School Leadership Practices, Student Socioeconomic Status, and Student Achievement in One Virginia School Division

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Abstract

The literature review for this study suggests that socioeconomic status is a factor in student achievement results. Over the decades the variety of factors contributing to the changes in the achievement gap among subgroups of students has consistently included such elements as educational attainment, employment and earnings, and neighborhoods affected by concentrated poverty. As the income gap has widened, so has the achievement gap between children in high- and low-income families (Reardon, 2011). The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of school leaders in one Virginia school division regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement. Using a survey design that included qualitative analysis of free response questions allowed the researcher to examine K-12 administrators’ perceptions of the relationship between SES and student achievement and the leadership practices they use to balance any effects of low SES on student achievement.

This study was conducted through a survey of elementary, middle, and high school leaders. The survey participants were building level administrators within one diverse, school division. The administrators were at various stages of their career with a wide range of service years. The findings of this study identify school leaders’ perceptions of the practices they should employ to mitigate the impact of SES on student achievement. School leaders perceive SES to have an impact on student achievement based on available resources, environmental experiences, and developmental skills students bring to school with them.

The collective responses are important in helping school divisions make informed decisions to mitigate any negative impact low SES has on student achievement by understanding the community demographics and having the resources to help balance the impact of income-deprived communities. The variables mentioned in the qualitative data responses regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement indicated that school leaders perceive their understanding of student and community culture, relationships, and high academic expectations as factors that can help mitigate the negative impact of low SES on
student achievement. The identified leadership practices include building relationships, understanding community culture, and being visible.
General Audience Abstract

Over the decades the variety of factors contributing to the changes in the achievement gap have consistently included such elements as educational attainment, employment and earnings, and neighborhoods affected by concentrated poverty. The literature review for this study suggests that socioeconomic status is a factor in student achievement results. As the income gap has widened, so has the achievement gap between children in high- and low-income families (Reardon, 2011). The purpose of this study was to explore administrative perceptions of the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and student achievement and to identify what leadership practices administrators use to mitigate the impact of socioeconomic status on student achievement in one Virginia school division. Using a survey with both qualitative and quantitative data allowed the researcher to investigate K-12 administrators’ perceptions of the relationship between SES and student achievement and the leadership practices they use to balance any effects of low SES on student achievement.

This study was conducted through a survey of elementary, middle, and high school leaders. The survey participants were building level administrators within one diverse, school division at various stages of their career with a wide range of service years. School leaders in the participating school division perceived SES and leadership practices to impact student achievement. They perceived leadership practices, including building relationships, understanding community culture, and being visible to have a mitigating effect on student achievement as long as school leaders have an understanding of the school and community cultural demographics and the resources to support student academic needs.
Dedication

“Different cultures often value education and knowledge differently. The inheritance from ancestors in terms of values, expectations, and life goals is important. After American slaves gained their freedom, laws finally were passed giving Black people equal legal status with others and removing legal barriers to education and employment. But none of this restored an ancestry that, before the slaves were captured, reached back in an unbroken line for ages; African ancestry was simply severed from the lives of the enslaved people” (Barton & Coley, 2010, p. 28).

If it was not for those who paved a way before me, I would not have fathomed that I could even attempt such an accomplishment. To you, Earl and Clara James, Donald Robinson, Beatress Smith, and Rosa Cox, I dedicate this journey of learning.
Acknowledgments

Thank you for:

- My committee who helped me narrow this topic and for being engaged participants consistently challenging me to push to the next level.
- Each person who joined me along the way on this journey sharing experiences, knowledge, and expertise at just the right time.
- Faith and the will power, humility, grace and mercy, and a spirit of determination.
- My loved ones who loved me unconditionally through this process.
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Chapter One
The Problem

Introduction

This study identified the perceptions of school leaders in one Virginia school division regarding the relationship among socioeconomic status, leadership practices, and student achievement. Educational leaders provided their perceptions on the leadership practices they employ in low and high SES schools to enhance student achievement. According to Worley (2007, p 2), “Despite huge efforts on the part of educators, students who are not from higher income brackets do not achieve at the same level during school or in their post high school experiences.” Educators have worked to identify solutions and develop plans to promote rigorous academic standards for every student (Worley, 2007).

Background

Researchers have reported for decades on the existence of an achievement gap between students from low and high socioeconomic communities. Bryant’s (2016) research study, “Measuring the Achievement Gap: A New Lens for Economic Disadvantage” looked at the student achievement gap between students who receive reduced price lunch and those who received free lunch. This research noted socioeconomic level as a predictor of academic achievement greater than race, school environment, class size, or district funding levels (Bryant, 2016). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandated that schools close the achievement gap by measuring academic growth primarily through a norm-reference standardized assessment for all students. NCLB used family income levels to determine if a student qualified for free or reduced lunch benefits based on the classification of economically disadvantaged. In NCLB, schools were held accountable for failing to close the achievement gap and this accountability measure ignored outside contributing variables when schools failed (Evans & Rosenbaum, 2008).

The reauthorization of Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA) allows states to determine their own accountability measures along with school improvement and teacher quality. There is still a requirement to maintain foundational supports for vulnerable student groups like minorities, English-learners, and students with disabilities; however, ESSA is expected to have more flexibility on accountability measures (Klein, 2018).
Bland (2011, p. 2) stated, “Schools where students feel safe, engaged, and connected to their teachers are also schools that have narrower achievement gaps between low-income children and their wealthier peers.” Research has also demonstrated that parental involvement also plays a role in supporting student academic growth (LaBahn, 1995). Bland (2016) suggested that a positive school climate promotes equality in educational opportunities, decreases socioeconomic inequalities, and weakens the effects of low socioeconomic status on achievement. The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research tracked data from 2007 to 2014, comparing state test results with teacher and student surveys about their experiences. The study findings suggest that school leaders in the school division who focused more on students feeling safe and supported in schools resulted in stronger achievement gains (Allensworth & Hart, 2018).

**Statement of the Problem**

As of 2013, the majority of students in public schools come from low SES families (NEA, 2014). Students who live in low socioeconomic communities may enter school with learning deficits. Economically and racially segregated neighborhoods contribute to families with low income living in higher concentrations of poverty and students being subject to lower expectations from teachers (Ladd, 2012). This research study allowed administrators to provide their perceptions of the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and student achievement, and to identify what leadership practices they use to mitigate the impact of socioeconomic status on student achievement in one Virginia school division.

Administrators who do not understand the impact of the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement may not be engaging research-based best practices to ensure high academic achievement for all students. Projected changes in demographic trends related to race and SES suggest public schools will be charged with meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student body representing the lower spectrum of the achievement gap. An increase in the academic performance of minority and low-income groups is important for the future of our nation (Ladd, 2012). By 2022, minority students are expected to enroll in public schools by more than half of the overall school enrollment. Evidence indicates that a student’s socioeconomic level is a factor in achievement. Studies conducted by researchers like Reardon, Barton, and Worley conclude with Ladd (2012) that students from economically disadvantaged families do not demonstrate the same academic success as their peers.
Parental involvement becomes an issue of concern as it tends to decline when students enter secondary school. Involvement lessens as the traditional family changes, single-parent households may lack more resources, time is limited, and often financial restraints play a role (LaBahn, 1995). “The relationship between SES and student achievement is the product of a set of social conditions, policy choices, and educational practices. The relationship between family socioeconomic characteristics and student achievement has been readily documented in educational research, yet the causes and mechanisms of this relationship have been the subject of considerable disagreement and debate” (Reardon, 2011, p. 3).

Kaniuka (2009) wrote, “Low performing students seem to be at-risk not only due to their non-school variables, but possibly due to how a combination of variables are manifested in the instructional policies enacted at the school and district levels. Educators’ instructional paradigms are arguably rooted in prior professional experience and school-based contextual variables” (p.1). Dufour (2004) emphasized professional learning communities as a means to improve student achievement and engaging all faculty in this effort is necessary to capitalize on the collective expertise throughout the school.

**Significance of the Study**

This study could aid in understanding how educational leaders perceive their role in directing student achievement results. The perception of building level leaders acknowledging the practices they use to positively influence student success would assist local and state officials in developing more meaningful and relevant accountability measures aligned with school environments conducive for learning. Gay’s research of school culture (2010) contributed to the push for education reform in aspects of educational enterprise relating to budget and finance, policymaking, and leadership. Gay (2010) suggested school administrators must be able to dictate the direction of the school environment. Students in high-poverty schools are not receiving the same educational opportunities as students in low-poverty school settings (Griffin & Allen, 2006). School leaders who promote and sustain a stable learning environment understand the complexity of this relationship in retaining good teachers and countering the negative effect on student achievement (Khalifa et al., 2016).
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of school leaders in one Virginia school division regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement. Educational leaders shared their perceptions on the leadership practices they employ in low and high SES schools to enhance student achievement.

Exploring the connection between leadership practices and student success across varied economic levels could pave the way to effectively mitigate the impact of poverty on student achievement. Policy makers, educational leaders, and stakeholders are realizing student achievement to be the complex work of variables that could predict and impact student achievement levels in public schools (Kaniuka, 2009). “As population demographics continuously shift, so too must the leadership practices and school contexts that respond to the needs that accompany these shifts” (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1274).

This study identified common educational leadership practices in schools with various SES and student achievement levels. An open discourse about how school leaders perceive the impact of SES and leadership practices on student achievement could encourage synergy among local and state policy makers regarding the purpose of standardized testing and how the data is used (accountability).

Research Questions

RQ1--- What are the perceptions of school leaders regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement?

RQ2--- Which leadership practices are perceived to have a positive impact on student achievement regardless of SES?

Definition of Terms

Economically Disadvantaged – “Economically disadvantaged family or individual means a family or individual who is:

- Eligible for the program for Aid to Families with Dependent Children under part A of title IV of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 601).
• Eligible for the free or reduced-price lunches program under the National School Lunch Act” (42 U.S.C. 1751). (Title 34 Education)

**Free Lunch Eligibility** – “Students are eligible for free lunch if their household income is less than 130% of the federal poverty guidelines” (Harsewell & LeBeau, 2010, p. 122). A four-person family with an annual salary of $32,525 or less would be eligible for free lunch benefits (Federal Register, 2015).

**Generational Poverty** – This term is applied to families in which two generations or more have been born into poverty. Families to which this term applies do not have the resources or methods to move out of poverty (Jenson, 2009).

**PISA** – “The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international assessment that measures 15-year-old students’ reading, mathematics, and science literacy every three years. First conducted in 2000, the major domain of study rotates among mathematics, science, and reading in each cycle. PISA also includes collaborative problem solving and several other competencies. By design, PISA emphasizes functional skills that students have acquired as they near the end of compulsory schooling. PISA is coordinated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an intergovernmental organization of industrialized countries, and is conducted in the United States by NCES” (Bryant, 2016, p. 19).

**Poverty** – Federally, poverty is determined by using census data from the Census Bureau. If a family of a certain size has an income that is below a certain standard, the family is considered to be in poverty. The same standard is applied in each state. However, the Consumer Price Index (SPI-U) is used to adjust the income amounts for inflation. “The official poverty definition uses before-tax income and does not include capital gains or noncash benefits (such as public housing, Medicaid, and food stamps” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

**Reduced Lunch Eligibility** – “Students are eligible for a reduced-price lunch if their household income is less than 185% of the federal poverty line” (Harswell & LeBeau, 2010, p. 122). A four-person family with an annual salary of $44,863 or less would be eligible for reduced-lunch benefits (Federal Register, 2015).

