12-2020

Educational Leaders' Role in Sustaining Achievement in Successful, High- Poverty Title I Elementary Schools: A Case Study on Practices and Actions Leaders Take

Jennifer Ann Fodness

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

EDUCATIONAL LEADERS' ROLE IN SUSTAINING ACHIEVEMENT IN SUCCESSFUL, HIGH-POVERTY TITLE I ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY ON PRACTICES AND ACTIONS LEADERS TAKE

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Jennifer Ann Fodness

College of Education and Behavior Sciences
School of Education
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

December 2020

This Dissertation by: Jennifer Ann Fodness

Entitled: *Educational Leaders' Role in Sustaining Achievement in Successful, High-Poverty Title I Elementary Schools: A Case Study on Practices and Actions Leaders Take*

has been approved as meeting the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in College Education and Behavioral Sciences in School of Education, Program of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies.

Accepted by the Doctoral Committee

_____
Michael Cohen, Ed.D., Co-Research Advisor

_____
Amie Cieminski, Ed.D., Co-Research Advisor

_____
Corey Pierce, Ph.D., Committee Member

_____
Randy Larkins, Ph.D., Faculty Representative

Date of Dissertation Defense: August 4, 2020

Accepted by the Graduate School

_____
Jeri-Anne Lyons, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School
Associate Vice President for Research

ABSTRACT

Fodness, Jennifer Ann. *Educational leaders' role in sustaining achievement in successful, high-poverty Title I elementary schools: A case study on practices and actions leaders take.* Published Doctor of Education dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2020.

An education system where every student is successful has been a primary goal for the United States. Increasing student achievement for student populations identified as at risk for not meeting educational goals is imperative for students, school leaders and educators, policymakers, businesses, and taxpayers across the nation. The purpose of this qualitative, multiple-case study was to explore and describe practices and actions used by educational leaders in two successful high-poverty Title I schools who influenced sustained achievement. Three themes were identified in each school through thematic analysis of interviews, observations, and documents. For one school, the three themes were (a) a high-quality team, (b) practices to maximize learning, and (c) a caring culture. For the second school, the three themes were (a) systems for learning, (b) functioning as a team, and (c) a student-focused staff. The findings indicated that leaders utilized systems to influence sustained achievement that was corroborated in educational leadership literature. This study extended research on Title I schools by specifically looking at leader practices and actions in high-poverty public elementary schools that sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years in Colorado. The results of this study may provide educational leaders and policymakers with insights on leaders' use of systems: instructional leadership, a caring culture focused on students, and increasing student learning.

Keywords: Title I; sustained achievement; systems: instructional leadership, a caring culture focused on students, increasing student learning.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to children of poverty: May your future opportunities increase and may you succeed

In loving memory of Crystal Ann Boersma: You were supposed to be here and very much part of the reason for this study

ACKNOWLDEGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank my participants for making this dream become a reality by participating and inspiring me through your words and empirical success. Thank you for your selflessness and dedication to making this world a better place one student, one staff member, one school at a time. I am forever grateful to have found magical unicorns.

Next, I want to thank my family. Mom, thank you for always believing in me, supporting me and my family, and teaching me the value of hard work and gratitude. Also for reminding me about the power of positivity, to never feel sorry for oneself because challenges are obstacles meant to be overcome, and the intrinsic reward of helping others. Never have I met someone who is as selfless as you. Thank you for being my role model and a role model for the many others that you so willingly give to. Lindsey and Brittney, thank you for always listening to me vent and supporting my family during this journey. Donny, Crystal, Rachel, Josh, Lindsey, Trisha, and Brittney (my siblings), thank you for the best childhood memories and the inspiration for this study. Dad, thank you for continuing to check in on my progress in this process and sharing your wisdom with me. Brendan, Bailey (my children), and Kevin, thank you for your sacrifices and support. Brendan and Bailey, I hope these sacrifices provide you with greater opportunities for your futures.

Carmen, I am so thankful to have gone through this journey with you. Thank you for your love, support, and time. I am beyond thankful for your dedication to critical thinking; it has transformed my thinking and educational practice. Thank you for your selflessness and making

this world a better place. Because of you, I strive to be forever fair minded with an increased thoughtfulness for a greater purpose than myself.

My committee, thank you pointing out that this research was like looking for unicorns and assisting me in the search. Thank you for your time reading and providing feedback on the countless revisions, challenging my thinking, and assistance in making the research possible. Megan, thank you for your attention to detail, suggestions, and support. I am not sure how much longer this would have taken without you.

Last, but not least, my village and friends: Thank you for your contributions to raising my kids while I was on this journey. I am so thankful to have such incredible support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE

CHAPTER I

FRAMING THE INQUIRY

A well-documented growing economic concern in the United States is income inequality (Kochan & Riordan, 2016; Saez, 2015). United States income data trends from the 1970s indicated that the top 1% of income shares realized disproportionate gains with dramatic ascents compared to the bottom 90% (Kochan & Riordan, 2016; Saez, 2015). More specifically, the top 1% accounted for almost 60% of income growth between 1976 and 2007 (Kochan & Riordan, 2016). According to Saez (2015) options for reversing trends in income inequality include increasing the demand for skills and education. Saez asserted that "education is a critical starting point" (p. 430); however, "with the prevalence of poverty in society, schools continue to deal with the impact of poverty on their students" (Brady, 2016, p. 11). Educational leaders have sought and continue to seek practices that are effective in supporting and sustaining achievement for all students and to close the achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent counterparts. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe practices and actions used by leaders of successful, high-poverty Title I schools who influence sustained achievement.

Poverty impacts educators as well as families, our society, and students. "In 2014, approximately 20 percent of school-age children were in families living in poverty" (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016b, para. 1). Since 2000, the poverty rate in the United States has increased, and in 2014 the rate of poverty was higher than it was in 2000 for 41 states (NCES, 2016b). The designation of families or a person living in poverty, as noted by the

United States Census Bureau in 2016, is based on the number of family members and income within a household. Similar to poverty, socioeconomic status is a measurement of inequalities and access to resources; however, socioeconomic status is based on a combination of schooling, salary, and profession (American Psychological Association, 2017). The American Psychological Association (2017) noted that "low SES [socioeconomic status] and its correlates, such as lower education, poverty, and poor health, ultimately affect our society as a whole" (para. 2). Specifically, poverty places limitations on opportunities and access to resources for economically disadvantaged students as early as preschool and elementary grades, resulting in disparities in learning for these students (Berliner, 2009; Brady, 2016; Coleman, 1966; Hattie, 2009; Jensen, 2009).

Influence of Poverty on Learning

Researchers have sought to identify challenges confronting students because of the impact of poverty and low socioeconomic status on students and learning as stated by Berliner (2009). Jensen (2009) listed four primary risk factors affecting families in poverty: (a) emotional and social challenges, (b) acute and chronic stressors, (c) cognitive lags, and (d) health and safety issues. As students in poverty experience any one of these factors, there are implications for learning that educators and educational leaders must keep in mind.

Berliner's (2009) research reported similarities to Jensen's (2009) research. Berliner identified six out-of-school factors in related research that affect learning: (a) low birth-weight and non-genetic prenatal influences on children; (b) inadequate medical, dental, and vision care, often a result of inadequate or no medical insurance; (c) food insecurity; (d) environmental pollutants; (e) family relations and family stress; and (f) neighborhood characteristics. Berliner

stated that these factors place limits on many educational professionals who seek to remove obstacles for optimal learning.

Berliner (2009) and Jensen (2009) noted the influence of poverty-related health issues on learning. According to Berliner, inadequate medical, dental, and vision care are obstacles that impede learning. For example, a student with an unmet dental need, such as a toothache, may be more distracted or absent from school (Rothstein, 2004). These factors affect a student's ability to learn and, furthermore, a student's ability to attend school (Jensen, 2009). It is common knowledge that it is difficult to educate students who are not at school, which Jensen asserted as a frequent problem for students with low socioeconomic status backgrounds.

Along with the poverty-related health challenges, students from low socioeconomic status often suffer from limited access to many resources, such as preschool, technology, nutrition, books, pencils, and paper (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Gorski, 2013; Jensen, 2009). Jensen (2009) noted, "Even when low-income parents do everything they can for their children, their limited resources put kids at a huge disadvantage" (p. 37). Another effect of limited resources on students due to poverty is a limited exposure to vocabulary (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Rothstein, 2004). As a result, many students from low socioeconomic status families enter school with a vocabulary and reading-readiness deficit when compared to their higher socioeconomic status counterparts resulting in a gap in achievement (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Rothstein, 2004). As students continue to struggle throughout elementary school, the gap in achievement can continue to widen as subject difficulty increases (Barr & Parrett, 2007). Thus for the struggling student, the gap can become overwhelming by the time the student reaches high school and many end up dropping out of school (Barr & Parrett, 2007). The challenges of poverty for students on

learning is daunting, “and their only hope for escaping the cycle of poverty is a high-quality education” (Barr & Parrett, 2007, p. 21).

Poverty and the Achievement Gap

The accumulated ramifications of poverty on student achievement for certain groups of students, such as economically disadvantaged students, have resulted in what is commonly referred to as the achievement gap (Colorado Department of Education [CDE], 2015). To measure achievement, as required by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), students must be tested in specific grades (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). Student achievement is often measured by student performance on standardized state and national tests (Portin et al., 2009), and results are disaggregated to monitor learning for at-risk students (Brady, 2016). For economically disadvantaged students, educational professionals use information based on students who qualify for free or reduced-priced meals or free or reduced-priced lunch (FRL) in school to disaggregate achievement data (Brady, 2016).

Each year the NCES is commissioned to write a report on the status of education for the United States at all levels of education in fourth, eighth, and 12th grade to identify trends and important developments for education using the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) data (NCES, 2018f). Achievement data from the NAEP is used as a national representative sample of what fourth, eighth, and 12th graders know in various subjects (NCES, 2016c). Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 and ESSA in 2015, all states were required to participate in NAEP testing to compare school data across states as well as to national data (Chenoweth, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2001, 2016a). The NAEP data can be categorized by FRL (NCES, 2016c). Generally, higher percentages of FRL student populations are associated with lower percentages of student achievement (Gonzales, 2016). The trends in

data from NCES indicate a historical achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent counterparts (Brady, 2016). For example, in 2013 half of the fourth-grade students who took the NAEP test were eligible for FRL. Only 20% of fourth-grade students who were eligible for FRL scored at or above proficient in reading on the NAEP, while 51% of fourth-grade students not eligible for FRL scored at or above proficient (NCES, 2016c), indicating a national achievement gap.

Influence of Poverty on the State-Level Achievement Gap

Some states are experiencing a similar gap in achievement that reflects the national NAEP data. In 2015, 25% of FRL students in fourth grade in the state of Colorado scored at or above proficient level on NAEP mathematics tests compared to 59% of their more affluent peers who scored at or above proficient (NCES, 2018b). Similarly, in 2015 only 21% of FRL students in fourth grade in the state of Colorado scored at or above proficient level on NAEP reading tests compared to 54% of those not eligible for FRL who scored at or above proficient (NCES, 2018d).

Not only are some states in the United States experiencing the achievement gap between high- and low-income students, but many states are experiencing an increase of students living in poverty (NCES, 2016b). As mentioned earlier in 2014, 41 states experienced an increase in poverty since 2000 (NCES, 2016b). In 2003 in the state of Colorado, 31% of fourth grade students were eligible for FRL compared to 47% of students eligible for FRL in 2015 (NCES, 2018d). It is important for educational leaders to be prepared for the changes in demographics in order to help ensure the success of all students.

