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Examining Barriers That Inhibit Student Achievement From a Teacher's Perspective

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Abstract

Teachers' Perceptions of Barriers That Inhibit Student Achievement

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Abstract

Teachers at an urban high school in the South East have failed to see an increase in classroom achievement or standardized test scores despite efforts to increase passing rates. If achievement rates do not increase, school restructuring will occur. While the site has implemented programs to reduce academic failure, data exists external barriers may be affecting student achievement. Guided by Bandura's (1986) theory of metacognitive beliefs and self-efficacy as the conceptual framework, this qualitative case study explored teachers' perceptions about the root cause of poor student achievement. This study examines how to identify those causes to help students improve academically, while providing teacher recommendations to reducing the effects of those causes in hopes to improve student success. Five teachers were selected from the math and science content areas to participate in 1-on-1 interviews to identify external barriers to student success. Thematic coding and member checks allowed for data triangulation to analyze the findings. Seven themes emerged to increase student success by helping close the achievement gap through fostering support between teachers and the families of all students involved: socioeconomic status, ability of goal setting, having encouragement and motivation, seeing another environment, lacking parental support, building relationships with parents, and stress of taking state tests. Developing resources that will help students to overcome issues outside of the school day leading to increased student academic achievement and graduation rates creates social change.

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Section 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

A Nation at Risk, in 1983 created an intense national focus on the weaknesses of American students, particularly in subjects such as math and science (Jennings, 2012). Although federal legislation directed toward student achievement underwent many forms, the most significant change was the reauthorization of Chapter I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2002, known as *NCLB*. These legislation-required school districts to develop programs designed to help students from low-income families to increase their skills in critical subjects (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). With the ESEA act, school districts in the United States created stringent assessments of academic readiness to measure whether students were reaching adequate yearly progress in selected school subjects. In Texas, accountability measures called State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) required many teachers to make changes in their classroom instruction to try to meet the demands of the legislation (Education Trust, 2014). Although there are problems common to classrooms, few in a school know better than teachers what their particular students are experiencing in and out of the classroom. The state of Texas expects a common solution to a complex problem, and teachers have yet to be invited to contribute to the suggestions about how to help their students succeed (Epstein, 2013).

Increased graduation requirements have contributed to plummeting scores on the Texas state report card (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2014). In 2013, the state report card scores of students in this study site dropped in math, science, and reading. For

example, scores from 2012 to 2013 in math went from 57% to 40%, science dropped from 59% to 56%, and overall passing in reading went from 76% to 65% (TEA, 2014). With several consecutive years of low performance, the school has endured an array of disruptive changes such as teachers and administrators leaving to teach at other schools or reassigned elsewhere.

Although the school in this study site once had a magnet program for gifted and talented students wanting to pursue a career in math or engineering and a program called Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) that was designed to help students prepare for college, low enrollment and inadequate funding led to the demise of both programs. Because resources had been directed at student success, and those efforts were failing, some faculty began to look outside of the school day to determine if other influences were thwarting their efforts.

In 1974, the California Court of Appeals specified in *Lau v Nichols*, "every student brings to the starting line of his educational career different advantages and disadvantages caused in part by social, economic, and cultural background[s]" (p.174). The disadvantages are what educators perceive as inhibitors to academic achievement (Rothman, 2012; Sunderman, 2006). Studies of academic outcomes from the critic's perspective described the effects of accountability on student outcomes and retention. However, no available studies to date have focused on teachers' perceptions of how outside influences affect student learning (Carnoy & Loeb, 2003; Dee & Grant, 2011; Grant & Stronge, 2013).

In this study, I explored the perceptions of teachers at a high school in an urban independent school district (ISD) in the southwest to learn their beliefs about what is contributing to the failing scores in math, science, and reading in an attempt to identify external barriers to student learning. Some researchers such as Gollnick and Chinn (2013) found that not all families give the needed learning support to their children because securing the essentials to survive daily is a priority. For reasons such as this, there is a problem to address.

Problem Statement

The goal of Texas school districts and districts in other states has always been to increase student success and academic performance, but *NCLB* placed an additional burden on schools districts to increase graduation rates. However, in 2015, finding the right formula to help students reach the required standards of learning is still a challenge. A Title I school in an ISD in the southwest continues to try to increase the number of high school graduates while decreasing student attrition. However, neither this school nor others in the district formally examined the perceptions of teachers about their students' inability to perform well and graduate from high school.

The problem examined in the study was that students at an urban high school in the South East were not performing as well as similar students in other districts in the state. As a result, the state imposed sanctions on the school that may ultimately include restructuring of the school and teaching or administrative position changes. What had not occurred was seeking information from the faculty that interacts with students daily. The teachers at this school know their students' personal needs, strengths, and weaknesses

better than outside agencies that make decisions about instruction and school management. The teachers at the participating study site indicated a strong interest in contributing to efforts to isolate areas affecting students, which might lead to poor academic performance. Teachers strongly suggest that they are an untapped resource that might be better equipped to offer solutions than outside agencies are. Because I am the researcher in the study, teachers have expressed to me their willingness to try to identify areas that might be occurring outside of school that could be contributing to student failure. The teacher's interest led me to conduct a formal research study of teachers' perceptions of barriers to student success that is occurring outside of school, thus preventing students from achieving their goals as well as the goals of the school, district, and state.

Nature of the Study

In this qualitative study, I investigated the perspectives of math and science classroom teachers regarding what they believe are barriers to student achievement and solicit the possible solutions to the problem. *NCLB* (2014) legislation requires that students be proficient on state tests in the common core subject areas. To best help students become proficient in a subject; educators should know what is inhibiting students' academic performance (*NCLB*, 2014).

Through individual interviews, selected teachers from math and science provided their perspectives on outside barriers that affect their students' academic performance. From those interviews, the results sought to identify those barriers in hopes to increase graduation rates. A research question guiding this study asked what classroom teachers

perceive to be the root cause of poor student achievement. Because teachers have not been a part of the decision process about changes in curriculum, staffing, textbook choices, and other areas, their perspectives provided information that have the opportunity to influence district and school decisions. Using the ideas from those who know students should help to place the solution where it will be most effective.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify and examine teachers' perspectives of the barriers that are the root cause of the achievement gap. Using this knowledge, teachers may be able to increase academic performance and prevent school restructuring. Those who create new local educational policy, rate schools' academic performance, and impose new graduation requirements do not know teachers' beliefs about the reasons for poor performance. Through interviews, an examination of potential barriers such as students' reactions to issues outside the classroom, and teacher's thoughts on reducing the achievement gap was ventured.

The No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB) required that all students in public schools be proficient in all subjects tested by 2014, and if they were not, schools could be restructured or closed because of not meeting state requirements. In many areas, schools are the heart of a neighborhood, with many adults living there having attended the same schools for several generations. Before accountability legislation, the schools and students may not have performed better, but the existence of the schools was a unifying element.

Teachers use the resources that are accessible to them, but at this particular school there continues to be a low percentage of students meeting STAAR requirements. In 2013, for example, only 56% passed all sections of the state test (TEA, 2014). School restructuring is possible in ways that might make it lose its place in the community, a condition that may reduce continuity and stability in the learning climate of the school as well as the neighborhood. The restructuring of schools happens when student academic performance does not improve according to the states timeline.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the study began with understanding the characteristics associated with metacognitive beliefs and self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) introduced self-efficacy as the ability to accomplish any goal or task based on one's own thoughts and actions. People with high self-efficacy expect to do well, but without it, doubt they will achieve. Metacognitive beliefs describe the ways a person views his or her own cognition alongside a coping strategy such as *doubt* or *fear of completing a specific task* (Fernia & Spada, Nikcevic, Georgiou, & Moneta, 2009). Bandura evaluated and analyzed the metacognitive and self-efficacy beliefs to create the domains found in the taxonomy (1956), which holds that there are three learning domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Bandura's taxonomy has since updated prior to the findings (Huitt, 2011).

Huitt (2011) identified what Bloom described as the *cognitive domain*, the level at which a person's mental and intellectual skills enable him or her to retain knowledge.

The cognitive domain is the area in the brain for remembering and recalling information. Similar to the original terms in Bloom's taxonomy, this domain still draws out answers and recognition, but through using verbs and questioning techniques. Table1 presents Bloom's verb usage and model questions used to help process information and teaching strategies to help learners remember.

Table 1

Remember (Knowledge)

Verbs for objectives	Model questions	Instructional strategies
Choose	Who?	Highlighting
Describe	Where?	Rehearsal
Define	Which one?	Memorizing
Identify	What?	Mnemonics
Label	How?	
List	Which is the best one?	
Locate	Why?	
Match	How much?	
Memorize	When?	
Name	What does it mean?	
Omit		
Recite		
Recognize		
Select		
State		

Note. All tables are adapted from the Bloom et al.*Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain*. (2011) *Educational Psychology Interactive*. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University.

In the revised Bloom's taxonomy (2011), the *understanding* (comprehension) stage is comprised of how to translate and interpret information. Huitt (2011) lists the strategies to translate and interpret information by using different verbs and model

questions to help understand information. Table 2 describes the comprehension stage used to translate or interpret information.

Table 2

Understand (Comprehension)

Verbs for objectives	Model questions	Instructional strategies
Classify	State in your own words	Key examples
Defend	Which are facts?	Emphasize connect
Demonstrate	What does this mean?	Elaborate concepts
Distinguish	Is this the same as…?	Summarize
Explain	Give an example	Paraphrase
Express	Select the best definition.	Students explain
Extend	Condense this paragraph	Students state the rule
Give example	What would happen if…?	"Why does this example..?"
Illustrate	State in one word….	Create visual representations (Concept maps, outlines, flow charts organizers, analogies, pro/con grids)
Indicate	Explain what is happening.	
Interrelate	What part doesn't fit?	
Interpret	Explain what is meant.	
Infer	What expectations are there?	
Judge	Read the graph (table).	
Match	What are they saying?	
Paraphrase	This represents	
Represent	What seems to be…?	
Restate	Is it valid that…?	
Rewrite	What seems to be..?	
Select	Show in a graph, table.	
Show	Which statements support…?	
Summarize	What restrictions would you add?	
Tell		
Translate		

The third level of the revised Bloom's taxonomy, shown in Table 3, describes when to apply and why to apply knowledge, a skill that helps in recognizing new or unfamiliar patterns.

Table 3

Apply

Verbs for objectives	Model questions	Instructional strategies
Apply	Predict what would happen	Modeling
Choose	Choose the best statement	Cognitive apprenticeships
Dramatize	Apply	"Mindful" practice-NOT just a "routine" practice
Explain	Judge the effects	Part and whole sequencing
Generalize	What would result	Authentic situations
Judge	Tell what would happen	"Coached" practice
Organize	Tell how, when, where, why	Case Studies
Paint	Tell how much change there would be	Simulations
Prepare	Identify the results	Algorithms
Produce		
Select		
Show		
Solve		
Use		

Learning how to break down pieces of information will help to differentiate or compare and contrast information. Table 4 shows the differentiation through verbs and questions.

Table 4

Analyze

Verbs for objectives	Model questions	Instructional strategies
Analyze	What is the function of..?	Models of thinking
Categorize	What's fact? Opinion?	Challenging assumptions
Classify	What assumptions..?	Retrospective analysis
Compare	What statement is relevant?	Reflection through journaling
Differentiate	What motive is there?	Debates
Distinguish	Related to, extraneous to, not applicable.	Discussions and other collaborating learning activities
Identify	What conclusions?	Decision-making situations
Infer	What does the author believe?	
Point out	What does the author assume?	
Select	Make a distinction	
Subdivide	State the point of view of….	
Survey	What is the premise?	
	What ideas apply?	
	What ideas justify the conclusion?	
	What's the relationship between . . . ?	
	The least essential statements are. . . ?	
	What's the main idea or theme?	
	What inconsistencies, fallacies?	
	What literary form is used?	
	What persuasive technique?	
	Implicit in the statement is…	

Table 5 illustrates the evaluation level; reached only after one has analyzed a concept. After analyzing a concept, a person can state the reason for it.

