

2018

# Using Appreciative Inquiry to Discover School Administrators' Learning Management Best Practices Development

Michelle Estes Tittle  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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2018

Abstract

Using Appreciative Inquiry to Discover School Administrators' Learning Management

Best Practices Development

by

Michelle Estes Tittle

MBA, Walden University, 2009

BSBA, Walden University, 2007

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

Walden University

February 2018

## Abstract

The U.S. Department of Education has mandated that each U.S. state develop successful initiatives to help students navigate their educational experience. Yet in Alabama students neither advance academically nor in improved life skills development. It is unclear if school administrators in Alabama Schools have contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support and improve the experiences of vulnerable K-12 students. The purpose of this descriptive case study was to explore how administrators of Alabama schools develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support students. The conceptual framework was designed using collaboration theory, organizational learning theory, and appreciative inquiry. The overarching question addressed developing an understanding about how Alabama school administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation. Appreciative inquiry was used to facilitate a focus group and individual interviews with 15 participants. Data were analyzed using inductive analysis and bracketing. Thus, 4 themes were identified from the interviews and focus group. Most significant results were the identification of having a positive, engaging mobile environment and improving full community participation in the collaborative process. Contributions to positive social change may be experienced by developing community-based collaboration where all contribute to, and benefit from, co-create, collaborate, and structure a more balanced and feasible approach to successful implementation of strategic plans in an environment of financial constraints.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to my three children, Caroline, Rachel, and Jack. The education organizational experiences, through which they have journeyed, were many times challenging, but all times encouraging to my passion regarding education management reform. This study has extended my knowledge of the organizational processes and has driven my passion further to help support the organization to obtain what it needs to successfully help all students, especially vulnerable students. It is my hope that all members of a society will work together for the better development of our kids in their formative years to instill the love for learning, the ease of learning, and the success from learning.

Thank you.

## Acknowledgments

My academic journey over the last 8 years in Walden University's PhD program has been one of perseverance. In the last two years, my mentor, Dr. Phlypo, has been a strong support and excellent mentor for my work. I want to thank Dr. Phlypo, and my committee, including Dr. Lao and Dr. Gould, for their patience, their expertise, and their encouragement.

I want to thank my friends and cohort for their support and encouragement. With all my heart, I thank God for keeping me strong, tenacious, and hopeful. With all of you on my side I have come to a full circle in my academic journey and I am ready for many new adventures.

Thank you.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In the United States, there are K-12 students in public education who suffer numerous detrimental academic and social consequences partially due to ineffective learning management methods deployed in common school environments. The Stanford University Teaching Commons has categorized academically vulnerable students as either those who struggle with material or those who believe that their instructors and peers doubt their abilities (Stanford University, 2016). These students are prone to be labeled as bad, lazy, unfocused, too talkative, restless, daydreamer, troublesome, defiant, and more (Glass, 2014; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Salehzade et al., 2012). These students are often subjected to official screening following parental consultation, and then diagnosed and labeled with a learning disability (LD) or another condition requiring special education (Glass, 2014; Harry & Klingner, 2014). These students may suffer long-term negative effects upon leaving school when trying to obtain work and a college career (Glass, 2014; Harry & Klingner, 2014).

Although schools for years have been held accountable for reaching certain goals for all students in K-12 according to federal and state mandates, some schools continue to struggle to support such mandates for vulnerable children in various subgroups including (a) economically disadvantaged students, (b) students with limited English language proficiency, (c) students with disabilities (special education), (d) students from major racial and ethnic groups as determined by the state, (e) students with a homeless status, (f) students with parents in the military, and (g) students in foster care (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016).

In this chapter, I covered the problem, the background of research, and the gap in the scholarly research found. I also explained the purpose of the study and the significance of the study to theory, practice, and social change. In the process, I reviewed the conceptual framework of the study, the research questions, and nature of the study. Further, I provided the definitions of the terms I use throughout the study, and discussed the context, assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations and transitioned to the literature review in Chapter 2.

### **Background of the Study**

A vulnerable student falls into one or more categories including economically disadvantaged students, limited English language proficiency students, students with disabilities, including learning and physical disabilities, which includes special education; major racial and ethnic groups as determined by the state (Stanford University, 2016). The 2016 Every Student Succeeds Act has added homeless status, students with parents in the military, and students in foster care to the vulnerable student categories (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016).

One in three parents of students labeled with a LD is struggling with their ability to cope with their children's learning issues (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). These parents feel isolated, guilty, stressed, and worried about their children's futures (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Forty-five percent of parents state that their child labeled with an LD has been bullied, and 37% of parents of LD-labeled children report that the schools do not effectively test for LD (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

There have been several federal mandates signed into law over the past 50 years including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002, and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2016. Alabama administrators developed an additional plan that began in 2012-13 called Plan 2020 (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016b). Plan 2020's vision was to make sure all students graduated high school and were prepared for college, work, and adulthood in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, which follows suit with the 2011 Obama administration offer of state waivers easing the mandates of the NCLB law. After 4 years of the Plan 2020 being implemented, Alabama schools continue to fall short of most, if not all, targets and some strategies have not been measured at all (see Appendix E; Alabama State Board of Education, 2016b).

In an October 2016 article, Alabama's new state school superintendent stated that Alabama faced a crisis in math education and called for a strategy to address the problem (Cason, 2016). Alabama fourth-graders ranked 52nd in math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in the 2015-2016 school year (Cason, 2016). Also, there are problems in teaching science and reading (Cason, 2016). The state superintendent told the board he plans to name a panel of about 25 people, which will include teachers, administrators, academics, school board members, and business leaders with experience in mathematics education or applied mathematics, to develop a strategy to address these issues (Cason, 2016). The panel was to hold meetings around the state and report to the board in December of 2016. Board members reacted favorably to the state superintendent's idea (Cason, 2016). Alabama ranked second worst in the country in state

K-12 education funding cuts, with state support down 17.3% since the start of the 2008 recession, according to a report released by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (Fambro, 2015). Overall, Alabama cut its total state and local investment in K-12 schools by 11.3% per student between 2008 and 2014, the seventh worst cut in the nation (Fambro, 2015).

A December 2016 audit revealed that graduation rates, the only target of 14 that had been reported as met, in fact was not met because graduation reporting had been falsified (McLain, 2016). That is, not one of the targets has been met and those who have reported progress have done so erroneously. Race-specific graduation rates, which were reported in high regard, had to be recalculated, which led to lower progress than initially reported.

### **Previous Research**

Harry and Klingner (2014) conducted a study involving collaboration between university researchers and a school district's special education administrators to develop effective intervention models designed to reduce inappropriate referrals to special education. Harry and Klingner supported adherence to specified guidelines regarding which children are allowed the individualized supports of special education, but they argued that guidelines for eligibility should not be based on a belief system that constructs illogical borders between normalcy and disability. Harry and Klingner noted that such eligibility guidelines stigmatize, alienate, and underestimate children, particularly children whose families and communities are already underestimated and marginalized. Harry and Klingner contended that children should be able to obtain

specialized services according to their level of performance in academic tasks and not based on a decontextualized testing process designed to determine an underlying *deficit*.

Researchers have investigated various elements within the education process that affect students. Tausan (2011) reviewed ways in which the school must adjust educational strategies and the entire educational-instructive process to the individual needs of the students. Heward (2003) discussed ten notions that he believed to limit the effectiveness of special education by impeding the adoption of research-based instructional practices. Salehzade, Amiri, Neshatdoost, and Molavi (2012) investigated the effects of the teacher-assigned “bad kid” label on children’s self-image and future observed behavior of the child.

Labeling and social reproduction are occurring in schools (Glass, 2014). Social reproduction theory, in the context of schools, contends that schools are not institutions of equal opportunity but mechanisms for perpetuating social inequalities (Collins, 2009; Glass, 2014). This area of research is important when considering the long-term impacts of labeling, such as the resultant systems of tracking and high school dropout rates, which are included concerns of the NCLB Act, the Plan 2020, and the ESSA (Glass, 2014). A child’s self-concept is affected more from labeling by teachers and peers than from formal labeling as a delinquent by the court, the police, or parents (Glass, 2014).

### **Gap in the Scholarly Research**

Harry and Klingner (2014), Glass (2014), Tausan (2011), Niculescu (2014), Christenbury (2010), Kocakoglu (2010), Blackwell et al. (2007), and Heward (2003) have all found a gap between recognizing vulnerable students and successfully helping

them through learning hurdles while avoiding negative labels and loss of motivation. Administrators must learn to develop contextual best practices to design and implement strategies for successful education reforms. Evidence-based decisions theory has emerged to aid in making the right choices (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Research has shown that best practices are best when they are contextual, instead of so general as to blanket all issues and all organizational learning practices (Patton, 2001). Knowledge management should include a versatile learning management system for all stakeholders to collaborate and share strategies and best practices, in context. A full circle of the learning experiences and successful strategy implementation can then be designed for students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

### **Problem Statement**

Many K-12 students suffer numerous detrimental academic and social consequences due to ineffective LM methods deployed in common school environments. After 4 years of Plan 2020 being implemented, Alabama schools continue to fall short of most, if not all, targets, and some strategies have not been measured at all (Alabama Board of Education, 2016b). The general problem was that school system administrators might not have contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable students. The specific problem was that school system administrators in Alabama schools might not have contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students.

Organizational learning research is extensive. In regard to best practices in organizational learning, Mistry et al. (2016) showed that not all strategies or policies

created at higher administrative levels are a good fit for subunits and must be contextually altered to fit the needs of the subunit. Hiebeler et al. (2012) argued that it is good practice to have a pool of different kinds of best practices from which to extract according to contextually specific strategic needs. The findings of how best practices are best in the context of the organization and agenda of the strategy in organizations help support my study's agenda. I used a qualitative single case study facilitated by an appreciative inquiry guided focus group and semistructured interviews with the state districts' superintendents.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this descriptive single case study was to explore how administrators in Alabama schools develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students. The descriptive single case study included 15 administrators of Alabama schools, most of whom were district superintendents.

Organizational learning and need for change are growing (Aggestam, 2006; Hussein et al., 2014). Learning organizations share ideas and concentrate on processes for acquiring information, interpreting data, developing knowledge, and sustaining learning (Aggestam, 2006; Hussein et al., 2014). How an organization manages its knowledge is central to organizational development (Aggestam, 2006; Hussein et al., 2014). Knowledge management (KM) includes creating, organizing, sharing, and using knowledge (Aggestam, 2006). Information technology (IT) is a prerequisite for effective KM (Aggestam, 2006). Learning management (LM) is crucial for organizations because

learning capability is not always apparent in organizations naturally or readily (Hussein et al., 2014). Learning organizations help to ensure that organizational objectives are attained (Hussein et al., 2014).

A learning organization searches for information in its environment, creates information by itself, and encourages individuals to transfer knowledge between the individuals in the team (Aggestam, 2006, p. 296). Innovation and performance are linked to learning organizations (Hussein et al., 2014). In a learning organization, work processes must offer due diligence to every aspect of knowledge, and the processes must enable knowledge distribution while the culture must encourage knowledge sharing (Aggestam, 2006; Hussein et al., 2014).

### **Research Questions**

I developed the following research question to guide this study: How do Alabama school administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study included appreciative inquiry, organizational learning theory, and collaboration theory. I used these theories and modes of inquiry to develop my literature review. These principles led me to seek out supporting and opposing research in regards to best practices, contextual lessons learned in business learning management , and strategy creation and implementation. I searched for and synthesized literature addressing ways actors collaborate to create methodical processes to meet certain goals. I searched the literature for collaborative techniques such as

brainstorming, group sessions, and focus groups, which may develop learning organization strategies to support vulnerable students in K-12.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a theoretical research perspective and change methodology (Calabrese, 2015). AI is a form of action research promoting systematic, collaborative research on problems of practice in a democratic and participatory research environment (Calabrese, 2015). AI can be used as a methodology to inform practice simultaneously with an inquiry into practice (Calabrese, 2015). Calabrese noted three assumptions that can guide AI theoretical research on school administration: (a) change and inquiry occur simultaneously, (b) school administration is a craft-informed practice in which the more experience school administrators have in their craft, the more knowledgeable they become in the practice of the craft; and (c) when school administrators share similar contexts and challenges, they more fully understand their context and discover innovative ways to implement their craft and advance the work and outcomes of their organization (2015, p. 213). AI is a research approach that seeks to facilitate change based on the participants' actual experiences of best practice (Breslow et al., 2015, p. 2).

Levitt and March (1988) described organizations as collections of subunits learning in an environment that consists largely of other collections of learning subunits (p. 319). They viewed organizational learning as routine based, history dependent, and target oriented (p. 319). Organizational learning characteristics include the structure of beliefs, frameworks, paradigms, codes, cultures, and knowledge that strengthen, elaborate, and contradict the regular routines (Levitt & March, 1988).

Levitt and March (1988) argued that in an organization that is invariably successful, routines that are followed are associated with success and are reinforced, while other routines are withdrawn. Maintaining an appropriate balance between exploration and exploitation is a primary dynamic in organizational survival and prosperity (March, 1991). Rumelt (2011) argued that strategic plans failure is not often the fault of the employees not executing the plan, but that there was never a strategy or good strategy with which to begin. Rumelt stated that the key components of a strategy are the diagnoses of the situation, the approach to dealing with the situation, and a set of immediate coordinated actions to address the situation. These strategic components associate with the balance of exploration and exploitation as discussed by March (1991).

I included collaboration theory in my conceptual framework because it involves actors interacting in the process of planning, brainstorming, making decisions, follow-up, and adjustments to operation implementations (Thomson, Perry, & Miller, 2008). My study participants collaborated in the focus group, and they shared ideas through the positive lens of appreciative inquiry both in the focus group and in semistructured interviews (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework.

I used the components of the conceptual framework to guide development of the research question, data collection, and interpretation of the research findings. In Chapter 2, I discuss these components in more detail.

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was a qualitative, descriptive, single case study facilitated through appreciative inquiry. Qualitative research offers insight into how people think, how people process information, how people learn, and how people use or allow their environment to shape their behaviors (Austin & Sutton, 2014; Taylor et al., 2015). The purpose of this descriptive single case study was to explore how Alabama school

administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students.

Qualitative methodology allows the researcher close encounters with the participants and environment while obtaining data to uncover a new phenomenon or understand a current one. Qualitative research includes the active interactions between people involved, and the adjustments they make in response to various changes. Such changes may include job changes, geographic changes, economic changes, family makeup changes, and so on (Hartas, 2015). Although quantitative research has its advantages, knowledge produced through quantitative methodology might only contribute abstract generalizations that are inadequate for direct application. Furthermore, the researcher using quantitative methodology might neglect phenomena occurring because of a focus on theory or hypothesis testing, rather than on theory or hypothesis generation (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Qualitative methodology offers numerous options of design to conduct the study. For this study, I have used a single case study design. A case study results is a written report about a thing, person, or event after observations, investigations, and analysis of data and findings (McLeod, 2008). Case studies can provide valuable information about how things or persons act or perform, and the resulting outcomes of those behaviors (Tsang, 2014). In this case study, I used an AI approach to interviewing the focus group. AI is a form of action research promoting systematic, collaborative research on problems of practice, but requires less activities and time than traditional action research (Putman & Rock, 2017). Administrators participating in the study had limited time available.

Action research typically seeks to discover the problem, design, and implement strategies to solve the problem (Putman & Rock, 2017). Action research requires multiple meetings of the participants, behind the meetings tasks, and analysis of tested resolution (Putman & Rock, 2017). Action research was not feasible due to time restraints. AI was a better choice for this study because AI helped to keep the focus positive, and allowed for participants to contribute their individual thoughts, perspectives, ideas, and knowledge. Several advantages of AI include renewal of energy, hope, motivation, and commitment; increased curiosity and sense of vitality; and improved working relations and conflict resolution (Whitney & Schau, 1998). These benefits contributed to rich data collection to answer the research question.

The participants included 15 administrators from Alabama schools. There are 138 district superintendents of Alabama schools. Through the focus group and semistructured interviews, I used appreciative inquiry and collaborative theories to collect data and developed conclusions regarding the research problem. The focus group met, was introduced to the study, and data collection proceeded through utilization of an interview guide. The individual semistructured interviews were conducted in the same manner. I used Nvivo, a web application for qualitative data analysis, to analyze the data analysis.

### **Definitions**

The following section includes definitions of some terms in this document that may not be readily known to the audience.

*Collaborative inertia:* A phenomenon that makes slow progress or fails to achieve anything. The rate of output is slow; even successful outcomes involve frustrations and hard work (Huxham & Vangen, 2013).

*Contextual best practices:* Best practices which are considered within the context of the environment of the situation (Patton, 2001).

*Education reform:* Any planned changes in the way a school or school system functions, from teaching methodologies to administrative processes (Rand Corporation, 2016).

*ESEA:* The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was designed to improve educational opportunities for poor children (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

*ESSA:* The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed by President Obama on December 10, 2015. This bipartisan measure reauthorizes the 50-year-old ESEA, the nation's education law that marked longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b).

*Labeling:* A process used by teachers/administrators due to some factors including student performance, attitude toward authority, the level of involvement within the school, parental involvement and support, and prior knowledge of and interaction with the student (Glass, 2014).

*Learning management system (LMS):* A software application for the administration, documentation, tracking, reporting, and delivery of electronic educational

technology (e-learning) courses or training programs. An LMS allows you to create, distribute and track training anywhere on any device (Mindflash, 2016).

*NCLB*: The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was a congressional act that reauthorized the ESEA; it included Title I provisions applying to disadvantaged students (US Department of Education, 2016c).

*Opportunism*: The conscious policy and practice of taking advantage of circumstances with little regard for principles or for what the consequences are for others. Opportunist actions are expedient actions guided primarily by self-interested motives (Paas & Sweller, 2012).

*Plan 2020*: A strategic plan for education in Alabama with a goal to prepare all students to be successful in college and career upon graduation from high school (Alabama State Department of Education, 2016).

*Special needs (SN)*: Any student who might need extra help because of a medical, emotional, or learning problem. These students have SNs because they might need medicine, therapy, or extra help in school that other students do not typically need or only need occasionally (Gavin, 2016).

*Stigmergy*: A mechanism of indirect coordination between agents or actions, in which the aftereffects of one action guide a subsequent action (Elliott, 2016).

*Strategy*: A plan of action or policy designed to enhance organizational performance (Parnell, 2013).

*Systemicities*: The partial, fragmented, and irregular sightings of the *whole system* that are missing, glossing, and reducing. Organizations are many overlays of partially

implemented, rarely totally removed systemicities. Those systemicities are in time and in space of organization everydayness. Systemicities are spatial fractals, temporal fractals, and their entangled combinations across the involvement-contexts of an organization (Boje, 2016).

*Vulnerable students:* There are two kinds of academically vulnerable students: those who struggle with material and those who believe that their instructors and peers doubt their abilities. It is important to recognize both threats to a student's achievement and to construct an environment where students who need help are comfortable asking for it, and where students do not feel pressure to dispel stereotypes about their race, ethnicity, age, or gender (Stanford University, 2016).

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions in research are defined as aspects of the study that are believed to be true but are not in the control of the researcher (Simon, 2011). In this descriptive case study, I made several assumptions including the assumption that I could obtain the required number of participants (which proved to be a daunting task). I also assumed that the participants would be open, honest, candid, and informative when answering the interview questions. I based my assessment on prior research of (McLeod, 2008; Taylor et al., 2015; Yin, 2003, 2015), I assumed that the research method I chose was best suited to the study.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of a study is the parameters in which the study is performed (Simon & Goes, 2013), and delimitations are characteristics in the researcher's control that limit the

scope (Simon, 2011). My study extended to individuals who were engaged in designing and implementing strategies for their learning organizations to meet needs of all learners. I delimited the study to 15 administrators of Alabama public schools, mainly superintendents. There are 138 school district superintendents in Alabama. The participants were limited mainly to district superintendents because superintendents' roles include strategic planning to address education reform mandates to support vulnerable students, leading in the development of contextual best practices for strategic planning, and leading in plan analysis on all levels including plan modification and plan outcomes.

I held the focus group virtually, using a web-conferencing platform called Zoom. I also conducted the semistructured interviews virtually using the same web-conferencing platform. This design allowed for transferability with sufficient disclosure. An area outside the scope of this study was strategy implementation processes in individual school levels. Additionally, the financial data used to support the system's strategy implementation and learner success were beyond the scope of this study.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are matters that appear in a study that are outside the researcher's control (Simon & Goes, 2013). Limitations of the study included the experience and knowledge, or lack thereof, the participants had with collaboration, vulnerable students, organizational learning management techniques, and contextual best practices. The study was limited to mainly superintendents of school systems in Alabama. The focus group was limited to 45 minutes in length, which might have fallen short in capturing all data

the participants wanted to express. The study was limited to six questions in the interview guide, though I did ask additional probing questions for clarification.

Assuring participants of confidentiality and probing for honest and informative feedback helped ensure credibility. Collaboration with my dissertation committee helped me identify any vulnerabilities in the course of action, exposed any needed adaptations and potential biases, and more. Overlapping methods of the focus group and individual interviews helped establish dependability. Dependability was ensured with the audit trail, which involved maintaining and preserving all transcripts, notes, audiotapes, and more (see Shenton, 2004). Reflective appraisal, which involved evaluating the effectiveness of the process of inquiry undertaken, also contributed to the study's dependability.

There are several types of bias encountered in research, and triangulation can help with most of them (Denzin, 1978b). I triangulated data collected from the focus group, interviews, and historical records. I brought a small amount of experience with the topic, and bracketed my experience to exclude it from the study. I did not allow prior knowledge or experience to affect the outcome of the study.

The volume of data analyzed and interpreted was manageable because of the lower number of participants. My presence during data gathering did not appear to affect participant responses. I did not find it difficult to articulate or characterize the study's findings. Assurance of confidentiality and a nonjudgmental environment for the participants, patience, and organization of data helped to divert or eliminate these possible limitations.

## Significance of the Study

### Significance to Practice

The findings from this study might be beneficial to local and state officials and administrators of school systems in their professional practice as they work to support vulnerable K-12 students. Managers have difficult jobs, and even the best managers might make mistakes while under pressure to make decisions with incomplete information (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Evidence-based decisions theory has emerged to help managers make the right choices (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Many managers ignore the evidence, relying instead on outdated information or merely their experiences to make decisions (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Some managers yield to propaganda about miracle or quick fix management cures, and adopt other companies' best practices without asking whether they will work in context for the organization in question (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). This type of decision-making typically results in poor-quality decisions, which waste time and money, and risk the company's future (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). An evidence-based management movement begun within the organization will aid managers in avoiding the poor decision results (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Galliers argued that including a focus on methods used to reach your destination is imperative for a full journey understanding (1991). Having a pool of different kind of best practices from which to draw when contextually needed for specific strategies and other business agendas will lead to better outcomes (Hiebeler et al., 2012).

**Significance to Theory**

Organizational learning theory, collaboration theory, and the appreciative inquiry model allow the study to contribute further to the theories by expanding how these theories can be used in the field of education, collaboration among administrators, and organizational learning. Using these theories, I summarized and organized information and helped focus the research (Mitchell & Jolley, 2004). The theories are useful tools for developing research ideas and tying those ideas to existing knowledge while further validating the theory and its uses (Mitchell & Jolley, 2004).

**Significance to Social Change**

This study might affect positive social change by providing insight and tools to administrators and local officials regarding methods for collaboration while developing contextual best practices for strategic plans to address education reform mandates to support all students. In turn, especially vulnerable students will be more apt to build better self-esteem, develop more motivation to keep working, and not suffer from negative labeling. Successful students will be more likely to retain a positive outlook for their future endeavors in work and higher education, thus avoiding implications of negative and hostile experiences in elementary and secondary education environments.

**Summary and Transition**

In this chapter, I have reported that in the United States there are K-12 public education students who suffer numerous detrimental academic and social consequences partially due to ineffective LM methods deployed in the common school environments. These students may suffer long-term negative effects upon leaving school when trying to

obtain work and a college career (Glass, 2014; Harry & Klingner, 2014). Although schools for years have been held accountable for reaching certain goals for all students in K-12 according to federal and state mandates (NCLB, Plan 2020, ESEA, and ESSA), some schools continue to struggle to support vulnerable children in various subgroups (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016).

I sought to explore how administrators of Alabama schools develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students. The descriptive single case study included 15 administrators of Alabama schools. The qualitative study included a focus group and semistructured interviews to answer the research question.

I assumed enough participants would be available to develop a rich dialogue through appreciative inquiry to help envision best strategic planning for the Alabama education system. I assumed the participants were honest, candid, informative, and maintained confidentiality. Regardless of the limitations, including a focus group and semistructured interviews of 15 administrators, my quest for envisioned best practice strategic planning was achieved and the study can be repeated as often as needed throughout the region and state.

The overlapping theories I used in the framework (collaboration theory, appreciative inquiry, and learning organizations) provided the means for a collective and positive inquiry. In Chapter 2, I reviewed the literature regarding these conceptual components, which led to the research method and design.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this descriptive single case study was to explore how administrators of Alabama schools develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students. The specific problem is that school system administrators in Alabama schools might not have contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K- 12 students.

In this study, I used a practical research framework based on AI and collaboration theory to explore how school administrators develop contextual best practices to address education reform mandates that support vulnerable K-12 students. Vulnerable students are prone to be labeled with negative characteristic words and descriptions, such as bad, lazy, unfocused, too talkative, restless, daydreamer, troublesome, defiant, and more (Glass, 2014; Harry & Klingner, 20014; Salehzade et al., 2012). These students are often subjected to official screening, following parental consultation, and the labeled with a LD or another condition requiring special education (Glass, 2014; Harry & Klingner, 2014). These students may suffer long-term negative effects upon leaving school when trying to obtain work and a college career (Glass, 2014; Harry & Klingner, 2014). Using an appreciative inquiry approach to interviewing the focus group and conducting semistructured interviews to collect data, I maximized administrator input regarding organizational learning management methods, strategic plans of inspiration and success, contextual best practice development, and more to support all learners.

This chapter serves as an overview of the elements involved in my exploration of how administrators of Alabama schools develop contextual best practices for strategic

planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students. First, I explain my literature search strategy. Next, I review the literature on each applicable element of the study including labeling issues for K-12 students, organizational learning, learning organizations, management, AI, collaboration theory, and federal mandates for education reform. I then identify and discuss a gap in the literature and close with a summary.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

In this section, I reviewed literature that focused on concepts relevant to this study including organizational learning, collaboration, and appreciative inquiry. Also, I have reviewed and included relevant literature regarding vulnerable students and education reform mandates. The literature review included peer-reviewed articles I gathered from academic databases via Walden University's library including Google Scholar, Education Research Complete, ERIC, and Sage (see Table 1). Many of the articles were published in *Educational Leadership*, *Management Sciences*, *Interactive Learning Environment*, *Educational Technology Research*, and *Computers and Education*. Also included are *Harvard Business Review*, *American Journal of Evaluation*, *Project Management Journal*, *European Journal of Information Systems*, *The Urban Review*, *Social Psychology of Education*, *Public Personnel Management*, *Journal of General Management*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organizational Science*, and *The Learning Organization*. Of the 145 main references, 90% were from peer-reviewed articles, 85% were from contemporary sources published in the last 5 years (2011-2016), and 15% were from electronic or printed books.

Table 1

*Literature Search Strategy*

Database	Keyword search	# Used	# Found
Google Scholar	Appreciative inquiry	13	19
Google Scholar	Best practices	6	12
Sage	Case studies	1	4
Google Scholar	Case studies	1	4
Google Scholar	Collaboration theory	13	20
Google Scholar	Common core standards	1	3
Google Scholar	Contextual best practices	7	8
Google Scholar	Data coding and analysis	4	5
Google Scholar	Data collection instruments	3	5
Google Scholar	Education reform	4	5
Google Scholar	ESEA	1	2
Google Scholar	ESSA	2	2
Google Scholar	Focus group protocol	2	3
Sage	Focus groups	1	6
Sage	Labeled students	2	4
Google Scholar	Labeled students	3	6
Google Scholar	Learning organizations	6	17
Education Research Center	Learning styles, primary schools	1	2

(table continues)

Database	Keyword search	# Used	#Found
Google Scholar	LMS	2	10
Google Scholar	NCLB	1	3
Google Scholar	Organizational learning	6	12
Google Scholar	Plan 2020	1	2
Google Scholar	Qualitative research	8	18
Google Scholar	Research instruments	3	5
Google Scholar	Research methodology	5	10
Google Scholar	Role of the researcher	2	9
Google Scholar	Sample size and saturation	6	7
Google scholar	Special needs students	14	9
ERIC	Special needs students	1	5
National Center for Learning Disabilities	Special needs students	1	1
Google Scholar	Strategic planning	8	10
Google Scholar	Strategic planning with AI	2	2
ERIC	Time to learn	1	1
Google Scholar	Triangulation	5	7
Google Scholar	Trustworthiness in qualitative studies	2	8
Sage	Trustworthiness in qualitative studies	1	6
Google Scholar	Validity in qualitative research	1	4
Google Scholar	Vulnerable students	3	5
Total included		145	263

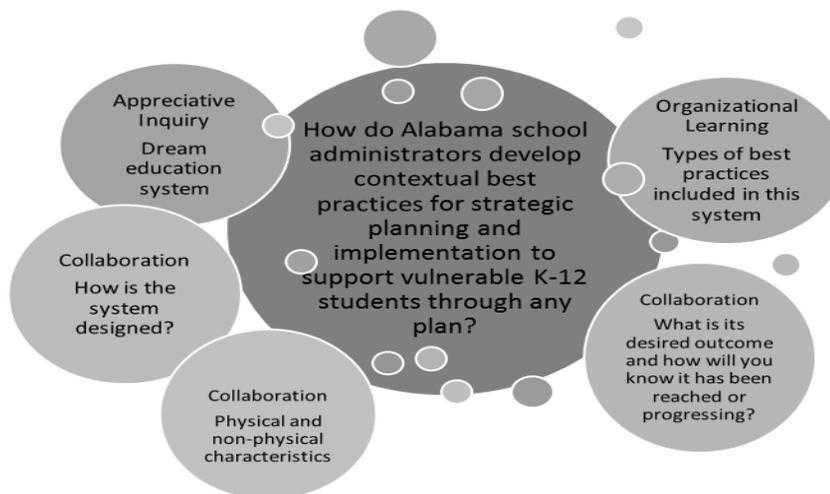
I entered keywords, such as *best practices for managers*, *organizational learning*, and *contextual best practices* into Google Scholar, Walden library databases, and a small number of specific journal home pages. The literature was published between the years 2011 and 2016, with most of the referenced studies published within the previous 3 years. A small number of citations were selected from the more distant past because I used canonical texts to develop the conceptual framework.