Influence of Poverty on the Achievement Gap from Elementary through Middle and High School

In addition to analyzing national and state data between students who qualify for FRL and their more affluent counterparts, researchers have identified that the achievement gap widens between fourth and eighth grade students (NCES, 2018e). As stated in the NCES (2018f), *The Condition of Education 2017* report, "In 2015, the achievement gap between high-poverty school and low-poverty schools was 30 points at grade 4 and 38 points at grade 8" in mathematics on the NAEP (p. 168). The 2015 achievement gaps on the NAEP mathematics and reading test scores between students at high-poverty and low-poverty schools were not measurably different for fourth and eighth graders in 2005 (NCES, 2018e).

Similar to the national level, the achievement gap widened at the state level between elementary and middle school, specifically in the state of Colorado. According to the Colorado Department of Education (CDE, 2018a), elementary reading data for the 2013–2014 school year showed 54.21% of FRL students scored a proficient and advanced level on the Colorado State Assessment Program test in contrast to 83.26% of students not eligible who scored proficient and advanced. In the 2013–2014 school year, 50.97% of Colorado middle school FRL students scored a proficient and advanced level on the Colorado State Assessment Program test in comparison to 81.30% of their more affluent counterparts who scored proficient and advanced (CDE, 2018a).

According to NCES (2018f), *The Condition of Education 2017* report, reading scale scores that range from 0 to 500 for 12th grade, "the achievement gap between the students at high-poverty schools and low-poverty schools was 32 points in 2015" (p. 160) and 36 points for

math, “which was not measurably different from previous assessment years” (p. 160). *The Condition of Education 2017* report findings noted that the achievement gap did not grow from 2005 and 2015, but it was not measurably different either (NCES, 2018f). Brady (2016) stated that the NAEP data have historically revealed a gap for economically disadvantaged students.

Long-Term Effects of Poverty on the Achievement Gap for Students, Businesses, and Taxpayers

Poverty and its impacts on student achievement can have long-term effects for students, businesses, and taxpayers. Brady (2016) asserted that high achievement can result in increased opportunities for students’ postsecondary education and careers. For students, achievement is often measured by their performance on an assessment, and Portin et al. (2009) noted that assessment results are often based on one annual test. The implications for students and their test results begin in high school. Currently, the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) is a globally recognized assessment tool for students, high schools, and colleges (Collegeboard, 2017a). According to Collegeboard (2017b), high school students take the SAT to demonstrate a command of information taught in high school. For many students, in order to go to college, an admissions test such as the SAT is required (Collegeboard, 2017b). Professionals at colleges use SAT scores to recruit and advise students for course placements and scholarships (Collegeboard, 2017b).

The SAT scores can be disaggregated into several categories such as income. According to the NCES (2018e), in the 2010–2011 school year the average SAT reading score for seniors with a family income less than $20,000 was 434, in sharp contrast to seniors with a family income between $80,000 and $100,000 which was 515. The average SAT reading score for all

seniors in 2010–2011 was 497 (NCES, 2018e). Achievement impacts several aspects for students' college choices.

Not every student will choose the college pathway; however, the achievement gap also has implications for students and their opportunities, career choices, and potential income. As students continue to struggle throughout elementary school, the student achievement gap can widen as subject difficulty increases, and thus for the struggling student, the gap can become overwhelming by the time they reach high school (Barr & Parrett, 2007). For students who begin behind academically, "few will ever catch-up, and most will drop out of high school (Barr & Parrett, 2007, p. 21). For instance, in the 2014–2015 school year, 76% of economically disadvantaged students graduated compared to 83% of the nation (NCES, 2018c). For students who drop out of high school, opportunities for careers and chances of making a successful living are diminished (McKinsey & Company, Social Sector Office, 2009). At the time of this writing, the jobs that required minimal education were being replaced by machines or shipped overseas, and "individuals who fail to earn a high school diploma are at a great disadvantage" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2018, para. 2). In fact, "by 2020, 65 percent of all jobs in the economy will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school" (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, n.d.). For economically disadvantaged students, the achievement gap has serious ramifications on opportunities for higher education, careers, and earning potential (McKinsey & Company, Social Sector Office, 2009).

Businesses are impacted by low achievement levels due to a lack of essential workforce skills and decreased graduation rates (Barr & Parrett, 2007). Early education success is associated with increased graduation rates that results in increased wages over time (McKinsey & Company, Social Sector Office, 2009). Outcomes on assessments as early as fourth grade can

serve as a predictor for graduation rates and life outcomes (CDE, 2017). However, economically disadvantaged students are at risk for school failure, which can result in a lack of necessary workforce skills required by businesses (McKinsey & Company, Social Sector Office, 2009).

Taxpayers are impacted by low achievement levels due to decreased graduation rates and unhealthy lifestyles (Barr & Parrett, 2007). According to a report on the achievement gap in American schools, a high school dropout is five times as likely to end up in jail compared to a college graduate, which directly impacts taxpayers' increased expenditures for facilities (McKinsey & Company, Social Sector Office, 2009). Additionally, lower education levels are also associated with an unhealthy lifestyle and as a result, healthcare costs increase, impacting tax payers (McKinsey & Company, Social Sector Office, 2009). Ultimately, the achievement gap is problematic for businesses and taxpayers.

The influence of poverty on learning and the achievement gap has long-term implications for students, businesses, and taxpayers. Due to the implications from poverty on the achievement gap, now, more than ever, it is extremely important to ensure a high-quality education for all students. As a result, policymakers, educators, and educational leaders have and continue to seek practices that are effective in supporting and sustaining achievement for all students as well as close the gap between low-income students and their more affluent counterparts.

Student Achievement Reform Efforts

Policymakers, taxpayers, administrators, and educators desire an education system where every student is successful because education can provide opportunities for students. To ensure that, policymakers have enacted various federal reform efforts throughout the history of the American educational system. The reforms that are discussed within this study focus on

increasing equity and achievement such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, NCLB in 2001, Race to the Top in 2009, and ESSA in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 1965, 2001, 2009, 2016a).

Elementary and Secondary Education Act: Increased Equity

Starting in the late 1950s, the United States was confronted with challenges in response to the Soviet Union's successful launching of Sputnik, which changed economic competitiveness on a global scale (Masewicz, 2010). This historical event called for policymakers to make drastic changes to ensure that the United States remained in a position of economic power (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). President Lyndon B. Johnson recognized that improving the quality of education was a way to eliminate poverty and increase economic prosperity (Louis et al., 2010). As a result, the ESEA was passed in 1965. Under the Johnson administration, ESEA provided a major reform effort for the public school system (U.S. Department of Education, 1965). This act allotted supplemental federal funds to schools to alleviate disproportionate opportunities for low-income students with the goal of closing the achievement gap between the at-risk populations and their more affluent counterparts. It attempted to create equity in education with the implementation of a financial aid program known as Title I, Part A (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). Under Title I, Part A, there are formulas for grants based on United States census data, which can be used to qualify a school to receive federal money (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). Schools awarded Title I grants, commonly referred to as Title I schools, receive categorical funds that have strict usage guidelines intended for specific programs or to assist economically disadvantaged learners (Boland, Mohajeri-Nelson, Pearson, & Aldinger, 2012). The Title I funds are authorized for

specific items intended to increase achievement for at-risk students, such as professional development (PD), instructional materials, resources to support programs, and parental involvement (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c).

In addition to Title I, Part A, the FRL program was a provision enacted through the ESEA (NCES, 2016a). This program was implemented to assist in meeting children's basic food needs to help create equity in education (NCES, 2016a). The FRL program is currently being utilized in schools by students from families who meet the specified criteria (National Title I Association, 2017). These criteria include students whose family income is 130% or under the federal poverty threshold to qualify for free meals; whereas if their family income is 130% to 185% of the federal poverty threshold, they qualify for reduced price meals (NCES, 2016a). According to the NCES (2016a), high-poverty public schools have more than 75% of students who are eligible for the FRL program. Schools that have at least 40% of students qualifying for FRL may use the Title I funds for a schoolwide program versus targeting students who are the most at risk for failure (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c).

Two decades after the ESEA implementation, the focus of federal policymakers shifted from inequality to the quality of American education by reviewing test scores and skills (Porter, 2009). Under the Reagan administration, the National Commission on Excellence in Education was created to write a report of student performance in 1983, entitled *A Nation at Risk*. The authors of *A Nation at Risk* asserted that public education was in a state of crisis due to a perceived decline in the overall performance of student achievement (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Recommendations of high expectations and teaching to standards were made, and reform efforts ensued (Rousmaniere, 2013). During the late 1980s policymakers recognized a need for clear and improved educational goals to improve the quality

of education. As a result, educational goals and standards were proposed under the George H. W. Bush administration with the intent that states would voluntarily adopt a set of national academic standards, which students would be expected to meet by the year 2000 (Vinovskis, 1999). However, the resources needed to fulfill the goals and standards were not identified, and thus the goals and standards were not enacted (Vinovskis, 1999). The standards-based reform efforts continued into the early 1990s. In 1994, under the Clinton Administration, Congress re-authorized the ESEA through the Improving America's School Act. Intended to promote the achievement of disadvantaged students, this legislated each state to develop high academic standards and assessments in order to be eligible for Title I funds (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a).

Policymakers identified a need to collect student achievement data at the federal and state level to document and monitor the outcomes of education reforms as well as student performance (NCES, 2003). According to the NCES (1994), NAEP national-level reading data findings for 9-year-olds, scores were "significantly higher" (p. 107) in the 1980s compared to 1971, but "performance declined somewhat in the early 1990s" (p. 107). Additionally, for 9-year-olds the 1994 NAEP reading scores were not measurably different from 1971 (NCES, 1994). In 1971, the average reading scale score for 9-year-olds by quartile was 253, 211, and 162 for the upper, middle two, and lower quartiles, respectively (NCES, 1994). In 1994, the average reading score for 9-year-olds by quartiles was 256, 213, and 162 for upper, middle two, and lower quartiles, respectively (NCES, 1994). Through analysis of data and reform efforts during the1960s to the late 1990s, policymakers identified a need for accountability of the performance of all students. Thus further reform efforts ensued.

No Child Left Behind: Increased Accountability

In an effort to improve achievement and close the achievement gap, ESEA was reauthorized in 2001 as the NCLB Act under the George W. Bush administration (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The NCLB has been known for the stringent assessment and accountability systems for student achievement (Portin et al., 2009). Policymakers desired to increase student achievement across the nation with the goal that all students would be proficient according to state standards by the school year 2013–2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). To achieve this, the NCLB guidelines included increased accountability for schools with a focus on the most at-risk populations (Porter, 2009): English language learners, students with disabilities, minority students, and students experiencing poverty (CDE, 2015). The increased accountability measures of NCLB also included a requirement for schools to disaggregate the data for the most at-risk populations as a measure to ensure that all children were successful (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Additionally, under NCLB, policymakers mandated assessment and accountability requirements by using determined annual measures for each school and at-risk populations referred to as adequate yearly progress. The purpose of adequate yearly progress was to compare scores for students and schools to the previous year scores to ensure that all students were making sufficient growth towards meeting the standards of learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The requirements included consequences based on outcomes of the assessment and accountability systems and had dire implications for schools, administrators, educators, and students (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). For instance, schools that were considered not proficient on assessments faced the consequence of being restructured or closed. Often the first action of being restructured resulted in replacing administration at the school (U.S.