**Relative Poverty** – “Relative poverty refers to the economic status of a family whose income is insufficient to meet its society’s average standard of living” (Jenson, 2009, p. 6).
Situational Poverty – “Situational poverty is generally caused by a sudden crisis or loss and is often temporary. Events causing situational poverty include environmental disasters, divorce, or severe health problems” (Jenson, 2009, p. 6).

Socioeconomic Status – SES is commonly conceptualized as one’s position in society or position within the economic class structure. Education, income, and occupation often play a role in determining the level of SES (American Psychological Association, 2015). For the purpose of this study, family income levels according to guidelines for free or reduced lunch benefits classified a family as economically disadvantaged or not.

Limitations

Limitations are those conditions and factors that cannot be controlled by the researcher. Defining what indicates a low- and high-resourced educational environment is a limitation. Small sample size and the use of data from only one school division are additional limitations of this study. A further limitation is that the data are derived from the responses of participants, who may or may not respond accurately.

Delimitations

Delimitations are those conditions and factors that the researcher identifies to place boundaries on the study. A delimitation of this study is that it addressed the perceptions of building administrators serving in one school division, thus limiting its applicability to other settings. Further, only the perceptions of administrators were sought, so the perceptions of other school personnel were not presented for consideration.

Conceptual Framework

Socioeconomic status could determine the leadership practices an administrator uses depending upon whether servicing in a high or low socioeconomic community. Leadership practices affect school environment positively or negatively which could result in high or low student achievement results. The achievement was once measured as a divide primarily among races. The gap now includes socioeconomic status and school environment. Identifying leadership practices and the impact of poverty on student achievement might assist teachers and school leaders in addressing the diverse academic needs of students.
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One is composed of an introduction and the background for the study, statement of the problem, significance of the study, purpose of the study, research questions, definitions of terms, delimitations, and limitations, conceptual framework. Chapter Two is a review of literature. Chapter Three addresses the research design and methodology. Chapter Four presents the data. Chapter Five is composed of a detailed data analysis summary, conclusion, and recommendations for practice and further research.
Chapter Two
Literature Review

This literature review consists of research related to the instructional practices that would narrow the achievement gap in K-12 education. It includes literature on current theories about the reasons for the achievement gap and students’ needs for academic growth. Factors that contribute to the gap and the most effective practices that affect student achievement will be expounded upon in this literature review. According to the National Education Association [NEA] (2014), the achievement gap continues to expand in today’s educational landscape. Much of the literature connects the achievement gap to increased poverty rates among public school children and a continued demographic shift to a majority-minority population. Despite this, the NEA (2014) research addresses a need for a renewed, collective commitment to closing the gaps to ensure educational opportunity for all students by looking at contributing factors and resources to close gaps and promote positive achievement outcomes. This review includes the following sections: (a) background, (b) standardized testing and educational legislation, (c) the administrator’s role as instructional leader, (d) studies on instructional practices and school environment, and (e) summary of the literature.

Background

School leaders across the country are seeking strategies to narrow or reduce the academic achievement gap, yet there may not be any sustained progress without fully understanding the achievement gap as part of a larger issue (Hall Mark, 2013). Boykin and Noguera (2011) showed the achievement gap as “a multidimensional phenomenon—one that must be confronted with an awareness of how the dimensions interact” (p. 2). The gap has historically between students of color and white students and has been evident through disparities in standardized test scores, grade point averages, rate of enrollment in rigorous courses, graduation rates, dropout rates, and college admission data, not to mention differential placements in special education and gifted and talented programs as well as behavior indicators (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Hilliard (2003) defined the achievement gap as “the gap between the average performance of African students and the average performance of European students” (p.137). Hilliard (2003) further explained that the gap is not referenced by the performance between African American or Caucasian any other group such as Asian students or Latino students, just between Black and White students.
Hilliard (2003) concluded, “It seems that something more than achievement is being discussed when the gap language is used” (p. 137).

“Members of some ethnic minority groups and low-income students consistently do not perform as well on achievement tests as other students. A more than 20-point gap between White and Hispanic students on National Assessment of Educational Progress tests in reading and mathematics has not changed significantly since 1990, and the gaps between Black and White students follow a similar pattern” (Beatty, 2013, p. 69). In the United States, the racial breakdown of students proficient in math and reading were as follows in 2011 (PISA; Peterson, Woessmann, Hanushek, & Lastra-Anadon, 2011; Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race or Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Reading</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian and Pacific Islander</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Milner (2010) noted that there are other gaps that affect student performance that demand our attention beyond the “perceived” achievement gap. These include:

- the teacher quality gap,
- the teacher training gap,
- the challenging curriculum gap,
- the school funding gap,
- the digital divide gap,
- the wealth and income gap,
- the employment opportunity gap,
- the affordable housing gap,
- the health care gap,
- the nutrition gap,
- the school integration gap,
- and the quality childcare gap (p. 9).

Over the decades, the variety of factors contributing to the changes in the achievement gap have been consistently similar. Educational attainment, employment and earnings, child well-being, and generation poverty are examples of such factors (Barton & Coley, 2010). Barton and Coley (2010) identified the impact of community programs—for example, urban renewal and public housing policies—on families and the well-being of children in communities of concentrated poverty and deprivation as contributing to closing the achievement gap in reading and mathematics in the 1970s. Overall, communities and the environments they create for children
are potential avenues to increase an understanding of the achievement gap. Barton and Coley (2010) suggested looking at the well-being of “whole neighborhoods” to understand school and student success, what has gone wrong in reducing achievement gaps, as well as what is happening in the schools.

Reardon (2011) reported the achievement gap based on income is now nearly twice as large as the Black-White achievement gap. There are disparities of academic performance among students in the same classrooms, using the same curricula, and being taught by the same teachers (Hall Mark, 2013). Boykin and Noguera (2011) discussed ways that schools “shortchange” poor children, contributing to an achievement gap and punishing the neediest and lowest-performing students. Referred to as the opportunity gap, this is a topic for discussion as the inequalities in school funding creates an imbalance in resources. Boykin and Noguera (2011) stated, “Opportunity gaps are perpetuated by two related aspects of inequality: inequalities that are directly related to children’s backgrounds and school practices that reinforce and often exacerbate inequity” (p. 186). As a result of limited research on the relationship between family socioeconomic characteristics and student achievement as a construct of social conditions, policy choices, and educational practices, the scholarly research on the topic has focused mostly on understanding the differences among families that lead to the differences in children’s academic success (Reardon, 2011).

Research has documented the associations between educational outcomes and factors associated with income, family, and cultural background. A report from the Equity and Excellence Commission of the U.S. Department of Education (2011) provides research that demonstrates the specific ways in which economic resources influence education, but the findings have not yet resulted in policies that significantly narrow the gaps.

“The students most likely to lag behind academically are those who attend schools with less-qualified teachers and poorer resources” (Beatty, 2013, p. 69). Once children enter school, the teachers and other resources may support those with disadvantages or may perpetuate or exacerbate the gaps. Struggling students whose families are not financially stable are more likely to struggle in school. “The lack of adequate health care, lack of adequate nutrition, and untreated medical and mental health problems also are associated with school problems. Healthy development is a complex and interactive process that encompasses cognitive, psychological, emotional, biological, and behavioral processes, as well as environmental influences” (Beatty,
Educational literature reviewed for this study repeatedly showed a connection among race and ethnicity, SES, access to resources, and academic success. Reardon’s (2011) research on the academic achievement gap between the rich and poor suggested evidence that there has been a profound shift in that income has become a greater factor than race and ethnicity in accounting for gaps in achievement. While Reardon’s research documented a shift from an achievement gap based on race and ethnicity to a gap between high and low socioeconomic status, the figure below outlines key data analysis of poverty rates among race and ethnicity. The Economic Policy Institute published a report on the state of working America. Table 1 below reveals data showing a connection between race and poverty.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age 18–64</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under age 18</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under age 6</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
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Analysis of Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS-ASEC) Historical Poverty Tables (Table 2) and CPS-ASEC microdata

To reduce the effects of poverty and thus to weaken the link between family poverty and deficits in children’s cognitive and social development, the Federal Head Start program was started in the 1960s as part of the War on Poverty (Kagan, 2002; Ziegler & Muenchow, 1992). Beatty (2013) noted that “Head Start focuses on school readiness for low-income children and provide services that address families’ health, nutrition, and social needs, as well as children’s cognitive and educational needs (p. 73). “The effects of these services have declined over time, in the absence of other supports to sustain the benefit. Head Start and other like programs attempt to address the multiple needs that struggling families face, but as children age out of the programs, their families still experience challenges that may undermine their capacity to meet academic challenges” (Beatty, 2013, p. 74).

During the 1970s and 1980s when the achievement gap was closing, researchers found a third of the achievement gap narrowed due to factors surrounding parent education and income
Students entering school from impoverished situations will most likely achieve at lower levels than students from middle- and upper-class home environments (Worley, 2007). Ritterband and Heller (2015) suggested that students from low-income backgrounds tend to lag behind their wealthier peers in developing metacognitive skills—awareness of one’s own thinking processes—given that “higher-income parents engage in more extensive questioning and discussion of psychological processes with their children” (p.4). However, the family is not an island where all the opportunity resides; opportunity also depends on the social and economic capital found in the community (Barton & Coley, 2010).

On average children growing up in disadvantaged neighborhoods are impaired in their development, lack family capital, and face hostile neighborhood environments. Students in disadvantaged communities are likely to attend lower-quality schools staffed by lower-quality teachers. In school, they face greater violence, disruption, and fear (Barton & Coley, 2010).

Gaps in school achievement among racial/ethnic groups and between students from different socioeconomic circumstances arrive early—beginning before birth—and stay late, continuing through to high school (Barton & Coley, 2010). Several indicators related to family demographics have been identified to have either a positive or negative affect on academic achievement to include gender, race, teacher-student relationships, motivation, SES, and peer influence. Evidence is displayed in standardized test scores where minority students, including African American and Hispanic students, score significantly lower than whites (Wilhelm, Hillocks, & Smith, 2005). Current income and educational achievement are the relative benchmarks for the well-being of both the White and Black communities, but they provide an incomplete picture of the depth of inequality. Poverty-stricken children are most concerned with their next meal or having heat in the home. Thoughts of high academic performance are often not a priority. Often communities where children live in these conditions may be from single-parent homes where the parent spends the majority of his or her time working and does not have the optimal opportunities to provide parental guidance for school work (Worley, 2005).

In 2007 the Nation’s Report Card (The Education Trust) showed the status of the nation’s students in several areas. There were greater improvements in math than reading (Worley, 2007). Although the performance of students in elementary schools had improved, achievement in secondary schools was stagnant. Grissmer, Kirby, Berends, and Williamson (1994) noted in the RAND report on Student Achievement and the Changing American Family that there had been
debate in the research community regarding student performance getting better or worse and the causes of changes over the previous 25 years. The authors of the Nation’s Report Card acknowledged an awareness that the make-up of the national population is shifting (The Education Trust, 2007). The authors projected a shift in national demographics to a minority-majority student population (majority of the population being people of color) increasing from 50 million in 2007 to 54 million by 2020 (Education Trust, 2007). Between 1993 and 2003, White student enrollment declined from 66% to 59% while Latino and Black student enrollment in public schools increased. Students enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program grew from 30% to 37% between 2000 and 2004.

