clustered the perceptions for reoccurring themes and phrases to analyze information for similarities.
and differences indicating those features that may be critical for success in high-poverty schools.

Findings indicated that the best practices utilizing inclusive and responsive techniques with students was most prominent on the minds of educators, posing a success, challenge, and critical feature for both schools. Further analysis of survey and interview data revealed that School 1, the F-graded institution, was focused on student-centered techniques while School 2, the C-graded institution was more focused on student-teacher relations and creating a safe and supportive learning environment.

Based on the findings, recommendations for further research include an ethnographic research study to better inform teacher, administrators and counselors how to effectively engage students through explication of their various daily life experiences that affect their learning, and a larger, comparative, mixed-method study with similar questions between similar schools, and unlimited, time money, and resources to provide decision makers with more useful data. Practices that would be useful for practicing educators include cultural immersion activities for teachers in high-poverty areas, such as internships or summer institutes, and increased communication among staff and students.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Virginia Genevieve Girard-Seder. She passed away in October 1993. I would have never accomplished this endeavor if she had not instilled in me the value of an education.

She always supported any educational aspiration I wished to pursue, and encouraged me to challenge myself. She gave my family and me her unconditional love. Achieving this goal is due to her wish for me to never be satisfied and to continue learning.
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The completion of this endeavor would have been impossible without the support of numerous contributors. The author wishes to express her appreciation to the members of her Dissertation Committee, Dr. Cindy Skaruppa, Chair; Dr. Adria Karle, and Dr. Leah Kinniburgh. In addition, Dr. Richard Cohen, Dr. William Leary, Dr. Cheryl Serrano, and Dr. Carole Warshaw for their encouragement and support.

The author wants to express her gratitude to the following:

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

The advantage of American global economic and political dominance has come at a high social and human cost, especially regarding the education and welfare of her youth (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). In 1993, nearly one in every five children under the age of 18 lived in poverty (Leidenfrost, 1993). By 2002, nearly one in every four children under the age of 18 lived in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2002). Twenty-three percent of children in the United States live in poverty; no other industrial nation comes close to this figure (Bassuk, Browne, and Buckner, 1996). The United States has a much higher incidence of child poverty than other Western nations, and the percentage of impoverished children in the population has continued to increase during the past two decades (Cohen, 1993).

Kentucky, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and New Jersey have in their state constitutions a provision that mandates that children of poverty have a constitutional right to an adequate education (Morgan, Cohen, & Hershkoff, 1995). Mandating school attendance draws attention to the fact that each state has the constitutional objective to provide an adequate education to all students (Morgan et al., 1995). Educational policymakers mandate school accountability that is meant to ensure equity in education for students of high-poverty schools (Morgan et al., 1995). These large numbers of children and youth living in poverty in the United States face severe economic and social consequences from the failure to obtain appropriate education in our schools (Children’s Defense Fund, 1998; Thompson, 1992). The rise in the number of children
in poverty has contributed to making our nation’s classrooms more diverse than ever before (Pellino, 2002). The numbers of children in poverty makes both teaching and learning more challenging (Pellino, 2002). Students are considered a minority or special population group, not because of their skin color, religious affiliation, or cultural beliefs, but rather because of the lack of educational opportunities and support historically made available to them (Rojewski & Miller, 1991). This increased number of minority students with special needs in the general school populace is greater than at any time in our nation’s history (Maddy-Bernstein & Rojewski, 1992).

The nation’s demographic changes affect the current and future student population (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). The increasing number of culturally diverse students in K-12 classrooms makes it imperative for practitioners to develop educational approaches that best serve these students [Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE), 2001].

Poverty data presents a significant way to appraise the nation’s well being. Poor people in the United States are too diverse to be characterized by one dimension. Hence, several perspectives of the extent of poverty relative to school age children are presented.

- Young children are more likely to be poor than any other age group. The poverty rate for children under age three was about 80% higher than the rate for adults or the elderly in 2000. The poverty rate for young children is also significantly higher than the poverty rates for older children and continues to represent a disturbing picture of young child poverty in the United States (U. S. Census Bureau, 2002).
Overall, the reading achievement gap between the highest-poverty and low-poverty schools increased from a 27-point gap in 1988 to a 40-point gap in 1999. Similarly, the mathematics achievement gap increased from a 20-point gap in 1986 to a 29-point gap in 1999.

Data indicates that a large percentage of students living in poverty filling our schools are minorities. The educational system’s failure to address the culture of high-poverty students may be the reason students in high-poverty schools have not been academically successful (Hunter, 1991). The majority of educators are White and subscribe to the values and norms of their cultural heritage, which the school system was designed to serve (Roosa et al., 2002).

The reality of the minority experience in schools in the U.S. is different from popular belief that all people are treated equally (Shannon & Escamilla, 1999). The truth is that minorities are not suffering because of their ethnic background, but suffering from the educational system’s failure in high-poverty schools (Shannon & Escamilla, 1999). Children of poverty generally achieve at lower levels than children of middle and upper classes (Pellino, 2002). It is important to recognize that educating children in high-poverty schools will remain a challenge for educators, but it does not have to be a problem (Pellino, 2002). The first step in a plan for reaching minority students with special needs would be to dispel the nationalistic perspective that views minority cultures and languages as potential threats to a united society (Shannon & Escamilla, 1999). Society created schools to operate in ways that meet past goals and expectations. The solution depends on modern society creating ways for schools to meet present goals and expectations for all of the nation’s youth (Richardson & Colfer, 1990). The priority in the
Nearly 40% of all children under age three lived in poor or nearly poor families in 2000. In addition to the 2.1 million young children who lived in poverty in 2000, another 2.6 million children under age three lived in near poverty (in families with incomes below 200% of the poverty line—the threshold for eligibility for the Medicaid and State Child Health Insurance (SCHIP) programs in many states) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

The percentage of public school students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch has increased steadily through the past decade, by more than 7% on the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) compiles available educational information on schools, teachers, and students, allowing analysis of student achievement relative to the poverty level of public schools proportioned to the percentage of students on free or reduced-price lunch. The Condition of Education (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002) averages scores of students in public schools by the percentage of students in the school eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The averages show a difference in student achievement in high and low poverty schools regardless of whether or not the individual student was eligible for the subsidized lunch (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The average score of students in schools with more than 50% of their students eligible for the school lunch program was lower than those in schools with less than 25% or fewer eligible. In contrast to the recent state assessment data, longer-term trends in NAEP scores depict a widening achievement gap between high- and low-poverty schools from the late 1980s to 1999 (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002).
reformation of schools is to recognize that true educational equality and equity is inseparable; school must reach all students in our schools (Goodlad, 1984).

Anthropologists, linguists, and cross-cultural specialists have analyzed the dominant cultural themes in the United States and have identified major values that seem to guide the behavior of the American people (Crane, 1994; Alexander & Siedman, 1991; Munch & Smelser, 1992; Kuper, 1999). The fact that not all cultural themes and values in the United States are consistent with the dominant cultural themes may help to explain some of the conflict that Americans have regularly experienced, both as individuals, as an educational system, and as a nation (Hunter, 1991). Although academic and intellectual circles are aware of differences in cultural themes within the country, their policy action demonstrates a strong resistance to attempt to explain aspects of academic behaviors in cultural terms (Hunter, 1991).

Teachers need to tune in to the culture of poverty and be sensitive to the vast array of needs that children of poverty bring to the classroom (Pellino, 2002). A good education is often the only means of breaking the cycle of poverty for poor children (Pellino, 2002).

First enacted in 1965 as a “War on Poverty” program, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) [P. L. 103-382] now provides funds system-wide for supports and additional resources for schools to improve learning for students at risk of educational failure (U. S. Dept of Education, 2002). Funding for Title I Part A, expressed in constant FY 2001 dollars, rose from $7.1 billion in FY 1994 to $8.6 billion in FY 2001 (a 21% increase), while total funding for elementary secondary education
programs rose from $16.2 billion to $27.8 billion, a 72% increase (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Title I funds are predominantly used at the elementary level. Overall, secondary schools received 15% of Title I funds, about half as much as their share of the nation's low-income students (33%). Secondary schools are less likely to receive Title I funds (29%, compared with 67% of elementary schools), and those secondary schools that do receive Title I funds tended to receive smaller allocations than elementary schools ($372 vs. $495 per low-income student, respectively, in 1997-98).

Definition of Terms:

1. **Household Income** is the sum of money income received in a calendar year by all household members 15 years old or older, including members not related to the householder (U. S. Census, 2002).

2. **Below Poverty** classification applies to families if their total household income was less than the poverty threshold specified for the applicable family size, age of householder, and number of related children under 18 present (U. S. Census, 2002).

3. **Poor** is an applicable term if the total income of a person’s family is less than the threshold appropriate for that family (U. S. Census, 2002).

4. **At Risk** children are children who come from poor families, families with limited English proficiency, families with low literacy, the children of migrant agriculture workers, and children who are neglected or delinquent (U. S. Dept. of Education, 2002).
5. **High-Poverty School:** Any school at which 50% or more of the students are receiving free or reduced-price lunch (Council for Educational Change, 2003).

6. **Typical School** 30-50% of students receiving free or reduced-priced lunch (Council for Educational Change, 2003).

7. **Best Practices:** A term which amounts to mean “Doing it Right,” which includes common strengths and strategies that help students achieve regardless of other challenges such as free and reduced-priced lunch, and/or limited English proficient students (Council for Educational Change, 2003).

8. **Title I** enacted in 1965 as a “War on Poverty” program, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) [P. L. 103-382] now provides funds system-wide for supports and additional resources for schools to improve learning for students at risk of educational failure (U. S. Dept of Education, 2002).

9. **Poverty Thresholds** are updated every year to reflect changes in the Consumer Price Index. They are the same for all parts of the country and, are not adjusted for variations in the cost of living (U. S. Census, 2002).

10. **Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)** is the primary measure of students’ achievement of the Sunshine State Standards. Student scores are classified into five achievement levels, 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. It is the basis for the yearly performance grade (A, B, C, D, or F) assigned each school in the state (U. S. Dept. of Education, 2003).

    The information gathered here is from reports based on empirical research, government surveys, national and state data banks regarding attitudes, problems, programs, challenges and successes within the present educational system. Florida
Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), used to measure and grade Florida’s school performance findings, and sources presented are to help develop a thorough understanding of the problem. The following evidences the breadth of the challenge the educational system of Florida faces in providing equity in education for students in high-poverty schools in the midst of rapid change of demographics.

- Among the largest states in the nation, Florida had the highest net rate growth from 1990 – 2000 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2002). Florida’s public school membership has increased by more than a million students in the past 20 years (U. S. Dept. of Education, 2002).
- As of 1999-2000, Florida elementary and middle schools have the largest average enrollment size of any state in the nation. Florida’s high schools are second only to Hawaii in average enrollment size (U. S. Dept. of Education, 2002). A positive relationship exists between size of class enrollment and apathy, tardiness, absenteeism, dropping out, forms of victimization, and drug use (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).
- Among all the states, Florida’s crime rate was exceeded only by Arizona (U. S. Dept. of Justice, 2000). Live Births to unwed mothers under the age of 18 are 5.1% above the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).
- Florida is projected to rank 1st among the 50 states and the District of Columbia in number of persons gained through interstate migration during the period of 1995–2020 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2002).
- Limited English Proficiency (LEP) student membership in Florida schools has more than doubled since fall 1991 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).
students served in Exceptional Student Education (ESE) has steadily increased during the past decade (excluding gifted). In the year 2001-2002, ESE students accounted for 15% of the total school membership. Including gifted students, ESE accounts for 19.4% of the total school membership (Florida Dept. of Education, 2002).

- In 2001, of the 68 Florida schools that received an F yearly performance grade from the state, 64 were high-poverty schools. Of the 173 D-graded schools, over 150 were high-poverty schools (Florida Dept. of Education, 2002).

- Schools serving a large percentage of low-income families had significantly lower student test scores than schools serving a small percentage of these students (OPPAGA, 2000). Poor children also score lower on home literacy indexes (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003).

- The percentage of students’ eligible for free or reduced-price lunch has increased steadily over the past 10 years. Over 44% of Florida students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This increase is attributed to the high percentage of minorities in the student membership (Florida Dept. of Education, 2002).

- Schools with highest percentages (over 50%) of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch are more likely to have a higher percentage of unqualified, uncertified, out-of-field, and new teachers. While nearly half of Florida’s public school students are from minorities, less than 24% of Florida’s teachers are members of a minority population (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003). Teacher turnover is increasing in Florida, and there is a larger percentage of new teachers (Florida Dept. of Education, 2002).
Poverty and Student Development

Public education in the United States is being called upon to provide educational services for culturally diverse students (CREDE, 1999). Gardner (1995) writes that the answer to the skill gap between socio-economically disadvantaged students and other student groups is culture; cultural beliefs and practices can affect the child. The social environment that is present in conditions of high-poverty affects the development of these children (Pellino, 2002). The school environment negatively affects impoverished students’ development by limiting the ways they learn to live in social groups, thereby hindering development of positive social interaction with school personnel (Pellino, 2002). The family, teachers, and other sources of influence in the culture signal what is important to the growing child, and these messages have both long and short-term impact (Gardner, 1995). Schools must provide opportunities for high-poverty school students to be academically successful (CREDE, 1999). Intellectual development of cognitive skills depends on learning opportunities that foster social interactions between students and educators (Pellino, 2002). Prevention of school failure for students means developing culturally sensitive and attractive interventions tailored to an ethnic group, or a subgroup within an ethnic group, that develops dialogue for learning (Roosa et al., 2002).

Betances (2002) states that it is urgent that we take the time and effort to break through cultural status barriers that stand in the way of students’ learning and performing successfully on standardized assessments. The quality of the child’s social interaction with the school staff has a great influence on future development and his or her potential to succeed (Pellino, 2002). Many factors contribute to the amount of exertion a student
applies to learning (Betances, 2002). How alienated and disenfranchised from the mainstream the student feels affects the student’s exertion and ultimately the academic outcome (Betances, 2002). Collier (2000) states that students who are failing in educational systems will continue to fail unless we commit our hearts, minds, and spirit to appreciating differences. When people with different group identities come together and educators do not make a conscious effort to appreciate the differences within the group, education damns itself to contend with long, drawn out conflicts (Collier, 2000). Successful schools make changes in classroom methods and take time to learn about assumptions educators bring with them into the classroom (Collier, 2000). The ultimate goal is for educators and administrators to alter teaching methods in light of the various values and norms held by a diverse student population. Teaching methods designed to create understanding and dialogue between educators and students can develop substitute ways for teachers to explain and provide more opportunities for their students to learn (Collier, 2000). Schools that use new methods to promote dialogue between teachers and students provide for opportunities for teachers to learn about their students’ values and norms. Improved and increased communication in the classrooms increases the school’s teaching options beyond the transmission of information (Collier, 2000).

Despite theories of multiple abilities, talents, and skills, traditional schooling emphasizes only two standard cultural abilities. The two standard cultural abilities are verbal-linguistic (especially in written form) and logical-mathematical (Gardner, 1993). Gardner emphasizes there are at least six other kinds of knowledge or talents that enrich our lives and help us respond effectively to our cultural environment. Gardner identifies entry points for tapping into these six intelligences: (1) Narrational skill is one easily
recognized in the high context cultural dialogue for details these high-poverty students develop, (2) Quantitative/numerical learners are intrigued by numbers and patterns performed in games of chance, (3) Foundational/existential is a learner that looks for the bottom line and is very inquisitive, (4) Aesthetic individuals are inspired by visual stimuli and works of art, which actively engages them in carefully designed outcomes, (5) Hands on young learners are people that rush into things, physically manipulating and experimenting with the environment, and (6) The Social learner does best in a group setting interacting with others to reach a solution.

Schools need to provide students with experiences that will serve as a foundation of knowledge for his or her future learning (Pellino, 2002). Identifying positive contributions a student can give through listening and learning about the student’s culture will have a positive effect on the students (Betances, 2002). Activities and lessons should be based on how the students’ perceive themselves and the world at the various stages of development (Pellino, 2002).

Limited social interactions with school personnel can negatively affect students’ opportunity to learn the appropriate school language, to organize school perceptions, to develop higher order cognitive processes, to develop the ability to internalize a concept to solve problems, and to think independently about academic challenges (Benson, 1995; Guerra & Schutz, 2001; Bowman, 1995). Schools must consider the cultural values of these students as they arrange for student learning (Pellino, 2002).

Senge (1990) describes cultural beliefs as mental models – invisible assumptions that determine how we view the world and how we make decisions. Senge warns that in
education, teaching models may limit our ability to think differently about what we do. Educators’ mental models of a student and his or her culture direct how they analyze a student’s capacity to learn and influences the decisions about the most effectual way to teach them (Senge, 1990). Students of poverty may be truly capable students who, because of previously demoralizing experiences or self-imposed mindsets generated through responses they experience in school, are biased toward teachers and have come to believe they cannot learn (Pellino, 2002). If there is limited social exposure, the foundation for students to draw upon is also limited; schools need to help them develop a broad base of social knowledge and experiences which will expand the student’s academic curiosity (Pellino, 2002).

Bamburg (2002) stated that the instructional methods used in most public school systems are biased toward the dominant culture. Bamburg explains that educators’ mental models, or stereotype concepts, have been identified as ineffective and unsuitable for the diversity of classrooms. Students’ thoughts, perceptions, and interactive behavior patterns must be understood, taken seriously, applied to curriculum development, and incorporated into meaningful learning. Meaningful learning involves recognizing students’ strengths and making connections with their prior knowledge (Connors-Douglas 2000). Students must have experienced some success in order to develop their positive self-belief, which greatly influences whether they fail or succeed in school (Pellino, 2002). The learning difficulties poverty students face are connected to their beliefs about chances to be successfully socialized to achieve positive status within the school society (Pellino, 2002). Academic failure is the consequence of the beliefs
students form through past responses to their efforts and about their control over the school experiences (Pellino, 2002).

Alternative methods for reform and improvements in education require change in classroom management systems. Student-centered schools focus upon successfully managing and motivating students to change negative feelings toward learning (Hodgkinson, 1991). Effective teachers that motivate students toward a positive change in academic outcomes know their students and what they need (Hodgkinson, 1991). Effective teachers understand the cultural context in which the student will understand and the learning experience must be performed in the social context their students follow (Hodgkinson, 1991). Teachers with the right people skills involved in the school’s change process play a critical role in the poverty student’s success (Hodgkinson, 1991).

Schools with a clear vision for future success include a responsive curriculum that builds on student interest and natural curiosity [North West Regional Education Laboratory (NWREL), 2000]. Methods that will meet the needs of all students require professional development programs for teaching skills that create intrinsic motivation and emphasize the processes of thinking in their students (Lewis, Schaps & Watson, 1995). When schools collaborate and support students, creating a shared vision of high expectations, students have improved academic outcomes (The Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk; North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (CRESPAR; NCREL, 2000). A focus on relational learning for value of mastery in language and literacy builds strong foundations for students to exceed (Lewis, Schaps & Watson, 1995). The change from traditional ways towards the development of modern
methods in school systems will lead educators to understand and meet the diverse needs of our nation's students (Hodgkinson, 1991).

Eddy, Martinez, Morgan-Lopez, Smith, & Fisher, (2002) state that the issue that delimits positive change in education is a lack of sensitivity to student minorities, caused by a lack of ethnic diversity among educational leaders. Despite an increasingly diverse U.S. population, the workforce and representation of minorities remains slim (Eddy et al., 2002). Development is needed in the field of research science that will set models for educational standards that prevent repeated failure in high-poverty schools. Science that focuses on “at risk” sociodemographic populations will serve to provide quality control for equity in the educational service provided to the majority of people of color (Eddy et al., 2002). Presently the educational system lacks a model for prevention of school failure (Eddy et al., 2002). Prevention of failure requires education to look beyond the school’s present value systems (Roosa, Dumka, Gonzales, & Knight, 2002). People’s values change and vary because of differences in income, occupation, living conditions, and length and exposure to another culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Hoff-Ginsberg & Tardiff, 1995). People’s behaviors change despite their values when they need to adapt to extremely stressful or threatening conditions such as poverty, and educators need to adapt learning methods to prevent widening of the achievement gap (Hoff-Ginsberg & Tardiff, 1995).