Department of Education, 2001). Educators also faced serious consequences, such as being replaced, if students did not score proficient on academic assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Furthermore, NCLB policy included offering school choices to families including (a) public school choice, (b) supplemental education services, (c) charter schools, (d) magnet schools, (e) private education, (f) homeschooling, and (g) District of Columbia choice (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b). The idea was to provide families with choices if the neighborhood school they attended needed improvement (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b). The notion of choice surfaced prior to NCLB in 2001. In the 1980s, President Reagan embraced economic policies similar to Milton Friedman, commonly referred to as Reaganomics, which adopted the notion of a voucher system (Owens, 2015). Owens (2015) noted that Friedman's ideas about choice and vouchers would create competition within education, and schools would compete against each other with the ultimate goal that schools would improve. The NCLB 2001 policy offered more choices for families but did not include vouchers (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b).

A report by Thompson and Barnes (2007) on the student performance under NCLB was titled *Beyond NCLB: Fulfilling the Promise to our Nation's Children*. In the report, Thompson and Barnes asserted that "While these changes are substantial, they have not been enough" (p. 12) and "The problems NCLB was intended to address remain" (p. 12). Additionally, Thompson and Barnes pointed out, "Unacceptable achievement levels continue to plague our schools" (p. 14). Nevertheless, in the federal policymakers' efforts for all students to be proficient prior to the 2013–2014 NCLB deadline, the policymakers recognized that little progress toward the

student achievement goals had been made and called for modifications to NCLB (Thompson & Barnes, 2007).

Race to the Top: Increased Guidelines

In 2009, Race to the Top was yet another initiative by policymakers aimed at increasing student achievement through the use of federal grants (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). Policymakers maintained focus on improving student achievement, specifically in regard to assessment and accountability systems, which were repurposed and most recently identified as the educator evaluation system in Race to the Top under the Obama administration. Although Race to the Top policymakers shifted more control to state-level policymakers, the final decision for awarding the grant money was determined by federal policymakers. This deterred a few state policymakers from participating in the grant. In the initial phase, 40 states were in the competitive race to change educational policies for the federal grant money (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). The federal grants were awarded to states based on guidelines, which included (a) adopting rigorous standards and assessments centered on college and career readiness; (b) utilizing informative data systems; (c) focusing on improving America's lowest-achieving schools; and (d) establishing an educator evaluation system aimed at "recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b, para 1). Specifically, the goal of the educator evaluation system was to increase educator effectiveness with set guidelines for the accountability of educators and principals (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). For example, specific goals and objectives with quality indicators for levels of performance were developed and placed into rubrics for educators to be evaluated on throughout a single school year; whereas, the NCLB reform

implemented qualifications for teachers, such as highly qualified in their field and level of expertise (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b).

The NCLB and Race to the Top mandates increased accountability and guidelines, but the achievement gap continued. According to NCES (2018c), the achievement gap between fourth grade NAEP reading and math scores for FRL students and their more affluent counterparts were not measurably different between 2005 and 2015. Despite previous reform efforts mentioned, federal policymakers declared that the 2013–2014 achievement goals were not met and identified a need to revise reform efforts (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b).

Every Student Succeeds Act: Increased Flexibility

The ESSA was the most recent reauthorization of ESEA which occurred in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). The ESSA provisions included increased flexibility for assessments, adoption of rigorous standards, and authorization for state policymakers to decide sanctions for failing schools. The ESSA was created with intentions of closing the achievement gap through increased flexibility and autonomy for decisions regarding spending to better address educational needs by state-level policymakers, compared to the strict guidelines of NCLB (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). Policymakers asserted NCLB federal policy focused too heavily on assessment and accountability; therefore, too much time was spent on testing and not enough time was given for instruction, which revealed the challenges to meet the policy's initial goal (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). Additionally, policymakers acknowledged that state-level policymakers were more knowledgeable about state-level needs. Subsequently, state-level policymakers would be able to utilize resources to more effectively meet individualized states' needs, leading to increased student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a).

Even though test scores fell short of the student achievement targets set for 2013–2014, ESEA, NCLB, and Race to the Top did increase equity, academic expectations, accountability, and consequences for schools, educators, and administrators (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). Despite the best hopes and dreams for all students, ESEA 1965, NCLB 2001, and Race to the Top 2009, albeit realistic attempts, once again ended in failed results for the goal of closing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent counterparts as supported by data from NCES (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e) and Collegeboard (2017b). The ESSA, the latest reform, was created to ensure every student is successful (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). However, many policymakers, leaders, and educators were concerned by the achievement gap that continued to remain despite these reform efforts (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Odden & Picus, 2008; Rothstein, 2004).

The Importance of Principal Leadership

Educational leadership and student achievement for economically disadvantaged students has been a focus of research since the mid-1960s. Research findings identified that leadership, which included the principal, influenced student learning (Hallinger, 2003; Hattie, 2009; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). The principal role has been shaped by educational reforms, landmark events, and court cases, thus impacting principal practices (Rousmaniere, 2013). Current research focused on leadership practices that influence student learning and named instructional and distributed leadership as practices used by effective principals to increase the instructional capacity for educators and student achievement (Leithwood, 2012).

The role of the principal evolved from strictly management during the early 20th century to an instructional leader during the mid-1960s (Rousmaniere, 2013). Research, focused on equity in education in the 1960s, concluded that effective schools for economically disadvantaged students had strong administrative leadership (Edmonds, 1979). Since the mid-1960s, instructional leadership has continued to be identified as an effective set of practices for leadership (Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004).

Leithwood et al. (2004) indicated that leadership is second to classroom instruction for school-related factors that contribute to learning. Furthermore, Leithwood et al. found that instructional leadership focuses on improving the classroom practices of teachers. Portin et al. (2009) noted the importance of skilled leadership for quality teaching and learning environments. The principal plays an essential role in improving teaching (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008) and providing PD to expand professional skills (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). Generally, PD often includes providing teachers with necessary training and support to improve learning for students (Leithwood et al., 2004). To support training for teachers, many principals invest time and money in PD and use teacher leaders to build instructional capacity (Portin et al., 2009), thus impacting student achievement.

Waters et al. (2003) conducted a meta-analysis on 30 years of research on leadership practices on student achievement. From the findings Waters et al. noted that the average correlation between principal leadership behaviors and school achievement to be .25. According to Waters et al., an increase of one standard deviation in principal leadership ability correlated a 10 percentile point gain in school achievement.

Another practice research identified for increasing the instructional capacity for educators used by effective principals is distributed leadership (Leithwood, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004).

Effective principals build the instructional capacity of the organization and utilize a distributed or shared leadership approach to meet the increasing demands of the principal role (DuFour et al., 2008). The notion of distributed leadership is that leadership roles are distributed across stakeholders (Leithwood, 2012). Engaging teacher leaders in decision making and leadership tasks, such as providing intellectual stimulation, can increase expertise and build instructional capacity across the organization (Leithwood et al., 2004; Portin et al., 2009).

In conjunction with reform efforts, the principal is vital to school improvement efforts (Portin et al., 2009). Effective principals utilize instructional and distributed leadership to build the instructional capacity of educators as well as increase student achievement (Leithwood, 2012). Despite these efforts, the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent counterparts remains.

Statement of the Problem

The ESSA was created to ensure that every student succeeds; however, educators are not yet reaching every student. The gap in achievement between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent counterparts is a challenge for many educators (Brady, 2016). High-poverty schools, as defined by the NCES (2016a), have a population of at least 75% of students who qualify for FRL. Gonzales (2016) found that, in general, the higher the FRL student population, the lower the percentage of student achievement. Though many high-poverty Title I schools have increased their student achievement over a one-year period, this growth is often followed by a plateau or regression, and far fewer have been able to maintain an increase in student achievement beyond two consecutive years (Hitt & Meyers, 2017). Going beyond two years is essential because two data points create a straight line compared to three data points,

which can be helpful to identify a possible direction of a trend to assist in data analysis (CDE, 2017).

Many policymakers, politicians, principals, and educators are still perplexed about how some schools with a large number of students experiencing poverty remain successful (Barr & Parrett, 2007). For example, some Colorado elementary high-poverty Title I schools are performing above the Colorado state average while others are not. Although there are several studies that have focused on leadership strategies that are successful in closing the achievement gap in some schools, the achievement gap continues (Anderson & DeCesare, 2007; Barr & Parrett, 2007; Brady, 2016; Cohen, 2015; Hitt & Meyers, 2017), and few studies exist on how leaders of high-poverty Title I public elementary schools in the state of Colorado influence sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years. Increasing student achievement for low-performing Title I schools is imperative for students, school leaders and educators, businesses, and taxpayers across the nation. Therefore, it was critical to explore how leaders of successful, high-poverty Title I schools sustain achievement beyond two consecutive years in Colorado to provide educational leaders in schools with similar context with strategies for sustaining achievement. Educational leaders can use this information to sustain success and close the achievement gap and, ultimately, improve outcomes for economically disadvantaged students.

Purpose of the Study

An education system where every student is successful has been desired by policymakers, administrators, and educators across the nation; however, this has not been the case for economically disadvantaged students. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and describe practices and actions used by educational leaders of successful, high-poverty Title I schools who influence sustained achievement. Because research has identified effective

leadership as significant to the success of a school (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Portin et al., 2009; Waters et al., 2003), it was important to glean insights on practices and actions from leaders' perspectives. Although previous research had identified strategies used by leaders of successful high-poverty schools, few studies have focused on leaders of successful, high-poverty schools who sustain achievement beyond two consecutive years.

Leithwood's (2012) leadership research identified setting directions, building relationships and developing people, developing the organization, improving the instructional program, and securing accountability as necessary components of a framework for leadership. How leaders develop Leithwood's (2012) categories in successful, high-poverty schools that sustained achievement may provide new insights into what leaders can do to help economically disadvantaged students succeed. Therefore, the primary research question guiding this study was,

Q1 How do leaders influence sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years in successful, high-poverty Title I public elementary schools in Colorado?

To explore the research inquiry, a qualitative research approach provided an opportunity to produce information-rich descriptions of the two case studies (Merriam, 2009). It was anticipated that this study would provide in-depth descriptions of practices and actions that influence sustained achievement. Perhaps educational leaders, particularly those in academically challenged high-poverty Title I schools, may glean insights on strategies and actions and use them as a guide for school improvement efforts so all students can succeed.

Study Overview

Because the nature of this study was to understand and construct meaning from the participants' perspectives, a qualitative approach using a multiple case study design was the

method to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and address the research question using observations, interviews, and document collection (Merriam, 2009). The participant schools in this qualitative inquiry were purposefully selected based on meeting the qualifying criterion of being a public elementary school sustaining achievement above the Colorado state average beyond two consecutive years. Additionally, the participant schools identified had a FRL population above 75% as indication that the school is high-poverty (NCES, 2016a) because of the challenges of sustaining achievement for high-poverty schools (Hitt & Meyers, 2017). Participant leaders within the participant schools were also purposefully selected based on the criteria (Merriam, 2009) that they maintained a leadership position within the school over the past three years. The leader position encompassed a responsibility for coaching, improving practices, and evaluating teachers (Green, 2009; Portin et al., 2009).

Utilizing methodologies from multiple case studies (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995), data were collected through multiple forms including observations of the setting and participants as well as participant interviews. Utilizing such forms was essential in obtaining rich thick information from the participant perspectives of educational leaders and the natural setting. Thus, the data were collected over a three-month period from multiple sources including observations, interviews with leaders, and documents used by leaders such as leadership meeting agendas. These sources of data were necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The data were transcribed and coded using descriptive coding, and then I identified patterns that emerged from the initial descriptive coding to build theories (Saldaña, 2009).

Researcher's Stance

One characteristic of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection and data analysis (Merriam, 1998). Stake (1995) stated that all research depends on interpretation, and the researchers doing the interpretation must realize their own "consciousness" (p. 41). Because of this, it was necessary to state my researcher stance to establish trustworthiness within this research as well as to minimize any bias due to the close interaction with the participants.