Worley (2007) declared that there is an achievement gap between wealthy and impoverished children as well as an achievement gap between minorities and non-minorities. She also referenced the variety of students’ backgrounds and resources, and thus varying knowledge and foundational skills, make the playing field uneven. Worley (2007) noted that because students do not enter the schoolhouse at the same level, public schools must work to develop tools to diminish the achievement gap, identify students who are at-risk of academic failure, and provide interventions. Furthermore, Worley (2007) suggested that there are numerous contributors to the achievement gap that make it difficult to isolate factors to determine which is more influential and the solutions that are most effective to eliminate the gap.

One view on eliminating the performance gap is that obstacles related to poverty must be removed to prevent children from entering school at-risk for low achievement (Worley, 2007). Haycock noted, “The nation spends, on average, about $825 less per pupil each year in school districts with the poorest children” (Worley, 2007, p. 4). This fact, documented in 2007, highlighted the need to assess equity in school funding (The Education Trust, 2007). Poverty is a major contributor to the achievement gap. Research reflects childhood poverty presents specific challenges that are more prevalent than in families of higher socioeconomic status. Challenges varied but tended to include “single-parent homes, parental stress, environmental risk, unsafe physical environments, homelessness and high mobility, residential crowding, and caregiver depression” (Bryant, 2014). With these challenges facing a specific demographic and policy makers’ continued interest in educational accountability, reform, and improving student achievement, it becomes imperative for building administrators to explore the relationship
among educational resources, student demographics and student achievement (Okpala, Smith, Jones, & Ellis, 2000).

Advancing an opportunity for district policies to expand equity, access, and opportunity for the students currently being left behind is a critical component of changing the story of achievement gaps from achievement for some to achievement for all. According to the NEA (2014), to balance the academic experience for students who face the greatest challenges, policies and practices promoting community schools and parent/community engagement along with an increase in diversity and cultural competence across the education workforce will assist with eliminating achievement gaps. Changes within school systems regarding important factors as curricula, instructional methods, and other aspects of educational practice alone are not enough (NEA, 2014). School leaders willing to address outside factors that impact students’ success inside the classroom is another valuable component. This willingness requires “unprecedented collaboration” across the spectrum with school leaders at the forefront of efforts in closing achievement gaps and expanding opportunity for all students (NEA, 2014, p. 7).

School Environment and Parental Involvement

Research studies have confirmed that SES is a major predictor of student achievement, and there is a clear link between poverty and low student achievement (Okpala, et al., 2000). Okpala et al. (2000) reported in their research that students receiving free or reduced lunch would have low achievement, but some post-high school education of parents would positively impact achievement. They researched the possibility of parental involvement being a positive factor to balance the effects of low SES. Analyzing the number of hours parents volunteered per 100 students, the team measured family/community involvement in education. Their research showed that students’ test scores were higher the more parents volunteered in school activities (Okapala et al., 2000). Also, Walberg (1984), Griffin (1996), and Monk (1966) concluded that parental participation in school activities undoubtedly contributes to student achievement, and schools with higher levels of parental involvement and empowerment also have higher student achievement scores (Okapala et al., 2000). Looking for the “best mix of resources,” Okapala et al. (2009, p. 11) studied the link among certain school characteristics, teacher characteristics, student demographics, and student achievement. Their work supports delving deeper into educational leaders’ perception of the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement to open discourse about funding policy decisions regarding the equitable
distribution and allocation of educational resources to develop improved measures of student achievement.

When reviewing literature on school environment, one study conducted by Griffin & Allen, (2006) explored the lower rates of college enrollment for minority students. The study signified the importance of understanding how different high school environments affect college preparation and matriculation and what it takes to succeed in spite of the environmental barriers. They conducted a multi-site case study exploring the experience of nine black high achievers attending a well-resourced, suburban school and eight academically successful black students attending a low-resourced urban school. “Factors such as cultural differences, peer influences, and SES have been cited as having a negative influence on black students’ college attendance rates” (Griffin & Allen, 2006, p. 2). In the literature reviewed for the present study, the researcher found no studies were race was studied as a variable in affecting student achievement. However, Griffin and Allen (2006) studied the importance of cultural differences, peer influences, and SES as related to shaping the school experiences of black students. Their work is relevant to this study as it documents research looking at how social and educational environments influence achievement. Although race is not a direct focal point of this research study, the experiences of Black students at low-resourced, high-poverty schools is an important consideration due to their significant representation in impoverished schools (Trent, Owens-Nicholson, Eatman, Burk, Daugherty, & Norman, 2003). Trent et al. (2003) analyzed data revealing that more than half of the students in high-poverty school districts were Black and Latino and that only 9% of students in low-poverty school districts were Black and Latino. Minority students are often concentrated in urban schools that typically have lower per-student expenditures and fewer resources and that are more likely to have classes taught by less experienced and out of major instructors (Trent et al., 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). “There are significant connections between school resources and student outcomes such as academic performance, educational aspirations, and access to higher education” (Griffin & Allen, 2006, p. 4).

**Instructional Practices and Student Achievement**

Currently, school districts still seek researched-based, best-fit strategies for their student demographic in an effort to narrow the achievement gap (Hall, 2013). According to the NEA
(2011), educational leaders bear the responsibility of cultivating the strengths of all students, and the organization stated the need for an educational system that will serve all students well and build educators with skills, knowledge, and attitudes capable of valuing student diversity. Dennis Roekel, and John Wilson believe that innovative teaching strategies that match students’ ways of understanding and interacting with the world will help increase student performance as measured by grades and tests (NEA, 2011).

Discourse regarding teachers’ differentiation of instruction could be noted as the result of extensive research and theory confirming that students learn differently, requiring teachers to use varying teaching strategies (Miller & Miller, 2002). However, research on facilitating culture differences within the learning environment questions whether when using different teaching strategies, teachers considered students’ cultural diversity. Sahin (2003) defines “cultural diversity” as “a phenomenon that includes differences in race/ethnicity, language, values, customs, attitudes, geographic location, and religious persuasion” (p. 2).

For this study literature was reviewed that related to the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement. Research on responsive teaching for culturally diverse students as well as culturally responsive school leadership were identified as paramount factors. Culturally responsive teaching is characterized as teachers being knowledgeable about how cultural characteristics of different groups affect the teaching-learning process and manifesting this knowledge into relevant learning experiences for students (Gay, 2000). Lack of such knowledge and associated skill result in “culturally unresponsive teaching,” which can create challenges regarding the verbal and non-verbal communication patterns of students of different ethnic backgrounds within the learning environment (Khalifa, 2016, p. 1273). Gay (2000) further notes that failing to align school curriculum with the cultural diversity reflected in schools promotes a lack of motivation to learn, and the historical data on low achievement on standardized tests and high dropout rates in K-12 education are evidence of this. Although Ferdinand (2009) studied cultural diversity as connected to race and ethnicity, this literature review does not specifically examine race or ethnicity but does consider the connection of such as parallel with research associated with SES. Importantly noted, a single teaching style does not fit all students, and the above literature shows a need to focus on preparing teachers and faculty to be culturally responsive in teaching in public schools. “Research on accommodating students’ cultural differences in teaching will help to ascertain any cultural gaps and identify areas for
improvements” (Ferdinand, 2009, p. 5).

One resource for teachers who aim to close the achievement gap is *C.A.R.E.: Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gaps* (NEA, 2011), a publication designed to help assist with culturally competent teaching because of the role the relationship among race, gender, language and social class groups has in closing the achievement gaps. C.A.R.E. stands for “culture, abilities, resilience, and effort.” The research published in *C.A.R.E.* (NEA, 2011) was developed through the collaborative efforts of teachers, education support professionals, researchers, community advocates, parents, and practitioners. An important statement on the role of culture at school is published in *C.A.R.E.* (NEA, 2011):

Students bring their culture to school—their everyday experiences—and as educators learn how to connect these experiences and cultures to what is taught and reflect on the culture that permeates the school setting, we will have a better understanding of how it advantages or disadvantages certain students. (p. 2.1)

The NEA has established that all *C.A.R.E.* strategies and reflections are vitally important in the schools classified as priorities. These schools have persistently underperformed in producing strong readers, adept math users, cogent writers, critical thinkers, and high school graduates.

To close the achievement gaps and to help students be successful, schools need a new vision of underachieving students, according to Williams (2003). Williams (2003) focused on the need to move beyond the restructuring of schools to the “re-culturing” of education (p. 1.2). Williams (2003) notes that it is important to understand the difference between “improving achievement” and “closing the gap” (Williams, 2003). *C.A.R.E.* (NEA, 2011) research indicates that significant changes are needed to close gaps and makes several recommendations for those taking a leadership role in closing the achievement gaps:

- Establish an agenda for all children that focuses on specific strategies that have been shown to close the achievement gaps among groups of students.
- Reflect upon ways we think about students and the causes of low student achievement. Focus more on factors within the system, rather than within children, that create barriers to effective schooling for poor and/or culturally and linguistically diverse students (classroom instruction, assessment, curriculum, school leadership)—aspects of the system educators can influence.
- Research innovative, comprehensive approaches to school reform. Comprehensive
reform can be redefined by requiring accountability beyond one-dimensional strategies and toward approaches that address the multidimensional issues facing schools, classrooms, and students today.

- Reflect on the types of learners in classrooms. How can educators enable all learners with the knowledge and interpersonal skills required to successfully participate in the workforce and in varying social, community, and family contexts? (NEA, 2011, p. 1.2)

The Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) suggests that using best practices connected to student culture, abilities, resilience, and effort—what NEA calls the “C.A.R.E. themes”—can close the achievement gaps. CARE themes along with the traditional four focal points of school reform: (a) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (b) staff development; (c) family, school, and community engagement; and (d) school organization, is the combination that could address the unique needs of students (NEA, 2011). These components will fit together as educators reflect on such questions as the following:

- How would educators engage families differently if we valued their cultural differences?
- How would instruction change if we focused on what students know, rather than on what they don’t know?
- What would staff development be like if we wanted to increase the resilience of all students? (p 1.3)

Each C.A.R.E. theme correlates to one or two key standards for effective pedagogy developed by CREDE (NEA, 2011; Table 2).
### Table 3

C.A.R.E. Themes and CREDE Standards for Effective Pedagogy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C.A.R.E. Themes</th>
<th>CREDE Standards</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture: The sum of one’s experiences, knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, language, and interests. Learning is greatest when the cultures of home and school connect.</td>
<td>Contextualization: Connect teaching and curriculum to the experiences, values, knowledge, and needs of students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abilities: Intelligence is modifiable and multidimensional. Abilities are developed through cultural experiences; culture affects thoughts and expression.</td>
<td>* Learning through Observation-Modeling: Promote student learning through observation by modeling behaviors, thinking processes, and procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience: Displayed when protective factors alter a person’s response to risk factors (poverty, crime, etc.) in the environment. Resilient students exhibit social competence, problem-solving skills, and a sense of future.</td>
<td>Challenging Activities/Teaching Complex Thinking: Challenge students toward cognitive complexity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort: The energy used in reaching a goal. Maximized when students receive teacher encouragement and high expectations for quality work.</td>
<td>Language and Literacy Development across the Curriculum: Develop student competence in the language and literacy of instruction across the curriculum.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Helping learners link their culture with the new knowledge and skills acquired from school experiences is a key component to ensuring high achievement levels for all students, according to the C.A.R.E. standards (NEA, 2011). The interest in diverse cultures has always been an American philosophical concept, and while America was built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity, historically it has not pertained to all creating gaps from the origin (NEA, 2011). Two of every five public school students are Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, or American Indian/Alaska Native (NEA, 2011). This alone creates an “urgency” for educators to expand their understanding of the role culture plays in learning, as
indicated by recent findings that “when students of color are taught with culturally responsive techniques . . . their academic performance improves significantly” (National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004, p. 2.2). Relevant professional development is essential to enriching content knowledge and skills for all educators, considering the demand for accountability and closing student achievement gaps. Researchers’ Paul Barton and Richard Coley declared their support for enriching the professional development experience of all educators when stating that “all schools must support their teachers, no matter what race and culture, to become more knowledgeable about diversity so they can be better equipped to work with the changing student populations in their classrooms” (NEA, 2011, p 2.2).

