


1-1-2009

Teaching them all: An exploratory mixed methods study of African American students' perceptions of their middle school's culture

Henry Hankerson
Walden University

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Review Committee

Dr. Ella Benson, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty

Dr. Patricia Marin, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer

Denise DeZolt, Ph.D.

Walden University

2009

ABSTRACT

Teaching Them All: An Exploratory Mixed Methods Study of African American
Students' Perceptions of Their Middle School's Culture

by

Henry Hankerson

Ed.S., Lincoln Memorial University, 2005

M.S., Troy University, 2002

B.S., University of Georgia, 1996

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education
Administrator Leadership for Teaching and Learning

Walden University
October, 2009

ABSTRACT

Research indicates school culture impacts student achievement. At Teach Them All Middle School (TTA), an achievement gap exists between African American and White students. The purpose of the current study was to examine the perceptions of African American students concerning the school culture at TTA. The research questions explored the perceptions of these students regarding the role of school leaders in shaping a school culture that is academically supportive, as well as their perceptions of the actual academic support, academic rigor, and encouragement they received from administrators and faculty. A sequential exploratory mixed methods strategy was used to quantify and describe the perceptions of 8th-grade African American students at TTA. Participants (36 students) completed a school culture survey and individual in-depth interviews.

Descriptive statistical analysis of survey results revealed students have an overall positive perception of the school culture at TTA. Triangulation of results showed a strong view by students of the school administrators' influence in establishing the school culture present at TTA. Constant comparison analysis of coded interview data revealed two themes: (a) the willingness and availability of teachers to help students even after school, and (b) the students' belief that problems can be brought to the attention of administrators and/or teachers for resolution. The study's key recommendation is for TTA to ensure its school culture exhibits high academic expectations for every student, especially African American males. The study contributes to positive social change by giving voice to a stakeholder group, African American students, who research shows have had a limited one in school improvement efforts. The study also guides schools in utilizing insight from these stakeholders to establish school cultures with high quality teaching and learning.

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DEDICATION

This doctoral study is dedicated to my daughter, the pride and joy of my life, Hillaree Hankerson and my mother, the encouragement behind everything I do, Lula Hankerson. Thanks to the both of you for giving me the inspiration to be the best God made me to be. It is also dedicated in loving memory of my grandparents Robert, Sr. and Annie Willie Goodwin (maternal) and Hillary Rhodes, Sr. (paternal); my uncles Robert Goodwin, Jr., Leonard Goodwin, and Charlie Rhodes; and my aunts Margaret Hinzey and Richardean Goodwin-Jones. Each of you will forever be dear to my heart. I only wish you were here to share in this joyous moment for our entire family.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The process of completing a doctoral study is not easy one or an individual journey to undertake. Numerous people have served as sources of encouragement along the way. I am grateful to each of you in ways words cannot adequately explain.

First, I would like to acknowledge my family Yolette, Keyondra, Todd, and Hillaree. Thanks for enduring the countless hours I stayed in front of the computer working on class assignments and completing my research. I appreciate your understanding that I was not neglecting my family obligations during those tremendous blocks of time that were spent working on various tasks.

Next, I would to express my gratitude to my mother Lula and cousin Wendy McSweeney who continuously raise the bar of high expectations for me. Thanks for the motivation you two give me to reach my full potential. Whenever I think about slacking even the slightest, you quickly get me back on track and remind me to never settle for less.

To my doctoral committee, Dr. Ella Benson and Dr. Patricia Marin, I could not have made it without your constructive feedback. Though I sometimes hated having to go back and make revisions based upon comments or suggestions made, I knew in my heart that you both were pushing me to reach a high level of scholarship and you had confidence in me to do so. For that, I am truly appreciative.

Eddis Kirkland and Dr. Linda Page, thanks for the “talks” to inspire me towards completing this doctoral journey when I began to take too frequent breaks in working towards finishing. Your friendship during this time has been invaluable.

There were many others who helped me along this journey that perhaps are not named independently, but know that you were not overlooked. I greatly appreciate and thank each of you.

Last, and certainly not least, I would like to thank God for the strength, determination, and skill set to complete this journey in my life. Without Him, I know completing my doctoral degree would not have been possible. He equipped me before the foundations of the world with all that I would need to be successful in life and for that I am eternally grateful and thankful.

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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) has increased the level of accountability for schools in America. These increased accountability mandates have left educators searching for effective best practices to employ in increasing student achievement and ensuring all students reach high learning standards. With growing amounts of research aimed at improving teaching and learning within schools (Danielson, 2002; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001) one key factor, positive school culture, shows promise in helping school leaders pave the way for academic success by students. Chiang (2003) summarized, “School cultures are keys to school achievement and student learning” (p. 4). Deal and Peterson (1999) concluded the success and development of improvement efforts in schools surrounding teaching and learning are more likely to occur in schools where a positive school culture is present. Positive school culture is strongly supported as being useful in improving student achievement.

Student achievement is a top priority, so schools must establish themselves as institutions where high quality teaching and student learning take place. The school leadership must lead the way in this initiative (Marzano, et al., 2001). To accomplish the desired results, school leaders with the repertoire of behaviors (e.g., people-friendly, goals oriented, focused) necessary for promoting a positive school culture are needed. While administrators have a myriad of responsibilities, the need to ensure the development of a school culture built upon quality teaching and learning must be a priority. Moreover, an integral step in solving the achievement gap that exists among

students in many schools is the development of a school leadership that promotes a positive school culture and establishes a high standard of learning for all students. Lastly, schools with leaders who articulate and model effective leadership practices that establish a positive school culture will positively influence the achievement of every student (Chiang, 2003).

Problem Statement

The research problem addressed in this study examined the school culture of Teach Them All (TTA) based upon perceptions of African American students. TTA is a middle school in rural southeast Georgia with a student population of over 55% minority students and a faculty makeup of less than 3% minorities. The school has experienced improvements in academic achievement of students (the school recently was removed from “Needs Improvement” status on its Annual Yearly Progress rating). The problem at TTA is that there is an achievement gap between White and minority students. This achievement gap is not new, nor is it specific to TTA. Historically, African American students have scored lower than their White classmates on standardized tests (Gibson, 2005; Haskins & Rouse, 2005; Jamar & Pitts, 2005; Moses-Snipes & Snipes, 2005). Faculty and staff at TTA have recognized this situation and realize the need for reform. More specifically, they have expressed concern about the school culture that exists at the school.

Frequently, African American students at TTA have expressed displeasure with certain aspects of the school, including what they perceive as a low level of academic expectations, biased enforcement of school rules, and lack of concern by teachers, to name a few. This displeasure highlights not only the need to improve the achievement of

African American students at the school, but also the importance of adjusting the school culture to better meet their needs. Waxman and Huang (1997), Howard (2002), and Tyson (2002) produced findings that demonstrate the importance of evaluating student perceptions of their learning environments for the purpose of improving schools.

Cushman (2003) pointed out that little attention has traditionally been given to student input about their achievement and even less has been given since NCLB. The research questions for this study address the achievement gap at TTA by exploring the perceptions of African American students of the school's culture. The areas evaluated include the administration's role in establishing the school culture, along with the academic support, academic rigor, and encouragement students perceive they receive. Attitudinal differences between the views of male and female students were also explored.

Improvements in the school culture are one means by which the achievement gap issue can be addressed and hopefully eliminated (Deal & Peterson, 1999, 2002). Fullan (2001) concluded the real agenda underlying educational reform is to change a school's culture, rather than to implement a single innovation. Students' perceptions of culture may be a useful tool in understanding a school's culture, which promotes or hinders educational achievement. The present research brought awareness to all stakeholders regarding the school culture at TTA by examining the perceptions of key stakeholders; this awareness may be used in improving the school's culture and the achievement of all students.

Nature of the Study

This mixed methods study involved a methodological triangulation design to investigate the perceptions of a selected African American student group about school culture. Methodological triangulation uses qualitative and quantitative methods to address the same research problem. This approach produces a research methodology that is comprehensive in nature (LeBlanc, 1995; Morse, 1991). Methodological triangulation was accomplished through use of a survey, interviews, and researcher notes taken during interviews. Participants included 36 8th-grade African American students. Eighth grade students were selected if they had attended TTA for all 3 years of middle school. The researcher is the assistant principal at the school where the study was conducted and has worked with students involved in the study for 3 years. The roles I served included surveyor, interviewer, observer, data collector and data analyzer. Students completed a Likert-type survey that measures school culture. The survey was developed by me and reviewed by a panel of experts (five middle school principals) and a group of African American peers (educational colleagues with doctoral degrees and/or more than 10 years experience) to establish its reliability and validity. Seven open-ended questions regarding each participant's perception of school culture were used during the interview phase to satisfy the qualitative portion of the study. The interview questions were a part of an interview protocol developed by me. Quality control strategies used were triangulation of data, member checking, and peer debriefing. A complete description of the research methods employed is found in chapter 3.

Research Questions

With an overarching theme of positive school culture, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How do 8th grade African American students describe their perception of the role of school leaders in shaping a school culture that is academically supportive?
2. How do 8th grade African American students describe their perception of the school culture at TTA with regards to the academic support, academic rigor, and encouragement they have received from administrators and faculty?
3. Is there a difference between male and female African American students in their perception of school culture at TTA?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine African American student perceptions of school culture based upon their experiences at TTA. While addressing school culture and the achievement gap would not represent new research (e.g. Brewster & Klump, 2005; Chiang, 2003; Danielson, 2002; Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005) evaluating perceptions of African American students about the culture of their school begins the journey to uncovering original inquiry into an educational area. The demographics of the teacher and student populations within the school site selected for the study added to the study's originality. The aim was to uncover useful information from African American students to aid TTA in improving its school culture along with raising the achievement of these students to combat the achievement gap issue. On a broader scale, I hoped useful findings would result thereby helping improve school cultures for schools in Georgia and

across the United States that, like TTA, have high minority student populations and very low numbers of minority teachers with similar difficulties.

Theoretical Framework

School administrators play a vital role in creating the school culture present in schools. Marzano et al. (2005) listed this responsibility as 1 of 21 essential leadership qualities. In addition, Marzano et al. stated it is critical for administrators to possess the necessary skills and demeanor to help establish a school culture that generates high quality teaching and learning. The beliefs, behaviors, customs, and norms of the school are heavily affected by the leader's actions and direction in these areas. Chiang (2003) postulates that school leaders must be culture builders who promote the attitude of continuous improvement and academic excellence to all stakeholders at the school. With this educational environment in place, a healthy school culture primed for high student achievement becomes a natural by-product (Deal & Peterson, 1999). This process begins with recognition by administrators of the school culture that is already in place and builds upon factors that promote a positive school culture while eliminating factors that do not. In cultivating the school culture, administrators are essential to the overall success of schools as institutions of quality teaching and learning (Chiang, 2003).

Teachers believe administration plays a critical role in establishing school culture (Lambert, 2005). Whether a culture is seen as positive or negative is strongly affected by the principal's actions. Furthermore, while teachers acknowledge a plethora of factors that contribute to the overall establishment of school culture, most teachers think the principal's actions are highly influential in producing the school culture that emerges

(Chiang, 2003). Even in cases where the principal believes his or her actions are promoting a positive school culture, this belief must also permeate the faculty in order for the principal's efforts to reach their maximum potential.

Research shows a critical component of establishing a school culture rests in the leadership behaviors displayed by leaders on a daily basis (Kelley, Thornton, & Daugherty, 2005). The knowledge base on educational leadership is constantly growing (Leithwood, 2005) and a wide assortment of leadership models can be found in the literature ((Kelley et al., 2005; Leithwood, 2005; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005). The purpose of the literature review was to demonstrate how each model identifies practical attributes that school leaders use in their roles as culture builders for academic excellence. The leadership models addressed include transformational leadership, reflective leadership, participatory leadership, and contingency leadership. Each is presented to demonstrate the power of educational leadership in being the most important single determinant of an effective learning environment (Kelley et al., 2005). Research by Leithwood and Riehl (2003) strengthens the idea that school leaders have an influence on student learning. They make the following five claims regarding educational leadership:

1. Leadership has significant effects on student learning, second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teachers' instruction.
2. Currently, administrators and teachers provide most of the leadership in schools, but other potential sources of leadership exist.
3. A core set of leadership practices form the "basics" of successful leadership and are valuable in almost all educational contexts.
4. Successful school leaders respond productively to challenges and opportunities created by the accountability-oriented policy context in which they work.
5. Successful school leaders respond productively to the opportunities and challenges of educating diverse groups of students. (p. 3)

Educators also have a tremendous ability to make a positive or negative impact. Students spend a significant amount of their early lives in educational institutions. These institutions must serve as places for authentic learning for them. Principals, through carefully constructed actions, create institutions that exhibit the necessary care for students, which fosters learning (Brewster & Klump, 2005). Successful school leadership happens when administrators connect with students in such a way that they have a profound affect on the students' educational experience (Robbins & Alvy, 2004). The actions of the administrators in their dealings with students help promote a positive school culture where high student achievement is the norm (Chiang, 2003). Through leading such schools, principals ensure students have access to a quality education and opportunities to equip themselves for a successful future (Rooney, 2003).

Because they are so impressionable, students need direction in their lives (Fullan, 1997). Educators are challenged to help students navigate the difficult road of acting responsibly and making a valuable contribution to their communities (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999). The ability to obtain such direction is more prevalent in schools where a positive culture of genuine care, concern, and love for students exists. In these schools students feel they are active participants in the school culture (Chiang, 2003). Principals aid in this direction by upholding school-wide policies and procedures that invest in these citizen worker and leaders of tomorrow. It is imperative that schools provide students access to the best possible education. Such access is made available within a school where students experience the proper nourishing to help them reach their maximum potential (Schmoker, 1999). An unsuccessful school fails the very students it was designed to assist become productive individuals (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Administrators must continuously be at the forefront of research-based best practices that enable their students to reach their potential. Ensuring that a positive school culture exists in their school is an excellent aid to accomplishing this outcome for an administrator (Rubin, 2005).

Finally, Kelley et al., (2005) further strengthen the importance of administrators in schools by stating that “education leadership is possibly the most important single determinant of an effective learning environment” (p. 17). For this reason, the achievement of a positive school culture hinges greatly on the school’s administration. That positive school culture leads to high levels of student learning. The ability to have excellent schools in America depends on the presence of strong leadership. It is this environment of quality leadership that the theoretical framework supports as being conducive to continuously improving student achievement levels. In a society where schools of excellence is the requirement, administrators, through promotion of a positive school culture, can help make this ideal a reality.

Definition of Terms

The following are definitions of terms used consistently in this doctoral study:

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): one of the cornerstones of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2001), AYP is a measure of year-to-year student achievement on statewide assessments. AYP requires schools to meet standards in three areas: Test Participation (for both Mathematics and English/Language Arts), Academic Performance (for both Mathematics and English/Language Arts), and a Second Indicator (Georgia Department of Education, 2008).

Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT): criterion-referenced tests designed to measure how well students acquire, learn, and accomplish the knowledge and skills set forth in Georgia's content standards as outlined in the Georgia Performance Standards (Georgia Department of Education, 2008).

Needs Improvement status: the rating given to a school that has been identified as needing to improve in specific areas. This indicator is for schools that do not make AYP for 2 or more consecutive years in the same subject and are in need of improvement or are simply underperforming.

School culture: a complex, continuously changing construct that emerges from a collection of assumptions, beliefs, values, and expectations that form over time within a school. The culture of the school is seen in the attitudes, behaviors, practices, perceptions, and artifacts of stakeholders that shape the collective understanding of how the school works. School culture and culture have been used interchangeably (Krug, 1983) and in this study they are used this way.

School leaders: the principal and/or assistant principal(s) who carry out the everyday tasks that lead a school in all aspects of its functions.

Student achievement: the scores of students on the Georgia CRCT given each year to students in public schools in Georgia. State guidelines mandate that students attain passing scores in the areas of Math and English/Language Arts in Grades 3, 5, and 8 to be eligible for promotion to the next grade (Georgia Department of Education, 2004).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

In any research, it is important to discuss any facts assumed to be true, weaknesses of the study, and the bounds of the study, particularly as they relate to the

concepts of reliability, quality, validity, and generalizability for the quantitative and qualitative analyses of this research study (Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 1998, 2003; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; Punch, 2005).

Assumptions

Assumptions refer to what the researcher accepts or takes for granted regarding conducting the study (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Punch, 2005). Assumptions of the study are:

1. Middle school students are good informants of their perceptions and attitudes.
2. The participants answered the survey and interview questions based on their true perceptions and not based on what they feel their perceptions should be.

Limitations

The major limitation of the study is it evaluates one middle school in rural Georgia. As a result, the generalization of the study and its findings to other school settings is restricted. In addition, key research data are based upon self-reported perceptions by the participants. The age of the participants and sample size are also limitations. While important, these limitations do not significantly alter the findings of this study to such a degree as to render the research invalid or unreliable.

Scope and Delimitations

A fundamental flaw in the literature addressing the influence of educational leadership on student achievement is that conflicting findings exist. In the highly regarded work *School Leadership that Works*, Marzano et al.(2005) concluded actions by the principal have a profound impact on student achievement. Conversely, the work of Witziers, Bosker, and Kruger (2003) produced results that find school leadership has virtually no correlation with student achievement. Witziers et al. utilized a quantitative

meta-analysis to examine to what extent principals directly affect student outcomes. The small positive effects found in this meta-analysis confirmed earlier research findings on the limitations of the direct effects approach to linking leadership with student achievement. Another study completed by Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) produced findings that showed wide statistical range of the correlation between leadership and student achievement. The irony in the findings from each of these studies is that they all had similarities in the methodology employed, but came up with marked differences in their study results. In the end, Marzano et al. concluded there are not any straightforward explanations for these differences, but their work indicates a strong correlation between principal leadership and student achievement. The conclusion drawn here by Marzano and his colleagues is based upon the type of meta-analysis conducted in their research. Due to the contradiction in the literature, this researcher notes this contradiction as a potential delimitation.

Significance

In evaluating schools, leadership, teaching, and adult actions matter greatly (Reeves, 2006). This statement is one that all educators can find hope in as the quest for a better educational system takes place. An essential variable to the equation is the school leadership present. This study sought to gain a more in-depth understanding of student perceptions of skills utilized by school leaders that improve student achievement and educational equity through establishment of a positive school culture. The goal is for high levels of achievement by *all* students to become a reality and not just another idea that does not come to fruition. Schmoker (1999) reiterates that educators, especially school leaders, can and should engineer improvement efforts that benefit every student. For that

reason, it is imperative that school leaders not simply be satisfied with seeing an overall improvement in student achievement, but truly evaluate the data to ensure all students are achieving at a high level. In the end, school leaders must courageously take a stance and develop school cultures that meet the needs of every student and provide every student access to the highest quality education possible, while removing any obstacles detrimental to reaching this outcome. The data collected in this study can be used by school leaders in helping make the aforementioned a reality.

Social Change

This research has the potential to effect social change through examining an area that has been given scant attention in the literature: African American students' perceptions of their learning environments (Waxman & Huang, 1997; Howard, 2002). While much has been done to improve schools, the voices of these critical stakeholders have often been overlooked. Soo-Hoo (1993) stated that "we listen to outside experts to inform us, and consequently we overlook the treasure in our very own backyards: our students" (p. 390). Giroux (1988) stated that students' viewpoints of their schooling provide two important perspectives: (a) insights into important components of the teaching and learning process, and (b) "an important starting point for enabling those who have been silenced or marginalized by the schools . . . to reclaim the authorship of their own lives" (p. 63).

Listening to the students must become an integral part of discussions and action to reform schools in a manner that grants all students an equitable opportunity for school success. A student-centered approach to research may unveil possibilities that could transform many of the modes of inquiry and practices deemed as being best suited for

marginalized groups. If students' perspectives into their learning environments offer critical insights for educators, not only can research and practice improve, but the academic and social empowerment of students may be greatly enhanced as well (Howard, 2002). Waxman and Huang (1997) hypothesized that understanding how students perceive and react to their learning environment is very useful. This research provided an opportunity for African American students to share their educational experiences and add valuable research to the literature in a needed area. With this information school leaders can further expand their skill set to meet the challenges of improving schools.

At TTA, the achievement gap between African American students and their peers is evident. Addressing this problem is a focal point of the school as it continues its improvement efforts. Numerous initiatives in varied forms have been implemented. Throughout this process, African American students have been helped to varying degrees. Yet these students have not been given a voice in selecting the initiatives aimed at helping them. The initiatives have come and gone, some with success others without, all at the expense of the students not being more involved in the process. This research gave that voice to students and provided the administration, faculty, and staff of TTA with valuable information to aid in closing the achievement gap and establishing a positive school culture for every student.

Summary and Transition Statement

Today's administrators face a complex blending of roles, contexts, and challenges. Through it all, they are still required to lead schools towards continuous improvement and produce learning communities where quality teaching and learning are the norm. Likewise, school leaders must ensure that all students have access to an

education that is backed by high standards and allows them to succeed academically. Twenty-first century educational leadership requires individuals with a plethora of skills who can not only grapple with complex, dynamic educational systems, but can also respond to social and political pressures (Goldring & Greenfield, Jr., 2002). The task of the school administrator is not an easy one, and the demands of the job require a resilient individual if optimal results are to be achieved.

The content in the remaining chapters of the study are as follows. A literature review is covered in chapter 2 of the study. A description of the research methodology is found in chapter 3. Chapter 4 is a presentation of the results of the study. Chapter 5 includes interpretation and discussion of the findings along with recommendations.

CHAPTER 2:
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The review of literature in chapter 3 is presented in three main sections. In the first section I presented the theoretical framework for the importance of educational leadership and school culture in impacting student achievement. The literature reviewed describing educational leadership styles and the relationship of each to student achievement is presented in section 2. Literature reviewed on the role of school culture in impacting student achievement is detailed in section 3. Additionally, literature is presented on the perceptions of students about school culture and the relationship of demographic variables (ethnicity, age, and gender) to student perceptions is presented.

I utilized the Walden University library and examined multiple databases, including Academic Search Premier, Dissertations & Theses, Dissertations & Theses at Walden University, ERIC—Educational Resource Information Center, and ProQuest Central. The keywords used to conduct the literature search included school culture, minority students, student achievement, multicultural education, African American students, achievement gap, and educational leadership. An Internet search of educational leadership, school culture, student achievement, and related topics was also conducted. Numerous books related to the topics of educational leadership, school culture, student achievement, and strategies for teaching minority students were reviewed as well.

The following questions provided by the National Research Council (2002) were used to determine if a resource should be included in the literature review for this study:

Is there a clear set of questions underlying the design? Are the methods appropriate to answer the questions and rule out competing answers? Does the study take previous research into account? Is there a conceptual basis? Are data collected in light of local conditions and analyzed systematically? Is the study clearly described and made available for criticism? The more closely aligned it is with these principles, the higher the quality of the scientific study. (p. 97)

Resources that met the aforementioned criteria were thoroughly reviewed and pertinent information was extracted for use in the literature review for this study.

Background

The educational research literature identifies principals as major stakeholders in the success of schools in the area of student achievement. As a result, a myriad of research has been conducted that identifies specific behaviors of effective principals that have a positive impact on student achievement (Carter, 2001; Danielson, 2002; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Schmoker, 1999). These identified behaviors provide a framework that principals can use in effectively leading schools towards continuous improvement.

A key concept identified in the research for improving schools is the role of the principal in creating a positive school culture within schools. Positive school culture is greatly affected by a principal's actions. The school culture that exists, whether positive or negative, correlates with the principal's behavior and in turn greatly affects others within the school environment. Marzano et al. (2005) identified 21 leadership responsibilities, among which school culture is listed, as important to improving schools and student achievement. Research indicates the role of the principal in creating school culture is a critical factor to improving a school and increasing student achievement (Chiang, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005).

A school's culture can define the quality of a school that creates healthy learning places, nurtures children's and parents' dreams and aspirations, stimulates teachers' creativity and enthusiasm, and elevates all of its members (Freiburg & Stein, 1999). An important factor in educating diverse groups of students is a school culture open to innovation, trust, and caring among professionals, opportunities for professional development, and supportive leadership. Successful school leaders respond to the challenges of educating students from diverse backgrounds. School leaders can promote equity and justice for all students by establishing school cultures where patterns of discrimination are challenged and negated. Through the management of school culture school leaders can and do affect the lives and learning of students (Maehr & Parker, 1993). Although principals cannot improve student achievement alone, they do provide the leadership and support that translates into an environment where increased productivity occurs (Karpicke & Murphy, 1996). Sergiovanni (2000) argued that school leaders should not only assume an active role in this process, but also serve as enablers of others to function more effectively in completing tasks geared towards the improvement of teaching and learning for all students. Principals must nurture the traditions, ceremonies, rituals, and symbols that express and reinforce positive school culture (Stolp, 1994).

NCLB (2001) has forced educators to focus on increasing student achievement as part of the efforts to improve the educational system in America. The growing achievement gap between White and minority students, especially African American and Hispanic children, is as a serious problem to undertake (Farkas, 2005; Gibson, 2005). While there is no simple explanation for the achievement gap, the ability to close it is

possible. The achievement gap, for many schools, has become a top priority to address. To address this dilemma, the role of educational leader has changed, placing a greater emphasis on skills beyond those of mere manager to the development of individuals with a plethora of skills and knowledge regarding effective practices to improve teaching and learning within schools (Danielson, 2002; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). The responsibility for closing the achievement gap is one that must be shared by educators, policymakers, parents, the community, and students. Educational researchers also play a part in continuing to find ways to improve education and combat problems such as the achievement gap (Moses-Snipes & Snipes, 2005). This collective endeavor is the only way that lasting results can be achieved. The achievement gap issue must refocus educators to revolutionize the manner in which educational leaders lead schools into the future. A goal for this study is to identify the perspectives of students about the culture in the school they attend that has an achievement gap issue and the role of the principal in creating and improving that culture.

Educational Leadership

Shift in Thinking About Educational Leadership

The increased emphasis on student achievement and addressing the achievement gap issue by educators reshapes thinking on educational leadership. Murphy (2002) described three key concepts that make up a new framework for educational leadership: school improvement, democratic community, and social justice. Noting the inadequacies of traditional thinking on educational administration, he outlined a new design for successful school leaders based upon those three concepts. Murphy also described

today's administrator as moral steward, educator, and community builder. This shift in design helps set the stage for a fresh look at educational leaders of today.

The increased attention on accountability for student achievement makes continuous school improvement a key concern for school leaders. The days of simply managing school operations, while teachers shoulder much of the burden for student learning, are over. Today, educational leaders must lead the way in improving the educational quality within schools (Marzano et al., 2005). Continuous school improvement is not a passing fad, but an established concept for the school of excellence moored in a positive school environment. Moreover, to achieve the greatest results requires leadership that makes school improvement a part of the school's standard operating procedures. Danielson (2002) postulates school improvement is achieved when educators make "an uncompromising commitment to action" (p.122). School leaders have the task of taking steps to ensure that continuous school improvement transpires. Fullan (1997) said, "The focused, interactive, interdependent principal is a socially responsible being, working avidly on the improvement of the school" (p.39). In a demanding and challenging profession, educational leaders' ability to understand the importance of school improvement allows them to be more effective.

Americans' concept of a democratic community within schools is a major shift in thinking for the school administrator. For years, the principal served as the sole decision maker at the school and took full responsibility for the outcome—good or bad. The complexity of school operations today requires leaders to delegate some of their authority and bring others into the decision-making mix (Leithwood, 2005; Reeves, 2006). No one individual has all the knowledge and expertise necessary to lead a school towards high

student achievement. For that reason, the savvy principal recognizes the importance of establishing a democratic community in the school setting. In a democratic community where shared decision-making takes place, increased productivity and student achievement readily occur and the school benefits as a whole (Meyers, Meyers, and Gelzheiser, 2001). Awareness of the benefits of operating a democratic community is another technique for principals to employ as effective leaders.

The social justice agenda focuses on practices that generate and perpetuate inequities in schools. These practices further setback already marginalized students and deny them access to a quality education. Issues such as the achievement gap make social justice in schools a major focus for today's educational leaders. The necessity for action to promote social justice and equitable practices in schools is paramount (Jamar & Pitts, 2005). As exclusionary practices continue to manifest themselves, administrators are confronted with issues demanding their attention to advance the implementation of policies to rectify these injustices. Ultimately, the proactive practice of educational leaders will produce socially just outcomes for all students (Dantley & Tillman, 2006). At the heart of social justice is the establishment of an educational system that establishes high expectations for all students and provides a means by which the highest level of educational quality is afforded to all. For this to happen, educational leaders must repaint the landscape on which our educational system is drawn on a new canvas that equitably educates every child.

In redefining educational leadership, Murphy, Manning, and Walberg (2002) presented six recommendations: (a) building leadership knowledge, (b) linking research and practice, (c) collaboration, (d) communicating, (e) reforming leadership training, and

(f) reculturing. These six recommendations provide a foundation on which effective leadership practices can be built for the 21st-century school leader. In addressing each recommendation, by virtue of a shift in the role of the daily activities of administrators, building leadership knowledge is of utmost importance. Administrator expertise in the areas of curriculum and instruction is critical for effective teaching and learning to transpire (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Hand-in-hand with this skill is the ability to link research and practice, which should be a natural progression as an administrator seeks to improve a school. The leader who can efficiently incorporate research-based best practices into the fabric of his or her school is well on the way to constructing a dynamic learning environment. A key aspect of this dynamic learning environment is collaboration, the third recommendation from Murphy and his colleagues. Through collaboration, leaders work towards bringing all stakeholders together to achieve research-based objectives aimed at improving instructional practices at the school, thus increasing student achievement (Reeves, 2006). In the end, the construction of a high-achieving student population is accomplished. Fourth, Murphy et al. (2002) concluded that communicating the need for new leadership models will influence the political sector to call for change in leadership principles and goals. As a result, the stage for increased implementation of research best practices within a school's curriculum by aptly prepared school leaders is set. These better trained school leaders are the result of reforming leadership training, the fifth recommendation. Murphy (2002) concluded reforming leadership training creates a better pool of quality candidates with greater prowess as educational leaders. Finally, reculturing school leadership to include individuals who function not only as instructional leaders, but also in organizing

democratic and socially just communities in schools is integral. By redefining education leadership, the establishment of schools where all students achieve at high levels and are successfully educated occurs.