My childhood experiences of overcoming the challenges of poverty were a contributing factor to my passion for researching this topic. As a little girl in a blended family of 10, living in a single-wide trailer for a period of time, we did not have much in terms of resources and opportunities. I always had food, clothing, and shelter, and I considered myself lucky. My parents worked full-time to provide us with the things we were lucky to have. My grandparents, mom, and dad did graduate high school, but none of them went on to experience college. My exposure to any scholarly material came from my experiences at school.

My experience in elementary, middle, and high school was that of a typical happy student who graduated with good grades. Although I graduated high school with satisfactory grades, I recognized how the challenges of poverty were impacting my life. After high school, I decided to go on to college and earn an associate's degree. I signed up at a local community college and learned that I had to take remedial classes, which would cost me additional money and time. I did not understand how I could graduate with a 3.15 grade-point average and have to take remedial classes. I was told that if I had good grades, I would be fine in college. I learned the hard way that it was more than that. So, I worked full-time and went to school at night, which also caused me to take longer to complete the degree. As I grew older, my childhood

experiences with the challenges of poverty became more prevalent in academics and in everyday life. I had to work harder than my more affluent peers to overcome the impacts of limited access to educational, nutritional, dental and healthcare resources. I did not want my own children or any child to go through the same experience that I went through. I desired to provide my own children with an environment that included a rich vocabulary, a plethora of literature, resources to help with academic struggles, and knowledge of how to adequately prepare for and navigate college. So, I decided to be an educator and earn my bachelor's degree in teaching.

As an educator, I am currently working in the elementary school where I attended school. However, the school has since become a high-poverty Title I school that is struggling with achievement. During my first year as a teacher, I was new to the world of education along with Title I. It was 2009 and there was a lot of buzz about NCLB and increased accountability. The school's achievement was plummeting, and parents were choosing to take their students to another school; as a result, our principal was let go. Our school was the shame of the district. The new principal arrived and made structural and instructional changes. One year later, the school was meeting state achievement expectations. Finally, we could feel good as educators. The principal was promoted to a district administration position. Sadly, the success of our achievement was short lived, and the next year our achievement dropped. Based on the data of our district, I knew we were not the only school experiencing this phenomenon. I was determined to help our students and school and understand how Title I schools sustain achievement, so I embarked upon this research journey in my doctoral program. My experiences have shaped the assumptions I have about educational practices and educational leaders within high-poverty schools.

As a researcher, I held assumptions related to this study. To safeguard against these assumptions and their influence, I must state these assumptions that guide my beliefs and dispositions. As an educator with nine years of experience, all of which were in the same high-poverty school, I have been influenced by practices and actions used by educational leaders within my building. I have had the opportunity to work closely with leaders within my building. Each leader has utilized different approaches to leadership. I hold many assumptions about effective leader strategies based on my experience as well as from literature, such as the importance of shared and instructional leadership, building relationships, and improving the instructional program.

Currently, my administrator utilizes a distributed or shared approach, spreading leadership tasks across our leadership team and stakeholders. Additionally, researchers have identified shared leadership as an effective strategy (Leithwood, 2012). I assumed leaders would utilize shared leadership to distribute tasks, but may have limited knowledge about practices and actions to effectively implement shared leadership. Furthermore, I assumed educational leaders provided instructional leadership in order to build instructional capacity.

Building relationships was identified as an effective practice of educational leaders (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Leithwood, 2012). Building relationships included partnerships with parents and the community (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012). I assumed that educational leaders wanted and put forth effort to build relationships with all stakeholders.

Improving the instructional program encompassed planning, assessing, and monitoring learning as well as staffing (Leithwood, 2012). As a current educator, I had a preconceived notion of how our leaders develop and utilize systems for planning, assessing, and monitoring learning. Also, I assumed that leaders' hiring practices were focused on hiring educators who

had a desire to ensure all students were successful, but some educators may be hindered by a leader with limited knowledge about how to help educators develop effective practices for planning, assessing, and monitoring.

My experiences with educational leader practices such as shared and instructional leadership, building relationships, and improving the instructional program were focused on meeting the needs of high-poverty students. Setting aside "prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things" is referred to as Epoche (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Keeping my experiences in mind, I wanted to ensure that I remained as objective as possible and documented what I saw, so as not to limit potential findings to what I knew and have learned over time. I set aside my voice, listened, and used the words of the participants to describe the phenomenon. To minimize any biases, I created and utilized observation and interview protocols and recorded careful notes. Additionally, I collected multiple sources of data such as interviews from several participant perspectives as well as observations for rich thick information, which helped reduce biases.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined relative to the context of this study:

High-poverty school. High-poverty schools have a population of at least 75% of students who qualify for FRL (NCES, 2016a).

Leader. An educational leader who holds a responsibility for coaching, improving practices, and evaluating teachers (Green, 2009; Portin et al., 2009).

Title I school. Title I schools receive federal financial assistance to support the students from low-income families (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). Title I schools can have a large variation in percentages of students qualifying for FRL. For this study, the Title I

school had a student population of at least 40% of who qualify for FRL in order to be eligible to implement a schoolwide program compared to implementing targeted assistance, which uses funds to help individual students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c).

Summary

The achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent counterparts is a challenge for policymakers, administrators, and educators. As the researcher, I sought to understand this challenge through research literature. Therefore, this chapter opened with an identification of challenges of poverty for student learning and the ramifications resulting in the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students. Specifically, economically disadvantaged students enter schools with deficits in literacy compared to their more affluent peers (Jensen, 2009). Following this was a review of United States federal reform approaches aimed at closing the achievement gap. The reforms mentioned were ESEA in 1965, NCLB in 2001, and ESSA in 2015, which increased equity, accountability, and flexibility, respectively. Despite these endeavors, the achievement gap still exists. Educational leaders have been identified in research literature as significant to helping schools succeed; however, there is a dearth of studies on leaders in successful, high-poverty schools who are sustaining achievement. The significant problem facing leaders in education of sustaining achievement for high-poverty schools was discussed along with a study overview as well as helpful definitions. In Chapter II, a review of how federal reform requirements and court cases shaped the role and demands of educational leaders along with their influence on effective approaches to educational leadership is presented. Finally, strategies used by leaders in successful high-poverty schools are provided.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Federal educational reforms, landmark events, and court cases continually shape the role and demands of educational leaders. These influence educational leaders' approaches to bolster student achievement and close the achievement gap. Effective leadership is significant to the success of a school and is the catalyst in reaching the organizational goals of the school (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Portin et al., 2009; Waters et al., 2003). According to Neimeier's (2012) literature review on factors that influenced student achievement, leadership was documented as a key element for ensuring school success; however, as external changes such as federal reforms, landmark events, and court cases influence the requirements for education, the need remains for effective approaches to leadership that support sustained achievement in high-performing, high-poverty schools. Therefore, in this review of literature, I focus on two approaches to educational leadership that have been identified to influence student achievement: instructional and distributed leadership. Using a framework created by Leithwood (2012), leadership strategies for high-poverty schools is discussed. Lastly, I close the chapter with a recommendation on the need to further explore leadership practices in high-performing, high-poverty Title I elementary schools sustaining achievement.

Evolution of Instructional Leadership

Leadership practices between the late 1840s and early 1900s often included a preceptor, schoolmaster, and head teacher or principal who was responsible for organizing the courses of study, administering discipline, and supervising the operation of all classes and teachers

(Rousmaniere, 2013). During this time, the principal role was largely defined by these managerial skills (Portin et al., 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013). As time passed, the responsibilities of principals and superintendents became increasingly convoluted with conflicts between authority jurisdictions (Rousmaniere, 2013). Rousmaniere (2013) indicated that during the 19th century, educational reformers sought to further clarify the role of the principal from supervisor of classroom instruction to higher-level instructional responsibilities that included improving learning. Academic preparation and credentials became requirements for principals, and thus transformed the principal position from strictly management to an intellectual field of study (Rousmaniere, 2013). This was the beginning of many changes for the instructional leadership approach, because the role of the principal continued to evolve in response to federal mandates, court cases, and landmark events.

Responsive Instructional Leadership

During the 1950s and 1960s, educational leaders faced many challenges that drastically impacted their roles. In 1954, the case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* changed the demands for educational leadership. Segregated schools were declared unconstitutional because separate was ruled as not equal (Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1954). This case was the beginning of a period of turmoil for communities and schools that were adapting to integration. Rousmaniere (2013) stated that the principal role included the difficult task of creating unity between the two divided cultures within schools as well as in communities, and principals had to do so as quick as possible. Through the Civil Rights Act of 1964, school districts were held responsible to ensure the "desegregation goals of Brown" (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 90), and the Civil Rights Act also permitted funds to be withheld from school districts that were not in compliance (Rousmaniere, 2013).

Shortly after *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, Sputnik was launched by the Soviet Union in 1957, which created a competition for the advancement of technology between the United States and the Soviets (Porter, 2009); thus policymakers passed legislation to provide federal funding through the National Defense Education Act of 1958 for science, foreign language, and technology education (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1959). In addition, the funds were used to improve school testing and competencies to ensure military and economic strength for the United States, creating the initial tie between federal funding and public education (Rousmaniere, 2013). This event influenced educational leaders to improve instructional leadership that was responsive to global competition through developing innovative programs, hiring personnel to support the programs, and ensuring all students reach the newly identified competencies (Rousmaniere, 2013).

Within a few years of the launching of Sputnik was the monumental passing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which was part of President Johnson's War on Poverty (Porter, 2009). Title I, Part A of ESEA provided federal funds to assist educational leaders in improving the academic achievement for students from low-income families as an effort to increase equity in education and close the achievement gap (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). This reform impacted the principal's role to include allocating funds to programs and staffing to ensure the success of economically disadvantaged students (Porter, 2009).

In the mid-1960s, external challenges continued to impact educational leadership as disparities in equity for at-risk students remained a focus for education; thus policymakers commissioned a study on the availability of equal education opportunities, titled *Equality of Educational Opportunity (Coleman) Study (EEOS)* (Coleman, 1966). This study is more

commonly known as the Coleman Study (Brady, 2016). Coleman (1966) concluded that family background served as a predictor for student achievement outcomes more so than schools; however, Edmonds (1979) disagreed with the findings from the 1966 Coleman Study and attempted to identify schools that were "instructionally effective for poor children" (p. 21). Edmonds' research conducted in response to the Coleman Study is termed as the effective schools movement (Brady, 2016). Edmonds sought to explore correlates of school-based practices that contributed to achievement within successful urban schools serving economically disadvantaged students. Edmonds' core finding from the effective schools movement research reported that effective schools had strong administrative leadership (Edmonds, 1979). Additionally, the effective schools movement research concluded that administrative leadership practices encompassed high expectations, an orderly atmosphere, a prioritization of learning, and a plan to monitor student progress (Edmonds, 1979). Among these practices was a newly developed notion that the principal was an educational resource for teachers who was also responsible for creating vision and goals centered on instruction (Rousmaniere, 2013). This research was the epiphany in the identification of the impact of the principal's leadership on student learning (Rousmaniere, 2013).