Artiles (2011), argues that everything we do is influenced by culture. In addition to balancing learning environment, being considerate of student cultures, and educators investigating their personal culture and the cultural assumptions that influence their teaching style. It is important to understand how different types of school environments affect learning and how some students are able to succeed despite the environmental barriers faced in school (Artiles, 2011). Griffin and Allen (2006) explored processes for seventeen Black high achievers—one group who attended a well-resourced, suburban high school and the other group who attended a low-resourced urban school. Findings indicated students at both schools encountered barriers (environmental and resources) that inhibit their preparation (Griffin & Allen, 2006). One indicator of an achievement gap is the disparity between the matriculation rates of Black students and their peers. Review of this case study supports an effort to learn more about how to address the experiences of minority and low socioeconomic students across different educational contexts (Griffin & Allen, 2006). Griffin and Allen (2006) noted, “Factors such as cultural differences, peer influences, and SES have been cited as having a negative influence on Black students” (p. 2).

Commitment and professional learning communities that set common goals and relative accountability measures combined with trust, collegiality, leadership support, and the avoidance of blame are a few of the overarching areas researchers have identified as important to the discussion of education reform in closing the achievement gap (Ontario Leadership Conference [OLC], 2012).

**Leadership and Standardized Testing**

The Wallace Foundation commissioned a report from the Universities of Minnesota and
Toronto looking at the effectiveness of educational leadership on student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004). Educational reform efforts in the United States in recent years have mandated the use of standardized test data to fulfill the demand for accountability. This has created an expanded system of rewards and sanctions associated with test results, prompting states to create a punitive system of sanctions for schools and educators based on student performance (Deville & Chalhoub-Deville, 2011). Regardless of the approach to school reform all efforts are aimed at improving teaching and learning, and those efforts, “all depend on the motivations and capacities of local leadership” (Leithwood et al., 2004, Pg. 4). Matt Chapman shares the belief that while all division stakeholders—including students—want to focus on learning, assessments must be the central component focusing on the student and that data used for teaching and learning improvements (NEA, 2014). Improving student learning is less likely despite the efforts of reform unless school and district leaders agree with its purpose and understand the requirement to make it work (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Public schools are currently required to collect, summarize, and file various data directly related to student achievement, school operations, and quality of education. Commonly, available data is misused (Noyce, Perda, & Traver, 2000), and most administrators collect data only to meet state and federal reporting requirements. High-stakes testing and standards-based funding bring data-based decision making to the top of every educator’s agenda, and pressure has increased on principals to improve achievement. McClean (1995) asserted that, more than any other educational innovation of the last century, the proper implementation of a complete data collection and analysis program will lead to the improvement of the educational process. Thornton and Perreault (2002) identify the benefits of a data-based approach to school leadership as “(a) providing students with accurate and timely feedback, (b) documenting improvements in instruction, (c) measuring the success or failure of specific programs, (d) guiding curriculum development, and (e) promoting accountability” (p. 87). They continue,

“As with any proposed change, several conditions must be met before successful data-based leadership can occur. Efficient leaders anticipate resistance to change, identify root causes, and take steps to eliminate the barriers to success. Data-based leadership is missing from many schools due to a lack of data analysis skills, the anti-data culture within schools, the absence of a truly shared vision, poor communication skills, too little time, and fear of failure” (Thornton & Perreault, 2002, p. 87).
Shared visions, mission statements, and strategic plans are commonplace in today’s schools. A shared understanding of expected outcomes when attempting to implement data-based leadership prevents the idea being viewed as the principal’s personal preference. A shared vision, supported by data, will provide clarity for personnel about where they are going, making it possible to identify or focus on steps that should be taken to get there (Hallinger, Murphy, & Mesa, 1999). A shared and supported vision provides school teams with guidance, and the backdrop for a strategic plan that provides milestones to track progress toward goals. Data gathered by stakeholders is used to evaluate the effectiveness of school policies and practices and identify differences between the existing and the ideal organization described in the vision (Manning, Curtis, & McMillen, 1996). The concept of data-based decision making evokes a natural emotional response—the fear of failure.

Covey (1991) asserted that a leader tends to earn the trust of the team when he or she demonstrates strong personal characteristics, professional competences, and an unwavering commitment to the shared mission and the values of the organization. Thornton and Perreault (2002) noted that trust evolves when there are supportive systemic norms within the building and emerges as a result of historically appropriate leadership behaviors. The principal must have or develop an empowered staff. Short and Rinehart (1992) defined six empirical dimensions of empowerment: impact, self-efficacy, autonomy, involvement in decision making, opportunities for professional growth, and professional status.

Many educators lack the ability to determine which data is relevant or how to interpret and analyze their school data (Holcomb, 1999). Principals cannot coach teachers on appropriate uses of data without a basic understanding of statistics, data analysis, and technology (Creighton, 2001). A shared vision, a trust-filled environment, and a leader who understands data-based decision making can guide a team toward effective data usage (Thornton & Perreault, 2002). With the obstacles educators face such as low reading ability, overcrowding, parental concerns, and limited budgets, there is an argument against the importance of data collection. Thornton and Perreault (2002) further noted that many consider data analysis as the principal’s job, yet the data collected are not useful to improve instruction and constitute another fad that will pass. However, they believe principals should coach and support teachers as they master new skills in data analysis, sharing findings, and modeling its use. Discussing data collection procedures, anticipated results, and planned improvements help foster trust and support team efforts,
enabling teachers to move beyond the fear of data. Thornton and Perreault (2002) add,

The principal must help teachers develop answers to questions such as (a) how will data help me become a better teacher? (b) how can data be used to solve building and classroom problems? And (c) how do I find the time to do the additional work? Building teachers’ confidence in data analysis, the principal should select an initial project that addresses important issues involving the students and the school that the staff can take ownership of. Principals should build on successful implementation to ensure that data-based decision making becomes a routine part of the school’s routine and administrative process. Principals will need to create opportunities for data collection, time for data analysis, time to plan appropriate changes, time for staff development, time to implement the necessary changes, and time to evaluate the results. (p. 90)

Educators and policy makers have argued the advantage of standardized achievement tests and their importance in America is to compare students across classrooms and schools (Duckworth, Quinn, & Tsukayama, 2011). Schools devote more and more time to test preparation because high-stakes standardized achievement tests play a prominent role in policy and practice. Willingham, Pollack, and Lewis (2002) have pointed out that no standardized achievement test can provide a full picture of student academic success, but this measurement is one of the main sources to identify the achievement gaps in certain content areas per grade levels.

Public officials have used achievement tests to evaluate educational progress. Policy makers, including state and national legislators and school boards, make policy decisions and allocate resources based on test scores (Haladyna, Haas, & Allison, 1998). In some U.S. schools, test results have been used to determine future educational opportunities for students, rather than to identify problems in learning that need intervention (Haladyna et al., 1998).

Public support for standardized testing is due to the perceived validity of concrete indicators of learning. Although it is unlikely the public’s taste for large-scale standardized tests will change, it is possible to ensure that the test results are correctly interpreted and used. Most policy makers want to know how much learning occurred in a particular school year. A standardized test given once a year is not a good measure of this kind of learning. Certain standardized tests are not precise enough, nor is instruction geared to reflect exactly what the test measures (Haladyna et al., 1998). Annual, standardized tests make no allowance for the fact that
students’ development and cognitive abilities in the early years are uneven. Although children’s developmental growth is not uniform, standardized test norms are based on average growth without regard to unique developmental patterns (Haladyna et al., 1998). It is important to know where each student stands relative to standards; however, simplistic uses of test scores are remotely connected to classroom teaching. Test scores do not present a complete picture of student progress especially when environmental factors are ignored and all students do not come from the same. One must question what the test measures and what factors probably contribute to the level of performance. A test score represents only one level of learning out of a very large domain.

When policy makers use assessment data to establish accountability criteria, the implementation must be a valid representation, allowing educational leaders, researchers, and the public to understand the extent to which students and schools are meeting expectations (Fulmer & Polikoff, 2014). Relying on standardized testing as the single measure in determining a student’s fate has not proven to be accurate or reliable. There needs to be a focus on identifying the interventions that really work for students from low SES communities (Almagor, 2014). Most pertinent is how standardized measures contribute to the overall perspective of the achievement gap. Are the resulting data providing information to address gaps? Norm-referenced tests do not measure the quality of learning or teaching. This becomes problematic because some questions require background knowledge and skills more likely identified with children from a privileged background, which creates a discriminatory effect particularly with norm-referenced tests where questions tap knowledge gained outside of school. This, as James Popham (1995) argues, provides a powerful advantage to students whose parents are affluent and college educated. As teachers adjust to respond effectively to children’s cultural and social needs in the classroom, school leaders should similarly approach the entire school environment the same regarding their perception of standardized testing and data driven decisions.

School principals can have a profoundly deep impact on instruction and student learning (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). School leaders are best positioned to promote and support school-level reforms (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). “Building-level leaders are held most accountable for progress or lack thereof and the principalship is the position most empowered by the division and state policy” (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1274). Leadership matters only second to teaching as a factor in student achievement and has the greatest impact in schools where there is
the greatest academic need (Leithwood et al., 2004). The Wallace Foundation supports research that suggests high-quality leaders are most impactful by:

- Setting directions—charting a clear course that everyone understands and establishing high expectations using data to track progress and performance.
- Developing people—providing teachers and others in the system with the necessary support and training to succeed.
- Making the organization work—ensuring the entire range of conditions and incentives in districts and schools fully supports rather than inhibits teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2004, Pg. 3).