Educators need to work to foster resiliency in students by focusing on the coping skill strength that poverty students can develop (Benard, 1995). A prevention intervention would include developing resiliency for meeting the challenges of living in poverty (Eddy et al., 2002). Resiliency is an interaction between characteristics of the individual
and the environment (Eddy et al., 2002). Prevention interventions foster protective processes referred to as resiliency that empowers students to overcome risk at critical decision-making moments in their lives (Eddy et al., 2002; Garmezy, 1993). Educators that recognize and understand the value of student resilient factors such as coping skills, community support systems, and strategies to survive a hostile environment can help the students use those resiliency skills for learning (Benard, 1995). When teachers empower students to use those resiliency factors to adapt or reverse expected negative academic outcomes, students in high-poverty schools would have an increased chance for academic success (Benard, 1995). High-poverty areas around the country have common definite manifestations (Hallcom, 1993). The earmarks of the hostile environment of a lower socio-economic area are characterized by unemployment, widespread deterioration, poverty, high crime rate, gangs, and violence (Hallcom, 1993). Surviving and functioning day to day in the hostile environment of poverty indicates the individual has multiple abilities (Benard, 1995).

Stiglitz (1998) wrote that positive cultural development that appreciates multiple intelligences represents a positive transformation in schools, society, and the nation. This transformation involves a movement from traditional relations, traditional ways of thinking, traditional ways of dealing with health and education, and traditional ways of construction to modern ways uniquely designed to help all achieve a common goal that empowers all societies to each be their best (Stiglitz, 1998). Different segments of each society hold different beliefs and understanding of cultural characteristics (Gardner, 1995). Stiglitz (1998) asserts that a good reason for modernizing the educational system is the lack of a design that meets the needs of students in high-poverty schools. The
society of poverty has the characteristic of heightened anxiety manifested from living in a hostile environment where values become skewed from the norm (Spring, 1996).

A social issue facing students of poverty is emotional trauma (Ciaccia, 2000). Poverty students often suffer a lack of nurturing, which leads to feelings of anxiety, alienation, and inadequacy that often are exhibited by aggressive or impulsive behaviors in the classrooms (McLoyd, 1998). There are intimate connections between poverty and the destruction of cognitive capacity in children (Fairbanks, 2000). Fairbanks stated that poverty is more insidious than statistics indicate because it increases anxiety and destroys aspirations, hope, and happiness. Eighty-four percent of all children in the world live coping with the anxiety of poverty (Fairbanks, 2000). The academic success and literacy of students living in poverty are negatively correlated with the productivity and prosperity of the area (Fairbanks, 2000). In an area where there is little productivity and prosperity, there is little aspiration for success (Fairbanks, 2000).

Rogers & Webb (1991) and Spring (1996) blame the shift in America from a rural, family-centered economy to a technology-connected society, for the nation’s educational problems. This shift from family to technology provoked an erosion of the family unit in America, diminishing family support for education systems (Rogers & Webb, 1991). This shift puts an additional burden on schools that leads to an increasing need for schools to assume greater roles in the provision of affective support for its members (Rogers & Webb, 1991). Educators must now work at reducing the level of anxiety to help students discuss, reflect, and think critically about their experiences (Spring, 1996). Sugishita (2000) states affective schools use practices that reduce stress,
create teacher-student bonds, develop emotional stability, and secure supportive
attachment needed to stimulate learning.

Students living in high-poverty areas enter classrooms labeled “at risk,” with fewer Standard English language skills, increasing the chances that anxiety will negatively affect their learning process (Gardner, 1995). It is essential for teachers to be aware of, acknowledge students anxiety levels, and have the skills to reduce it (Pappamihiel, 2002).

School accountability based on outcomes on standardized tests has brought with it additional student, staff and administrative anxiety (Davenport, 2002). The clamor for spotlighting test scores began when the National Commission for Excellence in Education published A Nation at Risk in 1983. Americans ignored Ogbu’s (1990) advice to “identify the problem” and not to hold tight to the concept of higher standards and increased accountability as the solution. Raising standards only motivated the students that were already achieving academic success (Ogbu, 1990). Accountability based on outcomes of standardized tests has broadened the gap and the differences in the social classes by raising the frustration level for those already struggling (Ogbu, 1990). Ogbru (1990) referred to the educational system putting the blame on the students, ignoring their civil rights to an appropriate education and overlooking, rather than analyzing, the system’s flaw that fails to achieve quality control of its processes.

Considering the fact that 95% of all the schools in Florida receiving the lowest performance grade of F for the year 1998-1999 (OPPAGA, 2000) were high-poverty schools, it is evident most of these children living in high-poverty areas are not learning
in the present educational system. What can be done to reverse this situation? A positive change that has occurred in education during the past decade has been the increased knowledge in the areas of brain research and cognitive sciences (Bamburg, 2002).

Students do not simply undergo experiences; they are agents of learning (Brophy, 1988). Learning requires the active engagement of participants through cognitive, sensory, and motor processes used to accomplish tasks and objectives that give meaning and direction to their lives (Bandura, 2001). The educational system has to design a framework that gets students to act consciously to make preferred things happen instead of letting themselves be acted upon by the environment. Educational reform holds true to the central issue in all processes, as a struggle against injustice (Gadotti, 1996)

Caine & Caine (1991) discuss what we know about how human beings learn in *Teaching and the Human Brain*. Learning engages the entire physiology, and awareness of the need to provide stress management and relaxation should be included in the learning process (Caine & Caine, 1991). Fairbanks (2000) states that there are intimate connections between poverty and the destruction of cognitive capacity in children. It is important for teacher programs to support specific skill development that will combat anxiety so that students attending high-poverty schools can be engaged in active learning.

Ornstein & Sobel (1987) assert that emotion and cognition cannot be separated. Lakoff (1987) maintains it is impossible for the brain to “learn” when patterns are not connected to previous learning experiences. The brain resists having any meaningless information patterns imposed upon it (Lakoff, 1987). Caine & Caine (1991) explain that by ignoring the personal world of the learner, educators actually inhibit the effective
functioning of the brain. Vygotsky (1978) expounds on the details of learning as a social interaction shaped by internal processes that give meaning to information only when it is embedded in familiar experiences.

Teachers who focus on developing emotional resiliency behaviors in children exposed to significant stress and adversity are the answer to preventing students’ failure in high-poverty schools (Rolf et al., 1993). Students in a high-poverty school can be helped to avoid succumbing to the dangers of school failure, substance abuse, mental health, and juvenile delinquency by developing emotional stability (Rolf et al., 1993). Students living in a high-poverty area are distracted from learning and find school meaningless because their energies are tied up in day-to-day emotional or physical survival (Covington, 1992). According to Covington (1992), we cannot overestimate the impact of these negative conditions on our nation’s youth.

**Statement of the Problem**

Poplin & Weeres’ (1994) state that the educational problem is to eradicate the crisis of academic failure among disadvantaged youth in public schools. Children from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds encounter profound difficulties when they enter the public schools (Renchler, 1993). There continues to be large numbers of children and youth in the United States who face severe economic and social consequences from the failure to obtain an appropriate education (Children’s Defense Fund, 1998; Thompson, 1992). The educational system found it easier to define the problem as stemming from the students rather than inspecting the basic features of the school to identify a system flaw (Goodlad, 1992).
The framework of the United States educational system was built to support the needs of the dominant White culture, and policymakers did not foresee the demands that the coming diversity of our society would put on our schools (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990). The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (1999) stated that identifying essential features that enhance success in schools that fail to meet students' needs demands further investigation. The content of this text provides evidence that there are many factors contributing to the delinquency in educational restitution for students in high-poverty schools. The literature review in Chapter II documents there are many essential features in programs of best practices that overcame the negative conditions and helped all students in high-poverty schools achieve academic success. The challenge is to narrow the multiple factors to the primary factors for high-poverty students' academic success.

Purpose of the Study

This research investigated the perceptions and experiences of teachers and administrators as to the challenges, successes, and essential school features in high-poverty schools as they relate to best practices. This dual-site case study determined how teachers and administrators express successes, challenges and, what they consider as essential features as related to features of best practices helping students in a high-poverty school to learn and achieve academic success. The researcher analyzed data comparing features these administrators and teachers perceived and voiced as essential for students in high-poverty schools to achieve academic success with essential features of best practice.
The researcher then investigated if there were similarities and/or differences between perceptions of participants at an F school and perceptions of participants at a C school when compared and contrasted to essential features of best practice shown effective in the research for students' academic success in high-poverty schools.

Pianta & Walsh (1996), Poplin & Weeres (1994), and Russell (1994) establish that when specific features found essential for learning were provided, they acted as an intervention to improve student learning. This statement indicated a need for investigating what are critical essential features of schools that will enhance academic success for students in high-poverty schools.

This investigation brought additional information that may increase the understanding of how participants approached the challenges experienced and what they saw as the solution. The perceptions of administrators and teachers working in the high-poverty schools selected for this research have a direct effect on delivery of service to students presently struggling with academic success. By researching the administrators' and teachers' perceptions and experiences of the schools' challenges, successes and school features indicated as critical to reaching the solutions, this researcher surmised what was needed to be successful at helping students in high-poverty schools to achieve academic success.

This researcher identified what essential school features of best practices in successful learning environments the two high-poverty schools in Florida perceived as valuable and if they perceived their schools as adequately providing these features to their students. Identifying components and comparing perceptions of essential features from best practice in successful high-poverty-schools with the chosen schools highlights
what may be critical essentials of the learning environment for students to achieve academic success in high-poverty schools.

Research Questions

This research study was designed to answer the following questions:

(1) What are the challenges and successes experienced by administrators and teachers in relation to essential features of best practices working in secondary high-poverty schools?

(2) What are the perceived best practices needed in high-poverty schools in relation to essential features of best practices that facilitate academic success as identified in the literature?

(3) Were there similarities and/or differences between the perceptions and experiences of administrators and teachers in a C-graded high-poverty school and an F-graded high-poverty school in relation to essential features of best practice indicated in the literature?

Significance of the Study

Cummins (1986) suggests that a major reason previous attempts at educational reform have been unsuccessful is that the relationships between schools and students have remained essentially unchanged. This researcher hopes these findings add to the knowledge base by highlighting the challenges, successes, and essential school features that helped these secondary students in high-poverty schools to achieve academic success. The items indicated as critical essential features may help in development of
important recommendations for promoting student academic success in high-poverty schools.

With research and ongoing open communication, professionals can help the remodeling of education to focus, stretch its thinking, make the tough decisions, and enhance the candor of communication among all people (Porter, 2001). Ferguson, Ferguson, and Taylor (1991) state research that interprets, empowers by connecting people to hear each other’s stories. Research that interprets pursues social justice one story at a time.

The researcher interpreted how the perceived challenges and experiences of, successes, and essential school components aligned with best practice essentials in both the successful and the unsuccessful high-poverty school. Identifying components and comparing perceptions expressed in interviews and the value attributed to each best practice listed in the survey explored alternatives and consequences of educational practices. Presentation of comprehensive results of the investigation may help administrators and teachers to reflect on their thought processes, review practices, and consider information to be utilized in future planning.

Limitations of the Study

This study’s research findings may not be generalized to administrators and teachers at other high-poverty schools because it was limited to participants employed at two high-poverty schools in Florida. The findings of the study suggest that further evaluation, survey and research of essential features, and perceptions of administrators, teachers and other school staff in more high-poverty schools over a longer period of time,
is needed to make general inferences about essentials that may be critical for students’ academic success at high-poverty schools.

Time is another limitation of this study. A longitudinal study throughout a school year could follow specific teachers, administrators, policy and procedures for implementing essential features of best practice from the beginning of the school year through the end of the school year. A longitudinal study that continued to follow teachers, administrators, and effectiveness of implementation after a state school grade is given may be needed. Research that sheds some light on the problems, the solutions, and the features essential for high-poverty schools to work successfully benefits the educational system and the nation.

Additionally, the researcher has enjoyed 20 years of working with special populations as an educator of adults with physical limitations, students with varying disabilities, and students in high-poverty schools. Throughout those years, the researcher participated in numerous workshops, trainings, staff development, and mini-ethnographic studies. Those experiences provided the researcher with up-to-date knowledge on best practices based on both field research in high-poverty schools and other special populations.

These extensive experiences may be sources of biases on the part of the researcher. This necessitated the triangulation of data sources, accomplished by using two sources of data, the interview and the survey done at two sites (Yin, 1994). The methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1984) of member checking was also done when the text of the interview was reviewed and confirmed as representative by the participants to increase confidence in the interpretation. These processes worked to accomplish an
ethical need to confirm the validity of the process employed to compensate for possible research bias (Stake, 1995).
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Government policy on education and educational practice continues to evolve into a partnership to remove obstacles that prevent many of our nation’s youth from striving for and achieving success through educational excellence (McKenzie, 1993). Politics have created necessary structures for governance and a system within which advocates, champions, and experts continue to “tinker” toward that one best system to meet the needs of students (Tyack, 1990).

Politics and Education

Spring (2001) defines “schooling” as the institutionalized system of education where learning and teaching is standardized, formalized, and quite distinct from applicable knowledge. In the United States, schooling is compulsory and required by law, and schools must follow pre-established state standards and curricula agreed upon by policymakers (Spring, 2001). The purpose of schooling in America is not agreed upon and creates differences and gaps in the educational system (Spring, 2001).

Determining how the politics of education actually translate into learning is a difficult task (Elmore, 1997). Investigation of the possible factors contributing to significant gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed a distinct correlation between political inputs and educational gains (Grissmer, 2000). Grissmer (2000) claims that without the political leadership present...
in each state, it would be difficult if not impossible to create the continuity in the reform agenda that is critical to long-term success.

Thompson (1992) explains that the Federal response to students that are failing and classified as special-needs populations is sporadic and limited. The term “special-needs population” encompasses the traditional constitutional disabilities, including prenatal complications, biochemical imbalance, organic handicaps, and sensory disabilities (Coie & Dodge, 1988). “Special needs”, sometimes referred to as “at-risk” also applies to skill development delays such as low intelligence, lack of social competence, attention deficits, reading disabilities, and poor work skill habits (Coie & Dodge, 1988). Special needs in education apply to emotional difficulties, with immaturity, conflict, poor self-esteem, and emotional dysregulation commonly referred to as the at-risk or disadvantaged category (Coie & Dodge, 1988). Other qualifiers for the label are family circumstances (low social class, mental illness in family, family conflict, and poor attachment patterns); school difficulties (school failure); and ecological context (extreme poverty, neighborhood disorganization, and unemployment) (Coie & Dodge, 1988). Verstegen (1992) states that shifts and increases in spending are consumed by traditional special populations, rather than redirected toward a more global view of “special needs” to include students experiencing failure in high-poverty schools.

There is a significant gap between “policy talk” and “actions” in the actual schooling of students (Elmore, 1997). Proposals to build stronger connections between politics and schooling appear to be gaining less momentum with the public than proposals that advocate an educational departure into “anti-politics” (Elmore, 1997).
The connection between politics and educational outcomes is tenuous at best (Ziebarth, 1999). While standardized comprehensive tests are being implemented to assess student and school success, there continues to be large numbers of children and youth in the United States who face severe economic and social consequences from the failure to obtain an appropriate education (Children’s Defense Fund 1998; Thompson, 1992).

Hope (1999) states that the political process of the educational system has shifted from a focus on affirmative action to understanding the much expanded and diverse student populations. Hope (1999) points out that the understanding of perspectives, both the similarities and differences, among various student groups creates in students a truly strong liberal education. Without cultural heterogeneity, there is no liberal education (Hope, 1999). In a qualitative research study, Fickel & Jones (2002) combined naturalistic inquiry and follow-up interviews with 33 teachers to identify teaching model essentials that are culturally responsive to supporting academic achievement for all students. The study sought to illuminate how professional development can assist teachers in developing a more culturally relevant practice (Fickel & Jones, 2002). The findings were consistent with both the philosophical and scientific constructivist teaching models (Fickel & Jones, 2002). Teaching model essentials that are successful divert from the transmission model and emphasize the importance of providing teachers with skills, professional development, and support in order to establish a culturally relevant climate for students in diverse classrooms (Fickel & Jones, 2002). Successfully prepared teachers can thus ensure that students engage in activities that are authentic, integrated, and developed from an interactive learning classroom (Fickel & Jones, 2002).
Philosophy of Constructivism

The pinnacle of pedagogy is reflected in Gadotti’s (1996) and Freire’s (1993) visions for public schooling that are aimed at creating informed citizens who will be able to actively participate in dialogue, not at indoctrinating protocitizens with the values of the nation. Gadotti’s vision for education sees as the “end result” a student who will use what he or she has learned in dialogue with others as the basis for their praxis in the world, in order to effect change in society and politics.

Gadotti (1996) and Freire & Shor (1987) address the issues of conflict versus dialogue and the equity/equality distinction. According to them, dialogue is the most important element of pedagogy. It is an enumeration of opinions, paying attention to the source of those opinions, in an effort to understand all of the influences that people feel in their lives over the information they have and the opinions they form (Gadotti, 1996; Friere, 1993). It is their belief that dialogue is integral to true pedagogy and it should be used in place of conflict (Gadotti, 1996; Friere, 1993; Freire & Shor, 1987). Conflict creates situations in which students are wrong and teachers are right, producing a hierarchical classroom. Conversely, dialogue creates a space in which all are equals, but with differences in events as far as information and experience go (Gadotti, 1996).

Freirean pedagogy (Gadotti, 1996) allows individuals to define for themselves what information is important and useful. Human learning is fundamental, and the purpose of pedagogy is to facilitate that learning rather than controlling or dictating it (Gadotti, 1996).
Constructivism is the pragmatic philosophical view of pedagogy Gadotti uses to describe how we come to understand or know (Gadotti, 1996). It is not a body of facts, skills, and interpretations to be transmitted to students (Phillips, 1997). It is knowledge actively constructed by learners as they interact with their environment (Phillips, 1997). Unlike the traditional conflict-based classrooms, the cognitive dissonance or dialogue is the stimulus for learning and determines the organization and nature of what is learned (Gadotti, 1996). Without the distinction between the sheer physical and social power inherent in relations between adults and children, understanding is influenced by the processes linked with the social give and take of meaning, unhindered by unnecessary power structures (Freire & Shor, 1987).

By understanding the layers of society through observation of conduct and collaboration, individuals become better informed about their social and political environment, and about the economic and social dynamics that have shaped their lives (Gadotti, 1996). Learning through informed action and acting according to a reflective system of values are what Freirean pedagogy demands of educators and workers for social change (Gadotti, 1996). Dialogue can be used to reflect upon our own values, but praxis refines them. Freire explains that pedagogy is politics, and if a student’s principles are not questioned in the pedagogical setting, then his or her existing value system will be responsible for the status quo (Freire, 1993). Gadotti’s review and summary of the key points in Freire’s philosophy of education, combined with his own vision of problem based learning for the future of education, provides today’s educators, students, and scholars with the tools for real social change, beginning with one's own value set.
Theoretical Framework

The importance of a departure from the educational system's present focus on a lecture model for transmission of information and a shift towards focus on the constructivist, student-centered model is essential for success with students failing in the present system (Levine, 2002). In an effort to understand the essential features for academic success in high-poverty schools, the following constructivist concepts, cultural, and economic concerns related to consistently successful learning methods and practices are highlighted.

Scientific Constructivism

Constructivism is an approach to teaching based on the premise that cognition is the result of mental construction (NCREL, 2002). Constructivist teaching is based on human brain function and knowledge of how learning occurs (NCREL, 2002). Recent research suggests that brain compatible teaching is based on 12 principles (Caine & Caine, 1991). The following propositions of Caine & Caine's findings summarize substantial changes in understanding how learning occurs and its implications for best practice features in educational systems:

- Information processing occurs concurrently with the social and cultural interactions experienced within one's environment. This physiological fact highlights the American humanist movement spearheaded by Abraham Maslow, concluding that human motivation is the integrated wholeness of the organism, and meeting the basic safety and emotional security needs must be one of the foundation stones for information to be processed (Maslow, 1954).
Classroom Application: Learners actively construct their own understanding of the experience in the classroom.

- Learning occurs naturally as a part of the growth process and can be negatively affected, much like other bodily functions, by stress and anxiety. The need for stress management should be built into the learning process (Bamburg, 2002).

