Investigating the Complexity of Community in a Challenged Urban Elementary School

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ABSTRACT

A school community is often more than meets the eye. With more research highlighting the benefits of school-community partnerships, the notion of what constitutes community in an elementary school setting leaves much room to be further examined. In this study, community is considered through two lenses: a geographically-defined community and a sense of community defined by mutual sensibilities, goals, and practices (Weathers, 2011; Wenger, 1998). The purpose of this study was to understand faculty and staff perceptions of community in a challenged urban elementary school. A qualitative research methodology with a phenomenological approach was used in this case study. Participants included the faculty, staff, and the leadership team currently employed at an elementary school. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, participant conversations, observations, artifacts, and document analysis. These methods were used to capture the phenomenon and experiences of people working in and with the school. Three themes emerged from the data, describing who and what contribute to community in a challenged urban elementary school: (a) members of the community, (b) the prioritization of students at the school, and (c) the intractable problems that exist within the school, both on micro and macro levels. Based on these findings, the main conclusion was that teachers played the biggest role in prioritizing students, as they were the community members most immersed with students on a daily basis. Additional conclusions were: (a) the level of student need is high, (b) intractable problems challenge the development of community, and (c) principal and teacher turnover challenge the development of community.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

A school community is often more than meets the eye. With more research highlighting the benefits of school-community partnerships, the notion of what constitutes community in an elementary school setting leaves much room to be further examined. In this study, community is considered through two lenses: a geographically-defined community and a sense of community defined by mutual interests, goals, and practices. The purpose of this study was to understand faculty and staff perceptions of community in a challenged urban elementary school. I conducted my research at an elementary school in the Southeastern part of the United States. I focused on the faculty, staff, and the leadership team at the elementary school. I interviewed faculty and staff, had conversations, observed within the school, took photos, and examined documents that helped me better understand the school and its community. In my findings, I described who and what contribute to community: (a) members of the community, (b) the prioritization of students at the school, and (c) the intractable problems that exist within the school. The main conclusion in this study was that teachers played the biggest role in prioritizing students, as they were the community members most immersed with students on a daily basis. Additional conclusions were: (a) the level of student need is high, (b) intractable problems challenge the development of community, and (c) principal and teacher turnover challenge the development of community.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation in memory of my friend John. I hope that in some way this achievement has continued the work he believed in so much, in a community that was made better because of his vision and determination.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Rationale

Federal acknowledgement of the academic needs of poor and minority children in the American public education system were first comprehensively addressed as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 under President Lyndon B. Johnson (Duke, 2016). He had been a schoolteacher. Still, more than 40 years later Calkins et al. (2007) reported that of America's 100,000 public schools, 5,000 (5%) were on track to fall into "the most extreme federal designation for failure" by 2009-2010 (p. 12). This statistic represented more than 2,500,000 students across America, recognizing a serious national social policy crisis: "America's collective inability to help high-challenge, high-poverty, low-achieving schools succeed" (Calkins et. al, 2007, p. 7). In 2014 almost 25% of states contemplated legislation related to school improvement generally, to school improvement interventions, or to sanctions for low-performing schools (Education Commission of the States, 2015; Institute for Education Sciences (IES), 2019). American Enterprise Institute (AEI) (2020) reported "even as K–12 schools have become ever more central to US society, the nation has continued to grapple with persistently low achievement among disadvantaged children and large achievement gaps between more and less advantaged student subgroups" (Executive Summary section, para. 1).

From urban schools to rural schools, high-challenge, high-poverty, low-achieving schools are not isolated cases. Crises of poverty have long plagued societies, naturally crossing over into the education system. Calkins et. al (2007) argue,

These schools fail because the challenges they face are substantial; because they

> themselves are dysfunctional; and because the system of which they are a part is not responsive to the needs of the high-poverty student populations they tend to serve… Turning around the "bottom five" percent of schools is the crucible of education reform. They represent our greatest, clearest need – and therefore a great opportunity to bring about fundamental change. (p. 12)

Tasked with this problem, education reformers began referring to these schools as t*urnaround* schools. Calkins et. al (2007) point out, "Standards, testing, and accountability enable us, for the first time, to identify with conviction our most chronically under-performing schools. Turnaround is the emerging response to an entirely new dynamic in public education: the threat of closure for underperformance" (p. 12). With this in mind, education researchers and school district leaders delved in to determine what factors were important to improving failing schools.

One of the most pertinent factors in improving failing schools is principal leadership (Cosner & Jones, 2016; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017). School principals are charged with developing and following School Improvement Plans (SIP). VanGronigen and Meyers (2017) write,

> For principals of low-performing schools, the SIP development process can be an opportunity to reflect upon and decide what the school can become, how the school's resources should be allocated, and how those resources might need to change in order to realize the vision. (p. 28; see also Duke et al., 2013)

Considering the numerous challenges of the SIPs, a review of literature by Meyers and Hitt (2017) on principals who have been successful in leading school turnaround identified 12 domains of principal leadership (p. 28, see Table 1). Three main domain themes emerged in the research, including: (a) utilizing vision with strategic leadership, (b) building capacity with

support and accountability, and (c) shaping of culture (Meyers & Hitt, 2017). Of these three major themes, the third theme, shaping of culture, is the most pertinent theme to the study discussed in this paper.

The *shaping of culture* is defined more specifically by Meyers and Hitt (2017) using three subdomains: (a) create or improve a climate that is safe and focused on teaching and learning, (b) generate quick wins to publicly demonstrate changing priorities and that improvement is possible, and (c) develop authentic relationships with parents and the community broadly. Building on the third domain, specifically community, Weathers (2011) explains community as, "exist[ing] when a group of people share a culture bound by geography or adherence to a similar interest"[1] (p. 5). Weathers (2011) goes on to explain,

> The somewhat unique culture consists of shared beliefs, values, symbols, meanings, and behaviors. Communities vary in the degree to which their culture is shared and its breadth and depth among members, the degree to which they identify themselves with this culture, and the strength of the cultural norms on the personally held and enacted views and behavior of members. (p. 5)

Weathers' (2011) explanation of community builds on Wenger's (1998) theoretical explanation of community. Both explanations of community are considered in this study. Wenger (1998) created a social theory of learning to "integrate the components necessary to characterize social participation as a process of learning and of knowing" (p. 4). The four components included in Wenger's (1998) theory are: (a) meaning, (b) practice, (c) community, and (d) identity. Wenger (1998) goes on to explain *community*, as it is used in the theory, as "a way of talking about the

[1] The participants in this study shifted back and forth as to how community was defined, depending on the context they were using or referencing.

social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence" (p. 5). Weathers (2011) suggests,

> What is needed is an enabling bureaucracy that understands how to promote a coherent culture through community building activities such as consistent reforms, providing a sense of order and reducing ambiguity, supporting teachers, and handing over leadership and control to teachers in areas where it may matter the most, such as in professional development activities. (p. 29)

Additionally, Weathers (2011) suggests future research "investigate exactly what principals do that they believe builds teacher community and study the effect of these specific activities" (p. 28). When considering communities and schools, Hargreaves (2009) explains,

> In the coming decade, we will learn and commit to the idea that the strongest and most effective schools are the schools that work with and affect the communities that affect them—schools where educational leaders are also effective community leaders. This will signal an end to the misdirected assumption that all responsibility for improvement falls exclusively on the shoulders of teachers and their schools. (p. 98)

Hargreaves adds an interesting notion of the importance of educational leaders and community members working together to affect both schools and the community in which the schools are located. This has been done successfully but the process takes time, careful consideration, and stakeholder buy-in (Casto, 2016; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Rincon-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016). The study discussed in this paper examines faculty and staff perceptions of community in a challenged urban elementary school setting.

Research Connection and Relevance

My interest in these topics, collectively, was built over the past 13 years. First, my interest in the kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) learning setting, and my current job, led me to work with Title I schools. While working in schools, I came across a particular school that was facing unique challenges. This school piqued my interest in turnaround schools. I began to investigate school leadership models, as the principal in that school was the catalyst for change within the school. As my studies and work continued, I began to follow the news of local schools in my own city, and I identified a school that was facing significant challenges. Combined with my interest in communities of practice and K-12 students, I began to conceptualize a study and cultivate relationships that would give me the opportunity to gain insight into the way school leadership and faculty tackle challenges within their schools.

I have been in my current job for 13 years. My work is focused on K-12 career development curriculum development and outreach, and leading professional development for K-12 educators and school counselors. My background and continued work in the field of education led me to the study I detail in this paper. Sharing the story of my path to this point gives you, the reader, a greater understanding of my connection to these topics. It also highlights how I have built the scaffolding for this research.

Approach to Inquiry

This study was approached with an interpretivist and constructivist tradition. Schwandt (2007) argues interpretivism "assume[s] that the meaning of human action is inherent in that action, and that the task of the inquirer is to unearth that meaning" (p.160). While interpretivism is a rather broad term that often can be applied to much qualitative research, constructivism is a bit more narrowed, and can be defined as "the belief that the mind is active in the construction of

knowledge…this means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as construct or make it" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 38). Using Schwandt's (2007) template for describing constructivism as it pertains to a particular study, "The constructivist seeks to explain how human beings interpret or construct some X in specific linguistic, social, and historical contexts" (p. 39). In the case of this study, X represents (and is further defined as) community in an urban elementary school setting.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate faculty and staff perceptions of community in a challenged urban elementary school. There is a need to better understand what factors influence the development of community in school settings. The study examined the perceptions of developing community in an urban elementary school through the lens of teachers, staff, and administrators at the school. More specifically, the purpose of this study focused on the perceptions of who and what contributed to community in an urban elementary school, as experienced and determined by the teachers, staff, and administrators at the school. Understanding these experiences provided insight to better understand the phenomena and meaning that made up these social constructs. A phenomenological approach was used in this study, which focused on understanding the experiences through the lens of the faculty and staff in the school. Specifically, the programs, policies, practices, and people were evaluated. Participants included the faculty, staff, and leadership team currently employed at the elementary school. A qualitative approach was used, including document analysis, artifacts, observations, semi-structured interviews, and participant conversations, to capture the phenomenon and experiences of people within the school.

Research Question

The research question for this study was: Who and what contribute to community in an urban elementary school?[2]

Key terminology that was used in this study includes: (a) community – exists when a group of people share a culture bound by geography or adherence to similar interest (Weathers, 2011, p. 5); (b) program – an event or activity as part of a purposeful, abiding plan; (c) policy – a principle adopted by the school and/or district; and (d) practice – a way or method of doing something.

A table of the research rationale is included in Table 2. This table was used as a planning document and encompasses the major pieces of the study.

Table 2
Research Rationale

Research Question	**Theoretical Framework**	**Method**	**Participants**	**Data Collection Processes**	**Data Analysis Processes**
Who and what contribute to community in an urban elementary school?	• Case-Study • Phenomenological approach– looking for meaning in experiences at a particular school in a particular setting • Participatory • Bracketing • Philosophical Paradigm: Interpretivist Constructivist	Qualitative	• School administrators • School leadership team • Teachers • Staff • External employees (to include contract employees) • Community members	• Semi-structured interviews • Field Notes • Document Analysis • Participant Conversation • Observations • Artifacts • Audit Trail	• Transcription • Open Coding • Thematic Analysis

[2] The participants in this study shifted back and forth as to how community was defined, depending on the context they were using or referencing.

This document is organized into five chapters. The first chapter introduces the study, states the purpose for the research, and states the research question. The second chapter gives a review of the literature, offering a summary of relevant research in the field of education to set the groundwork for my study. The third chapter explains the methodology that was used in the study, including the approach to research, details of the participants in the study, and data collection methods used study. The fourth chapter shares the findings and discusses the results of the study. The fifth and final chapter offers my conclusions, acknowledges the limitations of the study, and shares ideas for future research.

CHAPTER 2: Review of the Literature

In this literature review, I summarize three large topics in education – communities of practice, principal leadership, and turnaround schools - and attempts to determine how existing literature connects these topics, to garner a strong understanding of the intersections of these topics as it relates to my research. The purpose of this literature review is to (a) provide a review of research on education theories and perspectives relevant to communities of practice, principal leadership, and turnaround schools, and (b) identify how communities of practice, principal leadership, and turnaround schools intersect in the context of education.

Communities of Practice

For the purposes of this investigation, a community of practice (CoP), a term first used by scholars Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991 (see also Wenger, 1998), is defined as "property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise" (p. 45). The term community of practice was initially used to refer to concepts of situated learning. The evolution of the term community of practice began from an attempt to explain the social structures within human social interaction. The term represents years of thought, contemplation,

and exploration, incorporating a host of principal theories and perspectives in education, including: (a) Lev Vygotsky's theory on sociocultural learning, (b) Jerome Bruner's perspectives on structuralism and scaffolding, and (c) Albert Bandura's theory on social learning, later renamed social cognitive theory (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2003).

Understanding the Individual Existence and Social Relations

Psychologist and philosopher William James was a pioneer of American psychology. In the late 1800s, James (1958) described his view of education as, "Education, in short cannot be better described than by calling it the organization of acquired habits of conduct and tendencies to behaviors" (p. 36). James' pragmatist worldview led him to believe the value of truth was dependent on the person who held the truth and experienced the truth; his epistemological beliefs were controversial and led to continued conversations in the field of psychology.

The Marxian influence on psychology in the early 1900s led some scholars to the fundamental belief that social behavior could not necessarily be determined from individual behavior. Vygotsky supported the new fundamental belief, claiming "that in order to understand the individual, one must first understand the social relations in which the individual exists" (Wertsch, 1985, p. 58). Vygotsky's beliefs countered what had formerly been believed in psychology. For many years, psychologists had attempted to determine social behavior from individual behavior; Vygotsky's claim that the social dimension of consciousness was primary to the individual dimension of consciousness inferred scholars had it backward. Bruner first noted the similarity between Vygotsky's claim and G.H. Mead's scholarly work in 1962. Roeser et al. (2006) describe the influence of scholars Baldwin, Cooley, and Mead, whose work on self-identity was viewed in terms of:

1. Social and cultural structures that highlight labels, statuses, and roles.

2. Interpersonal processes determined by other people.

3. The development of multiple identities through participation in activities with others.

Like Vygotsky, Mead inherently believed that in many ways, an individual's identity was strongly influenced by social interactions with others and could not be determined by individual behavior alone. Pressley and Roehrig (2003) point out Vygotsky's development of sociocultural learning theory strongly attested "that the culture surrounding a child matters in the formation of mind" (p. 349). Furthermore, they described, "interpersonal thinking between an adult and a child, thinking driven more by the adult than the child, eventually becomes intrapersonal thinking, the type of thinking the child does for her- or himself" (p. 349). In Vygotsky's *Mind in Society* (1978), he poses the following question:

> Indeed, can it be doubted that children learn speech from adults; or, that, through asking questions and giving answers, children acquire a variety of information; or, that, through imitating adults and through being instructed about how to act, children develop an entire repository of skills? Learning and development are interrelated from a child's very first day of life. (p. 84)

Bruner and his associates (Wood et al., 1976) later referred to this teacher-student support system as *scaffolding*. This term was used to explain how an "expert helped a novice to perform some task or skill in a more competent way than the novice could achieve without such assistance" (Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003, p. 219). Contrasting this view, Tudge and Scrimsher (2003) argue that Bruner's description of scaffolding, and ultimately Vygotsky's theory, actually minimizes how the more competent person, or expert, can also gain from the communication. This point brings to light the reciprocal relationship such interaction potentially includes, extending beyond the expert-novice interaction.

Bruner studied human psychology through two primary models–anthropology and psychology; he joined these two courses of study throughout his life's work (Lutkehaus & Greenfield, 2003). Bruner (1971) makes connections between a person's cognitive development and their cultural constructs. Furthermore, he talks about the conflict between "context-free" and "context-sensitive" conceptions of mind (Lutkehaus & Greenfield, 2003). Specifically, he describes,

> I suspect that both kinds of theory are necessary…The strength of a context-free view is that it searches for universal structures of mind; its weakness is its intrinsic anti-culturalism…The weakness of most context-sensitive views of development is that they give too much importance to individual and cultural differences and overlook the universals of growth. Their strength, of course, is in a sensitivity to the nature of the human plight and how this plight is fashioned by culture. (Bruner, 1971, pp. 153-154)

Both concepts, cognitive development, and consideration of cultural constructs, are relevant and crucial to understanding the discussions of community in an educational context.

In a conversation with researchers Lutkehaus and Greenfield in October, 2000, Bruner shared, "I never felt I was going into education. If you didn't take into account this most powerful institution – schooling – how could you talk about cognitive development?" (Lutkehaus & Greenfield, 2003, p. 431). Bruner's interest in the connections and intersections between the individual and society began what ended up being a lifetime of research on the culture of education as well as cognitive development. His beliefs drew from Vygotsky's focus on the individual and society. Bruner (1960) wrote, "Grasping the structure of a subject is understanding it in a way that permits many other things to be related to it meaningfully. To learn structure, in short, is to learn how things are related" (p. 7). Bruner further argues the

importance of structure in knowledge, and the importance of understanding in knowledge (Lutkehaus & Greenfield, 2003). It was not until the late 1970s, when Bandura and his colleagues took the idea a bit farther, that the social learning theory was developed, and another formal element was added.