Table 5

Evaluate

Verbs for objectives	Model questions	Instructional strategies
Appraise	What fallacies, consistencies, inconsistencies appear?	Challenging assumptions
Judge	Which is more important, moral, better, logical, valid, and appropriate?	Journaling
Criticize	Find the errors	Debates
Defend		Discussions and other collaborating learning activities
Compare		Decision-making situations

The level of Bloom's taxonomy requiring the greatest level of thinking is *creative* level. To create, people need to have mastered the five previous levels (remember, understand, apply, analyze, and evaluate). Table 6 describes the sixth level of Bloom's taxonomy; *create*.

Table 6

Create (Synthesis)

Verbs for objectives	Model questions	Instructional strategies
Choose	How would you test..?	Modeling
Combine	Propose an alternative.	Challenging assumptions
Compose	Solve the following.	Reflection through journaling
Construct	How else would you…?	Debates
Create	State a rule.	Discussions and other collaborating learning activities
Design		Design
Develop		Decision-making situations
Do		
Formulate		
Hypothesize		
Invent		
Make		
Make up		
Originate		
Organize		
Plan		
Produce		
Role play		
Tell		

The revised Bloom tables are a representation of the sequences of learning that illustrates the sequences of how the brain develops mental skills. Applying Bloom's theory and putting it into practice in the classroom might help teachers and their students make sound determinations on what gaps in comprehension or learning may be causing students to fail. Effectively understanding a students' learning style from kindergarten on

up to secondary school could help increase student achievement (Anderson & Krawthwohl, 2001; Krawthwohl, Bloom, & Masia 1973; Huitt, 2011).

Bandura (1986) developed an experimental method that manipulates one variable to see how it affects another variable. Bandura postulated that a person's environment could cause their behavior to change. Changing of a person's behavior based on their environment is "reciprocal determinism" (p. 50). According to Bandura (1986), behaviors have a cause and effect based on the environment and is a barrier to learning (p. 50).

The environment young people live in can be so tumultuous that it also affects their personalities. Bandura (1986) believed that a person's personality forms from three forces: environment, behavior, and psychological processes. The psychological process describes the way people entertain images in their minds and the language they use to describe them. Bandura also discussed self-regulation, which is the ability to control your own behavior and that to control one's own behavior; a person had to follow three steps:

1. Always observe your own behavior and keep tabs of any changes.
2. Compare yourself according to a traditional standard of judgment.
3. Be self-responsive by rewarding yourself when you do well and holding yourself accountable when you do not (Bandura, 1986, p. 50).

Definitions of Terms

The following are definitions of terms used in the study.

Achievement gap: The difference in a student's academic achievement and other outcomes measured between socioeconomic groups (Murphy, 2010)

Adequate yearly progress (AYP): Under *NCLB* (2002), all school campuses, districts, and the state are required to meet AYP criteria in three areas: reading/language arts, mathematics, and either graduation rates (for high schools and districts) or attendance rates (for elementary and middle/junior high schools). If a campus, school district, or state fails to meet AYP for two consecutive years, they are subject to certain corrective actions (TEA, 2014).

High-stakes testing: Tests that are given to students to determine if they will be retained or promoted and whether they will receive a high school diploma. Instructors in some areas may receive a stipend based on the percentage of students that perform well on state tests. Test results from students are measured with test results from other parts of the state or country. This practice is especially common under *NCLB,* which demands base test scores from every school in the nation, forcing many talented teachers to "teach to the test" for their schools to avoid sanctions (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2014).

NCLB Act: This act, authorized in 2001, aims to have all students at the proficient level on state tests by the year 2014. School districts that receive Title I funds must meet AYP standards or risk being restructured if test scores show that students are low performing two consecutive years or more (*NCLB* Act 2001, 2014).

Pedagogy: The study of teaching methods, including the aims of education and the ways in such goals can be achieved. It is the teaching skills used to effectively teach their content/subject areas (Watkins & Mortimore, 1999).

Professional development: Providing administrators and teachers with resources and experiences to enhance their professional career growth (Stuit & Stringfield, 2012).

School restructuring: The practice of changing elements of a school to include, but not be limited to: closing and then reopening a school as a public charter school, replacing all or most of the school staff, including the principal, creating a contract with an entity such as private management company with a demonstrated record of effectively operating a school, and/or the state assuming the management and operation of the school (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2010).

Socioeconomic status: A measure determined by income, occupation, and education level. That condition contributes to health as well as the way people think and feel about themselves (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010)

Title I schools: Schools where at least 40% of the students are from low-income families. Title I status is measured by the number of families who are eligible to receive free and reduced-price lunch (USDOE, 2014).

Assumptions, limitations, scope, and Delimitations

Assumptions

In the study, there was an assumption that teachers who had taught more than 2 years were better suited to take part in the interviews because of their experience teaching at the same location. Participants in the study were math or science teachers with a minimum of 5 years' experience who had the highest student passing rates in the school on state tests. There is also the assumption that the teachers knew the school environment, demographics, and academic history of each student in their classes since

the school requires accessibility to this information upon class enrollment. Lastly, there is an assumption that participants gave their honest opinions.

Limitations

Another high school in the same area has similar demographics that would have possibly been accessible, but due to travel time and distance, teachers asked to volunteer were all on one campus. Interviews were individually administered in an intimate face-to-face setting. There was not a need to have any type of interview done by telephone or video/web conferencing. Keeping the study on one campus limited the number of participants. The high school study site was the only campus used from Johnston ISD because the particular campus is the only high school within a 20-mile radius, which limited the number of possible participants. Some teachers on the campus may not have wanted to participate because they were a colleague. Another limitation could have been personal relationships with teachers. Since a prior professional relationship exists, it was important for the researcher to eliminate bias and ensure participants felt comfortable enough to provide open and honest answers. Because there was an awareness of the potential limitations, the researcher was able to keep opinions and personal feelings aside without any influence made by participants.

Delimitations

Delimitations of the proposed study included the teachers' perceptions from observing students at only one school. Teachers asked to participate are core teachers in math and science. This study does not invent new teacher practices by changing the curriculum; seek to find resources like government funding, technology, or professional

developments to help increase academic achievement, or any other solutions. The participants in the study did not have to specify the barriers that inhibit student academic performance in other schools from different or more affluent locations.

Significance of the Study

Over the past 2 decades, Title 1 schools have found it difficult to provide students with the support they need to succeed academically. As a result, some are criticized by those in other districts are perceived to be incapable of performing at higher levels (Ravitch, 2011). Several researchers that have examined the causes of low performing schools have different answers to the reasons so many are performing poorly (McCallumore & Sparagpani, 2010; Pinkus, 2009). One cause of low performance is lack of textbooks and other resources. Textbooks may not be as readily available for students in poverty-stricken areas to take home and are in limited quantities in classrooms (Woodward, Elliot, & Nagel, 2013).

One self-defeating element, according to Alderman (2013), is that students in elementary school often recognize they are not doing as well as their peers. For students that young to recognize that they are not learning as well (or are not as smart) as others can form the beginning of stress and anxiety caused by competitiveness (Alderman, 2013). The pressure of performing well compared to their peers will most likely only intensify as these children enter secondary education and continue to fall further behind and face passing a state test if students are to graduate and earn a high school diploma (Alderman, 2013).

Over the past decade, there have been increased numbers of dropouts, student retention, teachers leaving the field due to burnout, accountability, teachers fired for not being qualified, administrators being fired or demoted, and schools closing or restructured because their students do not meet standards on state tests (Santavirta, Solovieva, & Theorell, 2007; Stitzlein & Quinn, 2012). Students enrolled at this study site continuously fail to pass state tests and meet requirements for graduation. The requirement that students pass the state test in order to get a high school diploma has caused an increase in dropouts. Figure1 illustrates the dropout rates for two consecutive school years. Figure 2 shows the decrease in state test scores between subject areas.

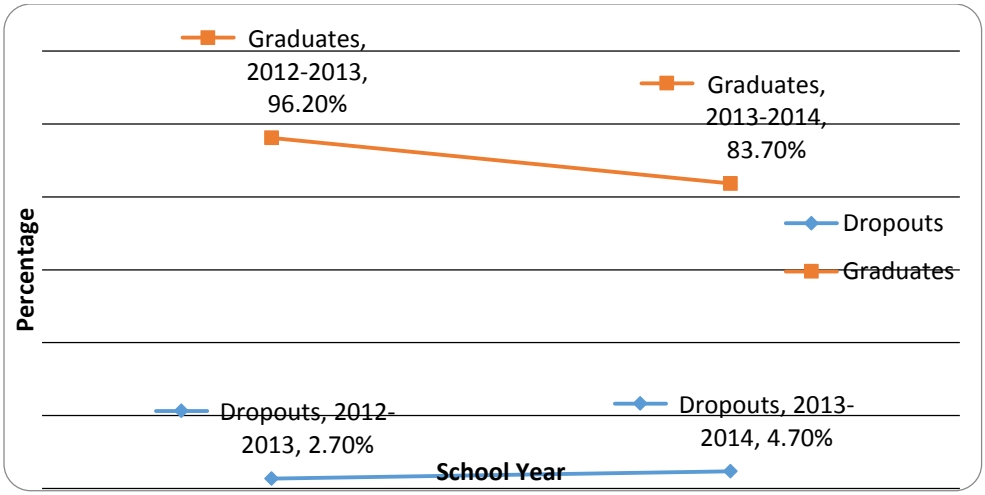

Figure 1.Dropout and graduation percentages by school year.

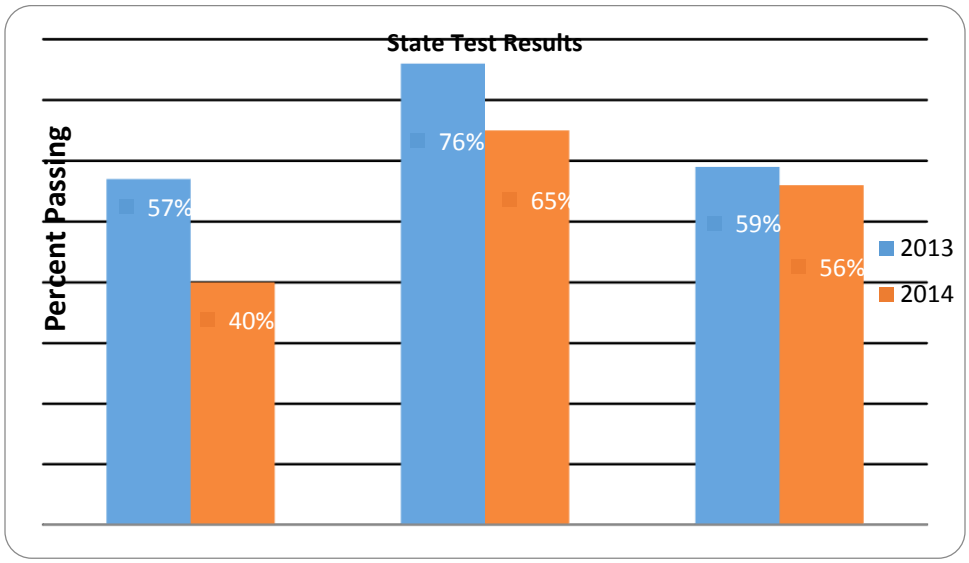

Figure 2. Percentage of students passing the high school state tests in math, reading, and science respectively for school years 2013 and 2014.

Since graduation rates are usually lower in poorer neighborhoods, determining barriers preventing student advancement could be identified by asking teachers their perceptions about external contributory problems (Ravitch, 2011). Learning the barriers that contribute to students' low performance may help improve the social dynamics of the schools. Inner city schools that are low performing could see an increase in scores if outside barriers that hinder student performance can be identified and reduced (Kruger, Wandle, & Struzziero, 2007; Volante, 2012).

A student that receives only a high school diploma averages about $10,000 more per year than a person without a diploma (Barrow & Schanzenbach, 2012; Wise, 2008). According to Bowers (2010) and Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007), persons without a high school education are more likely to engage in criminal activity, require government assistance such as welfare programs, and have more health problems than those who graduate. When there are higher percentages of graduation rates in communities, crime is

reduced, communities are strengthened, and positive social change may occur (Davis, 2013).