Classroom Application: Stress management is handled with instruction that allows for cultural diversity.

- The need to search for meaning and act on our environment is automatic. Social-emotional competence and environmental characteristics interact to promote adaptive social-emotional behaviors such as decision-making and health promoting behaviors (Wallander, 2000).

Classroom Application: Activities develop stable and supportive relationships while lessons are rooted in social contexts.

- The brain is designed to perceive and generate patterns. It resists processing of isolated pieces of information unrelated to what is already stored in the brain. Maslow (1954) states that any motivated behavior must be understood to be a channel through which basic needs can be satisfied or expressed.

Classroom Application: Literacy is embedded in social contexts.

- Emotions are critical to patterning because all information is influenced and organized by emotions and mindsets based on cultural and social interactions. Learning only occurs when the learner is not threatened by the inquiry (Ornstein & Sobel 1987).
**Classroom Application**: A supportive and collaborative classroom climate must be maintained on a consistent basis. Teachers must reflect on student responses, developing an effective strategy that encourages the student to explore the function of literacy.

- The brain has laterality (it processes parts and wholes at the same time), and although there are significant differences between the right and left hemispheres of the brain, the two are inextricably interactive (Levy, 1985). The implication of this is that people have huge difficulty learning if either parts or wholes are ignored. Understanding is developmental and cumulative; skills are built as time passes. Parts as well as wholes are conceptually interactive, giving meaning to each other.

**Classroom Application**: Teaching proceeds from wholes to parts in a way that the student relates to the whole experience as opposed to presenting unrelated parts of information. Teaching models incorporate methods to build student understanding and skills over time as a provision for cumulative development of learning.

- Learning involves both peripheral and focused perception, which means that every visual signal and audible sound contains meaning. This indicates that the subtle signals emanating from the teacher, such as posture, skin color, eye movement, rate of breathing, and tension, along with traditional environmental concerns such as temperature, noise, and so forth, all have a significant effect on what is learned.

**Classroom Application**: Develop learning activities that appeal to all learning
modalities. Activities are student-centered and individual differences are taken into account.

- The conscious and unconscious are always involved in learning. Both what we are told and what we experience is remembered. Students must be engaged in active learning to facilitate the ability to review what and how something was learned in order to develop personal meaning from an experience.

**Classroom Application:** Instruction emphasizes the processing of thinking and recognizes the place of the students’ life experiences and cultural schemata. Instruction provides times and activities for students to review how and what they learned to develop understanding with personal meaning for the learner.

- There are two different types of memory. The first is the instant memory of experiences that do not need to be consciously reviewed yet; they consume an inexhaustible space in our memory. The second type of memory is designed for storing relatively unrelated information connected to prior experience and knowledge. Teaching must facilitate the transfer of learning from previous experience to the subsequent development of understanding, a process that uses memorization to a minimum.

**Classroom Application:** Methods that use memorization are avoided and used only as an exercise because memorization interferes with transfer of learning into understanding. Instruction is exploratory.

- Facts and skills are best remembered when they are connected to our spatial and natural memory. Things such as language, which is experienced through multiple interactive processing channels, are imbedded in our minds. Social interactions
then begin to take shape in our memory through internal processes (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Classroom Application:** Instruction is designed to invoke real-life relational imagery of experiences and interactions. This type of instruction promotes cognition.

- Learning is inhibited by threat and enhanced by challenge. When faced with defeat, learners are less flexible and revert to acting out.

**Classroom Application:** Classrooms are set up to create a state relaxed (low in threat) alertness (high in challenge) in learners.

- Each person has a uniquely integrated brain system.

**Classroom Application:** Instruction design reflects students' individual differences, recognizes the strength of students' experiential knowledge, and respects their cultural values. Schools recognize that there comes a time when systems may need to make fundamental changes in their methods in response to cultural change.

**Poverty and Learning**

The matter of definition is a primary move in supporting and developing answers to problems high-poverty schools face educating students labeled "at-risk" (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990). Historically, these students were those whose looks, values, family units, discourse, society, and culture did not match the prevailing White culture that schools were designed to provide for and sustain (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990). These disadvantaged students are, for the most part, the poor, immigrants, and minorities, who have been measured as educationally or culturally lacking (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990).
A high-poverty area is defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as an area with 50% or more of residents living at or below the poverty level. Schools are designated as high-poverty schools if 50% or more of the students enrolled qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (OPPAGA, 2000). Free and reduced-price lunches are distributed by schools to students receiving Federal funding and/or residing in a household with a total income at or below poverty level, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The educational system found it was easier to define the problem as stemming from the students themselves rather than a system flaw (Goodlad, 1992). Though education has made it policy to use language that is less derogatory, most approaches to the problem are still based on the premise of a student deficit rather than an inspection of the basic features of the school (Natriello et al., 1990). Schools fail to recognize the problem in the delivery methods and identify it as a student's problem. The solution lies in developing an understanding of the culture of those living in poverty (Natriello et al., 1990). This approach often leads well-meaning educators and policymakers to devise ways to change the student. Educators and policymakers should instead look at the values and norms of poverty students to identify strengths. This understanding, combined with a respect for impoverished students’ prior knowledge and dominant cultural characteristics, provides a foundation on which to build solid educational methods (Goodlad, 1992).

In a comparative research study, Dimmock & Walker (2000) highlight the need for schools to develop a conceptual framework based on cultural and cross-cultural teaching models. They develop a framework for a cross-cultural approach to administration, present a rationale for adopting the approach, and focus on teaching and learning models as the baseline for analysis. A cross-cultural approach has traditionally
received little attention from scholars despite wide acknowledgement of the concept of school culture and the fact that culture has become a central concept in international business management (Dimmock & Walker, 2000). The proposed educational framework is built around interrelationships between core concepts of culture, organizational structures, management, curriculum and, teaching and learning (Dimmock & Walker, 2000). Internationalization of education policy serves to heighten rather than lessen the importance of culturally sensitive schools (Dimmock & Walker, 2000). Dimmock & Walker (2000) argue that change has to start with administration and center on supportive interrelationships among administration, teachers, and students. There are stark contrasts between schools in which teaching is predominantly teacher-centered and schools that are student-centered (Dimmock & Walker, 2000). Teacher-centered schools are focused on the transmission of information by the teacher to the students. Student-centered schools are focused on students internalizing new information with their individual experiences and background knowledge. Student-centered schools are successful and respectful of differences in life experiences and cultural concepts (Dimmock & Walker, 2000).

Poverty’s cultural characteristics are a diversion from cultural norms of the school system (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990; Covington, 1992). The framework of the school system did not take into consideration the impending diversity of our society when it was constructed in terms of the dominant White culture (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990).

The Achievement Gap

The difference in academic performance among children from different classes or groups (ethnic, racial, income) is referred to as the achievement gap (Pellino, 2002). Many children living in poverty see school success as a risk to their already fragile
emotional stability and adopt a “Why bother?” attitude (Brown, 1993). In many high-poverty schools, peer groups discourage academic achievement (Brown, 1993). Students fear that if they excel academically, it will give them a spot in the advantaged culture and they will be ostracized by their group for appearing to “sell out” their own culture (Brown, 1993).

Dwek (1986) clearly documented adaptive and maladaptive patterns of achievement behavior in students. The adaptive pattern (mastery) in the school environment is characterized by confidence (Dwek, 1986). Students that acquire adaptive behaviors meet challenges, demonstrate high effectiveness, and remain persistent in school (Dwek, 1986). Children displaying this pattern appear to feel connected to their school and enjoy exerting effort in pursuit of task mastery (Dwek, 1986). In contrast, the maladaptive (failure) pattern of achievement behavior is characterized by challenge avoidance (Dwek, 1986). Maladaptive students act out, demonstrate antisocial behaviors, and show low persistence in school (Dwek, 1986). Students displaying this pattern tend to have negative school experiences compiled with anxiety and the development of negative self-esteem (Dwek, 1986).

Graham & Golan (1991), along with Benware & Deci (1984), state that students who continually fail show poor recall of information when learning tasks require deeper levels of information processing. Researchers Arbreton & Roesner (1993) have found that when students are more focused on external reasons for doing schoolwork (e.g., good grades, recognition), they prefer a more passive form of seeking help. This involves less cognitive effort but it gets the job done. Kohn (1993) states, “The famous wad-ya-get preoccupation of students, compulsively comparing their grades to others, is not a
function of human nature but of the performance (ability) orientation that suffuses most American classrooms and stifles children’s interest in what they are learning” (p. 158). Brophy (1987) explains that student motivation to learn is an acquired competence. Motivation is a skill developed through general experience, but stimulated most directly through modeling with which students relate (Brophy, 1987). Communication of expectations and learned socialization skills are acquired only when the learner sees significance (Brophy, 1988). Focus should be placed on finding a harmonious relationship between the cultural values of these disadvantaged students and the values emphasized in the school (Marlow & Page, 1998). The social world of school is far from the rules or a norm of the world poverty students live in and consequently presents educators with many challenges (Marlow & Page, 1998).

**Challenges**

Jones’ (2000) research on the dilemma third world countries face in the course of their participation in educational systems parallels the plight of the disadvantaged, the disabled, and the diversity groups in public education in the United States. All involved in education need to participate in the system of collaboration in order to access the best from educational opportunities (Jones, 2000). Policymaker participation promotes the features of education that are counterproductive to the students’ developed value systems (Jones, 2000). The local leaders of education try to introduce into the system features they think would respond to local needs. Local participants lack access to collaboration with policymakers (Jones, 2000). The reason schools in high-poverty areas fail is that implementation of school policy and the impact of its strategies are diluted assumptions of leaders uninformed of the true values and needs of the students (Jones, 2000). Those
who lack the academic and social culture of policymakers are almost locked out of the system (Jones, 2000).

The educational system's foremost task is to provide content in varying ways that meets the needs of the diverse social differences in their own communities. Educational systems can learn by recognizing similarities and differences with the global society (Jones, 2000). More challenging than the transmission of academic skills is the maintenance of values and mores necessary for the application of skills developed by academic training (Jones, 2000).

Covington (1992) explains that students living in a high-poverty area are distracted from learning. Poverty students find school meaningless because their energies are tied up in day-to-day emotional or physical survival (Covington, 1992).

Teacher-student bonds are necessary to help students become ethical people, as opposed to people who merely do what they are told; we cannot merely tell them what to do (Kohn, 1996). Students that are not successful in the current educational system must figure out for themselves and with each other how one ought to act (Kohn, 1996).

The causes of failure for educational systems serving the poor are numerous and are related to both the social environment in which poor children live and the education they receive at school (Pellino, 2002). Schools can have a powerful impact on the academic achievement and success of all students by viewing them as “at-promise” instead of “at-risk” (Slavin, 2001). Educating students that live in poverty will always be a challenge, but it does not have to be a problem if the focus in schools is shifted from teaching to student learning (Pellino, 2002).
There is an ongoing campaign organized by the Heritage Foundation, a public policy research institute in Washington, D.C., that supports research to combat challenges high-poverty schools face. Carter (2000), the author of *No Excuses*, a book compiled of research, is committed to correcting the failure of most public schools serving the poor. The message Carter relates to educators is that there is no excuse for this national disgrace. Carter’s book compiles the successes, essential school features, and challenges teachers and administrators deal with to be high achieving, high-poverty schools. Twenty-one high-poverty public schools were examined and a number of important policy indications cannot be dismissed as a fluke or an accident but as analyzed, planned, common sense teaching combined with successful leadership strategies (Carter, 2000). The characteristics are common sense testimonies of teachers and administrators demonstrating ingenuity, the freedom to divert from philosophies dominating schools, creative budgeting, collaboration of everyone in the school, support, and ongoing training among staff and administration. First and foremost was a regard for student achievement and mastery (Carter, 2000). All essentials from the 21 schools studied are basically the same essentials referred to as best practices in the study.

Providing modeling, support, and other methods of scaffolding, teachers can help students use their skills, strengths, and knowledge to learn and succeed academically (Marlow & Page, 1998). To help these students deal with issues they face in daily living, problem solving learning activities should be based on what the students know (Bassey, 1996). Learning by doing offers students centered on surviving day-to-day existence the opportunity to be active and creative problem solvers (Bassey, 1996).
Child development expert James Gabarino (1995) explains that children in high-poverty schools are neither “at risk” nor “not at risk”. “It is more than the absence of risk schools must maintain, it is the presence of opportunities” (Gabarino, 1995, p. 195). Students’ thoughts and feelings about the social interaction patterns that they create and maintain must be analyzed and taken seriously by educators (Heath, 1990). Child psychiatrist James Comer (1997) wrote in his book Waiting for a Miracle that “what people who have turned poor schools into good ones will tell you is that students’ success is largely the result of relationships, climate, child emotional security and development, and then learning” (p. 173).

Hamburg (1993) in an address to the National Center for Children in Poverty stated the enormous importance of a continuing role for research to make a difference in what happens to the nation with respect to poor children. Many of the most successful interventions have a preventive character, providing what a vigorous, cohesive, intact family would provide in better circumstances (Hamburg, 1993). Interventions that work give encouragement, stimulation, and guidance to students to protect and pursue an education. Success For All is a good example (Hamburg, 1993). Success For All began in 1986 when representatives of the Baltimore city schools asked researchers at Johns Hopkins University to develop a school experience that would help all students. Success For All seeks to prevent learning problems by involving parents and using high quality research-based classroom instruction. It relies on intensive and immediate interventions to correct children’s learning problems before they get out of hand. The program includes preschool education, kindergarten, a family support team, reading tutors, individual academic plans based on frequent assessments, a program facilitator, training
and support for teachers, and a school advisory committee that includes parents (Slavin, 1996; Slavin & Madden, 2001). Not only does the program make higher academic accomplishment than traditional instruction, but also they have fewer behavior problems, better attendance and these results have been achieved in very poor communities (Slavin & Madden, 2001). Another example of an intervention promoting academic achievement in high-poverty schools is the Comer School Development Program, an educational effort in place for over two decades in New Haven, Connecticut schools (Comer, 1997; Haynes, Emmons, & Woodruff, 1998). The success of the Comer Program also points to the essential value of multifaceted governance teams, involving parents in the school, a mental health team, and an agenda of life skills training, especially mainstream social skills (Haynes, Emmons, & Woodruff, 1998).

In her 30 years in public education, Davenport (2002) said she faced many challenges in educating the diverse students in their high poverty schools and she found that students want teachers that care about them. Personal investigation by this researcher brought her to Davenport (2002), an Assistant Superintendent in Brazosport Independent School District in Texas. Davenport (2002) directed the implementation of an instructional process that resulted in closing the achievement gap for all student groups. Davenport (2002) said the Brazosport district schools had all the challenging characteristic demographics common to high-poverty schools. Davenport (2002) claimed that training teachers to have high expectations and positive support for students was responsible for turning 19 high-poverty schools around. The change in teacher attitudes and expectations came about through changes in management that supported, encouraged, and promoted teacher skill to empower their students (Davenport, 2002).
When management facilitated teacher growth, teachers facilitated student growth. Administration employed collaborative, site-based management. Everything was developed to be student-centered, to fit the students' needs. Teachers with nurturing personalities were moved from elementary schools to middle schools and high schools to support student efforts (Davenport, 2002). They double blocked schedules to give more time to students below level. All teachers used the same eight-step process to teach the standards. All staff adhered to a schoolwide discipline policy and offered wholehearted support. Staff was adamant about students' need to achieve; it became more important than sports (Davenport, 2002). Teachers' self-esteem was fortified and student self-esteem grew along with it (Davenport, 2002). Teachers did not feel sorry for students' disadvantages. Instead, they conveyed high expectations and support to every student.

This approach transformed their high-poverty schools into high-achieving schools. The support for teachers to change negative attitudes to positive attitudes concerning students was a challenge for management (Davenport, 2002). This is a positive response to the desperation and loss of many adolescents (and teachers) in today's schools.

Sugishita (2000), in a multi-method study of 176 eighth grade students, explored the relationship connecting teacher care and support variables that helped students achieve. Findings from qualitative interviews and student survey data indicated that the most recognized care variables motivating students were teacher friendliness, being a good role model, and knowing the likes, dislikes, and personal qualities of each student. Sugishita concluded that teacher care could be represented by a one-dimensional construct including a mix of instructional and affective aspects of teaching. This supports
physiological research on how the brain learns, concurring that emotion and instruction cannot be separated (Caine & Caine, 1991). Active learning takes place within social contexts and individual student differences need to be taken into account when planning a learning activity (Caine & Caine, 1991).

In a sociological study of how the formal and informal organizations of classrooms facilitate everyday forms of defiance, McFarland (1999) argues that student defiance is less characterized by the individual student traits than the formal and informal organizational traits of the social setting within the classroom. Several sources of data were used over the course of the school year: classroom observations, surveys, school records and interviews. The two schools, one in a rural area outside of a large metropolitan area with a homogeneous student population, one an elite magnet school in a dilapidated neighborhood of a large city with a heterogeneous student population, had surprising similarities in terms of student and teacher behaviors in two schools. In McFarland’s study, the salient identity distinction in the rural school concerned class background relative to the place of residence. Students and faculty in the urban school studied distinguished one another generally according to wealth (McFarland, 1999).

This study is significant because it makes advances over other research on student resistance using both ethnographic and detailed information on behaviors within two high schools and 36 different classrooms (McFarland, 1999). The study not only identified common defiant behaviors of students failing academically, but also identified the factors that are associated with resistant-to-learning behaviors and increased defiant behaviors in high school students. McFarland (1999) found that resistant and defiant behaviors (regardless of race, gender, class or individual traits) stem from classroom status and vary
according to teacher/student relationships. The void of teacher/student relationships enables student social and political network opportunities to undermine and redirect classroom affairs (McFarland, 1999). McFarland's study adds credibility to Connors-Douglas' (2000) micro-ethnographic research concerning the socio-cultural norms of middle school classrooms. Connors-Douglas (2000) observed and investigated the disruptive behaviors of the 61 students with a secondary concentration on the role of 12 teachers in a middle school setting. The study was based on Goffman's (1974) theory of social interactions in bound institutions that explains the different social roles persons take on in different settings as a frame of analysis.

Connors-Douglas (2000) found two interloping structures of classroom interaction present in the classroom. One emanated from the official structure, consisting of the teacher, the administrators and the school district; the other emanated from the student infrastructure (Connors-Douglas, 2000). The lack of an official structure consisting of students and teachers suggests to educators that there is much to be learned from the classroom interaction patterns between students and teachers (Connors-Douglas, 2000). Connors-Douglas (2000) stated that there is much to be gleaned and understood about the relationship between the official structures' imposed design of classroom interaction on students, and students' responses to this imposed design.

Cooper (1993) asserts that the real tragedy in failing to reach a child in our care does not stem from the child. A child does not fail because of his or her lack of preparation for school (Cooper, 1993). Cooper states the tragedy is the educational system's failure to respond to students' personal needs and developmental histories.
Cooper states that the tragedy is educators’ lack of response to who the students are and how they think.

Making the needed social change in the attitudes of educators is a long and arduous process (Fairbanks, 2000). Reform has to be the establishment of challenging standards in the academic disciplines (Cohen, 1993). Reform will have to include an alignment of curriculum, instruction, assessment, accountability, and professional development with new academic goals (Knapp, 1995).

The necessity for addressing the learning of students is highlighted in the wisdom, vision, and works of leaders in the philosophical work of Gadotti (1996) and physiological research on learning of Caine & Caine (1991). Student learning depends on the classroom aspects of social, cultural, economic structures and the perceptions of the students, teachers and administrators within that structure (Caine & Caine, 1991).

Students living in a high-poverty area experiencing school failure and increased anxiety are likely to display behaviors of juvenile delinquency, gang participation, and tendencies towards extreme violence and antisocial/criminal behavior [Colorado Institute for Conflict Resolution and Creative Leadership (CICRCL), 2002]. Educators have the opportunity to prevent these behaviors from developing by forming a relationship that supports the emotional development of their students (CICRCL, 2002).

Grossman, Neckerman, and Koepsell, (1997) undertook a one-year randomized controlled pilot investigation examining the impact of a violence prevention curriculum. Grossman et al. (1997) paired schools to reflect similar student bodies relative to socio-economic and ethnic makeup in 12 high-poverty elementary schools. By random assignment, one school in each pair was assigned to a control group and the other to an
experimental group. Observations indicated that physical aggression decreased when a teaching model designed to develop skills that are central to healthy social emotional development was used in the classrooms (Grossman et al., 1997).