Accountability and Instructional Leadership

The principal role in the late 1970s and 1980s was influenced by a period of pressure due to the spotlight on school performance and increased academic expectations, furthering a need to improve instructional leadership (Rousmaniere, 2013). Edmonds (1979) identified strong administrative leadership during the late 1970s as an effective correlate to schools with a large population of students experiencing poverty. Then in the early 1980s, instructional leadership became a focus due to the pivotal report, *A Nation at Risk*, which was published in 1983. The

findings from the report described public education as in a state of crisis due to a perceived decline in the overall performance of students' achievement and a need for improved instructional leadership within schools (Rousmaniere, 2013). Consequently, in 1989 the George H. W. Bush administration identified a need to adopt national academic standards and listed six goals to achieve by the year 2000 (Vinovskis, 1999). Later in 1994, the Clinton administration enacted Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994) that identified two additional goals as well as a need to adopt national academic standards to which student learning would be measured. However, policymakers neglected to implement accountability structures when schools did not meet the goals identified within Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994), so reform efforts continued into the George W. Bush administration beginning in 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

As a result of not meeting the goals identified within in Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994), the ESEA was reauthorized as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), an iteration of ESEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Under NCLB, the focus was on academic improvement and, specifically, that all students would be proficient on standards and make adequate yearly progress. Consequently, principals' accountability for the performance of their school increased (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The strict sanctions for schools related to their test scores created a mantra for NCLB referred to as "high-stakes testing" (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 133). These external challenges brought a need for improved instructional leadership for principals as educational leaders. For example, principals were responsible for the performance of all students within their school, championing all stakeholders to support the academic initiatives (Rousmaniere, 2013), hiring highly qualified teachers, and providing scientifically-based professional development (PD) for teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The pressure

and importance of instructional leadership, along with management skills for the principal, continued to remain while focusing on the impacts of instructional leadership on student achievement continued to increase (Rousmaniere, 2013).

Distributed Leadership

The cumbersome assessment and accountability requirements of the principal role heavily influenced the demand for a new approach to leadership for the 21st century, commonly referred to as distributed leadership (Rousmaniere, 2013). Barr and Parrett (2007) found that effective leaders of 21st century educational organizations need to have strong management, budget, and student discipline skills, as well as instructional leadership as the predominant trait. Portin et al. (2009) indicated that the new role of the principal included essential tasks that are aimed at improving instruction, but Portin et al. also argued that this work must be collaboratively created and distributed. As a result, a need for fulfilling the roles for several instructional leaders was created. Leithwood (2012) concluded that effective school leaders build instructional capacity via collaboration and distributed leadership, where teachers embrace informal leadership roles. The role of the principal transformed in the 21st century from that of the sole instructional leader to a leader who fostered leadership opportunities and qualities across stakeholders within the school (Rousmaniere, 2013) with distributed leadership.

Distributed leadership is often used interchangeably with shared, collaborative, democratic, and participative leadership due to the notion that leadership is dispersed (Leithwood et al., 2004). Leithwood et al. (2004) did not define distributed leadership but mentioned a process in which principals often build capacity in key teachers and parents. For example, principals rely on key teachers and parents to distribute expertise by engaging them in decision-making and instructional leadership tasks that build instructional capacity of the organization

(Leithwood et al., 2004). A study by Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001) focused on distributed leadership in relation to teaching and learning; the authors asserted that distributed leadership was shared among the principal, assistant principal, specialists, and teachers. Both Spillane et al. and Leithwood (2012) suggested that distributed leadership included teachers, but Spillane et al. included parents, specialists, and assistant principals as well. Spillane et al. concluded that when expertise is distributed, a focus on building knowledge is extended to the entire school versus an individual, such as the principal. Green (2009) also articulated the importance of distributing leadership across all stakeholders when establishing a "professional learning community" (p. 80). Effective 21st-century leaders are instructional leaders who utilize distributed leadership to build the instructional capacity as a means to increase student achievement (Green, 2009). Additionally, distributed leadership can provide the organization with maximized thinking and efficiency to address the tasks that principals are charged with today (DuFour et al., 2008).

Understanding the varying leadership approaches and how leadership has changed in response to external challenges is necessary to effectively utilize leadership practices and behaviors in schools today. An understanding of leadership approaches is essential to ensure success for all students. Though the aforementioned court case, landmark events, and reform requirements influenced instructional and distributed leadership roles to help educational leaders, specifically principals, close the achievement gap, the gap still remains. To better understand how leaders sustain achievement in high-poverty schools, the next section will include a review of strategies used by leaders in high-poverty schools.

Leadership Strategies and Actions Utilized in Successful High-Poverty Schools

For economically disadvantaged students, poverty reduces opportunities and access to resources, resulting in disparities in learning (Berliner, 2009; Brady, 2016; Coleman, 1966; Hattie, 2009; Jensen, 2009). High-poverty schools, as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2016a), have a population of at least 75% of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch (FRL). Gonzales (2016) found that in general, the higher the FRL student population, the lower the percentage of student achievement. High-poverty schools serve an atypical population of students (NCES, 2016b), which may require the use of specific leader strategies to reach success for at-risk students such as economically disadvantaged students. Despite the challenging effects of poverty to learning, there are themes, practices, and strategies for schools that can be learned from leaders who are successful in closing the achievement gap. Being a successful high-poverty school is a rare accomplishment, and the literature focused on high-poverty schools often includes schools with 50% FRL due to a loose definition of what "constituted" a high-poverty school (Olsten, 2015, p. 43). Therefore, this literature review included studies on schools with 50% FRL.

The focus of this next section within the literature review is on leadership in successful high-poverty schools because achievement data indicated that schools with 25% FRL score higher compared to schools with 75% FRL, which score at the bottom (Aud et al., 2010). Furthermore, there were a small number of high-performing, high-poverty schools that had sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years (Hitt & Meyers, 2017; National Title I Association, 2017). The Commission on NCLB (2007) identified highly effective principals as those who can accelerate and sustain high student achievement; thus this literature review includes findings from research studies of principals across various states within the United

States at successful elementary, middle, and high schools serving economically disadvantaged students.

The Ontario Leadership Framework

I sought to illuminate from the literature strategies utilized by leaders in successful schools that served economically disadvantaged students and strategies used to sustain achievement using Leithwood's (2012) Ontario leadership framework (OLF). Prior to the OLF, Leithwood (2012) collaborated with Louis et al. (2010) to research what was known about successful school leadership; at the time of this writing, this research had been cited 2,102 times according to *Google Scholar*. Louis et al. (2010) identified categories for practices used by successful leaders as setting direction, developing people, and developing the organization. However, as external changes have influenced educational leadership, Leithwood (2012) continued to refine leadership research and created the OLF. Leithwood (2012) continued with the same three categories as Louis et al. had identified as mentioned above, and added two categories: improving the instructional program and securing accountability. Leithwood (2012) also expanded the category of developing people to include building relationships. The OLF is intended to provide insights on what leaders need to learn to be successful. Given the wide influence of Leithwood's (2012) framework, I have used it to organize my discussion of literature on effective leader practices and actions, grouping the findings of studies within specific categories of the framework.

To develop the OLF, Leithwood (2012) reviewed 38 studies published prior to 2007 in order to identify characteristics of leadership in high-performing schools. Leithwood (2012) synthesized the research and named 21 practices. Leithwood (2012) categorized the 21 practices into five categories that are associated with student achievement. The five categories are (a)

setting directions, (b) building relationships and developing people, (c) developing the organization to support desired practices, (d) improving the instructional program, and (e) securing accountability (Leithwood, 2012).

Setting Directions

Leithwood's (2012) first category in the OLF is setting directions. Setting directions is based on the premise that all members of the organization are working toward a common goal (Leithwood, 2012). To ensure this, Leithwood listed four practices that support setting directions: (a) a shared vision, (b) specified goals, (c) high performance expectations, and (d) communicate the vision and goals.

Shared vision and specified goals. Leithwood (2012) noted the importance of co-constructing the vision, mission, and goals with stakeholders. Similarly, research on leadership in high-poverty schools identified establishing a shared vision, mission, and goals as essential components for success (Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016; Cohen, 2015; Hitt & Meyers, 2017; Mid-Content Research for Education and Learning [McREL], 2005; Ward, 2013). For the principal in Ward's (2013) study, establishing a shared vision included involving diverse stakeholders in discussing and establishing a set of core beliefs and goals. The process included input from the teachers, custodians, and clerical staff (Ward, 2013). Brady (2016) reported that leadership was an essential part of the mission and vision.

Several researchers made the distinction of creating a clear mission and vision so that the mission, vision, and goals were specific and understood by all stakeholders (Boland et al., 2012; Cohen, 2015; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson, & Ylimaki, 2007). Additionally, DuFour et al. (2008) stressed the importance of creating and implementing a clear mission and shared vision by stating that "a vision will have little impact until it is

understood, accepted, and connects with the personal visions of those within the school or district" (p. 121). Hitt and Meyers (2017) stated that leaders established clearly defined short- and long-term goals, and Cohen (2015) reported that 16 out of 25 principals required teachers to align student learning objectives to the school goals. Furthermore, Carter (2000) asserted that principals use goals along with holding personnel accountable to ensure goals are met. Given these points, Ward (2013) mentioned that developing a shared vision is a process and becomes a central aspect in establishing a culture of excellence for an organization. Principals envisioned their schools as a place where all students learn (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012).

High expectations. The effects of poverty create challenges for learning (Brady, 2016; Cohen, 2015; Jensen, 2009), and it is often reported that staff in high-poverty schools have low expectations of students (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Cohen, 2015). Despite the numerous challenges for students in poverty, specifically those that can have an effect on student achievement, Jensen (2009) drew upon neuroscience research to identify that "brains are designed to change" (p. 47). Jensen contended that efforts towards increasing student achievement can produce desired results.

Having and communicating high expectations, particularly for all students, was cited as an effective strategy used in successful high-poverty schools (Anderson & DeCesare, 2007; Brady, 2016; Carter, 2000; Cohen, 2015; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Hitt & Meyers, 2017; Jacobson et al., 2007; Jensen, 2009; Kannapel, Clements, Taylor, & Hibpshman, 2005; McREL, 2005). Gorski (2013), similarly to Cohen (2015) and Brady (2016), listed several instructional strategies that work to increase student achievement, such as having and communicating high expectations for all students. Specifically, Brady concluded that high expectations were required

from everyone, which included staff, students, and parents. Boland et al. (2012) noted that staff stated setting high expectations and empowering staff to accomplish expectations were instructional leadership behaviors exhibited in the schools. When staff truly believe and model behaviors that students can achieve, students learn more (Gorski, 2013). In one study, the school culture focused on a commitment to high-level continuous improvement beyond one year's growth for all students in efforts to close the achievement gaps (Boland et al., 2012). Staff reported observing characteristics of high expectations through the commitment to deliver best first instruction, which was an attempt to alleviate large numbers of students being placed in academic interventions to fill in the gaps (Boland et al., 2012).

Another example of an identified practice for high expectations was having an enrichment mind-set (Brady, 2016; Chenoweth, 2017; Jensen, 2009). Jensen's (2009) review of literature identified similar characteristics that affected achievement and prioritized those based on the characteristics known to change the brain. Jensen noted classroom and schoolwide factors that affected achievement and listed eight school-wide success factors. One of the school-wide success factors was an enrichment mind-set, which was described as an environment where staff focus on "enrichment" versus "remediation" and take every opportunity to enrich learning (Jensen, 2009, p. 94). Similar to Jensen, Carter (2000) mentioned that middle and high schools focus on college preparation. More specifically, Chenoweth (2017) reported that leaders in high schools create master schedules to ensure that all students are in college-preparatory classes and Advanced Placement classes. Furthermore, Leithwood's (2012) research on high expectations aligned with Jensen's enrichment mind-set for staff, because an environment focused on intervention emphasizes what is lacking as compared to an environment focused on high

expectations. Leaders in these schools not only held high expectations, but they also clearly communicated the high expectations.

Communication. Communication is essential for setting directions. Leithwood (2012) contended that the vision or goals do not carry "motivational weight" (p. 14) unless they are communicated to all stakeholders. Additionally, communicating the vision and goals to all stakeholders is important because not all stakeholders participated in creating the shared vision (Leithwood, 2012).