Summary

Inner city public schools face poverty, broken families, crime, and other problems that create negative influences on the academic success of the children of the community. Policymakers have focused on finding ways to improve academic performance so that students will be productive in the workplace and in life. According to the policymakers, the results of tests used to determine if a student is ready for the next grade or to graduate from high school continue to reveal that those living in areas of high poverty are not meeting educational goals of the state and nation. The results of the study may have a positive effect upon this school but may also provide a best practice example for similar schools in the United States. Section 2 will present discussions and analyses of literature about the barriers outside of the school that negatively affect student learning, and Section 3 will present the methodology conducted for this case study. After discussing the methodology, section 4 will present the results and section 5 will address the conclusions and recommendations.

Section 2: Literature Review

Content of the Literature Review

The review of literature includes studies of poor academic performance caused by the influence of impoverished neighborhoods based on the most recent available research. Included in the literature search are studies of the academic achievement of students who qualify for additional assistance under Title I because they come from families whose children qualify for free and reduced-price lunch.

Historically, researchers and legislators have focused upon the examination of various policies as they continue to add additional tests, change pedagogy, curriculum, administration, and faculty in an attempt to find a formula that will lead to increased student success that leads to increased passing and graduation rates (Bettinger, 2012). Because each district must maintain its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (Kelly, 2012), the state has determined that some inner schools that fail to meet its goals will be closed, restructured, or have new administrators if standards are not met.

In Johnston ISD, 31% of the Title I schools have increasing numbers of students performing below standard (TEA, 2014). Levenson (2010) concluded that there are many causes for poor academic achievement, suggesting that the connection to the achievement gap is due in part to socioeconomic status, student stress, and high stakes testing. In addition, Chapman, Laird, and Kewall-Ramani (2010) and Levenson (2010) speculated that poor achievement outcomes increase dropout rates and grade retention.

Organization of the Literature Review

To conduct the literature review, the focus was on the overall problem of students not completing high school. The literature is organized according to reasons for student academic performance and success, challenges, and obstacles students' experience.

Strategy Used for Searching Literature

Search engines used for the literature search were from the Walden University Thoreau database, and included Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Education Research Complete, Education: A SAGE full-text database, and ProQuest Central. The following keywords were also used to refine the search further: *academic achievement, educational improvement, achievement gap, closing achievement gap, teacher perceptions, educational outcomes, educational change, curriculum and instruction, standards-based curriculum, assessment, educational reform, educational policy, educational policy analysis, teacher policy, secondary education, outcomes of education, cross-cultural comparisons, accountability, accountability reform, academic standards, teacher arguments, student perception, stress, coping, stress management, tension, anxiety, high stakes testing, school demographics, academic culture, school culture, socioeconomic status, at-risk students, student outcomes, student attitudes, effects of testing, retention, promotion, teacher burnout, achievement effects,* and *student achievement.*

Literature Related to Research

Most academic literature suggests that for students to do well, they need out-of-school support from home in the form of a place to study, time to study, parents who

have the time to help them, and other resources that are common to middle-class income or more affluent households. Unfortunately, many Title I-eligible students come from families that lack places for children to study, parents in the home who can help with schoolwork, or they are required to work outside the home to provide money for the household. Because of poverty, students in Title I schools seldom have access to the same quality and quantity of resources to help them succeed as those in suburban areas (Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2010). To date, however, few researchers (Stipek, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004) believe that a problem like lack of resources is a researchable topic. Since there are few researchers that have addressed the lack of academic achievement, quality and quantity of available resources in Title I schools, there was a decision to seek a broader cause.

Fifty-seven of the 142 schools in the ISD have failed to meet the proficiency targets designated by *NCLB,* and they have even failed to increase their state scores to show progress toward reaching those targets. Although schools whose student scores show progress toward increased proficiency are granted additional opportunities to show improved scores, they ultimately face severe consequences if they do not reach significant improvement after a specified time. Title I-designated schools receive additional federal money, new curriculum resources, and require that a percentage of teachers be highly qualified in their subject areas in an effort to increase student achievement (Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2010). The district or the school can usually control these changes and additional resources, but when new or increased local efforts do not seem to affect student achievement, the cause most likely comes from outside the

school. In this study, to determine some of the causes administering interviews to teachers who work with students daily and have insight into students' lives beyond the school will be done.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided the research study are as follows:

RQ1: What do classroom teachers perceive to be the root cause of poor student achievement?

RQ2: Knowing the root causes to success, how will identifying them help students to perform better in school?

RQ3: What recommendations do teachers offer for reducing the effects of those causes?

The goal of the study was to determine the external barriers of the home or neighborhood that can cause poor student achievement as perceived by selected teachers whose students score better than average on state tests. The ultimate goal of the study was to determine ways for students to overcome the influences of the neighborhood they live in, pass state tests, and graduate from high school.

Foundations of Learning

Progressive reformers dating to the nineteenth century have emphasized the importance of learning and the need to increase literacy to improve society as a whole (Cuban & Usdan, 2003). During the early colonial period, reformers wanted to create an education system that produced literate citizens (Tozier, Violas, & Senese, 2002). Immigrants were taught English so they could contribute to America's continued growth.

In the 20th century, critics blamed public schools for America's failure to keep up with the scientific and military progress of the Soviet Union. In result of student's poor math and science skills, educational reformers, businesses, and the United States government determined that children must learn to read, write, reason, and compute on a more advanced level to become citizens who could compete with other countries (Cuban & Usdan, 2003).

Critics skeptical of *NCLB* have discussed the effects, which include placing unhealthy amounts of stress and anxiety on students' and teachers (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010; Wright & Li, 2008). Sloan (2007) found that teachers assigned to high stakes subject areas reported dissatisfaction with their jobs, high levels of stress, and reduced morale. Teachers also suggest that because of the importance of the scores, students who are weak test takers become very discouraged (Sloan, 2007). In situations where students have taken the test multiple times, some are likely to drop out of school out of frustration, increasing the number of students who do not graduate (Sloan, 2007). Researchers examined failure rate patterns in the state and concluded that after the adaption of a more rigorous exam in 1991, dropout rates began to rise and occurred in the earlier years of high school (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006).

Studies have tried to resolve the imbalance of poor student outcomes between communities by granting those schools in poverty-stricken areas Title I funds (Baker & Johnston, 2010). These Title I funds were created to help schools academically that cannot afford additional resources through their own funds. Barrow and Schanzenbach (2012) linked poor student outcomes to two variables: lack of support/encouragement and

minimal educational support to the impoverished communities in which they reside. Barrow and Schanzenbach (2012) suggested that schools with a higher percentage of parents with limited education could not assist their children. Schools with many students with parents with limited education develop programs such as after school tutoring and continued education services to help their children overcome such barriers. Tutoring resources have made some academic improvements within schools, however, there appears to be a shortage of programs in comparison to schools in suburban neighborhoods where students are already advanced or do not receive Title I funds (Barrow & Schanzenbach, 2012).

Background of Graduation Requirements

In 2004, all students entering the ninth grade needed five and a half credits for elective courses (TEA, 2014). In 2007, elective credits increased to seven, and then in 2013, the state changed electives to six and a half and added one required class in technology (TEA, 2014). According to *NCLB*, every student passing the state test determines high school graduation in the United States. Research indicates that the number of students earning a high school diploma is declining (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2007). Since the inception of mandated state testing and graduation requirements, nearly 6.2 million students dropped out of high school in 2007 and rates continue to increase (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2008). Long-Coleman (2009) determined that the intense emphasis on passing state tests, and the discouraging results of the tests could hinder students' motivation and create a sense of despair. When students continue to fail the same test repeatedly, they may begin to believe they will

never meet graduation requirements. After several attempts, many will become hopeless and opt to drop out of school rather than continue to experience failure (Long-Coleman, 2009). In the ISD, nearly 15% of students who had reached the legal age to quit school dropped out some time during the 2013-2014 academic year even when given the opportunity to retake the state test (TEA, 2014). Students who experience repeated failure are often discouraged. Other students dropped out by no longer showing up for school and were not part of formal record keeping. There is a possibility that some students may have earned a high school diploma through other means, but that group was not a part of the study.

Many types of programs nationwide are available to help students pass year-end or end-of-course tests. Some of these programs have been after school tutoring, pairing students with peer mentors, and reaching out to parents to offer them instruction in how to best help and support their children. Despite the best intentions of school and parents, few people living in low-income neighborhoods have the skills themselves to support their children in high school courses—many of which they did not experience in school themselves. Other efforts schools and districts have made have been to offer monetary incentives to teachers to teach in Title I schools. The incentives require that teachers be fully certified to teach in their subject area before being hired, attend regular professional development sessions tailored to working with children in high-poverty neighborhoods, and reach the highly qualified level of certification before they are hired to work in a Title I school (Shepard, 2009).

Motivation

To increase graduation rates, students should be engaged in school courses that require focused motivation (Lee, 2007). The teacher should maintain a positive classroom environment that promotes learning, as a positive classroom setting supports learning, keeps students on task, and creates instructional balance (Lee, 2007). Furlich and Dwyer (2007) and Wang and Eccles (2013) suggested if students have positive feelings about relationships with their teachers, students are more motivated to learn and be engaged in school. Looking into motivational skills, research suggest that motivation determines such factors like the level of engagement in a particular activity, how long one will stay engaged in that activity, and the length of time one will stay engaged (King, McInerney, & Watkins, 2011). King et al. (2011) also suggested that students who stay motivated and believe in the results of being determined to learn could reach their goals.

Other researchers believe one of the most important stimuli in student achievement comes from teachers' motivation and encouragement (Akbari & Alivar, 2010; Gallagher, Rabinowitz, &Yeagley, 2011; Ochoa, Lopez, Allen, Witt, & Wheeless, 2006). Teachers who motivate students and give them opportunities to succeed in the classroom create a positive culture of success (Bohanon, Flannery, Mallory, & Fenning, 2009). The main factor in inspiring students to perform well is to help them become self-motivated.

Docan-Morgan and Manusov (2009) suggested that self-motivation might develop through teachers providing opportunities for students to experience success. Giving students the opportunity to succeed makes them want to proceed to another task so they

might experience additional success. Coates and Seifert (2011) concluded that the psychological development of the human brain suggests that when a student continues to experience failure, it causes a disruption in motivation. Coates and Seifert (2011) also argued notions of success is caused from internal feelings of pride that derive from teacher and parent encouragement that boosts children's confidence. When students are confident in themselves academically, their will to graduate regardless of challenges increases.

Fletcher and Sampson (2012) concluded that when a student faces a challenging assignment or task, the motivation within is what drives students to complete tasks. There are three psychological necessities that come with intrinsic motivation: the need to feel good at doing something, self-determination to make their own decisions, and being able to connect and relate to others in class or in society. If students can proceed through the levels of motivation and succeed, they are more apt to control negative effects of academic challenges.

School Culture

School culture is an important part of having a healthy environment for learning. Cohen (2007) suggested that if a person's perception of school climate and culture are closely connected, then achievement might increase. Adults in a community and school have the potential to create either a positive or negative school culture. To create a positive culture, positive relationships between schools and their communities should be formed. Epstein (2013) suggested that if educators and parents in a community support

one another, they could develop a positive climate and become cheerleaders for the community where the school resides.

To increase positive school culture, faculty should identify and create activities that are meaningful not only to the school, but to the community for their involvement (Sundell, Castellano, Overman, & Aliaga, 2012). According to Gollnick and Chinn (2013), community involvement starts with faculty attitudes towards the culture of the school. Gollnick and Chinn (2013) indicated that a student's culture is the main link to the way young people think, feel, and behave in society.

Because one of the most stressful times a teacher may experience in their professional life occurs in the first years of teaching (Klassen & Chiu, 2010), members of the school community should work collaboratively. The lack of experience and, in some cases, lack of support from colleagues and administration can dampen the culture of the school and discourage positive development or young teachers (Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002). To help first-year teachers, mentors that share the same goals, teach the same subject, and have shown professional growth should be appointed to work with first-year teachers (Gatlin, 2012). If the match is positive, not only will a positive attitude of first-year teachers develop, but also young teachers may have a more positive attitude toward their jobs; additionally the mentor teacher may positively influence teaching and learning (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009).