Learning is an emotional part of the growth process (Levine, 2002). Learning is a natural function of adapting to the experiences in the environment to which the learner connects (Levine, 2002). A learner’s performance of processing information is negatively impacted when preoccupied by anxiety and threats that exist within the environment of poverty (Ornstein & Sobel, 1987).

The need for educators to reduce anxiety and effectively manage student stress should be built into the educational experience (Bamburg, 2002). Students living in high-poverty areas enter classrooms labeled “at risk,” and generally have fewer Standard English language skills (Gardner, 1994). This increases the chance that anxiety will affect their learning process (Gardner, 1994).

The district Davenport (2002) served had consistently and successfully turned high-poverty schools to high performing schools by ensuring teachers demanded mastery in English from all their students. Students that live in a high-poverty area may demonstrate apparent skills in Social English (Cummins, 2000). Social English is the basic oral communication skill (Cummins, 1986). Teachers evaluate students with proficiency in Social English as proficient in English (Cummins, 1986). Teachers fail to recognize that the cognitive Standard English language proficiency that is needed to be successful academically can take the student who does not speak Standard English up to eight years to acquire (Cummins, 1986).
Data identifies 83% of students that attend high-poverty schools as minority students (OPPAGA, 2000). Minority students, that do not speak Standard English, suffer the results of an inaccurate assessment of their English proficiency in their repeated failure to meet standardized benchmarks, manifesting additional anxiety for the student (Cummins, 1986).

It is essential for teachers to be aware of and acknowledge students’ level of anxiety (Pappamihiel, 2002). Pappamihiel studied the language anxiety level and the school factors contributing to the anxiety of 178 middle school immigrant students attending a United States high-poverty school. The research revealed that teacher-student interaction was the biggest contributing factor in student anxiety, challenge avoidance, reduction of anxiety, and student successes.

Understanding the concepts of Pekrun’s (1992) expectancy value theory of anxiety and Bandura’s (1991) theory of self-efficacy findings concerning student learning anxiety and behavior predictors of the anxiety responses in students should guide planning of educational experiences. When a student’s vision of a situation is used to relate the parts of lessons, it eliminates student anxiety of the unknown (Pekrun, 1992). The concepts of worry and distraction relate first to appraisal of situations with action control expectancies, intimidating or not (Pekrun, 1992; Bandura, 1991). Students assess their skill to carry out a successful resolution based on their previous talent or skill in dealing with the situation (Pekrun, 1992). Instruction that allows for cultural diversity and encourages exploration without threat to the student is essential in language learning (Bandura, 1991).
Bandura (1991) states when the situation is perceived as threatening, the resultant anxiety is dependent on past performance success rate. Learners form a perception of the chance that they will be successful in dealing positively with the threat (Bandura, 1991). Pekrun (1992) explains the resulting learning anxiety as situation specific to experience and the degree of emotional security in a given situation. Pekrun (1992) makes clear that failing in learning circumstances causes habitual reactions of high anxiety. The individual who has experienced the situation as threatening in the past perceives future learning situations as a threat that compounds anxiety for the learner (Pekrun, 1992).

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) make a further distinction of situation specific anxiety. Individuals who suffer situation specific anxiety perceive certain events as anxiety producing when certain similar factors are present such as repeated academic failure (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Caine & Caine (1991) discuss what we know about how humans learn in *Teaching and the Human Brain*: learning engages the entire physiology. Teaching methods encourage learning with exercises built for stress management and relief from anxiety during the learning process.

Stipek (1993) wrote that the academic motivations of students in high-poverty schools are inhibited by anxiety due to students’ repeated failure in our current educational system. If the anxiety is not remedied, it causes serious consequences in those students’ behavior and learning (Stipek, 1993). When students are given an academic task that they are unsure they can complete successfully, they act out (Stipek, 1993). The students’ problems with the learning activity are expressed in terms of low-
effort expenditure, poor attention, and high anxieties that are often displayed as disruptive behavior in the classroom (Stipek, 1993).

Sautter writes in a Kappan Special Report (1995) for the American Psychological Association that the anxiety children experience as either victims or witnesses to violence prevalent in high-poverty areas includes intrusive imagery, emotional constriction, challenge avoidance, sleep difficulties, disinterest in significant activities (such as school), and attention difficulties. The anxieties that manifest from living in areas of poverty interfere with normal development and learning in school (CICRCL, 2002).

There are characteristics of bonding breaks and attachment disturbances identified with children of poverty that causes them anxiety (CICRCL, 2002). That anxiety level can be measured according to their environmental experiences (CICRCL, 2002). There are serious behaviors that correlate highly to students termed “at-risk” because of their economic status (CICRCL, 2002).

Dwek (1986) describes adaptive and maladaptive patterns of achievement behavior. Children that feel helpless suffer increased anxiety, which diminishes their motivation and effort when they are confronted with academic challenges (Dwek, 1986). School failure compounds the student’s anxiety and results in increased negative affects on the student (Dwek, 1986). Increased anxiety and negative self-cognitions are imposed on students by the failure of the schools to recognize and relieve anxiety (Dwek, 1986). The society of cultures living in poverty develops values and norms to adapt to the increased anxiety they live with growing up in the hostile environment of a high-poverty society (Covington, 1992). Caine & Caine (1991) revealed that by ignoring the personal
world and anxiety of the learner, educators actually inhibit the effective functioning of the brain.

**What Successful Schools Do**

Darling-Hammond (1996) identified the characteristics of schools that are considered learner-centered. She indicated that these learner-centered schools are specifically designed and intentionally structured to be sensitive to the individual needs of learners (Darling-Hammond, 1996). In learning-centered schools, educators relate essential features of the learning activity to student interests; all activities are clearly focused on student reactions to the activity and modified to create increased positive student responses (Darling-Hammond, 1996). Through assessment and reflection, teachers develop powerful learning techniques and meaningful lesson presentations (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

These schools organize their efforts around learners’ needs for active, inquiry-based learning opportunities that build on prior experience (Darling-Hammond, 1996). Learning is planned around complex and integrative tasks that lead to major products and outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 1996). The students and teachers in a successful high-poverty school are grouped in ways that are suitably personalized for teachers to come to know their students well (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

A qualitative study conducted by the North West Regional Education Lab (NWREL) staff (2000) documented promising educational practices for restructuring schools that are failing to provide positive measurable learning outcomes for all students. Interviews, classroom observations, and examination of school documents were used to gather information on perspectives of school personnel, students, families, and
community members (NWREL, 2000). The project addressed such topics as resiliency, family and community involvement, effective literacy practices cultural continuity, professional development, and expectations and aspirations for students' education. The project identified a framework of best practice features common to successful high-poverty schools that lead to improved outcomes for educationally disadvantaged and culturally diverse students that include:

- Students' emotional development is the focus. A responsive, challenging curriculum is designed to enhance students' curiosity. Lessons build on students' present interests, and support all students' efforts.

- Professional development emphasizes teaching that reflects students' needs. Teachers learn to respond to students' needs. Teacher responses to student needs are addressed with instruction that emphasizes learners' thinking, life experiences, and cultural values.

- Teaching techniques are inclusive and culturally responsive to all students in order to encourage students to construct their own understanding.

- The focus is on mastery in language and literacy to build a strong foundation for all learning. Literacy is embedded in social contexts to enhance student exploration into the function of literacy.

- Collaborative, supportive relationships are developed among all of the members of the school's population. Instructional activities are designed to be a student-centered interest area for investigation.

Schaps & Watson (1996) highlight similar components that empower teachers to be successful working in high-poverty schools. The common essential elements of best
practices in successful high-poverty schools, that gained a school the academic edge when serving students with disadvantages and diversity are classrooms that included:

- Staff develops a supportive, stable relationship with each of the students. Schools are set up so that all members of a school community know one another and view each other as collaborators in learning. Teachers carefully examine their approaches and analyze what kind of relationships they are fostering with their students.

- Teachers foster students’ natural desire to understand the world they experience. They provide activities for students that encourage students to reflect, self-evaluate, and pursue answers to their questions. The learning experience is shifted from rote learning to discovery learning where students seek to find answers to evidence and focus that is different than their own.

- Curriculum is driven by long-term, defined, shared goals and short-term goals focused on coverage concerns. The long-term goals are broad to develop an understanding of purpose and meaning from the world.

- The pedagogy is one structured to create intrinsic motivation in students. Opportunities are available for enumeration of opinions. Students are encouraged to seek understanding of the influences they feel that leads students to proceed from the whole to the parts of why something is worth learning.

- Focus is on the emotional dimensions of learning. All models of teaching are structured in social contexts of human qualities and values. Discipline approaches are behavior strategies for developing responsible standards for the best interest of everyone.
Innovative approaches and techniques are most effective when combined with high expectations for at-risk learners. Programs that combine these elements are currently being adopted across the country. One such successful program is Success For All. Similar restructuring programs include Roots & Wings and The America’s Choice Design Network. Other programs focus on the individual learner. The ATLAS Communities Project works to create personalized learning environments for students. Reading Recovery, The Modern Red Schoolhouse, and Expeditionary Outward Bound are also examples of successful, student-centered educational models (NCREL 1996). Successful high-poverty schools combine high expectations, effective teaching techniques, and school wide restructuring programs in order to improve learning among at-risk learners.

Developing resiliency behaviors in children who are exposed to significant stress and adversity is relational education (Rolf et al., 1993). Educational practice that focuses on the entire physiology of the student will provide the answer to what is essential to help students that are disadvantaged to avoid succumbing to school failure, substance abuse, mental health, and juvenile delinquency problems that they are prone to experience (Rolf et al., 1993).

Sautter (1995) indicated that education could not overestimate the impact of these negative conditions poverty imposes on our nation’s youth. Educators need up-to-date information concerning the psychological stages of child development, knowledge of emotional developmental needs, and skills to serve the needs for each stage (CICRCL, 2002). Children’s learning environment and activities need to be structured around these needs and the optimal care of children must become a national priority (CICRCL, 2002).
Dr. Comer (1997), working as the director of the Yale University Study Center School Development Program, found when students traumatized with anxiety form a relationship with a reliable, caring, responsible teacher they overcome succumbing to failure in school. Caring teachers can make the provision for students to achieve strong academic gains in spite of the environmental difficulties they face (Sugishita, 2000). Comer added that with trust, bonding, and learning continuity within the classroom comes willingness from the student to open up and take risks that academic learning requires.

Sugishita (2000) defines teacher pro-social support as a form of teacher nurturance. Sugishita borrowed the term from developmental psychologists’ term “pro-social support” that refers to features of teaching traits and practices that reduce student anxiety. Poplin & Weeres (1994), in a study of school problems, concluded that the lack of nurturing learning experiences is a central issue in solving the crisis of the level of anxiety among disadvantaged youth in public schools. Pianta & Walsh (1996), Poplin & Weeres, and Russell (1994) assert that accommodating student-learning experiences increases student achievement and acts as a risk intervention for combating anxiety.

Poverty is not the blame for the achievement gap. The educational tradition has stood in the way of the modernization of the system. Educators need to focus on student learning. Research has given us tools to build solutions by identifying both risk factors and protective factors. Collectively and individually, we can make a difference.

This research work seeks to understand how administrators and teachers in high-poverty schools perceive challenges, successes, and essential school features of the learning environment that will facilitate student academic success. This researcher will
collaborate with educational professionals to consider what is going wrong and what can be done to prevent poverty schools from failing to meet students' needs based on solid knowledge of how children develop.
Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to identify the challenges and successes experienced by administrators and teachers working in high-poverty schools. This study also describes what administrators and teachers perceived to be essential school features needed to facilitate secondary students’ academic success.

Administrators and teachers working in high-poverty schools selected for this research have an influential effect on the delivery of services to students presently struggling with academic success. By researching the administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions of and experiences with the schools’ problems and features perceived to be essential in the solutions, the researcher was able to surmise what might be needed to successfully help students in high-poverty schools achieve academic success. This researcher investigated what essential features of the learning environment the two high-poverty schools in Florida perceived as important and if they perceived their schools as adequately able to provide their students the means to achieve academic success.

Research Questions

1. What are the challenges and successes experienced by administrators and teachers in relation to best practices for working in secondary high-poverty schools?

2. What are the perceived essential school features needed in high-poverty schools in relation to what the literature identifies as best practices that facilitate academic success?
3. Were there similarities and/or differences between the perceptions of administrators and teachers in a C-graded high-poverty school and an F-graded high-poverty school as it related to best practices shown to be successful from the literature?

The perspectives from administrators and teachers provided responses to critical beliefs, routines, practices and forces that have an influence on the academic success of secondary students in a high-poverty school. As suggested by Ferguson, Ferguson, and Taylor (1991), interpreting administrators’ and teachers’ perspectives may make a difference and help overcome educational challenges in these schools. Cummins (1986) suggested that a major reason previous attempts at educational reform have not been successful is that there has not been enough research to motivate an effort to reform teaching and learning needed to promote students’ academic success in high-poverty schools.

**Research Design**

The case study as defined by Gall, Borg, & Gall (1996), is a research tradition of in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon. This type of research method is best suited to this study because it postured the researcher as a “curious investigator” (Mahrer, 1988) who wished to address the gaps in literature and discover that which had been previously unknown. This researcher’s tenor of curiosity about the particulars for students’ academic success in high-poverty schools directed the approach from the qualitative perspective that emphasizes open-minded curiosity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

This study investigated the perceptions and experiences of administrators and teachers who work in secondary high-poverty schools. This “naturalistic inquiry” (Guba
& Lincoln, 1981) tradition emphasizes the interpretative understanding of human interaction. This study is what the qualitative researchers Bogdan & Bilkin (1982) refer to as “verstehen”: a concern with what informants are experiencing, how they interpret their experiences, and how they structure the phenomena in which they live. Constructed into this research was the methodology of Guba and Lincoln, which included (a) investigating credibility of sources, (b) acknowledging threats to validity, (c) precise documentation to insure consistency, and (d) strategies for meeting concerns.

Investigating credibility of sources was based on the recommendations of Kincheloe (1991), in terms of this qualitative research, it meant applying double consciousness of the researcher’s lived experience in high-poverty schools to the unknown high-poverty school. The researcher worked to ensure credibility with accurate and precise descriptions of the participants and school sites, the selection procedure, development of the interview questions, the procedures for procuring participants, and the techniques for information analysis presented in this chapter (Merriam, 1998).

Accuracy was enhanced by repeated reviews and by conducting checks of the information and instruments.

The results from the review indicated that changes to the instruments would be beneficial, and these changes were made for more clarity in meaning. Reliability was improved by the pilot study, which Babbie (1990) describes as a mini-walkthrough of the entire study. Reliability was addressed at the time of the research by explaining to participants the purpose of the study. The researcher provided participants details of the research methods, used consistent interviewing techniques, and provided explanation of elements of the processes that directed the need and value for this investigation (Goetz &
LeCompte, 1984). Additionally, threats to validity were addressed through acknowledgment in the limitations of the study, open disclosure on possible researcher bias, employing self-monitoring with continual questioning and re-evaluation of all phases of the studies activities (Erickson, 1986). Internal validity was addressed using triangulation (Maxwell, 1996), presenting an honest rendering of how participants actually viewed the discussion items via multiple methods of data collection.

Additionally, the researcher has worked in School 1 and in other areas with high-poverty populations as an educator. The researcher has participated in numerous workshops, trainings, staff development, and mini-ethnographic studies. Those experiences provided the researcher with up-to-date knowledge on best practices based on both field research in high-poverty schools and other special populations. These extensive experiences may have been sources of biases on the part of the research.

Compensation for possible bias necessitated triangulation of two sources of data, the interview and the survey (Yin, 1994). The methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1989) of member checking was also done when the text of the interview was reviewed and confirmed as representative by the participants which led to increased confidence in the interpretation. These processes worked to accomplish an ethical need to confirm the validity of the process employed and to eliminate possible research bias (Stake, 1995).

This type of intrinsic exploratory case study is appropriate when the researcher has an interest that may serve as a prelude to more research (Yin, 1993; Stake, 1995). It was conducted in the natural setting of their schools to enhance participants comfort when investigating (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) the successes, challenges experienced, the importance of essential features for best practice and how satisfactorily participants felt
their school addressed those essential features of best practice.

**Settings**

The researcher was an employee of School 1, whose student population consisted of over 91% of the students on free or reduced-priced lunch. The school where the researcher taught was rated by FCAT results as a D school for the years 1999 - 2002. In 2003, the researcher’s school received an F grade. A county and surrounding area public information data search unveiled no upper level schools with more than 50% of their students on free or reduced-price lunch with better than a grade of D.

This researcher sent a request for information to the Florida Department Of Education (FDOE) asking to provide the researcher (via electronic mail followed by a United States Postal Service-delivered information letter) a list of any schools with similar demographics to School 1 that was more successful. The FDOE found only one school in the state with similar demographics that was more successful. It was rated C according to FCAT results.

Two schools were the setting of this study: School 1 and School 2. School 1 is a traditional tracked combination middle-high school serving a total of 1076 students located in a small (high-poverty area) town 70 miles from a large metropolitan area. The majority of the students (77%) are Black, 23% are Hispanic, and only 4% are White. The status distinction is somewhat solidified by the class background and place of residence relative to the area. Ninety-one percent of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch.

School 2 likewise is a traditional tracked combo middle-high school located in a small (high-poverty area) town 50 miles from a large inland state capital city serving a
total of 424 students. Fifty-six percent of the students are Black, 30% are Hispanic, and 16% are White. Eighty-eight percent of the total student population receives free or reduced-price lunch.

The criteria for site selection were:

1. The school must have more than 50% of the student population on free or reduced-price lunch.
2. The school must serve grades 7-12.
3. One school must have a failing Florida school grade of F (the researcher’s school).
4. The second school must have a grade better than a D and have similar demographics to the F school.

**Description of Participants**

The researcher selected the participants according to the following criteria:

1. The secondary teacher and the administrator participants were employed in School 1 rated F, based on the results of the students’ performance in the FCAT.
2. The secondary teacher and the administrator participants were employed in School 2 rated C, based on the results of the students’ performance in the FCAT.

The researcher chose her school of employment as School 1 for her research because it was a struggling high-poverty school. School 2 was chosen because it was the only school with similar demographics that was more successful, with a C grade. Administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions of the challenges, successes, and essential school features associated with helping secondary students achieve academic success were analyzed. The researcher looked for commonalities and/or differences.
FIGURE 1-A
Ethnic and Gender Composition
of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Characteristics</th>
<th>No. of Subjects</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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</table>
FIGURE 1-B
High-Poverty Experience of Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School 1</th>
<th>School 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average No. of Years Teaching in High-Poverty School</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average No. of Years Living in High-Poverty Area</td>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Participant</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
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<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School “1”</strong> Administrator ‘1’</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator ‘2’</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator ‘3’</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher ‘1’</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher ‘2’</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td><strong>School “2”</strong> Administrator ‘1’</td>
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<td>Teacher ‘1’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher ‘6’</td>
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</table>
Procedures

Six teachers and three administrators in high-poverty School 1 and six teachers and three administrators in high-poverty School 2 were selected as participants in this research. All participants' filled out a questionnaire about their educational, professional, and ethnic backgrounds. The participants responded to a Likert-like scale on the survey that assessed the importance and satisfaction level of items of best practice identified in the literature related to teaching, learning, school environment and professional development. All participants also participated in an interview investigating challenges and successes associated with helping secondary students achieve academic success. The selection procedure was done to maximize what could be learned in the period of time available for the study (Yin, 1994; Stake, 1995).

It was decided by the researcher to interview and analyze data from six teachers and three administrators employed in each school. Every teacher had an equal opportunity to participate.

This researcher had an on going communication with her principal and administrators at School 1 concerning the focus of her research. Administrators at the researcher’s school continued to support her efforts to understand the problems of high-poverty schools as they related to student academic success. Dialogue among administrators and researcher specified that all participation would be voluntary.