Search terms and keywords included: *learning styles*, *labeled students*, *vulnerable students*, *special needs students*, *education mandates*, *organizational learning*, *learning organizations*, *appreciative inquiry*, *strategic planning*, *best practices for managers*, *contextual best practices*, and *collaboration theory*. I entered these terms in the search engines individually or in combination. In most cases, the search terms led to adequate results. The search terms that did not lead to adequate results, regarding specific contextual best practices for strategic planning versus general best practices for strategic planning, emboldens the use or development of best practices, in the matter of context of the business and area of opportunity, thereby supported the research agenda of this dissertation.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study included AI, organizational learning theory, and collaboration theory (see Figure 2), which I used to develop my literature review. These principles led me to seek out supporting and opposing research regarding best practices, contextual lessons learned, and strategy creation and implementation. I searched for and synthesized literature that addressed ways actors collaborate to create

methodical processes to meet certain goals. I searched the literature for collaborative techniques such as brainstorming, group sessions, and focus groups, which may develop learning organization strategies to support vulnerable students in K-12.



*Figure 2.* Conceptual framework to answer the research question.

I used AI to explore how administrators of Alabama schools develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students. AI is a theoretical research perspective and change methodology (Calabrese, 2015). As a theoretical research perspective, AI is a form of action research promoting systematic, collaborative research on problems of practice in a democratic and participatory research environment (Calabrese, 2015).

Another component of the conceptual framework included collaboration theory. Thomson, Perry, and Miller's (2008) focused on what is happening in the collaboration. Collaborative learners are a single information processing system that includes multiple, limited working memories, creating a larger, more efficient, collective working space (Paas & Sweller, 2012). Creative collaboration, as opposed to simple task collaboration,

involves the exchange of ideas to develop a novel solution that neither person in the pair or group would have crafted on their own. Affect-based trust creates a smooth exchange of new ideas that boosts creative collaboration (Chua, Morris, & Mor, 2012).

A learning organization, another component of the framework, searches for information in its environment, creates information by itself, and encourages individuals to transfer knowledge between the individuals in the team (Aggestam, 2006, p. 296). Innovation and performance are linked to learning organizations (Hussein et al., 2014). In a learning organization, work processes must offer due diligence to every aspect of knowledge, and the processes must enable knowledge distribution, while the culture must encourage knowledge sharing (Aggestam, 2006, Hussein et al., 2014). Learning organization leaders must encourage individuals in a team to transfer knowledge between one another (Aggestam, 2006). This information processing must be guided by the structure and by the vision that is guided by the strategic leadership of the organization (Aggestam, 2006).

I used these three overlapping components of the conceptual framework (appreciative inquiry, organizational learning, and collaboration) to gain knowledge and understanding of how administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students. AI can be used as a methodology to inform practice simultaneously with an inquiry into practice (Calabrese, 2015). The research agenda in Calabrese's appreciative inquiry study involved how to make more of the successful events happen again. Calabrese strove to understand if observing and sharing successful school practices/events in a whole group setting led to

change in the group's perceptions, attitudes, and administrative practice (Calabrese, 2015, p. 213). Calabrese (2015) found (a) the AI focus of inquiry on successful practices/events shapes school administrator perceptions, attitudes, and application of craft knowledge to practice; and (b) the school administrators' sharing of successful practices/events in a whole group setting generated new forms of practice during the 10-week study (p. 213). This type of finding was of interest for and benefit to my study's agenda.

Organizational learning research is extensive. In regard to best practices in organizational learning, Mistry et al. (2016) showed that not all strategies or policies created at higher administrative levels are a good fit for subunits and must be contextually altered to fit the needs of the subunit. Hiebeler et al. (2012) argued that it is good practice to have a pool of different kinds of best practices from which to extract according to contextually specific strategic needs. The findings of how best practices are best in the context of the organization and agenda of the strategy in organizations help support my study's agenda. I used a qualitative single case study facilitated by an appreciative inquiry guided focus group and semistructured interviews with the state districts' superintendents.

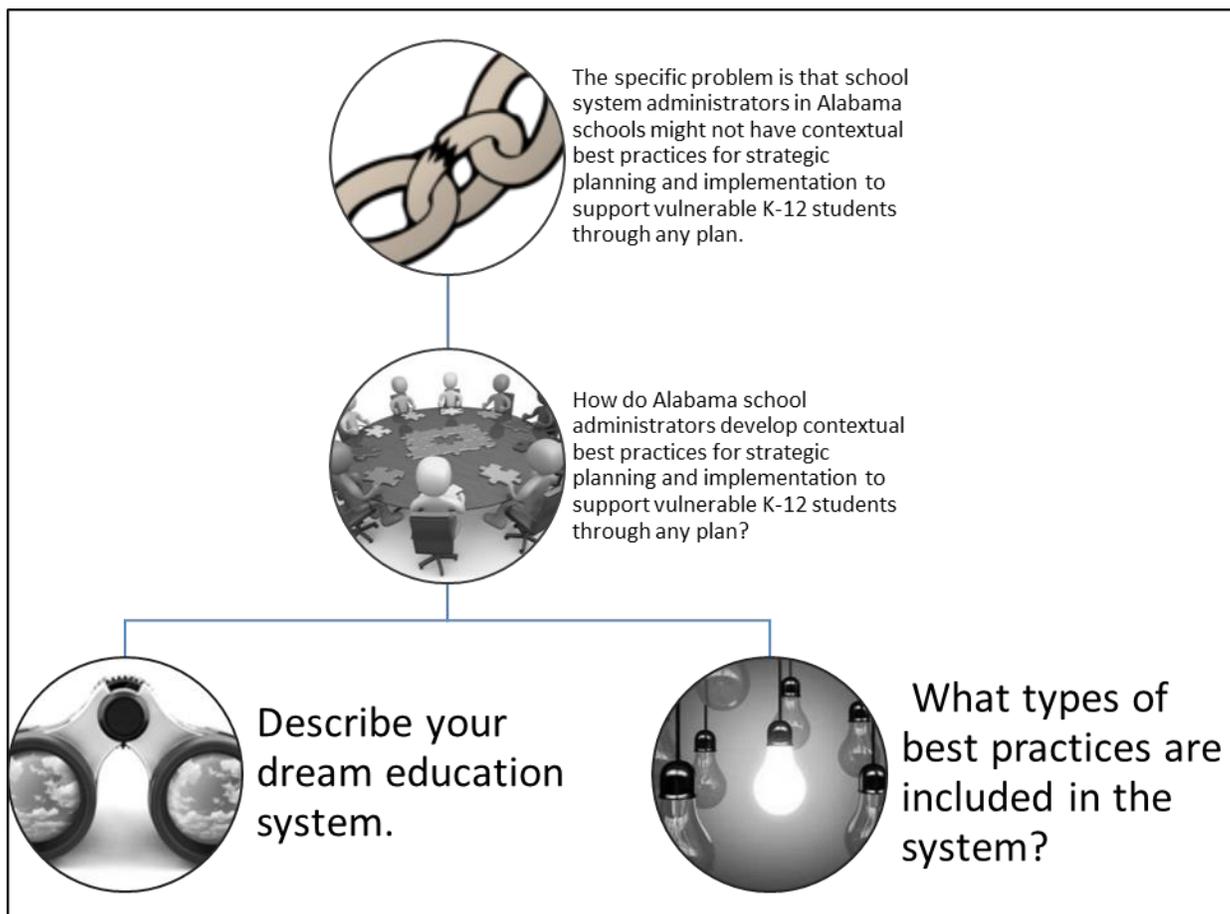
Collaboration research has proven time and again that more effective knowledge discovery and strategic planning can be achieved through collaborating learners to solve complex problems that may not be possible for an individual learner (Chua, Morris, & Mor, 2012; Daoudi & Bourgault, 2012; Devlin-Scherer & Sardone, 2013; Huxham & Vangen, 2013; Paas & Sweller, 2012; Smith, 2014; Williams, Merriman, & Morris,

2015). My study's agenda benefited from the collaboration description outlined in the research, as the previous research findings support my research agenda.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review was a synopsis of the elements important to the study's agenda. The components included research literature regarding vulnerable students and labels, organizational learning, learning organizations, management, collaboration theory, federal mandates for education reform, and appreciative inquiry. The knowledge and application of these components were integral to my research study in exploring how administrators of Alabama schools develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students. First, I presented the background information regarding vulnerable students and labeling theory with implications. Next, I reviewed what organizational learning, learning organizations, and management within the organization mean to strategic planning, favorable outcomes, and developing contextual best practices for future growth and enhancements to the operations and outcomes of the organization. Third, collaboration theory literature research was reviewed to compel the field to understand the importance of ongoing and cooperative collaboration within any organization. Fourth, federal mandates for education reform that have been enacted over the last 50 years were reviewed, and the current progress reports for Alabama schools were outlined. Lastly, I presented research literature about appreciative inquiry, which guided my study's focus group's interview and semistructured interviews. My intention was to use appreciative inquiry attributes and create a positive atmosphere where the participants can fully express their visions for

their dream education system, and discover how administrators of Alabama schools administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3.* Research study's problem and research question.

### **Vulnerable Students and Labels**

In the United States, there are K-12 students in public education who suffer numerous detrimental academic and social consequences partially due to ineffective LM methods deployed in the common school environments. The Stanford University Teaching Commons section categorized academically vulnerable students as either those

who struggle with material or those who believe that their instructors and peers doubt their abilities (Stanford University, 2016). It is important to understand both threats to a student's achievement and to create an environment where students who need help are comfortable asking for it, and students do not feel pressure to oust stereotypes about their race, ethnicity, age, or gender (Stanford University, 2016). A vulnerable student falls into one or more categories including economically disadvantaged, limited English language proficiency, students with disabilities, including learning and physical disabilities, which falls under special education; and major racial and ethnic groups as determined by the state (Stanford University, 2016). Recent additional categories, under 2016 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes homeless status, students with parents in the military, and students in foster care (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016).

These students are prone to be labeled with negative characteristic words and descriptions, such as bad, lazy, unfocused, too talkative, restless, daydreamer, troublesome, defiant, and more (Glass, 2014; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Salehzade et al., 2012). These students are often subjected to official screening, following parental consultation, and be labeled with a LD or another category of Special Education (Glass, 2014; Harry & Klingner, 2014). These students may suffer long-term adverse effects upon leaving school when trying to obtain work and a college career (Glass, 2014; Harry & Klingner, 2014). For years schools have been held accountable to reach certain goals for all students in K-12 as per federal and state mandates, such as NCLB, Plan 2020, ESEA, and ESSA. Some schools continue to struggle to support implications of such mandates for vulnerable children in various subgroups, as mentioned above (Alabama

State Board of Education, 2016). Shifrer (2013) found that being labeled 'different' led to being bullied and marginalization in expectations of performance. Being labeled with a special need or disability can result in social disadvantage and poor performance, and influences the student's beliefs and attitudes (Shifrer, 2013; Shifrer et al., 2013).

**Teacher behavior influence.** Special needs (SN) students have more conflictual relationships with teachers than those without SN, and SN students feel a disconnect instead of closeness with their teachers (Demirkaya et al., 2015). Tekinarslan et al. (2015) found a significant difference in the loneliness of SN students in Inclusive classrooms versus that of non-SN students. Furthermore, SN students have significant predictions in social disapproval category while students without SN had a significant prediction in approval category (Sazak et al., 2013).

Success for the SN student in Inclusive Classrooms is strongly related to teacher behaviors (Guner-Yildiz, 2015; Kumar & Bala, 2014; Sazak et al., 2013; Strogilos & Tragoulia, 2013) and listening to students and acting on their views is essential (Wickremesooriya, 2015). Orsati and Causton-Theoharis (2013) found that teachers began labeling students instead of the behavior and this led to teachers excluding the problem students from the classrooms. In opposition to the concept that teachers' callous behaviors were barriers to special needs students' success in inclusive classrooms, Gibbs and Powell (2012) investigated the relationship between teachers' individual and collective beliefs regarding their efficacy with children's behavior, and whether these beliefs were associated with the use of exclusion as a sanction. Gibbs and Powell found that the more positive the teachers felt about their abilities to handle special needs

children, the more engaging and less excluding the teachers became. The less the students were excluded, the more positive the students felt about learning (Gibbs & Powell, 2012). Gibbs and Powell exposed an important fact: if the teacher feels inadequate to handle special needs students, their inadequacy will affect the success or unsuccessfulness of the student. Conversely, when the teacher believed they were well equipped in all ways to include the special need student, the successfulness of both teacher and student improved (Gibbs & Powell, 2012).

Praise for ability can damage resilience and persistence in some students while praising effort and suggesting that ability can be improved can encourage resilience and persistence in school-aged children (Guner-Yildez, 2015; Sazak et al., 2013). Fostering a growth mindset could ensue in positive changes in motivation in classroom settings (Dweck, 2015; Gutshall, 2013; O'Rourke et al., 2014). Student mindset is integral in academic performance; although, research on teachers' mindsets have been marginal and will require further investigation (Dweck, 2015; Gutshall, 2013; O'Rourke et al., 2014).

Some of the most pertinent barriers to supporting teachers and students, especially disabled or labeled students include: (a) poor funding for education (World Bank Report, 2005), (b) unwillingness to introduce essential provisions to the entire education system to support inclusive education (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003), (c) reluctance of professionals to engage in collaborative practice, and (d) slow progress of attitudinal changes towards disability within society (Wickremesooriya, 2015).

**Research studies involving vulnerable students.** A study conducted by Harry and Klingner (2014) involved university researchers and a school district's collaboration

where special education administrators positioned themselves to play a role in developing effective intervention models designed to reduce inappropriate referrals to special education. Harry and Klingner argued that the response to intervention (RTI) process ought to provide the avenue for tailoring instruction and prevention to individual children's needs, rather than functioning as the lever for identification of disabilities (2014).

Glass' (2014) study supported that labeling and social reproductions are occurring in the school. Glass emphasized that the teachers and administrators not be solely to blame for the labeling or the negative outcomes. Glass' research into the application of labeling theory and social reproduction theory placed importance on the teachers' perceptions of different students and the teachers' reactions to student misbehavior. Glass' research design included classroom observation, informal conversations, and in-depth interviews with teachers and administrators. Glass found that some students came to school each day with a vastly different set of individual expectancies placed upon them by other members of the student body. These expectations included the student behavior, outlooks about the student academic performance, and beliefs about the student social outcomes (Glass, 2014).

This area of research is important when considering the long-term impacts of labeling, such as the resultant systems of tracking and high school dropout rates, which are included concerns of the NCLB Act, the Plan 2020, and the ESSA Act (Glass, 2014). Significant factors impacting a students' likelihood of dropping out include: (a) low-income background, (b) frequent absences or truancy, (c) a record of disciplinary actions,

(d) academic failure, and (e) being older than other students at that grade level (Glass, 2014, p. 374). These occurrences can lead to youth becoming involved in criminal activities (Glass, 2014). Students who experience labeling do not achieve access to full resources of the school (Glass, 2014). Labeling could produce additional deviance of the student (Glass, 2014). The *accused* individual's social, political, and economic resources shape the capacity to reject or mitigate the stigma of a deviant label (Glass, 2014, p. 374). Glass contended that jail time is a real consequence of the long-term effects of being labeled a troublemaker.

***Labeling theory.*** Labeling theory, according to Glass (2014), explained why some groups of students are referred more often than other students for disciplinary action. Glass argued that disciplinary action might apply especially to students in a lower socioeconomic background category. Glass argued that the teacher may label a certain behavior by a lower-class student as troublemaking, and the student might then be disciplined. The same behavior by a student of higher social status may not cause the teacher alarm (Glass, 2014). This difference applies to social class and race.

A child's self-concept is affected more by labeling of any type by teachers and peers than being formally labeled a delinquent by the court, the police, or parents (Glass, 2014). Also, a child being sent to the principal's office or poor treatment by peers is more detrimental to the child's self-concept than being labeled a delinquent by the court, the police, or parents (Glass, 2014). These research findings might motivate administrators to learn to design and implement properly aligned strategies to support K-12 vulnerable students.

Labeling is a process that occurs due to some factors that include student performance, attitude toward authority, the level of involvement within the school, parental involvement and support, and prior knowledge of and interaction with the student (Glass, 2014, p. 388). Glass offered many questions about teacher reaction to behaviors of students, as well previous knowledge or lack thereof particular students. The questions include: (a) are the teachers' reactions to the same form of misbehavior consistent from student to student, (b) are the principles of social reproduction theory in operation at the classroom and administrative level, (c) did the label and social status cause the behavior, and (d) did the behavior cause the label and social status (Glass, 2014, p. 373)? By answering these questions, Glass filled a gap in the literature with some understanding of the decision-making process used by educators.

The use of guards, metal detectors, electronic surveillance, and personal searches in schools are a type of priori labeling (Glass, 2014). Schools with zero tolerance policies may not consider individual circumstances (Glass, 2014). Labeling within the educational system can have a negative and long-term impact on a child or adolescent regardless of the level, individual or institutional (Glass, 2014).

***Reproduction theory.*** Reproduction theory is the idea that a child who is socialized in an environment, which has the advantages of the middle class, is prepared to perform well in the educational setting (Glass, 2014, p. 374). This socialization is also referred to as *cultural capital*. Children who do not have this social advantage are placed in an inferior position and are treated consequently by the teachers and administrators (Glass, 2014). Reproduction theory occurs when students are rewarded for possessing

middle-class values and behaviors and for having cultural capital (Glass, 2014). In turn, reproduction theory penalizes students who do not adhere to middle-class values and behaviors, through numerous policies that inhibit their chances for academic success (Glass, 2014). The educational system, in turn, repeats the existing social segregation system by treating students differently based on their possession, or lack thereof, of cultural capital (Glass, 2014). Some teachers divide students, whether mentally or physically, based on their expectations (Glass, 2014; Houtte et al., 2013). This labeling leads to a noticeable disadvantage for students who come to class with speech patterns that differ from middle-class standards, dress codes, which differ from middle-class codes, and demeanor, which is sometimes interpreted as negative and defiant (Glass, 2014, p. 375). Glass argued that these differences are normal and appropriate according to the child's external environment, such as his social circles and family environment.

Linguistic codes of the working class and expanded linguistic codes of the middle class could continue into secondary school and cause further irreconcilable interactions (Glass, 2014). Glass questioned whether students who display cultural capital are handled the same or different than those students who do not appear to have cultural capital. A student may ignore a teacher, or not take the teacher seriously if the teacher asks for something to be done because the child is used to being told, versus asked, what to do in the home (Glass, 2014). The teacher may view the student's behavior as defiant and issue a disciplinary consequence (Glass, 2014).

***Teachers' hardships.*** Teachers reach a point where energies spent on the troubled students act as a detriment to the students who want to learn (Glass, 2014, p. 386). Glass

emphasized that the teachers and administrators not be solely to blame for the labeling or the negative outcomes. Teachers become distressed by the lack of motivation, the glum attitude toward education among the indigent and disadvantaged students, and the change in attitude from those who want to learn who might become discouraged and disinterested because they cannot learn in a classroom of chaos (Glass, 2014). Teachers might perceive lower class students as less able and less diligent in completing homework because of students' social and cognitive characteristics and glum attitude towards school or education (Houtte et al., 2013). Some students are labeled as an underachiever, which relates to how the student has performed in the past without recognizing the students' circumstance or reasons behind the performance or lack thereof (Glass, 2014).

In recognition of these issues, the school in Glass' (2014) research had increased its efforts to bring students into compliance through the employment of an early intervention response program, known as the Praise Program. The characteristics of the program include: (a) the program's primary job was to maintain contact with a select group of students who are routinely struggling in school, both academically and behaviorally; (b) the program functions to deter misbehavior in its early stages and to counsel the students with behavioral problems by teaching the students coping strategies and ways to manage their anger, discontent or dissatisfaction with school; and (c) the program offers an environment of understanding for troubled students, and a safe place where they may go to vent their frustrations and unwind (Glass, 2014, p. 387). The referral rate for disciplinary action decreased each term, thus illustrating the program to

be effective (Glass, 2014). Glass contended that the Praise Program is beneficial to the teacher, students who want to learn, and students with behavioral issues.

At the administrative level, poverty is viewed as a potential cause for tardiness and truancy, defiance of authority and refusal to work (Glass, 2014, p. 389). Poverty may function as an explanatory factor for some misbehavior, but it is not justified as an excuse (Glass, 2014). Glass' study demonstrated that labeling and lower expectations for those who are labeled do exist in schools. Glass stated that it is unlikely these labeled students will attend and succeed in college with their current attitudes. It is important to begin intervention programs, such as the Praise Program, in primary education where students are less likely set in their negative ways of coping or where they are first misunderstood (Glass, 2014). Students at the high school level are nearing adulthood and must learn to accept responsibility for their behavior and performance (Glass, 2014). According to Glass, high school students should be held accountable for their behavior and performance whether it is good or bad.

*Follow-up and suggestions regarding labeling students.* Hornby and Witte (2008) conducted a follow-up study in New Zealand on former students of a residential special school for children with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Previous research on post-school outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties had found low levels of quality of life indicators such as education, employment, and community adjustment (Hornby & Witte, 2008). Twenty-nine former students and their parents or caregivers were included in the study that was conducted 10-14 years after they had left residential school (Hornby & Witte, 2008). Interviews focused on their

educational achievement, employment record, and community adjustment, which discovered low levels of achievement regarding educational qualifications and employment records, high rates of involvement with the criminal justice system, and low levels of community adjustment (Hornby & Witte, 2008). Hornby and Witte argued that operative procedures for transition, ongoing support for ex-students, and enhanced special needs training for teachers are imperative in improving student outcomes.

Hornby, Gable, and Evans (2013) reviewed some studies that have promoted evidence-based education policies. Using formative evaluation, enhancing student-teacher relationships, and cooperative learning and reading recovery programs for young children with literacy difficulties are interventions that should be widely used in schools (Hornby, Gable, & Evans, 2013). Homework and between-class ability groups are not effective enough to enforce, and grade retention should be avoided (Hornby, Gable, & Evans, 2013). Cooperative learning, peer tutoring, parental involvement, cognitive strategy instruction, self-regulated learning, memory strategies, assistive technology, reciprocal teaching, and more are effective evidence-based strategies for inclusive and special education (Hornby, Gable, & Evans, 2013).

Carter-Wall and Whitfield (2012) focused on identifying interventions that have successfully improved educational outcomes for disadvantaged children. Carter-Wall and Whitfield's review concluded that there was little evidence for the influence on educational outcomes of interventions focused on improving attitudes or aspirations. There was substantial evidence for the influence of interventions focused on parental

involvement and some support for the effect of interventions focused on mentoring and extracurricular activities (Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012).

Hornby, Gable, and Evans (2013) stated that extensive international literature on evidence-based practice in education has developed; yet, establishing these as the practices of choice in schools is frustratingly slow. Hornby, Gable, and Evans strived to provide evidence-based methods to improve educational outcomes for all students and help overcome the barriers to such programs and practices in schools.

### **Learning Organizations/Organizational Learning**

Levitt and March described organizations as collections of subunits learning in an environment that consists largely of other collections of learning subunits (1988, p. 331).

The learning outcomes depend on: (a) the number of competitors, (b) the rates at which they learn from their experience, (c) the rates at which they adjust their targets, (d) the extent to which they learn from the experience of others, and (e) the differences in the potentials of the technologies (Levitt & March, 1988, p. 332). Organizational learning and the need for change is growing (Aggestam, 2006; Hussein et al., 2014).

Organizational learning and learning organizations share ideas and focus on processes for procuring information, interpreting data, developing knowledge, and sustaining learning (Aggestam, 2006; Hussein et al., 2014). How an organization manages its knowledge is central to organizational development (Aggestam, 2006, p. 295; Hussein et al., 2014).

Knowledge management (KM) comprises creating, organizing, sharing, and using knowledge (Aggestam, 2006). Information technology (IT) is a necessity for effective KM (Aggestam, 2006). Learning management (LM) is crucial for organizations because

learning capability does not always happen in organizations naturally or readily (Hussein et al., 2014). Learning organizations help to ensure that organizational objectives are attained (Hussein et al., 2014).

A learning organization searches for information in its environment, in other contextual environments, and creates information itself, and encourages individuals to transfer knowledge between the individuals in the team (Aggestam, 2006). Innovation and performance are interconnected to learning organizations (Hussein et al., 2014). In a learning organization, work processes must provide due diligence to every aspect of knowledge and the processes must enable knowledge distribution, while the culture must encourage knowledge sharing (Aggestam, 2006; Hussein et al., 2014).

Since the 1970s when learning organizations emerged, various fields have been debated whether to benefit from this learning phenomenon (Casey, 2012). Casey's study reviewed key thematic issues about organizations and learning. In the economic conception model, the competitive learning organization must recognize the needed modification to organizational restructuring and reconfiguration to compete and employ human capital more efficiently (Casey, 2012). Casey argued that organizational learning is focused on learning surrounding the selection, coordination, and retention of practical and theoretical productive knowledge. Classification of workers' personal capacities, tacit knowledge, and creativity are vital characteristics of the organizational learning regarding the sharing of knowledge and regeneration of the same (Casey, 2012). In this economic conception model, worker learning is important because it contributes to organizational systems learning (Casey, 2012).

Claims have been made that simply using information technology is a great source of competitive advantage instead of focusing on its use because of a strategic process (Galliers, 1991). Making these claims, as mentioned by Galliers (1991), include the American Hospital Supply, American Airlines in the United States, and Thomson Holidays in the United Kingdom. Galliers warned companies to be prepared to tackle the process of identifying and implementing strategically vital information systems, due to its complexity. Management must consider the particular company/context to better their opportunity for successfully implementing strategic information systems (Galliers, 1991). Galliers proposed a contingent, socio-technical approach to strategic information systems planning. Galliers argued that many organizations do not convey strategy according to the strategic information systems planning (SISP) model. Galliers further argued that organizations do not plan their information systems appropriately, nor weave competitive considerations into their planning efforts. Therefore, organizations inevitably have trouble implementing their plans, once these have been formulated (Galliers, 1991). Attention in SISP is now much more focused on using IT to capture or exclude the following competitive forces: (a) potential entrants/new rivals, (b) substitute products/services, (c) suppliers, (d) buyers/customers, and (e) traditional industry competitors (Galliers, 1991, p. 55).

According to Galliers (1991), SISP practice appears inadequate of what is the conventional wisdom for SISP success. Galliers (1991) offered a broader concept of what properly constitutes SISP, as is a framework that has been used to assist companies in choosing an appropriate information system (IS) strategy. Galliers' concept explained

that: (a) information systems that test the assumptions foundational strategic plans or business objectives are classified as strategic, (b) competitive information systems directly support the execution of strategy by improving the value/cost relationship of the organization to its competitive environment, and (c) emphasis is on improving competitiveness using IT in reducing costs or adding value to products/services (p. 56).

Although Galliers' study represented an optimistic view of strategy construction, most organizations' strategy is informal or casually arrived, and some companies have no formal strategy (1991). The attitude of managers to IT is one of disinterest, except regarding concern about costs, and in most cases, the IS professional will have to take the lead, versus the senior manager (Galliers, 1991). Quality of management involvement and the extent of their commitment to subsequent change are not always known or expected (Galliers, 1991). Benefits of SISP should be measured in the context of what is expected of the SISP processes, for the importance of the benefits vary from one stakeholder to another (Galliers, 1991). Evidence-based knowledge of the IS strategy best practices can help to achieve commitment to, and involvement in SISP from management (Galliers, 1991).

Rumelt (2011) argued that strategic plans failure is not often the fault of the employees not executing the plan, but that there was never a strategy or good strategy with which to begin. Rumelt stated that the key components of a strategy are the diagnoses of the situation, the approach to dealing with the situation, and a set of immediate coordinated actions to address the situation. Proximate objectives, those you can conquer right away, are essential so success can be observed right away instead of a

long drawn out wait and loss of motivation in the process (Rumelt, 2011). Answer the *why* something is being done to provide clarity and vision (Rumelt, 2011). The strategist must discover and reveal key things that can advance interests (Rumelt, 2011). Teams cannot solve all problems at once. Thus, the strategist must match between values and which problems that the team will try to solve (Rumelt, 2011). Rumelt argued that goals be used as a response to opportunities and problems. Effective leaders outline goals that the organization can pursue as a way of accomplishing strategy (Rumelt, 2011).

Organizations are perceived as learning by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behavior, such as routines-forms, rules, procedures, conventions, strategies, and technologies (Levitt & March, 1988). Organizational learning characteristics include the structure of beliefs, frameworks, paradigms, codes, cultures, and knowledge that strengthen, elaborate, and contradict the regular routines (Levitt & March, 1988). In an organization that is invariably successful, routines that are followed are associated with success and are reinforced, while other routines are withdrawn (Levitt & March, 1988, p. 326). The organization becomes committed to a set of routines, early or random actions often determine these routines than by information gained from the learning situation (Levitt & March, 1988). Levitt and March argued that if failure is experienced, routines are changed without evidence-based research. The routine that failed is not considered relevant. The search for ones that work is futile instead of evidence-based effective (Levitt & March, 1988).

Myatt (2012) argued that failed strategies or entire businesses fail because of poor leadership who make and implement the decisions. Myatt (2012) listed 15 reasons

attributed to business failures due to the poor leadership characteristics, which include lack of character in leaders, lack of vision, lack of execution, flawed strategy, lack of capital, poor management, toxic culture, no innovation, poor professional advice, and inability to attract and retain talent. Nyman (2014) argued that 90% of organizations fail to execute their strategies. This failure can be due to the team not having a clear understanding of what is going on and what their part should be to help with the successful implementation (Nyman, 2014). Nyman (2014) also stated that the team might know what is to be done but have no input as they work, only to follow instructions no matter the outcome. Nyman argued that full team inclusion, attraction, and retention of the best people are two keys to successful strategy design and implementation (2014).

**Adaptive systems.** Adaptive systems or learning organizations that engage in exploration to the exclusion of exploitation should expect to endure the costs of experimentation without gaining many of its benefits (March, 1991, p. 71). In organizational meaning, exploration comprises things captured by terms such as search, variation, risk-taking, experimentation, play, flexibility, discovery, and innovation, while exploitation comprises things such as refinement, choice, production, efficiency, selection, implementation, and execution (March, 1991). The learning organization may exhibit too many undeveloped new ideas and too little distinctive competence (March, 1991). Systems or organizations that engage in exploitation to the exclusion of exploration are likely to find themselves trapped in suboptimal stable equilibria; all acting influences are canceled by others, resulting in a stable, balanced, or unchanging system (March, 1991). System survival and prosperity depend on an appropriate balance between

exploration and exploitation (March, 1991).