If the students, educators, and the community are engaged in the well- being of the school, the school climate can flourish. When the climate is healthy, those healthy attitudes may create a gateway to learning. Research shows there is a connection between

the culture of the school and student achievement that tends to narrow the achievement gap (Badalament, 2008; Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2009; Jones, 2007).

Achievement Gap

To improve academic achievement requires an understanding of the effects associated with the achievement gap. The research of Pallas, Natriella, and McDill (1989) suggests that "Divorce, job changes, and housing mobility resulting from poverty have destabilized the community, and if this trend does not change, nearly 50% of all students will be labeled as academically disadvantaged by the year 2020" (p.7). The goal of *NCLB* (2001) was to eliminate the achievement gap, but a significant narrowing of this gap has not yet been documented (Lee, 2006).

Robinson and Lubienski (2011) concluded that standardized test scores are the most commonly used form of measuring achievement, but that there are questions about how accurately the test measures knowledge and learning. Kao and Thompson (2003) said using these tests to measure achievement is discrepant because socioeconomic variables among African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian students affect experiences, culture, and tangential knowledge. A child who has not travelled widely outside of his neighborhood, and whose parents do not subscribe to stimulating reading material will have narrower experiences than a child whose affluent parents expose them to a variety of places and people. Barton (2009) believed that physiological conditions like birth weight, interactions with others, environmental hazards such as lead paint in the home, and the quality of a child's nutrition play a significant role in cognitive development.

Aikens and Barbarin (2008) suggested that to close the achievement gap, more academic exams would do better administered at the primary grade level instead of waiting until later years to test for academic achievement through standardized testing. Rowan, Hall, and Haycock (2010) indicated that the first initial thing the U.S. has failed to do is agree on what is taught at each grade.

Rowan et al. (2010) also found that high poverty schools set very low expectations of their students by giving higher grades on assignments that would have earned a lower grade elsewhere. Williams (2011) suggested that students at the top and bottom of the achievement gap could achieve academically if similar first-class learning opportunities are provided. Although intentions might be good, teachers who give high ratings on mediocre work are not providing academic stimulation that promotes greater achievement. To solve the problem of underachievement, teachers and parents should encourage more low-performing students to take higher-track classes (Williams, 2011). Berger, Paxson, and Waldfogel (2009), along with Loeb and Bassok (2008), documented that the achievement gap occurs in a child's life as early as the second year of school and further explained by factoring in socioeconomic factors.

Socioeconomic Status

Students in inner city schools perform below average primarily due to their socioeconomic status and because they come from families with minimal education (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Conger & Donnelly 2007; Rouse & Borrow 2006). Students from low-income families are a major concern for stakeholders. There is a strong correlation between a parent's perception of themselves, their children, and their

children's perceptions of education (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith & Dutton, 2012). Parents play a critical role in whether a child will have high aspirations about academic success and high school graduation (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009). According to Gardner and Forrester (2009) when students have questions about their education, the first persons they generally ask about education are their parents. Students base a lot of their education aspirations and academics on the encouragement or lack thereof from their home environment or the level of education of the parents (Ferrell & Gresham, 1989).

Studies show that families with little to no education who live below the poverty level view a children's helping to support the household through working more important than their finishing school (National Commission of Schools, 2001). Studies such as one of a public Title I school in Virginia suggested that a child's demographics play a significant role in a child's education and the dropout rate (Cornell, Huang, & Fang, 2013). Cornell et al. (2013) further stated the dropout rate would continue among low-income families if they do not understand the continuing socioeconomic effects of lack of education.

Some low-income students lack the drive to set goals because they are discouraged by their past poor school performance. Rouse and Barrow (2006) reported that students in poverty areas tend to have varied school experiences due to lack of childhood preparation, financial support, and parental encouragement. Aikens and Barbarin (2008) along with Raag, Kusiak, Tumilty, Keleman, Bernheimer, and Bond (2011), found that a child's home life and early reading patterns account for a major part

of achievement. According to Angus (2009), many outside elements affect a student's performance: family background, financial status, and social class, none of which is controlled by anyone other than the family.

By the time children reach secondary school, there may be many demanding home situations for them to deal with daily (Wang & Gordon, 2012). Some students function as parents at home for various reasons, including those who must work outside the home throughout their high school years to help support the household (Laberge, Ledoux, Auclair, Thuilier, Gaudreault, & Perron, 2011). Some student responsibilities may be so great that some students miss school to work, take care of siblings, or even to take care of their own babies.

High-Stakes Testing

The state in the study was among the first states to use tests to try to assure teachers are educating students and that students are learning the information high school graduates are required to learn (Cimbricz, 2002). Because state assessments are a graduation requirement under *NCLB*, passing the tests is critical. Since the early 90's, all 50 U.S. states challenge students through some form of test known as an exit exam or high stakes test (Center for Public Education, 2006). Researchers continue to debate whether high stakes testing is an effective indicator of academic achievement for all children.

The state has created several tests over the years to examine how effective high stakes testing has been. Initially, in 1979, Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS)

tested students in Grades 3, 5, and 9 in basic math, reading, and writing skills. Students must retake the test if they failed, but still allowed to graduate if they did not pass TABS. TABS represented the beginning of "high stakes" accountability assessment in Texas. In 1984, the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) became the state test. The TEAMS test was still use to evaluate basic math, reading, and writing skills, but was given to students in the first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth grades. The same test placed individual requirements on juniors and seniors test results.

Six years after the TEAMS, Texas replaced TEAMS with the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), the first test given to students at the exit level. TAAS measures academic skills and is considered a more comprehensive assessment of reading, mathematics and writing (TEA, 2010). Beginning in January 2001, students enrolled in high school were required to pass the test in order to graduate. TAAS was also the first test to include a statewide accountability system that rates school campuses and districts. In 2003, Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) replaced TAAS. The state legislature mandated TAKS and required testing in additional academic subjects such as English language arts, math, science, and social studies.

Benefits of Testing

Bettinger (2012) concluded that a good test provides a clear analysis of a student's strengths and weaknesses, which identifies what knowledge is required to succeed in particular areas. Some students say tests motivate them to work hard and perform at their best because of the high level of accountability to master a particular skill (Guskey, 2007). Teachers that are advocates of state testing believe tests help to

identify the strengths and weaknesses in the school curriculum (Febey & Louis, 2008). The state test results help teachers align pedagogy based on insights the tests illustrate (Patrick & Eichel, 2006). Teachers who were not initially effective or whose students had good test results believed teachers would not limit students by just preparing the students for a test; rather, many teachers worked to give students skills necessary to be successful overall (Zeichner, 2011). Administrators in favor of state testing are able to use curriculum and instruction and can align appropriate professional development opportunities to a particular content area.

Critics of high stakes testing believe state tests have negative effects on students and the educational system. Tests can cause some students to become frustrated and defeated, further devaluing grades and assessments (USDOE, 2009). Testing even tempts some teachers to cheat by bubbling in answers after turning in tests, or leaving visual aids such as multiplication tables visible on classroom walls (USDOE, 2009). There are many complaints made by teachers and students about the unhealthy level of stress state testing places on each to perform well (Blackmore& Hutchison 2010; Wright, 2009). Several surveys found that some teachers were even thinking of leaving the profession (Wright, 2009). Similarly, a Florida survey found that educator's motivation to teach had declined (Education Policy Studies Laboratory, 2009).

The Coalition for Educational Justice (2007) insists that high stakes tests are biased because of the effects the tests have on poor and minority students in particular. The Coalition for Education Justice (2007) also suggest tests discourage students in the most vulnerable circumstances and increases dropout rates among at-risk students.

Academic Retention and Social Promotion

Academic retention and social promotion both have a negative effect on learning and student achievement (Jimerson, Haddock and Brown, 2012). Most in education agree that retaining a student in a grade is costly and does not yield the expected benefits (Bowman-Perrott, Herrera, & Murry, 2010). Jimerson, Haddock, and Brown, (2012), concluded that social promotion does not yield improved success as students leave one grade and enter the next. Some teachers believe if students do not pass the end-of-year grade test, the student should not move to the next grade. In addition, students should earn awards—like a high school diploma, and teachers generally do not want to give students credentials that have neither been earned nor worked for (Levin, 2007). Teachers in Ontario, Canada, felt that awarding students passing grades and unearned credentials would lack integrity (Levin, 2007). Hedy Miller, the North Side area coordinator for the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council, cited that students who have graduated after by social promotion have come for help in reading. According to Hedy Miller, several students who completed 12th grade lacked basic skills, but passed on through the system (Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council, 2009). In the District of Columbia Public Schools, as many as one-third of Grade 12 students have had to attend 6 weeks of summer school until meeting required standards because students had been promoted from one grade to the next (Curto & Fryer, 2014).

Research indicates that the social promotion policy is widely practiced throughout the early grades, despite policies that require students to pass specific tests before awarding a diploma (Peterson& Hughes, 2011). Critics of high stakes tests believe that

mandated test have caused some teachers to teach students how to pass a test rather than to learn information and develop skills (Brown, 2007). A state poll revealed most people believe that every student in the state should be able to read before promoted to the fourth grade (McComb, Kirby, & Mariano, 2009).

Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott (2009) reported the state in the study has school districts such as Dallas, Fort Worth, and Wichita Falls that practice a different form of social promotion. Districts in this area of North Texas have a minimum grading policy in which a student will receive no less than a 50, 60, or in some cases, 70% because of policies that restrict a teachers' grading authority. At some school campuses, teachers report principals have instituted unwritten rules preventing teachers from giving failing grades (Commissioner Robert Scott, 2009). Minimum grade policies undermine the authority and professional judgment of teachers and grant students grades they have not earned. The grading policy signifies students will pass to the next grade or graduate despite having poor academic achievement.

Teachers believe taking responsibility for social promotion should include describing to parents and students the problems attendant upon the practice and letting both teachers and parents to participate in the decision (American Federation of Teachers, 2010). Other challenges lie with possible physical or emotional maturity that exceeds their classmates' development coupled with weak academic skills, lack of higher-order thinking skills, limited English language usage, excessive absenteeism, and lack of engagement in learning (American Federation of Teachers, 2010).

Social promotion has been around for decades, although special education programs can be an option. If students' physical maturity significantly exceeds that of their classmates, practicing social promotion often outweighs the intellectual problems a student might have if promoted to the next grade. DOEs often weigh the social and physiological problems that might occur if a student may possibly be retained and placed with a younger group of children (USDOE, 2009).

There are many costs to students and society to move students from one grade to the next without clear attention towards their skills. Former Governor James Hunt of North Carolina insists students failing to grasp the concept of working to achieve academic goals, and get by without working as hard as others to be a significant emotional problem (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2010). Social promotion takes a great deal of effort and resources to help students who do not meet standards. According to Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel, failure to take responsibility for assessing social promotion options ultimately creates greater costs for states because poor achievement is strongly associated with more poverty, crime, and violence (USDOE, 2010).

Currently in this particular state, a school district's policy on social promotion is a student can move to the next grade as long as the grade placement committee (GPC) believes that at the end of the upcoming school year, the student will perform adequately at the specified with guided instruction (TEA, 2009). The GPC considers the recommendations of teacher(s), principal, and parents (TEA, 2009). Students can get additional instruction recommended by (a) attending summer school paid for by the

parents or other source(s), (b) hiring an independent tutoring agency paid for by the parent or other sources, and (c) other options left to the parents' discretion.

If a student shows signs of intellectual immaturity in preschool, several strategies may end the potentially poor outcomes that would come with social promotion. Strategies include requiring early identification of the potential problem with literacy proficiency opportunities that might prevent academic failure. Identifying students' weaknesses early will provide appropriate instructional strategies and professional development for teachers that will deepen their content knowledge and improve their instructional strategies. Other efforts may include holding schools accountable for grade reports, providing summer school for those not meeting academic standards, before or after school tutoring programs, and developing transitional and dropout prevention programs (USDOE, 2009).