Bandura, much like Vygotsky, Bruner, and others, believed that the relationship between a person and the environment was key to identity and behavior. However, in 1977 Bandura developed a new model, "in which he analyzed human learning and self-regulation in terms of triadic reciprocal causations involving complex interplay between personal (cognitive-affective), behavioral, and environmental determinants" (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2003, p. 438). In Bandura's model, people served as both products and producers of their environment; this new approach saw influences on human thought – environmental, behavioral, and personal determinants, as equal in influence (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2003). In his own words, Bandura described social learning theory as, "What people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave. The natural and extrinsic effects of their actions, in turn, partly determine their thought patterns and affective reactions" (Bandura, 1986, p. 25).

Situated Learning and Legitimate Peripheral Participation

With nearly a century of work related to social and cognitive theory and identity already established, Lave and Wenger (1991) saw an opportunity to connect and build on prior theories:

> We wanted to broaden the traditional connotations of the concept of apprenticeship- from master/student or mentor/mentee relationship to one of changing participation and identity transformation in a community of practice. The concepts of identity and community of practice were thus important to our argument, but they were not given the spotlight and were left largely unanalyzed. (Wenger, 1998, pp. 11-12)

Wenger's explanation refers to the book he authored with Lave, *Situating Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (1991). It was in this book that the idea of a community of practice was first introduced; however, the term was first used to describe concepts of situated learning.

At first, situated learning was introduced as an idea to explain, "how much the particulars of context influence what and how we learn" (deMarrais et al., 2011, p. 84). After a few shifts in perspective, Lave and Wenger (1991) finally described the notion of situated learning as "a transitory concept, a bridge, between a view according to which cognitive processes (and thus learning) are primary and a view according to which social practice is the primary, generative phenomenon, and learning is one of its characteristics" (p. 33). The latter shift in situated learning led to the term legitimate peripheral participation. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe legitimate peripheral participation as a "way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice" (p. 29).

Lave and Wenger's first views on situated learning reflected a more modernist perspective, and over time have shifted to incorporate more of a postmodernist perspective. Wenger continued to develop the concept of a community of practice on his own, and in his book *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* in 1998, he provided a full explanation of the term community of practice.

Elements of Community of Practice

Wenger (1998) claims "associating practice and community does two things: (a) It yields a more tractable characterization of the concept of practice – in particular, by distinguishing it from less tractable terms like culture, activity, or structure; and (b) It defines a special type of community – a community of practice" (p. 72). Similarly, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992)

define a community of practice as, “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short practices emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor” (p. 464). Wenger (1998) believes a community of practice should be seen as a unit with three dimensions – mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire.

Wenger (1998) first points out the mutual engagement of participants, which he describes as, “exist[ing] because people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another” (p. 73). A community is defined by its members, and it is a matter of mutual engagement. Wenger (1998) highlights the importance of engagement as it pertains to belonging, the importance of diversity and lack of homogeneity, and how when mutual relationships are created, participants are connected on a deeper level.

A joint enterprise, the second dimension, Wenger (1998) believes is the source of unity in a community. He highlights the importance of negotiating meaning, how participants are contained by their own situations, and the pertinence of mutual accountability within joint enterprises.

A shared repertoire is the third dimension of a community of practice, which Wenger (1998) explains as including, “routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice” (p. 83). The repertoire includes both reificative and participative components and is considered shared resources within a community. A repertoire also has elements reflecting a history of mutual engagement as well as the unique quality to be ambiguous. The ambiguity aspect, though unpredictable, is also a way to be open-ended and friendly to new ideas or meanings.

In summary, Wenger (1998) summarizes the importance of the three dimensions as:

1. Through mutual engagement, participation and reification can be seamlessly interwoven.
2. A joint enterprise can create relations of mutual accountability without ever being reified, discussed, or stated as an enterprise.
3. Shared histories of engagement can become resources for negotiating meaning without the constant need to "compare notes." (p. 84)

Communities of practice exist, without negative or positive intent. Because they involve and value relationships, sharing knowledge, and negotiating meaning, they can be a powerful entity.

Community of Practice in Education

Community of practice in its original context, was used as a way of explaining learning in business. Much of Wenger's (1998) work explains the components of a community of practice within the contexts of specific milieus, like the world of the claims processor and clerical personnel. However, communities of practice, by definition, are not siloed and can therefore be found wherever there is a community exemplifying the necessary components of mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. The field of education is a natural fit when discussing communities of practice because of the many sub-communities within education and learning communities. Wenger et al. (2002) state "Although communities of practice develop naturally, an appropriate amount of design can be a powerful engine for their evolution, helping members identify the knowledge, events, roles, and activities that will catalyze the community's growth" (p. 63).

Community of Practice in Schools

In a qualitative study conducted by Scanlan et al. (2016), a case study methodology was used to examine how communities of practice develop within a network of schools. Data in the form of a survey was collected from participants who were part of the Two-Way Immersion Network of Catholic Schools (TWIN-CS), which is a "multiyear effort forming a national network of Catholic elementary schools transitioning from monolingual to bilingual instructional environments by implanting a TWI model" (Scanlan et al., 2016, p. 13; Howard & Sugarman, 2007). The survey was used to reveal relational networks participants identified as central to their own learning to implement TWI. Participants (n = 51) were distributed as follows: administrators (12), teachers (31), and mentors (8). The survey has three categories, addressing: (a) If participants sought help in implementing TWI, (b) From who did they seek guidance, and (c) What kind of help did they seek (Scanlan et al., 2016). These questions allowed researchers to create visual networks using nodes and webs around the degree of communication, as well as the kinds of existing social capital among the networks.

In addition to the survey, researchers also collected data using

- archival documents including handbooks, mission statements, and news reports (document analysis),
- interpersonal communication among TWIN-CS participants online, in webinars, and through email, and
- field notes generated by the four research team members including meeting minutes, and email correspondence.

The data were collected over an eighteen-month period (Scanlan et al., 2016).

Researchers described their data analysis process as both iterative and cyclical (Scanlan et al., 2016). First, researchers analyzed the networking patterns obtained from the survey results,

using ego network analysis (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010). Using triangulation, researchers then compared the network analysis data to the networks identified by survey participants. This technique allowed the researchers to reveal "the formation of CoPs as they emerged, as opposed to assuming that a formally established grouping (e.g., a TWIN-CS Implementation Team) was a de facto CoP" (Scanlan et al., 2016, p. 17). Second, the researchers used Saldana's (2013) two-cycle coding method to analyze the archival documents, interpersonal communication, and the field notes. In a detailed process, researchers first coded for CoPs considering the identifying factors as well as learning dualities (X/Y) of CoPs: (a) mutual engagement, (b) joint enterprise, and (c) shared repertoire, as well as: (a) reification/participation, (b) designed/emergent, (c) global/local, and (d) participation/negotiation (Scanlan et al., 2016). In the second coding cycle researchers coded based on emerging themes and patterns in the dualities (X/Y, or X versus Y), and it was determined that oftentimes both dualities (X and Y) were represented. Patterns were identified in the TWIN-CS network, both in and across the schools; researchers described these patterns as CoPs.

Findings in this study first highlighted the not unforeseen development of CoPs in and across the TWIN-CS schools, which seemed to form as a response to the schools' decision to participate as a TWI school. Further findings determined, "As this implies, the contours of particular CoPs are not hard and fast but murky. They are subjective, based on the perspective one takes" (Scanlan et al., 2016, p. 18). Next, researchers divided the findings into two categories: (a) CoPs as extemporaneous, tentative, and localized, and (b) exploring the learning products and processes within the CoPs. Participation and reification were the two CoP dimensions most prominent in the 'learning architecture', as described by the researchers, with components such as Summer Academy and webinars contributing to the dimension (Scanlan et

al., 2016). For the designed and emergent dimension, contributing components were information technology tools and assessment data. For the local and global dimension, the contributing component was boundary spanning. Lastly, for the identification and negotiability dimension, contributing components were selecting a TWI model and mission revisions. See Table 3.

From this research Scanlan et al. (2016) determined,

> By understanding the learning architecture of CoPs, school leaders can more purposefully influence the forms and functions therein – attending to what is reified and what is participatory, what is designed and what emerges, what is localized and what is global, what is part of a shared identity and what is negotiated separately. (p.33)

Furthermore, the researchers mention these findings support existing research that "school leaders design for socially just schooling by "cultivating communities of practice as spaces of transformational learning" (Scanlan, 2013, p. 381; Scanlan et al., 2016). This comprehensive study not only provides an example of how CoPs exist in schools, but also how CoPs operate in facilitating progress and change in education.

School-Community Partnerships

Pulling back the lens from CoPs in schools, and thinking more broadly, school communities extend beyond the physical walls of the school. Warren (1978) saw communities as social systems and the resulting formed connections, arguing, "A particularly important point is the nature of the systemic linkage between various community-based units and their respective extracommunity social systems" (p. 51; Casto, 2016). Casto (2016) conducted a qualitative case study exploring connections and desired connections of school administrators, teachers, parents, and community members between a small, rural elementary school and the community. Casto (2016) extensively reviews the literature surrounding the goals and motivations of school-

community partnerships and summarizes how school-community partnerships are formed: (a) to support families, (b) for community development, (c) to develop a sense of place, and (d) for social and economic benefits in rural communities.

Casto (2016) conducted research at a rural elementary school in a nonrural school district, purposely chosen, "because it offers an interesting though not unique context for research" (2016, p. 145; Patton, 2002). Research participants (n = 21) included: teachers (5), school staff and school administrators (6), parents (7), and community members (3). The researcher conducted semi structured interviews, with the purpose of understanding participants' conceptions of the community, school, and the relationship between community and school (Casto, 2016). Participant interviews were transcribed, and codes were used to develop themes. The themes can be summarized as:

- with whom the school has existing partnerships
- who began partnerships
- who and how are partnerships maintained
- what benefits the school sees from existing partnerships
- what benefits the community sees from existing partnerships
- with whom are partnerships desired
- why is this partnership desired
- what obstacles exist or why does this partnership not exist (Casto, 2016)

The researcher organized the findings as existing partnerships in two sections: those within the community and those beyond the community but within the school district. The findings are also reported with an analysis of rurality as well as the barriers to desired partnerships. Findings reported that within the community, a local non-profit was identified as a partner of the school.

When examining partnerships outside the community, it was determined a community mentorship program between retirees and the school was most mentioned among interviewees.

The findings related to rurality were especially intriguing. Casto (2016) describes tensions related to racial and socioeconomic class as an issue at the high school, which includes students from rural and nonrural areas in the school district. Interviewees identified a rural-urban partnership between elementary schools in the district, where students from rural and urban schools for field trips and activities, as a factor in the effort to develop more of an inclusive community in middle and high school. Lastly, the barriers to partnerships "can be summed up in one word: time" (Casto, 2016, p. 153).

Focusing specifically on the thoughts from the principal regarding barriers to partnerships, he identified a push and pull effect, and the difficulties of trying to balance what is expected and required in the school district from himself and from teachers with his own strategy for developing school-community partnerships (Casto, 2016). Hauseman et al. (2017) write,

> Many factors moderate, influence, and drive such work intensification [for principals], with school-community involvement acting as an antecedent variable influencing both principals and their work. By no means is school-community involvement a new phenomenon (Auerbach, 2010, 2012; Best & Holmes, 2010; Hands, 2010; Koyama, 2011). However, now, more than ever before, principals are expected to build relationships with community organizations and agencies connected to the students and school. (p. 84)

The implications of this push and pull effect open the door for "future work [to] address the role of administrators and teachers in the implementation of place-based education" (Casto, 2016, p. 160).

Principal Leadership

Significant research supports the notion that principal leadership is key in the success of a school, especially success in a turnaround school (Duke et al., 2013; Duyar et al., 2013; Finnigan, 2012; Goff, et al., 2014; Grissom, 2011; Meyers & Hitt, 2017; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017; Weathers, 2011). House et al. (1999) point out significant research supports, "that what is expected of leaders, what leaders may or not may do, and the status and influence bestowed on leaders vary considerably as a result of the cultural forces in the countries or regions in which the leaders function" (p. 4; House et al., 1997; Posner, 2013; Brown & Posner, 2001). When thinking about principal leadership in schools, this is notably relevant and has important implications for school success. In the case of principal leadership, it is the community and its cultural forces that have immediate impact. The "community" can be defined as specifically as the leadership team within the school, and as broadly as the neighborhood or school district in which the school is located.

Principal Self-Efficacy

Researchers have found connections between collective efficacy and student achievement (Bandura 1986, 1993, 1997; Goddard, 2001; Goddard et al., 2015; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Louis et al., 2010; Takahashi, 2011). Collective efficacy is defined as "a group's shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment" (Bandura, 1997, p. 477). Strong collective efficacy in school settings has shown to positively influence school culture, therefore increasing the school's functioning capacity (Bandura, 1993; Versland & Erickson, 2017). This kind of school environment has a positive effect on teacher behavior, and how well the school functions as a social system (Bandura, 1993).

In one qualitative case study, Versland and Erickson (2017) studied the efficacy beliefs and behaviors in a high poverty, rural middle school. In laying the groundwork for their study, they point out,

> Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2004) also suggest that a school's strong collective efficacy can mitigate the effects of poverty by increasing the degree to which teachers differentiate their instructional practices to reach all students at their individual levels. Additionally, they propose that principals and other school leaders gain an understanding of how to develop and influence collective efficacy through the four sources of efficacy belief development and described by Bandura (1986): mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, socially persuasive experiences, and affective states. (p. 2)

Individual teacher self-efficacy has been widely researched, but there has been less prevalent research surrounding collective efficacy and its opportunity to affect school culture and improving opportunities for academic growth (Versland & Erickson, 2017).

Versland and Erickson (2017) examined the efficacy beliefs and behaviors of a principal in a rural, middle school setting through the eyes of the school's teachers. A mixed methods design was used to first identify a school case to consider for research; an embedded case study allowed the researchers to conduct a more in-depth analysis. There were three criteria used to choose the case used in this study: (a) school had to be led by a highly efficacious principal, (b) school had to be high poverty and high student achievement, and (c) school had to report high collective efficacy. Considering these criteria, first, 538 principals in the site state were surveyed about their principal self-efficacy using the Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) Principal Sense of Efficacy Scale (PSES), as part of a larger study. Of the 292 survey responses, 41 principals rated themselves as highly efficacious. Of those 41 principals, 14 of the principals' schools

reported greater than 45% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch based on the National School Lunch Program's 2012 Income Eligibility Poverty Guidelines (Versland & Erickson, 2017). Next, of those 14 schools, only two schools met the Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs) for student proficiency and math and reading for three consecutive years; the schools that met AMOs also made Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). The first of the two schools was a K-8 elementary school in a rural setting with 120 students. The second school was a 6-8 middle school with 350 students. Faculty at the two schools were given the 21-item Collective Efficacy Scale (CE-Scale) and based on the CE-Scale, the 6-8 middle school faculty responses yielded higher ratings. The 6-8 middle school was chosen as the case site.

For data collection, researchers first reviewed documents such as the mission and vision statements, school achievement data, education plans, and leadership goals (Versland & Erickson, 2017). The research team then used the data collected from the document review to help develop semi structured interviews with teachers in the school. Researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with eight teachers. After the interviews were transcribed, member checking was done and data from both the interviews and the document review was used to help develop six questions to be used in a focus group. The intent with the focus groups was to gain a deeper understanding of collective efficacy. In the focus groups, 13 teachers participated. The focus group data helped triangulate the data collected in the document review and interviews. Inductive and deductive coding was used with the interview data, and then large groups of data were organized by similarity. Finally, thematic coding was used, and themes were generated. The themes were shared with the participants for feedback.

The results of the study highlighted two main themes, and which factors influenced those themes. They were reported as follows:

- Experiences contributing to collective efficacy – (a) fidelity to instructional initiatives, (b) relationship building, and
- Principal self-efficacy influences collective efficacy – (a) instructional focus, (b) developing teacher leaders and building capacity, (c) leading by example. (Versland & Erickson, 2017)

The result I would like to highlight is that principals should lead by example. Versland and Erickson (2017) determined,

> In summary, there was significant agreement that the principal's self-efficacy beliefs and purposeful actions influenced the collective efficacy development of the school. This was accomplished by maintaining a relentless focus on instruction to increase student achievement, and [by] developing teacher leaders to accomplish the goals and mission of the school. (p. 13)

This result specifically helps shed light on the study conducted and discussed later in this paper. Though the study I conducted was not designed around collective efficacy, this study shows the importance of collective efficacy as a factor in the principal-teacher relationship, and ultimately the success of the school (Versland & Erickson, 2017). Additionally, the researchers also write,

> More research is needed to help new and veteran school leaders understand their efficacy beliefs and subsequent leadership actions and strategies, and to successfully apply them to struggling schools. Additionally, the relationship between principal self-efficacy beliefs and the development of collective efficacy warrants greater attention. (Versland & Erickson, 2017, p. 16)

The implications to practice suggested by the researchers touches on both the importance of efficacy in leadership, as well as the impact it could have on struggling schools, specifically.

Both factors could contribute to the culture, particularly the feeling of community within the school.

Principal Leadership Behaviors

Principal leadership behavior has been widely studied and found to be especially influential regarding improving underperforming schools (Finnegan, 2012; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Gkorezis, 2016; Gülşen & Gülenay, 2014; Hall et al., 2016; Heck & Marcoulides, 1993; Hoy & Miskel, 2010; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006; Price, 2012). A study by Price (2012) found that principal-teacher relationships affect their collective satisfaction, cohesion, and commitment levels. Moreover, the study found, "The relationships of principals, as the school leader, strongly and directly affect teachers' attitudes, which define the schooling climate" (Price, 2012, p. 40). A growing body of literature highlights that principal turnover "makes it hard for schools to implement new policies and programs and to commit to improvement" (Rangel, 2018, p. 87; Holme & Rangel, 2012; Miller, 2013). Research also suggests that effective principals indirectly impact student learning (Branch et al., 2008; Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Grissom et al., 2014; Rangel, 2018; Supovitz et al., 2010). While many factors play into positive school climates, principal leadership behaviors are critical to the climate and ultimate success of schools.