Stadler et al. (2014) found that even though there has been significant research conducted since March's publishing about exploration and exploitation, little substantial resolve for how to keep the balance have emerged. The most significant reviews, according to Stadler et al., have been Gupta et al. (2006), Lavie et al. (2010), Raisch et al. (2009), Raisch and Birkinshaw (2008), and Turner et al. (2012). These reviews provide good information regarding structural and behavioral approaches to achieving a balance between exploration and exploitation, and performance implications, at a firm level (Stadler et al., 2014). Stadler et al. strived to go beyond these reviews to further insights about the ability to balance exploration and exploitation. Stadler et al. argued that learning literature concentrate primarily on different solutions that enable a separation between exploration and exploitation. The key question that remained unaddressed to Stadler was how firms should ensure an appropriate level of integration despite this necessary separation (Stadler et al., 2014).

How people work usually differs chiefly from how organizations describe the work in manuals, training programs, organizational charts, and job descriptions (March, 1991). Organizations tend to rely on these descriptives in their attempts to understand and improve work practice (March, 1991). Therefore, a reexamination of working, learning, and innovating should make it possible to reconceive and redesign organizations to improve all three (March, 1991).

## **Best Practices in Learning Organizations**

Managers have difficult jobs and might make mistakes while under pressure to make decisions with incomplete information (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Evidence-based decisions theory has emerged to aid in making the right choices (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Many managers ignore the evidence, relying instead on outdated information or solely their experiences to arrive at decisions (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006, p. 3). Some managers accept miracle or quick fix management cures and adoption of other companies' best practices without considering whether they will work in context for the organization in question (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). This type of decision-making results in poor-quality decisions, which waste time, money and risks the company's future (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). An evidence-based management movement begun within the organization will assist to avoid the poor decision results (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). HakemZadeh and Baba (2016) argued there should be a new independent organization, called the evidence-based management (EBMgt) collaboration to facilitate generation and dissemination of knowledge that is rigorous, relevant, and actionable.

Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) suggested that organizations should encourage managers to experiment with new ideas. Pfeffer and Sutton stated that rewarding those who learn from these efforts, even if the experiment itself fails is a step towards repetitive involvement by managers. Problems with knowledge transfer and knowledge production are considered some of the reasons for research-practice gaps (HakemZadeh & Baba, 2016). Organization leadership should require managers to stay current in their field and provide continuing professional education opportunities to help them do so (Pfeffer &

Sutton, 2006). Expose and research incomplete information or half-truths and engage in smart decisions on the most persistent issues facing the organization (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006).

Beginning evidenced-based management movement in an organization requires specific tasks, including demanding evidence when someone makes a seemingly compelling claim (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Examine the logic behind evidence presented, looking for faulty cause-and-effect reasoning (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). If benchmarking is offered, make certain the success is in accord to the context of the organization implementing the best practice (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Do not be afraid to experiment before setting things in stone.

HakemZadeh and Baba's process model of evidence-based management (EBMgt) incorporates a collaboration that ensures the mixture of rigor, relevance, and actionability of management knowledge toward the production of vigorous evidence that is of value to a decision maker (2016). HakemZadeh and Baba suggested that the collaboration produces evidence in the form of a systematic review (SR) using a standard template and make it available online to management decision makers around the world in real time (p. 2587). The authors proposed details on the format and content of a standardized SR along with a template to execute it. In an SR, the actionable aspect of the research guides the way it is produced (HakemZadeh & Baba, 2016). It adds value to the practicing manager.

Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) believed the greatest barrier to evidence-based management is the flawed prevailing standards for assessing management knowledge. The authors offered six standards for producing, evaluating, selling, and applying

business knowledge. These standards include: (a) stop treating old ideas as if they were brand new, (b) be suspicious of ‘breakthrough’ ideas and studies. Managers desire magic remedies, and purveyors pretend to give them what they want; (c) celebrate and develop collective brilliance. Recognize that implementing practices, executing strategy, and accomplishing organization change require the corresponding actions of many people whose commitment to an idea is greatest when they feel ownership; (d) emphasize drawbacks and virtues. Recognize the hazards but do not be afraid to implement *it* because of them; (e) use success, and failure stories to illustrate sound practices, but not in the place of a valid research method; and (f) adopt a neutral stance toward ideologies and theories. Establish clarity and consensus on the problem to be solved and on what constitutes evidence of efficacy (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006, p. 9).

**Previous Research.** Studies that have addressed best practices for strategic planning by school administrators include: (a) the NAESP’s 2011 report, which reviewed evidence-based performance strategies; (b) Glanz’s (2014) book, which demonstrated how education leaders could engage efficiently to create best practices for strategic planning, developing, and monitoring; and (c) DuFour and Marzano’s (2015) book, which focused on district, principal, and team leadership, and how teaming with colleagues will help implementation of successful strategies, and getting rid of the old initiatives to begin fresh strategic plans.

Maden (2012) introduced a conceptual model for transforming public organizations into learning organizations. Maden realized research regarding learning organizations was primarily focused on private enterprises versus the public sector

(2012). The previous knowledge age had evaluators generating lessons learned and best practices; what is meant by these best practices and lessons learned, which is coined Intellectual Capital but are now commonly captured by chief knowledge officers of organizations (Patton, 2001). To be considered best within the context, learned lessons, which are local knowledge about what works, had to be translated into best practices, which are universal knowledge about what works, at least by implication of being best (Patton, 2001).

Best practices and lessons learned are not usually identified for whom the practice is best, under what conditions it is best, or what values or assumptions sustain its bestness (Patton, 2001). Context is important to consider when reviewing best practices. Patton argued that best practices that are principals to guide practice could be helpful. Further, use better or effective practices verbiage, which is more practical and deviates from overgeneralization (Patton, 2001).

Stead (2012) argued that in handling international business, best practices have a more limited role in policy-making processes. Stead explained the value of exchanging European best practices is limited because there are huge differences in the economic, political, or social situation between countries in the European Union. Stead further argued that this is particularly true when there are numerous differences in and between countries.

Mistry et al.'s (2016) study addressed the fact that not all higher level created strategies or policies are a good fit for subunits of the whole and must be altered to contextually best practice fit that of the subunit for any opportunity for successful

implementation. Hiebeler et al. (2012) argued that it is good practice to have a pool of different kind of best practices, from which to retract when specifically, or contextually needed for specific strategies and other business agendas. Hiebeler et al. (2012) believed best means best for you in context and that not every practice will work in every situation.

Generalizations about effectiveness, or lessons, unite collected wisdom that can be adapted to specific programs or even entire organizations, which is a type of cluster analysis (Patton, 2001). Patton argued that high-quality lessons learned (HQLL) represent principles deduced from numerous sources and independently triangulated to escalate transferability as collective knowledge or employed hypotheses. The collective knowledge can be adapted and applied to new situations, pragmatic, utilitarian generalizability (Patton, 2001).

It is widely accepted that project management practice varies from one context to another (Besner & Hobbs, 2013). The PMBOK® Guide identifies the need for determining what is appropriate for any given project, but the guide does not provide knowledge as to how this choice might be made (Besner & Hobbs, 2013). The observed component of Besner and Hobbs' research provides insights into both the nature of project management practice and its contextual variation. Project management has both a generic component and an element that varies contextually (Besner & Hobbs, 2013). This study designed a basis of general practices with a list of tools, techniques, and practices (Besner & Hobbs, 2013). These practices are used to varying degrees in all contexts (Besner & Hobbs, 2013). None of the practices is a *best practice* in all of the contexts;

nevertheless, a group of four best practices in the overall sample is also best practices in at least three of the five contexts: (a) initial planning, (b) databases, (c) business case definition, (d) baseline change management, and (e) team management (p.31). These best practices are considered general best practices in most contexts and should be used to inform the production and revision of standards (Besner & Hobbs, 2013, p. 31).

### **Collaboration**

Commonly found views of collaboration are outlined here that synthesize important concepts and approaches. Understanding how the processes involved in collaborative learning work helps one design computer support for them and evaluates the effectiveness of the learning and the support (Thomas, Perry, & Miller, 2008). Researchers and practitioners share an interest in understanding the outcomes of collaboration. Scholars need to examine three areas: antecedents to collaboration, the process of collaboration itself, and the outcomes of that process (Thomas, Perry, & Miller, 2008). These categories are rarely modeled clearly, and therefore should be designed accordingly for examination and for adaptation as collaboration ensues. Collaborations vary depending on their goals, settings, teams, and resources (Thomas, Perry, & Miller, 2008). Collaborations are a human activity, and the scope of the project at hand may change as it moves through the design process (Thomas, Perry, & Miller, 2008).

**Collaboration attributes.** Collaboration and its attributes have a positive effect on project performance (Zhang & Peng, 2015). Accurate measurements help to increase the level of collaboration (Zhang & Peng, 2015). One measurement among scholars is

that if partners maximize the project satisfaction, the collaboration will be promoted to a high level (Zhang & Peng, 2015). Collaboration will perform well or poorly, based on the identification of attributes, conditions or factors that are present (Huxham & Vangen, 2013).

Collaboration can range from small, parallel groups, to large distributed communities (Elliott, 2016). Within community development circles, collaboration has assumed progressive importance as a response to promoting community relations for varied reasons (Smith, 2014). Mass collaboration, as digital stigmergic collaboration, which is a collective creation of shared representations in digital media, where the membership is near or greater than 25 participants, is based on an underlying understanding of collaboration as the process of a group collectively creating emergent, shared representations of a process and outcome that reflect the input of the total body of contributors (Elliott, 2016, p. 65). Linking stigmergy to the role of media in collaboration provided a technique for tracing an evolution from the manipulative of materials for the augmentation of the face-to-face collaborative process to the emergence of digital workspaces and mass collaboration (Elliott, 2016, p. 66). Stigmergic collaborations give more space and more time for all applicable roles, such as timekeeper, scribe, leader, speaker, observer, resource monitor, facilitator, and helper, of collaboration (Elliott, 2016).

Wouters et al. (2014) explained how developers and leaders could engage in the process of collaboration without issues of compliance and resistance, through the adoption of Thomson, Perry, and Miller's (2008) definition of collaboration. This

collaboration concept focused on what is happening in the collaboration (Wouters et al., 2014). Independent or semi-autonomous actors interacting by the use of formal and informal negotiation, actors working together to create rules and structures, governing their relationship, and behaviors to act or decide on the issues that brought them together remained in that theory focus (Wouters et al., 2014). This theory focus led to discussions from a social psychology perspective, versus an educational philosophy.

In Wouters et al.'s (2014) case the stakeholders were able to create a positive balance between autonomy and collaboration. The stakeholders engaged in productive collaboration by making the natural tensions between their various self-interests visible, and discussed them rationally and defined their collective interests. Wouters et al. argued that collaboration is a complex phenomenon consisting of five interrelated dimensions, which each describe a process and take time to develop. These dimensions include governance, administration, mutuality, norm, and organizational autonomy (Zhang & Peng, 2015; Wouters et al., 2014). This complexity makes collaboration a fragile process; nevertheless, the authors identified three elements that Thomson et al. (2008) did not explicitly cover, which may help to reduce this fragility (Wouters et al., 2014). These elements include: (a) the stakeholders took their time initially to focus on questions regarding the effectiveness of the portfolio before they started worrying about the efficiency of their plans, (b) the formal leaders did not immediately stress the importance of governance and administration but rather invested their energy in sustaining the mutual interdependence dimension, and (c) based on the trust that could grow under these conditions and awareness of the collective interest, the stakeholders could all come to

terms with the tensions between their particular self-interests and the collective interest (Wouters et al., 2014, p. 34).

Huxham and Vangen aimed to conceptualize the issues that face those who have to confront collaborative situations (2013). Thus, their conceptualizations often lead to tools for thinking about how to manage collaborative situations (Husham & Vangen, 2013). Collaboration is complex and multifaceted, there are no easy routes to success, and those who have a rich understanding of the tensions connected to collaboration practice, generally do manage to collaborate (Huxham & Vangen, 2013). Collaborative advantage is a resource-consuming activity and is only to be considered when the stakes are worth pursuing (Huxham & Vangen, 2013, p. 13).

Daoudi and Bourgault's (2012) study offered a theoretical overview of discontinuity and collaboration practices in technology industries. The study supports the contribution of discontinuity to effective collaboration (Daoudi & Bourgault, 2012). Discovering that different forms of discontinuity contribute differently to collaboration, and that cultural discontinuity has a negligible impact on collaboration, appealed to Daoudi and Bourgault (2012).

Collaboration has been comprehensively explored in many areas of management and organizational research: corporate strategy, innovation management, and social networks (Daoudi & Bourgault, 2012; Moolenaar, 2012). There are diverse views of collaboration, its rationale, its processes, and its contribution to teams' performance, namely the network perspective (Daoudi & Bourgalk, 2012; Moolenaar, 2012). Network perspective focus is on the study of key dimensions influencing collaboration (Daoudi &

Bourgalt, 2012; Moolenaar, 2012). Discontinuity is defined in the literature as a difference, diversity, or heterogeneity that may exist between members of an extended team and have an impact on the collaboration dynamics in various negative or positive ways including, geographical, organizational, and cultural diversity (Daoudi & Bourgalt, 2012, p. 5). The discontinuity related to information and communications technology (ICT) refers to inconsistencies existing between the systems and software used, which can cause barriers to collaboration and project performance (Daoudi & Bourgalt, 2012). Different organizational practices can generate a risk to the effectiveness of collaboration among members of an extended project team (Daoudi & Bourgalt, 2012).

**Collaboration as groups.** Many researchers agree that a group of collaborating learners could solve complex problems that may not be possible for an individual learner (Chua, Morris, & Mor, 2012; Daoudi & Bourgault, 2012; Devlin-Scherer & Sardone, 2013; Huxham & Vangen, 2013; Paas & Sweller, 2012; Smith, 2014; Williams, Merriman, & Morris, 2015). Collaborative learning is documented as an alternative way of overcoming individual working memory limitations, resulting in what is called the collective working memory effect (Paas & Sweller, 2012, p. 31). The collective working memory effect found that collaborating learners could gain from each other's working memory capacity during learning (Paas & Sweller, 2012). Collective working memory effect is established in cognitive load research comparing individual to collaborative learning environments (Paas & Sweller, 2012, p. 30).

Collaborative learners are a single information processing system that consists multiple, limited working memories, creating a larger, more efficient, collective working

space (Paas & Sweller, 2012, p. 31). Long-term memory is accumulated by observing, imitating other people, listening to what they say, and reading what they write (Paas & Sweller, 2012). Paas & Sweller argued that dividing information between individuals reduces cognitive load, which requires the communication of information and coordination of actions. Paas & Sweller believed the collective working memory effect provides the first example of the potential benefits of using biologically primary knowledge to assist in the acquisition of the biologically secondary information that is the usual subject of instruction (p. 32). Anything is likely possible through collaboration because one is not limited by their resources and expertise (Huxham & Vangen, 2013).

Most business people share ideas and brainstorm solutions to a problem with others in their professional network (Chua, Morris, & Mor, 2012). This collaboration of ideas leads to innovative products and deals development (Chua, Morris, & Mor, 2012). Chua et al. argued that the creative potential in a collaboration come from the differences between the two or more people. Surface demographic differences correspond to deeper differences in people's knowledge of the world, their capabilities, and connections, which can discover ideas that are unique, resulting in novel combinations of ideas (Chua, Morris, & Mor, 2012).

Managers skilled at thinking about their cultural assumptions, metacognitive, will develop affect-based trust in their relationships, including people from different cultures, assisting creative collaboration (Chua, Morris, & Mor, 2012). Creative collaboration of exchanging ideas to develop effective solutions and affect-based trust within the collaboration is important for success (Chua, Morris, & Mor, 2012). Chua et al. insisted

that reflective thinking about cultural differences enables individuals to communicate better, to put people at ease, and to avoid misunderstandings and tensions.

Co-teaching is one method of professional development through collaborative efforts (Devlin-Sherer & Sardone, 2013). Co-teaching engages increased communication between teachers and students while improving retention and achievement (Devlin-Scherer & Sardone, 2013). Co-teaching teams fuse into collaboration; when built on trust and mutual interest, this experience of co-teaching can make for a rewarding collaboration and enrich professional development opportunities (Devlin-Scherer & Sardone, 2013). Project teams often work in multifaceted collaborative and extended settings (Daoudi & Bourgault, 2012). Collaboration is considered as a joint initiative that transforms into observable communications, or information exchanges, the coordination of different activities, and participation in decision making to achieve common goals (Daoudi & Bourgault, 2012).

**Trust's role in collaboration.** Zhang and Peng explored the relationship between trust and collaboration (2015). In integrated project delivery (IPD), collaboration is the key performance indicator to measure its success, and it is influenced by partners' trust (Zhang & Peng, 2015). In a trusting environment, team members can work with each other as a cohesive whole, though, some scholars ignore the trust's relational attribute (Zhang & Peng, 2015). Norshakirash et al. (2011) believed that trust is like the heart of collaboration, which needs to be constructed and maintained. Trust can be instrumental in decreasing the cost for negotiation and increase achieving mutual agreements (Zhang & Peng, 2015). For managerial implication, it is indicative that the level of collaboration

depends on the degree of trust, so members in IPD should do their best to promote the trust, yet, many do not know how to promote trust and may need training and practice (Zhang & Peng, 2015).

Huxham and Vangen believed one would recognize the collaborative energy when it works well (2013). Collaborative advantage is about tackling those issues that would otherwise fall between the gaps and those who work to make collaboration successful describe the experience as painful and frustrating (Huxham & Vangen, 2013). Collaborations that make slow progress or die without achieving anything are termed collaborative inertia (Huxham & Vangen, 2013). The broad purposes of collaboration may be at the strategic level, with the advancement of a shared vision, or a delivery of a short-term project (Huxham & Vangen, 2013). The collaboration may necessitate considerable joint investment in action or simply the development of a relationship and some exchange of information (Huxham & Vangen, 2013).

Strategic alliances can be difficult, and the amount of energy needed to encourage participation of key members at onset, and throughout the project for continued support can be exhaustive and requires attention to avoid collaborative inertia (Huxham & Vangen, 2013). Researchers discovered specific barriers to sharing, learning, and building trust for collaborative working: time, trust, and turf (Smith, 2014). Smith believed that extraordinary degrees of trust, tremendous amounts of time, and the sharing of turf are required for successful collaborations (2014). Trust plays a major role in these collaborations (Devlin-Scherer & Sardone, 2013; Huxham & Vangen, 2013; Smith, 2014).

Sharing one's knowledge and insights with another person, an integral aspect of creative collaboration entails making oneself vulnerable to the other and requires trust (Chua et al., 2012). Affect-based trust depends on feelings for the other and the other's concern for oneself (Chua et al., 2012). Collaboration has relationship characteristics of members belonging to one system, where mutual trust characterizes frequent communication, and the consensus is reached on all decisions (Devlin-Scherer & Sardone, 2013).

Trust is an effective technique to prevent opportunism (Paas & Sweller, 2012; Zhang & Peng, 2015). Paas and Sweller noted that from an evolutionary perspective, natural selection promotes the fittest individuals and this survival of the fittest perspective could predispose individuals to selfishness, but collaboration can increase the fitness of the collaborators, for when together, they can access more resources than when working individually (2012, p. 30). If there were one that does nothing but reaps the benefit of others' knowledge, the advantage of collaboration would be for naught (Paas & Sweller, 2012).

**Collaboration dimensions and phases.** Many researchers have utilized Ann Marie Thomson's five dimensions of collaboration, which include governance, administration, mutuality, norm, and organizational autonomy (Zhang & Peng, 2015). As described by Zhang and Peng: (a) governance means that the participants seeking to collaboration must understand how to jointly make decisions about rules regulating their behavior and relationship, (b) administration, compared with governance, focuses more on the implementation, less on the supply of institution; (c) autonomy always leads to the

dilemma. It is formed by the dual identities of members in the projects; (d) mutuality can be described as interdependence. Organizations must experience mutually beneficial interdependencies; and (e) norm refers that partners believe that these members in the projects will balance the inequality about cost and profit. Reciprocity and reputation are the core of this concept (2015, pp. 3-4).

Huxham and Vangen favored one approach in the research which described the collaboration process and conceptualized it regarding phases or stages in a life cycle (2013). The five overlapping phases include courtship, engagement, housekeeping, which discovers their different ideas about how the alliance should operate, bridging, and old marrieds, in which each organization realizes that it has changed as a result of the alliance (Huxham & Vangen, 2013). The theory of collaborative advantage is constructed around themes, such as common aims, sharing power, accountability, trust, resources, commonality, commitment, compromises, in collaboration practice, and they overlap with each other, so issues underlying each theme cross relate with issues underlying others (Huxham & Vangen, 2013).

Williams, Merriman, and Morris (2015) suggested that a model of the collaboration lifecycle includes six phases: issue, assembly and structure, productivity, rejuvenation, decline, and dissipation. Issues serve as a motivation for collaboration, and are contextual and stem from a plethora of problem areas (Williams et al., 2015). After establishment, the collaboration will assemble its actors and structure itself to begin its productivity phase (Williams et al., 2015). In the assembly and structure phase, collaboration runs the risk of an early termination, curtailing from a lack of resources

(Williams et al., 2015). Therefore, it is crucial for collaborations to focus on growth, building a network of stakeholders, and amassing resources (Williams et al., 2015). An agreed-upon structure is needed, for collaboration must define its goals to institute a structure and division of labor (Williams et al., 2015).

Defining the goals, the roles for the members, such as facilitator/leader, note-taker/listener, questioner/devil's advocate, encourager, checker, timekeeper, runner, and harmonizer and setting up a coordinated work environment are steps included in any well-created collaboration (Williams et al., 2015). The productivity phase begins when the collaboration is sufficiently staffed, resourced and is the business end of any collaboration, encompassing the remainder of the collaboration model (Williams et al., 2015). This complex phase results in outputs, which in turn affect social capital, produce environmental outcomes that feedback to the context of the issue and requires constantly occurring communication, learning, decision making, and managing stability (Williams et al., 2015). The productivity phase will last if there are interested stakeholders and at least one issue requiring resolution (Williams et al., 2015).

The decline phase occurs by degrees and has a phase range; also, many factors cause the decline phase, such as environmental or participant change, or the end of the project has naturally come about (Williams et al., 2015). Rejuvenation of a collaboration that is experiencing decline could result from when the function of an essentially stagnant organization suddenly increases in value or importance (Williams et al., 2015). The resulting abundance of attention, resources, and energy will reverse the downward

direction of the collaboration and generate a new productivity phase (Williams et al., 2015).

Collaboration may encounter a recycling phenomenon when formal groups in the later phases of development come across crises, or the organization may experience crisis such as changes in resources or loss of key advocates that cause them to return focus to an earlier point in their productivity phase (Williams et al., 2015). Whether leading out of success or failure, all collaboration declines to the dissipation phase, which is the end of the project (Williams et al., 2015). The initiation phase should focus on the effectiveness of participants refraining from using power for forcing others to comply and determine the speed of transitions between the phases (Wouters et al., 2014).

**Collaboration support.** Development of tools to support collaborative workshops and similar events will determine the chances that the collaboration will perform well or poorly (Huxham & Vangen, 2013). Coaching designed to encourage more emotional and personal connections can be useful in a collaborative team's work together (Chua et al., 2012). Cultural metacognition helps individuals to direct intercultural interactions, which fosters affect-based trust and creative collaboration (Chua et al., 2012). Utilizing visual methods of assimilating understanding to support collaboration is beneficial (McAuley & Roxburgh, 2015).

Devlin-Scherer and Sardone (2013) provided a list of tips for faculty considering collaboration. One, find a person who is slightly different from you, that you respect and whose company you enjoy. Two, be confident in your abilities. Three, take inventory: Assess what you do well and determine areas that you need to improve upon. Four,

recognize that perfect does not exist! Five, do not be defensive about suggestions; changes to papers such as edits, and so on. Six, do other things together besides work. Dinner and a glass of wine together go a long way in forging a lasting, enriching relationship that provides for a dual lens. Seven, be short on gossip and long on discussing ideas for current and future collaborations. Eight, recognize that your collaboration may cause others to be envious. Be conscious and aware of such reactions. Nine, be extremely cautious about adding or deleting others from your collaborative relationship, as the dynamics will change. Ten, laugh and have fun (Devlin-Scherer & Sardone, 2013, p. 6).

Elliott (2016) suggested conducting a collaboration to build the skills needed to collaborate and to understand any collaboration. This experience would allow researchers and educators to cultivate a more full and genuine understanding of the collaboration (Elliott, 2016). Moolenaar (2012) argued that patterns of teacher relationships and collaboration present a starting point for an understanding of the success and failure of school reform initiatives. Through the social network perspective, Moolenaar (2012) found issues of student learning, teaching, and educational change were correlated to teachers' relations with colleagues. Administrators would benefit to keep mindful of this when developing strategies for supporting vulnerable students in K-12.

### **Federal Mandates for Education Organizations**

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was passed by President Johnson, as part of Johnson's War on Poverty (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016). The intent of the law to close skill gaps in reading, writing, and

mathematics between children from low-income households who attended urban or rural school systems and children from the middle-class who attended suburban school systems (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016). In 1968, Congress added to the ESEA by incorporating new programs and titles, including for migrant children, for neglected or delinquent children, and by passing the Bilingual Education Act (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016).

In 1978 President Carter signed a reauthorization of the law specifying that schools in which at least 75% of children are in poverty can operate *schoolwide* programs with Title I funds, rather than spending that money only on their low-income children (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016). In 1979-1981, the U.S. Department of Education was established under President Carter, and President Reagan championed an update of the ESEA that consolidated many programs into a single block grant but maintained Title I-renamed Chapter 1- as a separate program. The law also cut down on regulatory requirements for districts and states (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016). In 1994, President Clinton signed the Improving America's Schools Act, a renewal of the ESEA that called for states to develop standards and aligned tests for all students. Districts had to single out for improvement schools that are not making adequate yearly progress, but the law had a much looser definition of AYP than the subsequent No Child Left Behind Act version, and Chapter 1 verbiage returned to being Title I (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016).

There have been several additional federal mandates signed into law over the past 20 years including, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002, enacted by President

Bush. The NCLB Act significantly expanded the ESEA's testing requirements, calling for states to assess students annually in Reading and Math in Grades 3-8 and once in high school, as opposed to certain grade spans only. The NCLB law also stated that states are to use specific interventions, namely, public school choice and free tutoring, with schools that fail to make sufficient progress, and it required that all teachers be *highly qualified* (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016). Congress was lagging in reauthorizing the ESEA, which had been due for renewal in 2007, but it adopted major education provisions as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016).

The Obama administration ultimately used \$4 billion to create Race to the Top, which awarded grants to a dozen states willing to embrace the president's priorities on school turnarounds, state data systems, standards, assessments, and teacher evaluation (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016). With ESEA reauthorization still stalled in Congress, in 2011 the Obama administration offered states waivers easing many of the mandates of the NCLB law (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016). States were to embrace standards that will prepare students for college and the workforce, teacher evaluation that incorporates student outcomes, and aggressive school turnarounds, to get the flexibility, hence the Plan 2020 (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016).

Lastly, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed in late 2015. The ESSA reauthorizes the ESEA and replaces the NCLB Act while adding three new subgroups: homeless status, students with parents in the military, and students in foster care, to the vulnerable students' category (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016). One

important notation of the ESSA is *highly qualified* teachers are no longer a requirement (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016).

Alabama administrators developed the Plan 2020, which began in 2012 (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016b). Plan 2020's vision was to make sure all students graduated high school and were prepared for college, work, and adulthood in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, which follows suit to the 2011 Obama administration offer of states waivers easing many of the mandates of the NCLB law. The Plan's strategies include: (a) develop and implement a unified Pre-K through college and career readiness plan, (b) develop and adopt college and career ready aligned standards in all subject areas, (c) create and implement a balanced and meaningful assessment and accountability system, (d) develop and implement a Unified School Readiness Plan, and (e) align available programmatic and fiscal resources to support local school needs in the area of instruction (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016b, p. 5).

Plan 2020 included 14 objective targeted goals (see Appendix E). After four years of the Plan 2020 being implemented, Alabama schools continue to fall short of their targets and some targets have not been assigned goals or have been measured at all (Alabama State Board of Education, 2016b) (see Appendix E). A new audit in December 2016 discovered that the only target, graduation rates, out of 14, that was previously reported as had been met is wrong due to falsified reporting (McLain, 2016). Therefore, it can be said that not one of the targets has been met and those who report the progress or lack thereof, are doing so erroneously. Further, any other reported progress affiliated with

the falsified reporting must be recalculated by an audit; this includes the race-specific graduation rates that were reported in high regard.

The United States is 17 years into 21<sup>st</sup> Century education, yet no plan or mandate that has been developed has moved Alabama schools forward to reaching their targeted goals, furthering vulnerable students' demise. During the implementation of the Plan 2020, Alabama fully adopted the Common Core Standards curriculum, which is a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy/2012 for Mathematics, 2013 for ELA (Academic Benchmarks, 2016). There has been much controversy nationwide over this new curriculum, especially dealing with Math (Spring, 2015). Did this adoption of a new curriculum, during implementing Plan 2020, present an unexpected challenge that hindered the plan?

In an October 2016 article, the Alabama's new state board of education superintendent stated Alabama faced a crisis in mathematics education and called for a strategy to address the problem (Cason, 2016). Alabama fourth-graders ranked 52nd in math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in the 2015-2016 school year (Cason, 2016). Also, there are problems in teaching science and reading (Cason, 2016). The state superintendent told the board he planned to name a panel of about 25 people, which will include teachers, administrators, academics, school board members, and business leaders with experience in mathematics education or applied mathematics, to address these issues (Cason, 2016). The panel was to hold meetings around the state and report to the board in December 2016. Board members reacted favorably to the state superintendent's idea (Cason, 2016). The state governor had already responded to the

new ESSA mandate with appointed groups in the summer of 2016, throughout the state to work together to come up with new strategies and plans of action to implement the new ESSA mandate. Working groups were to meet and formulate, as a collective whole, a new plan to present to the governor in December of 2016. Will the state superintendent's appointed panel work with that effort or separately?

Alabama ranked second worst in the country in state K-12 education funding cuts, with state support down 17.3 % since the start of the Great Recession of 2008, according to a report released by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (Fambro, 2015). Overall, Alabama cut its total state and local investment in K-12 schools by 11.3% per student between 2008 and 2014 (Fambro, 2015). The budget cut is the seventh worst cut in the nation (Fambro, 2015).

### **Appreciative Inquiry**

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) developed the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) model and based it on three propositions: (a) the need to move beyond the problem-solving approach, (b) the notion that organizations are socially constructed realities, and (c) the power of new ideas as a force for change. Some key concepts underlying AI are stakeholder participation, narrative, discourse, and building on existing strengths (Breslow et al., 2015, p. 2). A new component of the AI phases termed topic choice was added to the AI process (Breslow et al., 2015). Topic choice is considered a separate phase in some models of AI and integrated with the dream phase in other models, and consists of the selection of a positive focus of inquiry (Breslow et al., 2015, p. 3).