Teacher Accountability

Policymakers have focused on improving students' academic performance through increasing teacher accountability. According to teachers, improving academic performance are best through several methods, including reducing their classroom engagement strategies and curriculum (Diamond & Cooper, 2007). Some teachers believe that accountability policies do not focus on teachers performance or on how the teacher should present core lessons (Baker, Barton, Darling-Hammond, Haertel, Ladd, Linn, & Shepard, 2010; Freeman, Mathison, & Wilcox, 2012; Reich & Bally, 2010). Rather, teachers view the policy as narrowing their ability to apply their own methods to engage students.

Reich and Bally (2010) reported that teachers have started to teach based solely on the content of the state test, and, as a result, have begun to require students to memorize facts. Teachers have focused on ways to help students prepare for tests by going over test-taking strategies during class in the event their jobs are compromised (Reich & Bally, 2010). In 2010, Burns, Klingbeil, and Ysseldyke noted that less than one third of teachers asked students questions that made them analyze or formulate their own answers rather than recall previous information they had learned.

Several states want districts to have clearer teacher evaluations linking student academic performance to teachers (Steele, Hamilton & Steecher, 2010). A member of the Broward school district teacher's union in Illinois identified accountability measures should consider a student's home environment, parental support, and the emotional state of the student.

When accountability threatens a teachers' job, stress and anxiety may follow (Perryman, Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2011). "Reasons for teacher stress include being labeled a *poor* teacher, being frequently supervised and observed; after students' test performance, the demand to maintain their scores or raise them; and being employed at a school known for poor test results (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006, p.11)." Some states have made a point to link teachers' raises to their students' performance on state tests (Lavy, 2007). Hanushek (2011), a Stanford economist said that although a good teacher may teach over a years' worth of lessons in an academic year, bad teachers generally taught less than half of that in the same period. Hanushek (2011) also said that stress-free

teachers could erase the achievement gap if students are able to learn a full year's worth of lessons.

Summary

Students know the academic goals required if they want to be promoted to the next grade or graduate from high school, which includes maintaining passing grades and passing state tests. Demands can make it difficult for students and teachers to focus. Accountability can make it hard for teachers to teach as creatively as they would like or seek unique ways to engage students. Research suggests many barriers to academic achievement are things such as stress, frustration, outside influences, the achievement gap and socioeconomic status (Inman & Marlow, 2004; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Stipek, 2011).

School districts receive an annual report card that states how well or poorly the district is performing. Typically, schools that receive Title I funding perform lower than schools that do not receive such funding. In this study, the researcher examined teachers' perspectives in areas that inhibit or contribute to low academic achievement. There was a theoretical framework used to determine external barriers other than environment or socioeconomic status that contributed to academic development. Indicated in Section 3, are teachers' perceptions of barriers that are inhibiting student achievement.

Section 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

A Title I school in Johnston ISD has failed to meet the states' academic requirements under *NCLB*. For several years, the faculty and staff have tried to get to the cause of the problem by using numerous resources such as before- and after-school programs, assuring that teachers are certified to teach their assigned subjects, and providing additional tutoring during the school day. This qualitative research study, investigated teachers' insight on barriers that inhibit student learning in a Title I low performing school. The focus of the study was derived from teachers providing their views to several barriers that take place outside of the classroom and prevent students from performing their best. This section covers the research design and approach, research questions, data collection and analysis, the validity of research, and the researchers' role. In order to learn teachers' perspectives relating to the critical influences on student performance, five teachers were interviewed based on their years of teaching experience and percentage of students that successfully passed the state test.

Research Design and Approach

A qualitative research design approach was used because Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) purport that the design is characterized by the collection of open-ended questions, analysis of text or pictures, and personal interpretation of findings. Qualitative approaches allow for participants' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions to be considered as primary data (Van Maanen, 1998). Interview answers allowed for personal interpretation of open-ended answers given in participants' natural setting. Interviews also allowed

participants to state their personal views of the barriers outside of the school day that they believe are preventing their students from learning. A quantitative research method was not suitable for the study, as Merriam (2009) stated that quantitative studies are fixed, single, and contain agreed-upon or measureable phenomena, but using such would have required pre- and post-testing. Surveys are a good approach because they allow the researcher to formulate the questions, but ensuring that all participants understand the question could be difficult. Lastly, mixed method studies involve using both qualitative and quantitative procedures for data collection that is not appropriate for this study since the researcher interviewed participants.

This study sought to find answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: What do classroom teachers perceive to be the root cause of poor student achievement?

RQ2: Knowing the root causes to success, how will identifying them help students to perform better in school?

RQ3: What recommendations do teachers offer for reducing the effects of those causes?

Context of the Study

The study was conducted at a high school campus with a population that has been predominantly African American since its inception in 1953. During the 2012-2013 academic year, the student population consisted of 791 total students including 666 African Americans, 103 Hispanics, seven Caucasians, six Asian Pacific Islanders, two American Indian Alaskans, and seven multi-racial. The school had a successful magnet

program for science and engineering from 1953-2004, but as the number of students entering the program began to decrease, the district decided to end the program, but offer gifted and talented, advanced placement (AP), and honors courses. Since 2006, student achievement has decreased and is steadily declining. Teachers who had been a part of the magnet program are now about 29% of the total, as many have left to teach at other schools or retired. In 2012, the district implemented a Programs of Choice (POC) focusing on aviation and business technology to increase academic offerings and offer certifications and dual credit for those that choose to go to college.

Ethical Protection

Teachers were chosen to participate in the study based on their level of content knowledge in math and science, with a minimum of 5 years of teaching experience. Participants also taught students that produced the highest grades in math and science courses. An emailed invitation to teachers who met the criteria to participate in the study was sent to all candidates (see Appendix B). If teachers agreed to participate, a consent form was printed out for each person to sign and date, and returned back in a sealed envelope (see Appendix C). Participants were all informed of the purpose of the study, assurances of confidentiality, and the ability to withdraw from the study at any time. Each of the participants were also made aware of how the data will be used without disclosing personal identities. Numbers instead of names identified each teacher during interviews and on interview transcripts. Personal feelings were not shared during the interviews. If there was a need, asking probing questions was used to draw out as many details as possible. Participants were welcomed to review the transcribed notes during the week of

their interview. If any participant felt information was misinterpreted or questions arose, clarification and changes were made. The researcher was the only person who had access to the compiled data and findings, all of which were secured in a locked file cabinet at home. The study site principal approved the five teachers participating. However, the principal did not participate in data collection.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher has been a classroom teacher in career and technology for 12 years, all of which have been in inner city Title I schools. As a child, the researcher grew up in a neighborhood similar to the students being taught. According to Creswell (2003), researchers must identify their biases and personal interest relating to the study. Because there is a personal background, the researcher has developed a passion for seeing students excel regardless of the obstacles they may encounter. The researcher is also the technology integration specialist on the campus in which they seek assistance with technology needs such as computer malfunctions or different uses for software in the computer lab.

In the study, teachers were selected based on their high percentage passing rates on the state test in math and science content areas. Those participants that teach math or science were asked to participate because at the study site, those two areas show the highest failure rates. At the end of each year, teachers with the highest classroom passing rates are assigned to teach students the next year who are weak in those areas. Participants may change from year to year, but they would still be selected under the same criteria with the same student demographics.

Selection of Participants

Teachers from the math and science departments whose students have the highest passing rates and who have taught in the school for at least 2 years were identified as potential participants. The decision was made because the participants have taught the same type of students on the same school campus, and the only high school in the immediate area. Using only one campus allowed the researcher to focus on a single set of circumstances and have immediate access to resources and participants. If any of the original five participants withdrew from the study, an invitation would be sent to another candidate to participate in order to replace the one that withdrew. The new candidate would have been selected in the same manner: by considering their students' state test scores and their years of teaching experience to ensure they meet study requirements.

Data Collection

Data collection was in the form of individual, one-on-one interviews. There were not any interviews conducted before getting approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB# 04-12-16-0130926). Utilizing one-on-one interviews allowed participants to express themselves more freely. Participants were asked not to discuss any of the questions outside of the interview setting so that every participant would come to the interview with their own ideas. Teachers scheduled their interview with me before or after school or during their planning period. Coordination of timing for interviews was facilitated through the on-site campus substitute who was available every day or through teachers covering another's class to provide needed time. With participant's permission, the interviews were audio tape-recorded.

During the interviews, field notes were kept about nonverbal body language such as facial expressions or casual comments of the participant. At the conclusion of each interview, transcription of the tape-recorded questions and answers were made with marginal notes about interruptions or comments. After the transcriptions were recorded, the tapes and transcripts were locked away in a locked personal file cabinet at home. When all interviews had been transcribed, member checking was done by inviting participants to sit and review their own responses and add or alter any of their answers if necessary. Harper and Cole (2012) explained that member checks are used to ensure that the researchers own biases and perceptions do not influence what is being described.

According to Byrd (2010) and Louioliene and Metiuiene (2009), journaling is a valid supplemental source of data. For that reason, journal notes were used during the analysis. The responses from teachers set the tone for the direction of the interviews. When participants got off track from an answer or the focus of the study, the researcher was able to guide them back to the specific questions so that data from each participant covered the same areas and could be collected and analyzed similarly.

Data Analysis

For the study, the typology analysis was created based off of the open-ended interview questions. Hatch (2002) describes this data collection approach by "dividing the overall data set into categories or groups based on predetermined typologies . . . generated from theory common sense, and/or research objectives" (p. 152). Data was collected by following the steps outlined by Hatch. First, identify distinct keywords, concepts or patterns in the data known as open coding by using different colored

highlighters to distinguish between them. All of the information from the audio taped interviews and journals were read and used to start marking entries related to the keywords, concepts or patterns. Secondly, axial coding was used to confirm that the keywords, concepts or patterns accurately identified all aspects of my analysis. Afterwards, the main ideas were recorded on a summary sheet. Identifying common themes was easily done based off the keywords, concepts, or patterns that were created. After the themes had been created, two sentence generalizations to support the data analysis was created.

Validity

Johnson and Christenson (2011) specified that to validate the accuracy of a qualitative study, researchers must make sure that it is "plausible, credible, trustworthy, and therefore defensible" (p. 264). Johnson and Christenson noted that for a qualitative method to be validated, it must have at least two of the following procedures.

- Researcher as detective
- Ruling out alternative explanation
- Extended fieldwork
- Low inference descriptors
- Triangulation (of data, methods, theory, or investigators)
- Participant feedback (also called member checking)
- Peer review
- External audit
- Negative case sampling

- Reflexivity
- Pattern matching

After the interviews, member checking was used to triangulate the data through analysis of participant feedback from the interviews and pattern matching. This way of triangulation is a way of checking the integrity of the assumptions a researcher may draw. The categorized groups of answers created during data analysis helped validate the process. Creswell (1998) stated using various types of data from different perspectives increases validity. The researcher avoided personal experiences, beliefs, morals, values, and relied on participant responses from recorded tapes rather than using personal perceptions. Participant feedback and reviewing notes from journal entries was necessary while forming conclusions. As the participants discussed their viewpoints, it gave them the opportunity to clear up any areas that were possibly misinterpreted. Utilizing audio taped, open-ended interview questions made it easy to go over the results several times for validity so that there were not any discrepancies. Lastly, using pattern matching helped determine if the actual results fit any of the predicted patterns that were anticipated.

Summary

In this section, the researcher described the methodology used for the qualitative study. The methodology included how the interviews were conducted, the assurance that participants could withdraw from the study at any time, how data was secured, and the method used to analyze the data. Section 4 will present an analysis of the data and findings.

Section 4: Results

Introduction

This qualitative research study examined barriers to student learning as perceived by teachers. In a poverty-stricken inner city school, there has been a decrease in graduation rates despite the many efforts to improve academics. In the study, five teachers were interviewed to discuss their reasons as to what may be the root cause of low student achievement.

An inner city school has seen a decrease in graduation rates for several years. That school has received several grant-funded programs implemented to increase academic achievement, but none of the programs helped the school meet academic standards set by the state. The purpose of the study is to determine what external barriers may affect student achievement. Through utilizing interviews, teachers discussed their thoughts on ways to reduce the achievement gap. The significance of this study could lead to schools creating programs to help overcome such barriers, which will increase the academic achievement rate at the particular school. Section 2 of the study focused on the research from relevant literature. Section 3 featured the research design approach used.