Many principals in high-poverty schools went beyond communicating the vision and goals and stated that communication was an important factor contributing to student learning (Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016). Communication included communicating student learning with families, students, the community, and staff for many purposes (Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016). Brady (2016) concluded that utilizing various forms of communication to inform stakeholders about student learning and school events included conferences, home visits, phone calls, e-mails, and newsletters. Communicating with families about student learning progress, such as regular communication between teachers and families on student progress, was also utilized as a method to monitor student learning (Boland et al., 2012; Chenoweth, 2017). Brady stressed that communication between staff and students focus on student performance as well as opportunities for students to express their needs and concerns, which create a safe environment for student learning. In addition, staff in high-poverty schools reported communicating with the community about student data (Boland et al., 2012). Setting direction, along with the previously mentioned supporting practices, are essential effective leadership tasks used by leaders to support the needs of all students.

Building Relationships and Developing People

Establishing relationships with stakeholders and stimulating professional growth are the characteristics of Leithwood's (2012) building relationships and developing people category. Leithwood (2012) determined that building relationships with stakeholders and developing people through PD increased the capacity of the organization. Opportunities to increase skills for staff are equally important as having staff who are willing to take risks and apply the knowledge, which is based on a foundation of trusting relationships (Leithwood, 2012). Leader practices focused on developing people included leaders influencing members towards reaching the shared organizational goals through intellectual stimulation and support (Leithwood, 2012).

Instructional leadership. Instructional leadership is associated with improving instructional practices through providing intellectual stimulation (Leithwood, 2012). Instructional leadership was mentioned as an effective leadership approach utilized in high-poverty schools (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Boland et al., 2012; Carter, 2000; Cohen, 2015; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Jacobson et al., 2007). Barr and Parrett (2007) cited that effective school leaders built instructional capacity of the organization. For instance, a critical factor in high-poverty schools was instructional leadership focused on developing instructional practices to increase student achievement (Boland et al., 2012). To develop instructional practices Boland et al. (2012) reported that the instructional leadership team consists of the principal and teacher leaders working closely together to develop best instructional practices to advance student achievement. Moreover, Hitt and Meyers (2017) contended that leaders identify and utilize strengths of staff to meet organization goals.

Stimulating professional development. Intentional PD practices were a common theme among successful high-poverty schools (Anderson & DeCesare, 2007; Boland et al., 2012;

Brady, 2016; Carter, 2000; Chenoweth, 2017; Cohen, 2015; Jacobson et al., 2007; Martinez, 2011; Ward, 2013). Martinez (2011) found that ongoing and systematic PD is vital to school reform aimed at increasing student achievement. One study of effective leadership practices utilized the Louis et al. (2010) and Leithwood (2010) early framework, which encompassed setting direction, developing people, and developing the organization to synthesize findings (Ward, 2013). In this study, Ward (2013) emphasized developing the people to meet leadership goals for the school through PD. Anderson and DeCesare (2007) found that teachers should be included in decisions regarding PD. The PD practices encompassed (a) allocating resources to PD; (b) creating sustainable, supportive, effective, and efficient systems for PD (Chenoweth, 2017); (c) providing PD opportunities using peer coaching, mentoring, and feedback (Brady, 2016; Cohen, 2015; Reinhorn, Johnson, & Simon, 2017); and (d) encouraging professional growth in teachers (Chenoweth, 2017).

Allocating resources to professional development. Effective principals in high-poverty schools allocated resources such as money and time for PD to build the capacity of the organization and support achievement (Anderson & DeCesare, 2007; Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016; Chenoweth, 2017; Hitt & Meyers, 2017; Jacobson et al., 2007). Brady (2016) and Anderson and DeCesare (2007) found that principals allocated money to PD; however, teachers often relied on the district's instructional coaches and other administrators for differentiated PD. For instance, principals role-modeled best practices and shared learning from PD courses as well as information from books and articles they read (Jacobson et al., 2007). Boland et al. (2012) pointed out that principals and teacher leaders led PD and that built instructional capacity as well as helped to maximize the limited budget. Furthermore, PD, particularly with a focus on issues relating to poverty for teachers in high-poverty schools, was mentioned in order to better meet

the needs of their particular student population (Cohen, 2015). According to Reeves (2003), all staff, including bus drivers and cafeteria workers, were invited to attend PD opportunities due to the fact that students usually begin their day with interactions from these staff members. Principals also ensured time to collaborate as another resource allocated to PD (Anderson & DeCesare, 2007; Barr & Parrett, 2007; Chenoweth, 2017; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Jacobson et al., 2007; McREL, 2005).

***Professional development opportunities*.** Providing PD opportunities for staff was another common theme listed in high-poverty schools (Anderson & DeCesare, 2007; Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016; Cohen, 2015; McREL, 2005). The PD opportunities included many forms such as mentoring, coaching, reflection, feedback (Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016; Cohen, 2015; Reinhorn et al., 2017), and peer observations (Reinhorn et al., 2017; Ward, 2013). According to Cohen (2015), 21 of the 25 principals interviewed reported a sense of duty to build the capacity of others through mentoring, coaching, reflecting, and feedback. One example Brady (2016) mentioned was a math coach who utilized co-teaching to assist the teacher with implementing higher-order questioning. Another example of developing people strategy, according to Ward (2013), included supporting staff through providing explicit feedback from observations, as well as providing time for teachers to participate in professional learning communities, PD, and peer observations. Similar to Ward's findings, Boland et al. (2012), Brady , and Cohen found that principal visibility, such as frequent visits in classrooms for either a brief or long observation with feedback, was reported as a practice to improve instruction. Furthermore, Reinhorn et al. (2017) contended that improving teachers' practices used an integrated approach of evaluations, instructional coaching, teacher teams, whole-school PD, peer observations, and feedback.

***Professional development systems*.** Principals in successful high-poverty schools created systems for PD focused on collaboration and developing new leaders (Chenoweth, 2017). According to Cohen (2015), professional learning communities were a cornerstone to establishing a collaborative and professional environment. Systems for collaboration involved grade-level teams, cross grade-level teams, and specialists to focus on standards and student work, map out curriculum, plan assessments, and study data to improve instruction. Teachers reported that time together increased effectiveness through supporting one another, developing new strategies, and evaluating instructional practices (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012). Similarly, Cohen found that instructional leadership collaborated to monitor data. For example, monitoring data included vertical alignment in calibrating scoring, which ultimately increased the focus for purposeful and meaningful instruction by teachers (Cohen, 2015).

Encouraging professional growth for educators was reported as a strategy used in high-poverty schools (Brady, 2016; Chenoweth, 2017; Hitt & Meyers, 2017). One high-poverty school had a system to monitor teacher growth (Chenoweth, 2017). Chenoweth (2017) contended that principals provided mentors for new teachers. Additionally, staff reported that principals were knowledgeable about research and selected PD opportunities aligned with improving the instructional goals of the school (Boland et al., 2012). Instructional leaders encourage PD and utilize several methods to provide PD (Brady, 2016; Chenoweth, 2017; Ward, 2013).

Relationships. Relationships were a critical factor to the success of high-poverty schools (Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016; Chenoweth, 2017; Cohen, 2015; Jensen, 2009; Kannapel et al., 2005; McREL, 2005). Relationship building, according to Jensen (2009), included fostering supportive relationships for staff and students. In a study focused on practices of administrators

and teachers, Brady (2016) stated, “Teacher relationships with one another and with students were paramount to the school’s success” (p. 122). Brady also articulated that parents and teachers reported strong student-teacher relationships because students believed they were cared for by their teachers. According to Boland et al. (2012), relationships were the solid foundation for open and effective communication, teacher ownership for student learning, and parents’ assistance with attendance expectations.

Leaders excelled in building strong relationships with students, parents, and teachers through the creation of a shared mission and vision that was committed to continuous improvement, as noted above within setting directions (Boland et al., 2012). The Boland et al. (2012) study revealed that a culture where staff cared about students and inspired their best efforts existed within schools from the study. Furthermore, a practice for building relationships involved celebrating successes (Brady, 2016; Jensen, 2009). A principal adopted celebrating as a practice to keep a positive climate because of challenges associated with high-poverty such as discipline, mobility, and a lack of parental involvement (Brady, 2016). The principal acknowledged that teachers experienced burnout; however, the principal was committed to a continued focus on learning and to revive the culture, celebrate student growth, success with programs being implemented, students embracing leader roles, and home-school connections (Brady, 2016). In sum, instructional leadership focused on PD, and building relationships were strategies used by leaders to increase the instructional capacity of the organization.

Developing the Organization to Support Desired Practices

Schools are complex organizations. Leithwood (2012) in the third category of the OLF framework shared that leaders can benefit from an understanding of how successful leaders develop the organization. The understanding helps to support economically disadvantaged

students despite the challenges that confront high-poverty schools. The characteristics that encompassed developing the organization were (a) creating a collaborative and safe environment with shared leadership, (b) making connections to the community, (c) building productive relationships, and (d) maximizing structures (Leithwood, 2012). Of these practices, the shared leadership approach is the means to establishing and implementing a collaborative culture with effective systems and structures (Leithwood, 2012).

Shared leadership. Shared and distributed leadership were common characteristics utilized by principals in high-poverty schools (Anderson & DeCesare, 2007; Boland et al., 2012; Cohen, 2015; Jacobson et al., 2007; Kannapel et al., 2005). Cohen (2015) asserted that participatory and distributed leadership is reflective of a collaborative culture. Principals implemented distributed leadership with opportunities for input from staff (Boland et al., 2012; Jacobson et al., 2007). Boland et al. (2012) found that the principals and teacher leaders led PD, and the teacher leaders also assisted in monitoring school improvement goals. Similar to Boland et al., Cohen (2015) reported that 22 of the 25 principals interviewed noted the importance of teachers participating in the strategic planning process. Furthermore, shared-decision making was utilized by all 25 principals; however, the makeup of the decision-making team varied sometimes, including content specialist and central office professionals (Cohen, 2015).

High-poverty principals noted the importance of including parents in shared decision making (Cohen, 2015; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; McREL, 2005). Cohen (2015) found that a strong desire to involve stakeholders in the school improvement effort was reported as a leadership practice utilized, and these stakeholders included parents and other community members. Principals reported an awareness of the impact of parental involvement on student achievement (Cohen, 2015). Parent involvement is often cited as a challenge in high-poverty

schools, and efforts made by the 25 principals to reach out to parents showed little improvement in increasing parent involvement (Cohen, 2015); however, successful principals in high-poverty schools involve parents (Education Trust, 1999). Hagelskamp and DiStasi (2012) reported that some high-poverty schools had developed effective strategies for involving parents as well as businesses within the community. Hagelskamp and DiStasi asserted that parent and community involvement was not a primary focus, but instead the focus was on things principals, teachers, and students can do within the "school walls" to improve learning (p. 4). Although leaders can encourage parent engagement, leaders cannot force parent engagement.

School environment. A safe environment was identified as an essential factor in high-poverty schools (Jacobson et al., 2007; McREL, 2005). According to principals in studies by Jacobson et al. (2007) and Olsten (2015), creating a safe environment was a priority to improve student learning. Because principals can be overwhelmed with discipline issues (Brady, 2016), many schools utilized discipline systems (Chenoweth, 2017; Jacobson et al., 2007; Olsten, 2015). Discipline systems focused on students learning what is expected (Chenoweth, 2017) and respect (Jacobson et al., 2007). No assumptions were made about behaviors students should already know; all students were explicitly taught behavior expectations (Chenoweth, 2017). One high school instituted Saturday detentions to avoid a loss of student learning, compared to suspension, which typically results in more problematic behavior (Chenoweth, 2017).