AI is an organization development (OD) process that grows out of social constructionist thought, which means knowing takes place through interaction with and within a social system, and its applications to management and organizational transformation (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003). AI is consciously positive about people, organizations, and relationships and thereby leaving behind deficit-oriented approaches to management and critically transforms the ways to approach questions or organizational improvement (Cooperrider et al., 2003). Such questions surround culture change, strategic planning, organizational learning, leadership, customer focus groups, development, team building, diversity training, quality management, measurement systems, joint ventures and alliances, survey analysis, and more (Cooperrider et al., 2003). Appreciative inquiry can be used as a methodology to inform practice simultaneously with an inquiry into practice (Calabrese, 2015).

In context, AI refers to two things: (a) a search for knowledge, a theory of collective action designed to evolve the vision and will of a group; and (b) an organization or society as a whole (Cooperrider et al., 2003, p 3.). The process involves interviewing and storytelling to draw out the best of the past and set the stage for effective visualization of the future (Cooperrider et al., 2003) (see Table 2 for a paradigm comparison).

Table 2

*Comparing Problem Solving to Appreciative Inquiry in Organizations*

Problem solving	Appreciative inquiry
Identification of the problem	Appreciating and valuing the best of what is
Analysis of causes	Envisioning what might be
Action planning or treatment	Dialoguing what should be
An organization is a problem to be solved	An organization is a mystery to be embraced

Appreciative inquiry involves four stages: discovery, dream, design, and destiny (Cooperrider et al., 2003). The discovery stage involves mobilizing a whole system inquiry into the positive change core. The dream stage involves creating a clear results-oriented vision about discovered potential and relation to questions of higher purpose. The design stage involves creating possibility propositions of the ideal organization. An organization design that people feel is capable of magnifying or eclipsing the positive core and realizing the articulated new dream. The destiny stage involves strengthening the affirmative capability of the whole system. This strengthening enables the system to build hope and momentum around a profound purpose while creating processes for learning, adjustment, and improvisation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

There are five principles of AI, which include: (a) the constructionist principle, (b) the principle of simultaneity, (c) the poetic principle, (d) the anticipatory principle, and (e) the positive principle (Cooperrider et al., 2003, p. 52). Cooperrider et al. (2003) discussed these principles in their handbook of Appreciative Inquiry. The Constructionist Principle involves interweaving social knowledge and organizational destiny. Being an

effective leader, one must be proficient in the art of reading, understanding, and analyzing organizations as living, human constructions (Cooperrider et al., 2003). Knowing organizations are fundamental to organizational development (OD) tasks (Cooperrider et al., 2003). AI is a method of reclaiming imaginative competence. The Principle of Simultaneity identifies that inquiry and change are not separate moments but simultaneous because inquiry is considered intervention (Cooperrider et al., 2003). One of the most important things a change agent does is to articulate questions, which set the stage for what is found and discovered (Cooperrider et al., 2003). The data discovered becomes the stories out of which the future is conceived, discussed, and constructed (Cooperrider et al., 2003).

The poetic principle involves understanding that human organizations are an open book and its story is always co-authored (Cooperrider et al., 2003). The principle also explains that inquiry can be negative or positive and that it is a choice to which how one wants to address an issue to seek the knowledge and innovation needed (Cooperrider et al., 2003). The anticipatory principle involves the image of the future guiding the current behavior of an organization (Cooperrider et al., 2003). The positive principle develops out of years of experience with AI because momentum for change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding (Cooperrider et al., 2003). Momentum for change requires positive attitudes such as hope, inspiration, and the sheer joy of creating with one another (Cooperrider et al., 2003). The more positive the question used to guide a group's collaboration, the longer lasting and effective is the change (Cooperrider et al., 2003). In

all, the organization must choose to focus on the positive to lead the inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2003).

The positive core, the heart of inquiry, of organizational life is one of the greatest and essentially unrecognized resources in the field of change management today (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Some of the most important things learned with AI involve human systems growing in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about, as this inclination is strongest and most justifiable when the means and ends of inquiry are positively correlated (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The future is intentionally constructed upon the positive core strengths of the organization (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Cooperrider and Whitney believed that the single most creative thing a group can do is making the positive change core the common and obvious property of all. Positive core might be expressed through best business practices, core and distinctive competencies, embedded knowledge, innovations, values, product strengths, technical assets, visions of possibilities and more (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

AI is presupposed on three basic assumptions, which include: (a) organizations are responsive to positive thought and positive knowledge, (b) both the image of the future and the process of creating that image that creates the energy to drive change throughout the organization, and (c) AI is based on a belief in the power of affirmations. If one can envision what one wants, there is a better chance of it happening (Johnson & Leavitt, 2001, p. 130).

**Conflicting views of AI.** In opposition, Boje (2016) believed Appreciative

Inquiry (AI) is one-sided, focusing exclusively on the positive stories, a blank *positivity* approach lacking negative stories' content, and thoroughly opposed to any dialectical method of change. Boje wanted to theorize a dialectical storytelling paradigm that would be useful to organizational development and change (ODC). Boje defined dialectical storytelling as the self-moving process of scientific inquiry, learning, diagnosis and intervention that is manifested in space, time, and mattering, or more accurately, space-time mattering of organizations (p. 2). The socio-economic approach to management (SEAM), by contrast to AI, dialectically manages change by focusing on how there are a human subject and a predicate of hidden costs in each negative, or dysfunction (Boje, 2016). This negative can become converted into an organization value-added, including a positive human potential (Boje, 2016).

Boje (2016) believed that action research (AR) is not based on any *action* perspective, but is embedded in social constructivist standpoints of gathering and shifting points of view epistemically. Boje believed AI's narrative exposition is that diagnosis means collecting five positive stories to every negative story heard, forgetting past conflicts, to develop positive futures. In other words, positive stories are good, and negative ones are bad. Boje believed that SEAM refers to the negative as the dysfunctions of working conditions, work organization, time management, integrated training, and strategic implementation. Boje believed AI is not science and that AI fails to see the positive in negative inquiry.

Boje's (2016) work with Hegel's 1807 phenomenology of spirit continued to show a conventional example of dialectic systems theory. The ego-self begins self-

indulgently, focused on the self as the lens to view *Others*. In a practical way of encounters with *Others* with their ego-selves, a dialectic occurs, while the ego-self is not mindful of the many forces behind the phenomena of *Nature* (Boje, 2016). Boje called this obliviousness kaleidoscope of systemicities. Boje stressed that it is important to become self-aware of the actual transitions of consciousness in our systemicity experiences.

Bushe (2013) proposed that generativity, regarding AI, is the creation of new images, metaphors, physical representations, and so on that has two qualities that: (a) causes change in how people think so that new options for decisions and actions become available to them, and (b) are compelling images on which people want to act (p. 1). Research and experiences suggest positivity, particularly positive emotion, are not sufficient for transformational change (Bushe, 2013). Instead, generativity is a key changer in cases of transformational change (Bushe, 2013). A model of different characteristics of generativity is discussed in Bushe's study. These characteristics include ways in which appreciative inquiry can be a generative process, increase generative capacity, and lead to generative outcomes (Bushe, 2013). Bushe believed the successful AI practitioners are those who can design generative images at the beginning of their AI sessions. Writers accentuate the importance of defining the right affirmative topic (Bushe, 2013). Bushe argued that a generative image could have great influence on an affirmative topic.

AI sessions with participants who do not feel a strong sense of mutual belonging or concern for the group differ from those who have this sense of mutual belonging

(Bushe, 2013). AI can be transformational with these type groups by creating a stronger sense of identity and membership in the group (Bushe, 2013). In such groups, the AI core questions can be generative during the Discovery phase (Bushe, 2013). Beginning an AI with a generative image significantly increases the chances of producing generative outcomes (Bushe, 2013). For an affirmative topic to be generative it has to: (a) capture the core issue those sponsoring the inquiry are interested in, (b) match the identity state of the group in which it is being used, (c) frame the focus of the inquiry in a way few people have considered before, and (d) capture the interest and energy of those people who will need to be engaged in the inquiry for it to be successful (Bushe, 2013, p. 9). Bushe argued that the power of appreciative inquiry is more probable when the positive is used in the service of the generative.

**Application of AI in research.** Drew and Wallis (2014) described how appreciative inquiry (AI) could be used to develop and sustain organizational change based on principles of positive psychology, leadership, and complex systems theory. The use of the summit method, which is the whole system positive change, in promoting large-scale change, such as organization-wide strategic planning, cultural reorientation, globalization, and disruptive technological innovation is reviewed in Drew and Wallis' (2014) study. The authors argued that AI could be used as a stand-alone approach to change, as a very effective complement to traditional top-down models, and as to methods based on principles of emergence, complexity, and organizational learning (Drew & Wallis, 2014).

An AI Summit has been the intervention of choice when the task requires high levels of participation and cooperation (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000). The ratio of monolog to dialogue during a Summit is about 10 % monolog to 90% dialogue among participants while there are no formal leadership presentations, and everyone who attends comes with equal voice (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000). An AI Summit involves a high participation where all stakeholders attend the meeting and are mixed into discussions that cross many boundaries so that all voices can be heard (Drew & Wallis, 2014; Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000).

Calabrese's (2015) study was informed by an AI theoretical research perspective and guided by three assumptions, including (a) change and inquiry occur simultaneously, (b) school administration is a craft informed practice where the more experience school administrators have in their craft, the more knowledgeable they become in the practice of the craft; and (c) when school administrators share similar contexts and challenges, they more fully understand their context and discover innovative ways to implement their craft and advance the work and outcomes of their organization (p. 213). AI, as a theoretical research perspective, is a form of action research promoting systematic, collaborative research on problems of practice in a democratic and participatory research environment (Calabrese, 2015).

AI can be used as a methodology to inform practice simultaneously with an inquiry into practice (Calabrese, 2015). Calabrese strived to understand if observing and sharing successful school practices/events in a whole group setting would lead to changes in their perceptions, attitudes, and administrative practice. There were two findings: (a)

the AI focus of inquiry, on successful practices/events, shapes school administrator perceptions, attitudes, and application of craft knowledge to practice; and (b) the school administrators' sharing of successful practices/events in a whole group setting generated new forms of practice during the 10-week study (Calabrese, 2015, p. 213). These findings were of interest to my study agenda.

Appreciative Inquiry aims to create new knowledge that expands the realm of the possible and aids a member of an organization to envision a collectively desired future (Cooperrider et al., 2003). AI also contributes to implementing vision in ways that successfully translate images of possibilities into reality and belief into practice, causing a win-win situation (Cooperrider et al., 2003). AI is a simple and engaging process (Cooperrider et al., 2003). Many organizations find this method rewarding because it lends to the practice of creating common ground, accelerating organizational learning, uniting labor and management, and more (Cooperrider et al., 2003).

**Strategic planning guided by AI.** In industries where strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis is used, strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results (SOAR) can be used as an alternative to keep the positive core momentum in place (Keene & Scott, 2016). Stakeholders find building a strategic plan together enables them to have a vested, positive grasp on building success (Keene & Scott, 2016). SOAR powers AI to focus on the positives while still addressing areas of need (Keene & Scott, 2016). SOAR involves diverse groups of stakeholders representing each part of the organization to maximize diverse viewpoints (Keene & Scott, 2016). External stakeholders may also be included in the collaboration of AI (Keene & Scott, 2016).

SOAR can be used to re-engage employees and lift their spirits (Keene & Scott, 2016).

SOAR is a useful guide for navigating complexities with its step-by-step approach framework (Keene & Scott, 2016). SOAR's framework can be used to generate knowledge from buried parts of an organization and to develop talent (Keene & Scott, 2016). SOAR's framework can be used in colleges and university classrooms to improve learning dynamics (Keene & Scott, 2016). SOAR's practices can build or help build an organization's vision and mission statement (Keene & Scott, 2016).

*Previous research.* Appreciative Inquiry is used to support positive change within organizations. Strategic planning with an appreciative inquiry as the guide has previously been successful. In Waters and White's (2015) case study, 15 bottom-up and top-down initiatives were generated over two and a half years. Waters and White believed AI to be a synthetic, holistic, and collaborative methodology. Waters and White outlined three strategic phases in the planning, including development, implementation, and monitoring. Alignment of the organization to the goal is an important element to successful strategic planning and implementation.

Schlombs et al. (2015) used AI to change the institutional environments of Rochester Institute's College of Liberal Arts to make it more beneficial to the success of women, and all genders, instead of the women, or other genders, changing themselves to fit better into the existing environment. After a year of working within the AI process simultaneity principle, AI quickly began a change in the college. More local and professional support for the students was created, and daily learning, and progressing through AI has helped produce more positivity for future positive changes.

Albon et al. (2016) reviewed strategic planning history within university contexts and investigated complicated issues related to their process. Strategic planning for universities is vital for clarifying future directions, decision making, and improvements for organizational performance (Albon et al., 2016). Albon et al. argued that the process for creating a strategic plan is non-linear and messy, as opposed to what the traditional thought process is, linear and straightforward. Albon et al. found that strategic planning success depends on successful collaboration and appreciative inquiry guided methods within that collaboration including (a) evidence-based approach, (b) alignment of term meaning, (c) anticipate and embrace reflexive and iterative aspects of planning, (d) maintain positive momentum, (e) assign a moderator to keep things on track and with the right attitude, (f) identify needs, (g) engage stakeholders, and (h) keep planning and implementation aligned with positive monitoring (2016, pp. 216-218).

Paige et al. (2015) found that strategic planning through appreciative inquiry assisted partners to re-establish collaborating with each other, improved their eagerness about working together, and aided with clarifying of their roles to update future collaborations. The participants in the study highlighted community and university strengths of shared key values related to the program (Paige et al., 2015). The participants also praised the aspects of program management that allowed them to contribute to positive program outcomes (Paige et al., 2015). The Center for Appreciative Inquiry (2016) offers to coach in strategic planning with AI, along with many other comprehensive AI coaching needs.

**Data collection in AI.** Johnson and Leavitt (2001) described the data collection

and analysis process of Appreciative Inquiry in the following steps. One, collect data from interviews: this is a discovery process to learn about the best of *what is*. The discovery process shifts the balance of organizational attention from what is not working well to what is working and to what may work in the future. Two, determine common themes: the themes or topics are stated affirmatively and should involve areas of inquiry that are important to the organization. Three, articulate provocative propositions: the dream phase, which encourages the participants to think about what could be and think outside of traditional boundaries of what has been done in the past. Four, validate the propositions: this begins the design phase. The discovery and dream phases encourage participants to think about possibilities while the design phase uses the provocative propositions to focus participants on creating action around the possibilities. Five, support analysis: this step involves forward thinking about what organizational resources are in place and which ones need to be developed. Six, develop action agenda: determining what will be is an important element of the design phase. Organizational commitments are established, and application plans are developed to realize the provocative propositions. Seven, implement the action agenda: this is the delivery phase and focuses on action planning and on personal organizational commitments to change. Eight, evaluate the implementation: the key to determining whether the AI has been an effective process to stimulate organizational change is to evaluate outcomes. Moving from the vision to implementation requires committed leadership from the top of the organization, and unrelenting and maintained energy from those who work on the implementation teams. Time and resources are needed to do the work, and efforts are to

be recognized, regarded, and publically celebrated (Johnson & Leavitt, 2001, pp. 130-131).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

This literature review intended to include an examination of the presence of research on organizational physiognomies, collaboration within organizations, the benefits of the appreciative inquiry approach, and support for vulnerable students in K-12. There were six major themes in the literature review. First, in context, appreciative inquiry (AI) refers to two things: (a) a search for knowledge and a theory of collective action designed to evolve the vision and will of a group, and (b) an organization or society as a whole (Cooperrider et al., 2003). Appreciative inquiry can be used as a methodology to inform practice simultaneously with an inquiry into practice (Calabrese, 2015). The process involves interviewing and storytelling to draw out the best of the past and set the stage for effective visualization of the future (Cooperrider et al., 2003).

Second, recognizing collaboration as groups of people working together to produce an outcome. Third, trust and support are imperative elements involved in collaboration. Norshakirash et al. (2011) believed that trust is like the heart of collaboration, which needs to be constructed and maintained. Fourth, a learning organization searches for information in its environment; creates information by itself; and encourages individuals to transfer knowledge between the individuals in the team helping to ensure that organizational objectives are attained (Aggestam, 2006, p. 296; Hussein, 2014). Fifth, organizational learning is viewed as routine based, history dependent, and target oriented (Levitt & March, 1988). Context is important to consider

when reviewing best practices. Hiebeler et al. (2012) argued that it is good practice to have a pool of different kind of best practices, from which to retract when specifically or contextually needed for specific strategies and other business agendas.

Lastly, labeling of the students is a process that occurs due to some factors including student performance, attitude toward authority, the level of involvement within the school, parental involvement and support, and prior knowledge of and interaction with the student (Glass, 2014, p. 388). It is important to begin intervention programs, such as the Praise Program, in primary education where students are less likely set in their negative ways of coping or are first misunderstood (Glass, 2014). Students at the high school level are nearing adulthood and must learn to accept responsibility for their behavior and performance, rather than blaming the teachers for labeling them as troublemakers or blaming the administrators for any suspensions (Glass, 2014, p. 392).

The gap in the literature that my study may reduce, while extending the knowledge in the discipline, included contextual best practices used by school system administrators in Alabama schools, to develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students. There exists a breakdown, or gap, between knowing what outcome is desired and what best practices, in the context of the industry and stakeholders, to use or develop when creating strategic plans for implementing a successful reform. To discover how the organization administrators work to develop or use these contextual best practices, or how they do not use them provided key information as to why the reforms are or are not working, and how to have them work in the future. We knew that the state schools' administrators

present an outline of the plan that is developed, which is supposed to lead to successful mandate execution for support vulnerable students' education experiences. The public did not know what happened between mandates handed down from the U.S. Department of Education to the states, and the evaluation of whether the mandate had enhanced student success. My research agenda, through a focus group and semistructured interviews, guided by appreciative inquiry, explored the strategy development phase of what we did not know.

In Chapter 3, I reviewed the research methods to explore how school system administrators use or develop contextual best practices to design strategies to support vulnerable students throughout K-12, to fill this gap. The research questions addressed sought to explore this phenomenon, and I discovered what possible strengths and weaknesses exist within the current process of the phenomenon.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this descriptive single case study was to explore how administrators of Alabama schools develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students. The descriptive single case study included 15 administrators of school districts in Alabama. This sample was sufficient to reach saturation, the point when the collection of new data does not add anything new to the study (Gutterman, 2015; Mason, 2010).

Organizational learning and change are needed (Aggestam, 2006; Hussein et al., 2014). In learning organizations, stakeholders share ideas and concentrate on processes for acquiring information, interpreting data, developing knowledge, and sustaining learning (Aggestam, 2006; Hussein et al., 2014). How an organization manages its knowledge is central to organizational development (Aggestam, 2006; Hussein et al., 2014). Knowledge management (KM) involves creating, organizing, sharing, and using knowledge (Aggestam, 2006). Information technology (IT) is a prerequisite for effective KM (Aggestam, 2006). Learning management (LM) is crucial for organizations because they do not always naturally or readily have learning capabilities (Hussein et al., 2014). Learning organizations help to ensure that organizational objectives are attained (Hussein et al., 2014).

A learning organization searches for information in its environment, creates information by itself, and encourages individual team members to transfer knowledge amongst themselves (Aggestam, 2006, p. 296). Innovation and performance are linked to learning organizations (Hussein et al., 2014). In a learning organization, work processes

must offer due diligence to every aspect of knowledge, and the processes must enable knowledge distribution, while the culture must encourage knowledge sharing (Aggestam, 2006; Hussein et al., 2014).

This chapter includes descriptions of the research design, the population, the sampling procedures, measures to protect participants' rights and anonymity, and approaches and procedures for data collection, storing, analysis, and integrity. This chapter also includes reviews of the instrument and methods I used for data collection and subsequent data analysis.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

I developed the following research question to structure this study: How do Alabama school administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students?

The central concepts of the study included appreciative inquiry, collaboration among administrators, and contextual best practices to develop strategic support for vulnerable learners. These concepts are operationally defined in Table 3.

Table 3

*Central Concepts of the Study*

Concept	Definition	How measured	Target population/scope
Appreciate Inquiry to help design and implement strategies	AI is a purposely-positive organization development (OD) process that grows out of social constructionist thought and its applications to management and organizational transformation (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003).	Focus groups and individual semistructured interviews, within a descriptive single case study	Administrators of Alabama Schools
Collaboration among administrators	Collaboration involves actors to interact in processes of planning, brainstorming, making decisions, follow-up, and adjustments to operation implementations (Thompson, Perry, and Miller, 2008).	Focus groups and individual semistructured interviews, within a descriptive single case study	Administrators of Alabama Schools
Contextual best practices	Best practices which are considered within the context of the environment of situation (Patton, 2001)	Focus groups and individual semistructured interviews, within a descriptive single case study	Administrators of Alabama Schools

The nature of this study was a qualitative descriptive single case study. I chose a qualitative over quantitative research method because with qualitative research one can understand how people cope in real-world settings (Lewis, 2015; Yin, 2015). Researchers use qualitative methods to understand how people think, process information, learn, and

use their environment to shape their behaviors (Austin & Sutton, 2014). In qualitative research, the researcher can experience participants' subjectivity. Subjectivity is the quality that makes human beings most fascinating. It is what differentiates them, as subjects, from the inanimate, unthinking objects of the world.

Qualitative research involves active interactions between people involved (Hartas, 2015). Qualitative research can inform the researcher about people's reactions and the adjustments they make in response to various changes such as job changes, geographic changes, economic changes, family makeup changes, and so on (Hartas, 2015).

Qualitative methodology is compatible with almost any field of study (Lewis, 2015; Yin, 2015). Researchers use quantitative methods to produce numerical data. The knowledge produced through quantitative methodology might not be fit for direct application to my study's agenda, such as the qualitative method. Quantitative research may overlook an occurring phenomenon because it is focused on theory or hypothesis testing (Johnson & Onweugbuzie, 2004). Qualitative researchers observe what is occurring to generate theory or hypothesis (Johnson & Onweugbuzie, 2004). Qualitative methodology offers many design choices, including the single case study design I chose.

A case study results in a written report about a thing, person, or event, after observations, investigations, and analysis of data and findings (McLeod, 2008). Case studies can provide valuable information about how things or persons act, perform, or happen, and the resulting outcomes of those behaviors (McLeod, 2008). Using an AI approach to interviewing the focus group and conducting semistructured interviews, I maximized administrator input regarding organizational learning management methods,

strategic plans for inspiration and success, contextual best practice development, and more to support all learners. In Chapter 2, I reviewed Johnson and Leavitt's (2001) discussion of AI data collection. Johnson and Leavitt explained that data collection in focus group and individual semistructured interviews should follow the AI phases, starting with the discovery phase where common themes of what is working are derived. Next is the dream phase where participants' future visions are explored. This process moves into the design phase where participants can picture a more connected structure of their dreams. The destiny phase will bring thoughts about how the participants will know their designs and dreams have been met. What will success look like? Thoughts about the best practices to use in participants' dream systems brings about the action phase, which brings the focus group and individual semistructured interviews to a close in a way that the participants can continue to work on their ideas after the study.

Previous researchers, including Drew and Wallis (2014), Calabrese (2015), and Whitney and Cooperrider (2000) have used an appreciative inquiry approach to facilitate focus groups and individual semistructured interviews. I chose to use a case study using the appreciative inquiry approach instead of action research. Using an action research approach requires more time (Putman & Rock, 2017), which was not feasible given that the administrators who participated had limited time available. Action research seeks to look at the problem and develop a remedy (Putman & Rock, 2017). This approach would have required participants to hold multiple meetings to help discover, design, and implement resolutions to be tested and measured (Putman & Rock, 2017).

According to Yin (2003), case studies' design parameters must be constructed to support the validity or credibility of the study. Design parameters are physical or functional characteristics of the components in the design process. Design parameters can determine cost, design, and risk tradeoffs in the study's development (Yin, 2003). The design parameters form the criteria against which you will evaluate your design alternatives (Yin, 2003) (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Design Parameters*

Tests	Definition	Case study tactic
Credibility	How compatible are the findings to reality	Established by the researcher analysis of the data through a process of reflecting, sifting, exploring, judging its relevance and meaning and ultimately developing themes and essences that accurately depict the experience
Transferability	Findings that can also apply to other situations and populations	The study will showcase how the case study location compares with other similar environments within the region and state regarding the contextual data.

(table continues)

Tests	Definition	Case study tactic
Dependability	For qualitative research, this study may be repeated using its method and design but may produce different results depending on the context of a new study's situation	Overlapping methods of the focus groups and individual interviews will help establish dependability. Dependability will be ensured with the audit trail. Reflective appraisal, which involves evaluating the effectiveness of the process of inquiry undertaken, will also contribute to the study's dependability.
Confirmability	Refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others	Confirmability will be determined by linking the data to their sources. Reflexivity will help determine confirmability. Triangulation from different data collection methods will further determine confirmability. An audit trail will also help determine confirmability.

Discussing rationales for single case studies, Yin (2003) has noted that a case study is warranted if it (a) is representative of a critical case in testing a well-formulated theory, (b) represents an extreme case or unique circumstances, (c) is representative of experiences of a large institution, (d) is revelatory and provides access to data previously inaccessible to the scientific community, and (e) is longitudinal and tracks how certain conditions change over time (pp. 39-40). Yin reviewed ways of reporting a case study, which include linear-analytic, comparative, chronological, theory building, suspense, and un-sequenced (2003). The linear-analytic reporting method was a good fit for this study because it enabled be to proceed sequentially by first identifying the issue/problem, and then moving through the literature review, methods, findings, conclusion, and implications.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In this case study, I brought a small amount of experience as a parent of K-12 children. I bracketed my experience, which included setting aside potential prejudices, biases, and experiences, to keep them from biasing the outcomes of the study (Sutton & Austin, 2015). I did not know any of the possible participants and did not have an authoritative role over them. There was no foreseen conflict of interest between me and the participants. While experience helps, researchers must set aside any preconceived thoughts or ideas and allow the evidence to guide the study (Davidsen, 2013). Researchers follow the evidence wherever it leads, and the process of discovering the important aspects of the data is as important as the outcome (Fram, 2013).

A qualitative researcher asks probing questions, listens, thinks about the participant's feedback, and clarifies by asking further probing questions (Davidsen, 2013; Lewis, 2015). The qualitative researcher takes all the pieces of the puzzle and connects them by themes and concepts to derive a full picture of the phenomenon under study. My role as the researcher involved facilitating the focus group and semistructured interviews, and recording and analyzing the data collected during these sessions. The process of developing an interview protocol included forming questions and thus compelled me to clarify and prioritize the information wanted from each interview (see Krueger & Casey, 2014).

If a research effort includes multiple interviews, it is important that the first interview comprise the same topics, in the same way, as the very last. Otherwise, the data are not comparable. Focus groups are a productive method to gather qualitative data on

the issue or problem being explored (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Using a modified version of an existing business focus groups protocol (Boston College, 2016), I developed this study's focus group protocol to provide consistent guidelines for whoever participated. I remained impartial and open to all feedback given by the participants. I analyzed the data objectively and articulated the final report factually.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

In the following section of this chapter, I discussed the participants in the study, the sampling strategy, the environment of the study, and the logic of the same. The population of the study included school administrators of K-12 in Alabama Schools. These administrators varied in experience. The general population of the Alabama School Districts top administrators was 138 district superintendents. The sample size for this study was 15, with saturation met.

The sampling strategy for this study was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, is a type of nonprobability sampling technique where the characteristics of the subjects lead to their selection (Grinnell, 2009; Palinkas et al., 2015). In this strategy, the settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is relevant to the questions and goals, which are adequately unattainable from other choices (Maxwell, 2013). Settings, times, and individuals selected are important decisions in qualitative selections (Maxwell, 2013). Qualitative studies tend to focus on a special section of the population for a better understanding of the data collected, regarding answering the research questions in the

study (Maxwell, 2013). As Maxwell (2013) reviewed, purposeful selection has five goals. One, achieve representativeness of settings, individuals, or activities selected. Two, adequately capture the heterogeneity of the population. Three, deliberately select individuals or cases that are critical for testing the theories. Four, establish comparisons to illuminate the reasons for differences between settings or individuals. Five, select groups or participants with whom one can establish the most productive relationships, that will best enable one to answer the research questions.

In goal two, the purpose is to make sure that the conclusions represent the whole, and not just a portion, maximum variation sampling (Maxwell, 2013). Performing systematic sampling helps to claim key informants' statements that are representative of the whole group (Maxwell, 2013). Goal three tends to lean towards using extremes to give light to what is happening, where representatives are not as successful (Maxwell, 2013). Goal four warrants use of comparative designs to understand the reasons why certain settings or individuals better suit a study, according to their differences (Maxwell, 2013). Lastly, goal five resembles convenience sampling but remains purposeful in providing the best data for the study (Maxwell, 2013). Maxwell stressed that feasible access and data collection processes are important considerations when contemplating sampling selection.

The criteria for the participants comprised the status of district superintendents or other administrator role within the Alabama schools. The participants were known to meet the criteria through the confirmation of the roster listed on the Alabama State Board of Education website and each school systems' website. Furthermore, I screened the

returned participant consent forms to make certain they met criteria. The participants were protected from any harm or ill effects through the study's confidentiality agreements, the study's anonymity of the participants, and the due diligence of the researcher. This study included 15 participants, in one case study.

I first sent the letter of cooperation to the Alabama State Department of Education superintendent for permission to conduct my study virtually, through a web-conferencing platform in Alabama schools. I found that no special permissions were needed to conduct the study with the organization's personnel. Once I received IRB's approval, I submitted a request notice for participation to all confirmed Alabama district superintendents and other administrators (see Appendix D for consent form and Appendix G for invitation to research). No specific county or school district was named in the study, only generically Alabama Schools. The request notices for participation explained my study, assured confidentiality, and addressed what activities would proceed in the study. The notice also allowed for the participant to choose which method of collection they preferred, focus group or semistructured interview. The notice included a consent form for their permission and agreement to participate. Participants returned the consent forms with their signatures. I screened the consent forms for proper participant criteria, and authorization of participation, and any questions or concerns they might have had. Due to slow recruitment, all participants that consented to participate were chosen to participate. I offered the participants to select a convenient time and day in which to participate and proceed accordingly. Data collection occurred, and I transcribed the sessions by units of participant, and assigned coded identifiers to the transcripts for use in

NVivo software. For example, transcription for superintendent participant in the focus group was labeled SFG1 (superintendent focus group), and so on. The superintendents in semistructured interviews were labeled SSI (superintendent semistructured interview), and so on. The other administrators, principal, assistant principal, and department head in the semistructured interviews were labeled ASI (administrator semistructured interview), and so on.