The section is organized around 3 research questions:

1. What do classroom teachers perceive to be the root cause of poor student achievement?
2. Knowing the root causes to success, how will identifying them help students perform better in school?

3. What recommendations do teachers' offer for reducing the effects of those causes?

From the presented research questions, the study will discuss in detail the results of the data collected from the interviews by using a reflective journal and emerging understandings. A brief description of the setting of the study and participants' demographics is included. The data collection measures and data analysis are expressed followed by evidence of trustworthiness. Lastly, the research findings are presented.

Research Setting

The five participants were selected from a particular secondary school in Johnston ISD. Each participant is employed and has worked at the same school a minimum of 5 years with a teaching background in math or science. These teachers have students with high scores on the state test. During the data collection, none of the participants discussed changes in opinions or interpretations of the results. None of the five participants discussed having any significant personal issues or circumstances that would have affected their interview responses.

Data Collection

Once I was able to conduct the research, eligible participants were sent an overview of the study with an invitation (see Appendix C) through email. If the candidates wanted to participate, they were asked to reply to the email. Seven willing participants replied to the invitation and were thanked for replying in a timely matter. Only five of the seven willing participants were solicited based off their students state test scores. At that time, each participant was asked to schedule an interview time and date

within two weeks if possible. Each participant was informed that the interview would take an hour or less and would be audio recorded. Before each interview, all participants conversed in light conversation, were offered bottled water and I assured they were comfortable. After each interview, the participants were thanked and shown appreciation by being given a $5 gift card to Starbucks. Hatch (2002) asserter that interviewers should feel respected, interested, and show confidence to the interviewees. The intent of the interview was read and the participants asked if they were okay with moving forward with the interview. After acknowledging the intent of the interview, each participant then signed his or her consent form (see Appendix B). According to Rubin and Rubin (2011) memoing is data that you analyze first to figure out what follow-up questions to ask and later to develop themes and theories that will be the product of the study (p.150). During each interview, the interviewee was given a copy of each interview question (see Appendix A) to help them follow along or refer back to.

As participants answered questions, written notes were made that contained key phrases. I made certain to only smile and be polite to show empathy about what feedback the participant had given. Smiling and being polite was also done not pass judgment on their opinions or perceptions. When probing questions were required by the interviewees it was done so as needed. Hatch (2002) stated that using probing questions encourages that interviewee to answer with great depth. It was beneficial to take notes during the process to assist with probing questions, making notes about nonverbal cues, and also in the event audio equipment failed. After each interview, the recording was transcribed while all thoughts were fresh and clear. Hatch (2002) gave several reasons for

transcribing the interview data as soon as possible after each interview is performed such as thoughts of what participants indicated are still clear and comments are not forgotten. After interviewing the participants, each of them were emailed their transcribed interview to make any additional comments or clarify statements to their responses. No additional comments or clarification was necessary. All of the typed interviews were saved on a personal computer and kept locked in a file cabinet at home.

All interviews took place in an office on the school campus because that was most convenient. Participants were assigned numbers instead of their names during the interviews for optimum anonymity. Each set of interview questions and notes had only a number at the top to identify the participant as well. None of the interviews lasted over 40 minutes. There were no unusual circumstances encountered during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

After the interviews were completed, analyzing the data was done by looking at transcribed notes from audiotapes that I typed in Microsoft Word. Reviewing transcribed notes allowed the creation of themes and patterns to emerge. To analyze the data, colored highlighters in Microsoft Word was used to identify recurring themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Common patterns were easily identified due to using the color-coding process. The common patterns were created by following the below steps:

1. Read the transcripts to highlight groupings of statements, which were either a sentence or phrase, then reviewing each sentence or phrase to create patterns of interest.

2. After reviewing the statements and phrases, identify those that had the same commonalities amongst all five interviewees. The statements or phrases that were not consistent responses were eliminated and were not one of the patterns created.
3. Cluster the patterns to identify themes by looking at the commonalities in them.
4. Compare each of the 7 themes that were created to the transcribed notes one last time for validity and ensure the responses were; (a) stated directly from the participant's interview, or (b) were stated if not explicitly from the notes compatible (Braun & Clark, 2006).

By following the above steps in the process core themes were created to describe teachers' perceptions. Braun and Clarke (2006) specified that themes are comprised of statements that capture aspects of the data in relation to the research question and represent a level of patterned response or meaning within the data. There were not any discrepant cases factored into the data analysis.

Findings

Each participant answered 16 questions and answers between each were consistent with one another, which supported the findings. The 16 questions derived from the following research questions: RQ1- What do classroom teachers perceive to be the root cause of poor student achievement; RQ2- Knowing the root causes to success, how will identifying them help students perform well; and RQ3- What recommendations do teachers offer for reducing the effects of those causes? The themes that emerged from the research questions were: (1) socioeconomic status, (2) ability of goal setting, (3) having the encouragement and motivation, (4) seeing another type of environment, (5) lacking

parental support, (6) build relationships with parents, and (7) stress of taking state tests. How each theme emerged is explained below by providing verbatim quotes from the participants.

Theme 1: Socioeconomic Status

Theme 1 was created based off RQ1: Participants were asked what they perceived to be the root causes of poor student achievement. Three participants indicated that they knew a majority of their students' parents worked long and hard hours for low paying jobs. Those low paying jobs left parents little time to spend reading and helping their children with schoolwork. According to Participant 1: "A lot of parents have maybe 1 or 2 minimum wage jobs to provide for their families so they work too much. They make low salaries so they work more shifts to take care of their children and when they get home, they do not have time to read. Without reading to them early on causes them to not have those comprehension skills." Participant 2 concurred and discussed that many of the parents are just living to survive: "The main problem is household issues from parents living to survive. Many students I teach do not have the bare necessities and are lacking nutritional foods because parents cannot afford them. I mean you see it every day; they come to school only eating chips and junk food." Additionally participant 3 mentioned, "The socioeconomic disadvantaged students here just start off behind due to parents' lack of education and they don't see the urgency of getting help for their children so that they will do better than what they possibly did. The environment and neighborhoods they grow up in plays a major part of what is important to them." Participant 4 expressed, "the

main issue is a lot of students are not getting the basic resources at home. Students then have to come to school with kids that may make fun of them and try to fit in. Some kids may come to school with all the new clothes and shoes and others have had the same stuff since last year because they can't afford anything new." Lastly, participant 5 added, "I believe they did not and do not have parents reading to them at home because they don't read well themselves perhaps or it is just has never been a necessity at home. Parents have to take time out of their schedule to practice reading skills at home because it is hindering them."

Due to the root causes of poor student achievement, the participants provided their thoughts on how to help students overcome socioeconomic issues and better prepare them academically.

Theme 2: Goal setting

Theme 2 was created from RQ3. Participants were asked what recommendations they could offer to help students overcome socioeconomic problems. Four out of five participants felt they had to help students figure out what their strengths, abilities, and aspirations were. Participant 1 suggested in their experience it starts with teachers letting students know that they can better prepare themselves for whatever they put their minds to: "We as teachers have to tell them that there are opportunities out there for them and that we can help them. Students don't know what direction to go; we have to help them work towards a direction." Participant 2 explained, "The teacher is the main one that they communicate with and the counselor. Both teacher and counselor have vital roles and must make the connection to help the student understand that they can do something

different by starting to strive towards those goals now." Participant 3 responded stating, "Students need to speak with someone about the opportunities available. Knowledge of some education to get out of their environment. They need to see what else is out there and see people like them working, giving students a sense of, I can do it too!" Participant 4 stated, "A student has to want an education even with those distractions or lack of things. It is inevitable, kids are going to be cruel and say mean things. You really have to just want to do right and get good grades. Making a goal that I will have all A's and B's can overshadow everything else at home. It's different when you're the poor kid with bad grades versus a poor kid with good grades and that's what they should strive for." Participant 5 believed that unfortunately, student goals are not aligned with academics: "They are focused on playing a sport and a lot of their parents support those ideas. Saying things such as my baby will become the next NBA or NFL player and buy me a house one day. So academic goals are not really there, but we need to get them there. Saying that, maybe we need to get them to look at playing ball to get into college that will "pay" for them to play and in return, they can get an education. Some feel like we hold them back from playing a sport when we fail them. We have to get them to set goals and let them see how those goals align with their dreams."

Students that lack a lot of parental support and have yet to set personal goals need adults to fill that gap and be their cheerleaders to reach their fullest potential.

Theme 3: Encouragement and Motivation

Theme 3 was developed from RQ 3. Participants were asked what recommendations they could offer to reduce the effects of poor student achievement.

Participants of the study identified the need for students to be encouraged and motivated to do their best regardless of their personal obstacles and if they are lacking parental support. Participant 1 indicated as a child, they were a product of a father that could not read and came from a socially disadvantaged family: "I see some of the same things in my students that was in my household. They do not know what to do to get into college or how to do better in school, we have to encourage them. Tell them they can be anything they want to be, and peer influence…patting each other on the back for encouragement." Participant 2 explained that motivation is intrinsic and extrinsic: "Hopefully they have intrinsic motivation, but if they don't then hopefully their parents or guardians are. If parents are not motivating them then we have to! We need to provide opportunities for them to have tutoring and by getting the extra help, they will be successful. It will build their confidence oh and sometimes that means taking in late work or giving extra time to get it done right. That encouragement to complete the work even if it is a day or two late." On the other hand, Participant 3 felt a student's perspective of normal is what they see their parents at home having majority of the time: "We need to get them to do more, see more people that look like them working in good paying jobs, and experience things through college tours or field trips. That would probably encourage them to go after it!" Participant 4 felt, "if you don't have parental support, you don't have anyone pushing you to go to tutoring, study harder. They do not care to do the work if you don't push them. A lot of times, kids just only do things based off what they see their parents have. When they start having small successes they are prone to doing more." Additionally, Participant 5 expressed, "if their parents have graduated then they are more likely to graduate. If they

have parents that have not finished school, then sometimes the parents don't value or push their kids to do so. If parents don't have high school diplomas then they may not get one. Some do not want them to do better than them so we have to motivate them in some capacity. Some need a money motivator or an incentive EVERYTIME just to complete work."

Since it is necessary to motivate and encourage students, giving them opportunities to actually see environments other than their current neighborhoods and jobs within the area should be provided.

Theme 4: Seeing another type of environment

Theme 4 was developed from RQ2. Participants were asked how identifying root causes of poor student achievement help students perform well. Participants discussed that being able to go places and see people in different career fields that look like they do gives students the opportunity to see the tangible benefits of working hard in school. Participant 1 expressed there are not enough field trips: "A lot of the times we judge them on their behavior so they do not get to do activities or field trips. We take fun things away. We should let students go or have fun activities so that they get the experience then they have something to continue to work for." Participant 2 suggested, "Teachers should post things that are positive like "star" student inside and outside the classroom for most improved. Praise them for growth even if it still isn't passing or an A or B average. Things that you can do to praise them for doing better even a little bit helps." Chiming on a previous question, participant 3 recapped on an earlier experience and stated, "If all of the students not just the honor roll students got to go on college tours that would be great.

They need more field trips to places other than colleges too like beauty schools, mechanic shops, construction sites, etc. Take them on things they are not accustomed to seeing and get them involved with different things rather than the norm." Participant 4 felt teachers have to get them out of the current environment: "They should be given a reward or experiences like a field trip up front. A lot of the students have never left this area. They live in the area, go to church in the area, their families live in the area, and they do everything in a few miles of where they live. They don't get a chance to see other areas. We need to give them a chance and experience things and we can do it to motivate them. For example, we should take ALL students on field trips for the experience and to motivate them to do well. Then throughout the year, we can say if you do well on this assignment, we can take another field trip to wherever. That would encourage them to do what is needed in the classroom. It's about having those small successes." Lastly, Participant 5 said to break the cycle and change their views/morals to where education is a priority: "We need to make education a priority. Not always like go to college, but like be an electrician. It does not have to lead to college, but a trade. An electrician is a trade that pays well and there are people like them that have blue collar and white-collar job. Our students just don't see people working like that in their environment. They need to see people like them doing different types of jobs so taking them on field trips would help them envision it!"