As numerous leadership concepts have evolved over the years in educational leadership, so has the role of the principal. The day of the school principal operating with a managerial mindset is fading away. While managerial skills are still needed to operate schools, in today's educational system, the overall effectiveness of a principal goes well beyond the level of mere manager. Incongruously, an administrator, acting strictly as a manager, is deemed ineffective by the standards of school leadership for the 21st century (Day, 2000). On a practical level, true

leadership is about having a vision and articulating, ordering priorities, getting others to go with you constantly reviewing what you are doing and holding onto things you value while management is about the functions, procedures, and systems by which you realize the vision. (Day, 2000, p.57)

Throughout the United States, the move away from the traditional, bureaucratic role of administrators is redefining the way principals are looked at and complete their jobs. This shift leaves present and future school leaders in search of ways to effectively fill their changing roles.

School Leaders and Instructional Leadership

An analysis of the research on the role of present-day principals produces a wide array of topics for consideration. Terms such as *transformational leadership*, *transactional leadership*, *servant leadership*, *situational leadership*, and *instructional leadership* are used to identify the effective school leader (Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005). Of these, instructional leadership has emerged as one of the most

popular leadership concepts. Over the last 2 decades in education, the principal serving as an instructional leader has been deemed critical to a school's effectiveness. The passing of educational laws like NCLB forced schools to be more accountable for the academic achievement of students. This increased accountability resulted in a shift in the role of the school principal. For many, the shift resulted in the principal becoming more of an instructional leader at the school. Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1999) note that over the last two decades instructional leadership is one of the most frequently discussed educational concepts when talking about improving schools. So, the question is: What constitutes instructional leadership?

The roots of instructional leadership developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the effective schools movement. The movement called for a leader committed to increasing his or her students' academic progress. Since these beginnings, a number of studies have been conducted to give a more precise and useful meaning of instructional leadership. A review of the literature produced more than 125 studies conducted between 1980 and 2000 addressing the topic of instructional leadership (Leithwood et al., 1999). From this research base, characteristics of instructional leadership emerged.

A key characteristic of an instructional leader is managing the school's instructional program. Leithwood (2005) presented an instructional leadership model based upon three main categories of practice: (a) defining the school's mission, (b) managing the instructional program, and (c) promoting a positive school learning culture. Portin (2004) pointed out that the instructional leader is responsible for ensuring quality instruction, modeling teacher practices, and maintaining quality teaching resources. This

includes supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curricula, and monitoring student progress.

The attributes of instructional leadership that received the highest level of visibility over time are found in the description given by Smith and Andrews (as cited in Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005). These researchers identified four dimensions, or roles, of the instructional leader: resource provider, instructional resource, communicator, and visible presence. As resource provider, the principal ensures that teachers have the materials, facilities, and budget necessary to adequately perform their duties. By actively supporting the day-to-day instructional activities and programs and giving instructional issues top priority, the principal serves as an instructional resource. The principal, as a communicator, has and articulates clear goals to the faculty and staff. Lastly, they maintain visible presence by visiting classrooms, making frequent classroom observations, and being accessible to all stakeholders. Fulfillment of these instructional leadership roles perpetuates the concept that teaching and learning are valued aspects of the school. Such a stance places a premium on instruction and demonstrates the principal's commitment to student academic success.

Collectively, these ideas about instructional leadership provide a wealth of knowledge to principals in effectively leading schools and increasing student achievement. Leaders have access to a knowledge base that allows them to be better equipped to meet the demands of today's educational system for quality leaders and strong leadership. Strong instructional leadership sets the stage for the highest level of teaching and learning to take place. When the principal places precedence on teaching and learning, teachers and students see the vision and more likely come on board.

Likewise, structures are in place that clearly shows instruction as a top priority. A school culture where the leader stresses the importance of instruction is on the way towards high student achievement. At the end of the day, being a school of excellence is more than a catch phrase; it truly forms the heartbeat of the school. Furthermore, principals who utilize leadership best practices, operate as instructional leaders and galvanize staff around continuous instructional improvement are several steps ahead in the NCLB accountability game (Brewster & Klump, 2005).

Other Leadership Models

Transformational leadership is a concept based in empowering behaviors by the leader (Sergiovanni, 2004). Sergiovanni postulated that leaders and followers become united in the pursuit of higher level goals common to both under transformational leadership. This united focus translates into power being attributed to those most able to inspire higher levels of personal commitment and accomplishment of group goals (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004). Transformational leadership places the center of attention on the commitments and capacities of all the school's members. In this type of organization, the performance level of everyone increases in the pursuit of excellence. Ultimately, a school culture that produces achievement results beyond expectations emerges (Marks & Printy, 2003). Transformation leadership involves the school leader carrying out the Four I's: (a) individual consideration, (b) intellectual stimulation, (c) inspirational motivation, and (d) idealized influence (Bass & Avolio, as cited in Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). This set of actions has a transforming effect on the level of human conduct of ethical aspirations by both leader and followers (Sergiovanni, 2005). That comprises the heartbeat of transformational leadership.

The next leadership style for consideration is reflective leadership. Reflective leadership promotes continuous growth and improvement by the leader. Reeves (2006) stated, "Reflection is so important for leaders because of the gulf between the theoretical abstractions of academic leadership development programs and the daily lives of leaders" (p. 50). Through reflective leadership, leaders can critically journal and think through lessons learned and use this real-life information to improve upon their craft. The reflective leader establishes teachable points that can be revisited at any time by simply revisiting his journal. Reflective leadership involves an active mindset the individual develops in order to become more effective as a leader. He is never satisfied with his present state and strives to not only better himself, but the culture of his organization as well (Reeves, 2006). Lastly, Reeves concluded:

Reflection is so important for leaders because of the gulf between the theoretical abstractions of academic leadership development programs and the daily lives of leaders. Leadership roles and processes are full of novelty, difficulty, conflict, and disappointments. In other words, leadership itself is a developmental challenge. (p.50)

A leadership style gaining prominence according to the literature is participatory leadership (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004). This leadership style is also known by several other names: group leadership, shared leadership, and teacher leadership. Participatory leadership involves collective decision making by the entire group (teachers & administrators) in schools. While such activity does not diminish the leader's role as the head, this leadership style does place a premium on the leader utilizing the talents of other organizational members for the overall improvement of the school. The participatory leader recognizes he can use his position to make decisions, but implementation of decisions happens more readily when other stakeholders are actively

involved in the process. Leverage for improved organizational performance results through collective participation, not one or two individuals dominating the decision-making process. Similarly, the participatory leader recognizes the need to allow decisions to be made by the person with the most expertise and/or greatest knowledge of the subject at hand without fear of losing personal authority. Whatever it takes to have all members enthusiastically involved in the operations of the school is the type of culture a participatory leader tries to promote at his school. In the end, the school is all the better for it and high levels of student learning is a natural by-product (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004; Reeves, 2006).

Kezar's (2001) case study strengthens the idea that participatory leadership has a place in improving schools, but on a cautionary level. This caution is based upon findings that show although a participatory leadership style was utilized at the school; a majority of the stakeholders did not feel adequately included in the school's leadership structure. Kezar presented specific pitfalls to avoid with leaders or schools using the participatory model.

The last theory for discussion is contingency leadership. Contingency leadership is perhaps one of the most complex approaches to leadership. This theory has its roots in the work of Fred Fielder and colleagues during the 1970s (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004). Lunenburg and Ornstein described this style as involving interactions of the leader's personal traits, the leader's behavior, and factors in the leadership situation collectively determining the contingency leader's effectiveness. The idea that contingency leaders will "master a large repertoire of leadership styles" (p.137) is this theory's greatest distinction from other leadership models. Contingency leadership allows individuals to

match the needed leadership style to a particular situation at any given point in time. This fluidity allows the contingency leader to respond accordingly and produce quality results, regardless of the circumstance or situation. With this skill the leader experiences greater influence with others within the organization. As a result, he is able to readily get positive things to transpire. In light of school culture, the contingency leader establishes an atmosphere that produces quality teaching and learning results because his leadership style adaptability warrants it (Lunenberg & Ornstein, 2004). Day, Harris, and Hadfield (2001) produced findings that demonstrate principals who make use of effective contingency leadership raised the level of student achievement. The study while conducted in the United Kingdom provides significant insight into what Day, et al. calls “values-led contingency leadership” for western leaders and the influence this form of leadership can have on student achievement.

Jabal (2006) in his study of contingency leadership expands upon the work of Day, et al. (2001) and the topic of “values-led contingency leadership” (p. 21). He stated that principals exercising this form of leadership “align person and organizational values, vision, and priorities to the broader social and school-specific conditions” (p. 55). This is accomplished by principals who: (a) apply situational expertise to align values, vision, and the contextual and contingent nature of leadership, (b) are people-centered and emphasize the well-being and success of children as people-not just as students, and (c) are learning focused who provide direction and exercise influence for the development and betterment of both staff and students (Jabal, p. 55).

School Leaders and Change

The rethinking of the principalship is a result of a changing educational system. This new context leads to a need by the principal to understand the change process. It is one thing to see and know change is going on, but the astute leader has practices in place that demonstrate an awareness of what is taking place and for leading in these change situations. Fullan (2001) provided a useable framework for principals in understanding the change process: (a) the goal is not to innovate the most; (b) it is not enough to have the best ideas; (c) appreciate the implementation dip; (d) redefine resistance; (e) reculturing is the name of the game; and (f) never a list, always complexity (p. 34).

These six components provide useful points for consideration by the principal when contending with change. Robbins and Alvy (2004) reminded principals of the frustrating reality that change takes time. Realization of this fact allows principals to not have unreal expectations, which can lead to additional problems. A large part of why change takes time is that it takes people into the unfamiliar. People are removed from their familiar way of doing things and acceptance of changing to something different often does not occur rapidly. For this reason, principals should demonstrate a level of sensitivity with individuals at the school in dealing with the change as it is implemented. Similarly, understanding that change takes time prevents principals from moving along to the next idea too soon. In an era, where time is at a premium, it is easy to move from one idea to the next in hopes of attaining the desired outcome. Good leaders understand this is not the route to go, and allow the change process to be fully implemented and a thorough assessment of its impact to be done. For the cognizant principal, leading in a culture of change is not about a mere set of action steps to follow, it is thoughtful insight into

dealing with whatever the change brings and producing an authentic learning environment within schools (Fullan, 1997).

School Culture

The study of school culture has increased in recent years, but the concept of school culture is not new. Waller (1932) stated, “Schools have a culture that is definitely their own. There are, in the school, complex rituals of personal relationships, a set of folkways, mores, and irrational sanctions, a moral code based upon them. There are traditions, and traditionalists, waging their world-old war against innovators” (p. 96). More recently, Sergiovanni (2000) called school culture the normative glue that holds the organization together, steering stakeholders in a common direction. School culture is a key variable educational leaders need to be aware of and willing to assess to improve schools.

Researchers agree that school culture is an important, but often overlooked, component of school improvement (Frieberg, 1999; Levine & Lezotte, 1995; Peterson & Deal, 1999). According to Wagner and Masden-Copes (2002), determining the quality and health of the school culture is essential for all schools as they strive to improve. They conclude institutions can shape their school culture through three key processes:

1. Read the culture: Leaders can learn the history of the school by talking to the school’s storytellers to understand the culture’s historical sources as well as analyzing current norms and values.
2. Assess the culture: Staff and administration should assess the culture, determining which elements of the culture support the school’s core purpose and mission, and which elements hinder achieving valued ends.
3. Shape the culture: Staff and administration can active shape their culture by reinforcing its positive aspects and working to transform its negative aspects (p.4).

Ensuring the school culture is right should precede “programs” in efforts to improve schools and raise student achievement. Schools with top-down, “do it or else” instructional plans rarely improve; schools sensitive to their cultures are successful in improving student learning (Wagner & Masden-Copes). A positive school culture is a key factor for schools as quality educational institutions.

Positive School Culture

Positive school culture is supported in the literature as being a significant factor. Peterson and Deal (1998) contend that the culture of a school is a powerful variable. Ignoring this variable can be a fatal mistake. They also state that cultural patterns shape the way people think, act, and feel. A school’s culture can define the quality of a school that creates healthy learning places, nurtures children’s and parents’ dreams and aspirations, stimulates teacher’s creativity and enthusiasm, and elevates all of its members (Freiberg & Stein, as cited in Freiberg, 1999).

The literature reveals that school administrators play a vital role in creating the school culture present in schools. His/her interaction with stakeholders significantly influences the school culture. For this reason, it is critical for administrators to possess the necessary skills, demeanor, and so on, to help establish a positive school culture within his/her school. In education today, student achievement takes precedence, so schools must place themselves in positions to having high quality teaching and student learning going on. Subsequently, it is school leadership that must lead the way in this initiative. In order to accomplish the desired results, school leaders with the necessary repertoire of behaviors to promoting the establishment of a positive school culture is an extremely needed quality. While there are certainly other responsibilities for

administrators to carryout, the need to ensure the development of positive school culture is a duty that simply cannot be overlooked.

Principals need a wide array of skills to serve effectively in schools. From instructional leaders to disciplinarians, and a wide range of other job duties, administrators have a tremendous job. In looking at the needed skills of an effective school leader, Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) conclude “an effective leader builds a culture that positively influences teachers, who, in turn, positively influence students” (p. 47). In the end, while other qualities are certainly needed by administrators, the ability to create a positive school culture is backed by significant research in addition to what is found in Marzano et al.’s *School Leadership that Works* to be a top priority in light of improving student achievement.

Additionally, principals themselves identify the value of a positive school culture being present within the school. The ability to create a school culture where all students can learn and high levels of student achievement occur is a major goal of today’s administrator. In accomplishing this goal, administrators acknowledge that having an atmosphere of caring, sharing, mutual respect, and trust among all members of the school community is critical to the achievement equation. For this reason, many put significant effort into leading the charge for the formation of a positive school culture at their respective schools. Good school leaders realize the tremendous power a school culture has on producing a fine educational institution, thus the effort is put forth to create a positive one. Evidence supports that a positive school culture is not only a determinant of student motivation and student achievement, but also supports a safe and collaborative

learning environments. Effective principals recognize this fact and make it their business to uphold practices that promote such a culture within schools (Chiang, 2003).