A narrative case study was conducted by Woods et al. (2016) through the lens of leadership. The case site was a rural elementary school with 250 students. Over 70% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch according to federal guidelines. This site was selected based on three criteria: (a) high incidence of poverty as measured by number of students receiving free or reduced lunch, (b) school meeting AYP for three consecutive years, and (c) a principal who had been in that position for at least five years (Woods et al., 2016). Participants included: a principal, a superintendent, five teachers, and five parents. Participants in the study

were purposefully selected to provide variety, in factors such as teacher grade level and parent socioeconomic status (Woods et al., 2016).

Data collection methods included semi structured interviews, focus groups, participant observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted first; after the interviews were transcribed, follow-up phone interviews were scheduled for further clarification as needed. Next, researchers conducted focus groups with five teachers and five parents, and then a day of observation following the focus groups. Document analysis was used to examine student achievement data, school improvements plans, faculty meeting minutes, and parent letters (Woods et al., 2016). The interview and focus group questions were developed to gather feedback about the leadership behavior of the principal, the leadership processes used to increase academic achievement (specifically, students from poverty), and the perspective of the principal – reflections on their own leadership behavior and the impact he or she has had on academic achievement (specifically, students from poverty). Researchers also observed the principal, teachers, interactions in classrooms, and faculty meetings. Researcher bias was balanced by field notes from observations.

Data from interviews, observations, and document analysis, though collected separately, was examined using the concurrent nested model, where data is examined in a combined fashion to "seek convergence among the results" (Creswell, 2007, p. 221). Results from the data revealed two main themes: (a) educating the whole child, and (b) synergy of expectations; additionally, it was determined that the principal in the study did practice transformational leadership.

When considering the theme 'educating the whole child,' researchers determined, not only did this principal focus on academic success for each student, but he made sure that the students' basic needs like clothing, dental hygiene, and nutrition were provided. As the

superintendent noted, “If a child needs dental work, medical attention, or other needs the school cannot provide, the principal reaches out to a community member for assistance. He said he has yet to be turned down” (Woods et al., 2016, p. 6). When considering the theme, ‘synergy of expectations,’ three subthemes were determined by researchers: (a) consistent expectations of students, (b) increased staff accountability, and (c) community involvement. Through these subthemes it becomes clear that synergy is indeed pertinent to the overall success of the school. It is not only the principal, or only the teachers, or only the community, it is a combined effort. The wrap-around factors contributing to both ‘educating the whole child’ with ‘synergy of expectations,’ as determined by the findings in this study, are basic needs, academic interventions, reading, extended academic time, relationships, students, staff, and community.

Researchers also shared that the principal has utilized the community to create volunteer programs, and a Christmas project where community members provide presents and food to families for the holidays. While there are high expectations of community members, the community members in this case study seem to meet and, at times, exceed the expectations. One implication of this research is for professional development programs to, “highlight the need to understand the value of relationship building within schools with teachers and students. This community building should also extend to the community, including parents and beyond” (Woods et al., 2016, p. 11). Additionally, another implication of this research is the importance of leadership training that includes a curriculum that both uses academic strategies and allows the principal to assess his or her community, so that programs can be developed to meet specific needs. The researchers also shed light on how, “Principals today are faced with numerous challenges…learning from high-performing schools with high incidences of poverty gives hope to educators who are struggling to have all students successful regardless of economic status”

(Woods et al., 2016, p. 11). This research suggests that with the right principal in place, with the right leadership skills, that high achievement and school success is possible, even in high poverty environments that have various challenges, starting with the meeting of basic needs for students.

Turnaround Schools

As this literature review explores the third and final topic of turnaround schools, the natural intersection of the three topics – communities of practice, principal leadership, and turnaround schools – becomes more apparent. In the available literature, it is difficult to find published research addressing turnaround schools that does not include principal leadership as a major contributing factor. Additionally, when considering principal leadership, it is difficult to find literature that does not include community–inside and outside of the school–as a prominent piece of principal leadership and success. This natural intersection reveals the close connections between the three topics and leaves lingering questions about future research that explores these three topics from many different angles.

As previously discussed in the introduction of this paper, Calkins et al. (2007) refer to turnaround schools as, “the emerging response to an entirely new dynamic in public education: the threat of closure for underperformance" (p. 12). Public school and district improvement planning has become routine practice in the United States since the mid-1980s (Doud, 1995; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017). When considering improvement planning, VanGronigen and Meyers (2017) point out that prior research suggests oftentimes schools will file yearly plans of improvement, when an alternative approach of short-cycle improvement planning may be a better option for low-performing schools (Duke et al., 2013; Mintrop, 2016). Short-cycle planning “Provides more opportunities for district and school leaders to gauge progress and assess performance. More frequent check-ins can lead to more intentional adjustments that, over

time, build the momentum and collective efficacy needed to sustain positive organizational change" (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017, p. 27; Ezer & Demetis, 2007).

Turnaround School Priorities

The 12 Domains of Principal Leadership (Meyers & Hitt, 2017, VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017, see Table 1), "make a practical framing of expectations for SIP content in low-performing schools because they are not only research-based, but they underscore the complexities of leading turnaround and the considerations for which principals must plan" (p. 28). To summarize, the three themes created by Meyers and Hitt (2017) include: utilizing vision and strategic leadership, building capacity with support and accountability, and shaping of culture. The latter of these themes, shaping of culture, offers much to this literature review, as it focuses on (a) creating or improving a climate that is safe and focused on teaching and learning, (b) generating quick wins to publicly demonstrate changing priorities and that improvement is possible, and (c) developing authentic relationships with parents and the community broadly (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017). These subthemes focus on school morale, climate, and relationship building, generally. Considering the literature on communities of practice in schools, as well as principal leadership, these are recurring themes in this literature review. This point does not undermine the other two themes or suggest that one is more important than another; it only highlights the presence of recurring themes.

This descriptive study conducted by VanGronigen and Meyers (2017) sought to understand what priorities principals leading turnaround efforts set in the early stages, the extent to which their priorities coordinate with the literature, and if and how the priorities changed over time. The researchers noted that the implications of this study could be important to the aspects of school planning. The study used a content analysis approach to "explore the most prevalent

topics and trends identified in a sample of short-cycle SIPs created by school-level leaders to guide turnaround initiatives" (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017, p. 29). The study cited the University of Virginia School Turnaround Program (UVA-STP) as a data source; principals in the university program agree to create and submit at least three SIPs as part of the partnership. This allows the UVA-STP to stay relevant and guide the focus of their program. Researchers in this study reviewed short-cycle SIPs from principals (schools) across four cohorts. The schools (n = 194) were from 40 school districts in 12 states. The Common Core of Data Urban Locale coding scheme was used to determine that 101 schools were in an urban setting, 22 schools were in a suburb setting, 45 schools were in a town setting, and 26 schools were in a rural setting (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017). Additionally, the schools were diverse in size, level, and demographic, and all but two schools were designated as Title I schools. A total of 410 short-cycle SIPs were examined by the researchers. To analyze longitudinal trends, the researchers narrowed the sample to 50 schools, all of which submitted three or more plans over the four cycles.

To analyze the data, researchers examined each plan and concluded three to five priorities, and a dataset was created. Open coding was used and included in vivo codes to code the determined priorities. From the in vivo codes, researchers then used axial coding technique to form 17 axial codes. See Table 4. The priority areas revealed great variety, including priorities such as achievement and assessment, as well as school climate and culture and professional growth. These priorities helped create an overarching–and overwhelming–view of the 'pieces' principals must consider in turnaround school settings. Three priority areas were most prevalent in the data – achievement, use of data, and instruction; followed by school climate and culture, professional growth, student behaviors and discipline, program implementation, and school

organization; followed by curriculum, assessment, and student academic skills; followed by the five least prevalent priorities–parent involvement and engagement, accountability of faculty and students within the school, faculty and staff knowledge of federal and state policies, vision-/mission-setting, and the school's physical plant (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017).

When the plans were examined to determine how well the priorities in the plan aligned with the literature on school turnaround leadership, it was concluded that, "In total, 1,121 of the 1,420 priorities (78.94%) aligned with one of the nine domains while 299 (21.06%) did not" (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017, p. 34). VanGronigen and Meyers (2017) "posit that short-cycle school improvement planning could be a lever to build collective efficacy, which, in the long-term, may create the conditions for low-performing schools to adopt high-leverage continuous improvement practices" (p. 36). Additionally, the researchers make light of the big question principals have when they try to turnaround a school–where to start? In conclusion, the researchers balance the pros and cons of using a short-cycle plan versus a traditional SIP approach, and they argue that low-performing schools could benefit from short-cycle planning because it puts them, "in a more advantageous position to eventually adopt and sustain continuous improvement planning practices" (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017, p. 39).

Connecting the Elements of the Literature Review

Making the case for how communities of practice, principal leadership, and turnaround schools connect in education fell into place rather naturally in this literature review. From a reader's perspective, narrowing the lens from a topic as large as communities of practice to a topic that addresses a specific challenge such as turnaround schools, shows just how multi-

faceted and often complex research can be in the field of education. The topic of communities of practice is a classic one, that spans to a much larger audience than just educators, as was discussed earlier in this literature review. Principal leadership and turnaround schools represent specific facets of education, in which one topic–principal leadership–according to the literature reviewed in this paper, has the potential to influence the other topic–turnaround schools. The literature covered in this review supports the notion that more research is needed on all three of these topics in education. The study I discuss in parts three through five of this paper is grounded in aspects of communities of practice, principal leadership, and turnaround schools. These topics are a constellation worthy of further exploration.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

A case-study research strategy was implemented in this research. Merriam (1988) and Cronbach (1975) stated that what makes a case study unique from other research designs is *interpretation in context*. Merriam (1988) further explains, "By concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity ("the case"), this approach aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon. The case study seeks holistic description and explanation" (p. 10). In this study, the purpose was to understand the social constructs of an elementary school community – both inside and outside of the school – that contribute to creating learning environments within the school that facilitate progress and ultimately, success. The four characteristics fundamental to a case study include: particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive (Merriam, 1988, 1998). This study focused on a particular situation (particularistic). The results of the study provided rich descriptive data (descriptive). The study shed light on the phenomenon in the study and provided insight for the reader (heuristic). Generalizations about the data emerged as the data were collected (inductive) (Merriam, 1988).

Approach to Inquiry

This research study was approached with an interpretivist and constructivist tradition. Schwandt (2007) argues interpretivism "assume[s] that the meaning of human action is inherent in that action, and that the task of the inquirer is to unearth that meaning" (p. 160). While interpretivism is a rather broad term that often can be applied to much qualitative research, constructivism is a bit more narrowed, and can be defined as "the belief that the mind is active in the construction of knowledge…this means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as construct or make it" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 38). Using Schwandt's (2007) template for describing constructivism as it pertains to a particular study, "The constructivist seeks to explain how human beings interpret or construct some X in specific linguistic, social, and historical contexts" (p. 39). In the case of this study, X represents (and is further defined as): developing community in an urban elementary school setting.

Research Approach

This case study used a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is defined as, "a form of qualitative research in which the researcher attempts to understand how one or more individuals experience a particular phenomenon" (Johnson & Christiansen, 2014, p. 49). Phenomenology was an appropriate approach for this study because the research focused on the experiences of faculty and staff working at the school; each person's perspective was valuable to the study. Howard (1994) describes phenomenology as, "Phenomenological investigations are uniquely suited to illuminate the meaning of an experience. They are attempts to reveal the phenomenon as it exists in the lifeworld, using a method, as Colaizzi (1978, p. 53) suggests, 'that remains with human experience as it is experienced, one which tries to sustain contact with the

experience as it is given" (p. 34). This is an appropriate approach for this study because it relies on human perception, as based on experience.

Study Procedure

The study included five phases. The first phase included writing a literature review to give a comprehensive description and analysis of the key background elements of the study and to build the conceptual framework for the study. The second phase of the study prepared for the research. The study was conducted in the third phase using qualitative research methods. The fourth phase of the study included the analysis of data. The fifth phase of the study provided a comprehensive write up of findings, discussion, and conclusions.

Research Design

To examine the experiences of faculty and staff in the school, a phenomenological research methodology was used in this study. Qualitative methods were used to address the research question, to include: (a) observations and field notes concurrently, (b) document analysis, (c) participant conversations, (d) artifacts, (e) semi-structured interviews, (f) bracketing, and (g) audit trail. These qualitative methods provided a holistic approach to the data collection, conducted to reflect aspects of faculty relationships with leadership, the school community, and students.

Because phenomenology is noted for being a "complex, multi-faceted philosophy" that focuses on description of 'things' (phenomena or the or the essential structures of consciousness) as one experiences them," this study organically had building blocks as the researcher learned more about phenomena and experiences in the research setting (Schwandt, 2007, p. 225).

Study Participants

The site for the study was a pre-kindergarten through fifth grade (PK-5) elementary school teaching grades in an urban setting in the Southeastern United States. Study participants included school administrators, faculty, and staff at the elementary school. At the time of the study there were 21 classroom teachers in grades PK-5, five special education teachers, four specialty teachers, six resource teachers, one school counselor, one social worker, a principal and assistant principal, and numerous support staff. The school had 375 students enrolled in 2019 with a student-teacher ratio of 15:1.

In 2016, the school failed to receive accreditation, and in 2017 received partial accreditation as a reconstituted school. In 2018 the school met accreditation standards. The term reconstitute is a reform strategy "that seeks to enhance the stock of human capital in schools by replacing (or threatening to replace) large percentages of a school's administrators, teachers, and support staff with individuals who are presumably more capable and committed" (Rice & Malen, 2010, p. vii). According to the state department of education, this rating "is applied to schools that fail to meet the requirements for full accreditation for four consecutive years and receive permission from the state Board of Education to 'reconstitute.'" A reconstituted school reverts to Accreditation Denied if it fails to meet full accreditation requirements within the agreed-upon term, or if it fails to have its annual application for Partially Accredited-Reconstituted School renewed by the state Board of Education. Reconstitution is also known as *turnaround*, because a reconstituted school is a school that is undergoing a change in staffing and practice to provide a revamped approach to schooling at that facility.

Participant Recruitment

Participant recruitment was initiated with a multi-faceted approach. I attended teacher workdays the summer before the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year. This gave me an

opportunity to establish a relationship with the faculty and staff. The school principal suggested this approach, as she believed the better the faculty and staff understood the components of my research, the more inclined they would be to participate in my research. The school principal and assistant principal also suggested providing an inclusive incentive for faculty and staff, such as providing donuts and coffee one morning. With approval from the principal, in early November I organized a "Let's Breakfast" event on a parent-teacher conference day. I provided coffee, juice, breakfast casserole, muffins, and fruit for faculty and staff at the school. The event was held from 10-11:30AM and 15 faculty and staff members stopped by to enjoy breakfast. This opportunity allowed me to converse with school employees in a casual setting. In some cases, I was asked about my research, and in other instances I was asked about my job and interests. Someone also asked me for the recipe for the breakfast casserole. I saw this as an opportunity to connect with the faculty and staff in a way that conveyed commitment to both my study and their school.

After attending teacher workdays and explaining my research to faculty and staff, I worked with the school administrative assistant to send an email to faculty and staff in the school inviting them to meet with me individually for a face-to-face interview. I sent one reminder email with the same content. I had previously considered attrition, as I understood due to busy schedules, workloads, and lack of time, teachers may initially agree to participate and then change their mind.

Participant Selection

For this phenomenological case-study, participants were chosen using purposive sampling. In this case purposive sampling was appropriate since the school leadership, faculty,

and staff were determined by current employees. Prior to emailing the recruitment email, four faculty members verbally expressed interest in participating in an interview. After sending out the recruitment email, I received four responses and immediately set up interviews with each participant. I did not receive responses from the four faculty members who initially expressed interest in participating in an interview prior to the recruitment email being sent. I reached out through email to confirm their interest, with no response. Of the four responses I did receive, one participant cancelled the interview due to a sudden family relocation. The other three participants agreed to meet during December 2019 and January 2020. Interviews were conducted at venues agreed upon by the participants, to make them feel comfortable during the interview. The interview locations included a local public library and at the school site.

The Story City Elementary School Community Context

Story City Elementary School (SCES) is a public elementary school in the Southeastern United States. The school is part of Westville Public Schools (WPS). At the time of the study, the demographic of the school was predominantly Black (69.5%), followed by White (10.1%), Multiple Races (9.8%), Hispanic (6.5%), Asian (2.5%), and American Indian (1.6%). During the 2019-2020 school year, there were 375 students enrolled in SCES. The school was designated as a Title I school, which meant that the school received federal funding through the state department of education. The designation was based on the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals. At SCES, 100% of the students received free or reduced lunch at the time of the study. Students received free lunch if their family income was at or below 130% of the poverty level. Students receive reduced-price meals if their family income was between 130%-185% of the poverty level.

In the 2016-2017 school year, reading proficiency at SCES was 58% and math proficiency was 71%, according to the state department of education. In the same year, SCES received partial accreditation as a reconstituted school. In the 2018-2019 school year, reading proficiency rose to 69% which was still lagging against state performance of 78% proficiency in reading for all students. Similarly, in the 2018-2019 school year, math proficiency rose to 78%, only slightly lagging the state performance of 82%. Data for the 2019-2020 school year was not available due to the temporary closure of schools for face-to-face instruction (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and cancellation of state assessments for the school year. Math and reading proficiency at SCES have room for much improvement but are beginning to turn around.