Maximizing structures and resources. Maximizing structures within the school system was reported as a practice utilized by leaders in the high-poverty schools (Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016; Chenoweth, 2017). One study noted increasing instructional time for reading and math (Education Trust, 1999). Another example of maximizing structures according to Boland et al. (2012) and Chenoweth (2017) was creating a schedule designed to maximize quality

instructional time. Boland et al. contended that a schedule centered on quality instructional time included the principal's awareness of interventions, assemblies, and other activities. Thus principals limited disruptions by being aware of core-subject instruction when scheduling interventions, assemblies, and other activities as integral considerations for increasing student achievement (Boland et al., 2012).

Strategies mentioned by principals in high-poverty schools to maximize schedules included teaching bell-to-bell (Brady, 2016; Chenoweth, 2017), utilizing after school hours (Brady, 2016; Carter, 2000; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Olsten, 2015), including Saturdays (Carter, 2000; Chenoweth, 2017), and summer hours (Carter, 2000; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012). For one high school, all students including incoming ninth graders were required to turn in a summer reading and writing project in the first grading period, and staff volunteered one day in the summer to help students (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012). This project was designed to reduce the summer loss of skills, communicate the high academic expectations, and act as a tool for teachers to assess students' entry skills (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012). One high school used grant funds to capitalize on Saturdays to welcome and prepare students for classes with a system design that alternated weeks with subjects (Chenoweth, 2017).

Allocating resources. Leaders in high-poverty Title I schools need to be skilled at managing resources, as resources are often limited (Brady, 2016). However, Title I schools receive supplemental funding with strict usage guidelines, and leaders need to be skilled at maximizing those funds to close the gap in student achievement (Brady, 2016). According to Boland et al. (2012), Carter (2000), and McREL (2005), principals were skilled in the allocation and use of resources. For example, Jensen (2009) included supporting the whole child, which encompassed finding resources to address the "social, emotional, and health" (p. 70) needs of the

students. Brady (2016) pointed out that Title I schools are provided additional funding resources and that leadership was intentional and strategic in allocating funds for additional resources. The McREL (2005) study asserted that resources need to be allocated for effective instruction. In one study, leaders spent a large proportion of Title I money for PD (Education Trust, 1999). Additionally, Brady found that the Title I funds were used for increasing achievement and PD, such as the positive behavior intervention support program, leader in me training, after-school tutoring, and use of technology.

Community partnerships. Researchers reported that establishing community partnerships was a strategy used by leaders in high-poverty schools (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Edmonds, 1979; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012). Effective schools movement research stated that effective instructional practices include utilizing resources from other businesses by establishing partnerships with the community (Edmonds, 1979). Partnerships were especially important for low-income schools, because they typically do not have access to many resources (Barr & Parrett, 2007). An example of a community and high-poverty school partnership was with Cincinnati Bell, a telecommunication company that provided technology incentives for students (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012). The program was founded on mentoring, tutoring, and motivating students (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012). Tutors were strategically paired with students based on needs and interests of the pair (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012). According to Hagelskamp and DiStasi (2012), partnerships provided incentives to motivate students, which consisted of cell phones and service, laptops and Internet access, gift cards, and scholarships. The incentives were earned by students based on a high grade point average. Clearly, shared leadership, safe school environment, and maximizing structures and resources are important practices to support economically disadvantaged learners.

Improving the Instructional Program

Improving the instructional program category, as identified by Leithwood (2012), is focused on increasing student learning. Leithwood (2012) documented that improving the instructional program included practices such as providing instructional support to staff and students while removing any barriers to learning, monitoring of learning, and utilizing hiring skills. Leithwood (2012) asserted that "teacher quality is widely judged to be the most powerful influence on student achievement" (p. 26). Being skilled at hiring is especially important; however, teacher quality can be developed (Leithwood, 2012). Leaders are required to provide evidence for student learning, and thus need to monitor learning (Leithwood, 2012).

Planning and delivering instruction for learning. Improving the instructional program within successful high-poverty schools involved implementing planning practices aligned to standards (Education Trust, 1999). Planning practices utilized by successful high-poverty principals included requirements for educators' instructional strategies that were purposefully planned, delivered, and monitored to drive instruction to meet students' needs (Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016; Chenoweth, 2017). Boland et al. (2012) stated that best first instruction was a priority within the high-poverty schools meaning that "all students have access to the core curriculum" (p. 9). For instance, strategies, such as sheltered immersion observation protocol, were utilized to help students access the core curriculum (Boland et al., 2012). Explicit vocabulary instruction was another instructional strategy found in successful high-poverty schools (Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016). Other strategies to support instruction identified by Gorski (2013) but not listed by Boland et al. included (a) incorporating music, art, and theater across the curriculum; (b) adopting higher-order, student-centered, rigorous pedagogies; (c) incorporating movement and exercise into teaching and learning; (d) making curricula relevant to

the lives of low-income students; (e) teaching about poverty and class bias; (f) analyzing learning materials for class (and other) bias; and (g) promoting literacy enjoyment. Planning for quality instruction is essential to meet the individual needs of all students.

Boland et al. (2012), Anderson and DeCesare (2007), and Education Trust (1999) found that a successful practice used by leaders within the high-poverty schools was monitoring student learning to identify individual needs and immediately identify learning gaps. Leaders reported using interventions (Brady, 2016; Carter, 2000; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Olsten, 2015; Ward, 2013) to target small groups of students who are struggling with a specific concept (Boland et al., 2012). Boland et al. noted that practitioners tend to place students who are below level in interventions and count on the intervention to be the sole answer to increase student learning, thus removing the accountability from the general educator. To effectively make a difference for the at-risk students, Boland et al. asserted a need for educators to align best first instruction and appropriate interventions. Response to intervention was a system used by principals to ensure appropriate interventions were in place for students (Gonzales, 2016). Appropriate intervention is placing students in interventions based on skills that students need (Gonzales, 2016). Leaders believed that student services addressed individual student needs and closed learning gaps (Boland et al., 2012).

Assessing and monitoring of learning. Assessing student learning was listed as an effective strategy used by principals (Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016; Chenoweth, 2017; Jensen, 2009; Reeves, 2003). Jensen (2009) identified monitoring strategies used in high-poverty schools and combined the strategies under the name “hard data” (p. 73). Hard data, according to Jensen, encompassed developing a plan that is timely, accurate, and includes multiple measures to monitor student achievement data. Brady (2016) found that leaders

implemented frequent, common formative assessments across grade levels. Leaders within high-poverty schools asserted that assessments need to be standards-based and rigorous (Boland et al., 2012). The assessments were used to provide staff with essential data to improve instruction and learning for students (Brady, 2016).

Monitoring student learning is commonly cited as a strategy utilized by leaders in high-poverty schools (Carter, 2000; Chenoweth, 2017; McREL, 2005; Reeves, 2003). Reeves (2003) documented monitoring student learning as an effective strategy along with other strategies used to improve the instructional program. The effective strategies to monitor learning included focusing on achievement, monitoring student learning while providing improvement opportunities, teaching writing focused on nonfiction, and calibrating the scoring of student work (Reeves, 2003). Reeves (2007) articulated the importance of a clear common definition of proficiency that is known among students, staff, and leaders as an effective strategy for instructional leaders. Additionally, assessments were reported as a common strategy utilized to monitor learning in high-poverty schools (Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016; Chenoweth, 2017; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; McREL, 2005; Olsten, 2015). Findings from the McREL (2005) report stated that in successful schools assessments and instruction were aligned. Weekly assessments with continued opportunities to improve learning for students who were not successful were an effective strategy (Reeves, 2003). The assessments were heavily focused on writing, and some principals were involved in reviewing and scoring the written assessments, giving more insight into the academic needs of the students (Reeves, 2003).

Data collection and analysis of learning. Data collection and analysis for staff and students was a practice implemented by effective leaders in high-poverty schools (Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016; Chenoweth, 2017; Cohen, 2015; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Ward, 2013).

Data collection included data on achievement (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Boland et al., 2012; Chenoweth, 2017; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012), behavior (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Brady, 2016; Chenoweth, 2017), and staff (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Brady, 2016; Ward, 2013). The findings from high-poverty schools concluded that leaders incorporated information from disaggregated data into the school improvement plan (Boland et al., 2012). Additionally, school leaders described utilizing professional learning communities to review and analyze student assessment data, set goals, and plan and support further instructional practices of staff (Brady, 2016; Cohen, 2015; Gonzales, 2016). In one study, leaders mentioned utilizing a data analysis model that included data on behavior, academics, health, and attendance (Gonzales, 2016). Furthermore, Ward (2013) reported that the principal collected data on observations of staff actions, and this was used to support staff through providing explicit feedback from observations.

Staffing. Staffing was identified as an important strategy used in high-poverty schools (Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016; Carter, 2000; Cohen, 2015; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Kannapel et al., 2005). Improving instruction is a primary role of a school principal (Cohen, 2015). Staffing influences instruction, and hiring the right staff is a critical task of a principal (Brady, 2016). An effective strategy cited by Boland et al. (2012) was implementing hiring practices. The hiring practices included hiring staff who shared the mission and vision; however, this strategy also included letting go of staff who did not support the mission and vision (Boland et al., 2012; Jacobson et al., 2007). Given these points, leaders in successful high-poverty schools plan, assess, collect data, and use staffing strategies to improve the instructional program.

Securing Accountability

Securing accountability, according to Leithwood (2012), is creating collective responsibility for student learning. Accountability for principals includes meeting internal and external requirements for student learning (Leithwood, 2012). As noted by Leithwood (2012), internal accountability is focused on meeting the school's goals. External accountability is focused on meeting the requirements for student learning that is aligned to district, state, and federal requirements (Leithwood, 2012).

Internal accountability. Accountability for learning was listed as a strategy utilized by leaders in high-poverty schools (Anderson & DeCesare, 2007; Barr & Parrett, 2007; Brady, 2016; Carter, 2000; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Jacobson et al., 2007; Jensen, 2009). Accountability for learning included holding students (Brady, 2016; Carter, 2000; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Jacobson et al., 2007), parents (Brady, 2016; Carter, 2000; Jacobson et al., 2007), teachers (Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016; Jensen, 2009), staff (Brady, 2016; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Jacobson et al., 2007), and leaders/administrators/principals accountable (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Jacobson et al., 2007). Students are held accountable for their learning (Brady, 2016), and in one study, students were made aware that they are in charge and responsible for their learning, not their parents (Carter, 2000).

Accountability for teachers focused on a responsibility to teach (Brady, 2016). Jensen (2009) stated, accountability is part of the job and teachers must be accountable for their actions through evaluations. Jensen listed strategies to increase teachers' acceptance of accountability, which encompassed purposefully placing teachers in their roles, including teachers in the accountability process and celebrating successes. Teachers' participation in planning as well as

their awareness of student performance on formative assessments was mentioned as a practice held by leaders in a high-poverty school (Brady, 2016).

Parents as well as teachers and students were required to sign a "Title I Compact" (Brady, 2016, p. 96) to ensure accountability for the expectations for their roles in learning (Brady, 2016). To hold parents and educators accountable, many principals reported the use of compacts/contracts that explicitly defined parent and educator roles in education (Anderson & DeCesare, 2007; Brady, 2016; Carter, 2000). Parent expectations included supporting their child and school efforts (Brady, 2016).

External accountability. Accountability for student learning included accountability for administrators to meet district, state, and federal requirements identified under federal mandates (Leithwood, 2012). In one study, leaders had accountability systems with consequences in place (Education Trust, 1999). In another study, accountability to state requirements included implementing teachers' evaluations (Reinhorn et al., 2017) and student performance. Federal policymakers increased accountability for principals under NCLB (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Accountability systems are in place for students, educators, and administrators at successful high-poverty schools.