In light of the all the members of a school community, the administrator's job in upholding a positive school culture is a great task. The reasoning behind the aforementioned statement is because administrators in leading the way for the creation of a positive school culture affect everyone else in the school building. What school leaders do or do not do plays a major role in making the school a place where teachers and students will want to be. Marshall (2005) outlines three steps for administrators to follow in creating a more positive school culture:

Step 1: Practice positive self-talk.

Step 2: Share the technique with staff

Step 3: Share with students (p. 29).

Through a concerted effort by principals, the ability to have an effect on creating a positive school culture is definitely an achievable outcome.

Students' Perceptions of School Culture & Demographic Variables (Ethnicity, Age & Gender)

Ethnicity may play a role in student perceptions of culture. Tyson (2002), in an ethnographic study of two all-Black elementary schools, concluded that African American children begin school with an orientation toward achievement. The students' school experiences helped shape the development of their attitudes toward school. Whether in success or failure these experiences had a tremendous impact. Not surprisingly, negative attitudes were more likely expressed by students experiencing

school failure. Tyson's findings imply students' feelings of academic failure rather than ethnicity correlates with a decline in positive perceptions of school.

Conversely, Howard's study (2002) of African American teachers whom African American students considered effective instructors sheds light on factors that may increase students' positive perceptions of school culture. Through the use of classroom observations and semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, Howard identified three teacher behaviors influential in African American students' positive perceptions of their learning environment: (a) students preferred teachers who maintained a family-and-community-like atmosphere in the classroom; (b) students perceived effective teachers as employing implicit and explicit displays of caring behaviors; and (c) students appreciated their teacher's verbal affirmation of effort, even if the teacher's classroom expectations were challenging. For students in this study, ethnicity did play some role in their positive perceptions of school.

Hollins and Spencer (1990) produced three key themes related to perceptions of African American students about school: (a) relationships between teachers and students affected academic achievement, (b) teachers' responsiveness to students' personal lives generated positive feelings that led to increased effort in school, and (c) students expressed a preference for teachers who enabled them to actualize their own ideas in completing assignments and becoming engaged in class discussions. Slaughter-Defoe and Carlson (1996) corroborated the important role that teachers play in students' perceptions of school. Their study involved African American and Latino students in which African American students expressed interactive teacher-child relations as the most important element in creating positive feelings about school. Teachers who cared for students, were

available to comfort them, and were concerned with helping students deal with their school and personal problems had a significant impact on their school experiences.

Phelan, Yu, and Davidson (1994) examined the pressures and problems African American students perceive to have an impact on their educational experiences. Their study revealed students had difficulty in class when teaching styles were boring and did not take advantage of students' strengths. Students stated they often felt singled out or "picked on" solely because of their ethnic background or cultural norms and beliefs. As a result, they resorted to inappropriate behavior such as copying other students' work, creating disruptions in class, or withdrawing quietly from the class. Students did express the teachers that had a positive impact on their learning frequently encouraged them and provided personalized attention when they began experiencing academic difficulties.

The literature provides some evidence that ethnicity plays a role in perceptions of students about school culture, especially African American students. However, the role of teachers for African American students appears to be the most significant aspect that shapes their perceptions about school (Hollins & Spencer, 1990; Howard, 2002; Phelan et al., 1994; Slaughter-Defoe & Carlson, 1996; Tyson, 2002). The role of teachers in the lives of African American students is of greater significance than ethnicity.

Age and gender appear to influence a student's responses to school culture. Current investigations of the role of gender and age in students' attitudes toward school support the trends identified by Haladyna and Thomas (1979). Using a survey, completed by 2,845 students in grades one through eight in Oregon, these researchers evaluated student perceptions of school culture. Haladyna and Thomas's study revealed three trends. First, students' attitudes become less positive as they move up in grade level. For

the variable attitude toward school, the means of both boys and girls declined steadily throughout the elementary school years. Second, during middle school students begin to perceive school less positively. The most notable decline occurred between grades 6 and 7. Third, boys' attitudes toward school decline significantly more than do the attitudes of girls, especially between grades 4 and 8.

Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold and Kannas (1998) found the perceptions of school culture become less positive as students leave the preteen years and enter adolescence. Overall, their satisfaction with school declines as well. Samdal et al. identified four factors that make up student perceptions of school: (a) justice in school, (b) disturbances in school, (c) teacher support, and (d) student support. These four factors were used to explain the variance of students' satisfaction with school. Two trends emerged: the proportion of students reporting low satisfaction with school increased with each age group and the proportion of 11- and 13-year-old boys reporting low satisfaction with school was significantly larger than the girls.

Buckley, Storino and Sebastiani (2003) lend support to the trend that boys perceive school environments less favorably than girls. The researchers used data from the California School Climate and Safety Survey to examine the attitudes students in a semi-rural school district regarding school culture. Multivariate analyses of variance were computed comparing perceptions of school climate by ethnicity and gender. Latino students comprised a large portion of the sample population. For comparison, Latino students did not differ significantly from non-Latino students on the climate dimensions studied. However, the differences in the responses of boys as compared to girls were significant for each of three school climate factors (how well the school is maintained,

adult support, and safety). The researchers reported that boys in the seventh grade seemed more likely than girls to judge school climate as less positive on these dimensions.

Wigfield and Harold (1992) suggested that student perceptions of their academic abilities begin to decline during early elementary school. A child questionnaire was used to assess the children's perceptions of their academic ability and their self-esteem. The participants in the study were predominately White children in 10 elementary schools from four different school districts. Wigfield et al. calculated the means for the effects on children's perceptions of ability. Findings showed older children had less positive perceptions than did younger children about their self-esteem and school activities. Sport activities were the exception. Older children perceived their prowess in sports more positively than younger children did.

Student demographic factors such as ethnicity, age, and gender are important to consider when studying school culture and three important trends emerged in the literature reviewed: (a) females experience schools more positively than males, (b) as students move through their school years, their perceptions of school culture and of their own academic abilities decrease, and (c) while ethnicity does not seem to be correlated with school culture, the perceptions of minority children of what constitutes a supportive school environment may differ from the perceptions of middle-class White children in elementary and middle schools.

Summary

The principalship today is indeed a challenging occupation. With increased pressures to improve schools and increase student achievement, the school principal has a daunting task ahead not only as an instructional leader, but in all of his/her duties. He/she

plays a crucial role in school-wide efforts to raise standards and have students achieve at high levels. Through resilience and hard work these aloof ideas to some are attainable goals to the judicious principal. Backed by leaders demonstrating research-based leadership practices the road to a higher quality educational system is paved. Consequently, all of America's schools benefit and its entire educational system made stronger.

Effective leaders understand the importance of the leadership they demonstrate and realize the importance of their actions in leading schools towards excellence or away from it. In the end, it is the collective traits and behaviors of principals that ultimately express a leader's effectiveness—the type of effectiveness that produces lasting quality results and school cultures that adequately meet the needs of all students and truly lives up to “no child left behind.”

Chapter 3 provides a review of the research methodology for this study. Specifically, chapter 3 explains why the research methodology employed was chosen along with procedures for selection of participants and my role in conducting the research. Chapter 3 explains how data was collected and analyzed along with verifications steps implemented to ensure reliable and trustworthy research.

CHAPTER 3:

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This sequential mixed methods study involved a case study design to investigate the perceptions 8th grade African American students have about school culture at Teach Them All Middle School (TTA), a middle school in rural southeast Georgia. Thirty-six 8th grade African American students participated in the study. The researcher is the assistant principal at TTA where the study was conducted and has worked with the students involved in the study for three years. This chapter includes sections on the research design, setting, participant selection, researcher's role, instrumentation/materials, data collection procedures, data analysis, and verification.

Design of the Study

This study employed a mixed methods approach, which has several advantages in using. "Often, this model is used so that a researcher can gain broader perspectives as a result of using the different methods as opposed to using the predominant method alone" (Creswell, 2003, p. 218). Creswell explained, "The mixed methods model has strengths because it is able to collect both quantitative and qualitative data at the same time, during a single data collection phase and gain insight from the different types of data (p. 218). Katzenmeyer (1997) added, "Using different sources and methods can build on the strength of each data collection step and minimize the weaknesses of a single approach", which is argued to "increase both the validity and reliability of evaluation data" (p.1). With the aforementioned in mind, a mixed-methods approach was an appropriate methodology for the present study. My goal was to produce both breadth and depth in the research findings and a mixed methods approach served that purpose.

The sequential mixed methods research presented here follows the case study design. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) define case study research as “the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomena” (p. 436). Additionally, case studies involve an in-depth look at one or a few examples or events rather than large samples. Case studies require a great deal of attention to detail, and researchers must seek to verify the information to allow for validity and acceptance in the research community. In a case study the researcher is developing a case for the research. The study describes with words an overall picture of events and procedures that are taking place to solve or describe a problem (Creswell, 1998, 2003). The nature of this study and its research questions necessitated the case study approach. Specifically, an exploratory case study design used in this mixed methods study involving the perception of school culture by a selected group of African American students. The present study also examined whether differences exist between male and female students in their perceptions of school culture at TTA. A description of participants’ perception was given along with any identifiable themes within the data. This research design was selected in order to study school culture in a realistic context. An attempt was made to ensure authenticity of the research findings. Merriam (1998) stresses the importance of natural settings to case study design and the ability to obtain comprehensive data through the design’s use.

According to Creswell (2003), mixed methods research often produces well-validated and substantiated findings. This is one of the primary advantages of this mixed methods model and a key reason this methodology was chosen. Data for the study was collected sequentially and analyzed with equal weight being given to both the

quantitative and qualitative phases of the research are additional reasons for using mixed methods.

Setting

The setting of this study was a rural Georgia middle school. This school is located within a rural city in a coastal southeast Georgia county. The county encompasses 367 square miles. According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, the county's total population is 26, 067. Broken down by race the population is 69.2% White, 24.2% Black, and the remainder mainly Asian. The city in which TTA lies is on the western boundary of one county and has grown into the eastern section of a neighboring one as urban flight has taken place over the last 10 years (United States Census Bureau, 2006).

The city in which the study took place has a population of 10,491 people. It encompasses 17.3 square miles. Broken down by race the city is 59.6% White, 36.9% Black, and 3.2% Hispanic with the remainder being Asian. Of its population 6,714 members are over the age of 25 and within that group, 74.7% hold high school diplomas. The median family income is \$40,091. The percentage of families living below the poverty level stands at 15.4% (431 families). The percentage of individuals at the poverty level is 19.9% (2,053; United State Census Bureau, 2006). See Table 1 for a breakdown of the demographic information for the city and county of the selected study site.

Table 1

Demographic Overview of County/City

Site's county/city statistics	Total population	Percent white	Percent black	Percent hispanic	Percentage high school graduate over 25	Median income per family	Families living at or Below poverty level	Individuals living at or below poverty level
County	26,067	66.2	24.2	8.9	61.8	\$26,811	17.8%	23.9%
City	14,491	59.6	36.9	3.2	74.7	\$40,091	15.4%	19.9%

Participants

Roberts (2004) provides a description of the terms sample and population that clearly distinguishes between the two:

Sampling is the process of selecting a number of individuals for a study in such a way that the individuals represent the larger group from which they were selected. The individuals selected comprise a sample and the larger group is referred to as a population. The population is the group of interest to the researcher, the group to which she or he would like the results of the study to be generalizable. (pp. 111 – 112)

This study targeted a minimum participant sample number of 30 students ($N = 30$). This sample number represented a feasible number of students deemed necessary to obtain a quality data set reflective of the total population. Although higher sample numbers are desirable, this smaller sample size still provided relevant and important data for this research study. In fact, Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) concluded small samples can be

used in quantitative research that represents exploratory research. Consideration was given to the sample size when analyzing the data.

Thirty-six 8th grade African American students participated in this study. Of this group of 36, 6 individuals (3 females and 3 males) were selected to participate in the interview phase of the research. TTA was selected as the site for this study because its faculty is primarily White (95%) while over 50% of the school's student population belongs to different ethnic minority groups (52% black, 2% Hispanic, 1% multiracial). Two criteria were used to identify potential participants: First, the 8th grade students eligible to participate in the study had to have attended TTA for all three years of their middle school education, and second, students could not have repeated a grade during middle school.

For the qualitative phase, 6 interviewees were selected from the larger sample. Once the original sample was identified, the male and female student names were placed in separate hats and names randomly drawn to identify students to participate in the interview phase. Six students were chosen for the interview phase. From the qualitative perspective when conducting case study research an in-depth look at one or a few examples or events rather than large samples occurs (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Furthermore, for qualitative research an appropriate sample size is "ascertained by how well the sample can represent the phenomena of interest (i.e., to what extent the participants have experienced the phenomena and can articulate their experiences)" (Morse, 1991, p. 121). For this study, a sample size of six for the interview (qualitative) phase was enough to produce a saturation of data related to school culture at TTA. The sample size was taken into consideration when analyzing the results.

Researcher's Role

Creating an authentic learning environment is at the heart of this researcher's goals as an educator. Extensive experience as a coach, teacher, and administrator in a variety of school atmospheres brought confidence to this researcher in working with the participants of this study and obtaining useful findings regarding school culture at TTA. Even in bringing certain biases to the study, I felt confident in his abilities to ethically conduct and carry out the research presented here.

I am the assistant principal at TTA and have worked with the students involved in the study for three years. Proper procedure was followed to obtain permission to conduct this study within the school. Access to participants was gained through consent from the superintendent of schools and the principal of the research site. Upon holding an informational meeting with prospective students to disseminate the appropriate parental consent forms and necessary information regarding the research study, students were given the option to opt out partaking in the study. Students had an opportunity to ask and have questions about the study answered. There were no penalties to students who wish not to participate or withdraw from the study. Actual participants in the study were selected from eligible students who return signed parent consent forms granting participation.

I solely handled all data collection and data analysis. I actively collected data for and was an observer in the study. Multiple strategies were put in place to validate the accuracy of study findings. Possible threats to the validity and quality of the research conducted here were overcome by a wide array of quality control factors being

implemented throughout the study such as use of a reliable data collection instrument, data triangulation, use of peer debriefing, and member checking.

I was responsible for protecting participants' rights by obtaining proper permission to conduct research in an ethical manner as approved by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I created an IRB application and submitted to Walden University for approval before any research conducted. Upon IRB approval (approval # 12-03-08-0320711), research conducted followed guidelines identified by researcher in IRB application. Participants were advised of their rights prior to participating in the study and had the option of opting out at any point they deemed necessary. All data collected and any other information that could jeopardize the rights of the participants kept secure by me. The final report contained identifiers that establish anonymity for participants and confidentiality of the participants utilized throughout the research process.

Instrumentation/Materials

Instrumentation for this study consisted of a survey instrument and an interview protocol with seven questions. The survey instrument used was developed by the researcher. The 40 questions initially proposed for the study were reduced to a final survey product consisting of 30 questions (see Appendix B). Questions were designed to measure the perceptions of African American students about their middle school education. The final survey product resulted from a process that included initial evaluation by a panel of experts. This panel of experts included five middle school principals with over 20 years of experience in the field of education. Based upon the recommendations of the expert panel, 30 items were selected and peer reviewed with a

group of African American peers with at least 10 years experience in education to determine the clarity and relevance of the questions to the research. Peer suggestions were recorded and considered, and survey questions were modified to produce the final survey product.