The sample size should be small enough to provide a manageable volume of data while accurately representing the population if any valid inferences are to be drawn from the sample results (Marshall et al., 2015; Mason, 2010; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). It is necessary to design the study in such a way that it can be repeated. This study's sampling strategy can be repeated easily throughout other populations within the state and across the nation. Time, resources, and researcher fatigue were also considered in determining the size of the sample. Administrators had limited time away from their everyday obligations. I chose to use both a focus group and individual semistructured interviews for two reasons: (a) participating in a focus group or any type of group collaboration allows all individuals access to others' ideas and insights that one individual may not have thought about or considered, and (b) individual semistructured interviews allows individuals to speak freely in a private environment, to provide data free from intimidation of others, and the ability to be less distracted by others. It is best to conduct a focus group, with a small number of participants, such as 5 participants in each group to obtain quality data from the participants (Kreuger & Casey, 2014). Focus groups and semistructured interviews will take time to conduct, transcribe, and analyze. The time

remaining for the duration of my program was also considered. I wanted to have time to conduct and have approved a research study of high quality with implications of positive social change.

Saturation, which means the collection of new data does not shed any new light in the study was reached through the sample size outlined in the study (Gutterman, 2015; Mason, 2010). I recruited participants until saturation was met. My participant sample size was 15 and saturation was met within that sample. Saturation is important to outline in the study to help provide credibility (Gutterman, 2015). Although there are concerns with the readily acceptance of saturation (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012), saturation was met in this study through the recruited participants because the administrators' positions were directly involved with the topic of the study on a daily basis, and their expertise on the topic eliminated the need for a larger sample size (Gutterman, 2015). Using a focus group and semistructured interviews with 15 participants allowed for comprehensive data collected for the study (Gutterman, 2015).

Marshall et al. (2015) argued that there existed little or no rigor for justifying sample size for virtually all the information systems (IS) studies in their study's dataset of 83 qualitative IS interview research studies. Marshall et al. stated the number of interviews conducted for the qualitative studies they reviewed was correlated with cultural factors, implying the subjective nature of sample size in qualitative IS studies. Marshall et al. provided recommendations for minimally acceptable practices of justifying sample size of interviews in qualitative IS studies, which include: (a) the most critical best practice is statistical demonstration of data saturation since this provides

internal support for the value of the dataset and the analysis and reporting built on the dataset, (b) citing other similar studies that have adopted similar designs with similar research problems, and (c) adopting more rigorous standards of qualitative research would generally enhance the reputation of qualitative research and make this type of research more appealing to quantitative researchers.

Sometimes the problem of developing a conclusion to the work is not necessarily a lack of data but an excess of it (Mason, 2010). The most common sample sizes were 20 and 30 in Mason's (2010) study of sample size and saturation in Ph.D. qualitative studies. The sample size for my study, 15 administrators among different school districts, reached the saturation requirement of the study.

### **Instrumentation**

The data collection instruments in this study were two types of interviews: a focus group discussion and semistructured interviews. Using an appreciative inquiry approach to interviewing the focus group and semistructured interviews provided for a comprehensive dialogue about the participants' vision about the topic. The focus group discussion and the semistructured interviews were audio recorded by the web-conferencing cloud recording feature for accuracy when analyzing the data. The focus group technique involved a moderator, the researcher in this case; facilitating a small group discussion between selected individuals on a topic, with audio recording through a web-conferencing platform, and hand note-taking, and was useful in the coordinated research approach studying the phenomenon in diverse ways (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

Table 5 includes some advantages and disadvantages of using focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

Table 5

*Focus Group Advantages and Disadvantages*

Advantages of focus groups	Disadvantages of focus groups
Interaction is easier in small groups	Some participants may have more confidence than others and may try to dominate group
Can be used as a first step to identify potential problem areas	Not useful for gathering statistics as it only allows analysis of people's views but not the number of people holding that view
Recruitment of participants can be based on certain criteria	The wrong mix within a group can cause problems and may not work effectively
The facilitator has no control over the content, only the general topic	Not a solid approach, so it may be impossible to compare information between the groups
The facilitator can clarify certain points with participants	It remains difficult to improve or establish confidence within a group setting as opposed to an individual interview
Focus groups can include people who are unable to read or write	Special additional requirements may have to be made to support it

Interviews are a systematic way of talking and listening to people and are a way to collect data from individuals through conversations (Kajornboon, 2005). To control bias, the researcher must remember the interviewer's views about the topic are not of importance (Kajornboon, 2005). The participant is the primary source of data for the study; the interviews are ways for those participants to get involved and talk about their views, perception, and interpretation in regards to a given situation (Kajornboon, 2005). Questionnaires influenced the development of personal interviews that helped obtain more clarified and descriptive answers, a better understanding of the questions, and could draw additional data from the participants that might not be accomplished with a standard questionnaire (Kajornboon, 2005). Fowler has contributed to the precision and use of interviews in qualitative research, has published books on the topic, and achieved awards on the same (2014). In this study, additional data were drawn from the participants that proved helpful to the study's agenda.

**Previous research using focus groups and semistructured interviews.** Lloyd et al.'s (2016) case study is one example of a case study using focus groups. Twenty-four pharmacists were recruited for one of four focus groups in a large district general hospital in the Northwest of England to explore the views of pharmacists to delivering feedback on prescribing errors (PE) (p. 461). The focus groups collected data were transcribed precisely and analyzed using a thematic framework approach to detect current practices, beliefs, and attitudes of pharmacists toward delivering prescribing error (PE) feedback. The transcripts were independently examined by the research team.

Irvine et al.'s (2013) study investigated how face-to-face semistructured interviews differed from those conducted by telephone. Some of the findings included (a) completion or formulation of interviewee talk by the researcher was more common in face-to-face interviews, (b) interviewee requests for clarification were slightly more common in telephone interviews, (c) vocalized acknowledgements given by the researcher were less frequent in telephone interviews, (d) interviewee checks on the adequacy of their responses were more common in telephone interviews, and (e) telephone interviews tended to be shorter than those conducted face-to-face (Irvine et al., 2013, p. 94). Table 6 shows some advantages and disadvantages of using semistructured interviews (Irvine et al., 2013).

Table 6

*Semistructured Interviews Advantages and Disadvantages*

Advantages	Disadvantages
Large amount of detail generated	Cannot guarantee honesty of participants
Flexible and sensitive	Flexibility of interview may lessen reliability
Fairly reliable and easy to analyze	Open-ended questions are difficult to analyze, compare answers, and may be time-consuming

Ramirez and Jaffee's (2016) case study is an example of case studies using semistructured interviews. Data sources included interviews, observations, and document

archival records of the past initiatives (Ramirez & Jaffee, 2016). In-depth semistructured interviews were one-on-one with each teacher. Probing questions were asked that stimulated deeper exploration and understanding of the phenomenon at hand (Ramirez & Jaffee, 2016). Detailed notes were taken during interviews and observations, while artifacts were collected for factual information (Ramirez & Jaffee, 2016).

**Design choice.** For this study, I chose to use both a focus group and individual semistructured interviews for two reasons: (a) participating in a focus group or any group collaboration allows all individuals access to others' ideas and insights that one individual may not have thought about or considered, and (b) individual semistructured interviews allows individuals a more private setting to contribute to data collection. With this combination, I obtained comprehensive data for the study and support methodological collection of data triangulation (Denzin, 1978, Patton, 1999).

**Protocol for focus groups.** Focus groups are a remarkable way to gather qualitative data on the issue or problem being explored. I used a modified version of an existing business focus group protocol (Boston College, 2016) for this study to provide consistent guidelines for whoever plans to conduct focus groups. Once the researcher chooses to use focus groups, and how many to use in the study, the researcher then needs to outline what will occur during the focus groups, inform on the setting, describe who will participate and what open-ended questions will be asked, in priority, describe how the data obtained is captured, and how the researcher will probe for more data. These activities are the first phase of the protocol.

My study used one focus group and several semistructured interviews. The focus group included 3 participants each. Twelve participants were included in the semistructured interviews. The same interview guide was used for the focus group and individual semistructured interviews.

The second phase of the protocol involved what occurred in the focus group. For my study, the following protocol was used in the focus group.

- Bring materials such as Notebook/computer, smartphone or tape recorder to record proceedings, at least two recording devices in case one fails, a list of participants, the number and forms previously turned in, to check attendance, and a clock or watch to keep track of time. Set up the web-conferencing platform well in advance of the participants' arrival.
- Greet each participant eagerly as they virtually enter the focus group.
- Introduce myself; give an overview of the topic.
- Set the ground rules making clear there are no wrong answers, to feel free to give honest answers whether positive or negative.
- Make it clear to the participants that their comments will be treated in confidence, and that no information which identifies specific individuals will be used, and carry on the focus group according to the script (see Appendix A).
- While conducting the session, keep mindful of the following: set a positive tone, make sure everyone is heard, draw out quieter group members, probe for more complete answers, monitor questions and the time closely, control

reactions to participants verbal and nonverbal with head nodding, short verbal responses, avoiding *that's good, excellent*, and so on.

- Summarize with confirmation, review the purpose, and ask if anything has been missed.
- Tell the group what the next steps are with the collected data
- Thank the group and dismiss (Boston College, 2016, p. 2).

Phase three of the protocol related to the summary of the focus group session, including:

1. Summarize each meeting: immediately after the meeting, the facilitator should write up a quick summary of his/her impressions, transcribe the notes or audio recording of the focus group as soon as possible after the focus group has been conducted.
2. Once data from the focus groups and interviews have been summarized conduct member checking.
3. Read the notes and look for themes/trends, write down any themes that occur.
4. Schedule the semistructured interviews for each participant (Boston College, 2016, p. 3).

**Protocol for semistructured interviews.** The process of developing a protocol for an interview includes the formation of questions and probes and thus compels the researcher to clarify and prioritize the information wanted from each interview (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Rand, 2016). If a research effort includes multiple interviews, it is important that the first interview address the same topics, in the same way, that the very

last interview is conducted. Otherwise, the data are not comparable. Interviews are time-constrained, so the protocol guides the researcher to prioritize the research questions and to understand which questions are crucial and which are secondary (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Inverted funnels were the protocol scheme for the focus group interview guide and semistructured interviews, which began with narrow questions leading to broad discussion, and placed participants in the context of the topic which allowed participants to become comfortable before they talk freely (Rand, 2016; Stewart, 2013). This study's semistructured interview protocol included:

- Bring materials such as Notebook/computer, smartphones, or tape recorder to record proceedings, bring two recording devices in case one fails; a list of participants, the number and forms previously turned in, to check attendance and a clock or watch to keep track of time.
- Set up the web-conferencing platform well in advance of the participants' arrival.
- Greet each participant as they virtually enter the web-conferencing platform for the semistructured interview.
- Introduce myself.
- Establish ground rules, making clear there are no wrong answers, to feel free to give honest answers whether positive or negative.
- Questions and probes will proceed in a prioritized manner (see Appendices B and C).

- While conducting the interview keep mindful of the following: set a positive tone, probe for answers that are more complete, monitor your questions and the time closely, control reactions to participants verbal and nonverbal with head nodding, short verbal responses, avoiding *that's good, excellent*.
- Summarize the interview and ask if anything has been missed.
- Thank participants and review the next steps to be taken, which will include member checking and study approval (Boston College, 2016, p. 2).

The next steps for conducting the interviews included a summary of the interview data and analysis of all the collected data.

1. Summarize each meeting: immediately after the meeting, the facilitator should write up a quick summary of his/her impressions, transcribe the notes or audio recording of the interview as soon as possible after the interview has been conducted.
2. Conduct member checking for all data collected and summarized.
3. Read the notes and look for themes/trends, write down any themes that occur.
4. Analyze all collected data through a qualitative data analysis software program.
5. Interpret the results (Boston College, 2016, p. 3).

The third source of data in this study was the documentation/archival records regarding the implementation and the progress of the Plan 2020 and its categorical measurements to date (see Appendix E). The data from these documents were instrumental in assisting the determination of the success or failure of the current and

previously implemented strategies for supporting vulnerable students by the state of Alabama. This data was retrieved from public records on the state board of education website.

### **Pilot Study**

Each data collection instrument was researcher developed. In this case, the data collection instrument, an interview guide, included questions I developed and tested in a pilot study for credibility and dependability. The one interview guide was used in two different data collection methods (see Appendix A and B). I used this interview guide for the pilot study. I created and submitted to IRB a pilot study to check for instrument question clarity, and understanding. I received IRB approval, 06-23-17-0032902. The following steps were included in the pilot study (see Table 7).

Table 7

#### *Pilot Study Outline*

Recruitment procedures	Participation procedures	Data collection procedures
Participants in the pilot study did not include those who participated in the main study but had the same type backgrounds or positions as administrators in the board of education environment. Requests for participation in the pilot study were sent to 5 possible participants.	A maximum of 2 participants participated in the pilot study. The pilot study included the exact questions used in the focus group and semistructured interview guides.	The pilot study data was analyzed for the instrument question clarity and understanding.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

After I sent the letter of cooperation to the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) for permission to conduct my study within the school board organization in Alabama, I was made aware by the ALSDE I did not need specific permissions to conduct my study with their personnel. Once I gained IRB approval, I submitted a request notice for participation to all confirmed Alabama district superintendents and other administrators (see Appendix E). No specific county or school district was named in the study, only generically Alabama Schools. The request notice for participation explained my study, assured confidentiality, and addressed what activities would occur in the study. The notice included a consent form for their permission and agreement to participate. Participants returned the consent forms with their signatures. I screened the consent forms for proper participant criteria, and authorization of participation, and for any questions or concerns they might have had. Due to slow recruitment, all participants that consented to participate were chosen to participate. I offered the participants to select a convenient time and day in which to participate and proceed accordingly. Data collection occurred, and I transcribed the sessions by units of participant, and assigned numeric identifiers to the transcripts for use in NVivo software. For example, transcription for superintendent participant in the focus group was labeled SFG1, and so on. The superintendents in semistructured interviews were labeled SSI1, and so on. The other administrators, principal, assistant principal, and department head in the semistructured interviews were labeled ASI1, and so on.

The focus group lasted 45 minutes. There were 3 participants in the focus group (Kreuger & Casey, 2014). The focus group was conducted virtually, through the web-conferencing platform Zoom. I recorded the data collection through the audio cloud recording feature of the web-conferencing software and recorded field notes by hand. Table 8 shows the focus groups composition, setting, and data capture.

Table 8

*Focus Groups Composition, Setting, and Data Capture*

Groups	# of participants	Compiled length of experience	Setting	Data capture
District Superintendents	3	#	Virtual Web-Conferencing	Audio recording through web-conferencing software, and field notes

Each semistructured interview lasted between 30-45 minutes. I conducted interviews as scheduled at the participants' convenience. I recorded the data collections through the cloud audio recording feature of the web-conferencing software and field notes were taken by hand. Once each interview or focus group reached its end, I thanked the participants for their time, their feedback, and assured them of the confidentiality of the participation through keeping identities anonymous. I informed the participants that once I completed the summary and transcription of their feedback, I would conduct member-checking by sending them the summary for their review to be certain I have not misinterpreted their feedback. Once they concurred with my interpretations, I downloaded the transcript in NVivo for data analysis. I reminded them that I would share

the executive summary with them when the study is completed and approved. Once the study is approved the executive summary of findings and recommendations and a final thank you letter, and general participation certificate will be sent to each participant.

A web-conferencing recording tool and field notes were used to keep track of the data, new emerging understandings, and ideas shared in the focus group and semistructured interviews. The following describes the procedures that typically occur after data collection sessions. One, summarize each meeting: immediately after the meeting, the facilitator should write up a quick summary of participant impressions, transcribe the notes or audio recording of the interview as soon as possible after the interview has been conducted. Two, analyze the summaries: read the notes and look for themes/trends, write down any themes that occur and analyze through a qualitative data analysis software program, and interpret the results (Boston College, 2016, p. 3). All data on the computer, disc, drive, or software will be password protected during the research project and removable items will be maintained in a locked container for 5 years after the research study concludes. After 5 years, the data will be deleted from any internal software, files, and drives. Any external items containing the data will be destroyed.

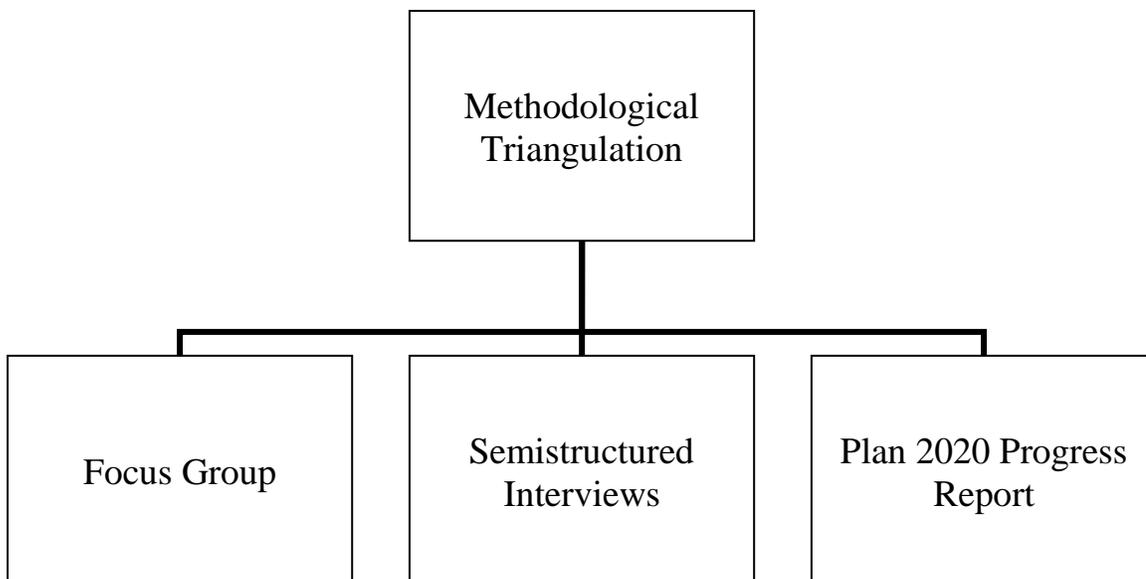
### **Data Analysis Plan**

For this study's data analysis, the following steps occurred. Immediately after each focus group or interview session, I wrote up a quick summary of participant impressions and transcribed the notes and audio recording of the focus group and semistructured interviews. Next, I conducted thematic coding, also called constant comparison. Thematic coding includes reading the notes and looking for themes/trends,

writing down any themes that occur, inputting information into the chosen qualitative data analysis software and analyze in various ways, such as concept mapping, themes, and so on, and interpret the results (Boston College, 2016). Thematic data analysis is a tool to summarize information from multiple sources and organize data into themes/concepts linking data from multiple sources and concludes with only relevant data while recognizing data that can be important for future research (Saldana, 2013; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). To perform a constant comparison analysis, as directed by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007), I (a) read the entire set of data, which led to a subset of the data; (b) chunked the data into smaller significant parts, (c) labeled each chunk with a descriptive code, and (d) compared each new chunk of data with previous codes so that similar chunks were labeled with the same code. After all the data were coded, the codes were grouped by similarity, a theme was identified, and documented based on each grouping. Once the code tree was established, I continued to re-visit what should be included and what should be excluded when thinking about where each code should be applied or not.

My study's type of triangulation included data collected from the focus group, interviews, and historical records. After coding themes, I conducted methodological triangulation, meaning for this study, I compared the data from the data collection methods; the focus group, the interviews, and the Plan 2020 progress report (see Figure 4). The focus group and interview questions helped to obtain information and the experiences of the participants regarding the following research question:

How do Alabama school administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students?



*Figure 4.* Methodological triangulation.

Comparing and contrasting data is vital to qualitative analysis (Gale et al., 2013). The ability to compare data, with ease, across cases and within individual cases is inherent to the structure and process of the framework method (Gale et al., 2013). The framework method is most commonly used for the thematic analysis of semistructured interview transcripts (Gale et al., 2013). The framework method is a systematic method of categorizing and organizing what may seem like bulky qualitative data (Gale et al., 2013).

Thematic analysis has been criticized for lacking depth, fragmenting the phenomena being studied, being subjective and lacking transparency about the development of themes, which can result in difficulties when judging the rigor of the findings (Smith & Firth, 2011, p. 3). The framework approach is similar to the thematic

analysis as both emphasize data analysis transparency, and linkage between the stages of the analysis (Smith & Firth, 2011). The framework approach involves a series of interconnected stages that permits the researcher to move back and forth across the data until a coherent interpretation emerges (Smith & Firth, 2011). In turn, the constant refinement of themes may lead to the development of a conceptual framework, whereas thematic analysis typically does not explicitly generate theory (Smith & Firth, 2011). The framework approach is a good fit for the analysis of cross-sectional descriptive data enabling different aspects of the phenomena under investigation to be captured (Smith & Firth, 2011, p. 4). In the framework approach, the researchers' interpretations of participants' experiences are transparent, while the interconnected stages within the framework approach describe the processes that guide the systematic analysis of data from the development of descriptive to explanatory accounts (Smith & Firth, 2011, p. 4).

The framework method is not a solution for problematic issues commonly associated with qualitative data analysis, such as how to make analytic choices and make interpretive strategies visible and auditable (Gale et al., 2013). To properly interpret the matrix, and expedite the generation of descriptions, categories, explanations, and typologies, qualitative research skills are required (Gale et al., 2013). Reflexivity, rigor, and quality are issues that are requisite in the framework method, just as they are in other qualitative methods (Gale et al., 2013).

I used the software NVivo for data analysis. To perform a constant comparison analysis, as directed by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007), I (a) read the entire set of data, which led to a subset of the data; (b) chunked the data into smaller significant parts, (c)

labeled each chunk with a descriptive title or code, and (d) compared each new chunk of data with previous codes so that similar chunks were labeled with the same code. After all the data were coded, the codes were grouped by similarity, a theme was identified, and documented based on each grouping. Once the code tree was established, I continued to re-visit what should be included and what should be excluded when thinking about where each code should be applied or not.

Theme and concept mapping was demonstrated through the excerpt reviewing, additional coding/tagging, and exporting features of NVivo. Key themes were isolated and matched with the literature comprising of the conceptual framework (see Figure 5). I articulated a comprehensive description of the experience. Triangulation was used to build a rational explanation for the themes. This narrative was presented in the findings section of Chapter 5.

### Qualitative Analysis Process

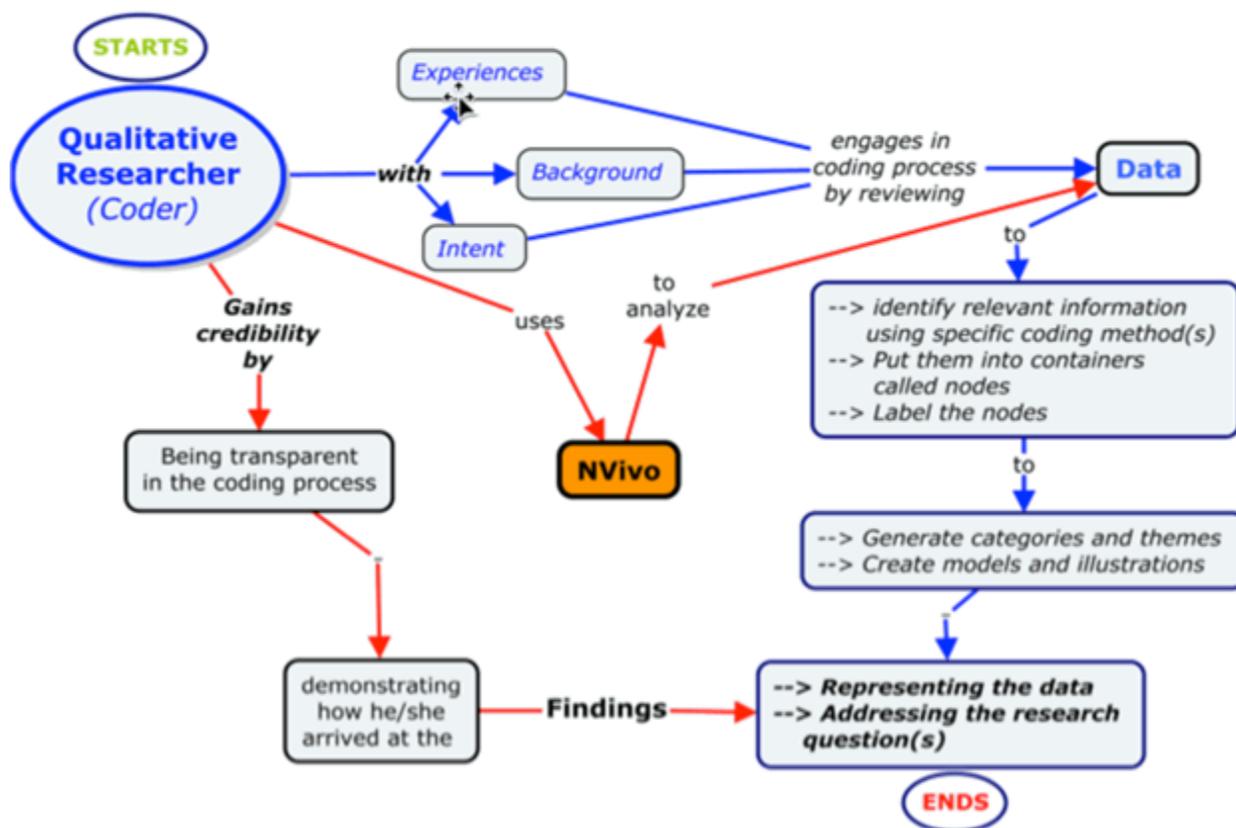


Figure 5. The qualitative analysis process. From, “*Perfecting the Art of Qualitative Coding*,” by Philip Adu, 2016, QSR International. Reprinted with permission (see Appendix F).

Yin (2003) provided the following four tenets of high-quality analysis. The analysis must: (a) attend to all the evidence, (b) address all major rival interpretations, (c) address the most significant aspect of the case study, and (d) utilize the researcher’s prior expert knowledge (Yin, 2003, p. 137). These four elements have been considered and built into the research study design and were used to guide the data analysis and ensure its quality.

## **Issues of Trustworthiness**

A central issue in qualitative research is trustworthiness, also known as credibility and dependability. Trustworthiness in qualitative research is determined by credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Establishing trustworthiness can include member checking, interviewer corroboration, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement, negative case analysis, audit-ability, confirmability, bracketing, and balance (Shenton, 2004). Elo et al. argued it is imperative to inspect the trustworthiness of every phase of the analysis process, including the preparation, organization, and reporting of results because together these phases ought to give the reader a clear indication of the overall trustworthiness of the study (2014).

### **Credibility**

Credibility is determined by strategies to check the accuracy of the findings. The question posed for credibility is how compatible are the findings with reality (Shenton, 2004). One type of strategy, Shenton explained, is a study's previously established research method and design would ensure credibility. My study used an established research method and design: a qualitative case study using a focus group and semistructured interviews. Another type of strategy for data analysis processes is to conduct research design methodological triangulation, meaning between different data collection methods, such as a questionnaire and observation (Denzin, 1978, Patton, 1999). My study's type of triangulation included data collected from the focus group, interviews, and historical records.

As discussed by Denzin (1978b), there are four valid reasons for using triangulation. One, triangulation is enriching to the outputs of different informal and formal instruments by explaining different aspects of an issue. Two, triangulation supports the discovery of countering hypothesis generation. Three, in turn, triangulation supports confirmation of hypotheses generated by another set of options. Four, triangulation helps in explanations, where one set of options sheds light on unexpected findings derived from another set of options. Triangulation helps minimize bias because relying on just one option can be perceived as bias. It is imperative the researcher address and provides resolve for any potential bias (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

There are several types of bias encountered in research, and triangulation can help with most of them (Denzin, 1978b). Measurement bias refers to the way data is collected. Triangulation allows you to combine individual and group research options to help reduce bias such as peer pressure on focus group participants (Denzin, 1978b, Patton, 1999). Sampling bias occurs when some of the population you are studying is omitted, omission bias, or you cover only some parts because it is more convenient, which is called inclusion bias (Denzin, 1978b, Patton, 1999). Triangulation combines the different strengths of these options to ensure sufficient coverage is obtained. Procedural bias occurs when participants are put under some pressure to provide information (Denzin, 1978b). Triangulation combines short engagements with longer engagements where participants have more time to give considered responses. Methodological triangulation using focus groups, semistructured interviews, and historically documented data was used to build a rational justification for the themes. Credibility is established by the strategy of

the researcher analysis of the data through a process that includes reflecting, sifting, exploring, judging its relevance and meaning and ultimately developing themes and essences that accurately depict the experience (Shenton, 2004). Another strategy involves a thick, or detailed, description of the phenomenon under examination will support credibility, as well the literature review of its previous research (Shenton, 2004). Purposive sampling, in this case, increased in-depth understanding by selecting information-rich experiences from participants who daily encounter being responsible for strategic planning to implement education reform plans to support vulnerable students (Palinkas et al., 2015).

More strategies include familiarity with the culture of the participants, establishing a researcher-organization-participant relationship helped ensure credibility; assuring participants of confidentiality and probing for honest and informative feedback helped credibility. Discrepancies or contradictions addressed in the final report and possible reasons for them contributed to credibility. Collaboration with my dissertation committee helped seek any flaws in the course of action, needed adaptations, or other changes, potential bias of the researcher, and more.

### **Transferability**

Findings of a qualitative project are specific to a small number of environments and individuals and can make it difficult to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions apply to other situations and populations (Shenton, 2004). Although each case may be unique, it is also an example of a broader group and, as a result, the prospect of transferability should not be immediately rejected (Shenton, 2004). A sufficient detailed

description of the phenomenon under investigation and a full description of all the contextual factors affecting the inquiry are provided in my study to allow readers to have a proper understanding of it. This description will enable readers to compare the instances of the phenomenon described in the research report with those that they have seen emerge in their situations as described by Shenton. I considered how the case study location compares with other similar environments within the region and state regarding the contextual data. This consideration allowed for transferability with sufficient disclosure.