At the time of this study, during the 2019-2020 school year, a faculty member shared that teachers at SCES could expect most students to be greatly below grade level at the beginning of the school year. State reports also listed 18.62% of the students at SCES were chronically absent in the 2018-2019 school year. State departments of education report on the achievement and progress of student groups, which allows schools to identify learners in need of additional support and resources. These are also known as school quality indicators. At SCES, during the 2018-2019 school year there was an achievement gap for Black students in English (subject) of Level Two out of three levels. The state department of education describes Level Two performance level as near standard. Level One performance is described as at or above standard, and Level Three is described as below standard. Similarly, economically disadvantaged students also experienced a Level Two achievement gap in English at SCES. Finally, for students with disabilities during the 2018-2019 school year, there was an achievement gap in English of Level Three. School accreditation was finally met in fall of 2018. School accreditation was waived for

the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, which I suspect was due to the interruptions in learning due to the temporary closure of schools for face-to-face instruction.

The state data showed that students at SCES were underperforming on state assessments compared to state averages in 2018. SCES had been given attention at the district level, and was considered, in every sense of the term, a turn-around school. A community member shared that SCES continues to be a work in progress and has received attention from both the school board and district superintendent. Across conversations I learned there was desire to continue to turn SCES around, and that it was an ongoing process if the turnaround was to be sustained. Because the challenges were so vast, progress in one area still meant there was much progress to be made in other areas.

In 2019 at SCES, nearly 70% of the students were Black, and over 90% of the student population was in a minority ethnic group. National data shows documented gaps between White and Black communities around the categories of income, health, and education have been at the center of debates on equity for quite some time (Muhammed, 2018). The national gaps are larger than ever, with the following data being most concerning:

1. Black people are two times as likely to be poor than White people.
2. The median income of Black people is half that of White people.
3. The average net worth for White people is 13 times the average for Black people.
4. The birthrate of nonmarital Black people is twice that of nonmarital White people.
5. Black children are three times more likely to live in a single-parent household than White children.
6. The gap in home ownership between Black and White people is almost 30%. (Muhammed, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2016)

The data revealed that many students at SCES were at a disadvantage before entering pre-kindergarten. Soyer (2018) found, “Children who grow up poor are more likely to be exposed to multiple adverse factors, peer influences, unstable homes, and substandard schooling that in aggregate increase their susceptibility to criminal behavior” (p. 13; see also Fergusson, et al., 2004).

Researcher-Participant Relationship

The researcher-participant relationship was *etic* and *emic*, given the positionality of the study. Lett (1990) describes etic as, “Etic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers” (p. 130). The study was etic since I was an outside researcher, who was not a direct part of the immediate community. Conversely, the study also had an emic approach. Lett (1990) describes emic as, “Emic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the native members of the culture whose beliefs and behaviors are being studied” (p. 130). Though a little more loosely interpreted, my interest in the school as a larger community member, and an educator with a vested interest in the progress and success of the school, made me a part of the community of educators working to make the school an even better place.

Data Collection

The data were collected in the following order, (a) observations, and field notes concurrently, (b) document analysis, (c) participant conversations, (d) artifacts, (e) individual face-to-face interviews, and (f) more document analysis. Conducting focus groups was initially part of the data collection; however, given the lack of participation in the one-on-one interviews,

the large workload of the faculty and staff, and the onset of COVID-19, the decision was made not to pursue focus groups. The order of data collection changed from the original prospectus. This was due to the nature of the study and held true to a phenomenological approach. Because of the circumstances of working in a challenged school, with many faculty and staff assuming other roles–professional and personal–after normal school hours, the data in the study were not collected in the preferred order but rather in the order the data could be collected. In other words, the phenomena were discovered at unanticipated moments. For example, while observing and taking field notes at the school, at times I was also able to talk to the teacher while the students were engaged in a project. These conversations were recorded as participant conversations. Further, while taking field notes, I was able to collect documents for document review, which I had not anticipated. What held firm regarding my prospectus–and phenomenological research–is that the first part of the study helped shape and determine the remainder of the study.

The first qualitative component of this study included observations and field notes. There were numerous reasons I wanted to collect data through observation for this study focused on faculty and staff perceptions of community. These reasons included documenting interactions between faculty members; interactions between faculty and students; how the school operates in classrooms, hallways, and lunchrooms; and to discover unknown components that may contribute to answering the research question. Merriam (1988) describes the importance of observation highlighting, “as an outsider an observer will notice things that have become routine to the participants themselves, things which may lead to understanding the context” (p. 88). I took the first two months of visiting the school to get to know the culture, cadence, and feel of the faculty, children, and the school in general. The observations recorded contributed to a better understanding of how the school was a community, and how the community was a school. These

observations were fruitful, as I found value in seeing things firsthand, and then used interpretation to acknowledge the meaning of the observations (Merriam, 1988; 1998). I visited the school 18 times over the course of the study, including visits during the week and visits during events held over the weekend. Activity was observed in the hallways in the school, individual classrooms, "specials" classrooms (ELL, reading, art, music, etc.), students at lunch, special events at the school, gym class, and the main office as students entered and exited the building. The field notes also included impressions of the culture within the school, the dynamic among faculty and staff members, and the roles different people played within the school. Additionally, the field notes reflected the challenges I encountered as an observer and perceived outsider in the school.

The second qualitative component of this study was document analysis. Document analysis is "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents - both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material" (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). True to qualitative research, document analysis relies on close examination and interpretation "to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (Bowen, 2009, p. 27; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Rapley, 2007). In this study, document analysis served as a form of triangulation, which is "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon" (Denzin, 1970, p. 291). The term 'document' was not limited, and encompassed nearly any written artifact, or 'social fact' (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997). The scope of documents was not limited; thus, the documents were obtained from different venues or locations.

In this study, documents such as school mission and vision statements, office flyers, an employee-distributed employee survey, public records, and news stories were utilized. Documents were reviewed and recorded using field notes; documents were reviewed to collect

background and historical information about the school, to gain a better understanding of the inner workings of the school. Merriam (1988) explains, “Documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem” (p. 118). Document review revealed the need to ask certain questions during the interview process. Lastly, “documents provide a means of tracking and change development” (Bowen, 2009, p. 30). Data was collected and then analyzed and coded for themes. The data, specifically the codes, collected from the document review were compared to data collected in interviews and participant conversations for triangulation purposes. According to Schwandt (2007), triangulation is a “procedure used to establish the fact that the criterion of validity has been met” (p. 297). He goes on to argue, “The strategy of triangulation is often wedded to the assumption that data from different sources or methods must *necessarily* converge on or be aggregated to reveal the truth” (p. 298). The systematic procedure that was used “entails finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesizing data contained in the documents” (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). The findings were organized into themes and categories.

The third qualitative component of this study consisted of unstructured interviews in the form of informal participant conversations with faculty and staff at the school. The participant conversations occurred throughout the course of the study, often as part of researcher-participant relationship building. Merriam (1988) explains unstructured interview as, “particularly useful when the researcher does not know enough about a phenomenon to ask relevant questions. Thus, there is no predetermined set of questions and the interview is essentially exploratory” (p. 74). For instance, during a classroom observation, a teacher began to talk to me as the students were working on an assignment. She talked about the students in the classroom and what they were learning. The conversation led to the teacher discussing the circumstances and general challenges

some of the students in the classroom had endured. This conversation was not exploitative in nature, but seemingly a way for the teacher to help me understand the makeup of the class, and therefore why the teaching methods used were appropriate. Merriam (1988) goes on to say that "one of the goals of the unstructured interview is, in fact, learning enough about a situation to formulate questions for subsequent interviews" (p. 74). Keeping this in mind, I implemented this component of the study alongside participant observations in the early part of the study, to gain insight into viewpoints and deeper understanding of the faculty and staff at the school.

The fourth qualitative component of this study involved the collection of artifacts. Artifacts are described as "Products of human workmanship or handcrafting, for example, a tool, text, work of art, monument or photograph" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 9). I took photographs of the classroom walls, school hallways, special student projects, and events and activities held at the school. These photographs added meaning to the narrative of the school shared in this study. The photographs helped me to better understand the culture within the school. Schwandt (2007) states, "Understanding and interpreting the composition, historical circumstances, function, purpose, and so on of artifacts are central to the study of material culture" (p. 9).

The fifth qualitative component of this study consisted of face-to-face semi-structured interviews that were conducted with faculty and staff at the school. Participation was voluntary. See Appendix A for the recruitment email. Interviews were chosen as a data collection method because of the high potential for collecting rich, descriptive data to understand the experiences of the participants. Seidman (2006) argues that interviews give researchers insight into the participant's lived experiences. The interviews allowed me to examine relevant experiences of faculty and staff. The interviews focused on personal experiences and reflections regarding sense of community, generally. Interviews provided an opportunity for "understanding the lived

experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). The interviews also provided an opportunity to further explore experiences shared by participants, seek clarification, and delve into the reactions to questions and/or comments of participants, including non-verbals (Patton, 2015). The interviews were semi-structured in format. This format provided me some leeway to expand upon relevant experiences shared during the interview. The interview protocol began with a review of the informed consent form, as well as a chance for participants to ask any questions related to the study needing further explanation or clarification. The participants were informed they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

I conducted three interviews in this study. Participants were asked to complete a demographic form to collect data about their experience as faculty or staff at the school relevant to the study, including years working in a school setting, length of time employed at the current school, and length of time employed by the school system. The demographic form was carefully considered and designed, as to not reveal the identity or any accumulation of identifiers. This intention was reiterated to participants, as I noticed that some participants were uncomfortable with being identified as an interviewee.

I followed the interview protocol. As the sole interviewer, I was sure to ask each question on the protocol to provide consistency throughout the interview process. Because of the semi-structured interview format, I had the opportunity to ask additional questions when necessary and appropriate to the study. I kept field notes throughout the interview process to record observations that may not be obvious or reflected through the interview. See Appendix B for the interview protocol.

The interviews were audio-recorded using a handheld recorder and a secure cell phone recording app as a back-up measure. After the interview, I transcribed the interview, which provided an opportunity to capture a more in-depth analysis. As Seidman (2006) suggests, I was immersed in the data through the transcription of the interviews and then again immersed when coding the transcripts. An email copy of the interview was sent to the participant. The participant had the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy, which complied with member checking best practices (Patton, 2015).

For the sixth qualitative component of this study, I returned to document analysis. In unstructured interviews and subsequent conversations with community members, participants made suggestions for further document review. I reviewed school quality indicators, the WPS strategic plan, and a partially accredited reconstituted school application.

To ensure the quality and rigor of the research study, I maintained an audit trail from the beginning to the end of the data collection and data analyses. The audit trail kept a record of all research decisions made throughout the study.

Recording and Data Analysis

For the interviews, my first step was to transcribe the interview and read the transcription multiple times to organize the data. Schwandt (2007) argues, "Coding requires constantly comparing and contrasting various successive segments of the data and subsequently categorizing them" (p. 32). The interviews were coded using Saldaña's (2013) First Cycle Coding methods. The First Cycle Coding method focuses initially on chunks of data that may ultimately contribute to overall themes. Regarding coding, Eclectic Coding was most appropriate, since it allowed for the combination of strategically selected methods of coding that resulted in relevant and focused data analysis (Saldaña, 2013). I used the constant comparative

method to provide as much input regarding coding as possible (Anfara, et al., 2002; Vogt, et al., 2014). After the codes were organized, I looked for themes that revealed the important experiences of the participants (Seidman, 2006).

Methodological Integrity

I used reflexive practices. Specifically, I: (a) included researcher stance, (b) acknowledged subjectivities, (c) used bracketing, (d) used triangulation, (e) conducted member checks, (f) included peer review, (g) carefully maintained an audit trail, and (h) maintained detailed memos and field notes. Researcher stance allowed me to share any biases or subjectivities related to the research. Bracketing, or the idea that "one ought to suspend judgment about the existence of the world and 'bracket' or set aside existential assumptions made in everyday life and in the sciences," was used in this study (Schwandt, 2007, p. 24). As noted earlier in the methodology, triangulation, which is "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon," was also used (Denzin, 1970, p. 291). The practice of member checking was used to solidify or clarify any remaining questions about data; member checking with respondents ensured data was confirmed and corroborated (Schwandt, 2007). Three community experts were consulted as part of member checking for this study. The community experts were all connected to SCES internally and externally and helped clarify and corroborate data. Peer review, or peer debriefing, was used to create a sounding board for information or ideas during the study. A trusted colleague and advisor served as a peer reviewer. Keeping a detailed audit trail ensured a "systematically maintained document system," where detailed records, including dates, communication, notes, questions, and reflections [were] kept (Schwandt, 2007, p. 12). Memos and field notes were kept as part of the audit trail. Memos are "conceptual in intent, vary in length, and are primarily written to oneself" (Schwandt, 2007, p.

188), and were kept in the audit trail. Similarly, field notes are "a kind of evidence on which inquirers base claims about meaning and understanding" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 115), and were also kept in the audit trail. Field notes came in many forms and varied in content.

Researcher Description/Positionality

As a researcher, I am constantly reifying the meaning of my lived experiences. Wenger (1998) writes, "Building an identity consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities. The concept of identity serves as a pivot between the social and the individual, so that each can be talked about in terms of the other" (p. 145). It is crucial to my research to identify my stance as a researcher, as well as experiences of participation – practices [I] engage in – and experiences of non-participation (Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) goes on to say, "As combinations of participation and non-participation, these aspects of our lives are not merely personal choices. They involve processes of community formation where the configuration of social relations is the work of the self" (p. 64). Since experiences of non-participation have the potential to become experiences of participation, it is important to consider both experiences. Oftentimes experiences of non-participation happen without any conscious intent. Experiences of participation and non-participation in communities of practice are not only informative, but also reiterate how self-identity can be altered as we acquire new knowledge.

Considering the field of academic research as a community of practice, who I am within that community of practice is important to my self-identity. I conducted this study as a White, cisgender female who had 12 years of work experience in the field of education, and eight years of experience as a part-time doctoral student. Additionally, I had a prior connection with the elementary school where the study took place. I had been a dedicated bystander for the past nine years, witnessing the school undergo changes in leadership, staff, and academic performance.

Students and teachers at the school had participated in educational programs in which I had been a collaborative planning member through my job. I had also interacted with students at the school through volunteer work with a community organization.

The elementary school was in the city in which I lived. Because of the proximity and my prior experiences at the school, I had a personal interest in the success of the school. I also believed that by conducting this study, I could show some of the positive strides the school has made over the past few years. Highlighting positive aspects of the school, its leadership, and its successes provides an opportunity for a community-wide sense of accomplishment.

Circumstantial Changes

Predating the study, I had a long-established professional relationship with the assistant principal. The assistant principal was instrumental in the planning of my study within the school, providing an insider view of the school which was crucial in helping design the study. Two months prior to the beginning of my research within the school, the assistant principal was moved to another school within WPS to serve in a leadership role. The loss of this relationship within my study provided some unforeseen challenges. My new contact at SCES became the principal. Efforts to establish a relationship of support and rapport with my new contact were ultimately not successful. As a result, the approach to my study changed. Principal leadership, specifically in turnaround schools, was originally an integral part of my study. However, without the active participation of the principal, I was unable to proceed with my study as originally planned. Therefore, I shifted my focus to the teachers and their shared focus of prioritizing students. I looked at their role in prioritizing students and how this impacted the development of community in a turnaround school.

CHAPTER 4: Findings and Discussion

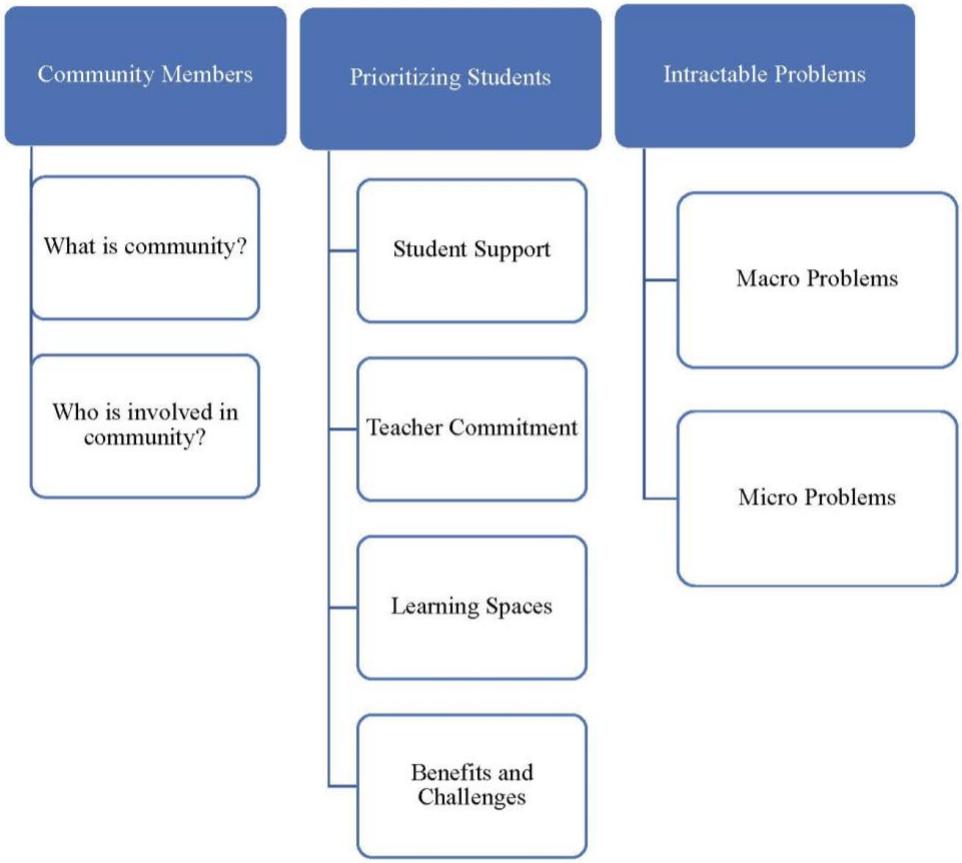
The challenges for a successful urban elementary school are numerous, and often, intractable (Gottfried, 2012; Miranda et al., 2017; Ravitch, 2013; Tighe et al., 2002; Williams et al., 2007). Community is the foundation of urban elementary schools (Epstein et al., 2009; Epstein & Sheldon, 2016; Sanders, 2006; Warren et al., 2011). The urban context of community surrounding the school–figuratively and literally–and a shared desire for student success, are critical to the school support system. The purpose of this study was to investigate *community* and its manifestation in an urban elementary school in the Southeastern part of the nation. For the purposes of this investigation, community is considered through two lenses: a geographically-defined community and a sense of community defined by mutual sensibilities, goals and practices (Weathers, 2011; Wenger, 1998). This study sought to answer the question: Who and what contribute to community in an urban elementary school?