The form of distribution agreed upon at School 1 was that the researcher would distribute the materials into teachers’ mailboxes. Research investigations at School 1 commenced week two after approval of the research proposal by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Lynn University. Every teacher in School 1 received in his/her mailbox a
letter of introduction stating the purpose of the research, a copy of the Bill of Rights for research participants, a consent form to be signed if the person wished to be a participant and, a questionnaire (See Appendices A-E). Also distributed with participant forms was a note requesting that the completed questionnaire be returned to the researchers’ mailbox if anyone wished to be a participant. This was requested to provide the researcher with the information to select a representative sample of participants from among those who agreed to participate.

All personal interviews were done on the teachers’ free time during the five days following distribution of research material. The researcher conducted her study as consent responses were received. As soon as an ample number (9) of participants in each school had agreed to participate, the researcher waited for teacher planning periods and conducted the interviews. The researcher informed the school principal that she had received ample responses and completed the research. The first (6) teacher respondents were varied enough to be a representative sample of the school for the study and no further responses were required. The researcher conducted her study as consent responses were received in the chronological order that the participant teacher’s free time was available. Administrator participants were interviewed on the researcher’s free time and when it was convenient for the administrator.

When the researcher attained approval for the proposal from the IRB, she spent the next five workdays to start the study at School 2. This researcher had contacted the principal administrator at School 2 by telephone first to introduce herself and summarize her intent. The administrator welcomed the researcher and agreed to assist in the research. A letter was faxed to the administrator at School 2 for confirmation of the
telephone conversation, followed by a postal confirmation. The researcher continued an ongoing communication with principal at School 2, concerning the focus of her research.

The principal at School 2 gave the researcher an open invitation to come to the school at the researcher's convenience. Administrators at School 2 continued to support the researcher's efforts to understand the problems of high-poverty schools, as they related to student academic success.

Dialogue among administrators and researcher specified that all participants would be voluntary. Every teacher had equal opportunity to participate. The form of distribution agreed upon at School 2 was that the researcher would distribute the materials into the teachers' mailboxes in School 2 on the day of arrival. The researcher notified the principal of School 2 as soon as she arrived to secure the appropriate setting to conduct the interviews with potential participants at School 2 and confirm the times administrators and teachers would be available for interviews.

The researcher spent one week at School 2 to conduct her research. On the first day, the principal offered the researcher a quiet area, a desk, and chairs in the conference lounge. The principal provided the researcher a school staff assistant to guide her to the teacher mailroom for the distribution of the materials. At that time the researcher distributed the materials. Each teacher in School 2 received a letter of introduction in his or her mailbox stating the purpose of the research, a copy of the Bill of Rights for research participants, and a consent form to be signed if the person wished to be a participant. Also distributed with participant forms was a note requesting that completed questionnaires be returned to the researchers' box. A box labeled "Research Response"
was placed next to teachers’ mailboxes. The participants’ questionnaire provided the researcher with the information to select a representative sample of participants.

The researcher conducted her study as consent responses were received. The Principal volunteered as a participant when the researcher finished the distribution of materials. The Principal at School 2 also provided the researcher with a schedule of time to determine when the other administrators and teachers would be available for participation.

As soon as an ample number (9) of respondents had agreed to participate, the researcher waited for teacher planning periods to conduct the interviews. The researcher informed the school principal that she had received ample responses and completed the research. The first six (6) teacher respondents were varied enough to be a representative sample of the school for the study.

All personal interviews were done on the teachers’ free time during the five days following distribution of research material. The researcher conducted her study with participants in the chronological order participant free time was available for the interviews.

**Pilot Study Revisions**

Babbie (1990) described the pilot study as a practice run-through of the entire study. The pilot study was conducted with five teachers and one administrator during the month prior to the research from a middle school and a high school in a county adjacent to the county where School 1 is located in an effort to pinpoint and correct research problems that may threaten the reliability of the case study (Babbie, 1990). The pilot sample included four females and two males, two Blacks, one Hispanic, and three Whites.
participated in the pilot study. The pilot study results that prompted revisions to improve reliability are listed below.

**Questionnaire Revisions**

The researcher omitted questions about age and name because the participants felt uncomfortable providing that information. In retrospect, the questions should not have been included, since confidentiality was promised to all participants. A question requesting information regarding years working in a high-poverty school was added to the questionnaire because it may have a bearing in the analysis.

**Survey Revisions**

The pilot survey proved to take longer than the estimated time to complete, which could cause an unacceptable intrusion on participant time. The second problem with the survey was the ambiguity of the language describing the essential features. In the revised form of the survey, attention was focused around short, direct identification of essential features of best practices in successful high-poverty schools. Rather than requiring participants to enter numbers as a method of rating each statement, options of corresponding values ranging from “poor/low” to “excellent/thorough” were available for rating importance and satisfaction of each essential feature of best practices.

**Interview Question Revisions**

The interview questions were revised to eliminate ambiguous language. Questions were aligned with essential features of best practice items on the survey. The essential features of best practice were addressed as classroom applications in the theoretical framework and identified in the literature review as features of best practices that
facilitate success. Questions that would obtain simple statements in the responses were deleted.

Revisions to prompt open-ended queries were made as recommended by Yin (1984) to expand the depth of the data gathering, and to increase the number of sources of information. Levy’s (1988) methodology was also added to this study’s revisions of interview questions. In the revised questions, each topic was followed by prompts to induce discussion of specific instances, applications, and experiences of the participant. This was done to flesh out responses so that salient contextual items could be identified, patterns brought to light, and relationships investigated in analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1988).

This pilot study provided the researcher with the experience necessary in preparation of research skills recommended (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991; Yin, 1995). This helped this investigator to function confidently and professionally to ask good questions, interpret the responses, be a good listener, be adaptive and flexible so as to react to various situations and responses, have a firm grip of the methodology, and be unbiased by preconceived notions (Yin, 1995). Finally, the sequence of questions was manipulated to enhance the interview climate with regard to providing participant comfort and designed to parallel survey items for analysis.

**Instrumentation**

**Questionnaire**

A demographic questionnaire (see Appendix F) asked participants to identify their ethnicity, gender, experience in education, years in a high-poverty secondary school, degree, and certification. This study did not investigate relationships between participant
perceptions and individual characteristics, such as sex or ethnicity. The information was collected to help establish the profiles of the participants as recommended in *Questionnaires: Design and Use* by Berdie & Niebuhr (1986).

**Survey**

Vogt (1993) describes a survey as a research instrument designed to record data of participant responses, such as ranking items under investigation. This survey was developed by the researcher to understand participants’ levels of importance and perceived satisfaction with what the literature identifies as essential features of best practices that facilitate success. Responses on the survey indicated participant perceptions of essential features found by empirical research as effective techniques of teaching, learning, and professional development, as they relate to academic achievement. Items under investigation were obtained by the researcher’s literature review, which highlighted school features essential in successful programs and projects (see Appendices G-H).

**Interviews**

The researcher utilized a semi-structured interview approach (Gall, Borg, & Gall 1996). The interview protocol was authored by the researcher to provide a framework within which respondents expressed their own understandings in their own terms (Bogdan & Bilkin, 1982). In this way, multiple perspectives were explored and included (See Appendices I-J). A more advantageous open-ended question as recommended by Babbie (1990) allowed for participants to voice their stories. In addition, item probes were created to help bring out responses of salient issues that could be identified, relationships explored and patterns brought to light (Huberman & Miles, 1988).
Procedures for Conducting Interview

Interviews were conducted on the teachers' free time during the five days following distribution of research materials. Participants at both schools were asked to fill out the questionnaire and the survey prior to the agreed upon interview time. As some of the participants forgot their survey, one was given to the participant when they arrived for the interview. The survey was filled out while the researcher prepared for the interview and adjusted the recording instrument to insure appropriate functioning. Additionally, participants at both schools were given the option of telephone interviews for the purpose of conducting member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This option was given in case time was a concern to the participant or the researcher.

All participants were comfortably seated for the interview. The participants were asked to verify their consent for audio taping. The participants were asked to submit their completed questionnaire and survey before beginning the interview. If the participant had not completed or brought the instruments to the interview, the researcher provided another and requested they be filled out at that time. The researcher waited for the participant to complete the instruments. No discomfort occurred, and there was no risk involved. All information provided was kept in strict confidentiality.

The audio taped interviews were done on a one-to-one basis and consisted of open-ended questions that required 15 to 20 minutes to complete. Interviews varied in length of time according to participants' contribution in response information and time available to each participant. Participants were contacted in person at School 1 and by
telephone at School 2 for a follow-up conversation requiring five to ten minutes to review the transcripts of the initial interview for accuracy (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

 Participation was voluntary, and any participant could have withdrawn from the study at any time without any negative consequences. If a participant had withdrawn from the study, the data collected would have been eliminated and destroyed.

 The researcher explained to the participant the objectives of the interview with the following statement: “I am going to break this interview into three segments. I am going to ask you about your school and your experiences, beginning with successes, and then we will talk about essential school features related to students’ academic achievement. Finally, we will talk about challenges and the features needed to help students achieve academic success.”

 The responses were transcribed. The transcription of the interview was then coded with a number and an alias was used instead of names to protect participant identity and confidentiality. The data resulting from this study is being kept in a security box in the researcher’s home office for a period of five years, after which it will be destroyed.

 Reports of this research study did not include any identifiable personal data. The overall results of the research study are published in this doctoral dissertation and possibly in other venues, such as a professional journal. Lynn University’s Institutional Review Board has authorized access to all materials related to this research study. There was no financial remuneration for participating in this research study.

 Data Analysis

 The researcher analyzed information from 18 surveys and 18 interviews. The use of a semi-structured interview protocol was superimposed with patterns of responses that
parallel the survey question items. Several readings of the audio taped interview
transcripts and the survey responses were done to synthesize the interview and survey
data. A conceptual matrix (Dey, 1993) was developed identifying major themes/topics
from clustering (See Table 2 in Chapter IV).

Krippendorff (1980) describes the importance of clustering as a process of
moving to higher levels of abstraction, subsuming particulars from data collection into
the general. Weber (1990) and Carley (1990) also recommend clustering. Analysis
utilized the tactics recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) with the qualitative
method of clustering themes and reoccurring phrases across the data sources. Content
analysis identified frequently appearing themes and patterns. A separate list of major
themes was developed to help the researcher avoid the typical oversight problem in
making clusters at complex levels in the manuscript.

The notes from the survey and interviews were reduced to repeated views and
experiences from participants. This process eliminated a common problem that occurs
when some of the themes being clustered have many attributes. It was difficult to cluster
entities relevant in one or more clusters. Having a separate list of themes allowed the
researcher to review themes for relationship in (successes, challenges and essential
features for success) each of the theme headings (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). An entity
that was relevant to several clusters was not overlooked and it was counted to each
relevant cluster. These clusters were then transformed into patterns. The patterns were
placed into the main themes from the literature review and strength of occurrences of
respondents was counted. In this qualitative analysis when determining the proxies for
challenges and successes, the researcher induced themes from the text (open coding) as
recommended by Shapiro & Markoff (1997). The effort displayed findings that reflect both prior concepts from the literature with relationship to topics generated from the research survey and interviews.

This researcher incorporated an incisive and thorough review. This identified any texts with the same specific concepts. Evidence of different meaning in relations among concepts were taken into account and provided the case analysis. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend using a graphic design to cluster both questions and responses for easier generation of meaning.

The preliminary conceptually clustered matrix was designed to display the findings. Columns are used to bring together items that are related under each theme. Columns are labeled Experiences, Successes & Challenges, Perceived as Essential Feature for Success, Inclusion or Omission of Best Practice Item Feature, Value and Satisfaction of Best Practice Essential Features, Rows are labeled for views of the four-role groups (Teacher School 1; Administrator School 1; Teacher School 2; Administrator School 2). The matrix was expanded for each participant. Additional rows were labeled for each of the 24 essential features of best practices. Columns were listed for successes, challenges, essential features, inclusion or omission, and value and satisfaction levels. An unnamed row was designated for unexpected reoccurring responses. The theme of importance and satisfaction level was embedded within each of the four themes to acknowledge participants attitude toward the topic. This research method identified items occurring within participant’s case analysis in relation to best practice features.

During the conclusion phase, findings on each theme were examined for representativeness. In addition, validity was tested through triangulation. Conclusions
were specified and interpretations made on the basis of the strength of the themes supported by multiple instrument sources.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation is the collecting of information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods (Denzin, 1970). Triangulation helps to eliminate biases (such as researcher bias) that might result from relying exclusively on any one data-collection method, source, analyst, or theory (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

This research used two instruments to serve as a means of triangulation by adding variety to the methods of collection of information from the participants as recommended by Denzin (1970). Triangulation took place by means of a survey, an interview, and member checking of the perceptions of the participants. These perceptions were associated with the challenges, successes, and essential school features related to best practices. Following the guidelines of Shavelson (1996), the survey was used to determine the incidence of a characteristic in the target group, the characteristic incidence or omission, and a characteristic relationship to value and satisfaction of essential school features related to students’ academic achievement in a high-poverty school addressed in this research.

Member checking was applied to validate information gathered. This meant checking with the participating individuals to review the statements they made in the researcher’s report to check for accuracy and completeness (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). The review of the statements in the report did not reveal factual errors and did not induce the participants to recall any new facts or perceptions of their responses. The researcher did not need to collect any more data to reconcile discrepancies and the reports did not
have to be re-written. This decision was based on participants' approval and agreement during the member check.

The researcher strived to adhere to the methodological guidelines presented in this chapter as strictly as possible so that the data collected would be authentic. The next chapter examines the data collected using the interview and survey described in Chapter III.
Chapter IV

FINDINGS

This chapter examines, describes, and analyzes the perceptions and experiences of administrators and teachers working in secondary high-poverty schools. Data was obtained from teachers’ and administrators’ responses in one high-poverty school that maintained a satisfactory grade from the state of Florida grading system and in one high-poverty school that received a failing grade by the Florida grading system (See Appendix K). Semi-structured interviews and written surveys focused on understanding their perceptions and experiences of successes and challenges working in high-poverty secondary schools. The instruments were designed for the exploration of essentials needed for success in high-poverty schools as they relate to best practices. The survey assessed the participants’ perceptions of the importance and the satisfaction levels of best practices. The best practices were identified in the literature review as critical features of successful programs for high-poverty schools.

The researcher followed the robust procedures of Yin (1993), Stake (1995), and Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg (1991), who have wide experiences in qualitative methodology. Procedures were also focused on understanding the different ways in which individuals and groups of participants conceptualize ‘bits of life’ (Bloome, 1989) that were used for investigation in these high-poverty secondary schools. This dual-case study approach was designed to elicit details from the viewpoints of the participants, using both the semi-structured interview and the survey as sources of evidence. These procedural specifications for the analysis also provided the internal validity as theories developed from the collection and analysis of the data (Yin, 1994). Exploration of this type was
useful in revealing the principles of practices that were constructed by participants at the
two schools, as they relate to essential features of best practices as indicated in the
literature as necessary for success in working with high-poverty populations.

External validity was achieved through the development of theoretical
relationships and generalizations made from analysis of data obtained from these dual-
site case study (Yin, 1994). Yin (1993) identified this method of exploratory case studies
as a prelude to social research and was instrumental in the development of the
understanding of this dual-site research. This dual site investigation provided more
reliability than what would be obvious through observation of one case study alone
(Stake, 1995).

The selection of these two high-poverty schools with similar demographics and
contrasting Florida school grades of C and F proved to be fortuitous. Data analysis of the
semi-structured interviews and surveys ranking the levels of participants’ expressed
importance and satisfaction that a best practice was being implemented was compared to
the essential best practice features indicated in the literature. The differences found
indicated which of the features of a best practice might be the most critical to implement
for students to achieve academic success.

The presentation of findings is organized in five sections: 1) successes, 2)
challenges, 3) essential best practices, 4) similarities between a C school and an F school,
and 5) differences between these two types of schools. All the successes, challenges,
similarities, and differences are in relation to those identified in the literature as essential
features of best practices. Sections 1 and 2 will answer the first research question (What
are the perceived successes and challenges experienced by administrators and teachers in
relation to what the literature identifies as the essential features of best practices needed in secondary high-poverty schools?). Section 3 presents data related to the second research question (What are the perceived essential features needed in high-poverty schools in relation to the essential features of best practices to facilitate academic success identified in the literature?). Finally, sections 4 and 5 analyze similarities and differences between the two schools in order to answer the third research question (Are there similarities and/or differences between the perceptions of administrators and teachers in a C-graded high-poverty school and an F-graded high-poverty school in relation to the essential features of best practices identified in the literature?).

In each section, the findings were analyzed with regard to best practices in successful schools. The researcher utilized two sources to collect data regarding best practices in high-poverty schools. This data was examined in order to discover what successes, challenges, and essential features teachers and administrators experience in high-poverty schools. The first was an analysis of themes and patterns found in each group of interview questions. Interview questions were divided into three separate questioning phases, each designed to elicit perceptions of certain items in high-poverty schools. In the first questioning phase, questions were designed to elicit the successes of administrators and teachers. In the success-questioning phase, the following interview questions were utilized:

- What successes have you experienced?
- What are the successes you have had associated with teaching?
- What are the successes you have had associated with students?
- What successes have you had related to academic achievement levels?
What successes have you had with parents?

The next group of interview questions was designed to garner the challenges faced by teachers and administrators in high-poverty schools. The following interview questions were used to identify the experiences regarding challenges working in secondary high-poverty schools:

- What challenges have you experienced at this school?
- What challenges have you experienced concerning teaching?
- What challenges have you had related to students?
- What challenges have you had related to administrative support?
- What are the challenges concerning the curriculum?
- What are the challenges related to professional development programs?

The final interview-questioning phase looked at features participants deemed as essential features for success in their school. Representative questions were as follows:

- What do you think are the essential school features that schools must have to be successful with students in high-poverty schools (ideal situations)?
- What are the essential features of teaching methods?
- What are the essential features in learning?
- What are the essential features for professional development programs?
- What other features do you consider essential in high-poverty schools?
- What are some of the activities you use to promote mastery in language and literacy?
- What techniques do you use to promote inclusion of all students?
- What techniques are used to promote cultural sensitivity?
• What are some features your school emphasizes?
• What are some of the activities for collaboration of school staff?
• What are some activities for collaboration between staff and students?
• What are some of the activities for teachers to reflect on student learning responses?
• What are some essential features of the curriculum?
• What activities are geared to developing staff/student relationship dimensions of learning?
• How do you feel about schools being graded?
• What is this school doing to get a good grade?
• What solutions would you offer to improve the school?

Best practice items were ranked by the frequency they were mentioned during the successes, challenges, and essential features questioning phases. Next, selected excerpts from each participant's transcribed text of the interviews concerning successes, essential features, and challenges pertaining to best practice features were presented.

The final method of discovering the successes, challenges, and essential features perceived by the participants in the study was an analysis of written survey response patterns in regards to the levels of satisfaction and importance that participants assigned to each best practice item. Participants in the study were instructed to rate importance and satisfaction for each of the 24 best practice features presented. Responses were based on a Likert-type scale of 1 to 5, each number assigned to a corresponding value. One was the equivalent of none/poor importance or satisfaction and 5 was the equivalent of excellent/thorough importance or satisfaction. Based on these subjective values, best
practice features were ranked from highest to lowest concerning importance and satisfaction.

The researcher used a preliminary conceptually clustered matrix design (See Table 2 below), which organized themes and patterns among the findings for all participants. An individual conceptually clustered matrix (See Table 3) was designed to organize data collected from each participant. That matrix aligned interview themes with best practice items mentioned or omitted. Also included in the individual matrix design was a column for recording participant’s importance and satisfaction value of best practice items.
Table 2: Conceptually Clustered Matrix Design: Two Role Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School “1” Research Question</th>
<th>Experiences Successes &amp; Challenges Theme (pattern)</th>
<th>Perceived As Essential Feature For Success Theme (pattern)</th>
<th>Inclusion or Omission Of Best Practice Item Feature Theme (pattern)</th>
<th>Value and Satisfaction of Best Practice Essential Features Theme (pattern)</th>
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<td>School “2” Research Question</td>
<td>Experiences Successes &amp; Challenges Theme (pattern)</td>
<td>Perceived As Essential Feature For Success Theme (pattern)</td>
<td>Inclusion or Omission Of Best Practice Item Feature Theme (pattern)</td>
<td>Value and Satisfaction of Best Practice Essential Features Theme (pattern)</td>
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Successes

The researcher used three sources of data in order to discover what successes teachers and administrators experience in high-poverty schools. In order to determine the perceived successes of administrators and teachers in high-poverty schools, the semi-structured interviews of the 18 participants in the study were first analyzed for themes and patterns present in the responses to the interview questions related to success. Best practice themes were ranked by the frequency they were mentioned during the successes questioning phase. Next, selected excerpts from each participant's transcribed text of the interviews concerning successes were presented. The final method of discovering the successes perceived by the participants in the study was an analysis of written survey response patterns in regards to satisfaction.