It was discussed that many parents are not able to give guidance to their children if it is something that parents never had the opportunity to experience themselves.

Theme 5: Lack of parental support

Theme 5 derived from RQ1. Participants were asked what they perceive to be the root cause of poor student achievement. Participants discussed that when parents are involved, helping their child succeed becomes easier for all involved. Regardless of the paths, parents have taken in the past, it is important for parents to help their children and support their educational goals. Participant 1 pointed out, "A parent helps in the way they know how to help. They may ask if they have homework, but that does not mean they know how to help them or ensure that they go get the help they need. We should provide information for the parents such as Internet tutorials/programs or if we do, how do we know students go home and tell the parents what is available. If parents know what is available to help, that may be beneficial." According to Participant 2, "Teachers should call home and let the parents know what is going on although there are times where the parent has lost control and the child is pretty much on their own. Some parents I find get offensive, but they need to know." Participant 3 said, "Communication is key, but it is hard when you can't get in contact with them, their phones have been turned off or they send you to voicemail. We should use our access to technology to get through and communicate with parents in other ways. We should have a way to set aside time to get the word out about self-help tutoring, trainings etc. We should go viral!" Participant 4 personally said, "the first thing I try to do is get the parents involved, but when I tell them who I am they just say I don't know math either. Parents must be involved and we have to encourage them even if they are not good in a subject. I think we have to encourage parents to sit down with their child even if they are not good. Just go to the library with

them, or sit down and learn from You Tube videos for example or go over the teacher notes. I think if we give the parent's resources to help them understand the material their child is bringing home that will help." Participant 5 discussed needing to hold parents accountable: "It is hard because society doesn't hold them accountable they look at educators. We should ensure parents are a part of meetings, make sure parents and student come to school for tutoring if necessary, and conference, whatever it takes even if they feel inconvenienced! Parents need to take ownership and step up. It is their child's future."

It was discussed that parents and teachers should have a way to communicate with one another. The relationship built between the parent and teacher helps make educating the student easier most of the time.

Theme 6: Build relationships with parents

Theme 6 was created from RQ2. Knowing the root causes to success, how will identifying the causes help students perform well. Participants discussed when positive relationships were built with parents, students responded accordingly in the classroom. One problem they faced was ensuring that parents were doing their part in helping the child succeed and building that relationship to do so. Participant 1 explained, "You get a lot more positivity when you develop a relationship with the parents. We always call for the bad things, but I try to call for good things to build support. Whenever I do that, the parent always says that I am the first to do so and they thank me every time." Participant 2 said, "having a relationship with parents can benefit you when the communication with

the student is off if the parent cares and doesn't want their child behaving badly or doing poorly in school. Then there are times where the student tells the parent that we do not even like them for example, and they come acting the same way before you called home. They laugh about it too. But, when there's a good relationship between parent and teacher they will discuss issues with you and that will pour over into the classroom as a benefit." Participant 3 felt that in their experience, negative parents want special attention even when the parent or student are in the wrong. Positive parents are supportive and when a student knows you will call their parents, they get serious and straighten up. Therefore, "when positive parent relationships are built, you can correct them right then and there or just mention the fact that I will call home if you don't get it together and it works!" Participant 4 knows that parental support is good, but it depends on the relationship the parent and child has: "How the parents feel about education plays a big part. If education is not important to the parent, then building a relationship will not matter. You hope to have a good report with them and it makes the classroom experience better when you do." Furthermore, participant 5 stated, "having a relationship with parents is good and normally the student is receptive to it too. When you have a good relationship with the parent, the parent will stay on the child and ask them to not be disrespectful because they know I care about their education. On a negative note, sometimes if the parent doesn't like a teacher, the student will most of the time have the same attitude…no respect."

Participants knew that some parents are not able to help their child succeed at times due to the parents' lack of knowledge in certain subject areas.

Theme 7: Stress of taking state tests

Theme 7 was created from RQ1. Participants were asked their perceptions on the root cause to poor student achievement, and how do low performing students feel about high stakes testing, and anxieties they may have towards testing. All of them felt some level of personal stress especially in high failure rated subject areas such as math and science. Participant 1 stated, "Stress and testing is a process with math because parents tell their children that they are not good at math either which causes stress. Then they come to us and we have to get them to think positively and build their confidence." Participant 2 explained, "first of all they know that they will be held accountable for their scores. Everything they have done all school year is now being tested. They feel the pressure and it's like do or die. Since elementary school, they have been programed and know that they may not be promoted or graduate if they fail. What makes it worse is we try to set our classrooms up like a testing environment and drill them over and over." Participant 3 said, "On top of every day issues, those that feel like they don't have a chance to pass just don't care. Then you have those that are really trying and that care, but just have test anxiety if they have failed in the past. It scares them. They can have a sense of defeat before the testing day even comes. All the progress that they have made throughout the year sometimes just fades in the moment when it is time to perform." Participant 4 confirmed testing is a huge stressor especially with math: "It's like they either get it or they don't. Throughout the year I am constantly teaching in test mode. Just pressing the issue that they have to get it or else. A lot of them have failed in the past and now here it is they have to pass in order to graduate high school. It is a huge stressor for them!" Moreover, participant 5 simply indicated students do not do well on tests: "Tests

are analytical and they are black and white. They want you to just tell them what to do and they do it. It's like forget reading questions because they don't understand the question."

The data described above created the seven themes, which emerged from majority of the interview questions. Other interview questions gave insight to what teachers perceive to be root causes in academic achievement, but did not create a pattern amongst all participants. The responses show that the participants all have the same opinions as to what barriers are inhibiting student achievement. None of the information needed to be rewritten due to contradictory findings, therefore the data was neither nonconforming nor discrepant.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Creswell (2007) said member checking strengthens the accuracy and credibility of transcripts. To ensure credibility, all five participants verified the accuracy of their personal transcripts (member checking). According to Harper and Cole (2012), member checking verifies how well the results reflect what participants were attempting to convey. To implement credibility during the interview process three strategies were used: actively listening to the responses, and probing participants when needed to encourage elaboration allowed for richer responses. To gain deeper insight Rhodes, Dawson, Kelly and Renshall (2013), stated the use of memoing (note taking) to document personal observations is useful. Memoing was done throughout the entire process to eliminate distractions of writing paragraphs and to ensure participants felt that full attention was

given to them. Notes from each interview was written immediately after each interview while the information was new and fresh. After each interview was transcribed, the participants were asked by email to assess the transcripts for accuracy. The participants' verification of accuracy assisted in the analysis and development of identified themes.

The second strategy used was triangulation. Triangulation involves using multiple data sources to produce an understanding (Creswell, 1998). Comparing the teachers' perceptions made it easy to triangulate the findings to develop and support emergent themes. Lastly, to aid in the credibility of the study was saturation. During each interview, the participants communicated efficiently enough to gain rich thick descriptions. Utilizing teachers with the best test scores and more years of teaching experience also aided in saturation. I reviewed each audiotaped interview several times. Reviewing the transcribed notes ensured new themes did not emerge and helped in saturation. Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed, coded then member checked. One last final check was done to assure that saturation had been achieved. Examination of the data was done to identify discrepant cases in which no discrepant cases were found during the analysis.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree in which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts with other respondents; the interpretive equivalent to generalizability (Bitsch, 2005; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Rich, thick description involves a detailed depiction of the teachers' perceptions. Using probing questions to get detailed

answers from participants lead to the collection of detailed data. To report the findings of the study was done by utilizing the transferability process.

Dependability

Dependability is the capacity to display how, if given the same context, methods and participants, similar results would arrive at the same results (Shenton, 2004). The strategy used for dependability was in reporting each step and procedure taken while conducting interviews in which would lead to similar findings.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a qualitative equivalent to the objectivity within quantitative studies (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). To minimize researcher bias, setting aside personal feelings, preconceptions, and personal judgments prior to interviewing was done. By solely reflecting on note taking during and immediately following the interviews on participant responses aided in confirmability. Notes also assisted in remaining cognizant during the process. Since the themes were from saturated data, the themes identified were valid representations of each participant and not a reflection of researcher bias.

Summary

Throughout the study, the use of interviews was the method of data collection. Teachers shared their perceptions and experiences on what they felt were barriers inhibiting student achievement such as a lack of home/parental support, encouragement

and motivation, and leaving current circumstances/environment by exploring through field trips, socioeconomic status, and stress. Section 5 discusses the summary, conclusions, and recommendations of this qualitative study. The section closes with suggestions for future research.

Section 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The research study was conducted to examine teacher's perspectives of barriers that inhibit student achievement. There is an inner city school that has not been able to meet the states' academic standards. As a result, the school may be forced to restructure or new faculty and staff will be put into place. The school has made several changes to academic standards in an effort to close the achievement gap, but none has ended in scores high enough for state reprimands to be removed. Therefore, looking at the causes of what is hindering student achievement from a teacher's perspective has been explored. Five teachers participated in the study and were asked questions based off the following guided research questions:

RQ1. What do classroom teachers perceive to be the root cause of poor student achievement?

RQ2. Knowing the root causes to success, how will identifying them help students perform better in school?

RQ3. What recommendations do teachers offer for reducing the effects of those causes?

Seven themes were identified: socioeconomic status, goal setting, encouragement and motivation, seeing another environment, lack of parental support, build relationships with parents, and stress of taking state tests. These themes created the essence of participant perceptions that each had based on their experiences.

From the collection of data, this section will include the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and implications for social change.

Interpretation of Findings

After reading literature on poor academic performance and possible causes in impoverished neighborhoods, the results from the study supported the literature. All teachers that participated in the study helped create the themes listed below.

RQ1: What do classroom teachers perceive to be the root cause of poor student achievement?

Theme 1: Socioeconomic Status

Literature suggests that a child's home life and early reading patterns account for a major part of achievement (Raag, Kusiak, Tumilty, Keleman, Bernheimer and Bond, 2011). Additionally, many outside elements affect a students' performance: family background, financial status, and social class, none of which can be controlled by anyone other than the family (Angus, 2009). Teachers that participated in this study all implied that household issues and lack of education played a vital role in their child's education.

RQ2. Knowing the root causes to success, how will identifying them help students perform better in school?

Theme 2: Goal Setting

Docan-Morgan and Manusov (2009); Coates and Seifert (2011), believe that when the human brain continues to experience failure it causes a disruption in motivation. When teachers and parents encouraged them to be successful at one task, they are excited

to proceed to another task so students might experience additional success (Docan-Morgan & Manusov, 2009). Other researchers explain that some low-income students lack the drive to set goals because they are discouraged by their past (Rouse and Barrow, 2006). In this study, teachers believed that goal setting is necessary so that they have something to look forward too. Setting goals gave them the push they needed from their teachers along with having them build confidence and inspiring them that they can achieve those goals with the proper mindset.

RQ2. Knowing the root causes to success, how will identifying them help students perform better in school?

Theme 3: Encouragement and Motivation

Several researchers state that one of the most important stimuli in student achievement comes from teachers' motivation and encouragement (Akbari and Alivar, 2010; Gallagher, Rabinowitz, and Yeagley, 2011; Ochoa, Lopez, and Elmer, 2007). The need to be good at a task or being able to connect and relate to others is inspiring. All of the teachers agreed that motivating students offers opportunities to create a positive culture of success. The main factor is inspiring them to help them become self-motivated.

RQ3. What recommendations do teachers offer for reducing the effects of those causes?

Theme 4: Seeing another environment

The literature about a student's environment and culture coincides with comments made by teachers in this study stated. Students might not be aware of professional opportunities beyond the poverty- stricken environment they are raised in because students have not had the opportunity to meet people in the careers teachers discuss in

class. Gollnick and Chinn (2013) purport that a person's culture is the main link to the way young people think, feel, and behave in society. Kao and Thompson (2003) propose that a child who has not traveled widely outside of the neighborhood will have narrower experiences than a child whose affluent parents have exposed them to a variety of places and people.

RQ1: What do classroom teachers perceive to be the root cause of poor student achievement?