In this part of the paper, I present three cross-cutting themes to summarize the data in my findings. The first section focuses on the members of the community in the research setting that were revealed through data collection. While the levels are seemingly straight-forward at first glance, the dimensions and nuances become more complex once magnified. The second section explores the ways in which the community prioritizes students; these collective efforts seemed to be the unifying theme across the study, regardless of circumstance. The third section of the findings examines the micro and macro intractable problems that are endemic in an urban elementary school community. Figure 1 illustrates the components of this chapter of the paper.

Within each section, there are both descriptive and interpretive analyses of the data. The descriptive analyses of the data were collected through observations. The observations include participant conversations, interviews, observations, documents, and artifacts. The interpretive

analyses include extensive reflections and experiences illuminating the meaning, role, and importance of community.

Figure 1 shows how the findings of the study are organized in this paper



Inclusion of Critical Incidents

It should be noted from the onset, that this research occurred over a three-year period: over two years of building relationships, planning for the study, and gaining approval for the research, and six months of data collection. During that period the nature of the urban elementary school community under study changed, significantly, due to several critical incidents (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Tripp, 1994), including the loss of two principals, the loss of two assistant

principals, and recent partial/full school accreditation. It could be said that at the beginning of the data collection period the urban elementary school community was in a place of recovery and resurgence, while at the end the school was in decline and disrepair. Thus, this study reflects, to a large degree, a change in the state of the urban elementary school community, reflected in the actions and observations of the community members, rather than the nature of a community insulated within a stable and continuing circumstance.

Community Members

To better understand the community at SCES, it is imperative to recognize the marginalized student population in this school. Henry et al. (2017) found,

> Observed inequalities among diverse children from urban, low-income backgrounds are linked to the many stressors and structural barriers they face, including pervasive racism; limited economic opportunities; family unemployment and underemployment; food insecurity; lack of adequate health care; poor housing in high-crime communities; limited availability of mental health care; community resources, and networks; and underfunded schools with inadequate programs and services to support the needs of students. (p. 162-163)

Henry et al.'s list of observed inequities are found across a broad spectrum of the literature (Annie E. Case Foundation, 2010; Carter & Reardon, 2014; Hopson & Lee, 2011, Ivey & Zalaquett, 2011; Wallace & Chuon, 2014).

Using the key questions that guided coding of the data in the study, this analysis reports the findings of who and what contribute to community in an urban elementary school.

What is Community?

The definitions of community reported in participant interviews ranged in interpretation, factor, and scope. One participant, "Rose," shared that while classes operate as a community, faculty also rely on each other as community. She defined community as being "comprised of the people that you interact with regularly, including your neighbors, the people you work with, and the friends and family in your life." Regarding factors that contribute to community, Rose shared that, "it's even as simple as not a lot of people have cars, [which] means they stick to the bus system." She added, "I think location is a huge factor in community as well. [For example] I think you see that with sports teams. Boston fans are hugely loyal to their team and it's because they have that in common." Rose further explained that from a school perspective, there is a classroom community and there is a larger school community, suggesting different levels of community existed within the school. She also shared that school spirit represents community.

Rose shared that she tried to build a "classroom community," reinforcing the different levels of community in existence. She explained that she tried to create a family-like environment and form a tight-knit bond in her classroom. Rose pointed out that SCES was a small, neighborhood school, suggesting there was a community that is larger than just the school itself. Furthermore, she highlighted that there was not a lot of diversity at Story City. Specifically, Rose referred to lack of diversity, referencing how SCES was a generational school. When asked for further clarification, she said that many of the students' parents grew up in the neighborhood and attended SCES. Rose further explained that within the Story City community, there was a unique neighborhood culture. At other elementary schools in WPS there was diversity in race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and a mix of families coming from different neighborhoods, while at SCES, the student population was predominantly Black students from low socioeconomic families that lived within the Story City neighborhood.

A second participant, “Jane,” defined community as “the people you spend your time with.” She said it can also be places, recognizing that people can be limited in their lived radius. Jane further explained that at SCES, she can see that community is forming. Jane noted the high teacher turnover at SCES, stating that “teachers are in and out all the time,” but that communities were in existence, and even still forming. She discussed the growing number of communities within the school. For example, Jane mentioned “the community of the faculty, and the importance of community in everyone getting along to do their job well.” She then explained “there is a community of the whole school…a place where kids can come and feel safe.” Jane highlighted that community at SCES “has been loosely scaffolded, but [it is] not cemented in place.”

A third participant, “Jesse,” defined community as, “everyone within the school, and in contact with the school.” She further defined community to include parents, students, teachers, administrators, and employees from the central office. Jesse added that “[community] even extends out from there” to include community partners, explaining that community partners are outside of the immediate school community but within the larger community. She summed up the definition of community saying, “I think community is just anyone involved in it, that has a stake in it.” Jesse explained that SCEC had numerous community partners, who provided goods and services to students at the school. For example, a local organization held an annual coat drive for students at SCES. Further, while some community volunteers helped with the garden at the school, others displayed SCES students’ work in community places, or donated money and supplies.

Specific evidence of the classroom community to which Rose, Jane, and Jesse referred could be seen in the way classrooms were personalized, with visuals that included

developmentally appropriate posters, content support visuals, and inspirational quotes or animated characters geared toward students. The hallways were similarly decorated, creating a positive and encouraging space. Ultimately, SCES could be seen as a community of communities. The overall SCES community was comprised of an integration of the classroom, school, and neighborhood communities.

Who is Involved in Community?

While Rose, Jane, and Jesse referred to existing and developing communities within the larger SCES community, I was also interested in who they thought were the key participants in the community. The key participants in the SCES community were centered in the classroom with the students comprising the heart of the community. Metaphorically, surrounding the students in the community were the administrative staff, school leadership team, faculty, building staff, and outside organizations. These SCES community members are further detailed in the following section.

Students. Students at SCES ranged from four to eleven years old, in grades PK-5. As previously shared in the methodology section of this paper, the student demographic at SCES was predominantly Black (74%), followed by White (12%), and two or more races (6%) ([State] Department of Education, 2019). Data from the state department of education further revealed that in 2017 reading proficiency was 58% and math proficiency was 71%, and the school received partial accreditation as a reconstituted school. According to the state department of education, in the 2018-2019 school year, 18.62% of the students in this school were chronically absent. Ansari et al. (2020) report “school absenteeism has been repeatedly shown to have clear, negative, educational consequences: Students who are more frequently absent from school do less well on a variety of educational benchmarks” (p. 1835). During the study, several reports

were observed on the nightly news addressing high crime and gang activity in the SCES neighborhood. Of 12 federally subsidized housing communities in the city, four housing communities were a part of the SCES school community. These factors shed light on the structural barriers students experienced outside of school that threatened their ability to succeed in school (Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2017). If their basic needs were not being met, students have a more difficult time learning. Maslow (1943) noted the importance of basic needs–physiological, safety, love, esteem needs, along with the need for self-actualization–as critically important to human motivation. Indeed, Blitz et al. (2016) and Blair et al. (2011) further indicate environmental factors that are a consequence of poverty including unsafe housing and inconstant guardianship are connected to higher levels of stress in children as young as infants.

Administrative Staff. The administrative staff played a large role in the organization of the school, and included the principal, school secretary, and school nurse. In the opening meeting for the school year, the principal stated the secretary will serve as "office secretary and bookkeeper" and that she will "organize training for teachers" and that currently she was "preparing student files for teachers." The school secretary greeted visitors to the school, as she was the first face guests saw when they entered the school. Because of this, the secretary set the tone for the experience at the school. Through observations, interactions, and conversations, I learned the administrative staff ensured the organization and logistics of the school. These duties included budget-related details, organizing faculty and staff meetings, sharing dates and times of important events, and relaying information regarding school policies. The secretary also assisted the principal in coordinating dates and times for my visits to the school. The school nurse's office was located directly across from the secretary's desk, in the main foyer of the school building. The nurse was typically occupied with students during my visits to the school, and

therefore had limited interactions with visitors. She was available to speak with parents when they arrived to pick up students who were sick. The administrative staff's familiarity with nearly every child or parent who entered the school created a true feeling of community at the school.

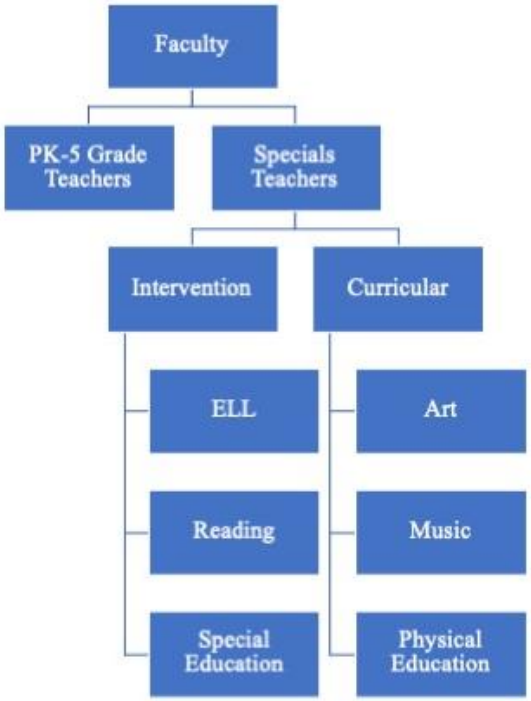
Leadership Team. The leadership team was made up of a team of five people including the principal, the assistant principal, the instructional coach, the school counselor, and the social worker. Of the team, four members were female, and one was male. Four members were Black, and one member was White. Given the small size of the school, team members often wore many hats supporting each other during busy times or crisis situations. That said, team members' basic roles were as might be expected. The principal was an experienced educator, having previously served as a principal for seven previous years in a neighboring school system before coming to SCES. At the time of the study, the principal was beginning her second year as principal at Story City. The principal tended to the logistics within the school, including enforcing policy and procedure, and supervising all programs and happenings within the school. She was a visible figure in the school and made a point to participate and interact with the students throughout the day–in the hall when students arrive at school, during lunch in the cafeteria, and in the afternoon when students leave to go home.

The assistant principal (AP) at SCES, a former community advocate and educator, began his current tenure as AP at the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year. The duties of the AP mostly include handling discipline issues with students at Story City. He shared on the school website, "I will treat your children like they are my own." He had a calming presence around students. The AP grew up in the Story City neighborhood and lived there for many years, only recently moving out of the neighborhood to be closer to family. He came out of retirement to take the job at Story City. The AP's office is in the middle of the school and not in the front of

the school where the principal's office is located, for convenient interactions with students. While I did not determine if the AP's office had always been located alongside the classrooms, the current office was intentionally placed in the middle of the school so the AP could be close to the students and teachers.

The instructional coach was a former teacher at the school and began her second year at SCES at the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year. The instructional coach was familiar with the school setting, the students, the teachers, the parents, and the needs of the school. She provided an array of services to teachers in the school to include meeting weekly (schedule-dependent) with teachers in each grade level to discuss student progress, content, and needed interventions. She also met with the "specials" class teachers, to problem-solve and get feedback on the effectiveness of special support. "Specials" teachers were two-pronged at SCES; there were intervention special teachers to include English Language Learner (ELL) specialists, reading specialists, and teachers focused on special education, all of whom provide extra support to students. Then there were curricular specials teachers to include music, art, and physical education teachers, which are an extension of the student curriculum. See Figure 2.

Figure 2 shows the incorporation of specials teachers.



The school counselor began her first year at SCES during the 2019-2020 school year. She was energetic and enthusiastic about school counseling. During the faculty and staff orientation at the beginning of the school year, she shared that the school counselor is "no longer the testing coordinator" and instead intends to "spend more time with students, and [therefore] give less classroom lessons this year." Additionally, she asked teachers not to send students to her office as punishment. She asserted her approach to school counseling is student-centered. The school counselor's focus on the students supports the documented high need for student services at SCES. Given counseling needs at a high-poverty school, her job came with increased responsibility. The school counselor partook in specific activities to include counseling students, communicating with parents, inviting people into the school for special events, and assisting

teachers in a counseling capacity with students, such as classroom observation. The school counselor worked closely with the social worker at SCES.

The social worker entered her third year at SCES at the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year and was well-versed in the family dynamics of the children attending the school. True to the role of a social worker, on the school website, the role was described as "to serve as the liaison between school, home, and the community." The social worker specifically worked to include facilitating internal and external services and interventions for students, including coordinating support of services to meet students' basic needs such as coat drives, emergency bags, and backpack programs.

Teachers. There were 35 teachers in the school across grades PK-5. There were between two to four teachers per grade level, three special education teachers, three resource teachers, a school resource officer, an art teacher, a music teacher, a library sciences teacher, and a physical education teacher. At the opening meeting for the school year, the principal said there were "five or six new teachers" for the 2019 school year. Of the 39 teachers and staff members in attendance at the opening meeting, all but two were female. The teachers were predominately White. Only three faculty members had been at the school longer than five years. Across tenure, experience, gender, and race, the faculty lacked diversity.

Grove and Fisher (2006) found, "[teachers] must form an educational community, one that supports and sustains teachers and students and hopefully increases stability in both groups. To do so, they have to move beyond surface collegiality into collaboration" (p. 55). Within the school, there were teams of faculty members who work together for common causes. In some cases, the common cause was the students. In the case of school leadership, the SCES leadership team provided support to classroom teachers in an organizational and student support capacity.

For instance, the school counselor and social worker were available to support teachers by providing direct student or class support, including one-on-one student interventions, assessing need for external interventions and resources for students, and communicating with parents and families. The social worker worked with students and their families to coordinate intervention services, both internal and external to the school. In this way, both the school counselor and the social worker connected important pieces of the school community–the students, parents, and teachers–in a collective effort to support student success. These collaborative efforts contributed to the collective efficacy at SCES, and to the sense of community at the school.

As another example, the instructional coach met with the ELL teacher, who expressed concerns about balancing time spent when pulling students from the classroom for interventions, and the classroom teacher's desire to keep students in the classroom to maximize instructional time. In some cases, students met with specials teachers in groups, other times students met on a one-on-one basis, as determined by the need and support requirements.

Lastly, the school resource officer (SRO) had a strong presence in the school. The officer was not full time at SCES but was a regular figure in the school and attended faculty and staff meetings. According to the state department of criminal justice services, an SRO is "certified law enforcement officer hired by the local law enforcement agency to provide law enforcement and security services to [state] public elementary and secondary schools." A study by Lawson et al. (2021) describes the four main roles of the SRO as: law enforcement and safety, relationship building with students, teachers, parents, and the community, liaison between the school community and law enforcement resources, and law educators.

Building Staff. The building staff maintained a visible presence in the school. The building staff included the custodian and maintenance staff as well as the cafeteria staff. The building staff were friendly with the students, teachers, and visitors, and frequently greeted people in passing. One of the building staff members grew up in the Story City neighborhood and had lived there for many years. He remembered when the additions to the school had not yet been built and pointed out where an old road used to cut through the school property. One member of the cafeteria staff also worked in the after-school program focused on 21st century skills. She had a more than 20-year relationship with the school as her children had attended SCES. Her familiarity with the students was apparent, as she knew every student's name and engaged with students at each table as they ate lunch. It was evident that several people working in the school were also part of the Story City neighborhood, connecting the community within the school to the larger neighborhood community.

Outside Organizations. Just as the members within the school made up part of the SCES community, there was also a community of organizations outside of the school that were considered part of the community. True to the saying "it takes a village," the local community played an important role for the school. A former SCES employee expressed a positive relationship between community organizations and SCES. The former SCES employee shared that when you hear the word community, you also think about outside organizations coming in to support the school and the students. The former SCES employee also expressed that it was a time of rebuilding at the school. The administration, faculty, and staff were trying to "get it back to what it used to be," as it had been lost for a while. The Story City neighborhood and SCES had a symbiotic relationship. A building worker, teaching assistant, and the AP all shared remembering SCES as being a tight-knit community representative of longstanding Black families and rich

community history within the city. The outside organizations included local non-profits, places of faith, and people invested in the Story City neighborhood. One of the community experts shared the importance of outside organizations supporting the school, and how valuable this is in supporting students at SCES. The coordination of outside organizations supporting the school were typically orchestrated by the leadership team, but there were also faculty members who initiated community support.