Researchers from the Universities of Minnesota and Toronto provide evidence that whether direct or indirect, the effects of leadership on student achievement is a quarter of the total school effectiveness, and the greater the challenge a leader in a formal administrative role faces the greater their actions are on learning (Leithwood et al., 2004). The study supports the value of making sure the leadership capacities of underperforming schools is a part of improvement efforts to reconstruct the school. Successful leaders understand the idea of leading by setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization. In addition, that success consists of productive responses to the unique demands within the context of the organizational culture they find themselves requiring school leaders to respond differently depending on the circumstances and the people with whom they work. To do this effectively, requires a repertoire of practices and the capacity to choose as needed. No longer is there a single best model or style of leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004).

**Summary**

Work has been done to improve student achievement; however, gaps persist (OLC, 2012). The U.S. educational system serves a very culturally and socioeconomically diverse student population. Perhaps, there is no one key to success for all students but, instead, a collective approach to discussing the current state of our educational system, the desired outcomes, and the resources needed so that all stakeholders can work toward having an authentic dialogue.

Hall-Mark (2013) suggested that we should not just focus on the “perceived” achievement gap, when in fact there are a multitude of inequalities that affect student
performance. Beginning in the early 1970s, when nationally representative test scores for student subgroups became available, data showed a positive picture of a narrowing gap until the late 1980s. Since then, there have been small changes in the gap, up and down, along with periods of stability (Barton & Coley, 2010).

NEA research indicated there are areas of concentrated poverty where generations of Black children are growing up bereft of many attributes and resources necessary to promote youth development (Barton & Coley, 2011). Hall-Mark’s (2013) research indicated there are shortcomings within schools and school districts that are struggling with finding ways to narrow their academic achievement gaps. Hall-Mark’s (2013) questions for educators and other stakeholders in the United States include the following:

- Why are some schools and districts making more progress than others?
- To what degree does race, ethnicity, or learning environment affect the academic performances of students? To what degree do these factors affect the effectiveness of teachers teaching in diverse classrooms?
- What role does government have to ensure that all students are being challenged and are successful?
- What are specific strategies that can be implemented to ensure success for all students, especially the underachievers?
- Why is it taking so long to close the gap?
- What other factors contribute to the disparity in standardized test scores and other measures?
- What is the relationship between the academic achievement gap and the gap of opportunities? (p. 337)

Answering these questions involves exploring the perceptions of educational leaders regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement. Researching best practices in the domains of instructional practices, school leadership, standardized testing, parent involvement and school and community culture will contribute to the wider effort to learn more about the factors with the greatest impact on closing the achievement gap.
Chapter Three
Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of school leaders in one Virginia school division regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement. Educational leaders shared their perceptions on the leadership practices they employ in low and high SES schools to enhance student achievement.

Exploring the connection between leadership practices and student success across varied economic levels could pave the way to effectively mitigate the impact of poverty on student achievement. Policy makers, educational leaders, and community groups are realizing that student achievement is a function of variables that could predict and impact student achievement levels in public schools (Kaniuka, 2009). “As population demographics continuously shift, so too must the leadership practices and school contexts that respond to the needs that accompany these shifts” (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1274).

This study identified common educational leadership practices in schools with various SES and student achievement. School and school division leaders could benefit from the findings and apply, as appropriate, similar leadership practices to mitigate the effects of poverty on their students’ academic achievement.

Research Design and Justification

A survey design was used for this study. The survey included both likert type and free response items. This allowed the researcher to share qualitative data responses and descriptive statistics related to leadership perceptions of the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement within their school division. The survey was sent to administrators in a small school division in Virginia (region 6). Elementary, middle, and high school leaders across the division were identified to participate. Qualitative survey responses were coded to construct themes. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify the characteristics of the schools and responders and to allow for the exploration of the variables identified from the qualitative response categories that affect the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement.
Educational leaders are charged with the task of overseeing the teaching and learning process for students. This research design provided expertise from practitioners. The qualitative analysis of the free responses of this study is a best fit for discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those involved in the study (Merriam, 2009). The descriptive data analysis is a best fit to look at data obtained from the survey identifying aggregate responses and the extent of the relationship between variables affecting student achievement (Howell, 2011).

Research Questions

RQ1--- What are the perceptions of school leaders regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement?

RQ2--- Which leadership practices are perceived to have a positive impact on student achievement regardless of SES?

Site and Sample Selection

Data were gathered from a school division in central Virginia (region 6) that serves an economic and culturally diverse student population. There are 17 schools in the school division: (a) 2 preschools, (b) 6 elementary, (c) 2 middle, (d) 2 high, and (e) 5 specialty schools. All educational leaders—principals and assistant principals—from the school division were invited to participate in the survey. The school division employs 17 principals and 12 assistant principals.

The selection of principals and assistant principals was based on the need to discover leadership perception of the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement. The school division profile is diverse enough to gain insight on school leaders’ perceptions of leadership practices they find most effective to raise student achievement within varied learning environments. Forty percent of the schools in the school division are fully accredited. There are 5,282 students enrolled within the school division and of those students 55.6% are considered economically disadvantaged. It was anticipated that educational leaders in schools serving a high percentage of students of low SES would provide a foundation from which the most can be learned regarding the relationships linking SES, leadership practices, and achievement.
Data Collection Procedures

All schools within the division were invited to participate in the study (see Appendix A). A research design survey, created via Qualtrics, was emailed (see Appendix B) to elementary and secondary level school administrators—principals and assistant principals. Qualtrics is a data management system with a survey building platform that allows the researcher to create customize research surveys and secures the data results. The survey (see Appendix B) consisted of quantitative questions that measured categorical data related to school culture, student achievement, and leadership as well as qualitative questions that allowed respondents to provide reflective insight on their perception of the relationship among the variables. A reminder (see Appendix C) was forwarded via email to the leadership team for those who hadn’t responded after a two-week window. Sixty-two percent of school division administrators responded on the survey tool. All three levels of comprehensive schools were represented by the respondents. Of the 6 elementary schools, five principals and one assistant principal responded. From the two middle schools, both principals and one assistant principal responded. From the two high schools, one principal and 4 assistant principals responded. The levels of positions of the other respondents were not identified. There were 18 (62%) total responses from administrators in the district.

Instrument Design and Validation

VDOE division profile was used to provide a general statistical outline of school division demographic and academic growth. An electronic survey was created with assistance using the Qualtrics data management program. Question selections were validated by a varied sampling of administratively endorsed school personnel not directly involved in the study sample, but representative of the study population. Each person was provided a draft copy of the survey tool and instructed to provide feedback regarding the survey questions relevance to the research questions. The suggestions were reviewed and edits made. A Virginia Tech doctoral cohort from diverse professional backgrounds also reviewed the survey documents and provided feedback. The suggestions were reviewed and questions were revised. Then, alignment of survey questions to research questions was verified. Table 5 compares the research questions to the survey questions.
Table 4
Research Questions Aligned to Survey Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Survey Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| RQ1…What are the perceptions of school leaders regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement? | 1. To what extent do you believe the socioeconomic status of your school community impacts student achievement?  
2. In what ways do you believe socioeconomic status impacts student achievement?  
3. What other comments would you like to share regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement? |
| RQ2…Which leadership practices are perceived to have a positive impact on student achievement regardless of socioeconomic status? | 1. To what extend do you believe leadership practices impact student achievement?  
2. In what ways do you believe leadership practices impact student achievement?  
3. Which leadership practices are present in your school that you believe positively impact student achievement regardless of socioeconomic status? |

Demographic RQs:  
1. What percentage of your student body is economically disadvantaged?  
2. What percentage of your parents volunteer in your school?  
3. What is the accreditation rating of your school? 

Data Treatment and Analysis

A survey, created via Qualtrics, was emailed to elementary and secondary level school administrators—principals and assistant principals. All survey responses were collected and secured within the Qualtrics data management system and downloaded to the researcher’s computer hard drive and for backup storage in a secure data file housed on a USB.

Likert-type survey questions were used to provide demographic information related to both the school and the respondent, while free response questions were used to investigate the perceptions of school leaders regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement. A qualitative data analysis of the free responses was conducted using coded sequences to determine categorical themes. “Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon” (Patton, 2001, p. 234). All survey responses were coded (qualitative) and analyzed (quantitative) to identify common participant responses. The overall
objective of this analysis was to identify patterns in the data and those patterns were categorized into themes aligned with the research questions.

Descriptive data were collected through the survey and outlined the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in the school division, the percentage of parents who volunteer in the schools, and school accreditation levels in relationship with leadership practices and student achievement. The descriptive data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to explore the variables identified from the free response categories that affect the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement. Because there was very little variance in the responses on the descriptive data from the study, the researcher was unable to disaggregate the data based on participant responses.

**Time Line**

Once the proposed study was approved by the committee, the researcher who had received IRB training (see Appendix D) requested approval from the institutional review board (IRB) at Virginia Tech to conduct the study. The researcher requested permission from school division personnel to conduct the study (see Appendix E). These steps were completed during the spring semester. After IRB approval and all other necessary approvals were obtained, the survey was sent by email via Qualtrics. By completing and submitting the survey, the participant acknowledged that they are providing consent (see Appendix F) to participate in the study. Survey results were gathered, and responses were analyzed during the summer session, with a possible defense in either summer or fall.

**Methodology Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perception of school leaders in a suburban division in central Virginia regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement. The school division identified for the study was selected based on convenience, diverse socioeconomic demographics, and student achievement results. A survey design was used to collect data electronically via email and analyzed using coding and descriptive statistics. These data identify the perceptions of educational leaders regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement. The survey tool was generated through Qualtrics, a data management program, and reviewed by cohort of professional educators and doctoral students for content validity.
Chapter Four
Data Analysis and Discussion

Restatement of Purpose

This study identified the perceptions of school leaders in one Virginia school division. Educational leaders provided their perceptions regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement. Educational leaders shared leadership practices they perceive to positively impact student achievement regardless of SES. The following research questions were the focus of this study: RQ1—“What are the perceptions of school leaders regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement?” and RQ2—“Which leadership practices are perceived to have a positive impact on student achievement regardless of SES?”

In this chapter, the research data are shared in two parts. The first part provides a description of the participants and their schools. The second part consists of responses to survey data related to RQ1 and RQ2. The responses to survey questions 1 through 6 were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Participant responses from survey questions 7 through 12 provided qualitative data that were coded and categorized into themes related to variables outlined in the research questions. The variables are the following: (a) SES, (b) leadership practices, (c) student achievement, and (d) positive impact.

Data Analysis

Demographic profiles. Table 6 shows the school division’s demographics of the responding participants. All school leaders (n=29) were invited to participate in the survey. Sixty-two percent of school division administrators (n=18) responded on the survey tool. The school division has a total of 17 schools and employs 17 principals and 12 assistant principals. Principals made up 27.5% (n=8) of the respondents, and assistant principals made up the other 20.6% (n=6). There were four responses noted as incomplete or title not identified. The average number of years of experience was 12.5 years among the principals who responded and 10.5 years for assistant principals.
Table 5

Demographic Profile of Participant Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrative Title</th>
<th>Response Rate, %</th>
<th>Average Years of Experience</th>
<th>N=29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principals</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incomplete Response/No Title</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 shows the respondents by school level. The school division has two preschools; six elementary, two middle, and two high schools; along with five specialty schools. Of the 17 schools in the school division, the elementary schools represented 33.3% (n=6) of the overall respondents; high school administrators represented 27.8% (n=5) of the respondents, and middle school administrators represented 16.7% (n=3) of the respondents.