The survey consisted of Likert-scale questions. Miller (1991) writes that Likert scales are exceedingly reliable in rough ordering of people with regard to a particular attitude or attitude complex. Kerlinger (1992) outlines the purpose of the Likert scale is to put the subjects somewhere on an agreement continuum of the attitude being evaluated. According to Anderson (1990), Likert scales can range from three to seven intensity levels, with five being the most practical for common purposes. The survey in this study was based on a scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The range of the scale was 1 to 4: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree and 4 = strongly disagree. Students were instructed to choose the one answer that most accurately expressed their opinion.

In the qualitative phase of the study, the researcher is the instrument (Patton, 1990), designing and gathering information relevant to the study. Materials used in qualitative segment of the study were the interview, interview transcripts, and notes generated by me during the interviews. An interview protocol developed by me was utilized during the interview sessions (see Appendix C). The one-on-one interview consisted of seven open-ended questions to which students were asked to respond. The interviews were designed to last no more than 30 minutes, though *overtime* was allowed. Necessary notes were recorded by me during the interview. Immediately following each interview, I dictated a transcript of the interview session.

Data Collection

A single-time administration of the survey was conducted with all the participants. A time was prearranged for the student group as a whole to complete and submit their survey to me and I served as a proctor during the survey administration. Surveys were completed using an online format. The online survey permitted flexible administration to students along with providing immediate access to survey results for analysis. Also the use of the online survey helped streamline the data collection process. Student interviews were conducted following completion of the survey.

The qualitative phase involved the use of one-on-one interviews. An interview guide was developed and utilized during the interview process. The interviews were conversational and semi-structured. Hatch (2002) suggests following the rules of polite conversation when conducting interviews for a qualitative study. A conversational approach was used to engage the participants in dialogue and obtain their descriptions of their educational experiences. This approach allowed participants to be talked *with* and not *to*. Patton (2002) considers the informal conversational review the most open-ended of all interview approaches, offering a high level of flexibility. In the end, the interview guide along with the informal conversational review formed a semi-structured interview approach. This data collection procedure allowed me to add or subtract questions depending on the responses of the participants.

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed for review by me. Each of the six participants interviewed were asked to share their unadulterated perceptions of the school culture at TTA. Interviews were conducted on a predetermined date and took place in the conference room of the school media center. A one-week reminder was given to all

student participants before interviews were conducted. All interviews incorporated the use of open-ended questions, and they were later transcribed verbatim for further review. Review of written documents helps to verify and corroborate data gathered through interviews (Yin, 2003).

This process generated high quality research data as the interviewees were allowed to fully tell their stories. Conway (2000) asserts that recording the oral histories of African Americans is extremely important to preserve. As such, leaving interview responses in their original form eliminated the chance that my perspective is imposed on the study participant's stories. To preserve the richness of the students' perspectives, views, and experiences interview responses were used in their original form as transcribed.

Data Analysis

Hatch (2002) stated, "Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning" (p. 148).

Data were analyzed to identify:

1. Patterns of student perceptions that define or illustrate the quality of education received at TTA.
2. Patterns of student perceptions that define or illustrate the level of support and encouragement received from faculty and staff at TTA.
3. Patterns of student perceptions that define or illustrate the students' overall experiences at TTA.

Quantitative Data

Statistical analysis of the survey results was conducted. Summarized data were analyzed for key patterns in students' responses using descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics show the mean and standard deviation for each survey question. Additionally, means for survey responses are grouped by gender and analyzed to determine whether significant difference exists between male and female students' perceptions of TTA's school culture. Quantitative data was collected, tabulated, and analyzed during December 2008 and January 2009 using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data analysis of the interviews regarding school culture at TTA was done using a coding process for the perspectives held by the study's participants. Interview tapes were transcribed verbatim. The major themes regarding school culture at TTA were generated, interpreted, and described. Data was reviewed repeatedly and continually coded (constant comparison analysis was used; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Likewise, the use of pattern matching was conducted to help identify themes. Pattern matching is one of the most desirable techniques for analyzing qualitative data (Yin, 2003). Pattern matching was useful in properly developing and coding like data. All data and preliminary findings were verified through member checking.

Coding Process

Dana and Yendol-Silva (2003) state coding is the process that "disaggregates the data and breaks it down into manageable segments" (p. 90). Coding is essential for making sense of, sorting, and assembling the data for final presentation. The coding

process was guided by the steps prescribed by Tesch (1990), Hatch (2002), and Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007, 2008). The interviews were audio taped and transcribed immediately following each interview. The interview transcripts were reviewed and checked for accuracy by the interviewees. After the review process, each transcript was examined independently looking for clusters of like information. After completing this process for all informants, I determined patterns or themes to develop a preliminary list of codes that lead to having no more than five to six codes for the entire data set, as Creswell (1998, 2003) suggested. This process involves reading through the transcripts several times to develop codes based on chunks of data related to similar topics. From the final list of codes, a color was assigned to each code, and each chunk of data color coded accordingly within the interview transcripts. These chunks of data were then grouped together by code and analyzed further according to the emerging theme or pattern present (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007) along with any exceptions being noted.

Data convergence was conducted using all quantitative and qualitative data produced in the study. During this aspect of the research, themes that emerged from both the data sets were compared. Similarities and differences were noted and described.

Verification

Verification outlines the procedures used to describe the quality criteria employed in a study. These procedures ensure the accuracy and credibility of the findings for a study. Verification methods, while accomplishing the same goal, are very different for quantitative and qualitative research. A survey was used during the quantitative portion of the research. This instrument's validity and reliability in measuring student perceptions of school culture within a middle school was established through review by a panel of

experts and a group of African American peers with doctoral degrees. Members of both groups have more than ten years experience in education.

Qualitatively, construct validity involves establishing correct operational measures for the concepts studied. The test for construct validity entails using multiple sources of evidence, establishing a chain of evidence, and having the draft of the study report reviewed by the study's participants (Yin, 2003). In ensuring construct validity, multiple sources of evidence came in the form of the interviews and interview notes generated by me. Member checking and triangulation served as the chain of evidence. Member checking involved the preliminary findings being shared with the participants so they can determine if the data was accurate. The interview data was triangulated with the results of the survey and observation notes so the three sources of data could support each other.

Peer debriefing was another strategies used for quality control (Creswell, 2003) in this study. A coworker who is a recent doctoral graduate served as the peer debriefer. The ultimate purpose of peer debriefing is to enhance the credibility, or truth value in a study, by providing an external check on the inquiry process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The peer debriefer in this study made pointed observations and suggestions, and posed "devil's advocate" questions throughout the research process.

Credibility was brought to the study by: (a) showing coherent logic or explanations that make sense to the reader, (b) discussing the findings in a clear and credible manner, (c) discussing the limitations of what was discovered and what is still not known or is unclear to the researcher, (d) answering the question as to how well the researcher addressed the study's fundamental objectives, (e) discussing how the findings

can be generalized to public schools in general, (f) seeking to clarify the evaluative process, and (g) providing a thorough explanation of the process from its beginning to end (Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, & Dillon, 2003).

Summary

This chapter included a section on the research design that described in detail the overall design of the study. It addressed the manner in which participants would be selected and provided a demographic overview of the participating site. It explored the data collection procedures, how the data would be analyzed, and the interpretation process. Finally, the chapter closed with a section on verification procedures and what type of evidence would be used to demonstrate quality and establish credibility for the study.

CHAPTER 4:
RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The following chapter presents the process by which data for this exploratory mixed methods study was generated and analyzed. Included in this section are the research questions that guided the study, the collected survey and interview data collected and an interpretation of these data. Answers to the research questions based on findings in the study are also included.

The achievement gap that exists between African American and White students at Teach Them All Middle School (TTA) was the key factor behind this research. The purpose of the research was to gather information from African American students that may aid TTA in raising the achievement of these students to levels attained by their White peers. To accomplish this purpose, this research examined African American student perceptions of school culture based upon their experiences at TTA. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do 8th grade African American students describe their perception of the role of school leaders in shaping a school culture that is academically supportive?
2. How do 8th grade African American students describe their perception of the school culture at TTA with regards to the academic support, academic rigor, and encouragement they have received from administrators and faculty?
3. Is there a difference between male and female African American students in their perception of school culture at TTA?

The research design was a sequential mixed methods case study. Upon approval from Walden University's IRB, the research process began in December 2008. Thirty-six African American middle school students at Teach Them All Middle School (TTA) were surveyed first. This sample consisted of 21 female and 15 male students. The survey consisted of 31 items. The first 30 items of the survey served to gauge student perceptions of school culture at TTA while the 31st item was a gender question utilized for data analysis purposes. The survey results were entered into the SPSS software program and analyzed to determine mean and standard deviation.

Six students (3 males and 3 females) were randomly selected for one-on-one, face-to-face interviews with me following the survey phase of the study. Each 20-minute interview was conducted in the media center conference room at TTA. The interviews were conversational and semistructured. Hatch (2002) suggested following the rules of polite conversation when conducting interviews for a qualitative study; therefore, a conversational approach was used to engage the participants in dialogue and obtain their descriptions of their educational experiences. An interview guide was followed (see Appendix C). Interviews were recorded using a tape recorder and notes were taken. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim and participants were asked to check the transcriptions for accuracy. To identify major themes and patterns, I reviewed the interview responses multiple times using constant comparison analysis. Specifically, an inductive constant comparison (e.g., codes then themes emerged from the data) was undertaken (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Three stages were conducted: (a) data was chunked into segments and codes assigned to segments, (b) codes were grouped into similar categories, and (c) codes were refined and themes identified (Leech &

Onwuegbuzie, 2008). The themes were compared and analyzed, and along with the survey results, were used to answer the research questions.

Overview of Survey Results

Analysis of the data demonstrated largely homogenous responses to the survey items meaning mean scores were in close proximity to each other for all survey items. Eighty percent of the survey responses had a mean score above 3.01. Due to an absence of outliers in student responses, the usefulness of the mean as a statistic for analysis in this study was supported (Johnson, 2006).

Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation results for Questions 1-30 of the survey. A review of the means showed a range of 1.69 to 3.56. Eighty percent of the questions had scores above 3.0 (*agree*). Conversely, no questions had a score below 1.0 (*strongly disagree*). Question 24 responses had the highest agreement with a mean of 3.56, suggesting students have a strong sense of belonging to TTA. Responses to Question 12 had the lowest agreement with a mean of 1.69, suggesting students feel strongly that African American students are not treated differently than their White counterparts by the administrators at the school. Question 26 responses produced the highest standard deviation with a score of 1.052, signifying there is substantial variance in the way students view teacher frustration with African American students. Responses to Question 2 generated the lowest standard deviation with a score of 0.485, suggesting there is little variance in student responses about their enjoyment in coming to school daily.

Table 2

Survey Means and Standard Deviations: All Participants

Question	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
1. I am being equipped for academic success in high school.	36	3	4	3.36	.487
2. I enjoy coming to school daily.	36	2	4	3.22	.485
3. School rules are fair and consistently enforced when students misbehave.	36	2	4	3.06	.630
4. School is a place where I feel safe and secure.	36	1	4	3.17	.737
5. The faculty/staff respect my cultural (African American) identity.	36	1	4	3.28	.659
6. I consistently feel challenged to perform at a high level academically.	36	2	4	3.39	.645
7. The teachers pay attention to my needs as a student.	36	2	4	3.25	.604
8. I feel cared for as an individual at school.	36	2	4	3.25	.500
9. I believe I was academically prepared for the CRCT on last year.	36	2	4	3.33	.676
10. Most teachers are accessible if I need extra help with my class work.	36	2	4	3.53	.560
11. I feel African American students are treated differently than White students by teachers.	36	1	4	2.06	.924
12. I feel African American students are treated differently than White students by the administrators.	36	1	4	1.69	.786
13. The administrators help create a positive environment for me at school.	36	2	4	3.31	.577

Table Continues

Question	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
14. My teachers consistently encourage me to do my best.	36	2	4	3.53	.560
15. Teachers listen to my concerns and try to do something about them.	36	1	4	3.14	.639
16. My teachers consistently present exciting and challenging lessons during class.	36	1	4	3.03	.774
17. Most teachers go above and beyond to ensure I am learning.	36	2	4	3.25	.692
18. The administrators make sure that teachers are doing their best in teaching students.	36	2	4	3.36	.639
19. I feel the academic expectations for African American students are low.	36	1	4	2.19	.920
20. This school has good principals.	36	3	4	3.50	.507
21. This school has good teachers.	36	1	4	3.06	.715
22. I believe I am receiving a quality education.	36	3	4	3.42	.500
23. The administrators care about students doing well academically.	36	2	4	3.56	.558
24. I feel like I belong in this school.	36	2	4	3.28	.513
25. Students and teachers care about each other.	36	1	4	2.89	.667
26. Many teachers display frustration with African American students.	36	1	4	2.42	1.052
27. The school frequently celebrates the accomplishments of students.	36	2	4	2.97	.696
28. School is preparing me for a better way of life in the future.	36	3	4	3.53	.506

Question	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
29. I feel that I can talk with the administrators about problems I'm having at school.	36	2	4	3.33	.632
30. I am proud to be a student at this school.	36	2	4	3.36	.543

Table 3 illustrates the pattern of agreement for student responses to the first 30 items in the survey. This pattern of agreement shows which questions had similar mean scores representing like perceptions of students regarding the respective question. Table 3 served as an additional data analysis tool and brought greater meaning to perceptions reflected by students in responding to survey items.

Table 3

Survey Responses: Pattern of Student Agreement by Means for Survey Questions

Strong disagreement < 1.5	Medium disagreement 1.51-2.50	Medium agreement 2.51-3.00	Strong agreement > 3.01
None	11, 12, 19, 26	25, 27	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 28, 29, 30

Questions classified as medium disagreement are: 11, 12, 19, and 26. Responses to Questions 11 and 12 suggested students do not feel African American students are treated differently than White students by teachers and administrators. Question 19 responses demonstrated students generally do not feel the academic expectations for

African American students are low. Students do not believe many teachers at TTA display frustration with African American students evidenced by responses to question 26.

Responses to questions classified as medium agreement (Questions 25 and 27) suggested students feel students and teachers care about each other and students generally agree TTA frequently celebrates the accomplishments of students.

Results produced a high number of questions to which the perceptions of students reflected strong agreement. Question classified as strong agreement based upon student responses included: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 28, 29, and 30. Question 1 responses suggested students believe strongly that they are being equipped for academic success in high school. Responses to Question 2 demonstrated students enjoy coming to school daily. The notion that school rules at TTA are fair and consistently enforced and that students feel safe and secure at school is concluded from questions 3 and 4 responses. Students felt faculty/staff respect their cultural (African American) identity as evident in responses to question 5. Students strongly agreed to being challenged to perform at a high level academically (question 6). Questions 7 and 8 responses showed students believe teachers pay attention to their needs as students and they feel cared for as an individual at school. Students strongly believed they were prepared for the CRCT on last year according to question 9 responses.