Prioritizing Students

When considering community at SCES and its many community members, there is a strong, collective effort placed on creating an atmosphere of belonging and student success through the building of relationships. Research in educational psychology supports teachers creating relationships with students. Jones (2009) affirms, "Caring relationships with instructors have been shown to be related to intrinsic motivation, positive coping, relative autonomy, engagement in school, expectancies, values, effort, cognitive engagement, self-efficacy, persistence, and performance" (p. 279). Jones's (2009, 2018) acknowledgement of the benefits of caring relationships is found across a broad range of the literature (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Freeman et al., 2007; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Goodenow, 1993; Hyde & Gess-Newsome, 2000; Murdock, 1999; Osterman, 2000; Ryan, 1995; Ryan et al., 1994; Walker & Greene, 2009).

In forming student-teacher relationships, Wenger (1998) points out that the natural organization of schooling typically does not provide students with much interaction with adulthood as a lived identity, as it refers to student-teacher interactions. He suggests first, "teachers need to 'represent' their communities of practice in educational settings. This type of lived authenticity brings into the subject matter the concerns, sense of purpose, identification, and emotion of participation" (Wenger, 1998, p. 276). In this way, it is the experience of students

seeing their teachers as both identities, teachers, and adults, that connects them to the school experience. Second, Wenger wrote, "it is desirable to increase opportunities for relationships with adults just being adults, while downplaying the institutional aspects of their role as educators" (p. 277). This idea suggests that the notion of teachers bringing children into their adulthood "as a way to engage in the learning that membership [in the community of practice] entails, and then to open forms of mutual engagement that can become an invitation to participation" (Wenger, 1998, p. 277). As part of prioritizing students, teachers at SCES have created caring and engaging relationships with students that are deeper than typical student-teacher relationships. Teachers have not only invited the students into their classrooms, but they have also established incredible support for students.

Student Support

The principal, teachers, and staff at SCES found many ways to support students, such as verbal encouragement, student-centered instruction and curricula, and supportive physical spaces. I repeatedly observed the principal, teachers, and support staff telling students, "I love you," "You are special," "You are smart," and "You are going to have a great day." These statements were designed to support student learning and well-being. In a study by Fullan and Pinchot (2018) addressing sustainable turnaround in schools, one of the items used in a school culture survey of staff was "students have at least one adult at the school that really cares about them" (p. 51). As explained by faculty and staff at SCES, due to the often-challenging circumstances of students and families, students may not always be getting consistent academic or emotional support from home. Additionally, behavior that is acceptable at home might not be behavior that is allowed or acceptable at school. Jane mentioned, "In a school like this where you're trying to build a community, where the community at home is different than the

community at school… you need to teach [students] the expectations to create a calm and respectful space." To support her students, Rose shared "I try to show love, and I try to figure that out for each kid. If you felt loved by a hug, fine. If you felt loved by me being close to you, and working with you, and in small groups, perfect. If you felt loved by me giving you a treat, then I would do that." In all, teachers supported their students in the ways that worked for their classroom setting, based on their interpretation of student needs.

While teachers recognized the need to improve test scores, their priority was to ensure that students' basic needs (physiological, safety, love, esteem needs, along with the need for self-actualization) were met. As such, students seemed to focus and participate well in classrooms that were run with structure with the teacher holding the students accountable for their learning and behavior with a caring but firm discipline. Teachers provided celebrations for small and big student accomplishments alike. In one instance, students were asked to quickly form a line to leave the classroom. When the students formed the line without issue, the teacher praised the students and told them they would get extra free time. Another teacher recognized and praised students in her class who were running for SCES Homecoming king and queen. Teachers were attentive to students' needs and provided individualized learning experiences whenever possible.

The pressure to improve test scores in the WPS district, and specifically at SCES, presented a dichotomous split around what it meant to be student-centered around student learning. On one hand, the teachers were authentically student-centered in how they framed learning for students. On the other hand, their job responsibilities carried an expectation to improve student test scores. Curriculum design is determined by the teachers. The students were given choices in the process of their learning, but not necessarily in learning content. For example, one teacher asked her students if they would prefer to read their book before or after

lunch. She followed up by saying that if students do not read their books, they will finish the math problems from earlier in the day instead. The students chose to read their books. Finding the balance of following a standardized curriculum and being student-centered in learning felt like a tug-of-war for the teachers at SCES. If they were fully student-centered, teachers risked falling short of meeting the standardized curriculum and students failing state assessments; but if they were not student-centered enough, they risked a decline in student autonomy with the potential for decline in motivation in learning (Deci et al., 1991).

Jaramillo (1996) reinforces Vygotsky's (1933) sociocultural theory regarding student-centered curricula, writing,

> The classroom should be an egalitarian setting, rather than a teacher-centered setting where authority solely determines the curricula. Therefore, the curricula should reflect both parties' interests so as to facilitate the connection between curricula and students. When this does not occur in the classroom situation and up throughout the institutions of society, then, the social structure will break down, because non-participants will feel disempowered. All participants must feel they are playing a fair game on a level field where the rules are synonymous. (Social Interactions section, para. 3)

Artifacts collected at the school showed an effort to create a nurturing space. For example, the photos taken at the school during data collection revealed efforts among faculty to highlight student successes in the classroom and throughout the school. The photos also showed teachers' efforts to support classroom management and encourage good behavior.

Teacher Commitment

In addition to supporting student success through student-centered instruction and supportive physical spaces, there was a noticeably high level of teacher commitment to student learning at SCES. I observed teachers' deep dedication to students through their language, patience, differentiated learning, and efforts to work one-on-one with students. The teachers took time to explain a concept until every student understood it. The classroom sizes I observed at SCES ranged from 14 to 24 students, and in most cases, there was not a teaching assistant in the classroom. One teacher shared that "teachers are faced with not just one or two students needing specialized interventions, but in some cases it's nearly the entire class." Rose shared that while talking to a teacher who teaches in another WPS elementary school, she said, "You have two students that really disrupt your classroom, out of 20. At SCES, it is the other way around. You have two students that won't disrupt your classroom." Teachers were tasked with understanding each student: the level of need, level of required support, level of trauma, prior knowledge, and the home and family situation. The shared interests among teachers to invest in their students contributed to the community at the school.

Conversations and interviews revealed the teachers really loved what they did, but they were also exhausted. Jesse said, "It's so emotionally challenging here because you just never know what's going to happen from day to day and you're trying to adjust, and meet the needs, and do it." Jesse added, "There was an argument today between one of the teachers and another teacher because one thought the other's job was really easy. They got into it with each other and went back and forth, much longer than you would have expected them to." Jesse shared that one teacher suggested switching places with the other teacher so they could see what their job was like. This situation shows that the working environment at SCES was high stress at times. Jane shared that she often worked late during the week and even some weekends to prepare lessons

for her class. She explained, “It's not like I enjoy being here late, but I guess I feel appreciated. I feel like other people recognize that we're working hard…all of the new teachers. We have people telling us constantly ‘you're doing great job.” Though sometimes it required extra work, teachers were committed to working hard for their students.

Teachers were also committed to creating classroom environments that facilitated learning. I observed the classroom of a teacher with especially strong classroom management skills. This teacher’s classroom management style kept a strict adherence to time and routine when teaching. I felt like a distraction to the students because I was a new person in their space. This teacher had a commanding presence in the classroom, and it showed in how the students respected the teacher. I noticed the teacher used caring language, such as “my love” and “baby,” and she also used uplifting and affirming language such as “I’m proud of you,” “awesome job,” and “thank you” while working with the students. I observed one student say to another, “Need help bro?” The sense of community in this classroom could be seen and felt. Another teacher shared with me that she had observed a student in this class tell a classmate, “We don’t represent [teacher’s name] like that,” revealing the students held one another accountable within their classroom community. The teacher in this classroom went to great lengths to be respectful and adhere to boundaries with students, saying things such as, “please join us in line,” or “can I use your desk?” or calling each student's name individually to join the carpet circle in the classroom. The teacher used relevant examples for the students when teaching, including a word problem in which she asked students, “Is your brother going to think that is fair? No, he is not.” The teacher seemed to always have eyes and ears across the entire classroom.

I also observed teacher-directed instruction in this classroom. As discussed earlier in this chapter, it was a challenge to balance student-centered instruction with the need for passing

student test scores at SCES. There were times when teacher-directed instruction benefited student learning. Magliaro and Borko (1986) report, "the rate of students' academic engagement is higher when the students are actively participating in a teacher-directed lesson than when they are working independently" (p. 128, see also Delquadri et al., 1979; Fisher et al., 1978). When the class broke out into working groups, four students were asked to sit at a table in the back of the room, next to the teacher. The teacher remained at this table throughout the lesson and monitored these students more closely. The teacher divided the class in a purposeful way when having students work together, supporting a teacher-directed strategy. The teacher was giving detailed instructions to each of the students at the table, while also looking across the room, instructing students to "put your feet on the floor," asking "what did we discuss last week about subtraction?" and "are you close to finishing?" The teacher held each student to high standards. I observed comments to students such as, "go back to your seat and come back [to me] when you're ready to get help without laughing." The student returned to his desk. The teacher's classroom management was firm and practiced, with very clear expectations. There was a sense of community in the classroom. The teacher understood each student's past and current struggles, and kept students focused on learning. She had figured out how to balance competing priorities in a high-need classroom within a struggling school.

Rose shared that the teacher workload associated with managing individual student needs was dramatically higher, as SCES was a high-need school. Rose highlighted the effect of student trauma on the teachers, saying "[the students bring trauma] with them, and then they're exhibiting certain behaviors that kind of beat up on the teachers over time." Rose added an analogy to further explain the issue, saying, "teaching at [SCES] is kind of like you're a teacher and you're a firefighter. You're constantly putting out fires amongst the students." Rose

compared her experience at another school in the district, explaining “I walked into a fourth-grade classroom and every kid was sitting there reading a chapter book. You know, whereas, at [SCES], if a kid didn't want to read the chapter book, he or she might be tempted to throw it at you.” Rose’s explanation revealed some of the challenges teachers face as they navigate teaching students at SCES.

Efforts to provide consistency for students was one topic Jane spoke about during an interview. She explained it was important in teaching to set rules and procedures for students in the classroom, sharing, “I have a whole binder, that’s [like] my purse, with all my procedures in it …it's important for me because kids are so good at trying to find the gray area. I literally type it up word for word. [For example], the pencil sharpening routine [that I review] on the first day of school.” If a student needed to use the pencil sharpener, Jane shared that the students knew to raise their hand and she would sharpen their pencil for them. Jane established this system of recording classroom rules and procedures so that the language was always clear and consistent. The rules were reviewed with students on the first day of school. Jane’s rationale and response to students who challenged the rules was that these are the rules, the students know the rules, and there is no debating the rules. Because the rules students have at home could be different than rules students had at school, this system provided stability and expectations for the students. I heard many teachers refer to the classroom rules, which were in almost all instances, posted on the whiteboard or on a wall in the classroom. While classroom rules were often posted on walls, there were also colorful content-supporting visuals on the walls. Providing clear rules and expectations for students created a sense of mutual accountability (between teachers and students), which was important to developing community at SCES.

Learning Spaces

Based on my visits to nine classrooms, each room evoked a feeling of warmth and safety. The classrooms were thoughtfully designed by the teachers. The classroom walls were covered with hand-written and hand-designed words, slogans, and visual aids. There were also content-based learning tools lining the walls. I noticed aesthetic intention in the way teachers designed the classrooms. I felt a sense of warmth in the classrooms that extended into the hallways.

I observed artifacts on the school grounds, both indoors and outdoors, that showed efforts to create a certain ethos of community. According to conversations with faculty and staff, SCES strived to create a family environment–a place where students felt protected and safe. During an interview, Jesse shared, "they're doing a school spirit [thing] and stuff that usually you see at the high school. They're having a dance and then they're having Homecoming. Then they're voting for SGA president… I just think that they're building a school community as a whole." I visited the school during Red Ribbon Week, which was an anti-drug campaign encouraging students to "just say no" to drugs. There were banners on the fences along the playground outside of the school, as well as on the inside walls in the halls of the school. Resources supporting the initiative were available in the main office/lobby area of the school.

I attended a faculty meeting one afternoon where I learned about the upcoming Homecoming event at SCES. The school counselor, social worker, and community resource officer led efforts to plan a Homecoming for students. The event was modeled after a typical high school Homecoming. According to one organizer, the purpose of the event was "to boost morale for teachers and students." Organizers were hopeful to involve students, parents, and faculty and staff members in the event. They shared they were committed to building a stronger community to benefit students. This supports the collective efforts of faculty and staff at SCES to create a positive, safe place for students. Students were nominated for the Homecoming court

and were asked to display posters to showcase students' strengths. Homecoming followed a week of celebrating Spirit Week. During this week, students campaigned for king and queen of SCES Homecoming. The candidates' posters lined the halls, which provided a unique opportunity to meet the student population at SCES.

I also visited SCES during the Fall Festival. There was a video and sing-along projected on a screen for students in the cafeteria, as well as a dance party. Many students were dressed up in Halloween costumes, as were many teachers and staff. Popular songs played over the speakers including Camilla Cabello's *Havana* and Justin Bieber's *Sorry*. The Fall Festival was a true community event, as students, teachers, and staff were engaged and having a good time together. This was an example of shared repertoires the school was establishing, which contributed to community at the school.

During a faculty meeting early in the school year, a teacher announced the date and location of the International Festival at SCES. The teacher planned to survey students about their country of origin to be sure all students were represented. The festival was presented as a way to celebrate the different ethnicities and cultures represented at SCES. The festival was to include food, music, and an opportunity to learn about different countries. There was a great sense of pride about the International Festival. During the meeting teachers commented to each other in excitement. The organizing teacher encouraged high student participation at the International Festival, because the event would be an opportunity for students and their families to come together. As part of preparing for the International Festival, students created posters representing various countries and they were hanging throughout the school. The Homecoming and International Festival both provided opportunities for community members to engage with shared interests. The Homecoming offered an opportunity for students to interact with peers,

share in school spirit, and campaign for SGA president. The International Festival offered an additional layer of shared interest by including family members. The event offered an opportunity for families to gather and share their favorite foods.

In documenting my experience at SCES, I took photos as part of my artifact collection. The photos revealed a deliberate effort on behalf of faculty and staff to make school feel like a safe place where students wanted to come each day and where they felt loved and supported. School faculty and staff worked together to provide a sense of safety and support for students. While there were many complexities at SCES, the united efforts of faculty, staff, and administration to put students first were not complex at all. There were many aesthetic touches inside each of the communities in the school designed to engage and inspire students in the learning process. Prioritizing students was a shared goal among faculty and staff at SCES. This goal contributed to strengthening the community. SCES also facilitated opportunities for building mutual engagement with families of students at the school.

Benefits and Challenges

The benefits of a school collectively prioritizing students lie within the shared focus and the cumulative energy of the teachers, students, administrators, and staff. They made it a priority to provide a warm and welcoming environment for students. This was evident through observations of tone, facial expressions, and interactions between teachers and students. Above all, students were prioritized at SCES. While passing standardized test scores and obtaining full accreditation were key overall goals for this school, the staff recognized student well-being must come before learning. This contributed to creating a joint enterprise and shared repertoire within the community.

The challenge of collectively prioritizing students was trying to balance the expectation of student outcomes with student well-being. Even the best of efforts may fall short of expectations if the expectations are not clearly communicated from leadership. Having a collective focus in a school needs strong leadership to lead, measure, and evaluate the school's goals. As such a clear challenge to this was leadership and staff turnover. The staff understood students must be ready to learn to have good test scores. In this way, building relationships was critical. For the teachers, the individual classroom became the most critical community to nurture, because providing a safe space for students to learn was one of the most controllable aspects for the teachers and staff. Managing different expectations (home and at school) seemed to be a challenge for students who were trying to meet expectations, for teachers who were trying to set expectations in their classrooms, and for administrators who were trying to develop community around these expectations.

Intractable Problems

The SCES community did not exist in static isolation, but rather, lived dynamically, growing and changing over time and circumstance in pursuit of prioritizing students. This growth and change, like all growth and change, came with challenges. In the case of SCES, these challenges seemed intractable. Fleener (2016) finds, "education's most intractable, perennial problems go unresolved not because policy makers and teachers lack the will to address them, but because the challenges result from the interconnectedness and complexities of education, creating social problems seemingly beyond reach for systemic, sustained solutions to be attempted" (p. 1). This was evident at SCES, as many of the intractable problems were

acknowledged and addressed by policy makers and teachers. Efforts to address them were tirelessly tackled yet met with slow forward movement and improvement. At SCES, the evolution of circumstances was complex. When considering community, much of the community had evolved as communities do over time; there was progression in the processes of negotiating meaning, learning, developing practices, and forming identities and social configurations (Wenger, 1998).

However, when considering the neighborhood community, not much had changed in circumstance and knowledge. This speaks to Wenger's (2008) idea of a dual constitution of histories, explained as, "Practices evolve as shared histories of learning. History in this sense is neither merely a personal or collective experience nor just a set of enduring artifacts and institutions, but a combination of participation and reification intertwined over time" (p. 87). Poverty had been present in the Story City neighborhood for many years, parallel to local gentrification efforts in the 1970s. These revitalization efforts devastated many Black-owned businesses, and it was at this time government-funded housing communities were built to ensure rehoming for families affected by the gentrification. In 2019, poverty remained an oppressive factor in the Story City neighborhood.