Table 6

Frequency of School-Level Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>% of respondents</th>
<th>N=18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified level</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100 %</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The leaders of the school division provided their perception of the leadership practices they thought were most effective to raise student achievement within varied learning environments. Forty percent of the schools in the school division are fully accredited. As of 2018–2019, 5,686 students were enrolled within the school division, and, of those students,
55.6% are identified as economically disadvantaged. The latest published data on free and reduced meal eligibility via the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) school division profile (2016-2017) indicated that 95% of the students in the school division are eligible for free and reduced meal plans. The VDOE website exhibits the school division’s “At-A-Glance Virginia School Quality Profile” outlining the demographic data for the school division between 2016 and 2019 (see Appendix F).

Table 8 shows the school accreditation rating of the leaders who responded to the survey questions. The survey participant responses indicated that 38.9% (n=7) of their schools are fully accredited. Some schools (22.2%; n=4) were identified as partially accredited with conditions. Some leaders (38.9%; n=7) that did not identify an accreditation rating. None of the school division leaders from the nonaccredited schools responded to this question. Five specialty schools within the school division are not governed by VDOE accreditation standards (see Table 7).

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Accreditation Rating</th>
<th>Percentage of Schools, %</th>
<th>N=18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fully accredited</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially accredited:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaching improving</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially accredited:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warned</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not accredited</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other(^a)</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Other (n=7) consists of nonresponse or not under accreditation guidelines.

Table 8 indicates the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in survey participant schools. In response to survey question number 4 regarding the percentage of economically disadvantaged students, 38.9% (n=7) of respondents indicated that 51% to 75% of their student population was economically disadvantaged. Another 33.3% (n=6) of the respondents indicated that 76% to 100% of their student population was economically disadvantaged. Most participants 72.2% (n=13) represent schools where the majority of the students identify as economically disadvantaged.
Table 8

_Percentage of Economically Disadvantaged Students_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economically Disadvantage Students, %</th>
<th>Frequency of Responses, %</th>
<th>N=18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–25</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–50</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–75</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76–100</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The percentage of parent volunteers in participant schools is outlined in Table 9. Of the school leaders who responded, 55.5% noted that 0% to 25% of parents volunteer at their schools. Also, 20% of respondents noted that 51% to 75% of parents volunteer. In addition, 11.1% of school leaders responded that 26% to 50% of parents volunteer.

Table 9

_Percentage of Parent Volunteers in Participants’ Schools_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Volunteers, %</th>
<th>Frequency of Responses, %</th>
<th>N=18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–25</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–50</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–75</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76–100</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey Findings

A 12-question survey was disseminated to school-level administrators in one Virginia school division. The responses were focused on two research questions: RQ1—What are the perceptions of school leaders regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement; and RQ2—Which leadership practices are perceived to have a positive
impact on student achievement regardless of SES? The response data from division leaders (n=18) who participated came from a potential 29 respondents for a 62% response rate. Participant responses to each open-ended survey question were color-coded and categorized into themes as related to the frequency of related responses to each survey question. For example, in Table 10, SQ9 – ways SES impacts student achievement was the category from which 3 themes emerged: Resources, which was color-coded blue; Experiences, which was color-coded green; and Achievement, which was color-coded red.

Table 10

Response Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Color Code for each theme</th>
<th>Related Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SQ9-Ways SES impacts student achievement</td>
<td>1=Blue</td>
<td>Resources (n=4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2=Green</td>
<td>Experiences (n=5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3=Red</td>
<td>Achievement (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ10-Ways leadership practices impact student achievement</td>
<td>1=Blue</td>
<td>Instruction (n=4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2=Green</td>
<td>Culture (n=8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3=Red</td>
<td>Professional growth (n=4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ11-Leadership practices that positively impact student achievement</td>
<td>1=Blue</td>
<td>Data (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2=Green</td>
<td>Culture (n=7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3=Red</td>
<td>Collaboration (n=3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4=Yellow</td>
<td>Model (n=5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ12-Other comments regarding relationship among SES, leadership, and student achievement</td>
<td>1=Blue</td>
<td>Resources (n=2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2=Green</td>
<td>Cultural experiences (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3=Red</td>
<td>Practices (n=6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ1—What are the perceptions of school leaders regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement?

Survey questions 7, 9, and 12 addressed RQ1. Survey question 7 was the following: “To what extent do you believe the socioeconomic status of a school community impacts student achievement?” Twelve participants (66.7%) indicated that they believe SES greatly impacts student achievement. In addition, 11.1% (n=2) believe SES has a moderate impact, and 5.0% (n=1) responded there is a slight impact; 0 responded “not at all.” Most participants 77.8% (n=14) responded that SES moderately to greatly impact student achievement. See Table 11.
Table 11

Responses on the Extent that Socioeconomic Status Impacts Student Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent Selection</th>
<th>Percentage, %</th>
<th>N=18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greatly</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey question 9 was the following: “In what ways do you believe socioeconomic status impacts student achievement?” Participant responses were color coded and categorized into three themes based on similarity of ideas. Five (n=5) of the response notes indicated that respondents believe student achievement is impacted by SES through student experiences. Some respondents (n=4) believe that a child’s experiences outside of school impact their achievement in school. School leaders noted the second greatest impact SES has on student achievement involves whether families have the resources available to assist with academic supports. Also, school leaders (n=2) identified foundational skills entering school as the least to impact student achievement. See Table 12.
### Table 12

**Themes for Responses to Survey Question 9: In What Ways Do You Believe Socioeconomic Status Impacts Student Achievement?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Response Notes</th>
<th>N=18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Resources**  | • Limited technology, print materials, manipulatives  
                  • Tools to achieve goals  
                  • Higher income + more education=more opportunities + more language before school + greater assistance (financially) for after-school programs + tutoring  
                  • Physical needs (e.g., food and housing)                                                                                                                                                             | 4    |
| **Experiences**| • Formative/enriching experiences (e.g., travel, historical, cultural)  
                  • Survival vs. learning  
                  • Parent disengagement—Need someone outside of school who cares about what goes on in school with them (Resilience).  
                  • Environment = Culture-Peer pressure  
                  • Depression  
                  • Lack of self-esteem                                                                                                                                                                                 | 5    |
| **Achievement**| • Developmental delays-literacy  
                  • Learning-related behavior problems  
                  • Disciplinary referrals  
                  • Out-of-school suspensions                                                                                                                                                                           | 2    |
| **Other**      |                                                                                                                                                                                                             | 7    |

Survey question 12 was the following: “What other comments would you like to share regarding the relationship among school leadership practices, student socioeconomic status, and student achievement?” Participant responses were color coded and categorized into three different themes based on similarity of ideas as shown in Table 13. Response notes for most (n=8 of the respondents aligned with the idea of the relationship among leadership, student achievement, and SES being strongest based on leadership practices employed. Leadership practices had the greatest responses, followed by the idea of having the resources (n=2) and being purposeful in directing the school culture (n=1).
Table 13
Themes Regarding Additional Comments on the Relationship Among Leadership, Student Achievement, and SES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Response Notes</th>
<th>N=12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>• Resources to combat income-deprived communities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• SES—affects but does not determine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture/Experiences</td>
<td>• Understand parents’ background (e.g., educational, cultural)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>• Relationships: students, parents, consistency</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Higher expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Support students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Safety</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Positive rapport</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Consistency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Build academic vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Tools—manipulatives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Concrete to abstract thinking (understanding)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• All about the teacher=that’s how good the school is!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Effective learning/different teaching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Occupational pride and motivation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Collaborative to close the gap</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ2—Which leadership practices are perceived to have a positive impact on student achievement regardless of SES?

Survey questions 8, 10, and 11 addressed school leaders’ perception of leadership practices that positively impact student achievement. Survey question 8 was the following: “To what extent do you believe leadership practices impact student achievement?” Participants who believed that leadership practices greatly impact student achievement constituted 66.7% (n=12) of the sample. A smaller frequency of school leaders (16.7%; n=3) indicated that they believed leadership practices moderately impact student achievement; 0.00% responded “slightly” or “not
Majority 83.4% (n=15) of the participant responses indicated leadership practices moderately to greatly impact student achievement. See Table 14.

Table 14

*Responses on the Extent to Which Leadership Practices Impact Student Achievement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent Selection</th>
<th>Percentage, %</th>
<th>N=18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greatly</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey question 10 was the following: “In what ways do you believe leadership practices impact student achievement?” Participant 100% (n=18) response notes indicated school leaders believe that leadership practices affect instructional practices. Participant responses were color coded and categorized into 3 themes based on similarity of ideas. Most of the respondents 44.4% (n=8) believed that student achievement is impacted by leadership practices through purposefully directing the learning culture. Respondents also believed that leadership practices involved in overseeing instruction 22.2% (n=4) and professional growth for teachers 22.2% (n=4) impact student achievement. See Table 15.
Table 15

*Respondents’ Beliefs about the Ways that Leadership Practices Impact Student Achievement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Response Notes</th>
<th>N=18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instruction</strong></td>
<td>• Instructional leader/manager</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Leadership = instructional practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Affect teachers’ instructional practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Culture</strong></td>
<td>• Vision/knowledge/lead change</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Culture for collaboration of best practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Positive school climate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Student confidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Pride</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Leaders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• High expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Set tone for building</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Break barriers w/students; consistent; example/model; care; rapport</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Positive, caring environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Visible, accessible to all staff, set standards, adhere to policy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional growth</strong></td>
<td>• Empower good teachers/support struggling teachers w/supports in classroom</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Better equipped leaders = student opportunities to succeed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Getting into classes consistently</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Observational feedback and data analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No response</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey question 11 was the following: “What leadership practices are present in your school that you believe positively impact student achievement?” Survey participants identified leadership practices that they employ in their schools that positively impact student achievement. Participant responses were color coded and categorized into four themes based on similarity of ideas. Most of respondents (n=7) indicated that establishing school culture positively impacts student achievement. Culture (n=7) was closely followed by the school leader modeling, being visible, and guiding expectations (n=5) as leadership practices identified to positively impact student achievement. Collaboration (n=3) was noted by respondents to have a positive impact on
student achievement, whereas data was mentioned by the fewest respondents (n=2). See Table 16.

Table 16

*School Leadership Practices that Positively Impact Student Achievement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Response Notes</th>
<th>N-18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data</td>
<td>• Data analysis</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Data meetings with all staff (principal)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Poor test practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>• Positive learning culture</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Relationship building</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• School climate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Belief in student/staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Incentive program, communication, positive praises, safe and supportive environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Consistency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher support/empowerment to manage and lead</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Open door policy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>• Collaborative environment</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Well thought-out changes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Students involved in decisions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Safety patrol</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Decision making; planning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Listening (teachers/voice)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model/guide</td>
<td>• Walkthroughs</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Visibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Transitions: arrival, dismissal, breakfast, lunch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Presence in classroom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Administration models</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Hands on—direct instruction/interaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Summary**

Chapter 4 reported the data in two parts. The first part provided an overview of the demographic profile of the participant sample and included an outline of the school division characteristics. The second part consisted of survey data responses related to RQ1 and RQ2 from
62% of the school division’s leaders who responded (N=18). The data analysis was conducted to determine school leaders’ perceptions of the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement and the practices they employ in their schools to positively impact student achievement.