### **Dependability**

Dependability implies that if the work were repeated, in the same context, with the same methods, and with the same participants, similar results would be obtained (Shenton, 2004). Overlapping methods of the focus group and individual interviews in my study helped establish dependability. For qualitative research, my study may be repeated using its method and design but may produce different results depending on the context of a new study's situation as described by Shenton. Dependability of my study was ensured with the audit trail, which involved maintaining and preserving all transcripts, notes, and audio recordings. Authenticity also ensured dependability. Authenticity indicates the reporting of participants' experiences is completed in a way that sustains respect for the context of the data while presenting all perspectives similarly so that the reader can arrive at an impartial decision (Shenton, 2004). Reflective appraisal, as described by Shenton, which involved evaluating the effectiveness of the process of inquiry undertaken, also contributed to the study's dependability.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is concerned with the objectivity of the findings (Shenton, 2004). The researcher must analytically show that the work's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, and not characteristics and preferences of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). I established confirmability in my study by linking the data to their sources, as demonstrated in tables and quotes (see Tables 10-13). Reflexivity, where I examined myself as the researcher, the inherent biases, if any, and systematically considering the context of knowledge construction at every step of the research process, and examining the research relationship, helped determine confirmability. I set aside my potential prejudices, biases, and experiences. This is called bracketing (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Methodological triangulation of data collected from the focus group, interviews, and the Plan 2020 progress document, and other plan documents, further determined confirmability. The audit trail, which involved maintaining and preserving all transcripts, notes, and audio recordings was demonstrated in a data-oriented diagram, showing how the data, eventually leading to the formation of recommendations, was gathered and processed during the study. Finally, the data analysis portion of this report was scrutinized and validated by the researcher's dissertation committee.

**Ethical Procedures**

For this study, I have followed the IRB guidelines for research ethics. I prepared all permission forms, provided by the IRB, and obtain pilot study approval, which was conducted to test the interview guide questions' clarity and usefulness to obtain needed

feedback to answer the research question. I prepared the participation consent form (see Appendix D) for the study. I completed the IRB research ethics planning worksheet concerning the ethics of this study. Form C-Ethics questions included participant recruitment, recruitment materials, and processes. The questions also included participant refusal or early withdrawal from the study.

The participation request notice, or consent notice, explained my study, assured confidentiality, and addressed what activities proceeded in the study (see Appendix D). The notice included the participants' permission to participate. I have addressed the ethical treatment of all data concerning confidentiality, data storage, access to data limitations, and when the data will be destroyed. All data on the computer, disc, drive, or software is password protected during the research project and maintained in a locked container for 5 years after the research study concludes. After five years, the data will be deleted from any internal software, files, and drives. Any external device containing the data will be destroyed. I did not use incentives other than the benefits of sharing their personal experiences and knowledge to the study's research agenda for a positive social change.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I reviewed the description of the research design, as a descriptive single case study, the population, sample, and sampling strategy for the study. I reviewed the approaches and procedures for data collection, storing, analysis, and integrity. Measures to protect participants' rights, anonymity, and confidentiality have been detailed in this chapter. The instruments and methods used for data collection, including

their validity and reliability have been addressed in this chapter. The instruments to be used for data collection were two types of interviews: a focus group and semistructured individual interviews. The interview questions were tested in a pilot study to check for instrument question clarity and understanding.

I addressed the role of the researcher, the research questions, and how the study's design will answer the research questions. I disclosed personal bias and how excluded any bias from the study. I described how case studies provide valuable information about how things/persons act, perform, happen, and result. Case studies allow researchers to investigate a topic more thoroughly versus dealing with a large number of research participants (McLeod, 2008).

Detailed protocols for focus groups and semistructured interviews were outlined in this chapter. Data analysis protocol and processing through NVivo were detailed in this chapter. Lastly, the issues of trustworthiness and research ethics were described in this chapter. Chapter 4 includes results from the data collection and analysis. The pilot study was reviewed in Chapter 4. Furthermore, the study's research setting and the evidence of trustworthiness were reviewed in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how administrators in Alabama schools develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students. The specific problem I addressed was that system administrators in Alabama schools might not have contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students. Myriad K-12 students experience detrimental academic and social consequences due to ineffective LM methods deployed in typical school environments. After 4 years of full implementation of Plan 2020, Alabama schools have continued to fall short of most, if not all, targets, and some strategies have not been measured at all (Alabama Board of Education, 2016b). I designed this study to explore administrators' visions of their dream education systems through appreciative inquiry, and triangulated interview and focus group data with historical documentation of the previous plan's progress report. This triangulation helped to show if the administrators' visions, especially regarding contextual best practice development and application, if any, were actively applied and successful, or if the contextual best practices, if any, were not successful. I designed the study, not only to explore how administrators develop and implement best practices, but also, to explore how vulnerable students are brought from the point of federal guidelines assigned to the states, to the performance success of the vulnerable student by those same best practices. I addressed one general research question to fill the gap in research on successfully helping vulnerable students through learning hurdles while avoiding negative labels and loss of motivation. I developed the following research question to

guide this study: How do Alabama school administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students?

This study's conceptual framework included appreciative inquiry theory, collaboration theory, and organizational learning theory. This study included a pilot test of the interview guide questions. The interview guide questions were designed for the participants to keep a positive focus and describe an educational system they define as their *dream system*. In this chapter, I discuss the pilot study, the research setting, participant demographics, participant selection and recruitment, data collection procedures, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, study results, and the ways data addressed the research question. This chapter concluded with the transition to Chapter 5.

### **Pilot Study**

Before beginning the study, with IRB approval I reviewed the research question and interview questions with industry experts, each of whom had experience with the topic of the study. The pilot study participants were employed by the Alabama State Department of Education. One was a special education expert (department head), and one was a district superintendent. I conducted this pilot study in July 2017 to ensure that the interview questions were clear and understandable, and obtained applicable responses from the study participants. For the pilot study, I conducted semistructured interviews using Zoom, an internet-based video conferencing platform. The interviews were audio recorded with cloud recording in Zoom, and I took hand-written notes as the participants gave their responses. Each interview last approximately 25 minutes. Both participants had direct experience with implementation of plans that were developed to support

vulnerable students. Neither pilot study participant had any recommendations for changes in the research interview guide questions. Both participants understood the research question and the interview questions, and both engaged promptly with their answers to the interview questions. Their answers were, for the most part, detailed and produced the data sought. Some answers led me to ask additional probing questions to learn more about an element in their answers, which led to learning more about the item to discuss in the study.

### **Research Setting**

The research setting for this study was Zoom, a virtual web-conferencing platform. The focus group and the semistructured interviews were conducted through the Zoom virtual conference rooms and recorded with the software's cloud recording tool. I took handwritten notes as participants gave their responses. I conducted the sessions from my home while the participants were at their office or home. I did not encounter any technical or other problems during data collection. The participants were comfortable with the virtual web-conferencing platform and did not encounter any problems. The focus group session was conducted on August 9, 2017 and was 45 minutes in duration. Each semistructured interview session was between 20 and 30 minutes in duration. There were three participants in the focus group and it thus lasted a little longer to complete versus individuals in the 12 semistructured individual interviews I conducted. I had planned to have at least five participants in the focus group, but the schedules for the participants did not allow many opportunities for the participants to be available at the same time.

The participants had encountered several recent changes prior to the study including (a) the reform initiative change that went into effect August 2017; (b) a sudden performance review of the new state superintendent, which led to his reluctant resignation; and (c) the quick change back to the previous reform initiative. These changes could have led to the slow recruitment of the participants. Those who agreed to participate, however, followed the appreciative inquiry facilitation masterfully by keeping a positive focus, as is the intent of appreciative inquiry, to describe their dream education system and answering the interview questions, whether they were in a focus group or an individual semistructured interview.

### **Demographics**

I used purposive sampling, which is a type of nonprobability sampling technique where the characteristics of the subjects lead to their selection (Grinnell, 2009; Palinkas et al., 2015). The participants recruited for the study were employed by the Alabama State Department of Education system in an administrator role. When reviewing literature to determine to appropriate sample size, I found that the most common sample sizes were 20 and 30 in Ph.D. qualitative studies (Mason, 2010). The number of participants should be small enough for transcription management, but should accurately represent the population (Marshall et al., 2015; Mason, 2010; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). I reached data saturation with 15 participants, given their status as subject matter experts 3

Table 9 shows the demographics of the participants. I initially planned to include only school system superintendents, but because of slow recruitment I also included others in administrator roles including principals, assistant principals, and department

heads. I used the sample size of 15 participants, established data saturation with 10 participants, and answered the research question. Saturation is further detailed in the next section.

Table 9

*Demographic Composition of the Study*

Pseudonym	Occupation	Focus Group	Semistructured Interviews
FGS1	Superintendent	X	
FGS2	Superintendent	X	
FGS3	Superintendent	X	
SSI1	Superintendent		X
SSI2	Superintendent		X
SSI3	Superintendent		X
SSI4	Superintendent		X
SSI5	Superintendent		X
SSI6	Superintendent		X
SSI7	Superintendent		X
SSI8	Superintendent		X
ASI1	Principal		X
ASI2	Assistant principal		X
ASI3	Department head		X
ASI4	Department head		X

Table 9 includes participants' demographic information. Age, gender, and years of experience were not addressed because the position of each participant was the only criterion required. These high-profile positions listed in the table are considered by the industry and local and state officials to be those of highly qualified subject matter experts who can demonstrate the knowledge and skills needed to strategize and implement best practices to support vulnerable students.

### **Data Collection**

I sent a total of 105 invitations to candidates from the participant pool, in increments of about 25. I chose to send invitations incrementally because of the timing of the school year. The invitations began just before the beginning of the new 2017-18 school year as many changes in the state's system were being implemented and possible new leadership for the state was being considered. All invitations were sent by the end of the 2017-18 school year's first 6 weeks, between August and September. I sent two follow-up invitations to the pool of participants. I reached out twice to one who agreed to participate but never followed-up by sending a consent form and interview appointment choice, to no avail. In total, I recruited 15 participants.

I conducted a focus group with three participants. The focus group lasted 45 minutes. I then interviewed 12 participants, with each interview lasting between 20-30 minutes. All interviews and the focus group were conducted through Zoom web-conferencing. There were no variations in data collection from that described in Chapter 3 regarding my use of a focus group, semistructured interviews, and review of the Plan 2020 progress report.

For recruitment, I searched Alabama's state board of education's website for the list of administrators and their contact information. I obtained the emails of administrators and sent invitations through my student email (see Appendix G). Once I received a positive participation response, I forwarded the consent forms to the participants to sign, and requested that they choose their preferred method of participation and the time and day of their session. Once I received the signed consent forms, I scheduled the focus group/interview according to the participants' preferred method and time/day. I set up the meeting in Zoom and forwarded participants the information about how to connect to the meeting. The focus group and interviews were processed through the Zoom web-conferencing platform. Some sessions were held in the morning and some in the late afternoon. The data were recorded in a cloud file on Zoom.

At the beginning of the focus group and each of the semistructured interviews, I introduced myself, discussed the purpose of my study, assured confidentiality, informed participants that I would conduct member-checking to ensure correct interpretation and accuracy of their input, and asked if they had any questions. Prior to ending the sessions, I again asked if they had any questions, and if there was anything they wanted to add. Saturation for most interview questions was met with the focus group and three interviews, meaning that after the focus group and three interviews there was no new data obtained regarding those interview questions. Four interviews met saturation for the remaining interview questions, meaning that after four more interviews, no new data was obtained for the remaining interview questions. In all, saturation was met with 10

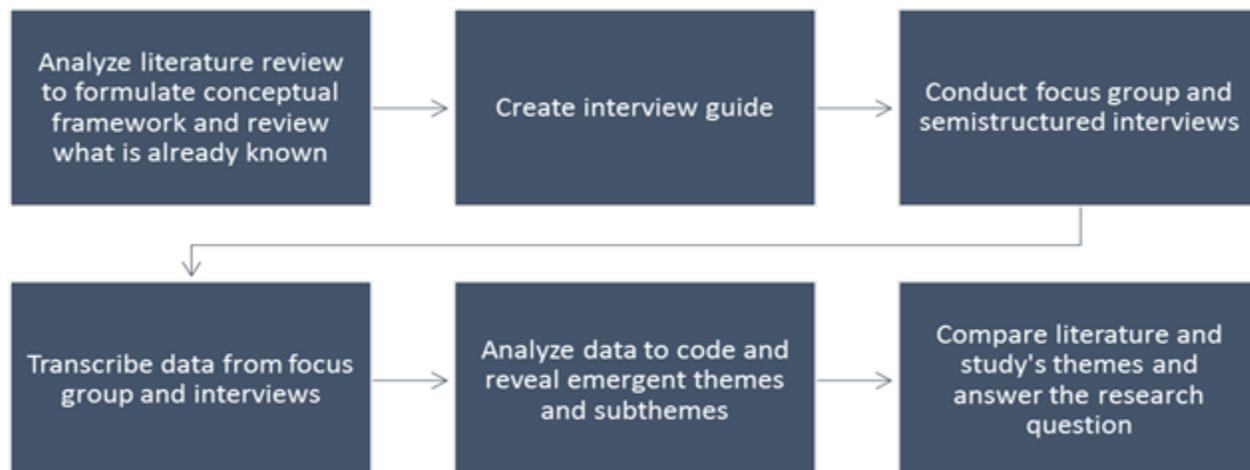
participants. I chose to include all data collected to further support the validity and trustworthiness of the results.

I used the interview guide as the data collection instrument. The interview guide included six questions (see Appendix A and Appendix B). I recorded each session and transcribed the interviews/focus group through Transcribe.com. This software allowed me to download the cloud-recorded session. The software allowed for different settings for playing, repeating, speed, skipping, and so forth. I set the software to play 2-3 seconds at a time, while I typed onto the designated section of the software. I set the software to auto rewind a second, then begin again, further playing for transcription. Transcriptions varied in length, depending on how much data was collected for each interview question. The transcriptions ranged from two to four single-spaced pages. Once my transcriptions were complete, I forwarded them to the corresponding participant for member-checking. Each participant replied with affirmative approval. The next process involved data analysis of the collected data.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), qualitative data analysis is "working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others" (p. 145). As with many qualitative researchers, I used inductive analysis of data, meaning that the critical themes emerged out of the data (Patton, 1999). Qualitative analysis involved placing the raw data into logical, meaningful categories to examine them holistically, and to find a way to communicate this interpretation (Patton,

1999) (see Figure 6 for the map of my process).



*Figure 6.* Qualitative analysis process of my study.

Once I had accurate transcriptions, I uploaded them into the NVivo data analysis software. I drew elements of the transcriptions for nodes, coding, themes, patterns, and charting, using open coding, and the thematic model approach with the NVivo tools, as discussed in Chapter 3. Open coding is a type of line by line coding of the data to develop descriptive themes and assign category titles (Maxwell, 2013). Open-coding involves breaking down the data into first level concepts, or master headings, and second-level categories, or subheadings (Maxwell, 2013). This type of coding is demonstrated in the Tables 11-13 of this chapter.

With the use of appreciative inquiry, to focus on the positive, what works, and the dream envisioned by the participants, the resulting themes of the data collected helped inform the topic or inquiry regarding ‘what contextual best practices might be used for

the organization's strategic plan.' The appreciative inquiry positive focus led to rich data regarding the description of the dream system. The data collected were analyzed, using NVivo, in the following manner (a) created associated codes/nodes for each interview guide question, (b) within each transcript, drew keywords or phrases within each interview question answer and assigned to appropriate node; (c) reviewed each node, seeing the keywords or phrases listed, and outlined emerging themes; (d) created a word cloud, (e) calculated how many participants mentioned the themes, (f) created tables to show the number of participants mentioning the particular themes, and (g) created a table with the three main themes and subthemes.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

Credibility was established by the strategy of analysis of the data through a process that includes reflecting, sifting, exploring, judging its relevance and meaning, and ultimately developing themes and proving participant quotes that accurately depict the experience. The question posed for credibility is how compatible are the findings with reality (Shenton, 2004). One type of strategy, Shenton explained, is a study's previously established research method and design would ensure credibility. My study's qualitative single case study is an established method and design. Another type of strategy for data analysis processes is to conduct research design methodological triangulation, meaning between different data collection methods, such as a questionnaire and observation (Denzin, 1978, Patton, 1999). This strategy was used in my data analysis processes with data collected from a focus group, semistructured interviews, and the Plan 2020 progress

report. Purposive sampling increased in-depth understanding by obtaining information-rich experiences from participants who were responsible for strategic planning to implement education reform plans to support vulnerable students.

I constructed several techniques, including accurate, word-for-word transcription and coding of key concepts that I sent back to participants for member-checking. I carefully bracketed my background and documented the process, including the point of data saturation. There were no deviations between the anticipated credibility and the final credibility of the study.

### **Transferability**

Findings of a qualitative project are specific to a small number of environments and individuals and can make it difficult to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions apply to other situations and populations (Shenton, 2004). Sufficient detailed description of the phenomenon under investigation and a full narrative of all the contextual factors affecting the inquiry have been provided to allow readers to have a proper understanding of it. This description enables readers to compare the instances of the phenomenon described in this study with those they have seen emerge in their situations. I have considered how the case study location compared with other similar environments within the region and state regarding the contextual data. This consideration allowed for transferability with sufficient disclosure.

### **Dependability**

Dependability implies that if the work were repeated, in the same context, with the same methods, and with the same participants, similar results would be obtained

(Shenton, 2004). Overlapping methods of the focus group, semistructured interviews, and the Plan 2020 progress report review in this study established dependability. For qualitative research, this study may be repeated using its method and design but may produce different results depending on the context of a new study's situation, as noted by Shenton (2004). Dependability in this study was ensured with the audit trail, which involved maintaining and preservation of all transcripts, notes, audiotapes, and more. Authenticity, which indicated the reporting of participants' experiences, was completed in this study in a way that sustained respect for the context of the data, while the presentation of all perspectives was similar so that the reader could arrive at an impartial decision, ensured dependability. Reflective appraisal of the effectiveness of the process of inquiry undertaken in this study contributed to the study's dependability.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is concerned with the objectivity of the findings (Shenton, 2004). I have analytically shown that the work's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the participants, and not my characteristics and preferences. Confirmability was also determined by linking the data to their sources (see Tables 10-13). Reflexivity, the process of examining both oneself as a researcher and the research relationship, helped determine confirmability. I bracketed or set aside my potential prejudices, biases, and experiences. Methodological triangulation of data collected from the focus group, semistructured interviews, and the Plan 2020 progress report has further determined confirmability of this study. The audit trail, which involved maintaining and preserving all transcripts, notes, audiotapes, and more has been demonstrated in a data-oriented

diagram, showing how the data, eventually leading to the formation of recommendations, was gathered and processed during this study (see Figure 6 above).

### **Study Results**

The participants' responses to the interview guide questions were essential in answering the overarching research question: How do Alabama school administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students? Open-coding, thematic analysis, and NVivo software were used to identify prevalent themes among the participants. Table 10 illustrates the demographic results of responses from the 15 participants and demonstrates how the participants answered the interview questions. The map provides the research question, interview questions, themes and subthemes, and quotes that illustrate the themes that emerged from the analysis of the transcripts.

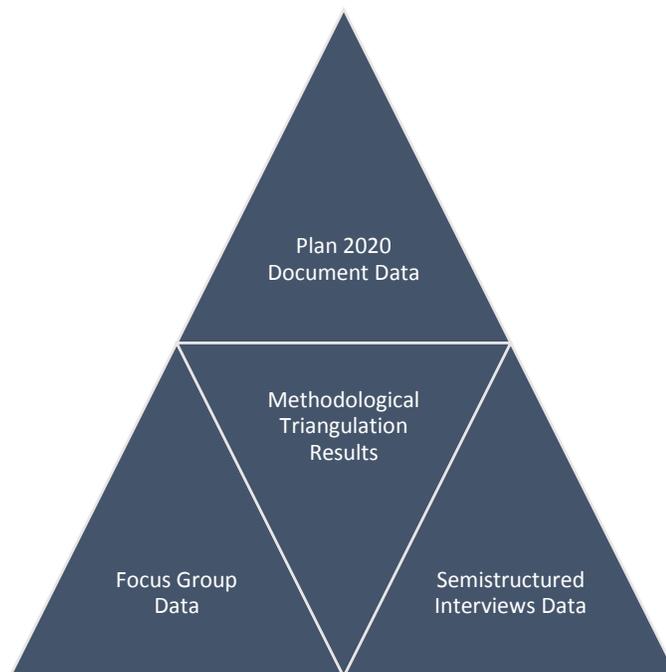
Table 10

*Results Map of the Study*

Research Question	Interview Questions	Themes and Subthemes	Quotes
How do Alabama school administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students?	1, 2, 3, 6	Positive environment: Happy teachers and students; selfless teachers and other personnel; learning- centered; development of the whole child	Provided
	1, 2, 3, 4, 6	Learning environment: selfless attitude of teachers; highest learning growth environment; project-based learning; developing kids; and instills the love of learning	Provided
	4, 5	Best practices: collaborative learning; data analyzation; small group instruction; and accelerated programs	Provided
	1, 2, 4, 5, 6	Whole child development: success in college and career; honorable character; soft skills, collaborative skills; and life- sustaining skills	Provided

Table 10 shows how the interview questions were intended to address the research question and shows the emergent themes and sub-themes creation.

Methodological triangulation with the focus group, semistructured interviews, and the Plan 2020 Progress report enhanced the validity of the data collected to address the research question (see Figure 7).



*Figure 7.* Methodological triangulation for the study.

Methodological triangulation involves using more than one quantitative or qualitative data sources or methods in a single of research (Jack & Raturi, 2006). I chose this type of triangulation to achieve (a) completeness, by using methods with complementary strengths and nonoverlapping weaknesses; (b) contingency, by paying attention to divergent inferences, inference, operational and population transferability, and common error types; and (c) confirmation, consistency, and interpretive agreement by using convergent, complementary, and meta inference (Jack & Raturi, 2006, pp. 349-350).

Triangulation allows the researcher to step back and reflect on the general findings to generate higher level theories or frameworks.

Considering the above objectives, I chose to include a focus group, semistructured interviews, and the Plan 2020 progress report for this study's methodological triangulation components. NVivo was used to analyze the data collected from the focus group and the semistructured interviews and to create tables. The analyzed data were considered and compared with the progress report statistics for the Plan 2020. The following sections describe the themes identified, along with examples from the participants in this study.

### **Study Results from the Focus Group Session**

The focus group consisted of three state superintendents. The focus group session was conducted through the Zoom web-conferencing platform and lasted 45 minutes. Each superintendent participant in the focus group was labeled with an SFG (superintendent focus group) and corresponding number. The participants in this group are labeled SFG1, SFG2, and SFG3. During the focus group, I was able to share my screen with the participants that showed the interview guide questions and purpose of the study summary. I read each question to the group, and the participants were able to see the questions while they discussed their answers. The data from the focus group were recorded onto the Zoom cloud, and I took handwritten notes. Table 11 demonstrates the codes and number of times the words and phrases were mentioned to identify these emerging themes from each of the superintendents in the focus group.

Table 11

*Codes/Nodes for Focus Group Superintendent Participants' Response*

Codes/Nodes	Number of times word, similar words, or phrases were in responses from the participants of individuals in the focus group
Positive/Engaging/Mobile Environment	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
State of the Art Resources	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Happy teachers and students	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
A true learning environment	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Innovative with no boundaries	SFG1, SFG3
Balanced teacher-student ratio	SFG2, SFG3
Whole student development	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Teamwork	SFG1, SFG3
Fosters student growth	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Plenty of teachers	SFG2, SFG3
Small Group Instruction	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Collaboration students/teachers	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Project-based learning	SFG1, SFG3
Selfless attitude among teachers working for students	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Instills the love of learning in kids	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Highest learning growth centered environment	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Data meetings and data analyzation	SFG2, SFG3
Collaborative learning	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Blended learning	SFG3
Individual Instruction	SFG2, SFG3
Rigorous accelerated programs	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Culture enhancement	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Relationship building	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Diverse learning/teaching styles	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Resources for technology/personnel	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Students prepared for the future	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Students thriving in college/career	
Students become life-long learners	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3
Students prepared for the future	SFG1, SFG2, SFG3

Table 11 shows how the participants responded to the questions and codes assigned to the responses. The popular emergent themes are discussed below. Participant quotes are provided to show examples of the data collected.

### **Superintendents Focus Group Emergent Theme One: Positive/Engaging/Mobile Environment**

The first emergent theme, a positive, engaging, and mobile environment was identified through participant responses to Question 1, 2, and 3. This environment included students who are not isolated solely in the classroom chairs but can get up and move around, take projects outside, work from home, and more. Further outlined were (a) educators who are there for the students due to their passion for the students and not because they must be there, (b) happy teachers and students (c) a learning-centered environment, and (d) all educators being on the same page for the betterment of the student were included data in this theme.

Examples of the data collected from the focus group participants regarding the characteristics of the system's environment include:

- SFG3: "My dream education system is a place in which it is learning centered. My dream education system is centered on 'are your kids learning,' and all the adjustments are made based on 'are the kids learning.' I would like to have all the resources that go along with that and serve all the kids to meet all learning."

- SFG1: “My dream education system would be one of innovation.” “I would picture a room with no walls where you have different students working on different things at their own pace.”
- SFG2: “I think for the dream, for me as we start the school year, is how we can reach the needs of every student. Moreover, the dream would be that we know what the kids’ needs are and we can target and reach each one of those children's individual needs.”
- SFG2: “It's a teamwork approach, a team-centered approach and that we are all working on the same team and we are all working for similar goals, we are all working in the same direction, and the target is that we are meeting the needs of our students.”
- SFG1: “Teachers would be servant leaders, happy, joyous; the kids would also be happy, joyous, enjoying what they did, on both sides, enjoying the learning, teachers being facilitators as well as self-learners, everyone is learning.”
- SFG3: “There are people who are called to teach, and there are people who are employed to teach. So, I would like to have people who feel it is their life’s calling to help people to learn to think and help people to learn. Age doesn’t matter. I think having varied strata of age, race, and gender is a necessity.”

- SFG2: “I think it is the non-physical. I think it is that everybody, that everyone would come into the system with a selfless attitude working towards students. Towards the goals or needs of the students.”
- SFG3: “The greatest feature that the teacher understands that it is a learning university. Even though it’s a school -it’s a pre-K, well I think it should be Pre-K to 12, or really Pre-K to 13. But the greatest feature is that we all understand that we are there to help the learner. It is an environment of the learner learning.”
- SFG2: “I think about safety, ease of travel, efficiency as far as time, state of the art engaging atmospheres environments up to date so students are able to use things such as Crewtech so they can practice where they would be working at in a new position once they leave high school; so that we have the state of the art industry based resources that students can use in a state of the art first class building, because normally, not everybody, but when students leave lots of times they are going to be faced with that so want them to have the best. I think it is important that to the extent possible that we have the latest and greatest buildings and technology.”
- SFG3: “But the greatest feature is that we all understand that we are there to help the learner. It is an environment of the learner learning.”

### **Superintendents Focus Group Emergent Theme Two: Whole Child Development**

The second emergent theme, whole child development, was identified through participant responses to Question 2 and 6. The whole child development theme included

(a) success in college and career, (b) honorable character, (c) soft (people) skills, (d) problem-solving skills without negative actions, and (e) life-sustaining and propelling skills are learned and carried out throughout students' lifetime.

Examples of the data collected from the focus group participants regarding developing the whole child include:

- SFG3: "We have a super-rich arts curriculum which I think helps several of our kids. I think we have a super-rich career tech and I think that helps some."
- SFG2: "We need social workers, and that is a huge expense. We have zero in our district, and we probably need four or five. We have four schools, and probably at least need four social workers in our district. I think about resources; the financial piece would be that if we know that it is good for students and we know that it is needed that we would have the resources available to make that happen."
- SFG3: "The outcomes are the issue. Our kids are the most important reason for being there, but learning outcomes are the issue. That is why I am pre-k. I think we are asking kids to know now. Some of the kids are from unstable homes, they really need that Pre-K piece, and I really believe we should be putting kids in career or college opportunities by grade 13."
- SFG3: "I'm big on one to one learning, but I am also big on blended learning (regarding infrastructure). I believe that the brick and mortar school has its place, but it is no longer the single mode. I think kids should have the WIFI ability at home, one to one devices, and do some online learning as long as it

is structured where they can come back to the school and get some face to face help.”

- SFG3: “We are developing the whole child. They come out ready to go to work, college, that we've taught them how to be honorable men and women character and that they have the people skills, or soft skills, to do that. To be successful in college or career.”
- SFG3: “Taxpayers don't pay tax money to have kids get diplomas. Taxpayers pay money so we can put kids in careers, career pathways, and strengthen our economy and our country. So, we're truly about developing kids and learning itself. Diplomas are the least a kid should get when they finish.”

### **Superintendents Focus Group Emergent Theme Three: Best Practices**

The third emergent theme, best practices, was identified through participant responses to Question 4 and 5. The third common theme that emerged, best practices, included (a) collaborative learning, (b) data analyzation, (c) small group instruction, and (d) accelerated programs.

Examples of the data collected from the focus group participants regarding the best practices of the system include:

- SFG3: “I think small group instruction is absolutely a best practice. The higher the grade level we can take them, the better off we would be. I think if you are doing some serious systematic approach to data analyzation and a serious systematic approach to looking at curriculum, what is being taught, and instructional piece and how it's taught, that is the key.”

- SFG1: “Project-based learning is one of the best practices.”
- SFG2: “Really working on culture and building relationships is a best practice.”
- SFG2: “I think data meetings are actually following the tracking data and having data meetings is a best practice. The data meetings are one of the things I am seeing that ... everybody wants to win - everybody has some nature to win, and sometimes in education we don't keep score - we don't have a win- teachers never have a chance to win, and conversely, they don't know if they are losing, so the data meetings to keep track, the students and to make sure they are moving and show the teachers - maybe keeping score is not the best way to look at that. Task-oriented, make sure that we are accomplishing something, so when we have data meetings and keep track of the students, the teachers know whether they are being effective and whether they are reaching the students, that is why I think data is so important.”
- SFG3: “I’m big on one to one learning, but I am also big on blended learning (regarding infrastructure). I believe that the brick and mortar school has its place, but it is no longer the single mode.”
- SFG2: “We have district-wide level data meetings, school level meetings, each school is somewhat different. As a system (LMS), we are using Scantron for K-12.”
- SFG3: “I think data analyzation and a systematic way to approach data analyzation and reteaching is a best practice.” We use a system called Global

Scholar, Scantron... our LMS though is called Canvas. I'm not a big fan of Canvas as my teachers are. Before that we used Edmodo. But our data is housed in Scantron/Global Scholar. It is a pretty great program as far as data storage goes.”

I was informed by one participant that many best practices used for the development and implementation of strategical plans are derived from a service contracted to produce research-based contextual best practices for such plans. This company is A+ Alabama's Best Practices Center. According to the participant “the company contracts themselves out to work with teachers, etc., is a think tank, bringing current best practices to the schools. This group had been very involved in Alabama Ascending (the new plan which began this school year 2017-18).” -SFG2

### **Study Results from the Superintendent Semistructured Interviews**

The state superintendents' semistructured interviews consisted of eight superintendents with each session lasting between 20-30 minutes. The semistructured interviews were conducted through the Zoom web-conferencing platform. Each superintendent is labeled with an SSI (superintendent semistructured interview) and a corresponding number. The participants in this group are labeled SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, and SSI8. During the interviews, I was able to share my screen with the participants that showed the interview guide questions and purpose of the study summary. I read each question to the participant, and the participants were able to see the questions while they discussed their answers. The data from the semistructured interviews were recorded onto the Zoom cloud, and I took handwritten notes. Table 12

demonstrates the codes and number of times the words and phrases were mentioned to identify these emerging themes from each of the superintendents in the semistructured interviews.