Theme 5: Lack of parental support

Out-of-school support is important for student success. Many outside elements affect a student's performance: family background, financial status, and social class, none of which can be controlled by individuals outside of the family (Angus, 2009). Unfortunately, for many students such as those addressed in the study, students lack parental support and also come from families that are ill-equipped to help with schoolwork or lack access to resources (Baker, Sciarra, and Farrie, 2010). Teachers have consensus that students lack parental support due to poor education, and having to work a lot of hours to provide for the family.

RQ3. What recommendations do teachers offer for reducing the effects of those causes?

Theme 6: Build relationships with parents

Parents play a critical role in whether their child will be successful in school. According to Mahoney (2008), children base a lot of their education aspirations from the encouragement of their home environment. Results of the study concluded that parents can only help children according to the level of education they have attained. Building

relationships with parents is key to help get them on the same page so that together, the student may be successful.

RQ2. Knowing the root causes to success, how will identifying them help students perform better in school?

Theme 7: Stress of taking state tests

Students that have failed in the past are discouraged. These students that fail repeatedly begin to believe they will never pass. Testing creates a lot of stress for students, leaving some to opt out of testing and drop out (Long-Coleman, 2009). Teacher stress often increases when pay raises are linked to their students' performance on state tests (Lavy, 2007). Teachers participating in this study concurred that the annual test is very stressful, and students do get discouraged after repeated failure, but they understand that testing must be done. According to state testing guidelines, students and teachers are held accountable for their performance and that causes stress. In addition, teachers feel they should get praise for the amount of growth they have accomplished even if they did not pass.

The findings have concluded that based off of interviewing results from section 4, teachers believe that lack of parental support and motivation, socioeconomic status, not setting goals, seeing another environment, and not building relationships with students are inhibiting student achievement. Literature also supports the results of the study. Researchers suggests students in inner city schools perform below average due to socioeconomic status (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009; Conger & Donnelly, 2007; Rouse & Borrow, 2006). Kao and Thompson (2003) specified that a child that has not traveled

outside of his environment, and does not read stimulating material has a narrower perspective of academic achievement. Coates and Seifert (2011) suggest success comes from feelings of pride that derive from teacher and parent encouragement. Lastly, researchers indicated that students base a lot of their aspirations from the encouragement or lack thereof from their home environment (Ferrell & Gresham, 1989; Amerin & Beardsley, 2009).

In accordance with the findings of the study, the conceptual framework explains that self-efficacy and metacognitive beliefs are also vital factors to what is inhibiting student achievement. Gollnick and Chinn (2013) believed that a child's culture is the main link to how people think, feel, and behave. Coates and Seifert (2011) explained the psychological development of the brain suggests that if students continually experience failure, it causes a disruption in academics. The aforementioned results confirm mandating field trips so students can see different jobs and environments, building relationships with parents by educating them on how to use the school resources to help their child(ren) become successful is encouraged.

Limitations of the study

The research study was limited to one campus with a sample of five teachers. The study was limited to one campus due to the distance of the next nearest high school. Due to my role of a classroom teacher on the same campus, some biases were formed in the study. Additionally, some biases could have come from my own perceptions of what inhibits students from reaching their academic potential. In addition, by the researcher maintaining an open mind prevented participant feedback from being influenced to

respond one way or another. By memoing (note taking), it was easy to accurately document the participant responses and not the researcher's. Lastly, journaling helped to limit biases while member checking was used to verify the accuracy of participant feedback.

Implications for Social Change

The research was conducted to examine barriers inhibiting student achievement from a teachers' perspective. There was a sample size of five teachers that are all employed at the same inner city high school and teach at-risk youth in either math or science. Each teacher in the study provided their opinions on what outside issues they felt were hindering students from excelling academically.

In order for this particular inner city school to see an increase in academic achievement, I recommend that a collaborative effort from educators, students and their families exist. The school districts' curriculum and instruction department should provide training on classroom strategies for teaching different cultural backgrounds for diversity and socioeconomic reasons. The training and classroom strategies will help teachers incorporate real world examples into their lesson planning. Instead of having career days, planning professional field trips throughout the school year to different companies and post-secondary schools should be mandated for students to experience what are some of the choices after high school they have and that they are obtainable. Lastly, the school district should incorporate mentoring programs not only for new teachers, but also for students. The mentors could consist of young adults from local colleges/universities or people from the community who have entered the workforce and can offer guidance

based off experiences. Mentoring programs have a positive impact on school culture, academic growth, and self-efficacy (Larose, 2013). This will form stronger relationships and increase the number of adults that are actually monitoring student progress.

Recommendations for Action

The findings of this research study could lead to positive social change by having both teachers and parents with a vested interest in finding ways to motivate students to reach their fullest potential. Pallas, Natriella, and McDill (1989) suggested that divorce, job changes, and housing mobility resulting from poverty have destabilized the community, and if this trend does not change, nearly 50% of all students will be labeled as academically disadvantaged by the year 2020. I sought to find answers to close the achievement gap by gathering data from those who work in the school system.

To increase academic achievement, it is recommended that schools implement programs or resources not only for students to use but also for parents so they can help their children at home with schoolwork. Educating parents to use available programs or resources through the schools' campus website would give them a place to look for help along with other educational websites including YouTube tutorials. To guarantee parents take advantage of such resources, their child's school could make it mandatory that each parent is registered and taught how to access online tutorials that will be posted on the school website throughout the school year. If parents do not have a computer or internet at home, the school has a parent resource center (PRC) with a parent liaison available to help them. The PRC is available to families during school hours and educating families

on how to use the resources available could be done during school registration or open house where parents come to meet faculty and staff. In addition, having each student at risk of not graduating put on a growth plan that must be signed by both the parent and student at the beginning and midway through the school year would be beneficial. The study's recommendation for future research could provide insight into what is needed to help assist low performing schools in impoverished areas become more successful by helping to support and improve student academic achievement.

Recommendations for Further Study

For future research, this study could be expanded to more than one campus and explore primary, middle, and high school grade levels. Using a larger sample size could broaden teacher feedback due to using different grade levels. There could also be a larger sample size of participants to gather data from if there was another school nearby. A follow-up study could be to ask parents to participate in the study to gain their perceptions on why their children are not academically successful. By holding the parent and student accountable for the above mentioned, the potential benefits are increased academics and graduation rates.

Conclusion

An inner city LEVEL school in Johnston ISD has made many efforts to increase their schools' academic performance according to state requirements. Helping students reach their academic potential has been at the forefront of education reform dating back to the nineteenth century. Cuban and Usdan (2003) have emphasized how Progressive

reformers saw the importance of learning and the need to increase literacy to improve society as a whole. Critics back then blamed America's public education system for lack of competitive edge against the Soviet Union. To date, there are still schools struggling to be as competitive to those around the world and in neighboring suburban areas. The study sought out to determine what external barriers might be effecting student achievement from a teachers' perspective. Teachers discussed valuable insights to possible causes of lack of academic achievement and as a consensus, those causes were socioeconomic status, goal setting, encouragement and motivation, seeing another environment, lack of parental support, building relationships with parents, and stress of taking state tests. According to researched literature, the findings of this study would be valuable to help increase student achievement so that there is an increase in high school graduates moving forward to being educated, working class citizens. Those students would give positive contributions to the communities in which they live and society as a whole, versus adding to poverty-stricken areas, the increasing crime rates, and the growing incarcerated population.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What obstacles do socio-economically disadvantages students face in school?
2. How can students better prepare themselves to reach their academic goals due to those obstacles?
3. When students lack parental support or have parents that did not graduate high school, what obstacles if any could they endure along the way?
4. What motivates socio-economically disadvantages students to succeed academically?
5. What steps do you think could be put into place to help students?
6. As a teacher, how can you ensure that parents are doing their part in helping their child succeed?
7. How can the interaction with you as a teacher affect a students' performance (positively or negatively) when you have developed a relationship with the parent(s)?
8. What would you do or say to a parent that has a child you deem that could potentially be at risk of dropping out?
9. How do your low performing students feel about high stakes testing?
10. What personal anxieties do you think students have towards high states testing?
11. To help your students succeed, having personal background information can help you assist in a students' education. What personal issues have helped you in helping student(s) succeed?
12. To what factors can those be attributed?

13. Knowing the students you serve in a Title I inner city school, what type of academic standards do you suggest to help close the achievement gap? (Ex. Encourage honors classes, change curriculum standards)

14. What are some advantages and/or disadvantages of socially promoting a student?

15. Have you ever witnessed a student be socially promoted that shouldn't have been? If so, why do you feel they should not have been promoted?

16. Should teachers be held accountable for student scores on state tests? If so, why?

Appendix B: Letter of Consent

Dear Faculty Member,

You are invited to participate in a research study titled *Teachers' Perception of Barriers that Inhibit Student Achievement.* You were chosen because of your commended teaching record, several years of experience, and your background in Math or Science in FWISD.

I am conducting this research for my doctoral study at Walden University. Although you know me as a teacher within this school district, this study is separate from that role. I will be the only person conducting this research study.

Background Information:
The purpose of this qualitative study is to determine what external barriers that may affect student achievement.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in an interview that may take up to 30 minutes (done at your convenience before, lunch, or after school)
- Review the transcripts from your interview for accuracy and validity.
- If participant feels transcribed notes are misinterpreted then changes will be made.
- Review the transcribed notes once again for accuracy and validity.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you change your mind at any time before or during the study you may do so.

Compensation:
There is no compensation for participation in this study, but a $5 gift card to Starbucks will be given.

Confidentiality:
Any information that you provide during your interview will remain confidential. Your name will not be used instead a pseudonym will be given. In addition, the information will not be used for any other reason other than for my research study.

Contacts and Questions:
If you have questions about your rights as a participant or concerns feel free to contact the Walden University Research Participant Advocate USA number 001-612-312-1210 or email address IRB@waldenu.edu. If you have questions about the study, please contact myself the researcher via telephone or email @ 214-498-1602 and taryn.everett@waldenu.edu. Walden University's approval number for this study is 04-12-16-0130926 and it expires April 11, 2017.

See below

Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant _____
Date of consent _____
Participant's Written Signature _____
Researcher's Written Signature _____

Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Legally, an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically.

Appendix C: Follow Up Invitation

Dear Faculty Member,

A week ago an invitation to participate in a research study titled *Teachers' Perception of Barriers that Inhibit Student Achievement* was sent to you. At that time I explained the nature of the study and procedures for you to follow if you chose to volunteer (see below). I understand that our daily schedules and personal lives may make our days hectic so it is possible that you had forgotten by mistake.

I would love for you to participate in the study, and again it is not mandatory. There would be no compensation for volunteering and your participation will be confidential.

I am conducting this research for my doctoral study at Walden University. Although you know me as a teacher within this school district, this study is separate from that role. I will be the only person conducting this research study.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Sign a consent form
- Participate in an interview that may take up to 30 minutes (done at your convenience before, lunch, or after school)
- Review the transcripts from your interview for accuracy and validity.
- If participant feels transcribed notes are misinterpreted then changes will be made.
- Review the transcribed notes once again for accuracy and validity.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or concerns feel free to contact the Walden University Research Participant Advocate USA number 001-612-312-1210 or email address IRB@waldenu.edu. If you have questions about the study, please contact myself the researcher via telephone or email @ 214-498-1602 and taryn.everett@waldenu.edu.

Sincerely,

Taryn Everett Researcher
Walden University

Appendix D: Letter of Cooperation

Letter of Cooperation between Taryn Everett (Data Recipient) and [redacted]

[redacted]

January 22, 2016

Dear Taryn Everett,

After looking over your research proposal with Walden University, I give you permission to conduct your study entitled "Teachers' Perception of Barriers That Inhibit Student Achievement" at [redacted] As a part of this study, I give you authorization to get student test data by classroom teacher in order to find teachers to voluntarily participate. This information will be passed on to the data analyst on campus so that she may assist you in gathering this data.

I understand that this information will be used for teacher selection and that those teachers will participate at their own discretion. They have the right to withdraw at any time, and their names will not be used during any part of this study.

Sincerely,

[redacted]