Consistently students demonstrated strong agreement on survey items related to teachers: (a) teachers are accessible if extra help is needed with class work (question 10), (b) teachers encourage students to do their best (question 14), (c) teachers listen to student concerns and try to do something about them (question 15), (d) teachers

consistently present exciting and challenging lessons during class (question 16), and (e) teachers go above and beyond to ensure students are learning (question 17). For perceptions of administrators, strong agreement was deduced for questions 13 (administrators help create a positive environment for students), 18 (administrators make sure that teachers are doing their best in teaching students), 23 (administrators care about students doing well academically), and 29 (students can talk with the administrators about problems at school). The perception TTA has good principals and teachers was supported by responses to question 20 and 21. Question 22 answers suggested students believe they are receiving a quality education. Students felt they belong at TTA and TTA is preparing them for a better way of life in the future as reflected in strong agreement to questions 24 and 28. Lastly, responses to question 30 suggested students have a strong sense of pride in being a student at TTA.

Findings for Research Question 1

Research Question 1 is, “How do 8th grade African American students describe their perception of the role of school leaders in shaping a school culture that is academically supportive?” This question was answered by survey and interview data. Thirty-six eighth grade African American students completed the survey. Survey questions 3, 4, 5, 12, 13, 18, 20, 23, 27, and 29 were analyzed to determine perceptions of 8th grade African American students at TTA to answer Research Question 1. Mean and standard deviation were calculated for these survey items. Analysis of these questions demonstrated that students believe the role of school leaders as important in shaping an academically supportive school culture. Evidence is found in responses to survey items 3, 4, 5, 13, 18, 20, 23, 27, and 29 used to answer this research question. Mean scores for

these survey items showed a level of strong agreement (>3.01) by students (see Table 2 for means). Question 12 responses produced a mean score of 1.69 on a level of disagreement (1.51-2.50) demonstrated students do not feel African American students are treated differently than White students by school administrators.

To collect interview data, six eighth grade African American students (3 male and 3 female) were interviewed. Interview transcripts were given to interviewees for verification of accuracy. Using constant comparison analysis, interview data was coded to identify themes related to student perception of the role of school leaders in shaping a school culture that is academically supportive. The procedure outlined by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) to perform constant comparison analysis was followed:

The researcher first reads through the entire set of data. After doing so, the researcher chunks the data into smaller meaningful parts. Then, the researcher labels each chunk with a descriptive title or a "code." The researcher takes pains to compare each new chunk of data with previous codes, so similar chunks will be labeled with the same code. After all the data has been coded, the codes are grouped by similarity, and a theme is identified and documented based on each grouping. (p. 565)

No one true theme emerged in answer to Research Question 1. Student responses were not closely related when talking about administrators in answering interview questions. Several students responded with "I can't think of anything" or a similar sentiment when asked questions related to administrators. The present survey findings supported the claim students perceive the role of administrators as vital to shaping a school culture that is academically supportive; a conclusion backed by previous research (Danielson, 2002; Marzano et al., 2001; Schmoker, 1999, 2006).

Findings for Research Question 2

Research Question 2 is, “How do 8th grade African American students describe their perception of the school culture at TTA with regards to the academic support, academic rigor, and encouragement they received from administrators and faculty?” Survey and interview data were analyzed to answer this question. Survey items 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28, and 30 were utilized to answer Research Question 2 (see Table 2 for survey mean results). Complete responses to survey items are found in Appendix D. Question 1 found students felt they are being equipped for academic success in high school. Students agreed strongly in Question 2 to enjoying coming to school daily. For feeling consistently challenged to perform at a high level academically and belief in being academically prepared for the CRCT (Question 6 and 9), responses again demonstrated strong agreement by students. More than 90% of students strongly agreed or agreed with Question 7 and 8 which asked about teachers paying attention to the needs of students and students feeling cared for as individuals. When asked if teachers consistently encouraged students to do their best (Question 14), more than 95% of participants strongly agreed or agreed. Responses to Questions 15, 16, and 17 suggested students agreed that teachers listen to their concerns and try to resolve them, teachers consistently provide exciting and challenging lessons, and teachers go above and beyond to ensure students are learning. Question 22 and 28 responses showed no level of disagreement by students for receiving a quality education at TTA and TTA preparing them for a better way of life in the future, they all agreed to these statements. For Questions 24 and 25 respectively, more than 80% of students agreed to feeling they belonged to the school and that students and teachers care about each other. More than

97% of students agreed to pride in being a student at TTA in Question 30. Two questions reflected disagreement by students: (a) feel that academic expectations for African American students are low (Question 19) and (b) belief that teachers display frustration with African American students (Question 26).

Summary of Interview Results Related to Themes

For the six student interviews conducted, three themes emerged in the data related to answering research question 2: (a) TTA has a positive school environment, (b) teacher willingness and availability to help students even after school, and (c) feeling that problems can be brought to the attention of administrators and/or teachers for resolution. Themes were identified following procedures described by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007; 2008) outlined in the previous section, Findings for Research Question 1. Pseudonyms were utilized in the following interview excerpts to protect anonymity of participants. Excerpts are presented in narrative form.

For the theme of TTA having being a positive school environment, Clarence states, "It's a good school. I like everything. I know I can get a good education." Tyler expressed, "I think TTA exhibit all the characteristics. It's been a great experience for me here." Carmen described the focus of TTA as "giving us a good education. They have all the stuff we need to be successful at the high school." Ashia said, "I think it's a positive school area. Overall I think it's a good school environment." Robert summed this theme up by stating, "I feel like TTA is like a good place to get and education, you have a lot of opportunities here." These statements give credence to the belief of students interviewed that TTA has a positive school environment. No negative remarks were given by students regarding the school environment.

The second theme to emerge, the willingness of teacher to help students even after school, was expressed by all 6 students interviewed. Carmen said, “Teachers stay after school if you need help.” Clarence explained, “Like if you need help like after school, the teachers are willing to stay after school and help you.” When asked about help provided to students by teachers, Ashia said “After school help or during lunch recess. When you need help in a particular subject that teacher will help you.” Robert identified “after school tutoring and staying late after class, in mornings or something,” as ways teachers at TTA help students. Laura echoed sentiments expressed by Robert, “I get all the help I need and after school help if needed or morning help in the mornings if needed. When you need help they’ll be there.” Lastly, Tyler said, “They have afterschool care. They go over stuff over again that we didn’t understand.” The idea that a willingness of teachers to provide the needed help to students even after school was an apparent theme supported in the interview data.

The third theme that emerged was students felt problems can be brought to the attention of administrators and/or teachers for resolution. Clarence stated, “I get treated good and if I have a problem I can go to Mr. H or Ms. W or one of my teachers.” Robert remarked, “If I feel uncomfortable in a certain place in the classroom or around certain people, I can go to my teachers or any administrator and talk to them about it and it’s just between me and them.” Carmen explained, “While I rarely experience trouble at school, when I do I know I can get help from the teachers and if not them, Ms. W or Mr. H.” Tyler acknowledged “I have no problem going to my teachers or the principals when I have a problem. I think this is the best way for me to get help and avoid getting into

trouble.” The theme, availability of administrators and teachers to help resolve student problems, was expressed by more than half of the students interviewed.

Collectively, the present findings from the survey and interview data demonstrated positive perceptions of students as it relates to academic support, academic rigor, and encouragement by administrators and teachers at TTA. Further discussion of conclusions for Research Question 2 is found in chapter 5.

Findings for Research Question 3

Research Question 3 is, “Is there a difference between male and female African American students in their perception of school culture at TTA?” This question was answered by survey and interview data along with researcher notes taken during interviews. For the survey, mean and standard deviation were calculated for 30 items on the administered survey. This section presents those results in Table 4 and 5. Table 6 provides a side by side comparison of mean scores for responses given by female and male participants. Each survey question was analyzed to determine general perceptions of students concerning the school culture at TTA and identify any key differences between female and male responses.

Table 4 presents the mean and standard deviation results for questions 1-30 of the survey for female participants. A review of the means shows a range of 1.62 to 3.67. As with the results for all participants, eighty percent of the questions had scores above 3.0 (*agree*). No questions had a score below 1.0 (*strongly disagree*). Questions that generated medium agreement (2.51-3.00) were at a higher percentage 10% when compared to the total responses. Responses to Questions 10 and 28 had the highest agreement with a mean of 3.67, suggesting female students have a strong sense of teachers being accessible to

provide extra help and TTA is preparing them for a better way of life in the future. Question 12 had the lowest agreement with a mean of 1.62 suggesting female students fell strongly that African American students are not treated differently than their White counterparts by the administrators at the school. Question 26 responses yielded the highest standard deviation with a score of 1.052 suggesting like the complete data set results there is substantial variance in female student responses for their view of the way teachers display frustration with African American students. Question 10 and 28 responses generated the lowest standard deviation with a score of 0.483 suggesting there is little variance in female student responses about their sense of teacher accessibility for extra help and the better way of life TTA is preparing them for. These two questions also received the highest means for female responses giving additional support to findings that female students feel teachers at TTA are accessible for extra help with class work and TTA is preparing them for a better future.

Table 4

Survey Means and Standard Deviations: Female Participants

Question	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
1. I am being equipped for academic success in high school.	21	3	4	3.43	.507
2. I enjoy coming to school daily.	21	2	4	3.24	.539
3. School rules are fair and consistently enforced when students misbehave.	21	2	4	3.19	.602

Table Continues

Question	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
4. School is a place where I feel safe and secure.	21	1	4	3.19	.873
5. The faculty/staff respect my cultural (African American) identity.	21	2	4	3.33	.577
6. I consistently feel challenged to perform at a high level academically.	21	2	4	3.43	.598
7. The teachers pay attention to my needs as a student.	21	2	4	3.24	.625
8. I feel cared for as an individual at school.	21	2	4	3.24	.539
9. I believe I was academically prepared for the CRCT on last year.	21	2	4	3.33	.796
10. Most teachers are accessible if I need extra help with my class work.	21	3	4	3.67	.483
11. I feel African American students are treated differently than White students by teachers.	21	1	3	1.95	.805
12. I feel African American students are treated differently than White students by the administrators.	21	1	3	1.62	.669
13. The administrators help create a positive environment for me at school.	21	3	4	3.48	.512
14. My teachers consistently encourage me to do my best.	21	2	4	3.52	.602
15. Teachers listen to my concerns and try to do something about them.	21	1	4	3.14	.727
16. My teachers consistently present exciting and challenging lessons during class.	21	1	4	3.00	.894
17. Most teachers go above and beyond to ensure I am learning.	21	2	4	3.33	.658

Question	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
18. The administrators make sure that teachers are doing their best in teaching students.	21	2	4	3.38	.669
19. I feel the academic expectations for African American students are low.	21	1	4	1.95	.865
20. This school has good principals.	21	3	4	3.52	.512
21. This school has good teachers.	21	2	4	3.14	.727
22. I believe I am receiving a quality education.	21	3	4	3.43	.507
23. The administrators care about students doing well academically.	21	2	4	3.48	.602
24. I feel like I belong in this school.	21	2	4	3.33	.577
25. Students and teachers care about each other.	21	2	4	2.95	.590
26. Many teachers display frustration with African American students.	21	1	4	2.29	1.056
27. The school frequently celebrates the accomplishments of students.	21	2	4	3.05	.805
28. School is preparing me for a better way of life in the future.	21	3	4	3.67	.483
29. I feel that I can talk with the administrators about problems I'm having at school.	21	2	4	3.29	.717
30. I am proud to be a student at this school.	21	3	4	3.48	.512

Table 5 presents the mean and standard deviation results for questions 1-30 of the survey for male participants. A review of the means shows a range of 1.80 to 3.67. Seventy-three percent of the questions had scores above 3.0 (*agree*) slightly lower than percentage seen for all participants. No questions had a score below 1.0 (*strongly disagree*). Questions that generated medium agreement (2.51-3.00) were at a higher percentage 20% when compared to the total responses. Questions 23 responses generated the highest agreement with a mean of 3.67, suggesting male students have perceive strongly that administrators at TTA care about how well students do academically. Answers for Question 12 suggested the lowest agreement with a mean of 1.80 reflecting male students felt strongly that African American students are not treated differently than their White counterparts by the administrators at the school. Questions 11 and 26 responses produced standard deviation scores above 1.0 which demonstrated substantial variance in male student responses for these questions. Answers to Question 11 (feel for African American students being treated different than White students by teachers) resulted in the highest standard deviation with a score of 1.082. Question 26 (perception of level in which teachers display frustration with African American students) responses yielded a standard deviation score of 1.056. Responses for Question 2 and 24 resulted in the lowest standard deviation with scores of 0.414 suggesting there is little variance in male student responses about their enjoyment in coming to school daily and feel of belongingness to the school.

Table 5

Survey Means and Standard Deviations: Male Participants

Question	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
1. I am being equipped for academic success in high school.	15	3	4	3.27	.458
2. I enjoy coming to school daily.	15	3	4	3.20	.414
3. School rules are fair and consistently enforced when students misbehave.	15	2	4	2.87	.640
4. School is a place where I feel safe and secure.	15	2	4	3.13	.516
5. The faculty/staff respect my cultural (African American) identity.	15	1	4	3.20	.775
6. I consistently feel challenged to perform at a high level academically.	15	2	4	3.33	.724
7. The teachers pay attention to my needs as a student.	15	2	4	3.27	.594
8. I feel cared for as an individual at school.	15	3	4	3.27	.458
9. I believe I was academically prepared for the CRCT on last year.	15	3	4	3.33	.488
10. Most teachers are accessible if I need extra help with my class work.	15	2	4	3.33	.617
11. I feel African American students are treated differently than White students by teachers.	15	1	4	2.20	1.082
12. I feel African American students are treated differently than White students by the administrators.	15	1	4	1.80	.941
13. The administrators help create a positive environment for me at school.	15	2	4	3.07	.594

Table Continues

Question	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
14. My teachers consistently encourage me to do my best.	15	3	4	3.53	.516
15. Teachers listen to my concerns and try to do something about them.	15	2	4	3.13	.516
16. My teachers consistently present exciting and challenging lessons during class.	15	2	4	3.07	.594
17. Most teachers go above and beyond to ensure I am learning.	15	2	4	3.13	.743
18. The administrators make sure that teachers are doing their best in teaching students.	15	2	4	3.33	.617
19. I feel the academic expectations for African American students are low.	15	1	4	2.53	.915
20. This school has good principals.	15	3	4	3.47	.516
21. This school has good teachers.	15	1	4	2.93	.704
22. I believe I am receiving a quality education.	15	3	4	3.40	.507
23. The administrators care about students doing well academically.	15	3	4	3.67	.488
24. I feel like I belong in this school.	15	3	4	3.20	.414
25. Students and teachers care about each other.	15	1	4	2.80	.775
26. Many teachers display frustration with African American students.	15	1	4	2.60	1.056
27. The school frequently celebrates the accomplishments of students.	15	2	4	2.87	.516
28. School is preparing me for a better way of life in the future.	15	3	4	3.33	.488
29. I feel that I can talk with the administrators about problems I'm having at school.	15	3	4	3.40	.507

30. I am proud to be a student at this school.	15	2	4	3.20	.561
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Table 6 presents a side-by-side comparison of mean scores for female and male participants. For both female and male participants, no question produced a mean score below 1.5. This indicated that there was no survey item in which female or male participants strongly disagreed with. Responses to the 30 survey overwhelmingly pointed to a perception of agreement by students. Over 90% of responses to survey questions for both groups produced a mean score of 2.51 or higher. This reflected agreement to a large majority of the survey questions by female and male students.