The responses associated with the data were categorized into themes based on recurring responses to open-ended survey questions. Participant responses to each open-ended survey question were color coded and categorized into themes as related to the frequency of related responses.
Chapter Five
Findings and Conclusions

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of school leaders in one school division in Virginia regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement. The following research questions were the focus of this study: RQ1—“What are the perceptions of school leaders regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement?” and RQ2—“Which leadership practices are perceived to have a positive impact on student achievement regardless of SES?”

School leaders in the participating school division responded to a 12-question survey sharing their experiences regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement. They also shared their perception of which leadership practices they believe positively impact student achievement in their schools.

A survey design was used for this study. The researcher used qualitative data from free responses and descriptive statistics related to leadership perceptions within one school division in Virginia. The survey was sent to school administrators in the school division. School leaders (i.e., principals and assistant principals) across the school division participated. Free responses from the survey were coded to identify both categories into themes within the categories. Descriptive statistics were used to describe survey participant responses to quantitative survey questions, which addressed school and leader characteristics and perceptions.

Discussion of Findings

RQ1—What are the perceptions of school leaders regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement?

Finding 1: School leaders in the school division perceive SES and leadership practices to greatly impact student achievement.

School leaders who responded to the survey serve a diverse economic demographic within the school division and believe SES (66.7%) and leadership practices (66.6%) greatly impact student achievement. School leaders (33.3%) who serve in schools where 76% to 100% of the student population is economically disadvantaged believed leadership practices such as
instructional leadership, visionary leadership (culturally responsive leadership), and professional growth greatly impact student achievement.

Even in schools where less than 50% of the student population identify as economically disadvantaged, school leaders believed SES greatly impact student achievement. Many of the responding leaders also serve in schools that are fully accredited. Schools in the study that were fully or partially accredited included schools in which 51% or more of the student body was economically disadvantaged.

According to Worley (2007), “Despite huge efforts on the part of educators, students who are not from higher income brackets do not achieve at the same level during school or in their post high school experiences” (p. 2). Survey results indicated that SES is perceived to greatly impact student achievement. Data from this study show all schools in this study that identified an economically disadvantaged community are fully or partially accredited.

**Finding 2: School leaders perceive that SES influences life experiences, and depending upon those experiences, they will impact a student’s achievement positively or negatively.**

Varied qualitative responses indicated that limited resources (22%; n=4) in terms of access to technology as well as limited printed materials and manipulatives hinder student achievement in low-SES communities. Ladd (2012) concluded that students who are classified as economically disadvantaged do not perform as well in school as their peers who aren’t economically disadvantaged. Higher income is a gateway to more family education; this is viewed as equivalent to more opportunities. Families with more financial resources are able to provide greater academic assistance by means of after-school programs and tutoring for students who struggle.

Survey participants noted that they believe that a family’s life experiences (27%; n=5) such as physical needs being met (e.g., food and housing) impacts student achievement. The survival aspects of daily living and a student’s level of resilience along with parent disengagement were all elements perceived to negatively impact student achievement. Respondents also noted that, depending upon SES, student achievement would be reflective of a student’s formative or enrichment opportunities such as travel, historical, or cultural knowledge.

Kaniuka (2009) wrote, “Low-performing students seem to be at-risk not only due to their non-school variables, but possibly due to how a combination of variables are manifested in the instructional policies enacted at the school and district levels” (p. 1). Kaniuka (2009) continued
in stating, “Educators’ instructional paradigms are arguably rooted in prior professional experience and school-based contextual variables” (p.1).

**Finding 3: School leaders believe leadership practices can mitigate the effects of low SES on student achievement.**

Based on responses, school leaders perceive SES, leadership practices, and student achievement to be related to one another. School leaders (82.8%; n=15) perceive SES to have an impact on student achievement based on available resources (22.2%; n=4), environmental experiences (27.7%; n=5), and developmental skills (11%; n=2) students bring to school with them. The collective responses indicate that in low-SES communities understanding the community demographics and school leaders having the resources to combat the impact of income-deprived communities will positively affect student achievement. “The relationship between family socioeconomic characteristics and student achievement has been readily documented in educational research, yet the causes and mechanisms of this relationship have been the subject of considerable disagreement and debate” (Reardon, 2011, p.3). The variables mentioned in the qualitative data on the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement showed that school leaders believe that their understanding of student culture, building relationships, and having high academic expectations are factors that can help mitigate the negative impact of low SES on student achievement (see Table 12).

School leaders who understand the need for continued growth of teachers’ instructional knowledge realize this expertise as central to improving instructional gaps (Dufour, 2004). Being an instructional leader affects teachers’ instructional practices. According to survey responses, the school leader must have a vision to lead change and be knowledgeable about how to facilitate and implement change. As previously noted, Kaniuka (2009) acknowledged that professional experience and school-based contextual variables play a role in instructional standards set for student achievement. A culture for collaboration and promoting best practices regarding professional growth and instruction empowers good teachers. School leaders can impact student achievement by setting the tone for the school building. Better equipped leaders will establish more student opportunities to succeed. School leaders have the responsibility of providing feedback and are able to do so when they are visible and accessible to all, when they set standards, and when they adhere to policies.
**RQ2--- Which leadership practices are perceived to have a positive impact on student achievement regardless of SES?**

**Finding 4: School leaders perceive school culture, collaboration with stakeholders, and visibility in their school building to have a positive impact on student achievement.**

School leaders equipped with research knowledge lead change and do so by consistently modeling care and building rapport. Leaders indicated that they believe enhancing the overall learning culture (38%; n=7) with a positive school climate through pride and confidence, student leadership, and high expectations will impact student achievement. A collaborative (16%; n=3) learning environment aids in well thought-out decisions for change. Listening to all stakeholders to include student leadership in decision making is a practice that is believed to positively impact student achievement. Modeling expectations (27%; n=5) through being visible in classrooms and accessible to all staff with a balance of being an instructional leader and manager of daily operations were also identified as leadership practices that positively impact student achievement. As a means of empowering good teachers and supporting those who struggle, observational feedback is a necessity along with data analysis to contribute to decision making.

School leaders who have organizational vision and who are willing to break barriers are believed to create more opportunities for student success. Leaders who are not capable of promoting and sustaining a stable learning environment and understanding the complexity of this relationship will eventually lose good teachers and negatively affect student achievement (Khalifa et al., 2016).

**Finding 5: School leaders identified an understanding of school and community culture as having the greatest impact on student achievement.**

This study notes that strategies geared to understanding school and community culture have the greatest impact on student achievement. “School culture refers to the beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how a school functions, but the term also encompasses more concrete issues such as the physical and emotional safety of students, the orderliness of classrooms and public spaces, or the degree to which a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013).

Leadership practices that purposefully orchestrate the school culture (88%; n=16) are noted to have a sure impact on student achievement according to survey responses across four
data tables. Practices such as building relationships with students and parents and demonstrating high expectations with consistency are noted to positively impact student achievement. Supporting students also means maintaining a safe learning environment; this too is an important practice. Bland (2016) suggested that a positive school culture promotes equality in educational opportunities, decreases socioeconomic inequalities, and weakens the effects of low SES on achievement.

**Implications of Findings**

The survey participants’ responses regarding their perception of the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement align with current research. Schools in lower SES communities serve children who come to school without foundational literacy skills, limited experiences beyond the community where they reside, and a lack of economic resources to support academic enrichment. These variables negatively impact student achievement, yet school leaders perceive their efforts to purposefully establish a learning environment conducive for learning make a difference. The findings of this study support those perceptions.

**Implication 1:** School leaders who perceive SES and leadership practices to impact student achievement should be mindful of how they direct the learning environment for students to be successful.

Leadership practices matter for student achievement in low SES communities. Educators have to identify with their personal beliefs and expectations for students in the community they serve. Any unidentified bias can shape a school culture around unconscious behaviors and beliefs that obstruct or encourage organizational improvement. School leaders have the responsibility of establishing policies that govern how schools will operate. Students who attend schools in low SES communities are capable of success even when 50% or more of the population identify as economically disadvantaged. School division leaders who collaborate with building leaders for feedback on systemic practices and who establish community partnerships could ensure consistency across the school division regarding meeting the needs of students and their families.

**Implication 2:** School division curricula/instructional specialists should align curricula materials to educational experiences that include culturally diverse academic enrichment.
Gay (2000) noted that failing to align curriculum with cultural diversity promotes lack of motivation. Local policy makers should look at their public educational systems to assess whether they are designed to serve all students whose interests may not traditionally be geared toward college. By developing educators’ skills and knowledge so they are capable of valuing diversity among the students they serve, school division leaders will encourage innovative teaching strategies that match students’ ways of understanding and interacting with the world as they see it. This could increase student performance as measured by grades and tests (NEA, 2011). This implication is relevant to school leaders’ perception that SES influences a student’s life experiences and depending upon those experiences could impact achievement positively or negatively. Educators would then teach with an understanding of the community’s cultural beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and written rules.

**Implication 3: School leaders should provide professional development for teachers that will expand the teachers’ understanding of the culture of the communities in which they teach, including an emphasis on instructional strategies that can assist students of poverty.**

Educators who believe leadership practices can mitigate the effects of low SES on student achievement should be aware of student demographic shifts in the community and how to facilitate changing academic needs. Administrators need to also participate in leadership development and reflective practice dialogue with teachers. Collaboration within schools among administrators and teachers regarding leadership and instructional best practices essential to student success opens the gateway for local and division-level school leaders to spearhead educational reform to influence policy makers.

**Implication 4: School division leaders should facilitate professional growth and organizational change to empower school leaders.**

In order to stay abreast of a school or community’s culture, school division leaders must be innovative as culture changes. As changes occur, understanding and professional growth is needed to either combat or embrace the impact of the change. One must be open to new ideas and different approaches (i.e. student resilience, Trauma Informed Care, Emotional Intelligence). The responsibility of school leaders ultimately is to model and train emerging leaders within our k-12 educational system by giving them a voice as a stakeholder in their learning. This implication is in response to finding 4.
Implication 5: School board members and school division leaders should promote policy that demonstrates an understanding of the school community they serve.

Board members and school division leaders should understand their school and community culture and advocate for what is needed based on community values and beliefs. Finding 5 indicates school leaders identified strategies that are geared toward understanding school and community culture as having the greatest impact on student achievement. The NEA (2014) stressed the need for a renewed, collective commitment to closing achievement gaps to ensure academic opportunities for all students. Communities where majority of the families are in a survival state for their daily living needs are less likely to have families able to pay fees for extended curricula enrichment. A policy such as this is an example of how school division leaders could revise policy to support all students having access to extra curricula enrichment when unable to financially provide such experiences outside of school.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Replicate the study with a larger sample size. Open participation to school leaders across Virginia. Perhaps, expand the sample to include interviews with school division superintendents.
- Conduct a study comparing leadership practices that school leaders implement in schools that foster a positive school culture in low-SES communities based on identified indicators for positive school culture.
- Assess effectiveness of the leadership practices employed in non-accredited schools across the school division.
- Using the leadership practices identified from this study, more closely analyze school leaders’ overall perceptions of the effectiveness of implementation in schools across school divisions.
- Conduct a study to determine whether a correlation exists between poverty and race among non-accredited schools within the school division.
- Target participant sample from high SES community to complete survey tool to determine if identify the same leadership practices as those from low SES community.
Conclusions

Student achievement is impacted by many variables related to SES and leadership practices. Schools serving students from families who reside in a low SES community face many barriers to student achievement. School leaders in one Virginia school division believe leadership practices can mitigate factors that negatively impact student achievement.