Figure 2 displays best practice themes by the frequency they were mentioned during the success questioning phase at School 1, the school that received an F grade. Figure 2 presents the best practice theme items ranked in order of frequency mentioned by the participants from School 1. As seen in Figure 2 there were four essentials of best practices presented to the participants that were never mentioned by any of the participants during the interview section regarding successes:

- (teaching) Techniques Encourage (student) Curiosity
- Students Have a Voice in Learning Process
- Teachers Show Support for Administration and
- Administrators Develop Relationships with Students.
Figure 2: Frequency Pattern of Response

School 1: "Success Questions Themes/Pattems"
School 1 participants frequently mentioned themes that correlated with items the literature identified as essential features of best practices for success. The researcher assumed that their desire to speak about a particular best practice during questions regarding success in the interviews reflected a perceived or experienced success by the school with that practice.

One administrator revealed the inclination of his hiring requirements and why he thought being warm and friendly was an important component of how a school operates as a contributing factor to school success related to teaching.

Administrator: “Teachers have to have compassion. Teachers have to care. They need to be the motherly and fatherly types. We have to have everyone working on the same page, teaming, collaborating, and all those things you know to hopefully get everyone working together.”

The following are the features/themes presented in order most frequently mentioned by the participants in School 1 coupled with text in the interviews that reveal personal involvement in relation to best practices:

- Acceptance of, interest in, compassion for, and understanding of the diversity of the students (Inclusive/Responsive Techniques)

Administrator: “Teachers have to deal with cultural issues and economic issues, Colleges deal with understanding but it doesn’t teach teachers how to deal with the problems the students have.”

- Making a conscious effort to understand and connect with students (Teachers Develop Relationships with Students)

Teacher: “Students need to know that they are safe and that you care about them.”
• Working together to provide a nurturing environment that made students feel comfortable to express themselves in whatever way the student chooses (Low Threat Environment).

Administrator: “Teachers have to have empathy, collaborate with the students and reflect on choices for reaching goals and connecting with the students.”

• Providing time to come together to participate in a continuous process of collaboration to meet the students’ needs (Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Students’ Success).

Administrator: “You can’t let things go. Things have to be kept in order, conforming to a school wide policy enforced with consistency. School staff has to be proactive and it has to be a joint effort.”

Teachers shared unique devices for making relational connections with students and staff as an important aspect of success. When interviewing a Black female teacher of English for grades 10 through 12 at this school for 22 years, she reminisced on what she considered success. This is the response one teacher gave when asked to describe her successes associated with students.

Teacher: “I have been blessed with progress from my students. I promote cooperation and give them support. The staff was a team all working together. It paid off for the students.”

A younger White male teacher that had been teaching for 15 years, eight of which were at this school, explained what he referred to as small successes that make a difference. He expressed the following as a success with parents:
Teacher: “I help them to do things that make them look good. I am treating the students right. Parents support my effort because they know that I am treating their kids right. It makes you part of a team gives you an advantage. Everyone works better.”

A White woman at the school had been teaching only four years, all of which were at School 1. She replied to the questions about success saying that she considered establishing meaningful relationships with her students as her greatest success. Based on her experiences with prejudice, she said that she overcomes students’ reluctance to trust outsiders and relates her success for promoting academic achievement with the statements:

Teacher: “I play games with the students and I try to get to learn everyone’s interests. I try to understand them. I challenge the students. I want them to take their education seriously.”

In addition to patterns reflected in the interviews, survey satisfaction rating values were used to elicit both successes and challenges based on the following assumptions:

1. The more satisfied a participant is with a particular best practice feature, the greater the likelihood that the feature is in place and functioning successfully at the participant’s school.

2. The less satisfied a participant is with a particular best practice feature, the greater the likelihood that the feature is not implemented properly at the participant’s school and therefore presents a challenge.

Figure 3 displays the ranking of best practice features in relation to how satisfied participants at School 1 were with the implementation of best practices. The respondents’
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FIGURE 3: Satisfaction Ratings of Best Practices
satisfaction rating in the survey showed practically no variation on their ranking of the 24 essential features of best practices. The lack of variation on satisfaction rating in the survey does not show the split in participants' responses. The majority of participants, that were involved in specific programs, responded to their individual successes indicating excellent/thorough satisfaction and the lesser number of participants indicating none/poor or unsatisfactory satisfaction ranking. Participants were given the option to add additional comments during the member check and did not wish to contribute more information. This survey data makes the interview data more reliable as a source of information about perceived successes as they relate to best practice themes. Since participants were almost equally satisfied with all best practices, those reflected as successes in the interviews were presented as the perceived successes of School 1.

In an effort to discover the success perceived by School 2 participants, the same methods (interview patterns, individual interview quotes, survey patterns) were utilized. Figure 4 illustrates the best practices that participants mentioned most frequently when questions related to success were posed by the researcher. The four best practices mentioned most frequently are stated here with text from the interviews by participants in School 2:

- Providing time to come together to participate in a continuous process of collaboration to meet the students' needs (Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Students' Success)

**Teacher:** “We have a leadership team of school based management that meets once a week. All activities come through us. We discuss everything from dress code to truancy to make sure problems are brought to everyone’s attention.”
FIGURE 4
School "2": Success Questions Themes/Patterns
• Making a conscious effort to understand and connect with students (Teachers Develop Relationships with Students).

**Teacher:** “The kids that gave me the most trouble are my successes. They tell me they understand and they tell me they feel like I am their father because I made them do what is right and important.”

• Acceptance of, interest in, compassion for, and understanding of the diversity of the students (Inclusive/Responsive Techniques).

**Teacher:** “I grade each student according to each students’ progress and effort. I treat them with respect day in and day out. I relate things to what they know and help them to increase their knowledge.”

• Teachers focus primarily on students’ internalization of concepts (Mastery Is the Students’ Learning Objective).

**Administrator:** “Teachers focus on what the students know and use it to help the students. If something doesn’t work the teachers work together to find something to help that student learn. They work hard and make it work for each student.”

There were no essentials of best practice not mentioned among participants at School 2 during the successes phase of the interview. Once again, the assumption is that the more vocal the participants are about a particular best practice when asked about successes, the more likely it is that participants perceive this best practice as a success in their school. Selected interview responses were chosen to reflect the themes and patterns found in the success phase of questioning.
A White male teacher that had grown up in the area and taught at the school for 22 years said the following about the teaching success of School 2 as he related to students’ success in their academic achievement:

**Teacher:** “I’m not sure it [success] exists anywhere else around here. Administrators are willing to listen and back you if you are willing to take something on you want to try. Problems are brought to everyone’s attention. Administration, staff, and even students work together. We support each other. We focus on the same goals at the same time. We take responsibility for our school. I treat the students like my kids and staff like family. It works!”

A man who was a former student at the school, at which he is now an administrator, revealed that he did use informal approaches to maintain control and provide a safe environment conducive to success at teaching and students learning. He said:

**Administrator:** “I ask the teachers how I am doing? Teachers will tell me I need to do so and so. It’s my job to make teachers more effective and to get obstacles out of the way. I talk to the kids. I don’t fuss. I don’t raise my voice. I use consistency and fairness and ask the students if they understand.”

One theme demonstrated among all respondents at School 2 was they insisted on availability for one to one meetings with administration, staff, and students for improvements as a key to success related to students’ academic achievement. They reported the following:
Administrator: “Every teacher in every class works together as a group to focus on one skill. They bond. They develop strategies for each individual student, working with them and supporting them.”

The three sources proposed in the beginning of this section for analysis of successes began with the survey. Survey response values were examined for patterns related to successes. As with School 1, School 2 also expressed similar levels of satisfaction, with practically no variation for each of the 24 best practice features (See Figure 5). There were not any none/poor satisfactions and few excellent or thorough ranking among responses from participants at School 2 on the survey. Participants at School 2, during the interview and survey responses, expressed avoidance of complacency and initiative toward continued improvement ranking most essentials of best practice very good. This makes the interview data more informative.

Challenges

In order to discover the challenges facing high-poverty schools, the researcher employed the same methods of data analysis used to ascertain successes in high-poverty schools. As established in the previous section, participants from both schools expressed almost equal satisfaction levels for each of the best practices. Therefore, an analysis of dissatisfaction as is relates to perceived challenges would be nearly impossible. It should be restated here that there was a minimal number of participants at School 1 that gave a none/poor satisfaction rating to most of the essentials of best practice implementation at their school. Although, the combined rating of satisfaction appears above average satisfaction this was not unanimous at School 1. In the challenges phase of the interview at School 1, while probes were part of the questioning to initiate responses related to the
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school, teaching, students, administrative support, curriculum, professional
development, and the survey of essentials of best practice, it did not stimulate a single
response or mention of School Strives to Ensure Student Success among participant
responses. As a result, the themes present during the challenges phase of questioning and
the observations expressed by individual participants will be the criteria for determining
perceived and experienced challenges of administrators and teachers in these two high-
poverty schools.

Excerpts from the text during the series of interview questions regarding
challenges, School 1 participants’ responses most often mentioned the following best
practices as challenges (See Figure 6):

- Teachers Committed to Professional Development

Administrator: “I encourage teachers to take ESE training to learn to meet students
diverse academic levels.”

- Inclusive/Responsive Techniques

Teacher: “To include everybody, teachers have to have enthusiasm to bring students into
the activity. Teachers need to encourage students with praise to engage students in the
learning.”

- Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success

Teacher: “Staff working together and getting along works to accomplish more.”

- Teachers Show Support for Students

Teacher: “Teachers need to get students to see they can do better and get students’ to
make the effort to improve because they can do better.”
Assuming that mentioning a particular best practice in relation to challenges means that it indeed poses a challenge, these four best practices are the perceived challenges by School 1 participants. Reviewing the figure also shows the increase in the frequency in which participants mentioned essentials of best practice during the challenges portion of the interview. Notably, two of these best practices (Inclusive/Responsive Techniques and Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success) that pose challenges to School 1 teachers and administrators were also determined to be successes.

A male administrator working at School 1 with 14 years of previous experience as a middle school math teacher and three years in administration described the challenges related to professional development and concerning teaching:

**Administrator:** “Teachers don’t use new techniques. They fall back on the teaching methods with which they grew up. Students need facilitators. Smarter students are easier to teach. There are cultural issues and economic issues. It’s not just low IQ. It’s frustrating. It is just how they are.”

One White male teacher of science with 26 years of experience in high-poverty schools, 16 of which have been in School 1, shared his challenges related to administrative support that was restricting his ability to operate effectively. He was implying that he lacks the autonomy to make decisions in classroom practices.

**Teacher:** “The students don’t want to do anything. We can’t demand mastery. Hopefully, we reach a few. Lack of support kills teacher aspirations to reach these students.”
Another White male physical education teacher at this school for 18 years had this to say regarding challenges related to students’ needs concerning the curriculum and professional development programs:

**Teacher:** “Kids don’t take an education seriously. These students are unique. We spend time in professional development programs learning things we can’t use in this type of school. The curriculum generalities don’t work with this group we need something different.”

Challenges facing School 2 were first determined based on how frequently participants mentioned best practices during the challenge questions. Figure 7 offers a bar graph interpretation of these results. There was only a slight increase in the frequency in which essentials of best practice were mentioned during the challenges phase of the interviews with participants at School 2 and no omissions of essentials of best practice:

- Teaching Integrates Real-Life Experiences

**Administrator:** “Teachers need a lot of skills and these teachers are devoted to creating lessons that these students can relate to and use to build their skills.”

- Safe and Secure Environment

**Teacher:** “We take responsibility for discipline and behavior. We don’t wait for administration, we take care of problems because we know that these students need security to be able to learn.”

- Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success
Teacher: “We meet formally and informally to make sure to preserve students’ self-esteem and get these students to work.”

- Inclusive/Responsive Techniques

Teacher: “I show them what the problem is and get them to see what has to be done to make it right.”

These are the best practices that are most challenging for administrators and teachers at School 2. School 1 felt that Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Student Success and Inclusive/Responsive Techniques were both successes and challenges. School 2 echoes this sentiment in their interview responses. These particular best practices were also repeated in both the perceived successes and perceived challenges of School 2.

Individual responses by participants echoed the themes and patterns found in the general analysis of interview responses. The principal administrator at School 2 had lived in the area as an adult for 12 years and returned to administration after working with a state educational think tank, which worked at developing solutions to educational challenges. She had been a teacher for 16 years and an administrator for 12 years in high-poverty schools. Her personal commitment to meet the challenges with students, to provide administrative support for the teachers related to professional development programs, and to work to develop a curriculum that provides education are reflected in the following response:

Administrator: “The challenge is to find time, to give teachers time, time to develop new skills, to get students interested, trying, motivated. I try to be creative and find the resources or share resources with other schools. It frustrates me that I don’t have the
resources to give teachers things they need. Time helps them give students the best. Students were coming in dirty clothes, so we put in a laundry. They have kids, so we have a nursery to keep their kids here and teach them parenting skills.”

One Black female teacher shared that she had grown up in a town similar to this school area. She was poor, had children, no husband, and no education. She had decided as a grown woman and a single mother that working in the fields was too hard. With perseverance, she completed her degree and was now teaching high school business math and language. She came here to help these children and her statements reflect the general consensus of teacher attitudes toward challenges related to students working at this high-poverty school:

Teacher: “Dealing with these students is a real challenge. I constantly tell them they have to learn. Working with them is a challenge. Finding student peers that can help to work together is difficult. Keeping after them and accepting no excuses is another difficulty. Finding resources to provide what the students need is hard. Showing students that you have high expectations when they think you don’t notice or care takes time and effort.”

**Essential Best Practice Features**

In an attempt to discover which of the 24 best practices were considered essential, three sets of data were utilized: frequency of mention during essential feature related interview questions, individual statements, and importance values garnered from written survey responses.

During the essentials of best practice interview phase, there was total omission among all participants from School 1 of Students Have Voice in the Learning Process. It
is important to note that the lack of response or comment to a particular feature of best practice in the interview was treated as qualitative analysis recommends; a silence may be an indication of participants’ underlying assumptions, avoidance of a sensitive issue, and lack of knowledge or understanding (Spradley, 1999; Pool, 1990; Price, 1959) of the item of best practice addressed in the survey. Though participants were introduced to the survey items as essentials of best practices there was a distinct minimum importance value given to the following essentials:

- Techniques encourage Curiosity

**Administrator:** “Teachers have to be facilitators to motivate students to want to find the answers, these students don’t take their education seriously and just act like they are not interested.”

- Multiple Learning Methods are Utilized

**Administrator:** “We are working to have teachers collaborate and incorporate new techniques into their lessons because some teachers are on cruise control.”

- Techniques Facilitate Use of Both Sides of the Brain

**Teacher:** “We need techniques that get these kids actively involved. Methods have to be designed to get students using their brains.”

- Students Have Voice in the Learning Process

**Teacher:** “Teachers need the tools to use what these students know so they can participate in the learning activity.”

- Mastery is the Student Learning Objective
**Teacher:** “Practice has to be driven by assessment and adjusted by those involved to ensure mastery of a concept we are just teaching FCAT and hoping students can remember some of it.”

School 1 participant responses for all essentials of best practice were minimal even though the essentials for success had the most probes during the interview to procure expressions of what schools must have related to high-poverty schools. The probes related to teaching, learning, professional development, mastery, inclusion, cultural sensitivity, school emphasis, staff, students, curriculum, relationships, school grades and essentials for solutions to the achievement gap. Other than those listed as most frequently cited as essential features for success, the questioning rendered minimal responses regarding most of the essentials listed as best practices among all participants.

Figure 8 ranks best practices in order of frequency of mention (highest to lowest) by School 1 participants during the interview questions regarding essential features. The most discussed best practice was:

* Inclusive/Responsive Techniques

**Administrator:** “If teachers have empathy toward their students that is inclusion.”

* Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success

**Teacher:** “We need everyone collaborating to meet the needs of these students.”

* Active Engagement of Students

**Teacher:** “Teachers that are successful with these students have an innate quality that gets the students involved. They know what the students are interested in and use it in their lessons.”

* Teaching Integrates Real-Life Experiences
Figure 8

School "J. Essential Features Questions Themes/Patients"
Teacher: “It helps if the teacher comes from here or knows the area so they can relate what they are teaching to what the students have experienced.”

The statements that follow illustrate descriptions of essential feature themes respondents ranked highest among features of best practice schools must have to be successful with students in high poverty schools. Regarding essential features for high poverty schools and professional development programs, an administrator had this to say:

Administrator: “It is difficult to find teachers with professional certification. I have difficulties finding teachers that keep working at professional development. It’s hard to find teachers that utilize effective techniques to meet students’ needs and cover the curriculum. Teachers need to work on their lessons to reach these students. It’s essential to have teachers that learn and develop inclusive methods that get everyone involved.”

When asked to comment on schools being graded and what this school was doing to get a good grade another administrator said:

Administrator: “We have everyone working on the FCAT skills this year. Homeroom is dedicated to FCAT. That means everyday for twenty-five minutes every student works on FCAT and hopefully that will help us get a better grade.”

A common response at School 1 was simply stated by this teacher when she was asked what would you offer to improve the school:

Teacher: “I don’t know what is wrong here and I don’t know if we can fix it.”

A White male teacher that had worked in School 1 for eight years and was a teacher for 16 years explained what he deemed as essential features for success in their school. His attitude regarding professional development programs and activities for collaboration of school staff to supply the features essential in high-poverty schools
seemed to dominate the opinions expressed at this school by participants regarding inapplicable professional development and the need for specific effective techniques in high-poverty schools:

**Teacher:** “We need to go to workshops that we ourselves choose to attend. Teachers need the administration to bring stuff to them, stuff we can use with these students. We need things we can use here, ways of keeping the students interested. We need to identify needs and ways to try to teach to their needs. This kind of school needs methods to get them to do something, anything.”

A teacher responded with this comment when questioned about schools being graded and what they are doing to get a good grade:

**Teacher:** “I hate the FCAT but I hope I did a lot of the things that were on the test. I don’t like teaching for the test but we have to do things to help get a better grade.”

Survey importance response patterns from School 1 (See Figure 9) revealed that participants felt that the majority of best practices were of “adequate” or “good” importance, with little variation among the best practices. Once again, survey responses offer similar values for all best practices (with the exception of the relatively low ranking best practice themes Students Have Voice in the Learning Process and Mastery is Student Objective. Based on interview patterns and the relatively similar importance values given to all best practices, the emerging group of perceived essential features are:

- Inclusive/Responsive Techniques

**Teacher:** “Teachers here know these students, they know what they have to deal with and they understand what these students need.”

- Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success
School "J" Importance Ratings of Best Practices

FIGURE 9
Administrator: “These teachers are so concerned about the students they came in during vacation so we could meet to work out a plan for meeting the students needs. They don’t get paid extra but they come in on Saturdays and give up their planning to do what has to be done for the students.”

- Active Engagement of Students

Teacher: “I talk about things and people we both know to get the students interested.”

- Teaching Integrates Real-Life Experiences

Teacher: “I use what I know they have experienced and they already know, then I start from there.”

When comparing this group of best practices to the successes and challenges experienced by School 1, Inclusive/Responsive Techniques and Administrators and Teachers meet to Determine Needs for Student Success are the reoccurring best practice theme. They are items that School 1 participants perceived as essential features.

The perceived essential features of School 2 participants were determined by reviewing the themes present in their interview responses. Other than the essentials listed as most frequently mentioned, frequency in items was widely spread among essentials of best practice. There was not an omission of any of the essentials of best practice among participants at School 2 during the interview sectioned geared to gain responses regarding perceived essentials for success. The best practice themes mentioned with highest frequency during the questioning phase regarding essential features are shown in Figure 10. They are:

- Teachers Show Support for Students
FIGURE 10
School "2": Essentials Questions Themes/Pattems

Best Practice
Administrator: “My thing this year has been to think to myself would I do as good as these students do if I had to deal with all they deal with everyday.”