Intractable problems are known in mathematical communities as being problems in which there is no easy algorithm to solve the problem. Similarly, in education, an intractable problem is a problem that has a multifaceted and complex approach to a solution. The following intractable problems can generally be chunked into two categories: (a) problems that are dynamic in nature to many challenged urban schools (macro), and (b) problems that are specific to SCES (micro).

Macro Problems

Long-studied issues surrounding struggling schools speak to larger systemic issues. Fleener (2016) points out, "An approach to the challenge of educational equity that recognizes and embraces the pervasive, systemic, global challenge of schools reflects a systems approach that honors the dynamics and interconnectedness of local and social dimensions, understanding education as a key social institution" (Policy Approaches to Failing Schools section, para. 5). The intractable problems discussed in this section are macro-focused and dynamic to urban schools with high turnover, and include poverty, personnel challenges, and culture challenges.

Poverty. As previously mentioned, 100% of SCES students received free or reduced cost lunch, and many underperformed in reading and math and are economically and socially disadvantaged. This situation provided extreme challenges for SCES. Poverty was at the heart of the challenges in the community for all participants at SCES, especially for the students who attended the school. Poverty is multifaceted and is a complex social and economic issue (Miller et al., 2014). Ladson-Billings (2017) claims,

> A common explanation of why urban students fail to succeed in the classroom is that they are coming from a "culture of poverty"…Urban students, particularly those who are African American, face a series of structural and institutional barriers that impede their pathways to success. Lack of access to quality healthcare, affordable housing, and quality schools means that the nation's most disadvantaged children remain disadvantaged. Yet classrooms with highly qualified teachers who believe in the efficacy of their practice and the ability of all students to learn can make a difference in these children's lives. (p. 80)

While the aspect of poverty added a difficult dynamic to the teaching and learning at SCES, it was the faculty, staff, and community that rallied around the school with a common goal to do their best for the students. The poverty at SCES was hard to ignore and impossible to fix.

Though services and interventions were available for students, teachers were constantly playing catch-up and working hard to both nurture students and produce student outcomes. It was the community that had been dedicated over the years to provide support to SCES. In some cases, it was a small group of community members helping through volunteering. In other ways it was local community organizations, places of faith, and individual contributors who supported the school. What was never wavering was the dedication to the students. One teacher shared that a local community organization held a coat drive every year for the students at SCES. During the Saturday book event I attended, volunteers led the efforts, but teachers and the principal dropped in to see students and their families. Truly, the dedication to students was above and beyond.

Working in a high-poverty school challenges teachers in ways that are different from schools in higher socio-economic areas (Ladson-Billings, 2017). Language, phonological awareness, and print knowledge have been identified as imperative skills for children entering kindergarten to be successful in learning to read (Landry et al., 2006; see also Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Frede, 1995, Whitehurst et al., 1994). An SCES teacher told me "The reading specialists are overworked and cannot meet the overwhelming needs of the students." The teacher also said many students were not on grade level at the beginning of the school year. This effectively meant teachers were playing catch up before they even began the school year. These challenges contributed to what teachers witnessed in the school, the student circumstances that occurred outside of school, and the huge responsibility teachers felt to serve their students and help advance their lives.

The dynamic of poverty complicated teachers' responsibilities and their approach to teaching. This was oftentimes because teachers first had to nurture the student before the student could be ready to learn. Navigating this in a classroom of 20 students was understandably

overwhelming and a challenge that was not easily overcome. At SCES the faculty and staff were the heroes. In some cases, I witnessed teachers multi-tasking in incredible ways. One teacher gave individual help to a student while she simultaneously gave instructions to the class. They worked tirelessly, with purpose and full dedication to their students. It was inspiring to see the different strategies and creative methods that teachers used in their classrooms. Much of the work teachers did at SCES cannot be learned in a university classroom; it can only be learned through lived experiences. Intractable problems were a barrier to developing community, but the faculty and staff at SCES did their best to mitigate this factor through prioritizing students.

Personnel. Because of the challenges of working in a high poverty school, faculty and staff retention were also challenges. The recurrent administrative, faculty, and staff turnover in the school made it challenging to execute long-term strategies to support students in the school. Change in administration often meant different leadership styles and approaches, which challenged the ecosystem. When a new administrator or leader began their role, faculty and staff experienced a change in strategy and focus. This inconsistency made long-term change difficult to sustain. The longest serving teacher at SCES had been there for 20 years; her peers described her teaching style and love of her students as being exceptional. A teacher commented, regarding this long-tenured teacher, that the level of respect in her classroom among student-student and student-teacher relationships was impressive. They further explained that the sense of camaraderie established in her classroom was incredible; her students saw their class as a community that they nurtured and protected, and they looked out for each other.

During a participant interview, Rose explained that while teaching at SCES, her marriage almost fell apart. In an interview with Jane, she explained that her hair began to fall out. Both participants attributed these issues to their high level of stress experienced while teaching.

With difficult circumstances came revolving doors. Many faculty and staff who believed they were up for the challenge sometimes found their professional and personal circumstances to be too difficult. Rose mentioned that some teachers left mid-year because the circumstances at SCES were too difficult. Others only stayed one year before seeking other employment opportunities that were less stressful. The circumstances and challenges that existed at SCES were not easy to solve. Efforts and energies that new faculty and staff brought were easily dimmed when strategies and solutions did not work as hoped or planned. Those tasked with finding solutions and improving circumstances may have only lasted a short period of time if their strategies were not successful. Solving intractable problems was an uphill battle.

To this point, there was an emotional component of working in a school like SCES. Because poverty was a complex issue, efforts could often feel tireless and never enough. Faculty and staff were regularly challenged personally and professionally, and they did their best to remain dedicated to their students. This dedication was poignant in the school and in the community. Whether successful or unsuccessful, the efforts of faculty and staff at SCES were well-intentioned. The school and community were full of champions for the students they served.

Jane shared that there was a lack of desire among teachers to invest in forming relationships with new teachers because it could be assumed, based on teacher turnover rates at the school, that they may not be at the school more than a year or two. An application for a partially accredited reconstituted school completed by SCES showed that for the 2015-2016 school year of 32 teachers employed at the school, only 25 (or 78%) were returning for the 2016-2017 school year. Jesse and Jane shared that teachers relied strongly on forming grade-level teams as a form of support. I observed support between veteran teachers and new teachers at the school even though they did not teach the same grade. I learned from a veteran teacher at the

school, that at only five years tenure she was the second longest tenured teacher at SCES. Furthermore, there were only three teachers that had been at the school longer than four years. However, more generally, Jesse shared "when I need support with different classes or students, the first thing I do is just go talk to some of my peers and teachers which helps give me a better picture of why things went the way they did, or what happened, or what I could do differently." The issues of leadership, faculty, and staff retention were a barrier to developing community. Despite this challenge, the SCES community rallied around the students, prioritizing their needs and success to the best of their ability.

Culture. Poverty and personnel impacted the school culture at SCES. Though the school faced challenges and the faculty and staff were dedicated to their students, the culture that was formed often revolved around putting out fires. The needs of the school and the students were so great that oftentimes current policies and procedures could not keep pace. Sometimes they were ignored or bypassed altogether out of a need for survival and meeting students' immediate needs. Faculty and staff went to great lengths to seek out and provide services for their students. In some cases, they might have been personally involved in finding solutions. Rose, Jane, and Jesse shared that some teachers had friends and families who donated resources for classrooms and students. These avenues were taken so that teachers could do their jobs effectively. The resulting culture was one that was often unstable as it was constantly changing. Many efforts were done out of survival. When designing a safe space for students to learn, faculty and staff had to consider creative solutions.

Teachers at SCES worked hard to protect the classrooms and communities that they had established for their students to learn and thrive. Meier (1995) shares that in her experience, building trust among teachers, administrators, parents, and students was crucial to meeting the

school's academic goals. Bryk and Schneider (2002) argue, "Little attention has been focused on the nature of trust as a substantive property of the social organization of schools, on how much trust levels actually vary among schools, and how this may relate to their effectiveness" (p. 12). Visitors who were not a part of the community present distractions from the communities that the teachers have built and are continuing to build with each year of new students. In some cases, caring for students and supporting their success did not look like a big smile and a kind voice. Sometimes it looked like timed tasks, clear and concise directions, and constant student check-ins. The ways in which the teachers cared for their students were authentic and genuine. The ways in which faculty and staff cared for each other looked differently throughout the school. While some teachers intentionally created support groups, others sought support as needed to help run their classrooms effectively. Whatever their method, the saying "it takes a village" resonated loudly at SCES. This commitment to prioritizing students contributed to the continued development of community despite the challenges.

Micro Problems

Fleener (2016) points out, "global solutions to complex problems require an understanding that local solutions are necessary. The 'chaotic' mantra—think globally, act locally—reflects that complex problems need to have local solutions that vary with context while keeping in mind the large-scale problem" (Policy Approaches to Failing Schools section, para. 5). With this in mind, the intractable problems in this section represent micro issues and are specific to SCES, to include student traumas, resources and support, and lack of support for teachers.

Student Traumas. Children in urban elementary schools are faced with complex challenges that affect their education. These challenges may include homelessness or alternative

living situations, lack of transportation, lack of access to community resources, lack of access to healthy food, and lack of access to high-quality preschool programs, to name a few. For example, Rose shared "not a lot of people have cars… that means they stick to the bus system." Murphy (2019) indicates, "Persons living below the poverty line and racial and ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable to [Transportation Disadvantage]. Research from Boschmann (2011), Henry et al. (2016); Hill et al. (2003), McCray & Brais (2007), Blumenberg (2016), and Shay et al. (2016) further supports this claim. Transportation disadvantages can negatively affect employment and educational opportunities, healthcare, and social services (Murphy, 2019).

I observed teachers struggling to manage and nurture personal student disparities in their classrooms. Through informal conversations with faculty and staff, I learned that many children at SCES were facing various challenges at home including traumas. Trauma is defined as "when a child feels intensely threatened by an event he or she is involved in or witnesses" (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2022, "Trauma Types" section). At SCES one teacher shared that of the 16 students in her class, one was homeless, one was in foster care, two had come to SCES after leaving refugee camps, three had deceased parents, seven had a parent incarcerated for life, and one student slept three and a half hours of the school day. Another student had arrived just a month prior from a border camp and did not speak or write in his native language and he did not speak English. The teacher used Google Translate to communicate with the student. Only four students in her class were on grade level. Other circumstances such as single-parent homes, students living with family members other than their parents, domestic violence, physical and emotional abuse, drug-use, language barriers, food insecurity, lack of prior formal schooling, and lack of feeling safe and secure contribute to the makeup of student traumas. Berardi and Morton (2017) indicate "Children who have suffered trauma generally present with

cognitive, social, physical, and emotional vulnerabilities" (p. 10). Additionally, Holmes et al. (2015) found, "Minority children in inner-city environments are particularly vulnerable to experiencing trauma due to high community rates of poverty, drug use, and crime (see also Stein et al., 2003; Ghosh Ippen et al., 2011). Experiencing trauma early in life has been linked to depression, anxiety, and aggression (Holmes et al., 2015). Despite the student traumas, faculty and staff at SCES remained committed to their focus of prioritizing students.

Teachers shared that student behavior at SCES posed threats to the classroom learning environment. Maintaining control of the classroom was regularly a threat to instructional time. Teachers had learned to recognize when students began to exhibit attention-seeking behavior in the classroom. In one instance, a teacher mentioned a particular student was on her "radar" because the student's attention and performance in the class had dropped and her behavior inside and outside of the classroom had changed. In addition to a full-time social worker at SCES, WPS partnered with a healthcare solutions company for school-based services. During a faculty meeting at SCES in October 2019, a representative from the company explained the company's goals as: reducing the rate of suspension, increasing grade point average (GPA), and keeping students in the classroom.

To decrease behavioral challenges at SCES, the school participated in a pilot program focused on mindfulness through WPS in 2019. The program was in collaboration with a local hospital system. According to a 2019 news article, the program used the MindUP curriculum which was developed by The Goldie Hawn Foundation. The program was created "in response to the global epidemic of childhood aggression, anxiety, depression and suicide" (The Goldie Hawn Foundation, 2021). The MindUP curriculum "has been shown to increase pro-social actions, decrease aggressive behaviors, and improve academic achievement especially in math and

language arts" (The Goldie Hawn Foundation, 2021). Because the program was successful, WPS expanded the program for the 2019-2020 school year.

Parents also played a role in managing student behaviors. Rose shared that the lack of parental education affected the parents' ability to understand the educational challenges their children face. Rose went on to say that generational poverty in the SCES neighborhood further complicated the challenges. Micro-level complexities around students' personal lives were easily transferred into their learning environments. Of the twelve government housing communities in WPS, four fed into SCES. One participant said that gangs were present in the housing communities and had an influence on students at SCES. Teachers and staff carefully considered Spirit Week and Homecoming colors, being sure to avoid colors affiliated with gangs in the community (specifically red and blue). These efforts showed faculty and staff's commitment to prioritizing students, while working around the circumstances in the larger Story City community.

Resources and Support. As a result of the high rate of poverty in the WPS school district, there was a lack of opportunity for student enrichment activities. Families were often unable to fund extracurricular sports for their children. Bridging this gap, the school provided experiences such as a Girls on the Run club. Girls on the Run "inspires girls to be joyful, healthy and confident using a fun, experience-based curriculum which creatively integrates running" (Girls on the Run, 2021). In an interview, one participant, when asked to give an example of when they felt a part of the community at the school, mentioned the Girls on the Run club at SCES. She described it as an after-school program and said that "A student needed a running buddy, and so I went, and it was really cool. The teachers went together to meet the girls and we ran together, and it was great. It's something that you can be involved in consistently."

In addition to limited extracurricular activities in WPS, there were a lack of opportunities to supplement reading. A local non-profit organization did research in the Story City neighborhood and determined that only one in every 300 children owns a book. To change this circumstance, the organization partnered with a nearby university to provide a weekend reading event two Saturdays a month at SCES. The event hosted SCES families for breakfast and reading. Every adult and child who attended chose a book to take home. I attended the bi-monthly event two times. On one Saturday I spoke with a parent who had been coming to the event for over a year. She had three children and explained to me that she had been able to fill a bookshelf in her home with books because of the program. She shared that her first grader had drastically improved his reading skills since the beginning of the program, and she attributed his improvement to his access to books.

One teacher explained that because of the high level of poverty for students at SCES, there was a lack of common resources. There were many students who came to SCES without prior formal schooling. Because of lack of staffing, coupled with the large student load on "specials" [ELL, reading, for example] teachers, tier three students in grades three through five did not get one-on-one reading specialist support last year. Teachers quickly recognized when children were getting behind, and they worked together to provide the intervention needed as soon as possible; however, there was acknowledgement that the low number of “specials teachers” made it difficult for students to get the level of intervention they needed because of the volume of need in the school. According to the state department of education website, the student-teacher ratio at SCES was 15:1, which was the same as the average district and state ratios. For ELL teachers, while there might have been an understanding of spoken Spanish for Spanish-speaking students, those students may not have been able to read in Spanish. This

oftentimes complicated the learning capabilities for those students learning to speak and write in English.

During a grade-level meeting with an instructional coach, teachers spoke about having too many Tier 3 (special education services) students to "push-in" to the reading specialist, so the only option was to "push-out" of the classroom. To push-in meant that the reading specialist was present in the classroom and engaged with students in need of support, in the classroom, alongside the teacher. To push-out meant that the students would leave the classroom and meet with the reading specialist in another location in the school, taking them out of the classroom for extra support. A push-out scenario created challenges for the classroom teachers who then managed numerous students being out of the classroom at different times during the day/week. This circumstance then required teachers to spend extra time with those students to catch up with core classroom learning.

While family events were offered at SCES, parents often did not attend. Teachers shared this was frequently due to scheduling conflicts with work, as many parents worked third shift and/or had more than one job. Many students lived in nontraditional households, where they: (a) lived with one parent, (b) shared a home with grandparents or aunts, uncles, and cousins, or (c) were in the care of a family member who was not their parent. They also identified transportation challenges as a barrier to parent participation. For many SCES events, the school provided buses to pick up children and families and bring them to the school. Providing transportation and food at events increased parent participation. Jesse said “we try to plan events at the end of the month when money is running low because we have found if we do them at the beginning of the month, even if we buy food, we don’t get that many people. If we do them at the end of the month, we get a lot.” Poverty and food insecurity are related, and volatility in income is associated with a

greater risk of food insecurity (Bartfeld & Collins, 2017). The effects of poverty and food insecurity may have influenced the presence and impact of school supports, such as SCES's Parent Teacher Association (PTA).

Rose, Jane, and Jesse said there was not an active PTA at SCES. Jesse shared "We kind of do the PTA thing as the teachers. Our social committee chair put snacks in the lounge once a month for birthdays. Like today it was coffee, cookies, and brownies." Some events are planned in lieu of a PTA meeting. Jane spoke about the lack of a PTA, sharing that sometimes events are called "PTA night" but it really is not related to a PTA. For example, "[the school resource officer] and [school principal] plan events for parents and plug the event, saying like 'we really need you to come." She went on to add, "We need parents involved because that's how a school is able to function. We need money for things. We need to raise money for things but there's no PTA." There was an active SCES PTA Facebook page, but I did not receive a reply after sending a message through the Facebook page. When I asked teachers who administered the page, no one knew. To prioritize students, faculty and staff made efforts to coordinate resources inside and outside of the school for students. In some cases, the efforts were new or ongoing.