Table 12

*Codes/Nodes for Superintendents Responses in Semistructured Interviews*

Codes/Nodes	Number of times word, similar words, or phrases were in responses from the participants of individuals in the focus group
Positive/Engaging/Mobile Environment	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
State of the Art Resources	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Happy teachers and students	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
A true learning environment	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Innovative with no boundaries	SSI1, SSI3, SSI4, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Balanced teacher-student ratio	SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI8
Whole student development	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Teamwork	SSI1, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Fosters student growth	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Plenty of teachers	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Small Group Instruction	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Collaboration students/teachers	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI5, SSI8
Project-based learning	SSI1, SSI3, SSI7
Selfless attitude among teachers working for students	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Instills the love of learning in kids	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI7, SSI8
Highest learning growth centered environment	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Data meetings and data analyzation	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Collaborative learning	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Blended learning	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Individual Instruction	SSI1, SSI3, SSI4, SSI6, SSI8
Rigorous accelerated programs	SSI2, SSI3
Culture enhancement	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI6, SSI8
Relationship building	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Diverse learning/teaching styles	SSI1, SSI6
Resources for technology/personnel	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI6, SSI8

(table continues)

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Accelerated programs	SSI1, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Students prepared for the future	SSI1, SSI3, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7
Students thriving in college/career	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Students become life-long learners	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8
Positive reputation for student success	SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8

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Table 12 shows how the participants responded to the questions and the codes assigned to the responses. The popular emergent themes are discussed below. Participant quotes are provided to show examples of the data collected.

### **Superintendents Semistructured Interviews Emergent Theme One:**

#### **Positive/Engaging/Mobile Environment**

The first emergent theme, a positive, engaging, and mobile environment was identified through participant responses to Question 1, 2, and 3. An environment which is positive, engaging, and mobile in several ways was a consistent theme among the superintendents in the semistructured interviews. Some data included in this theme included open, well-lit classroom, and rooms that are colorful and welcoming. Some data included in this theme mentioned more hands-on learning and positive reinforcements.

Below are a few quote examples.

- SSI1: “Non-industrial settings, one-on-one time with each student, plenty of physical movement throughout the day. More than one teacher/adult per classroom setting.”
- SSI1: “Getting kids to enjoy learning. Most kids don't do well when having to sit and listen to someone bark at them all day. Especially when in a crowded, poorly lit, ventilated and arranged room. Kids are tactile, and love getting

their hands into things, moving around and touching stuff. And many have questions, they just hate speaking out in class. Many also need more individual help to grasp an idea or problem.”

- SSI3: “Bigger spaces, more sunlight. Windows that open so breezes can come in on good days. Starting the class with a quick song, yoga stretch, or other group activity. Smiles. Greet each other. Encouragement. Not "do as I say" but "let's do this" - putting teachers in the real role of guiding, not bossing.”
- SSI3: “Well funded, smaller classrooms or two teachers per 15 students.”
- SSI5: “Welcoming rooms, kind administration, equal treatment for all students, never embarrass the students.”
- SSI5: “A more adapting learning environment.”
- SS8: “Listening to everyone and ensuring that bullying doesn't happen.”
- SSI8: “Using all the learning styles and making it a safe environment for everyone.”

### **Superintendents Semistructured Interviews Emergent Theme Two: Whole Child Development**

The second emergent theme, whole child development, was identified through participant responses to Question 2 and 6. The following quotes outline many of the common responses to the questions whole child development.

- SSI2: “High-level education standards, repeated disruptive students removed, and educators have more time to instruct instead of an abundance of busy paperwork.”

- SSI3: “More time or staff to help individuals who need it.”
- SSI6: “The most number of children will be helped by any system based off freedom of choice, employment, and involvement. That is the outcome I want; the most children helped the most efficiently.”
- SSI8: “Kids enjoying learning.”
- SSI7: “Happier kids, parents, teachers, administration. Better grades. Better thinkers, doers, and motivated students.”
- SSI6: “Well we can know by test scores raising, teachers’ wages raising, enrollment raising, demographics shifting, bad schools will be shut down or replaced, and good schools will thrive. There are more specific ways to know, but in general, it is word of mouth and attitude that will give you a good idea of how the schools are developing the whole child.”

### **Superintendents Semistructured Interviews Emergent Theme Three: Best Practices**

The third emergent theme, best practices, was identified through participant responses to Question 4 and 5. The following quotes outline many of the common responses to the questions regarding best practices of the dream system.

- SSI2: “Diversity of a group of people making decisions regarding the different educational rules and standards is the key; and parent and community involvement.”
- SSI3: “Small group instruction is a best practice. Many students need that small group environment.”

- SSI5: “Collaborative learning and collaborative meetings among educators is important as a best practice.”
- SSI6: “Having more teachers and more time for instruction and trial and error is a good best practice.”
- SSI8: “Blended learning, state of the art resources to accommodate the implementation of strategies to teach and help students learn is indeed a best practice.”

### **Study Results from the Administrators Semistructured Interviews**

Each participant in this group was an administrator and labeled with an A and a corresponding number. The participants in this group were labeled ASI1, ASI2, ASI3, ASI4. During the interviews, I shared my screen with the participants that showed the interview guide questions and purpose of the study summary on the Zoom web-conferencing platform. I read each question to the participant, and the participants were able to see the questions while they discussed their answers. The data from the semistructured interviews were recorded onto the Zoom cloud, and I took handwritten notes. Table 13 demonstrates the codes and number of times the words and phrases were mentioned to identify these emerging themes from each of the administrators in semistructured interviews.

Table 13

*Codes/Nodes for Administrators Responses in Semistructured Interviews*

Codes/Nodes	Number of times word, similar words, or phrases were in responses from the participants of individuals in the focus group
Positive/Engaging/Mobile Environment	ASI1, ASI2, ASI3, ASI4
State of the Art Resources	ASI1, ASI2, ASI3, ASI4
Happy teachers/Happy students	ASI1
A true learning environment	ASI1, ASI2, ASI3, ASI4
Innovative with no boundaries	ASI3
Balanced teacher-student ratio	ASI1, ASI2, ASI3, ASI4
Whole student development	ASI1
Fosters student growth	ASI1, ASI2, ASI3, ASI4
Plenty of teachers	ASI1, ASI2, ASI3
Data meetings and data analyzation	ASI1, ASI2, ASI3, ASI4
Blended learning	ASI1, ASI3, ASI4
Rigorous accelerated programs	ASI1, ASI2, ASI3, ASI4
Diverse learning/teaching styles	ASI1, ASI2, ASI3, ASI4
Resources for technology/personnel	ASI1, ASI2, ASI3, ASI4
Students prepared for the future	ASI1, ASI2, ASI3, ASI4
Students thriving in college/career	
Small group instruction	ASI1, ASI2, ASI3, ASI4
Collaboration among students and teachers	ASI1, ASI3
Selfless attitude among teachers working for students	ASI1, ASI2, ASI3, ASI4
Instills love of learning	ASI3
Highest learning growth centered environment	ASI1, ASI2
Project-based learning	ASI2
Collaborative learning	ASI1, ASI3, ASI4
Individual instruction	ASI1, ASI2, ASI3, ASI4
Culture enhancement	ASI1, ASI3, ASI4
Students become lifelong learners	ASI2
Positive reputation for student success	ASI1, ASI2, ASI4

Table 13 shows how the participants responded to the questions and the codes assigned to the responses. The popular emergent themes are outlined below. Participant quotes are provided to show examples of the data collected.

### **Administrators Semistructured Interviews Emergent Theme One:**

#### **Positive/Engaging/Mobile Environment**

The first emergent theme, a positive, engaging, and mobile environment was identified through participant responses to Question 1, 2, and 3. The following quotes outline many of the common responses to the questions regarding characteristics of the system and its outcomes.

- ASI1: “Helping children learn in their own way instead of trying to force them to learn as everyone else does.”
- ASI2: “A more adapting learning environment.”
- ASI3: “Positive environment and making learning fun. Derived from staff.”
- ASI4: “Allow minimum amount of students per class, additional funding for classroom activities and newer schools built in lower-income communities.”
- ASI4: “Advanced education with diversity in ALL schools and not zoning based on income level of the communities.”
- ASI2: “Teachers who are given regular training in psychology and special ed. More than one adult per classroom setting. Physical changes to classrooms to allow for more open and brighter spaces, more comfortable seating, ability for kids to choose optional therapeutic seating for stimulation or relaxation, as

needs require, etc. Hands-on learning. Block periods of time instead of 40-50 minutes per subject.”

### **Administrators Semistructured Interviews Emergent Theme Two: Whole Child Development**

The second emergent theme, whole child development, was identified through participant responses to Question 2 and 6. The following quotes outline many of the common responses to the questions regarding whole child development.

- ASI1: “Graduation rates will increase, college attendance among working-class children will increase, and poverty will decrease to show whole child development.”
- ASI2: “Retaining good teachers and administrators will be vital in achieving successful whole child development. Highly qualified teachers will know what each student needs in order to develop and grow. Lifelong learning will become important to the child.”
- ASI3: “Children need more than a textbook and examinations of what they have learned to be well rounded. Students are to become good citizens and learn to give back to their communities and beyond. It is our job to get them there, along with their parents.”
- ASI4: An important aspect of education or learning is the fact that we learn incrementally but wholly. Whole, part, whole in other words. If we can continue to help build student growth in a manageable and encouraging way,

we should consider this success for both the instructor/system and the student.

We want to help grow the whole child, not just one aspect.”

### **Administrators Semistructured Interviews Emergent Theme Three: Best Practices**

The third emergent theme, best practices, was identified through participant responses to Question 4 and 5. The following quotes outline many of the common responses to the questions regarding best practices.

- ASI1: “Small group instruction is helpful and should be a best practice.”
- ASI1: “I think we should keep in mind that not every student is the same. Each one has similar and different needs. It should be a best practice to be able to use a variety of teaching styles to match the students’ learning styles.”
- ASI2: “We must collaborate to formulate a cohesive but moldable plan to help each student receive the best education experience there is to offer. We must have adequate funding to provide all the tools and personnel it takes to develop the whole child and help them succeed. It is not a question; I think most would agree, of what needs to be done, but how to afford it.”
- ASI3: “A best practice must be to have full support from the state regarding what we need to provide the best for these students. We must get funding and cooperation to be able to adapt to the needs of the students and help them succeed, capture our communities’ confidence, and create a more positive view of Alabama’s education system.”



**Discrepant cases.** Discrepancies arose when discussing Question 6, which was:

What are the desired outcomes and how/when will you know the system is producing desired outcomes? Three participants stated they would know when graduation rates were higher and two participants stated that college enrollment of former students would be a measurement of the desired outcome. One participant stated, “I think that is one of the things we do not do a very good job of, maybe in the state, or definitely in our district, is that we don't track student success after they leave us.” -SFG2. “I think the graduation piece and how they graduate is definitely something that is an outcome obviously and is a measurement, but I think when we look at that dream or that desired outcome that we are measuring a year or two years out, to say ‘did we set you up so you can go right to work, in a job that you are happy in and that you are successful in; or college.’” -SFG2.

Four participants stated that society would reflect if the system is successful, meaning that the graduates would contribute to positive societal growth and well-being, and local and state communities will perceive the system in a more positive way when the system increases student success. “Society will reflect it, as it does now.” -SSI6 “Children will either feel positive or negative about their experience, and this can inform local communities how well the system is doing.” -ASI4

Test scores or assessments, demographics shifting leading to enrollment raises were mentioned by two participants as indicators of recognized desired outcomes. “Well we can know by test scores rising, teachers’ wages raising, enrollment raising, demographics shifting.” -ASI2 “Testing assessments are good indicators but also the communities will build new schools and refurbish older buildings to accommodate the

growth in population due to the school attractiveness that will occur from the school's successful student performance.” -SSI4 Although there seemed to be differences in general terms regarding outcome recognition, 12 participants concurred that desired outcomes would require purposeful after graduation follow-up and analysis to determine if the desired outcomes were successful. See the below table for responses summation.

Table 14

*Discrepant Cases in Question 6*

Codes	Frequency Focus Group Superintendents	Frequency Semistructured Interview Superintendents	Frequency Semistructured Interview Administration	%
College enrollment rates	2	0	0	13
Graduation rates	2	1	0	20
Society's reflection	0	1	3	26
Assessments	0	1	1	13
Need better procedures to determine met outcomes	2	8	2	80

As shown in Table 14, responses to Q6 regarding the desired outcomes and how would the outcomes be known varied among the 15 participants in this study. As stated above, most participants believed there needs to be a better way to measure the desired outcomes to more accurately measure system success and make changes where needed.

Nonetheless, the system does utilize several measurement tools to evaluate the system's

and students' success including testing, graduation rates, college enrollment, and career assignment readiness.

### **Summary of Themes**

Participants' responses in the focus group and semistructured interviews led to emergent themes. There were three major themes, with subthemes (see Table 15). Below is the summation of the final themes and their subthemes.

Table 15

#### *Emergent Themes*

Theme	Subtheme	Subtheme	Subtheme
Positive Environment	Happy teachers and students	Selfless teachers and other personnel	Learning-centered
Whole Child Development	Prepared with love for learning	Prepared for career and college	Prepared with people/soft skills and collaborating skills
Best Practices	Small group instruction	Data analyzation	Collaborative learning

Table 15 shows a summary of the three major themes and their subthemes. The interpretation of these findings is discussed in Chapter 5. These themes lead to explaining the gap and making recommendations. The next section reviewed the third component of the methodological triangulation, the Plan 2020 progress report.

### **Plan 2020 Progress Report**

The Plan 2020 progress report (see Appendix E) disclosed the results of the attempts to reach the targeted goals outlined in the Plan. Earlier in 2016, Alabama's graduation rate was reported to be 89%, a record in Alabama's history (McLain, 2016).

This rate was found to be erroneous. The state's graduation rate was 72 percent in 2012. An audit was performed and revealed that the results that showed movement toward positive progress were erroneously reported data. The graduation rates were lower than state officials reported to students, parents, politicians, and the federal government (McLain, 2016). Faults were found in two different reporting mechanisms. "First, the state school system admits to poor oversight of awarding credits. The audit found that some local school systems, which have not been named, misstated student records and inappropriately awarded class credits to allow students to graduate," (McLain, 2016, para. 4). The state department of education is responsible for assembling data from school systems to provide reports to federal offices. "Second, the audit found that recipients of an Alabama Occupational Diploma should not be counted in the four-year graduation rate. The reasoning is because the diploma does not meet the same standards required for graduation," (McLain, 2016, para. 9). The Alabama occupational diploma offers workforce and job-seeking skills to students with disabilities or special needs.

There has been increased debate over the last year regarding the education system in Alabama, including the controversial statement by the recently removed state governor, "I can tell you, education in this state sucks," said Gov. Robert Bentley (Gray, 2017). "Alabama ranks dead last behind all 50 states and the District of Columbia in fourth-grade math," said Gov. Robert Bentley (Gray, 2017). These statistics can be quite discouraging for in-service educators and future educators, but for some, it is a call to do more and push harder. In Gray's (2017) article, a future education graduate asked, "How is that supposed to make me feel? What purpose does that statement serve? For me, as a

future educator, I guess it was a push harder if he feels that way. Well, I just want to push harder to be the best that I can be to service the students.” Appearing on the Alabama Department of Education’s 2017 Failing Schools list based on the Alabama Accountability Act are, overall, 75 schools, down one from 2016 (Journey, 2017).

Over the past year, Alabama schools have been highlighted in the news for falsifying reporting records, schools have been taken over and shut down, a state governor removed from office, and a new state superintendent voted in, but within 12 months removed from the position. There has been no real progress towards targeted goals of the Plan 2020, and as of Summer 2017, that plan had been replaced by the new plan Alabama Ascending, which was implemented at the beginning of the 2017-18 school year. Considering all the debates, changes, and rush to create a better plan, it must be incredibly vexing to withstand such a consistently negative environment day after day, let alone participate in a positive focused research study. Nevertheless, the participants in my study were eager to help me envision their dream system, without any adverse comments, without poor attitude, and without a sense of hopelessness. The administration of this education system appears to have that forward moving zest that will help make way for positive progress towards any targeted goals.

Below is a table showing some of the targeted goals of the Plan 2020 and the resulting status, as of 2016:

Table 16

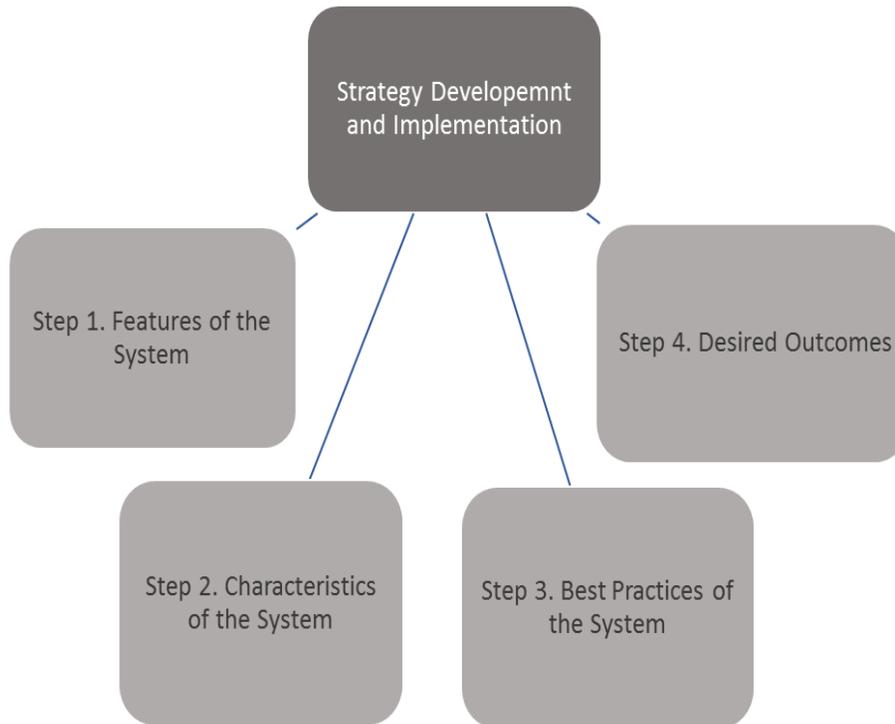
*Plan 2020 Top Targeted Goals and Results (after 4 years implementation)*

Every student graduates from high school	Every student graduates high school prepared (college and career readiness)	College and Career Ready	Reduce the number of students requiring remedial courses in reading and mathematics in two- and four-year colleges.	Decrease the gap in the 4-year Cohort Graduation Rate for selected subgroups.	By 2016, increase the number of systems designated as an Innovation School System.
Goal: 74% After 4 years: 89% <i>(this was found to be falsified data)</i>	Base (current at the time of plan implementation) was initially 11,706, but later changed to 5571:  No results data reported	The base was initially 30%, but changed to 70% in 2015:  No results data reported	Goal: 30% After 4 years: 30.40%  (may not be accurate due to other falsified reporting)	Year 4 <u>Goals:</u> Asian American 7.3 Hispanic 5.7 Limited English speakers 36.3 Poverty 7.8 Special Ed. 18.4 <u>Results:</u> Asian Am 2.5 Hispanic 0 Ltd English 14 Poverty 2.5 Special Ed 16 (erroneous)	Base 2/ Target 13  After year 4:  Target: 39  Results: 26

Table 16 shows the unsuccessful efforts of the existing state initiative that has been in place since the 2012-2013 school year in Alabama. By triangulating the data from the focus group, the semistructured interviews, and the Plan 2020 progress report I have presented the fact that something is missing within the system to implement a successful state initiative to support students, especially vulnerable students. Chapter 5 discussed this possible missing element further.

### **Summary**

This study was designed to answer the research question, “How do Alabama school administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students?” The data collected during this qualitative study helped answer the research question. The data analysis produced themes that surround the research question and portray a picture of administration’s thought process and collaboration efforts while developing contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation of plans to support vulnerable K-12 students (see Figure 9).



*Figure 9.* Elements of the administration systematic methods to strategic development and implementation.

The conceptual framework components, the data analysis emerged themes, the Plan 2020 progress report, the research question, interview questions, and the specific problem addressed contributed to the study results, which established that administrators collaborate to discuss (a) the elements of the school system such as the contextual best practices and resources, (b) how these elements can be used to enhance the student's learning experience, (c) influence the students to love learning, and (d) students becoming lifelong learners while preparing for their future college and career adventures.

Administrators strive to first offer the best and most safe, welcoming environment for students, with ample space to move around, brightness to encourage energy, engaging hands-on activities, smiles, and happy individuals. Administrators then want to provide state of the art resources to the teachers and students so that they have equal opportunities to receive the best education and have ample opportunity for self-paced and small group instruction. Administrators then strive to include many research-based and tested best practices into the system to offer a variety of known practices that will help teachers help students succeed and grow each year of school. Administrators' desire to develop the whole child, including learning power, self-esteem, and the love of learning. Finally, desired outcomes are outlined, and a few immediate measurements are prescribed, while long-term measurements are envisioned and sought. Chapter 5 includes the interpretation of the findings, the limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, and implications of the study. Also, Chapter 5 includes the discussion, conclusions, and practical recommendations of my research study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this descriptive single case study was to explore how administrators in Alabama schools develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students. I conducted this study using AI because of the gap found in the literature, which involved helping students, especially vulnerable students, navigate learning hurdles while avoiding negative labels and loss of motivation (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Glass, 2014; Tausan, 2011; Niculescu, 2014; Christenbury, 2010; Kocakoglu, 2010; Blackwell, et al., 2007; Heward, 2003). It is known that the U.S. Department of Education handed down mandates to K-12 academic organizations for student achievement as part of its mission to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness, foster educational excellence, and ensure equal access (Department of Education, 2017). It is not known what happens between mandates handed down from the U.S. Department of Education to the state's board of education, and the evaluation of whether the mandate or state initiatives enhance student performance. In my research guided by AI of the *dream system*, I used a focus group, semistructured interviews, and review of the Plan 2020 progress report to explore the strategy development phase of what was not known.

### **Key Findings**

Key findings indicated (a) administrators of Alabama schools have and understand contextual best practices for strategic planning of the state education initiatives, and (b) something else inhibits the initiatives' success. In my review of the data, I identified themes among the study participants' responses that I used to answer the

central research question: How do Alabama school administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students?

Participants' responses led to emergent themes. The three major themes were (a) a positive environment, (b) whole child development, and (c) best practices (see Table 15). A positive environment included (a) a welcoming and happy environment, (b) selfless and committed teachers, (c) happy teachers and happy students, (d) a learning-centered atmosphere, and (e) development of the whole child. Whole child development included (a) success in college and career, (b) honorable character, (c) soft (people) skills, (d) problem-solving skills without negative actions, and (e) life-sustaining and propelling skills that are learned and carried out throughout students' lifetimes. Best practices included (a) collaborative learning, (b) data analysis, (c) small group instruction, and (d) accelerated programs.

Discrepant cases regarding Question 6 are shown in Table 14. Three participants, SFG1, SFG2, and SSI5 stated they would know desired outcomes are met when graduation rates were higher or through college enrollment data of former students. Another participant, SFG3, stated that the graduation *piece* and how they graduate was an outcome and a measurement, but when looking at that dream or that desired outcome, measuring a year or two years out to determine success in preparing the student for his/her future endeavors was essential. Four participants, SSI6, ASI1, ASI3, ASI4, stated that society would reflect whether the system is successful, meaning that the graduates would contribute to positive societal growth and well-being, and local and state

communities will perceive the system in a more positive way when the system increases student success. Test scores or assessments, and students' feelings or impressions of the school/system were also mentioned by two participants, ASI2, SSI4, as indicators of recognized desired outcomes. Although the participants were discrepant regarding desired outcomes and recognition of the same, 12 participants, SFG2, SFG3, SSI1, SSI2, SSI3, SSI4, SSI5, SSI6, SSI7, SSI8, ASI2, ASI3, concurred that desired outcomes would require purposeful after-graduation follow-up and analysis to determine if the desired outcomes were successful.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The findings of the study confirmed many of the findings in the literature I discussed in Chapter 2. Learning organizations help to ensure that organizational objectives are attained (Hussein et al., 2014). If the objective of the organization is to help learners succeed and grow, then the organization must have what it needs to meet those objectives (Hussein et al., 2014). Innovation and performance are linked to learning organizations (Hussein et al., 2014). It is clear from the participants' responses that their system is a learning organization and must be given ample resources to help learners grow and propel to the next levels within the system. Another vital piece of the system is that everyone is on the same team and working together for the learners' success. More effective knowledge discovery and strategic planning can be achieved through collaborative learning to solve complex problems versus what may not be possible for an individual learner (Chua, Morris, & Mor, 2012). Co-teaching was stated as a resource for the system by four of the participants. Co-teaching encourages increased communication

between teachers and students while improving retention and achievement (Devlin-Scherer & Sardone, 2013).

IT is a necessity for effective knowledge management (Aggestam, 2006). LM is crucial for organizations because learning capability is not always apparent in organizations (Hussein et al., 2014). As Gallier (1991) noted, the attitude of managers to IT is one of disinterest, except regarding concern about costs, and in most cases the information system professional will have to take the lead in using IT, versus the senior manager. Furthermore, Young (2013) used a fuzzy-set analysis of 15 cases to show that it is crucial to have top management support for projects to be successful. According to Lee (2014), “Fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (Fs/QCA) is a social science method developed to combine case-oriented and variable-oriented quantitative analysis” (par. 1). The administrators of the system discussed in the study are advocates of IT but might be hindered by little to no budget to invest in the technology needed. The participants agreed that data analysis with IT was an important piece of the system and a best practice. Rumelt (2011) stated that the key components of a strategy are the diagnoses of the situation, the approach to dealing with the situation, and a set of immediate coordinated actions to address the situation. The administrators have an understanding and plan for each key component of their system but might be hindered by little to no budget. The participants in the study overwhelmingly stated that the system must receive full funding to implement the best practices that include state of the art resources.

Levitt and March (1988) argued that if failure is experienced, routines are changed without evidence-based research. The routine that failed is not considered

relevant. The search for routines that work can be futile (Levitt & March, 1988). The participants' system has included several reform plans over the last 15 years including the Alabama Accountability Act, Alabama 21, Common Core, Plan 2020, and briefly, Alabama Ascending. The most recent plan, Plan 2020, as evident in this study (see Table 15), has not achieved any target plan goals. Myatt (2012) listed 15 reasons attributed to organizational failures including: poor leadership characteristics, which include lack of character in leaders, lack of vision, lack of execution, flawed strategy, lack of capital, poor management, toxic culture, no innovation, poor professional advice, and inability to attract and retain talent. The data collected from the participants support that there is lack of capital for the plan to succeed, which implies there exists poor leadership in the state and local budget department personnel, which assigns the budget for the state education system, including the districts and their schools.

Nyman (2014) argued that 90% of organizations fail to execute their strategies because of team members not having a clear understanding of what is going on and what their part should be to help with successful implementation. Nyman (2014) also stated that the team might know what is to be done but have no input as they work, only to follow instructions no matter the outcome. Nyman's argument supports the idea that the local and national level of government budget personnel, which assigns and supplies the budget for the state education system, the districts and their schools, does not have a clear understanding of what is happening and how they should help. The system's administrators have no successful input to secure the monetary support needed to ensure learners' success. This might lead to morale dysfunction among the administrators,

faculty, learners, parents, and community of those systems that continue to struggle and fail, hence the data collected that addresses a desire for a happy environment, teachers who have a passion to help learners, and not just be there because they have to be; and parent and community involvement.

In the United States, school funding comes from three sources. The balance varies from state to state, but on average 45% is local money, 45% is from the state, and 10% is from the federal government (Turner, 2016). Not all school systems in Alabama lack funding for initiatives to support students. Some school zone residents pay more in property taxes towards their local education system, some schools in more affluent areas are sponsored by wealthy contributors, and some schools receive more funding from the government for various reasons (Crain, 2015). The systems in poor, rural, or less populated areas within the state tend to lack the resources to meet the demand for state of the art technology, small group instruction, programs for troubled students, one-on-one instruction for vulnerable students, and access to ample books and supplies for each learner (Crain, 2015). I discussed possible solutions to those barriers that hinder the administrators' plans and learners' growth under the practical recommendations section of this chapter.

These findings show that administrators in Alabama school systems understand, develop, and input contextual best practices in the state's initiatives to support students, especially vulnerable students. The findings extend the knowledge in the discipline through the participants' overwhelming plead for resources, namely monetary resources, to implement the best practices developed for the initiatives for its success, which allows

for learner/student success that leads to community and workforce success. Hornby, Gable, and Evans strived to provide evidence-based methods to improve educational outcomes for all students and help overcome the barriers to such programs and practices in schools (2013). As reviewed in Chapter 2, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, parental involvement, cognitive strategy instruction, self-regulated learning, memory strategies, assistive technology, reciprocal teaching, and more are effective evidence-based strategies for inclusive and special education (Hornby, Gable, & Evans, 2013). These types of effective strategies are costly and time-consuming, something that Alabama schools might be lacking.

Discussed in Chapter 2 were follow up studies of vulnerable students who had been out of school for 10-14 years. Interviews focused on their educational achievement, employment record, and community adjustment. Hornby and Witte (2008) discovered low levels of achievement regarding educational qualifications and employment records. Furthermore, high rates of involvement with the criminal justice system, and low levels of community adjustment were reported (Hornby & Witte, 2008). Hornby and Witte maintained that effective procedures for transition, ongoing support for ex-students, and enhanced special needs training for teachers are essential in improving student outcomes. Many participants in my study called for better measurable ways to conduct follow-up studies, such as the one outlined by Hornby and White, to measure desired outcomes of the system because graduation rates were not perceived as the ultimate desired outcome, but the whole life-long development of the child.