Questions that yielded a mean score of less than 2.51 include: 11, 12, and 19 for female participants; 11 and 12, for male participants. Question 11 and 12 produced results that reflect significant disagreement as perceived by both female and male students. Responses to Question 11 and 12 demonstrated students do not perceive that African American students are treated different than White students by administrators or teachers. Question 12 responses produced the lowest agreement for female and male participants with a mean of 1.62 and 1.80 respectively. This reflected both females and males felt strongly that African American students are not treated differently than their White counterparts by the administrators at the school.

Question 19 responses produced the largest difference in mean scores for females and males with a difference of 0.58. While female students disagreed with the idea that academic expectations for African American students are low, male perceptions reflected some agreement to this same question. This demonstrated a difference in perception of female and male participants about academic expectations for African American students.

Table 6

Side-by-Side Mean Score Comparison for Female and Male Participants

Question	Mean Score	Mean Score
	Female	Male
	Responses	Responses
1. I am being equipped for academic success in high school.	3.43	3.27
2. I enjoy coming to school daily.	3.24	3.20
3. School rules are fair and consistently enforced when students misbehave.	3.19	2.87
4. School is a place where I feel safe and secure.	3.19	3.13
5. The faculty/staff respect my cultural (African American) identity.	3.33	3.20
6. I consistently feel challenged to perform at a high level academically.	3.43	3.33
7. The teachers pay attention to my needs as a student.	3.24	3.27
8. I feel cared for as an individual at school.	3.24	3.27
9. I believe I was academically prepared for the CRCT on last year.	3.33	3.33
10. Most teachers are accessible if I need extra help with my class work.	3.67	3.33
11. I feel African American students are treated differently than White students by teachers.	1.95	2.20
12. I feel African American students are treated differently than White students by the administrators.	1.62	1.80

Table Continues

Question	Mean Score	Mean Score
	Female Responses	Male Responses
13. The administrators help create a positive environment for me at school.	3.48	3.07
14. My teachers consistently encourage me to do my best.	3.52	3.53
15. Teachers listen to my concerns and try to do something about them.	3.14	3.13
16. My teachers consistently present exciting and challenging lessons during class.	3.00	3.07
17. Most teachers go above and beyond to ensure I am learning.	3.33	3.13
18. The administrators make sure that teachers are doing their best in teaching students.	3.38	3.33
19. I feel the academic expectations for African American students are low.	1.95	2.53
20. This school has good principals.	3.52	3.47
21. This school has good teachers.	3.14	2.93
22. I believe I am receiving a quality education.	3.43	3.40
23. The administrators care about students doing well academically.	3.48	3.67
24. I feel like I belong in this school.	3.33	3.20
25. Students and teachers care about each other.	2.95	2.80
26. Many teachers display frustration with African American students.	2.29	2.60
27. The school frequently celebrates the accomplishments of students.	3.05	2.87
28. School is preparing me for a better way of life in the future.	3.67	3.33

Question	Mean Score	Mean Score
	Female	Male
	Responses	Responses
29. I feel that I can talk with the administrators about problems I'm having at school.	3.29	3.40
30. I am proud to be a student at this school.	3.48	3.20

From the interview data, four themes emerged. The first three main themes were: (a) students are receiving a quality education in a positive environment, (b) teachers' willingness to help students for academic support, and (c) resolution of issues by teachers and administrators when presented with student problems were common for both male and female students. The aforementioned three themes were shared in common by both female and male participants (see the Findings for Research Question 2 section for interview excerpts related to these three themes). The fourth theme, feeling safe at school was the only difference noted in the perceptions of male and female students. Two of three male participants mentioned school safety (feeling safe at school) as a characteristic of a good school and felt TTA exhibited this. Clarence mentioned "great teachers and a safe environment." as characteristics of a good school and stated that TTA exhibits these characteristics. At the end of his interview, Clarence again reiterated the importance of school safety to him, "It's a good school. I like everything. It's safe and I don't have to worry about nothing." A second male student, Robert, in his interview said, "Feeling safe, you know when you go somewhere like you able to walk down the halls without feeling

you got to watch your back or something.” He also pointed, “If I feel uncomfortable in a certain place in the classroom or around certain people, I can go to my teachers or any administrator and talk to them about it.” None of the female students interviewed mentioned the factor of school safety in any of their responses.

Findings led to the conclusion that minimal difference exists in the perceptions of females and males about the school culture at TTA. Means for survey items 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 17, 22, 24, 28, 30 (see Table 6) revealed this minimal difference. Mean scores for each was greater than 3.01 for both female and male participants.

Question 1 responses suggested females and males strongly agree they are being equipped for academic success in high school. Responses to Question 2 demonstrated agreement by both groups in enjoying coming to school daily. The notion female and male students feel safe and secure at school is concluded from question 4 responses. Students felt faculty/staff respect their cultural (African American) identity as evident in responses to question 5. Females and males also strongly agreed to being challenged to perform at a high level academically (question 6). Questions 7 and 8 responses showed students believe teachers pay attention to their needs as students and they feel cared for as an individual at school. Teachers go above and beyond to ensure students at TTA are learning was deduced from responses to question 17.

Question 22 answers suggested female and male students believe they are receiving a quality education. Both groups felt strongly they belong in TTA and TTA is preparing them for a better way of life in the future (questions 24 and 28). Responses to question 30 showed female and male students have a strong sense of pride in being a student at TTA.

Differences in perception were noted in responses to Question 19 which suggested male participants agreed that academic expectations for African American students were low. Females disagreed with this statement. In addition, school safety emerged as a theme only in the male interview data, and was not mentioned by female participants. These findings supported the conclusion that minimal difference exist between the perceptions of female and male students about the school culture at TTA. Further conclusions made related to Question 3 are presented in Chapter 5.

Evidence of Quality

Creswell (2003) describes eight strategies that may be used to verify the quality of research findings. Three of those strategies—triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing—were used in this study. Triangulation “involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (Creswell, 1998, p.202) The collection of data from three sources (student surveys, student interviews, and researcher notes) for the purpose of triangulation enhanced the quality of the current study and supported the conclusions drawn within it. To ensure accuracy of the interview data, member checking was performed. Member checking increases the rigor and trustworthiness of research findings in what Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) term “descriptive triangulation (i.e., consistency between researcher and participant[s])” (p. 575). The data, along with preliminary theme findings, were given to the participants to allow them to check for accuracy and give their opinion concerning whether the findings adequately reflected their views. To help students assess the accuracy of themes generated, an explanation of the themes was given, a technique suggested by Leech and Onwuegbuzie. Feedback given by students during the member checking process resulted

in no additional revisions to the themes. Lastly, before final submission of the research, a peer debriefer reviewed and made suggestions which were taken into account in preparation of the final document. The final doctoral study document was reviewed by the peer debriefer as well. Peer debriefing enhances the credibility, or trustworthiness, of research by providing an external check on the inquiry process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Merriam (2002) concluded a peer debriefer is used to strengthen the internal validity of research findings. These factors served as the evidence of quality for the study.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 presented data collected in the study and an interpretation of this data. Findings included students in the study have a positive view of the role of administrators at TTA in creating a school environment that is academically supportive. The study results and analysis also found students have a positive perception of the academic support, academic rigor, and encouragement they receive from administrators and faculty at TTA. Four themes emerged in the data: (a) TTA has a positive school environment, (b) teacher willingness and availability to help students even after school, (c) feeling that problems can be brought to the attention of administrators and/or teachers for resolution, and (d) perception by male participants that TTA is a safe school. Lastly, minimal difference between the perception of female and male participants of the school culture at TTA was found. The next chapter, chapter 5, presents additional discussion of the findings, implications for social change, recommendations, and personal reflections of mine.

CHAPTER 5:

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this sequential mixed methods study was to identify and describe the perceptions of a group of African American students of the school culture at their school. The study focused on students at a middle school with a majority minority student population and a very low number of minority faculty/staff members. Data was collected via a survey and one-on-one student interviews and analyzed along with researcher notes taken during the interviews. This section includes a summary of findings and interpretation of the findings of the perceptions of eighth grade African American students at Teach Them All Middle School (TTA) as related to school culture. This section also presents implications for social change, recommendations for future research, recommendations for action, personal reflections of mine, and a conclusion.

Summary of Research Findings

Research demonstrates the importance of principals in shaping the school culture and establishing quality educational institutions for the benefit of every student (Carter, 2001; Chiang, 2003; Danielson, 2002; Marzano et al., 2001; Schmoker, 1999, 2006). School culture has been shown as a critical element in student success at school (Chiang, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005). Students in this study demonstrated that the administrators at TTA are vital to establishing the positive school culture present at the school. These students also acknowledged the positive school culture at TTA as essential to their receiving a good education. A sense of belongingness and pride in the school is

exemplified in the results which again show the importance of school culture to the students. Findings reflected students believe they are receiving a challenging education that is preparing them for a better future. Results showed the aforementioned perceptions are as equally strong for both female and male students who participated in the study. The results of this study validate previous research on school culture and the role of school leaders in establishing a positive school culture.

Cushman (2003) pointed out little attention has been given to input from students as it relates to improving schools. Waxman and Huang (1997), Howard (2002), and Tyson (2002) demonstrate the importance of evaluating student perceptions of their learning environments for the purpose of improving schools. This study adds to the body of research by providing findings from the perception of students regarding school culture which helps fill gaps in the research. These findings also further corroborate the previous research cited and provide TTA with useful information to aid in its continuous improvement as a quality school.

Interpretations of Findings

Conclusions for Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked, “How do 8th grade African American students describe their perception of the role of school leaders in shaping a school culture that is academically supportive?” The survey and interview data presented in chapter 4 indicate that students have a strongly positive perception of school leaders in shaping a school culture that is academically supportive. Students believe the school administrators at TTA care for and treat all students equally and fairly and help ensure students receive a quality education. These results verify what previous studies have shown, demonstrating the

significance of school administrators in establishing academically supportive school cultures (Chiang, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005; Schmoker, 2006). School cultures are a significant part in providing quality education to students and administrators are instrumental in whether that school culture is positive or negative (Chaing, 2003). Marzano et al. (2005) found establishing academically supportive school cultures for students as 1 of 21 key roles for school administrators. The study results validate these previous findings and demonstrate students do believe that the role of school administrators in shaping a school culture that is academically supportive is important.

Conclusions for Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked, “How do 8th grade African American students describe their perception of the school culture at TTA with regards to the academic support, academic rigor, and encouragement they received from administrators and faculty?” Survey and interview data presented in chapter 4 were used to answer this question. Utilizing the research data, the conclusion African American students feel strongly about the support, rigor, and encouragement for their academic success in place at TTA was deduced. Previous research found the role of teachers for African American students is a significant aspect that shapes their perceptions about school (Hollins & Spencer, 1990; Howard, 2002; Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994; Slaughter-Defoe & Carlson, 1996; Tyson, 2002). Survey results and a theme that emerged in the interview data substantiate this prior finding as the African American students at TTA saw the teachers as an integral part of their positive educational experience. Students expressed the availability of administrators and faculty for academic support and as sources of encouragement for them to do their best. The study also found students believe education

they are receiving at TTA is rigorous and support mechanisms are in place that allows them to be successful. These findings supported previous research showing the importance of a rigorous education along with needed academic assistance being in place as a means to increase student achievement (Carter, 2001; Danielson, 2002; Marzano et al., 2001; Schmoker, 1999; Schmoker, 2006).

Conclusions for Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked, “Is there a difference between male and female African American students in their perception of school culture at TTA?” Survey data and interview data presented in chapter 4 were used to answer question. Findings yielded little difference in perception of school culture at TTA for the male and female African American students who participated in the study. Results in both survey and interview data presented in Chapter 4 support this conclusion. This is evident in over 90% of the survey questions the results had positive agreement for both male and female students. Likewise, belief students are receiving a quality education, teacher helpfulness and availability of after school tutoring, and ability by students to receive help for problems from administrators and teachers emerged as three themes in both male and female interview data. The theme of safety that emerged in the interview data taken from male participants was the only major difference in perception between male and female students found. The conclusion both male and female African American students believe the school culture at TTA to be a positive one was also made. This finding contrasts the work of Buckley, Storino, and Sebastiani (2003) who found that the positive perception of school begins to lessen for males during their middle school years. The perceptions of

males in this study were overwhelmingly positive towards school and the school culture at TTA.

Implications for Social Change

The significance of this study lies in the data generated regarding the personal perceptions of African American middle school students of their school culture. The findings of this study may serve as a catalyst for future studies into student experiences at school to close the gap in the educational research currently existing that evaluates and gives voice to a critical stakeholder in the educational process, the student. The findings of this study provided a unique perspective into the mindset of the African American students regarding their middle school years. These findings will be beneficial to teachers, administrators, and educational decision makers when they seek ways to improve the school culture within their particular school. With this information, the path to correct decision making for the benefit of all students is increased. The data generated from this study will offer stakeholders the straightforward perspective of African American students schooled in a school with a majority minority student population and very few minority faculty and staff members. The data illustrated honest and personal perceptions of these students via survey and individual interviews. This study presented a picture of the perceptions of these students in regard to their educational experiences and the culture of the school in which they attend.

Recommendations for Action

Based on the data collected, analysis of the study data and findings presented in the previous chapter, the following recommendations for actions are made:

1. Continue to maintain and ensure a support system (e.g., after school tutoring, availability of administrators and teachers for conflict resolution, teacher help for students during recess) for African American students aimed at improving academic achievement is in place.

2. Provide activities that invite participation by all students to promote an inclusive school culture.

3. Ensure all stakeholders collaboratively work together to strengthen the educational experiences of African American students.

4. Ensure teachers exhibit high academic expectations for all students, especially African American males.

These recommendations can be useful by schools not just TTA in ensuring they are educational institutions that adequately serve all its student populations. Schools that meet the needs of every student is the mandate in education today (Brewster & Klump, 2005; Chiang, 2003; Danielson, 2002; Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Day, 2000; Frieberg, 1999; Jamar & Pitts, 2005; Karpicke & Murphy, 1996; Leithwood, 2005; Leithwood et al., 1999; Leithwood et al., 2004; Levine & Lezotte, 1995; Lunenberg & Ornstein, 2004; Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005; Meyers et al., 2001; Moses-Snipes & Snipes, 2005; Murphy, 2002; Murphy et al., 2002; Peterson & Deal, 1999; Reeves, 2006; Wagner & Masden-Copes, 2002). Schools must take the necessary steps to reach this goal and work towards continuous improvement to adequately serve all students.