- Leadership practices that focus on instruction, culture, and professional growth were three categories identified by the sample population as having an impact on student achievement.
- Consistent leadership practices were identified among school leaders as related to data analysis, establishing culture, collaboration, and modeling expectations.
- School culture was the dominant response for the survey questions (Tables 12–16).

Reflections

School leaders who participated in this research study serve in schools that are fully or partially accredited. Most of the student population identified in the study is considered economically disadvantaged. School leaders who are oblivious of the culture within the community they serve will face challenges in building rapport and motivating students. Gay (2010) suggested that school administrators must be able to dictate the direction of the school environment, and to do this one must know the population she or he serves. Research confirms that poverty is a major contributor to the achievement gap (Worley, 2007). Regarding the relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement, leaders who participated in this research study shared the belief that practices can foster a school environment to shape the learning culture, and they perceive this to be one of the most important contributors to student achievement. School leaders related the impact of SES on student achievement with a focus on the impact of low SES on student achievement. The research study survey questions were designed not to sway the participant, yet little was shared regarding the impact of high SES on student achievement.

This study provided an opportunity to explore how school leaders in one small school division perceive the relationship of student achievement being impacted by SES and leadership practices. Based on the responses, it became evident that leadership practices shape the learning environment and fosters the foundation of what is valued as significant in facilitating student
success. However, this is just the beginning of looking at leadership practices and student achievement as the next step would be to look at all of the perceptions and actually evaluate to what degree successful schools actually use identified practices.

Surprisingly, perceptions around data analysis were not a prominent component for establishing successful achievement in school based on this study. Data analysis was identified as a process to assist school leaders with targeting academic needs, but it did not compare to responses focusing on understanding student experiences, building relationships, and establishing expectations. To replicate this study, the researcher would benefit from a follow up study to obtain leadership perceptions but build upon the quantitative data by narrowing the specific leadership practices to be examined for effectiveness.
References


Boykin, W., & Noguera, P. (2011). *Creating the opportunity to learn: Moving from research to practice to close the achievement gap.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.


Ferguson, R. (2004). *Necessary policies and practices to close the student achievement gaps*. Presentation to NEA Symposium on Critical Issues for Educators, Washington, DC.


students’ experiences with resources, racial climate, and resilience. *The Journal of Negro Education, 75*(3) 478+


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Leadership, 41, 19-30.
Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Email

[Emailed to each potential participant]

Greetings,

I am a doctoral student within the Education Leadership and Policy Studies Program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. I am currently writing a research study/dissertation titled: “School leaders’ perceptions of the relationship among socioeconomic status, leadership practices, and student achievement in a suburban division in central Virginia”.

The purpose of the study is to identify school leaders’ perceptions about the relationship among socioeconomic status, leadership practices, and student achievement; the impact of such relationship; and the best practices that will help narrow the achievement gap across varied school environments. The results from the study will be used in the researcher’s dissertation. Participation in the study is voluntary. Any decision not to participate has no bearing on your employment status with your current school division. Conclusions and recommendations from the study may be beneficial to school divisions throughout the state and perhaps, the nation.

I write to you in hopes you will agree to participate in this study which will entail completing and submitting a survey. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes of your time. The link to the survey is provided below:

[survey link here]

All participation is confidential and anonymous. Names or other identifying information will not be used in this dissertation. Please note, by completing and submitting the survey, you acknowledge that you are providing consent to participate in the study. If you wish to not participate, simply do not complete the survey.

As a former building administrator, I completely understand your time is valuable. I greatly appreciate your consideration regarding participation in this study.

Respectfully,

Cora B. Coefield
Doctoral Candidate
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Appendix B
Survey Instrument

Dear Educator:

Thank you for agreeing to complete this survey. It should take about 15 minutes or fewer to complete the survey. You are being asked to participate in this survey to gain insight on your perception of the relationship among socioeconomic status, leadership practices, and student achievement. Please answer all questions and provide additional comments when required. There are no anticipated risks to persons who participate in this study, nor are there any direct benefits for participants in this study.

All information disclosed on the survey instrument will be held in strict confidence. The data generated from the survey and that which will be included in the dissertation will contain no identifying information regarding the participants, the participants’ school or school division. The survey results will only be accessible to the researcher. Information disclosed in the survey will be held for approximately one year following the defense of this dissertation. During this year, the results will only be accessible to the researcher.

Please note, by completing and submitting this survey, you acknowledge that you are providing consent to participate in this study. Remember that all answers are voluntary and anonymous. Should you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact the researcher, committee chair, or VT IRB at the contact information below:

Researcher:
Cora B. Coefield

Email: ccora4@vt.edu

Committee Chair:
Dr. Ted Price
Virginia Tech Richmond Center
2810 Parham Road, Suite 300
Richmond, VA 23294

Email:

Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board:
irb@vt.edu
(540) 231-3732
Position: Principal________________ Assistant Principal________________
Elementary_________ Middle_________ High_________
Years of Administrative Experience_______________

1. What percentage of your student body is economically disadvantaged?
   A) 0 - 25%
   B) 26% - 50%
   C) 51% - 75%
   D) 76% - 100%

2. What percentage of your parents volunteer in your school?
   E) 0 - 25%
   F) 26% - 50%
   G) 51% - 75%
   H) 76% - 100%

3. What is the accreditation rating of your school?
   A) Fully Accredited
   B) Partially Accredited: Approaching Improving
   C) Partially Accredited: Warned
   D) Not Accredited
   E) Other: ______________________

4. To what extent do you believe the socioeconomic status of a school community impacts student achievement?
   A) Extremely
   B) Moderately
   C) Slightly
   D) Not at all

5. To what extent do you believe leadership practices impact student achievement?
   A) Extremely
   B) Moderately
   C) Slightly
   D) Not at all

6. In what ways do you believe socioeconomic status impacts student achievement?
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
7. In what ways do you believe leadership practices impact student achievement regardless of socioeconomic status?

____________________________________

____________________________________

____________________________________

8. What leadership practices are present in your school that you believe positively impact student achievement?

____________________________________

____________________________________

____________________________________

9. What other comments would you like to share?

____________________________________

____________________________________

____________________________________

____________________________________
Appendix C

Follow-up Participation Reminder

Hello,

I am a doctoral student within the Education Leadership and Policy Studies Program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. I am currently writing a research study/dissertation titled: “School leaders’ perceptions of the relationship among socioeconomic status, leadership practices, and student achievement in a suburban division in central Virginia”.

The purpose of the study is to identify school leaders’ perceptions about the relationship among socioeconomic status, leadership practices, and student achievement; the impact of such relationship; and the best practices that will help narrow the achievement gap across varied school environments. The results from the study will be used in the researcher’s dissertation. Participation in the study is voluntary. Any decision not to participate has no bearing on your employment status with your current school division. Conclusions and recommendations from the study may be beneficial to school divisions throughout the state and perhaps, the nation.

I write to you in hopes you will agree to participate in this study which will entail completing and submitting a survey. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes of your time. The link to the survey is provided below:

[survey link here]

I am sure this is a busy time, and your time is very important. Your insight is valuable to this research study. Don’t miss your opportunity to provide your perspective. Thank you all for your willingness to participate in this study by completing the survey.

Please review the survey questions and dedicate 15 mins. of your time to share your expertise.

Thank you,

Cora B. Coefield
Doctoral Candidate
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Appendix D
IRB Certification of Completion

Certificate of Completion

This certifies

Cora Beatress Coefield

Has

Training in Human Subjects Protection

On the following topics:
Historical Basis for Regulating Human Subjects
The Belmont Report
Federal and Virginia Tech Regulatory Entities, Policies and Procedures

on

November 7, 2016

David Moore, IRB Chair
Appendix E
Division Request to Conduct Research

Dear Superintendent or designee,

School leadership is a crucial component to the direction of the school environment. While evidence supports the need to address social, political, and economic inequities in education, this study focuses on the perception of educational leaders regarding the specific relationship among SES, leadership practices, and student achievement.

We are asking for your support in allowing educational leaders in your district to participate in a research survey providing their insight on the leadership practices they employ to enhance student achievement. This study will identify common educational leadership practices in schools with various SES and student achievement results. An open discourse about leadership perceptions could encourage synergy among local and state policy makers regarding standardized data (accountability) and leadership practices to diminish achievement challenges.

All information will be kept confidential. School divisions and individuals participating in this study will do so anonymously to safeguard against the possibility of identification. Once the study is completed, we would be happy to share the findings of the dissertation study with your district. In addition, we would be more than willing to answer any questions that you may have about this study. We can be contacted by email (ccora4@vt.edu) or by phone (M-610-574-2369).

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

Cora B. Coefield
Graduate Student
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Dr. Ted Price
Committee Chair
Virginia Polytech Institute and State University
Richmond Center

tprice@vt.edu
Appendix F

Implied Consent Agreement

Research Title: School leaders’ perception of the relationship among socioeconomic status, leadership practices, and student achievement in a suburban division in central Virginia

Investigator: Cora B. Coefield, Doctoral Student  
Contact email: ccora4@vt.edu

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this mixed method study, utilizing survey methodology, is to identify school leaders’ perceptions about the relationship among socioeconomic status, leadership practices, and student achievement; the impact of such relationship; and best practices that will help narrow the achievement gap across varied school environments. The results of this study will be used for the development of a dissertation.

Participation in the study: As a participant in this study you will spend approximately 10 - 15 minutes completing and submitting a survey. Your responses to the survey will be submitted electronically through Qualtrics.

Anticipated Risks: There are no anticipated risks to persons who participate in the study.

Time Period: The survey will take approximately 10 - 15 minutes to complete and submit your responses.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Confidentiality: All information disclosed on the survey instrument will be held in strict confidence. The data generated from the survey and that which will be included in the dissertation will contain no identifying information regarding the participants, the participants’ school or school division. The survey results will only be accessible to the researcher. Information disclosed in the survey will be held for approximately one year following the defense of this dissertation. During this year, the results will only be accessible to the researcher.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Participation: Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary.

Right to withdraw from the study: As a participant in this study, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time of your choosing. Your survey responses will be destroyed and deleted at the time of withdrawal and the data will not appear in the final dissertation.

Process for Withdrawal: If you elect to withdraw from the study, please notify the researcher at any time at the phone number and/or address provided within this Agreement.

Questions or Concerns: Should you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact the researcher, committee chair, or the VT IRB chair at the contact information below:

Researcher:
Cora B. Coefield

Email: ccora4@vt.edu

Committee Chair:
Dr. Ted Price
Virginia Tech Richmond Center
2810 Parham Road, Suite 300
Richmond, VA 23294
Telephone:
Email: tprice@vt.edu

**Participant Agreement:** By completing and submitting this survey, consent to participate in this study is implied.