Support for Teachers. Because SCES had limited resources and support, teachers looked for support in the form of relationships. Teachers said their working relationships with other teachers in the school were crucial to the success of their classrooms. One participant shared they suspected there was a true lack of administrative support for teachers, specifically, at this time, at Story City. The participant shared that teachers did not feel supported by administration, pointing out that this created an unhealthy dynamic in the school. Further discussion revealed that former administrators at SCES would do small things to show support to teachers, such as dropping in to say hello to teachers and leaving encouraging notes. The

participant noted that when teachers were exhausted, they really needed the support of the administration; if the support was not there, it could cause issues within the school.

Rose and Jane acknowledged their frustrations regarding access to resources, specifically financial resources. Because SCES is a Title I school, federal financial assistance is given to the school to support students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2020), the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA), "provides financial assistance to local educational agencies for children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards." Rose shared, "There are actually grants related to technology, but teachers have resorted to going to Donors Choose to get tablets." She added, "The frustration though, is that [SCES] is a Title I school. They shouldn't be in need of anything." Because of these frustrations, organic communities have formed. Teachers have learned to work together linearly to avoid the roadblocks of school or district processes. Rose and Jane expressed that for teachers, utilizing a personal network was an easier route than pursuing available funds at the school or district level. As another example, a participant shared that, if a child needed socks, the teacher may just go buy socks instead of pursuing another route that may take longer or be unsuccessful in finding a solution. Numerous participants stated that as teachers, they had to get their students to a place where they were able to learn, which meant first their basic needs had to be met. None of the participants mentioned a person within the school or district who was specifically tasked with advocating for teacher resources. Teachers prioritized student's needs and success despite the barriers with which they were presented.

Building on the idea of organic communities, teachers constantly struggled to manage their classrooms with so many student interventions. For example, one teacher shared that there

was an unspoken struggle of whether teachers should keep students in the classroom (pull-in), versus having the students leave the classroom to go to "specials" (pull-out). While the students needed the extra time with the specials teachers, it was a challenge for the teachers to have the students miss in-classroom time by being pulled-out. The struggle to find a workable balance between providing interventions for students and making up for missed in-classroom instruction was not easily resolved.

At SCES the need for reading intervention was so high that it was difficult to provide services for all students. One teacher shared that Tier 3 students in grades three through five did not get one-on-one reading support last year. In reading, Tier 3 instruction is considered a special education service, which was administered by a reading specialist at SCES. A student was first given Tier 1 instruction. Then if needed, they were given Tier 2 instruction. A small percentage of students may have required Tier 3 intervention, which is instruction: (1) directed by data, (2) that is individualized, and (3) done with repetition (The Iris Center, 2021). At SCES, the reading specialists were so overwhelmed with students in need of reading interventions, there were not enough staff to meet the student need. The Iris Center (2021) explains, “Most of the students who require Tier 3 intervention have difficulty decoding words, reading fluently, and comprehending what they have read.” Additionally, Tier 3 students often lack: phonological awareness, verbal knowledge and strategies, experiences before age 5 with letters and language, and motivation to read (often due to their struggles).

Oftentimes, efforts for teachers to interact and work together (purposively) fell short due to siloed job descriptions. Despite this, faculty and staff sought support and optimized resources in the school division. Interviewees shared there was a need to connect with coworkers, in some way. They also discussed the cliques that were present at the school. The cliques varied in shared

experiences, including, number of years teaching, grade level, special school project, and type of employee (faculty or staff). During an interview with Jesse, she identified specific cliques as: (a) counselor crew, (b) administration group, (c) specialist team, (d) grade levels, and (e) cafeteria workers.

While siloes among faculty and staff were present, there were bridges across the siloes. Jesse shared that she regularly connected with teachers to have conversations about student circumstances. She noted it was one of the most important things she did as a teacher. For example, she shared that if a student was having a bad day and had behavioral issues earlier in the day, it was important that she knew this before they entered her classroom. That one student had the power to change the dynamic of her classroom. She made a point to establish relationships with other teachers and regularly ask questions. In another example, Jesse shared, "there's lots of examples of [other teachers] just stepping in. If I'm missing stuff that I need, they'll give me stuff. We share information on kids, even from their last year's teachers. It can be very important. So, it's just this helping each other in a moment's notice, with whatever role." In an effort to develop and sustain their community, faculty and staff leaned on their shared goal to prioritize students.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusions

In this section of the paper, I provide context for the findings by sharing my conclusions to answer the research question: who and what contribute to community in an urban elementary school? Additionally, I acknowledge the limitations of my study and share ideas for future research. Because this study used a phenomenological approach, it provided insight into the faculty and staff perceptions of community in a challenged urban elementary school.

Due to the loss of my contact (assistant principal) within the school, the focus of my research shifted from principal leadership to teachers, who focused on a shared goal of prioritizing students. I looked at the teachers' roles in prioritizing students, and how this ultimately impacted the development of community in a turnaround school. Teachers played the biggest role in prioritizing students, as they were the community members most immersed with students on a daily basis. These collective efforts contributed to the development of community at SCES.

After presenting the findings in the previous chapter, four topics warrant further discussion related to prioritizing students and developing community in a challenged urban elementary school. These topics help make meaning of the data as they apply to a larger educational context. The following topics are the result of my reflection on all data sources, findings, and my cumulative understanding of how SCES operates and is sustained. My conclusions offer insight into the deep complexities of the SCES community.

Teachers Play a Significant Role in Developing Community at SCES

When I first designed this study, I expected to spend a greater amount of time with the leadership team in the school. There is significant research around principal leadership being the most impactful part of turning around a school that was underperforming. Due to the circumstantial changes, the focus of my research shifted to teachers. What I found was that the teachers at SCES, despite the barriers, shared a common goal to prioritize students. Teachers have created the communities needed to facilitate learning and success for students by prioritizing students. I found that the community at SCES is complex, mainly because of student circumstances surrounding poverty and trauma, and the intractable problems that weigh heavily

on the school. The high level of student need requires the teachers, staff, and administrators to think and act differently than they might at a school facing fewer complex challenges.

The Level of Student Need is High

In my time at SCES I observed so many people working diligently to provide positive, safe, and impactful learning experiences for students. However, the efforts in the school seemed fragmented. At times organic communities were formed by teachers to find the resources they needed for their students. A recurring theme in this study was lack of immediate access to resources, specifically Title I funds. Specifically, there is a lack of communication around the availability of Title I funds. When considering why student achievement in some schools is lower than desired, one consideration points to "economic problems, including resource allocation, inadequate funding, and the general conditions of poverty that erode support for children in school and in their surrounding communities" (McCaslin et al., 2006, p. 314; McCaslin et al., 2005; Rothstein, 2004). I believe that this consideration is relevant at SCES.

The need to find resources is both great and urgent. Informal community partnerships with the larger Story City community suggest the school community and the surrounding community work together well as a joint enterprise to meet the needs of the students. However, the level of student need is so high, sometime efforts are fragmented.

The social worker and school counselor seem to work exceptionally well together in recognizing the needs of the students and delegating efforts and finding solutions. Some of these efforts were in school-community partnerships. The social worker and school counselor had regular interactions in the hall and frequently stepped in and out of each other's offices. Initiatives around inclusion, student challenges, and coordination and communication with parents were topics in which the school counselor and social worker worked collaboratively to

find solutions. While it seems all members of the leadership team engage with the community in some way, the social worker and school counselor appeared to have the most engagement with the larger Story City community. Given the high need for community support at SCES, the responsibility warrants a larger collective effort to support the work that the leadership team – specifically the school counselor and the social worker– is doing to make connections within the SCES community.

Intractable Problems Challenge the Development of Community

Developing a sense of community is both geographically-defined and defined by mutual sensibilities, goals, and practices. In developing community at SCES, the school faced certain challenges. Intractable problems had a large impact on the SCES community. Intractable problems have been long acknowledged among schools with high levels of poverty and high instances of student trauma. For example, Meier (1995) chronicles her experiences teaching in America's public schools and shares her vision for its future. She writes,

> Public schools can train us for such political conversations across divisions of race, class, religion, and ideology. It is often in the clash of irreconcilable ideas that we can learn how to test or revise ideas or invent new ones. Both teachers and students need to search for metaphors that work across ideological, historical, and personal differences (p. 7).

It is, indeed, political conversations that have manifested within America, speaking to divisions of race, class, religion, and ideology, that have further highlighted inequities in education. Meier's vision and task for public education is a certain plight to begin and sustain reform. However, many of the challenges she, and countless other educators highlight speak to larger, intractable problems in education (Heymann & Cassola, 2012). At SCES, the faculty and staff

are actively testing, revising, and inventing new ideas, both in ways to prioritize students, and in developing community.

Acknowledging that problems are intractable opens the conversation to finding research-based solutions and guidance in making improvements. There is unfortunately not a one-size-fits-all model for solving each of the intractable problems discussed in this paper; thus, it is a challenge. When numerous challenges are present in the context of education and the educational system, the result is a large, multifaceted problem.

Principal and Teacher Turnover Challenge the Development of Community

Teachers at SCES are tasked with balancing student academic success, student needs, and teacher responsibilities such as lesson planning, content development, testing, and grading. In high poverty schools, teachers are expected to mitigate difficult circumstances with the same outcomes as other teachers. I observed the effects of poverty at SCES and the surrounding Story City neighborhood. I learned about the teacher turnover and was told stories of how some teachers left after one year at SCES. In one instance, a teacher left mid-year. I gained an understanding of the high emotional burden teachers experience at SCES.

In the years prior to my study, SCES lost two principals, two assistant principals, and numerous faculty and staff members. The school had recently met partial school accreditation and had met full school accreditation in the year just prior to the study. The lack of stability among the leadership team and among the faculty and staff provided challenges for the school. Principal leadership is key to turning around an underperforming school, and SCES lacked stability in principal leadership. Without strong principal leadership, teachers may not get the support they need. Darling-Hammond (2020) suggests, “Having centers of support for continuous professional learning is essential for turning around schools that serve the students

most often left behind because their teachers are left behind" (p. 67). This is relevant to SCES, because without stable leadership, the teachers do not have dedicated support.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations emerged during the course of this research. The following section describes the limitations of the study.

Circumstantial Changes to the Study

The change in leadership at the school a few months prior to the beginning of my study caused some unforeseen challenges and was a limitation in my study. My contact at the school was transferred to another school, and I was not able to develop a working relationship with the principal. This was impactful to my study, as principal leadership was one of the main aspects of my research in understanding the development of community in a turnaround school. Therefore, I changed the focus of my study to the teachers, whose shared focus was on prioritizing students. I looked at their role in prioritizing students and how these efforts impacted the development of community at the school.

Access to the Research Site

Though I had obtained permission from the school district to conduct research in the school, I did not end up having full access to the school (research site) as I had expected. The principal of the school required that I contact her by email or phone ahead of my visits to receive permission to visit on certain days/times. However, it typically took two to three days to receive a response, after using both email and phone for communication. This limited my time in the school, as I was also having to coordinate my research around my work schedule.

Data

Certain data sources were not as robust as I had hoped they would be when I designed the study. Four participants volunteered to be interviewed. Of those four participants, one moved to another state before the interview could be conducted. Plans to lead focus groups was not well received in informal conversations with teachers and other staff members at the school, therefore, I decided not to conduct them as part of the study. When I reconsidered focus groups due to the low number of interview participants, the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily closed the school for face-to-face instruction. Instruction was moved to virtual school for the remainder of the school year.

Length of Study

The length of this study was six months. For a school with longstanding challenges, six months cannot fully represent the entire story of the school. It was my goal in this study to build a narrative around the school currently, considering its past and helping to build a better future.

Unforeseen Circumstances

The COVID-19 pandemic prevented any further data collection or extension of the study. This study ended in February 2020, and schools in the WPS district moved to fully remote learning in March 2020.

Future Research

This paper provided insight on one elementary school's faculty and staff perceptions of community. While I learned an enormous amount about the SCES community, there is still much more to learn about SCES and schools like SCES. I have identified two areas of future research that emerged from this study.

Future research could observe the creation and implementation of a community advisory board. This is a topic of future research that could yield a better understanding of how

community, both geographically and in shared interest, can work together more effectively to prioritize students. Better understanding this idea could provide a more seamless collaboration between school and community partnerships.

Future research might attempt to better understand the phenomenon of teachers using organic (i.e., unofficial) approaches to provide resources for their students. Specifically, it would be interesting to gain insight into a) the specific resources sought, b) the platforms used to obtain resources, and c) the teachers' success and timeline in acquiring resources. Learning more about these organic approaches to obtaining resources could provide an understanding of community crowd sourcing in education.

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Table 1

12 Domains of Turnaround Principal Leadership

Utilizing vision and strategic leadership 1. Establish, shape, and drive a vision focused on high academic expectations 2. Identify, analyze, and respond to causes of school decline and failure 3. Navigate policies that, on the surface, limit their ability to lead effectively or their teachers' ability to provide high-quality, differentiated instruction 4. Make unilateral decisions as necessary
Building capacity with support and accountability 5. Secure significant, purposeful opportunities for teachers to develop 6. Cultivate leadership in administration and faculty 7. Focus on improving culture and instruction specifically in literacy and mathematics 8. Leverage data effectively to make strategic administrative/instructional decisions 9. Focus intensively on driving instructional improvement
Shaping of culture 10. Create or improve a climate that is safe and focused on teaching and learning 11. Generate quick wins to publicly demonstrate changing priorities and that improvement is possible 12. Develop authentic relationships with parents and the community broadly

Note. Meyers and Hitt (2017) determined the above domains provide a practical framing of expectations related to School Improvement Plans (SIPs). They are both research-based and acknowledge the practical complexities and considerations of principal planning (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017).

Table 3

CoPs Learning Architectures Dualities and Components

Learning Architectures	Components
Participation and reification	Summer Academy, professional development webinars
Designed and emergent	information technology tools, assessment data
Local and global	boundary spanning
Identification and negotiability	selecting a TWI model, mission revisions

Note. Scanlan et al. (2016) found the dimensions, or architectures, of learning (left column) to be explained by the components (right column) which were used as indicators, serving as evidence of CoPs.

Table 4

Seventeen Priority Areas from Coding Results

Accountability of staff and students	Professional growth
Achievement	Program implementation and evaluation
Assessment	School climate and culture
Curriculum	School organization
Data use	Student academic skills
Faculty/staff knowledge of state policies	Student behaviors and discipline
Instruction	Teacher effectiveness
Parent involvement/engagement	Vision-setting/mission-setting
Physical plant	

Note. VanGronigen and Meyers (2017) determined the priority areas after rounds of coding school short-cycle plans (p. 31).

Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Email

Good Afternoon,

As you may already know, I am a student in Virginia Tech's Curriculum and Instruction doctoral program. I am currently conducting research as part of my dissertation in Educational Psychology. I would like to gain insight into an elementary school community – both inside and outside of the school – that contribute to creating learning environments within the school that facilitate progress and ultimately, success. You have received this e-mail because you are currently a faculty or staff member at _____ (school), and I would like to invite you to participate in the study. I have included some information below to help you make an informed decision.

I am really interested in learning about the social constructs of an elementary school. Specifically, the social constructs inside and outside of the school that contribute to creating learning environments in the school that facilitates progress. I would like to learn about your experience as a faculty or staff member at _____ (school). I intend to present the findings to my doctoral committee, and it is possible I would present the findings at a regional conference, and/or submit an article for publication. Additionally, a summary of the research and findings will be submitted/presented to the school leadership team.

If you choose to participate in this study, I will ask you to meet with me for one 60 to 90-minute interview. There are minimal risks associated with the study. The direct benefits to you are also minimal, although it may help to better understand how communities of practice operate within an urban elementary school, thus providing insight for stakeholders. Participation in the study is strictly voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time. I will assign all participants a pseudonym for identity protection.

If you wish to participate in the study, or have further questions, please email me at _____. If you choose to participate in the study, I will contact you to set up a meeting to review a consent form and conduct the interview. I intend to send one reminder email. After the reminder email, if you do not wish to participate, there will be no further contact. I thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,
Emily Fielder

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Introduction and consent:

- Introduce myself and thank participant for agreeing to participate in the study
- Review informed consent. Ask participant if he/she has any questions regarding informed consent before signing it. Obtain both verbal and written consent.
- Explain the demographic form and its purpose; ask them to complete it
- After participant signs informed consent, collect document and begin recording interview
- Remind participant of the purpose of the study (see below)
- Begin recording

Purpose:

There is a need to better understand what factors influence the development of "community" in school settings. The proposed study examines the perceptions of "developing community" in an urban elementary school through the lens of teachers, administrators, and staff at the school. More specifically, the purpose of this study is focused on the perceptions of who and what contribute to developing community in an urban elementary school, as experienced and determined by the teachers, administrators, and staff at the school. Understanding these experiences will provide insight to better understand the phenomena and meaning that makes up these social constructs.

Interview questions:

- How do you define community?
- How would you describe community in your place of work?
    - Tell me about an example that helps to further describe community in your place of work.
- In what ways is this school a community to you?
- What contributes to community?
- Who contributes to community?
    - Can you provide a story or an example?
- What is the most important contributor or contributing factor to community?
    - Why?
    - Can you provide an example or share a story?
- Who are the most important people in developing a community within the school?
    - Why do you believe these people are most important?
- What are the key components in developing a community within the school?
    - Why do you believe these are the key components?
- Identify an example of when you felt like you were part of a community at this school.
- Are there specific examples surrounding community that do not exist that you would like to see that would improve community within the school?
- WRAP-UP QUESTION: Do you have anything else about your experience you would like to share, or any questions that I should ask you?

Thank the interviewee for their time and participation.

Stop recording.