Recommendations for Further Study

This sequential exploratory mixed methods study may be a vehicle for future studies regarding student perceptions of their school environment. A small sample was

used in this study; large scale studies of this research problem and questions are recommended to provide a greater wealth of useful information on the topic. The additional studies on student perceptions of their school culture could enhance the research already completed by providing more information on specific thoughts students have that might improve school cultures on a larger scale for the benefit of every child.

In view of study findings for students, a large-scale study of parent perspectives would likely yield interesting results. Parents' perspectives and descriptions of strengths and weaknesses their child's school would likely provide useful information concerning improving the school culture. This information could also improve the respective school's planning and implementing needed academic improvements.

Studies of student perceptions of school culture at different schools with similar demographics as the target school in this study using eighth grade African American student populations is another recommendation. The data collected at these additional schools can be used to compare strengths and weaknesses relative to the school culture as viewed by African American students. Data collected and findings can be shared amongst the schools in order to further school improvement efforts.

The last recommendation is for the research to be conducted by a researcher not affiliated with the target school. This would likely aid in the collection of unbiased data. It is possible my role as assistant principal in the target school of this study could have lead students to offer responses they deemed desired, thus creating a skewed data set. Additional research could be conducted by an outside researcher. This would potentially provide less biased data.

Personal Reflections

In reflecting on the researcher process, I see the value of using a mixed methods approach for my study. I believe evaluating my research questions both quantitatively and qualitatively rewarded me with both a breadth and depth of findings relevant to addressing my chosen topic. The most difficult aspect of the process was in interviewing students. I sensed there was some anxiety on the part of some of the students. A few of them seemed unsure about talking freely with me because I was the assistant principal at the school. I had to put aside personal biases to remain objective during the interview sessions especially when asking students to expound upon their responses. In the end, I strongly feel this did not skew the data obtained to generate accurate findings for my research. Conducting this study was a very enlightening experience for me as a doctoral student.

Conclusion

Increasing student achievement is the focus of schools today as mandated on the national level through the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act. This exploratory mixed methods study sought to provide useful information to a middle school as it seeks continuous improvement towards providing the best possible education for all its students. The results found here while specifically designed to aid TTA presented a guideline for other schools to use in gathering needed data related to improving student achievement. By giving voice to a stakeholder group, the students, who have traditionally been overlooked as sources for information in improving schools, this study helped fill a void in the research. The degree to which this study can be replicated in other settings is

limitless and its implications are fundamental to those seeking to improve student achievement.

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APPENDIX A

RESEARCH CONSENT FORMS

Letter of Cooperation to Conduct Research

(Superintendent)
(School System)
(Address)

Dear _____,

My name is Henry Hankerson. I am proposing to conduct an exploratory descriptive research study as a part of my doctoral requirements for Walden University. The nature of my study will involve evaluating the perceptions of school culture at _____ through the eyes of a selected group of eight grade African American students. I am interested in the perceptions of these students to ascertain their feelings about _____ and its school culture in meeting the needs of its African American students. Due to the Georgia Criterion Referenced Test results and associated achievement gaps between African American students and their White peers on these tests, I hope this study will shed light on helping improve this situation with valuable information gathered directly from the very individuals in need.

This letter is to request your assistance in gathering data necessary to complete my research. All of the proposed consent documents are attached as well as the interview protocol and survey which will be used. Upon completion of my research, a copy of the final report will be sent to you at your request.

If this is agreeable to you, please sign and return this letter to me to present to the Institutional Review Board at Walden University. If you have any questions about this research study, please feel free to contact me at (912) 537-8799 or my supervising professor, Dr. Ella Benson at (757) 986-3959.

, Superintendent

Date _____

Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Henry Hankerson

Letter of Cooperation to Conduct Research

(Principal)
(School)
(Address)

Dear _____,

My name is Henry Hankerson. I am proposing to conduct an exploratory descriptive research study as a part of my doctoral requirements for Walden University. The nature of my study will involve evaluating the perceptions of school culture at _____ through the eyes of a selected group of eight grade African American students. I am interested in the perceptions of these students to ascertain their feelings about _____ and its school culture in meeting the needs of its African American students. Due to the Georgia Criterion Referenced Test results and associated achievement gaps between African American students and their White peers on these tests, I hope this study will shed light on helping improve this situation with valuable information gathered directly from the very individuals in need.

This letter is to request your assistance in gathering data necessary to complete my research. All of the proposed consent documents are attached as well as the interview protocol and survey which will be used. Upon completion of my research, a copy of the final report will be sent to you at your request.

If this is agreeable to you, please sign and return this letter to me to present to the Institutional Review Board at Walden University. If you have any questions about this research study, please feel free to contact me at (912) 537-8799 or my supervising professor, Dr. Ella Benson at (757) 986-3959.

, Principal

Date _____

Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Henry Hankerson

Parental Consent Form

(Parent Name)
 (Address)
 (City), (State) (Zip)

Dear (Parent) of (Child Name),

My name is Henry Hankerson. I am proposing to conduct an exploratory descriptive research study as a part of my doctoral requirements for Walden University. The nature of my study will involve evaluating the perceptions of school culture at _____ through the eyes of a selected group of eight grade African American students. I am interested in the perceptions of these students to ascertain their feelings about _____ and its school culture in meeting the needs of its African American students. Due to the Georgia Criterion Referenced Test results and associated achievement gaps between African American students and their White peers on these tests, I believe this study will shed light on helping improve this situation with valuable information gathered directly from the very individuals in need.

This letter is to request your assistance in gathering data necessary to complete my research. Your role will consist of granting permission for your child to complete a survey and potentially be selected to be interviewed by me. The confidentiality of your child's survey and/or interview responses will be protected as the only individual with access to this information will be me. In writing the final report, aliases will be used to protect the anonymity of students who participate. Please be advised that participation is strictly voluntary and no adverse consequences will result due to lack of your child not being granted permission by you to participate in study.

If this is agreeable to you, please sign and return this letter along with the corresponding Assent Form to me as permission for your child to participate in this study. If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact me at (912) 537-8799 or my supervising professor, Dr. Ella Benson at (757) 986-3959.

 Parent Signature

Date _____

Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Henry Hankerson

ASSENT FORM

Hello, my name is Henry Hankerson and I am doing a project to learn about will involve evaluating the perceptions of school culture at _____ through the eyes of a selected group of eight grade African American students. I am interested in the perceptions of these students to ascertain their feelings about _____ and its school culture in meeting the needs of its African American students. Due to the Georgia Criterion Referenced Test results and associated achievement gaps between African American students and their White peers on these tests, I believe this study will shed light on helping improve this situation with valuable information gathered directly from the very individuals in need. I am inviting you to join my project. I picked you for this project because are a member of the study's target group. I am going to read this form with you. You can ask any questions you have before you decide if you want to do this project.

WHO I AM:

I am a student at Walden University. I am working on my doctoral degree. As a member of _____ School, you are vital to me as the researcher in completing this study.

ABOUT THE PROJECT:

If you agree to join this project, you will be asked to:

- complete a survey online to be taken 1 day during your Connections class time at school
- potentially participate in an interview to be conducted 1 day during your Connections class time at school

IT'S YOUR CHOICE:

You don't have to join this project if you don't want to. You won't get into trouble with administration, faculty, or staff at _____ if you say no. If you decide now that you want to join the project, you can still change your mind later just by telling me. If you want to skip some parts of the project, just let me know.

It's possible that being in this project might cause your to share personal information you might feel uncomfortable sharing with a school administrator But this project might help others by providing valuable information in improving the school culture for African American students at _____.

PRIVACY:

Everything you tell me during this project will be kept private. That means that no one else will know your name or what answers you gave. The only time I have to tell someone is if I learn about something that could hurt you or someone else.

ASKING QUESTIONS:

You can ask me any questions you want now. If you think of a question later, you or your parents can reach me at 912-537-8799 (home)/ 912-537-3813 (work) or my professor at Dr. Ella Benson at (757) 986-3959. If you or your parents would like to ask my university a question, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. Her phone number is 1-800-925-3368, extension 1210.

I will give you a copy of this form.

Please sign your name below if you want to join this project.

Name of Child

Child Signature

Parent/Guardian

Signature

Researcher Signature

APPENDIX B

SURVEY

School Culture Survey—Student Version

*The purpose of this survey is to determine your perceptions of school culture here at school. Please select the answer that best describes your **TRUE** feelings. All surveys will be kept strictly confidential.

1. I am being equipped for academic success in high school.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

2. I enjoy coming to school daily.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

3. School rules are fair and consistently enforced when students misbehave.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

3. School is a place where I feel safe and secure.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

5. The faculty/staff respect my cultural (African American) identity.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

6. I consistently feel challenged to perform at a high level academically.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree

- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

7. The teachers pay attention to my needs as a student.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

8. I feel cared for as an individual at school.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

9. I believe I was academically prepared for the CRCT on last year.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

10. Most teachers are accessible if I need extra help with my classwork.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

11. I feel African American students are treated differently than White students by teachers.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

12. I feel African American students are treated differently than White students by the administrators.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

13. The administrators help create a positive environment for me at school.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree

- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

14. My teachers consistently encourage me to do my best.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

15. Teachers listen to my concerns and try to do something about them.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

16. My teachers consistently present exciting and challenging lessons during class.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

17. Most teachers go above and beyond to ensure I am learning.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

18. The administrators make sure that teachers are doing their best in teaching students.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

19. I feel the academic expectations for African American students are low.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

20. This school has good principals.

- _____ 1. Strongly Agree
- _____ 2. Agree
- _____ 3. Disagree
- _____ 4. Strongly Disagree

21. This school has good teachers.

- 1. Strongly Agree
- 2. Agree
- 3. Disagree
- 4. Strongly Disagree

22. I believe I am receiving a quality education.

- 1. Strongly Agree
- 2. Agree
- 3. Disagree
- 4. Strongly Disagree

23. The administrators care about students doing well academically.

- 1. Strongly Agree
- 2. Agree
- 3. Disagree
- 4. Strongly Disagree

24. I feel like I belong in this school.

- 1. Strongly Agree
- 2. Agree
- 3. Disagree
- 4. Strongly Disagree

25. Students and teachers care about each other.

- 1. Strongly Agree
- 2. Agree
- 3. Disagree
- 4. Strongly Disagree

26. Many teachers display frustration with African American students.

- 1. Strongly Agree
- 2. Agree
- 3. Disagree
- 4. Strongly Disagree

27. The school frequently celebrates the accomplishments of students.

- 1. Strongly Agree
- 2. Agree
- 3. Disagree
- 4. Strongly Disagree

28. School is preparing me for a better way of life in the future.

- 1. Strongly Agree
- 2. Agree

- 3. Disagree
- 4. Strongly Disagree

29. I feel that I can talk with the administrators about problems I'm having at school.

- 1. Strongly Agree
- 2. Agree
- 3. Disagree
- 4. Strongly Disagree

30. I am proud to be a student at this school.

- 1. Strongly Agree
- 2. Agree
- 3. Disagree
- 4. Strongly Disagree

31. Gender

- 1. Female
- 2. Male

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Reminders for the Researcher

- (1) Welcome and brief review of study questions and objectives.
- (2) Provide brief explanation of the study and answer questions participant may have about the study.
- (3) Inform participant the interview will be taped and transcribed, he/she will be allowed to review for accuracy.
- (4) Review the length of the interview and thank interviewee for his/her time.
- (5) Address any other care or concern the interviewee may have and begin interview.

Student Interview Questions

Participant Number: _____ **Date:** _____

1. How would you describe your experiences here at TTA?
2. What characteristics about TTA do you like or dislike?
3. In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good school?
Follow-up: Does TTA exhibit any of the characteristics mentioned?
4. In regards to academics, what do you feel are the expectations teachers have of you? Of African American students as a whole?
5. What academic issues would you talk about to teachers/administrators if asked?
6. How do you feel about the enforcement of rules/regulations at TTA?
7. What would you tell a new student to TTA about the school if asked?

Notes:

APPENDIX D

Individual Responses to Survey Questions 1-30: All Participants

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I am being equipped for academic success in high school.	13	23	0	0
2. I enjoy coming to school daily.	9	26	1	0
3. School rules are fair and consistently enforced when students misbehave.	8	22	6	0
4. School is a place where I feel safe and secure.	12	19	4	1
5. The faculty/staff respect my cultural (African American) identity.	13	21	1	1
6. I consistently feel challenged to perform at a high level academically.	17	16	3	0
7. The teachers pay attention to my needs as a student.	12	21	3	0
8. I feel cared for as an individual at school.	10	25	1	0
9. I believe I was academically prepared for the CRCT on last year.	16	16	4	0
10. Most teachers are accessible if I need extra help with my class work.	20	15	1	0
11. I feel African American students are treated differently than White students by teachers.	2	10	12	12
12. I feel African American students are treated differently than White students by the administrators.	1	4	14	17
13. The administrators help create a positive environment for me at school.	13	21	2	0
14. My teachers consistently encourage me to do my best.	20	15	1	0

15. Teachers listen to my concerns and try to do something about them.	9	24	2	1
16. My teachers consistently present exciting and challenging lessons during class.	10	18	7	1
17. Most teachers go above and beyond to ensure I am learning.	14	17	5	0
18. The administrators make sure that teachers are doing their best in teaching students.	16	17	3	0
19. I feel the academic expectations for African American students are low.	4	7	17	8
20. This school has good principals.	18	18	0	0
21. This school has good teachers.	9	21	5	1
22. I believe I am receiving a quality education.	15	21	0	0
23. The administrators care about students doing well academically.	21	14	1	0
24. I feel like I belong in this school.	11	24	1	0
25. Students and teachers care about each other.	5	23	7	1
26. Many teachers display frustration with African American students.	7	9	12	8
27. The school frequently celebrates the accomplishments of students.	8	19	9	0
28. School is preparing me for a better way of life in the future.	19	17	0	0
29. I feel that I can talk with the administrators about problems I'm having at school.	15	18	3	0
30. I am proud to be a student at this school.	14	21	1	0

CURRICULUM VITAE

Henry Hankerson

hollywoodhenry@hotmail.com

hhankerson@vidalia-city.k12.ga.us

Education

Lincoln Memorial University

Ed.S., Educational Administration and Supervision, 2005

Troy University

M.S., Foundations of Education, 2002

University of Georgia

B.S., Biology, 1996

Experience

2005-Present J. R. Trippe Middle School, Vidalia, GA

Assistant Principal

2002-2005 T. J. Elder Middle School, Sandersville, GA

Life Sciences Teacher

1998-2002 Blakeney Elementary School, Waynesboro, GA

5th Grade Teacher

Professional Organizations

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

Georgia Association of Educational Leaders

Professional Association of Georgia Educators

Community Organizations

Vidalia Area Habitat for Humanity