- Safe and Secure Environment

Teacher: “Behavior is an issue here. Rules are rules.”

- Inclusive/Responsive Techniques

Administrator: “Teachers don’t ignore things. They work hard and every student gets the teachers’ attention. These teachers are proactive. Teachers don’t allow students to just slide.”

- Teachers Develop Relationships with Students

Administrator: “These teachers have a vested interest in all their students. They really care about them.”

These excerpts from the interview statements reflect the administrator’s desire to demonstrate her support for students, and ensure a safe and secure environment:

Administrator: “I feel like I should be out there with the students as much as the teachers. I like contact with the students. I like to talk to them and hear what’s going on. I need time to be out and about to listen to them. Even though some kids aren’t motivated, we have to let them know this is a safe place to get an education. We don’t put up with some things. We can’t let a few spoil it for everyone. Students here have to behave.”

Another administrator at School 2 started at this school six months prior to the study. She had been in administration six years and was a teacher for 16 years. She regarded student-centered learning techniques and commitment as an ethical
responsibility of educators. She concluded with a description of some activities for collaboration between staff and students: 

**Administrator:** "Education reform has got to recognize the importance of attitude. These people have energy, excitement about their job and investments in the students. They care, they really care, and they listen. They put their heads together and work to find a way to reach every student."

The ROTC teacher was a retired service man that had been teaching for 10 years at this school. His statement addressed his perspective of essential features regarding activities geared to developing the staff and student relationship dimension of learning: 

**Teacher:** “I come from where rules are rules. Teachers get them to see the importance of the rules. Tell students you care. Tell them you love them. Explain that love is not getting your way. It is understanding the rules. Tell students you can make any life for yourself. Explain their options. Check on students. Ask them if they need help. Look out for the students. Be consistent because it makes them feel secure. They understand the rules and there are no excuses. Let students see how far they have come. Tell them they are professionals and that professionals follow the rules. Build their self-esteem.”

This White male teacher has been teaching history at this school for seven years. His statements reflect the value he sees for getting to know students to improve the school. He feels establishing interpersonal connections with his students makes the learning meaningful and maintains the safe environment in his classroom.

**Teacher:** “I approach my students like we are going to learn together. I talk about people in town we know experienced something. I begin lessons with something we both know and then I go from there. I treat these kids like my neighbors. I do research to find
interesting ways of connecting learning to things they know. I form groups and make tapes. It's three times the work, but I get them all working and getting something out of it. The rules stay the same. They are not any different for anyone. Consistent enforcement of the rules gives these students structure and the safety that they need."

One administrator commented on schools being graded and what this school is doing to get a good grade saying:

**Administrator:** “We are trying to hang on to what we have. The teachers gave up their planning time to work on FCAT skills with the students. The teachers have to rely on the FCAT practice books and they are frustrated because they don’t have time to create the lessons for FCAT to the level they want to feel good about what they are doing.

Another administrator at School 2 had this to say about being graded and what their school does to get a good grade:

**Administrator:** We need some form of accountability but, school grades being tied to the money brings about improprieties and I don’t think it’s fair. We focus on the students and what they need and that seems to work.

- Analysis of survey responses provided by teachers and administrators at School 2 (See Figure 11) showed again the same finding that has been present throughout the study. Participants offered no remarkable differences among importance ratings of best practices. School 2 participants indicated on their surveys that all best practices were of good or excellent importance for success. With little or no variation among ratings, a scientifically relevant ranking of the best practices cannot be obtained. Therefore, interview patterns and statements were used as the
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primary source for determining perceived essential features, embellished by the fact
that all best practices were highly valued by participants at School 2.

Similarities

The two schools in this research study are most easily identified as similar in
student demographics. Further analysis of participant responses in the three major areas
of successes, challenges, and essential features elicits even more similarities between the
two high-poverty secondary schools.

Of the four perceived successes experienced by each school three were the same:

- Inclusive/Responsive Techniques
- Teachers Develop Relationships with Students
- Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success

The successes experienced by both schools reveal that student-centered techniques,
relationship building, and collaboration are perceived successes.

Survey responses illustrate that both groups of participants gave all 24 best
practice items similar satisfaction ratings (See Figures 3 and 5). Additionally, both
schools rated most of the best practice items of equal or similar importance, based on
survey responses (See Figures 9 and 11).

Challenges experienced by the participants in Schools 1 and 2 were similar in that
both groups of participants were dissatisfied with their own performance in relation to
some of the same best practices they considered successful. They felt they needed to do
more and that there was room for improvement in regards to the best practices:

- Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success
- Inclusive/Responsive Techniques
Collaboration and student-centered techniques are challenges that both schools face constantly. These two best practices were identified as both successes and challenges by participants at both schools. This indicates that these features are extremely important; although participants feel that a certain measure of success has been accomplished in regards to these practices, they are so vital that there is still room for improvement.

The aforementioned assumption is buoyed by the finding that the only best practice item that both schools concurred as an essential feature for high-poverty schools is:

- Inclusive/Responsive Techniques

This practice, which involves focusing attention on the individual student and his/her responses, was found to be prevalent in all sections of this chapter. Incorporating such techniques in the classroom was found to be a success, challenge, and essential feature by School 1 and School 2. This best practice was given special attention by participants at both schools, and therefore will receive significant review in Chapter V.

Differences

In general, participants from School 2 talked more frequently about successes. Figure 2 reveals that the highest number of times a best practice item was mentioned by School 1 was:

- 11 times

while School 2 (See Figure 4) mentioned their most successful best practice over:

- 25 times

However, School 1 appeared to more satisfied when rating best practices in the written survey with more excellent rating.
• Yet, some best practices were assigned a satisfaction rating lower than “good” by School 1 participants (See Figure 3).

• No participant at School 2 gave the worst satisfaction rating to an essential of best practice.

School 2 participants’ satisfaction ratings were generally “adequate” or “good”.

When asked to discuss the challenges they face as teachers and administrators in a high-poverty school, School 1 participants were more challenged by:

• Teachers Committed to Professional Development

• Teachers Show Support for Students

Conversely, School 2 participants felt that the best practices:

• A Safe and Secure Environment

• Teaching Integrates Real-Life Experiences

posed greater challenges. School 1’s challenges were teacher-centered. School 2’s challenges were focused on students.

In relation to perceived essential features, School 1 respondents felt that:

• Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success

• Active Engagement of Students

• Teaching Integrates Real-Life Experiences

were more essential than the best practices noted by School 2. School 2 participants felt that:

• Teachers Show Support for Students

• Safe and Secure Environment

• Teachers Develop Relationships with Students
were the essential best practices for success. School 1’s perceived essential features focus on students, with special attention to classroom techniques. School 2’s essential features were also student-centered, but more focused on environmental factors and relationships with students rather than specific classroom techniques.

Conclusion

In conclusion, School 1 and School 2 are similar in demographics, successes, and challenges, yet remarkably different in high-poverty living experience and the best practice items they perceive to be essential and critical to school success. School 1, an F-graded school, employs teachers who generally do not live in the area they teach, therefore it is less likely that they have experienced immersion in a high-poverty culture. School 2 teachers and administrators were generally residents of the area in which they worked. Participants from School 1 and School 2 experienced both successes and challenges with the best practices Inclusive/Responsive Techniques and Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success. While both schools chose essential features that were student-centered, School 1 seemed to focus solely on classroom techniques. School 2 focused on students on a larger level, advising that teacher-student relations and a safe environment were most critical for success. Preliminary interpretation of the findings suggest that staff ties to the community and a student-centered approach to teaching and learning may make the difference between a successful and unsuccessful school, each struggling against adversity in a high-poverty area.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The problem investigated in this study focused on the struggle for high-poverty schools to improve academic achievement of students. The focus emerged from the disciplined examination of the constructs of this challenge in high-poverty schools.

This chapter is presented in three sections: 1) discussion, 2) limitations, and 3) recommendations.

Discussion

Essential features of best practice have been discussed and researched within the framework of philosophical and physiological education, as well as through scholarship from the field of educational social developmental research. In the constructivist philosophy of Gadotti (1996) and Freire (1987), an understanding of the methods for learning are discussed in context of the effects political influence has on the role of academia in society. The theoretical framework of Caine and Caine (1991) explain the scientific constructivism based on the knowledge of how learning occurs.

The methods of best practices from the theoretical framework are supported with a review of schools that have implemented the essentials of best practices that is based on social development within the school environment in successful high-poverty schools. Three research questions were posed to help gain support for critical essential features of success with students in high-poverty schools. The study questions were grounded in the notion that specific features of best practices are critical for students to learn in a high-poverty school. The highlighting of similarities and differences as they relate to essential
features of best practices in two high-poverty schools led the researcher to ascertain the indication that certain essential features in best practices were more critical for success.

There were four best practice features found to be perceived as successes by administrators and teachers at School 1 (F school):

- Inclusive/Responsive Techniques
- Teachers Develop Relationship with Students
- Low Threat Environment
- Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success

School 2 (C school) exhibited similar perceived successes based on analysis of the interview data:

- Inclusive/Responsive Techniques
- Teachers Develop Relationships with Students
- Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success
- Mastery is the Student Learning Objective

Both schools experienced three similar perceived successes:

- Inclusive/Responsive Techniques
- Teachers Develop Relationships with Students
- Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success
These best practices encompass a broad variety of skills and concerns; they correlate to areas of classroom techniques, teacher-student relationships, and administrator-teacher collaboration.

Reflection on this data reveals that both high-poverty schools experienced similar successes, despite the difference in evaluations as a C school and an F school. If both schools have experienced similar successes, yet present vast differences in achievement, the explanation for the difference in achievement must lie in the challenges or essential features perceived by each school.

However, just as similarities appeared in the perceived successes of School 1 and School 2, patterns emerged when perceived challenges of participants of the two schools were compared. The best practices most often mentioned and commented on during the challenges questioning phase of the interview were:

- Inclusive/Responsive Techniques
- Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success

Both the C-graded school and the F-graded school experienced similar challenges. Moreover, the common challenges of both schools were also common successes of both schools. This leads the researcher to the conclusion that the explanation for differences in achievement of School 1 and School 2 lies in what each school determines are essential best practices for success. Apparently, the two best practices (Inclusive/Responsive Techniques and Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success) are foremost in the minds of teachers and administrators at both schools.
When the two aforementioned best practices are combined, successful results are possible. In 1998, Glennan, & Thomas, for the RAND Corporation released a study of schools that were implementing whole school design programs. The study found that clear communication between the design team and the entire school is essential for implementation, support, and teacher perception of the design. Strong leadership was also found to be crucial to implementation of school reform designs for improving students’ academic achievement in high-poverty schools (Olson, 1999). Schaffer et al. (1997) point out that in many schools where reform failed, principals did not keep the staff aligned to the goals of the design. Teacher commitment to improvement was found to be as crucial to school success as strong leadership (Shaffer et al., 1997). Teachers may feel threatened by change or view the reform as a fad that will not last, and, therefore, do not commit their energy (Shaffer et al., 1997). Teachers must be given assurances that the change will provide opportunity to develop professionally and should be given the opportunity to transfer with dignity, if they are not willing to be a whole-heartedly participant in the school efforts to make the reform (Shaffer et al., 1997).

The importance of a departure from the educational system’s present focus on a lecture model for transmission of information and a shift towards focus on the constructivist, student centered model is essential for success with students failing in the present system (Levine, 2002). The common best practice deemed as essential by both participating educational institutions was Inclusive/Responsive Techniques. This particular best practice has emerged throughout the study as an item study participants were vocal about; it was designated as a success, challenge, and essential feature by both
schools. Prior research supports the concept that incorporating inclusive/responsive techniques benefits the at-risk student in a high-poverty school.

In light of the overwhelming similarities between the perceived successes and challenges experienced by teachers and administrators at both schools, the best source from which to determine what the contributing factors are to School 2’s relative success and School 1’s failure is the data related to perceived essential features. As indicated in the survey data, all school personnel feel that best practices are of some significant value. School 2’s concentration on the relational development among students proved to be the critical difference between the success at School 2 and the failure at School 1. A closer look at demographics also offers insight into the key to School 2’s accomplishments as a high-poverty school.

In addition to Inclusive/Responsive Techniques, the remaining best practices deemed essential by School 1 were:

- Administrators and Teachers Meet to Determine Needs for Student Success
- Active Engagement of Students
- Teaching Integrates Real-Life Experiences

School 1’s prevailing opinion was that teaching techniques were critical to success in the face of adversity.

School 2 felt that in addition to Inclusive/Responsive Techniques, the following best practices were most critical to success:

- Teachers Show Support for Students
- Safe and Secure Environment
• Teachers Develop Relationships with Students

As presented in Chapter 2, a major barrier to student success in high-poverty schools is the presence of student anxiety in the classroom. Upon close examination, the best practices deemed as critical by School 2 (and not by School 1) are all closely related to reducing anxiety in students and motivating them. School 1 attributes importance to methods and techniques, but if anxiety is present, those techniques may be unsuccessful.

The unanimous opinion of School 2 was the absence of the sense of inferiority concerning students. This generated in students the motivation to learn. The lack of support has the tendency to retard the educational and mental development of children in poverty and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in an economically integrated school system (Taylor, 1997). Caine & Caine (1991) explained that ignoring the personal world of the learner actually inhibits the effective functioning of the brain.

Strong teacher support and relationships can also combat the low self-esteem that plagues students in high-poverty areas. Students failing in school feel low self-esteem and lack a sense of control over their lives compared with peers succeeding in school (McCaul 1989). Likewise, students that feel unconnected to their school are unsuccessful in school. Stress can come from steady tension in relational development, no interest, or inability to find meaning in life (Sylwester, 2002). Teachers need to be aware of tensions, they may not be able to avoid stress, but they can teach students to cope and professionals should view their success in the classroom as effective or ineffective in teaching students to cope (Sylwester, 2002). School 2, a school that experienced more success on the FCAT than School 1, deemed teacher support of students and teacher-student
relationships as essential best practice features; School 1 did not identify these as critical for success. This difference in value for support and relational oriented features is possibly a key component in School’s 2 success relative to School 1.

Demographic differences between School 1 and School 2 may also be a potential contributing factor to School 2’s success. As presented in Chapter III, Figure 1-B, the major notable difference between School 1 participants and School 2 participants is the average number of years of experience in a high-poverty area. In School 1, participants had lived in close proximity to the high-poverty area an average of three years. This number is strikingly small when compared to School 2’s average of 23 years. Individuals who did not live in the area primarily staffed School 1, a consistently low-graded institution. School 2’s administrators and teachers generally worked and lived in the area. When teachers have the skill to establish a culturally relevant climate for students they ensure students engage in activities and develop an interactive learning classroom (Fickel & Jones 2002).

The work of Fickel and Jones (2002) in the Alaskan tundra illustrates the importance of cultural immersion as it relates to the implementation of classroom techniques. Fickel and Jones (2002) found that teachers who experienced immersion in the culture of their students were more successful at integrating best practice techniques in the classroom than colleagues who were exposed to the same techniques, but did not experience cultural immersion. School 1 deemed that classroom techniques were of critical importance, yet it seems that without cultural immersion, the ability to successfully apply these techniques is severely impeded.
The findings indicate the importance of best practices that are focused on individual student needs. These findings are supported with statements related to successful high-poverty schools where students achieve academic success. Laurenson, (1995) explains how teacher belief and teacher practice exist on varying levels largely based on their usefulness and longevity. Long standing beliefs deeply rooted in personal life experiences transcend school practices, and teaching practices develop pedagogy consistent with deeply held beliefs. Authentic change occurs when one’s own beliefs have been challenged in some way and found to be lacking. It would seem that the responsibility of teachers is to figure ways to highlight acknowledged shortcomings and inconsistencies to be seen as a form of self-discovery in which teachers could gain insight into their thinking and develop functional pedagogies that are theoretically-sound and consistent with who they are as people. Teachers should choose a design of their own free will or there is a high probability it will not work (Olson, 1999). Berends, Mark, & Colleagues (1998) found that clear communication between the designers of a method and among the school members is essential for implementation, support, and teacher perception of the design. Designs that provide guidelines that are more prescriptive tend to have a smoother implementation because they require less time and expertise on the part of the teachers (Olson, 1999). When administration facilitates teacher growth, teachers facilitate student growth (Davenport, 2002). The change needed in teacher attitudes and expectations is realized through changes in administration to a collaborative site-based management that supports encourages and promotes teacher skills to empower their students (Davenport, 2002).
The major findings of essential features of best practice indicated in this study as most critical for success with students in high poverty schools can be succinctly summarized as follows:

1. Focusing on the individual student’s contributions and offering reflection to the student (Inclusive/Responsive Techniques) is a best practice that both schools have deemed as critical to success.

2. School 2, the relatively more successful school, felt that practices that reduce student anxiety (Teachers Show Support for Students, Teachers Develop Relationships with Students, Safe and Secure Environment) were critical, whereas School 1 focused on teaching techniques separate from the environment in which they are delivered.

3. Immersion in high-poverty culture, which is most easily achieved by living in a high-poverty area, may contribute to student success. School 2 participants had a significantly higher level of experience in a high-poverty area.

Dwek’s (1986) theory of adaptive and maladaptive school behaviors clearly documented that in order for students to have mastery, they must be given confidence and feel connected to their school because students act out (disrupting the safety and security) when the challenge poses a risk. Students that acquire adaptive behaviors meet challenges, demonstrate high effectiveness, and remain persistent in school (Dwek, 1986). Children displaying this pattern appear to feel connected to their school and enjoy exerting effort in pursuit of task mastery (Dwek, 1986). In contrast, the maladaptive (failure) pattern of achievement behavior is characterized by challenge avoidance (Dwek,
1986). Maladaptive students act out, demonstrate antisocial behaviors, and show low persistence in school (Dwek, 1986).

Natriello et al. (1990) stated schools fail when they do not recognize that the problem is in the delivery method and the solution lies in developing an understanding with students from poverty schools. Goodlad (1992) adds support to this explaining that understanding and respect for dominant cultural characteristics provides the foundation for solid educational methods.

4. The importance of administrators and teachers showing support and working to develop relational connections with students is a best practice of importance. Both schools expressed that this best practice was both a success and a challenge. Marlow and Page (1980) discussed the importance of relational connections, stating that focus should be placed on harmonious relationships between students and the school. Slavin (1998) sums it up by stating that schools can have a powerful impact on the academic achievement and success of all students by viewing them as ‘at-promise’ instead of ‘at-risk’. The achievement gap in high poverty schools may be attributed to the lack of relational development among school staff and students. This lack is understandable since schools with the highest percentage of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch are more likely to have a higher percentage of unqualified, uncertified, out-of-field, and new teachers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003). Although all study participants were certified teachers, administrators acknowledged difficulty acquiring and keeping qualified teachers. The satisfaction level expressed by administrators at School 1 concerning teacher empathy with students was lower and a challenge for administrators. As School 2, the administrators were very satisfied
with teacher empathy for students and not a challenge for the administrators to find teachers that care.

Another factor contributing to this lack of relationship among students and school staff is while more than half of the school students are from minorities less than one quarter of the teachers are from minorities (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003).

Dimmock & Walker (2000) highlight the need for schools to develop a conceptual framework based on cultural and cross-cultural teaching methods. Their proposed educational framework is built around interrelationships between core concepts of culture, organizational structures, management, curriculum, and teaching and learning (Dimmock & Walker, 2000). Dimmock & Walker (2000) argue that the change has to start with administration and center on supportive interrelationships among administration, teachers, and students.

Thus far, three areas of best practice have been discussed in which the shift to relational student-centered schools should occur. They are areas where important developments should be made. Economic, academic, and science professionals have found through research that the relational component is an important factor that must be addressed in any objective driven interaction. In their studies of brain function, Caine and Caine (1990) explained the physiological need for relational interaction as a component of brain function in the learning process. They (Caine & Caine, 1990) found it is impossible to isolate the cognition from the affective domain. Hence, the emotional climate of the school and classroom must be conducive to learning allowing for reflection and metacognitive processes (Caine & Caine, 1990). Part of School 2’s success could be
attributed to the high value placed on best practices of teacher support for students and teacher-student relationships by administrators and teachers at School 2. The emotional climate of a school and classroom is significantly enhanced (and more conducive to learning) when students feel support from teachers with whom they have relationships.