The gap found in the research pertained to helping students in their journey from the point where federal mandates for state education organizations were assigned to the performance and completion success by the student (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Glass, 2014; Tausan, 2011; Niculescu, 2014; Christenbury, 2010; Kocakoglu, 2010; Blackwell et al., 2007; Heward, 2003). This study determined that state education organizations review the federal mandates, collaborate, design, and develop strategic state initiatives with contextual best practices to support all students, especially vulnerable students, to complete year after year in their academic careers by developing the whole child and preparing them for their future college and career agendas. This study also found that these initiatives are not successful and might be hindered because of a lack of funding by local and state officials who distribute education funds throughout the state. I presented my recommendations for a solution and further research in the recommendations and practical recommendations sections of this chapter.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Trustworthiness in this qualitative research was determined by credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Establishing trustworthiness for this study also included member-checking (Elo et al., 2014) and bracketing (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Member-checking was conducted by sending the participants the transcription summary for their review, to be certain I did not misinterpret their feedback. Bracketing was achieved when I set aside my potential prejudices, biases, and experiences, focusing on the data collection and analysis of the same. Inspecting trustworthiness of every phase of the analysis process is important, including the preparation, organization, and reporting

of results because together these phases should give the reader a clear indication of the overall trustworthiness of the study (Elo et al., 2014). Findings of a qualitative study are specific to a small number of environments and individuals but can be representative of a broader group (transferability) (Shenton, 2004). With 105 invitations to research and five invitations to the pilot study, I found securing participation for the study rather daunting. I discovered there was a change in the statewide initiative from Plan 2020 to Alabama Ascending after I began inviting administrators to participate. I became aware that a call for state superintendent performance review, by a few department of education board members, was in progress, after the second group of research invitations was distributed. The state system had been under scrutiny for erroneously reported data regarding targeted goals progress of the Plan 2020, such as graduation rates and students being given passing grades to graduate while not earning the grades. The state also had 25 educators in 2014, and 19 educators in 2015-16 arrested for having sexual relations with students (Al.com, 2016, Dethrage, 2015). I believe that the slowness of recruitment or lack of participation might have been because of these tumultuous times for the state department of education.

Sufficient detailed descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation and a full description of all the contextual factors affecting the inquiry have been provided to allow readers to have a proper understanding of it. The intended audience can compare the instances of the phenomenon described in the research report with those they have seen emerge in their situations, comparing the findings with reality. This study can be repeated with the same method and design, in the same context, and with the same participants and

produce similar results. Additionally, for qualitative research, this study may be repeated using its method and design but may produce different results depending on the context of a new study's situation. I have analytically shown that the study's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the participants, and not mine, by linking the data to its resources.

Methodological triangulation of data collected from the focus group, interviews, and the Plan 2020 progress document, as detailed in Chapter 4, further supported confirmability. The audit trail demonstrated in a data-oriented diagram (see Figure 6), shows how the data, eventually leading to the formation of recommendations, was gathered and processed during the study. Reflection helped to keep my mind open and avoid bias. The data analysis report has been reviewed and approved by my committee. The interview and focus group protocol, member-checking, the review by the scholarly expert's' committee, and extensive use of the literature, during the data analysis and findings summary, contributed to the study's worthiness.

### **Recommendations**

One recommendation for further research regards specific best practices that are or were strategized and included in the previous and once again, current plan. The recommended research might more extensively answer interview guide questions four and five, about what best practices are included in the system, from where they are derived, which best practice (s) work best and why they work best. Further research might offer valuable knowledge about the use of contextual best practices, success in the implementation of best practices, and support needed for best practices to work, as

discussed in Chapter 2, regarding vulnerable students, best practices, evidence-based research, and learning organizations.

The second recommendation for further research is to use an alternative approach with the participants. Although employing appreciative inquiry was beneficial for a description of the dream system in a positive focus, the appreciative inquiry positive focus did not allow for data that might lead to explanations regarding reasons why the plans initiated by the state board of education have not been successful. We know by the progress reports of previous plans, school and district report cards, and other reports that there are more system failures than successes across the state. Why? We know that the administrators are aware of many best practices to use in their system, as represented by the data collected in the study; what we do not know is if these strategies are implemented fully or at all, and if not, why. Further research to answer the ‘why’ or ‘why not’ to this inquiry would be deemed a worthy study.

Third, research regarding what contextual best practices can be implemented within the existing budget assigned to the state schools might help administrators trim down to the immediately executable and most helpful best practices, which are feasible to administer during a particular school year. Fourth, a study might investigate a hypothesis that considers federal mandates might have too many expectations for systems to bear with only some of the resources available to them. Perhaps a study of these mandated expectations for the system can help answer how much responsibility the system must endure aligning with federal mandates and regulations.

The budget for Alabama education will not improve drastic enough to support the plethora of best practices in place for the initiatives designed for this and upcoming school years. Therefore, it is imperative, to prevent further failures of totality, to hone in on what best practices can indeed be executed with the budget at hand. Further, what local and statewide, or nationwide resources can be solicited to help the system within Alabama support all students, especially vulnerable students.

### **Implications**

#### **Positive Social Change**

Findings in this study can inform families, communities, local and state officials, educators, and national audiences about why Alabama initiatives have high failure rates and do not propel students academically, developmentally, and socially. Through data collection of the participants' responses to the interview questions, review of the Plan 2020 progress report, and my review of the state's past and current education budget dilemmas, it is evident that financial resources must be stronger for full initiative success. With this knowledge, the system, community, parents, local and state officials, educators, and national audiences might collaborate to structure a more balanced and feasible initiative.

The findings of this study can be used to navigate responsibility more appropriately, versus always censuring the school, teachers, and entire system for not doing their job. In review of the data collected, it is clear the system thrusts itself into the objective of providing a happy, safe environment for students where the student loves to learn, the educators' sole job is to develop the whole student and provide for all the

students' needs as they grow, and excel in their academic career. Repeated failed school report cards, failure of entire plan targets, and consistent negative feedback from parents, the community, the press, and state and local officials are morale inhibitors for all involved in the system and furthers odds that are already unbearable to beat.

The study's findings and further research might help engage local and state officials to enhance the education budget, connect with others who can help provide resources for the schools, and begin categorically listening to the intimate constituents that make up the whole system, including the students, parents, communities, educators, local and statewide officials, and anyone else who contributes to the betterment of the system. Additionally, as mentioned in this chapter, further research to determine, by way of the current budget, which strategically developed best practices can be implemented, and which practices might be sponsored in some fashion, or which practices must wait until more resources are available, would be an immediate move towards reaching targeted goals in the current initiative. Alternatively, the research can help structure simple goals, new or existing, set up for each student, class, grade, and school; giving opportunity to faculty, administrators, students, and parents to create a winning situation, which currently rarely occurs.

Each incremental win enhances morale, boosts self-esteem, and creates an innate drive to work harder, and persevere, as is evident in the small wins theory (Walker, 2015). Small wins theory was developed by Tom Peters, in his 1977 dissertation (Walker, 2015). Peters believed the idea that constant gaining on a small scale is a more secure road to success than a sweeping change (Walker, 2015). In the context of education,

particularly special education, a step-by-step approach to achievement is more probable to be measured effective and efficient versus a complete *break-through* cure (Walker, 2015). A series of wins at small but substantial tasks reveals an attractive pattern and are controllable opportunities that produce visible results (Walker, 2015). Walker argued that once one small win has been accomplished, dynamics are set in motion that advance another small win, which leads to a plethora of changes in thought processing, behaviors, opportunities, outlooks, and problem-solving abilities. Small wins break insecure barriers and replace them with hope, forethought, and excitement to do more (Walker, 2015). This type of change would benefit all stakeholders within the system and local and state officials.

### **Methodological Implications**

The methodological approach used in this study to explore how administrators develop contextual best practices was not uncommon. Qualitative case studies are used as a method that allows the researcher close encounters with the participants and environment while obtaining data to uncover a new phenomenon or understand a current one. A case study, using an appreciative inquiry approach to interviewing the focus group and semistructured interviews, was used. Appreciative inquiry (AI) was a better choice for this study because AI kept the focus positive, allowing participants to contribute their thoughts, perspectives, ideas, and knowledge to answer the research question. AI often includes benefits for participants, such as renewal of energy, hope, motivation, and commitment (Whitney and Schau, 1998). Qualitative research observes what is occurring to generate theory or hypothesis (Johnson & Onweugbuzie, 2004). In this study,

hypotheses have been generated regarding the reason (s) why understood and assigned best practices in the state's initiatives are not producing positive outcomes for the system, its learners, local and statewide communities, and other stakeholders. The hypotheses can be articulated as those that deal with the no to low budget for the education system, and the compilation of best practices, which outweigh budgeted resources. The hypotheses are discussed in the recommendations and practical recommendations sections of this chapter. There is no one study or one answer to the situation at hand, that is why further research is vital to the positive outcome of the system and its learners.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The conceptual framework for this study included appreciative inquiry, organizational learning theory, and collaboration theory. I used appreciative inquiry, collaboration theory, and organizational learning theory philosophies to develop my literature review. In Chapter 2, I included literature that contained ways actors collaborate to create methodical processes to meet specific goals. Literature for collaborating techniques such as brainstorming, group sessions, and focus groups, which may develop learning organization strategies to support vulnerable students in K-12 was included in Chapter 2. Data collected in this study supported the collaboration theory importance as an essential tool or practice which allows for educators to come together, discuss, determine, design, and implement the best practices for their system.

As reviewed in Chapter 2, organizational learning is often viewed as routine based, history dependent, and target oriented. Common characteristics in organizational learning include the structure of beliefs, frameworks, paradigms, codes, cultures, and

knowledge that strengthen, elaborate, and contradict the regular routines (Levitt & March, 1988). This study's data collected support those characteristics as defined in Chapter 2. Beliefs, culture, knowledge, paradigms, and more of the dream *system* were described by the participants as they answered the interview guide questions.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a theoretical research perspective and change methodology (Calabrese, 2015). This perspective was supported by using appreciative inquiry to facilitate the focus group and semistructured interviews that allowed opportunity for the participants to give their earnest, reflective input regarding a system that envelops state of the art resources, services for K-12 students, delivers wholly developed, adequately equipped, and eager students into the world known as *the rest of your life*.

As discussed in Chapter 2, I reiterate that AI has been viewed as a research approach that seeks to facilitate change based on the participants' actual experiences of best practice (Breslow et al., 2015, p. 2). Appreciative inquiry can lead to discussion, reflection, and rejuvenation of participants commitment and investment in their work, community, and country. Using appreciative inquiry to facilitate the focus group and semistructured interviews allowed for participants to focus on what works, what must remain, and what can help achieve success for their system.

### **Practice Implications**

As reviewed in Chapter 2, a focus on methods used to reach the destination is fundamental for a full journey understanding (Galliers, 1991). Additionally, having a pool of different kind of best practices, from which to retract when contextually needed for specific strategies and other business agendas, will lead to better outcomes (Hiebeler

et al., 2012). This study's findings and recommendations are directly aligned with these two sentiments. This study's findings offer significance to practice in that the findings sustain administrators' understanding, use, and support for contextual best practices inclusion in state initiatives, and further indicates an endorsement for full funding, for the execution of these contextual best practices, to deliver success thereof. Participants clearly expressed that state of the art resources are needed, which includes a fully funded budget as a resource, and the resources a fully funded budget obtains. Participants clearly expressed the importance of collaboration and teamwork for the sustainability of the organization's mission, which is to develop and grow the whole child and instill in them the love of learning, to sustain them through life's journey. For the participants, importance did not fall on rules, regulations, tests, and popularity, but rather the importance of the system surrounded the student's growth, self-esteem, understanding, people skills, love of learning, knowledge grasp at the individual level, small wins, psychological health, and freedom to be creative, and have fun, versus stifled, and encumbered. This placement of importance is an essential lesson for the practice, for the state officials, and for national officials alike.

### **Practical Recommendations**

In a review of the themes, which emerged during data analysis, administrators of the Alabama schools know which contextual best practices should be included in the system for efficient support of the students' success. These contextual best practices are developed through appointed committees, which include education scholars, subject matter experts, contracted best practice organizations, such as A+ Alabama Best Practices

Center, administrators of the system, and more. These committees collaborate and agree on evidence-based best practices to include in the state initiatives, to fulfill federal mandate directives, and support students' success, especially vulnerable students who necessitate enhanced teaching and learning methods. The administrators have contextual best practices included in the existing system's initiative, the previous initiative, and have employed the best practices to the best of their ability. Nevertheless, some contextual best practices are either missing or unable to be implemented within the system, evident through the Plan 2020 progress report, which revealed that none of the targeted goals were met after 4 years of plan implementation. After analyzing the data collected, it is evident that missing or unimplemented best practices are not a result of a lack of understanding what best practices must be in place, nor a lack of collaboration and planning to develop best practices, but more the lack of resources to include and implement the best practices. These resources include mostly money which would provide for more personnel, superior technology, including learning management systems that help administrators, faculty, students, and parents communicate, collaborate, and keep to date with each students' progress.

With this discovery, I reached out to locate specifics about the education budget in Alabama. Olster (2010) reported that Alabama funding for education was draining, turning schools to turn to private loans for their funding needs. The state came in last place in the federal Department of Education's Race to the Top grant competition. Moreover, a steadfast global recession combined with the Gulf Coast oil spill had put a severe strain on the state's tax receipts, the primary source of revenue for Alabama's

education system, forcing several school systems to take out private loans just to make it through the year (Olster, 2010). Five school districts borrowed against lines of credit they had with local banks to fund basic school operations and 25 additional districts had planned to follow suit, accounting for over 20% of the state's school system, according to the Alabama Association of School Boards (Olster, 2010). Some of the first cuts to the state budget came from the education budget when the state needed to trim or reorganize allocations (Olster, 2010). Olster reported that the education portion of the 2011 Alabama state budget totaled \$5.5 billion: a decline of 20% over a 3-year period. The budget cuts continued (see Table 17).

Table 17

*Spending by Function from 2010-2015 (as percentages)*

Year	K-12 education
2015	20.8%
2014	20.5%
2013	20.4%
2012	20.9%
2011	24.9%
2010	24.3%

*Note.* Alabama spending by function from 2010-2015. From <https://www.nasbo.org/home>

Table 17 shows how the budget for education spending decreased over a 6-year span.

In 2015, “Alabama's state Senate approved transferring \$100 million from the education budget to the general fund to help cover a large deficit” (Chappell, 2015, para.

1). One government official stated:

We are a bunch of cowards who are afraid to say to the governor take the pen and expand Medicaid. This (transfer of education money) is a cop out, a cop out by the Republicans who will not expand Medicaid and who will not raise taxes on the big businesses in this who do not pay their fair share. Instead, they are willing to put this on the back of school children. (Chappell, 2015, para. 4).

Of all 50 states, Alabama’s K-12 education budget saw the nation’s second-worst decline in funding per student during the Great Recession, and that funding has yet to be restored to pre-2008 levels (Brownlee, 2016). Alabama’s K-12 education funding per student in the fiscal year 2017, is still 14.2% less than it was in the fiscal year 2008 (Brownlee, 2016). One other state, Oklahoma, had a more profound funding cut at 26.9%. Brownlee stated that with the recurring budget deficits, it would be a while before the legislature can pay back the borrowed funds from the Education Trust Fund, the private loans, and lines of credit taken out by the schools. Some legislators have even suggested transferring the Use Tax from the Education Trust Fund to the General Fund (Brownlee, 2016). The state legislature did manage to increase education funding this year, 2017, by more than 3%, placing Alabama in the top 10 in budget increases; but the cuts since 2008 still run deep. “When you take into account local cuts to education funding, the picture is even more bleak as municipalities, and other localities struggle to keep their schools afloat” (Brownlee, 2016, para. 11). If there is a continued unadjusted monetary investment for

the plan, any plan for the system and the learners, what types of enhanced performance are expected to occur? If one plan, after 4 years, failed to improve or meet any targeted goals, which led to erroneous data reporting, not because best practices were not included or implemented, but because there was low to no budget to implement them, how will another plan help if there is no increase in spending to provide for the best practices strategized and designed for the plan?

About 31 states across the nation provided less state funding per student in the 2014 school year than in the 2008 school year (CBPP, 2015). The top 10 states with the largest cuts, not listed in any order, are as follows (CBPP, 2015):

- Idaho
- Arizona
- South Dakota
- Oklahoma
- Wisconsin
- Kentucky
- North Carolina
- Mississippi
- Alabama
- Georgia

AI contributes to implementing vision in ways that successfully translate images of possibilities into reality and belief into practice, causing a win-win situation (Cooperrider

et al., 2003). As reviewed in the literature research, the summit method is recommended to emphasize to legislatures, the imperativeness of a strong budget for the system. The summit method is the whole system positive change, in promoting large-scale change, such as organization-wide strategic planning, cultural reorientation, globalization, and disruptive technological innovation (Drew & Wallis, 2014). The authors argued that AI could be used as a stand-alone approach to change, as a very effective complement to traditional top-down models, and as to methods based on principles of emergence, complexity, and organizational learning (Drew & Wallis, 2014).

I recommend a summit method to be conducted with all stakeholders of the system to alter the current initiative to a manageable one where more wins can occur versus more failures. It will be challenging to convince legislature, as they just passed a budget that calls for spending \$6.4 billion from the Education Trust Fund during the 2017 fiscal year (Bennett, 2017). That is \$90 million more than the current year, a 1.4 percent increase. The budget would provide a \$26 million increase for the Foundation Program for K-12 school systems, including \$10.5 million to hire 152 new elementary school teachers for grades 4-6; there are 178 school systems in Alabama (Cason, 2017). Other entities, aside from K-12 education, would use the rest of the increased budget (Cason, 2017). Some of these entities include the veteran's scholarship program (35 million), teacher's retirement system (8 million), \$13.5 million increase for prekindergarten, universities would receive \$1.08 billion, and so on (Cason, 2017). A few legislatures, not in agreement with the majority, tried to save the Education Trust Fund from being stricken again, but to no avail (Bennett, 2017). "Until we address the issues we have right

now, our children are at a disadvantage," Bussman said (Bennett, 2017). "The lack of money will hurt a lot of things" Bussman said (Bennett, 2017, para. 7). In all, Alabama does provide funding for K-12 education. Nevertheless, the budget is inadequate and readily vulnerable to reallocation. A strong, untouchable K-12 education budget must be put in place to help administrators implement those strategically developed contextual best practices to support all students, especially vulnerable students, succeed.

### **Conclusions**

In this study, I explored how Alabama school administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic development and implementation for vulnerable students in K-12. Something is missing in Alabama's strategic endeavors to support K-12 students' navigation to success. National federal government mandates each U.S. state to propel all K-12 students successfully through their academic careers. Alabama state education administrators develop contextual best practices through collaboration with education scholars, subject matter experts, and best practice organizational services; and evidence-based research. These best practices are to be implemented during the execution of the state's initiative for student achievement. Nonetheless, students continue to suffer the hardship of apparent lack of resources to help them through the learning hurdles that straddle the common school environment. The system continues to suffer from the failed progress of targeted goals, and in turn, receives further scrutiny and adversity for such failures.

What appears to trigger the repeated failures does not seem to be within the organizational strategies managed by the administrators of the system, but within the

local and state official entities that establish the education budget for the system to use to execute their initiative. This potential discovery leads to hypotheses that can further be researched and perhaps extend the knowledge about why the system's initiatives repeatedly fail. As previously recommended, additional research or administrator collaboration might be warranted to trim the best practices to those that can be executed within the current and future education budget the system is assigned. This consolidation might offer a more manageable plan to support the students, offering small wins, which will lead to more wins, growing self-esteem, and excitement for further success within the student. After all, the system exists to grow and develop the student, which can be accomplished once the system can unload the scale tipping expectancies, via federal mandates or developed by the administration, or take on more resources to keep it balanced.

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## Appendix A: Focus Group Interview Guide

**Dissertation Focus Group Interview Guide**

Michelle E. Tittle- PhD student

**Focus Group**District  
Superintendents# of  
Participants  
in each  
Group: 3

Date and Time:

Setting: Web-conferencing platform

The research question: How do Alabama school administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students?

The interview questions, guided by appreciative inquiry that will guide the study are:

1. Describe your dream education system.
2. How is it designed?
3. What are the characteristics?
  - i. Physical- the people, the resources, the infrastructure.
  - ii. Non-physical- the environment aura, the behavior, the attitudes
4. What are the types of best practices included in this system?
5. From where do the best practices derive?
6. What is the desired outcome of your dream system?
  - i. How will you know it is moving towards or met the desired outcome?
  - ii. When will you know it is moving towards or met the desired outcome?

## Appendix B: Semistructured Interview Guide

**Dissertation Interview Guide**

Michelle E. Tittle- PhD student

**Semistructured Interviews**

District  
Superintendents  
and Other  
Administrators

Date and Time:

---

Setting: Web-platform conferencing

---

The research question: How do Alabama school administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and

implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students through the Plan?

The interview questions, guided by appreciative inquiry that will guide the study are:

1. Describe your dream education system.
2. How is it designed?
3. What are the characteristics?
  - i. Physical- the people, the resources, the infrastructure.
  - ii. Non-physical- the environment aura, the behavior, the attitudes
4. What are the types of best practices included in this system?
5. From where do the best practices derive?
6. What is the desired outcome of your dream system?
  - i. How will you know it is moving towards or met the desired outcome?  
When will you know it is moving towards or met the desired outcome?

### Appendix C: Probing Guide Example

Example of varied types of questions to clarify and confirm:

---

1) Can you give me an example of?

---

2) Would I be correct in interpreting that as?

---

3) What do you mean by?

---

4) What do you recommend that someone do in that situation?

---

5) What else can you tell me about?

---

## Appendix D: IRB Constructed Participation Consent Form

## CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a research study about how administrators of Alabama schools develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students. The researcher is inviting only district superintendents to be in the study. I have received permissions to conduct my study and distribute this notice to those who fit that criteria. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Michelle Estes Tittle who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You might already know the researcher as a parent of current or previous students, but this study is separate from that role.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to explore how administrators of Alabama schools develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable K-12 students.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do one of the following. Please choose your preference:

- Participate in one small (5 participants and researcher) focus group virtually, through a web-conferencing platform, and audio recording, lasting approximately one hour. You agree to maintain confidentiality concerning anything discussed in the focus groups.
- Participate in one interview through a web-conferencing platform, and audio recording or email, lasting approximately 30-45 minutes.

Here are some sample questions:

- What does your dream system look like?
- What best practices are included in the dream system?

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

This study is voluntary. You are free to accept or turn down the invitation. No one in your district or state, or Walden University will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to be in the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time. Please note that not all volunteers will be contacted to take part. 15 or until saturation, will be chosen. I will follow up with those selected for the study. You should never be asked to waive your legal rights.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as some fatigue, some stress, and perhaps becoming upset. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing.

The benefit of being in this study is that you are given opportunity to share your visions of your dream system. You will be able to play a role in discovering the knowledge the study seeks to help administrators, as yourself, to design and implement visionary systems that work to produce exemplar outcomes.

**Payment:**

There will not be any type of compensation for participation in this study. All participants will receive a certificate for general research study participation and an executive summary of findings and recommendations for the study, once approved by Walden University.

**Privacy:**

Reports coming out of this study will not share the identities of individual participants. Details that might identify participants, such as the location of the study, also will not be shared. Participants will be assigned numerical identification to further protect privacy. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purpose outside of this research project. All data on the computer, disc, drive, or software will be password protected during the research project and maintained in a locked container for five years after the research study concludes, as required by the university. After 5 years, the data will be deleted from any internal software, files, and drives. and any external device containing the data will be destroyed.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via telephone or email. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call the Research Participant Advocate at my university at 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 06-23-17-0032902 and it expires on June 23, 2018.

I will provide you a copy of this form to keep.

**Obtaining Your Consent**

If you feel you understand the study well enough to make a decision about it, please indicate your consent by signing below.

Printed Name of Participant

---

Date of consent

---

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Signature

---

---

Appendix E: Table A1

Plan 2020 Objective Targeted Goals/Results

<b>Plan 2020 Objective</b>	Target/Indicator Year 1 2013	Actual %	Target/Indicator or Year 4	Actual %	Target/Indicator Year 8	Actual %
<p>All students perform at or above proficiency and show continuous improvement (achievement/growth) All students succeed (gap closure) see more below</p>	<p>Strategies: 1. Develop and implement a unified Pre K through college and career readiness plan. 2. Develop and adopt college- and career ready aligned standards in all subject areas. 3. Create and implement a balanced and meaningful assessment and accountability system. 4. Develop and implement a unified School Readiness Plan. 5. Align available programmatic and fiscal resources to support local school needs in the area of instruction.</p>					
<p><i>Every student graduates from high school (falsified reporting)</i></p>	<p>Base 72% Goal 74%</p>	<p>75%</p>	<p>80%</p>	<p>89%</p>	<p>90%</p>	<p>—</p>
<p><i>Every student graduates high school prepared (college and career readiness) as measured by Industry Credential</i></p>	<p>Base was initially 11,706 but later changed to 5571</p>	<p>There are <b>NO</b> results listed for any target year</p>				
<p><i>College and Career Ready as measured by receiving 1) a benchmark score on the reading and</i></p>	<p>Base 30% - changed to 70% in 2015</p>	<p>There are <b>NO</b> results listed for any target year</p>				

(table continues)

math sections of the ACT test, 2) a qualifying score on an AP or IB exam, 3) approved college or postsecondary credit while in high school 4) a benchmark level on the ACT WorkKeys or 5) an approved industry credential added #6) documented acceptance for enlistment into the military)

*Reduce the number of students requiring remedial courses in reading and mathematics in two- and four-year colleges.*

Base  
34%  
Goal  
30%

**33%**

20%

**30.40%**

*Improve the percentage of students performing at or above proficiency on the Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test (ARMT)\* in 3rd through*

No  
targets  
found

There are **NO** results listed for any target year in general or by subgroups

8th grade Reading

*Decrease the gap in the 4-year Cohort Graduation Rate for selected subgroups.*

\*Numbers do not seem realistic since there are still issues.  
\*These numbers are not accurate seeing that the graduation rates were falsified. This would need to be recalculated by auditors.

Base: AA 8.3%/ Target 8.1  
Base: Hisp 6.7%/ Target 6.5  
Base: Ltd Eng 39.3%/ Target 38.7  
Base: Poverty 8.8%/ Target 8.6  
Base: SpEd 21.4%/ Target 20.8

AA **6.4/**  
Hisp **5.8/**  
Ltd Eng **36.**  
Poverty **8.3**  
and SpEd **2.7%\***  
**(something must be wrong with this %-most likely supposed to be 27%)**

Year 2 Goals AA 7.9/ Hisp 6.3/ Ltd Eng 38.1/ Poverty 8.4/ and SpEd 20.2

Year 2 Results AA **2.6/**  
Hisp **2.6/**  
Ltd Eng **20/**  
Poverty **4.9/**  
SpEd **20**

Year 4 Goals AA 7.3/ Hisp 5.7/ Ltd Eng 36.3/ Poverty 7.8 and SpEd 18.4

Year 4 Results AA **2.5/**  
Hisp **0/** Ltd Eng **14/**  
Poverty **2.5/**  
**SpEd 16**  
**(not as significant in change as the other sub-groups)**

*Reductions proposed for absenteeism (unexcused absence)*

Base 119,232/ Target- 115k

**118,928**

100k Change to 107500

**117,175**  
The next year **117,456**

*Reduce the number of disciplinary infractions.*

Base 115,118/ Target- 112,500

No results listed in any target year

105k

*Reduce the number of 9th grade failures*

Base 4786/ Target- 4000

**4159**

2500

**3160**

(table continues)

<p><i>By 2016, increase the percentage of effective teachers and leaders as measured by EDUCATE Alabama, LEAD Alabama, and multiple measures of student performance</i></p>	<p>Base 84.3%/ Target- 86%</p>	<p>No results listed in any target year</p>	<p>89%</p>	<p>No results listed</p>	
<p><i>By 2016, increase the percentage of effective teacher and leader preparation programs as measured by EDUCATE Alabama, LEAD Alabama, and multiple measures of student performance.*</i></p>	<p>No Goals No Targets No Measurements</p>	<p>*Assessment Task Force is determining the assessment(s) to be utilized as multiple measure of student achievement. These measures will be utilized to determine the effectiveness of graduates and, by extension</p>			<p>(table continues)</p>

*Increase the percentage of schools/ systems rated at or above standard on the Revised Alabama Accountability System Report Card once a baseline is set. By 2016, increase the number of systems designated as an Innovation School System.*

No Goals  
No  
Targets  
No  
Measure-  
ments

Base 2/  
Target 13

preparation programs.

No change  
Year 1/  
Year 2: **12**

39

**26**

225

## Appendix F: Copyright Permissions

**PERMISSION REQUEST – online-fillable form**

Author: Please complete the first three sections below and forward this request to the Copyright holder.

**Parties to the Agreement:**  
 Copyright holder: Philip Adu  
(Enter name, email address, and address of rights holder above)

Requestor: Michelle Tittle, PhD Student, Walden University, michelle.tittle@waldenu.edu  
(15988 Stone Ridge Cir, Brookwood, AL 35444)

**Materials:** Please enter full citation information for the requested materials, leaving any fields that are not applicable blank.  
 Figure/Table number(s): OSR Blog- Qualitative Analysis Process  
 Publication (Article/Chapter) title: Perfecting the Art of Qualitative Coding  
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 Journal/Book title: \_\_\_\_\_ Volume/Issue: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Link: http://www.qsrinternational.com/blog/perfecting-the-art-of-qualitative-coding\_DOI  
 Publication Year: 2016

**For inclusion in the dissertation tentatively titled:**  
Case Study: Contextual Best Practices for Strategic Planning and Implementation  
 to be published in: ProQuest Dissertation (the "Journal")  
 Journal's Language of \_\_\_\_\_ Publication: English and any additional languages listed here: English

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## Appendix G: Invitation to Research Email

**Invitation to Research**

Greetings! I would like to take this opportunity to introduce my doctoral study and request your voluntary participation. I am a doctoral student with Walden University. I am passionate about Alabama's organization, the Department of Education and find intriguing areas of possible research within that organization that might engage collaboration, creation of new knowledge, and development of strategies that can lead to positive social reform.

In the area of research of Management, or Learning Management, as is my specialty, the purpose of my study is to explore how administrators develop contextual best practices for strategic planning and implementation to support vulnerable students in K-12. This study will be guided by an appreciative inquiry, which allows the focus to remain positive and engages the participants in describing their dream system. The benefits of this study not only allow for the participants to contribute their ideas and knowledge, but will also benefit to positive social reform in that it is possible to discover unknown or untapped contextual best practices that may enhance support for the vulnerable students in K-12, in not only Alabama, but throughout the nation.

My study will involve only Alabama school districts' superintendents and other administrators, and can be repeated, separate from this study, across the state and other states, for future research endeavors. It is in this respect that I would like to extend an invitation to you to participate in the study using one of the following methods: **a virtual focus group (up to 5 participants in each group) or a semi-structured interview**. All participant information will remain entirely confidential and will not be provided to anyone outside of the researcher. (Please see consent form for more information)

Attached is the research consent form, if you so choose to participate, please sign and return either via email or postal service.

Please feel free to contact me with any inquiries. Thank you!

I appreciate your time and consideration.

Michelle Estes Tittle  
Walden University Doctoral Student