Although leadership style was not a focus in this investigation it was brought out in the interviews that School 2 had site-based management. This may have influenced the teacher ability to take on responsibilities and feel confident to make decisions concerning students. The frequent changes in administration may have further added to teacher collaboration. Skaruppa (1993) concluded that “increased participation in decision making, increased professionalism and unity, and an increased awareness of the needs of the students and school community were examples of positive outcomes for school-based management” (p. 128).

Conclusions

Although findings can be stated simply, the implications of these findings are meaningful and complex. This study challenges many conventional beliefs in the measure and value of the relational component in learning. Rogers & Web (1991) explain diminishing family support leads to an increasing need for schools to assume greater roles in the provision of affective support for its members. Educators must now work at reducing the level of anxiety to help students (Gomez, 2000; Spring, 1996).

Child psychiatrist James Comer (1997) found in his research that what people who have turned poor schools into good ones will tell you is that students’ success is largely due to the development of relational connections, a comfortable climate, that
provides emotional security, which in turn allows, the natural process of learning to occur.

Closer attention to the relational components that shape student performance is critical to the emergence of these paradigms. Student’s responses to connections within the school environment should make educators skeptical of the existing methods of delivery as appropriate for this diverse population. Under the existing paradigms in the best case, an ineffective strategy would be eliminated or modified with the intent of avoiding the sensitive issue of poverty. In the new paradigm, strategies would be adapted to each specific student. It is possible that the understanding could capitalize on the students’ sensitivity to issues related to survival in a high-poverty area.

Another issue highlighted by this investigation is that in School 2, the more successful school, the majority of teachers lived in the area. This difference could be explained by referring to the findings of Hixson & Tinzmann (1990). Educators unfamiliar with the environment of a high-poverty area may be insensitive to the cultural differences. Poverty’s cultural characteristics are a diversion from cultural norms of the school system (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990; Covington & Guthrie, 1993). The framework of the school system did not take into consideration the impending diversity of our society when it was constructed in terms of the dominant White culture (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990). Findings indicate the importance for focus on relational features of best practices with limitations.
Limitations

The following are the limitations of this study:

1. Since only one researcher was involved in the conduct of this study, the possibility of bias and subjectivity may be present.

2. There was only one middle-senior high with similar demographics for this study that has maintained a satisfactory school grade. This information was supplied by the Florida Department of Education and was accepted without hesitation as an optimal comparative.

3. The study was conducted prior to state test results used to ascertain school grades and the timing may have an effect on the results.

4. The study is limited to two middle-senior high schools in Florida. As a result, caution must be exercised in generalizing findings to other sites and populations.

Recommendations for Practice

1. Communication and a collaborative effort among teachers, administrators and students appear to provide teachers understanding of the cultural characteristics.

2. Relational development serves toward reducing the level of anxiety in students and crediting students' strengths.

3. Providing students opportunities to develop positive relational connection with the school enhances learning.

4. Immersion in a high-poverty culture can be achieved by educators who do not live in a high-poverty area through alternative methods such as summer institutes and community involvement activities throughout the school year.
Internships during educational training, similar to the summer cultural-immersion institutes used in the Fickel and Jones (2002) study, could be a key in promoting cultural awareness among educators.

5. Effective collaboration among all members of the school provides staff the opportunity to develop positive relationships with the students.

**Recommendations for Research**

Considering the findings along with the extensive research support, there are strong indications for a need to devise techniques for developing relational connections among the members of the school populous. Techniques that have surfaced throughout the research contain the seemingly critical component of developing relational connections within the school that can build networks for meeting objectives.

1. An ethnographic method of research study is needed to better inform teachers, administrators and counselors how to effectively engage student through explication of their various daily life experiences that affect their learning.

2. A mixed method study to complement this qualitative study is needed to verify the results and to expand on the causes for the students’ struggle to achieve academic success. A quantitative regression analysis of levels of importance and satisfaction to determine most critical best practices for success. Teachers’ community involvement in a poverty area needs special attention.
3. A larger, comparative, mixed-method study with similar questions between similar schools, and unlimited, time money, and resources to provide decision makers with more useful data.

4. The use of the joint information and combined efforts to develop means of meeting the need to put into practice responsive ways of teaching.

Final inspiration for continued research on the equity of education for the students of high-poverty schools can be found in the words stated in the famous Brown v. Board of Education (Id., 347 U.S. 483, 493. 74S, Ct. 686,691, 98 L. Ed. 873[1954]). The goal of our constitution is eloquently and movingly stated in this landmark case that speaks to the need for continued research toward advancement in the educational, relational and ethical imperative.

"Education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities. It is the foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms."
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Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval
Appendix A
Institutional Review Board
Approval

January 21, 2003
Charlotte Hayes

Re: IRB Review - 2002-005

Dear Charlotte,

I have received the requested information for your proposal entitled "Effective Characteristics for Successfully Working with Disadvantaged Students". You have approval to begin your research.

If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at [redacted]

Sincerely,

[redacted]
Karen Casey Acevedo, Chair
Institutional Review Board

Co: Dissertation Chair, Cindy Skaruppa
Appendix B

Permission Form
PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

To Whom It May Concern:

Appendix B
Permission Form Granting
Approval Obtained
Participating Schools

I, ________________________________, hereby grant permission to Charlotte Hayes, a doctoral student at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida, to conduct research at ____________________ County School District. I agree that the observer/researcher will take notes and conduct surveys and interviews for data collection and analysis purposes solely for this research project. The researcher will endeavor this project on her personal time. She will follow the proper protocols and etiquette. All prospective participants in the research project will sign informed consent forms prior to disclosing any information. All written reports will be handled professionally and in strict confidentiality, as per the directives of her Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Name of Administrator (Please print.)  Title of Administrator  Date

Signature of Administrator

Charlotte Hayes, Researcher  Date
Appendix C

Contact Letter
Dear Professional Educator,

My name is Charlotte Hayes and I am a teacher who is completing a doctoral program in the School of Education at Lynn University of Boca Raton. I am conducting a study of the perceptions of administrators and teachers regarding school success for the at-risk students. I am interested in learning what you perceive as teacher skill needs for working successfully with the at-risk students. I am also interested in how those perceptions and recommendations might affect and contribute to curriculum development of future educator programs for meeting the needs of the at-risk students. The administration of your school has given me approval to conduct this research.

An important piece of this work involves interviewing and surveying administrators and teachers in order to better understand how to maintain and nurture the social emotional well being of these students, labeled at-risk, ensuring them the opportunity to succeed in the public education system. Having been named by the administration as professionals actively involved in the future of education, I am very interested in your perceptions and comments. I have attached a copy of a formal consent form and the Human Subjects’ Bill of Rights that explains the conditions of this request.

You are in no way obligated to accept this interview/survey request; however should you agree to share knowledge of your instructional and relational practices with me, please be assured that your confidentiality will be protected and your contribution appreciated. I will be contacting you shortly for your decision.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Hayes
Appendix D

Human Subjects Bill of Rights
Appendix D

HUMAN SUBJECTS BILL OF RIGHTS

The rights below are the rights of every person who is asked to be in a research study. As a research subject, I have the following rights:

(1) To be told what the study is trying to find out;

(2) To be told what will happen to me whether any of the procedures, drugs, or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice;

(3) To be told about the frequent and/or important risks, side effects, or discomforts of the things that will happen to me for research purposes;

(4) To be told if I can expect any benefit from participating, and, if so, what the benefit might be;

(5) To be told of the other choices I have and how they may be better or worse than being in the study;

(6) To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study;

(7) To be told what sort of medical or psychological treatment if any complications arise;

(8) To refuse to participate at all or to change my mind about participation after the study is started; if I were to make such a decision, it will not affect my right to receive the care or privileges I would receive if I were not in the study;

(9) To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form; and

(10) To be free of pressure when considering whether I wish to agree to be in the study.
Appendix E

Informed Consent - Professionals
Appendix E

Informed Consent - Professionals

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Ms. Charlotte Hayes, a doctoral student in the Ross College of Education, Health, and Human Services at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida. This research involves teacher and administrator interviews about the characteristics that eighth grade teachers need to possess in order to be effective in working with disadvantaged students. You will be filling out a questionnaire about your ethnic and educational backgrounds and a short Likert-type scale evaluating the different components of an effective teacher preparation program. The interviews will be one-to-one asking open-ended questions that will be audio taped. The responses will be transcribed. You will be contacted in person or by telephone for a follow up conversation to review the analysis of the initial interview for accuracy.

The goal of the study is to identify viable components of effective practices to work with disadvantaged students in a public middle school. You have been selected because you meet the criteria for selection of volunteers. It is hoped that this research study will benefit students of disadvantaged backgrounds and the teachers working with them in South Florida public middle schools.

You will be seated for the interview. No discomfort is anticipated, and there is no risk involved. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without absolutely any negative consequences. Should you withdraw from the study; the data collected will be eliminated and will be destroyed. All information provided will be kept in strict confidentiality. The transcription of the interview will be coded with a number and an alias will be used instead of names to protect your identity and confidentiality.

The data resulting from this study will be kept in a security box in my home office for a period of five years, after which it will be destroyed. Reports of this research study will not include any identifiable personal data. The overall results of the research study will be published in a doctoral dissertation and possibly in other venues, such as a professional journal. Lynn University's Institutional Review Board has authorized access to all materials related to this research study. There will be no financial remuneration for participating in this research study.

Upon your request for a private consultation with the researcher, time will be set aside to talk about the results of the study. You may also feel free to contact Dr. Cindy Skaruppa, Dissertation Committee Chairperson, at Lynn University at [redacted] if you have any concerns about any aspect of this study. These precautions are taken for your protection to insure there is minimal risk involved as there may be sensitive questions asked.

Two copies of this Informed Consent have been provided. Please sign both copies, indicating that you have read, understood, and agreed to participate in this research. Please return one copy to the researcher and keep the other copy for your files. Thank you.
Appendix E
Informed Consent
Continued

Name of Participant (Please print.)   (Please see other side.)   Date

Signature of Participant

Date

Name of Researcher (Print.)

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date
Appendix F

Questionnaire
Appendix F

QUESTIONNAIRE

NAME________________________________________________________

SCHOOL_____________________________________________________

ETHNICITY_________________________GENDER____________________

YEARS IN EDUCATION____________HIGH POVERTY SCHOOL__________

POSITION____________________________________________________
Appendix G

Survey – Original Form
Appendix G
Survey
Original Form

This survey is designed to assess your perception of the challenges, successes and essential school features necessary for students to learn in high poverty school. Please reflect on the degree to which each of the following statements currently applies to your perceived Importance and Adequacy of each of the items listed using the scale below. Circle the appropriate number for each item.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Adequacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 - None/poor  2 - minimal/scant  3 - adequate  4 - good  5 - excellent/thorough

1 2 3 4 5 Teaching techniques are designed to be inclusive and culturally responsive to all students.

1 2 3 4 5 Teaching methods foster real-life activities challenging students’ natural curiosity to understand the world they experience building on present interests.

1 2 3 4 5 The classroom is designed to create a state of relaxed (low threat) for learners.

1 2 3 4 5 Curriculum is a shared and defined vision, for students and school alike, with long and short term goals for realizing purpose of the whole and meanings of its’ parts.

1 2 3 4 5 Methods are used to present information that permits the students to pull out patterns that relate to their past experiences as opposed to presenting patterns unfamiliar to the students.

1 2 3 4 5 Administrators and staff collaborate to determine when and/or what may need to be changed in the school and what does not need to be changed.

1 2 3 4 5 Learning activities are made to appeal to a variety of learning modalities and provide manipulatives to actively engage the students in the learning.

1 2 3 4 5 Mastery is the objective for students in teaching language and literature development.
Appendix G
Continued

1 2 3 4 5 Curriculum includes activities for students to review how and what they learned to provide opportunity for each student to develop personal meaning from the experience.

1 2 3 4 5 The school works collaboratively to create a safe and secure school environment.

1 2 3 4 5 Methods used in teaching are designed to activate multiple intelligences in learners.

1 2 3 4 5 Teachers work to develop supportive relationships and they communicate their support to all of their students.

1 2 3 4 5 Teachers work to build supportive relationships and they communicate their support to administrators and to all staff.

1 2 3 4 5 Teachers are committed to continued professional development that improves teaching and learning for all students.

1 2 3 4 5 Administrators are supportive to continued professional development that improves teaching and learning for all students.

1 2 3 4 5 Administrators work to develop supportive relationships and they communicate their support to all students.

1 2 3 4 5 Administrators work to develop supportive relationships and they communicate their support to all staff.

1 2 3 4 5 The entire school has a belief that all students can learn, has a mission to ensure students achieve success, and creates a vision that empowers everyone to do their best.
Appendix H

Survey - Final Form
Appendix H
Survey
Final Form

This survey is designed to assess your perception of school features necessary for students’ academic success in high poverty schools. The following statements reflect features related to school, teaching, and the learning process. Please rate the following statements on: a) How important the item is for high poverty schools to have in place (left scale) and b) The degree to which you are satisfied that the feature is successfully in place at your school (right scale). Circle the appropriate number on each scale for each item.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 = none/poor</td>
<td>1 = none/poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 = minimal/scant</td>
<td>2 = minimal/scant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 = adequate</td>
<td>3 = adequate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 = good</td>
<td>4 = good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 = excellent/thorough</td>
<td>5 = excellent/thorough</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 2 3 4 5 Teaching techniques are designed to be inclusive and culturally responsive to all students.

1 2 3 4 5 Teaching methods integrate real-life experiences.

1 2 3 4 5 Teaching methods facilitate students’ natural curiosity to understand the world.

1 2 3 4 5 Teaching strategies facilitate learning that involves both sides of the brain.

1 2 3 4 5 Teaching strategies actively engage the students.

1 2 3 4 5 Methods used in teaching are based on multiple intelligence theory.

1 2 3 4 5 Curriculum includes activities for students to reflect and construct meaning from their learning experiences.

1 2 3 4 5 Students have a voice in the learning process.

1 2 3 4 5 Mastery learning is the objective for students.

1 2 3 4 5 The classroom environment is designed for low threat to students.

1 2 3 4 5 The school is a safe and secure environment.

1 2 3 4 5 Administrators and staff frequently meet to determine what works and what doesn’t for students’ academic success.
Appendix H
Continued

1 2 3 4 5 Teachers work to develop relationships with students. 1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5 Teachers communicate their support to all of their students. 1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5 Teachers work to build relationships with administration and staff. 1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5 Teachers communicate their support to administrators and staff. 1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5 Teachers are committed to ongoing professional development that focuses on improving teaching and learning for all students. 1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5 Administrators are supportive of ongoing professional development that focuses on improving teaching and learning for all students. 1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5 Administrators work to develop relationships with students. 1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5 Administrators communicate their support to all students. 1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5 Administrators work to develop relationships with all staff. 1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5 Administrators communicate their support to all staff. 1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5 School personnel believe that all students can learn. 1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5 The school’s mission is to ensure students achieve success. 1 2 3 4 5
Appendix I

Interview Questions - Original Form
Interview Questions

I want to talk to you about how you approach challenges involved with the education of students at this school. I am mostly interested in your perceptions of these issues, apart from specific school policy, which applies to curriculum. I am going to break this interview into three segments. I am going to ask you about your school and your experiences, beginning with challenges, and then we will talk about successes related to students’ academic achievement. Finally, we will talk about essentials and the features needed to help students achieve academic success.

- How does it feel to be grade C/F school?
  - What is the school doing to get a good grade?
  - What should schools do?

- What are your challenges?
  - Concerning teaching?
  - Concerning students?
  - Administrative support?
  - Curriculum
  - Professional development

- What are the successes experienced?
  - You associate with teaching?
  - You associate with students as it relates to academic achievement?

- What do you think are the essential features (ideal situations)?
  - Of teaching methods
  - In learning methods
  - For professional development
Appendix I
Continued

- What are some of the features you use to promote mastery in language and literacy?

- What are the features of techniques you consider inclusive and culturally responsive to the classroom diversity?

- What are some features your school is and/or you do to emphasize
  - Reflective study of student responses?
  - Collaboration?
  - Challenging curriculum?
  - Intrinsic motivation in students?
  - Relational dimensions of learning?

This information collected is intended to encourage those involved in designing and implementing school policy and reform in classrooms for the academic success of students in a high poverty school.
Appendix J

Interview Questions - Final Form
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- What successes have you experienced?
  - What successes have you had associated with teaching?
  - What successes have you had associated with students?
  - What successes have you had as it relates to academic achievement levels?
  - What successes have you had with parent(s)?

- What do you think are the essential school features that schools must have to be successful with students in high poverty schools (ideal situations)?
  - What are the essential features of teaching methods?
  - What are the essential features in learning?
  - What are the essential features for professional development programs?
  - What other features do you consider essential in high poverty schools?

- What are some of the activities you use to promote mastery in language and literacy?

- What techniques do you use to promote inclusion of all students?

- What techniques are used to promote cultural sensitivity?

- What are some features your school emphasizes?
  - What are some activities for collaboration of school staff?
What are some activities for collaboration between staff and students?

What are some of the activities for teachers to reflect on student learning responses?

What are some of the essential features of the curriculum?

What activities do you use to develop the self-motivation of students?

What activities are geared to developing the staff/student relationship dimensions of learning?

How do you feel about schools being graded?

What is the school doing to get a good grade?

What are the variables that contribute to the school's grade?

What solutions would you offer to improve the school?

What challenges have you experienced at this school?

What challenges have you experienced concerning teaching?

What challenges have you had related to students?

What challenges have you had related to administrative support?

What are the challenges concerning curriculum?

What are the challenges related to professional development programs?
Appendix K

Florida School Grading Formula
School grades for 2001-02 utilize a point system. Schools are awarded one point for each percent of students who score high on the FCAT and/or make annual learning gains.

**Scoring High on the FCAT**

The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) is the primary measure of students' achievement of the Sunshine State Standards. Student scores are classified into five achievement levels, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest.

- Schools earn one point for each percent of students who score in achievement levels 3, 4, or 5 in reading and one point for each percent of students who score 3, 4, or 5 in math.

- The writing exam is scored by at least two readers on a scale of 1 to 6. The percent of students scoring "3" and above is averaged with the percent scoring "3.5" and above to yield the percent meeting minimum and higher standards. Schools earn one point for each percent of students on the combined measure.

**Making Annual Learning Gains**

Since FCAT reading and math exams are given in grades 3 – 10, it is now possible to monitor how much students learn from one year to the next.

- Schools earn one point for each percent of students who make learning gains in reading and one point for each percent of students who make learning gains in math. Students can demonstrate learning gains in any one of three ways:
  1. Improve achievement levels from 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, or 4-5; or
  2. Maintain within the relatively high levels of 3, 4, or 5; or
  3. Demonstrate more than one year's growth within achievement levels 1 or 2.

- Special attention is given to the reading gains of students in the lowest 25% in levels 1, 2, or 3 in each school. Schools earn one point for each percent of the lowest performing readers who make learning gains from the previous year. It takes at least 50% to make "adequate progress" for this group.

**SCHOOL PERFORMANCE GRADING SCALE**

- **A** • 410 points* or more
  • Meet adequate progress in math
  • Meet adequate progress in reading
  • Gains for lowest 25% in reading
  • Test at least 10% of students

- **B** • 380 points* or more
  • Meet adequate progress in math
  • Meet adequate progress in reading
  • Gains for lowest 25% in reading
  • Test at least 50% of students

- **C** • 330 points* or more
  • Meet adequate progress in math
  • Meet adequate progress in reading
  • Gains for lowest 25% in reading
  • Test at least 85% of students

- **D** • 320 points* or more
  • Meet adequate progress in math
  • Meet adequate progress in reading
  • Gains for lowest 25% in reading
  • Test at least 90% of eligible students

- **E** • Fewer than 260 points*
  • Gains for lowest 25% in reading
  • Test at least 90% of eligible students

**What happens if the lowest 25% of students in the school do not make “adequate progress” in reading?** Schools that aspire to be graded “C” or above, but do not make adequate progress with their lowest 25% in reading, must develop a School Improvement Plan component that addresses this need. If a school, otherwise graded “C” or “B”, does not demonstrate adequate progress for two years in a row, the final grade will be reduced by one letter grade.

*The 2002 grading scale above may vary by as much as 5% in order to make a smooth transition from 2001.