Summary

In sum, effective principals in high-poverty schools used practices identified in the OLF (Leithwood, 2012). Setting directions included creating a shared vision, setting goals, having high expectations, and communicating the vision and goals (Leithwood, 2012). Strategies used to build relationships and develop people consisted of utilizing instructional leadership for PD opportunities (Boland et al., 2012) and allocating funds to do so (Brady, 2016), as well as building relationships with the community (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012). Additionally,

principals developed the organization and supported desired practices through embracing shared leadership (Boland et al., 2012), creating a safe school environment (Jacobson et al., 2007), establishing systems (Chenoweth, 2017), and maximizing resources (Brady, 2016). Improving the instructional program practices consisted of planning and assessing for learning, monitoring learning, data collection and analysis, and specific staffing practices. Securing accountability practices encompassed defined stakeholders roles for internal and external accountability.

Leadership Strategies and Actions Utilized in Successful High-Poverty Schools Sustaining Achievement

Literature exists about successful high-poverty schools (Boland et al., 2012; Brady, 2016; Carter, 2000; Olsten, 2015; Reeves, 2003; Ward, 2013); however, performance levels reported were often followed by a plateau or a regression, and few schools have been able to sustain achievement (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012) beyond two consecutive years (Hitt & Meyers, 2017). According to Hitt and Meyers (2017), there has not been a "broad effort" (p. 1) to study schools that sustain improvement. Leithwood's (2012) OLF will be revisited to highlight the different strategies utilized in successful high-poverty schools and high-poverty schools that sustain achievement beyond two consecutive years.

Setting Directions

Setting direction strategies utilized by principals in high-poverty schools that sustained achievement for three years were similar to strategies used in successful high-poverty schools. The similar strategies included creating a shared mission and vision, goals, high expectations, and communication strategies (Brady, 2016; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Hitt & Meyers, 2017; Olsten, 2015). However, differences existed in communication practices. For instance, staff members communicated with families through home visits (Brady, 2016; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Olsten, 2015). Brady (2016) reported that home visits, along with other forms of

communication, were used by staff to communicate student progress and learning with the students' families (Brady, 2016). Similar to the Brady study, Hagelskamp and DiStasi (2012) found that teachers utilized home visits to let families know about "plans and expectations" (p. 34) for the coming year. Home visits are also about involving parents in their child's education, making parents feel comfortable, and a time for students to share special information that they want their teacher to know (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b). Furthermore, communication practices included being transparent about what goes on in the school, particularly in terms of student data (Brady, 2016). Other communication practices included quarterly learning nights to help with transparency, and part of the evening was dedicated to communicate school-wide data (Brady, 2016). As has been noted, communication is an important strategy to set directions for leaders in high-poverty schools that sustain achievement.

Building Relationships and Developing People

Leaders of high-poverty schools sustaining achievement utilized building relationships and developing people strategies similarly to successful high-poverty schools. Comparable strategies included allocation of resources and opportunities for PD and relationships. None of the studies on high-poverty schools that sustained achievement explicitly stated utilizing instructional leadership to build capacity, but instead mentioned in-house PD (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012). In-house PD is based on the practice of having staff within the school read and discuss topics relevant to the needs of the school, compared to "out-of-house" training (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012, p. 51). In-house PD was reported as a strategy that better met the school needs because it is tailored to the school's issues (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012). Brady (2016) also noted that PD was differentiated based on teacher needs identified from leader

walkthroughs. Clearly, building relationships and in-house PD to develop people were essential strategies used by leaders in high-poverty schools that sustain achievement.

Developing the Organization to Support Desired Practices

Developing the organization to support desired practices included (a) creating a collaborative and safe environment with shared leadership, (b) making connections to the community, (c) building relationships, and (d) maximizing resources (Leithwood, 2012). To create a collaborative environment, a practice used by leaders included district personnel assisting principals in carefully considering which leader practices should be implemented through distributed leadership or by principals only (Hitt & Meyers, 2017). Using staff to provide PD was an effective method to distribute leadership (Brady, 2016).

Principals of high-poverty schools mentioned the importance of a safe environment, specifically utilizing a behavior system referred to as positive behavior interventions and supports (Brady, 2016; Olsten, 2015) and providing PD for enacting positive behavior interventions and supports (Olsten, 2015). One principal reported that behavior expectations were revisited frequently during the year including what the expected behavior looked like (Olsten, 2015). Another practice for creating a safe environment was that staff sought to understand the reasons for behavior (Olsten, 2015). Additionally, leaders in high-poverty schools mentioned utilizing the positive behavior interventions and supports model to create interventions for behavior and reward and celebrate good behavior as a method to increase learning (Brady, 2016; Olsten, 2015). Similarly, Hagelskamp and DiStasi (2012) reported that high-poverty schools used tangible items, such as computers or cell phones, to increase motivation and improve student behavior. In essence, behavior expectations were a critical

factor to developing the organization to support desired practices in high-poverty schools that sustain achievement.

Improving the Instructional Program

Improving the instructional program encompassed practices such as providing instructional support to staff and students while removing barriers to learning, monitoring learning, and utilizing hiring skills (Leithwood, 2012). Similarities and differences in leader practices between successful high-poverty schools and high-poverty schools sustaining achievement were noted for improving the instructional program. The primary differences for leaders in high-poverty schools sustaining achievement were identified in delivering instruction and staffing practices.

Instructional approaches. One high-poverty school that sustained achievement utilized personalized and blended learning, as well as collaborative group work to deliver instruction (Brady, 2016). According to Brady (2016), "Personalized learning occurs when teachers tailor the learning environment based on how students learn best" (p. 78). For instance, some students used manipulatives, some used technology instruction, and some received small-group instruction from the teacher (Brady, 2016). As defined by Brady, "Blended learning occurs when part of a student's learning is through digital content" (p. 77). Additionally, focusing on teaching and learning was explicitly reported as a contributing factor to sustained achievement (Brady, 2016). For example, decisions were made keeping student achievement in mind, which included students being placed in specific classes and instructional plans for students (Brady, 2016).

The adoption of state-approved instructional frameworks for implementing new curriculum was another unique difference in leader practices used in high-poverty schools

sustaining achievement was (Olsten, 2015). Two schools reported adopting an instructional framework such as Advancement Via Individual Determination and Charlotte Danielson's Framework For Teaching (Olsten, 2015). One school implemented the Advancement Via Individual Determination program that focused on providing organizational skills for students that are aimed at "closing the gap as well as preparing students for college readiness and success in global society" (Advancement Via Individual Determination, 2018, para. 1). The other school implemented Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching (Olsten, 2015). The Framework for Teaching is an instrument used for teachers and evaluations (Danielsongroup, 2018). Under the framework there are four domains of teacher responsibilities that include 22 teaching practices that are broken down into 76 elements (Danielsongroup, 2018).

Staffing. Staffing practices in high-poverty schools sustaining achievement encompassed hiring the right people to accomplish the necessary task (Brady, 2016; Hitt & Meyers, 2017). One principal reported difficulty in hiring the right staff (Brady, 2016). Additionally, the principal asserted that staffing decisions should not only include people who are agreeable, but also members who advocate for what is best for students (Brady, 2016). A strategy for hiring the right staff utilized by the principal, as reported by Brady (2016), was being upfront with candidates about the difficulty of the job. To summarize, instructional approaches, such as teaching frameworks and being transparent about the difficulty of the job, were strategies used by leaders in high-poverty schools that sustain achievement.

Securing Accountability

Securing accountability for schools included meeting internal and external requirements for student learning (Leithwood, 2012). Similarities were identified in securing accountability strategies used by principals in high-poverty schools sustaining achievement and principals in

successful high-poverty schools. Internal requirements have more flexibility compared to external requirements, which are set by policymakers; however, internal requirements were similar across both schools. One difference for high-poverty schools that sustain achievement included explicit expectations for lesson plans that included objectives, pre/post assessments, vocabulary words, differentiation, cooperative learning, and teaching and learning reflections (Brady, 2016). Clearly, for leaders in successful high-poverty schools explicit expectations were a strategy to secure accountability.

In conclusion, there were differences in the OLF (Leithwood, 2012) practices used by leaders in high-poverty schools compared to leaders in high-poverty schools that sustain achievement. In relation to setting directions, leaders in high-poverty schools also included home visits, which were used to communicate between school and home (Brady, 2016); for developing people and building relationships strategies, leaders used PD conducted by staff within the school that was focused on the schools' needs (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012). To develop the organization to support desired practices, leaders in high-poverty schools that sustain achievement focused on a safe environment through behavior expectations (Olsten, 2015). Improving the instructional program for leaders in high-poverty schools that sustain achievement utilized different approaches to instruction and staffing. Instructional approaches included personalized learning, blended learning (Brady, 2016), and instructional frameworks (Olsten, 2015). One strategy for staffing was being transparent about the difficulty of the job with candidates (Brady, 2016). Leaders in high-poverty schools who sustained achievement secured accountability using explicit expectations of lesson plans (Brady, 2016).

Summary

The strategies used by leaders in successful high-poverty schools reported in this literature review for setting directions, building relationships and developing people, developing the organization to support desired practice, improving the instructional program, and securing accountability were similar with those strategies identified within the five categories from Leithwood's (2012) framework that served as a tool to synthesize the findings. The challenges in education are continually increasing with rising complexities, especially for high-poverty public schools with trends of low performance (Barr & Parrett, 2007). Barr and Parrett (2007) also believed that leadership of high-poverty schools is a "daunting undertaking" (p. 76).

The last section in the literature review included findings from studies focused on practices used by principals across the United States at high-poverty elementary, middle, and high schools that sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years. For example, Brady (2016) focused research on the principal and teachers in an elementary school in Virginia; however, leadership can also include assistant principals, instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and parents. Olsten's (2015) work focused on principals of high-poverty elementary and middle schools in the state of Washington that sustained achievement for five years. Likewise, the Hagelskamp and DiStasi (2012) research focused on high-poverty elementary, middle, and high schools in the state of Ohio. Hagelskamp and DiStasi identified 12 schools; however, only three sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years. Hitt and Meyers (2017) argued that sustaining school improvement is a challenge and that there is a lot to learn from the leaders who are successfully meeting the challenge. Furthermore, Hitt and Meyers also asserted the lack of research on schools sustaining improvement efforts have left educational leaders with minimal practices to support struggling schools. From this literature review, it is clear that further

research is needed on practices used by leaders that sustain student achievement beyond two consecutive years, especially for high-poverty Title I elementary schools, where sustaining achievement is often reported as problematic (Hitt & Meyers, 2017). Educational leaders of high-poverty schools with similar contexts may benefit from further research on how leaders influence sustained achievement in a high-poverty elementary school in the state of Colorado.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research is a process to collect data and analyze information for the purpose of increasing knowledge about a topic (Creswell, 2012). In this study, I explored the phenomenon of how leaders influence sustained achievement in successful, high-poverty Title I schools. The following research question guided this study:

Q1 How do leaders influence sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years in successful high-poverty Title I public elementary schools in Colorado?

Exploring the phenomenon using a qualitative approach provided an opportunity to produce rich, thick descriptions of the phenomenon through the participants' perspectives. The intent of this study was to identify practices and actions that may contribute to sustained achievement in high-poverty Title I schools. It is hoped that educational leaders in schools with similar contexts can use this information for school improvement efforts so students succeed.

Qualitative Approach

"Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry that explores a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2007, p. 249). Qualitative research is shaped by several characteristics (Briggs, Coleman, & Morrison, 2012; Merriam, 2009). One characteristic of qualitative research is that "the key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives, not the researcher's" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). A qualitative research approach allowed the researcher to explore and seek a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon from participant

perspectives, specifically through their lived experiences and how they make sense of these experiences (Merriam, 2009). To fully understand the phenomenon of sustaining achievement, it was important to gain access to how educational leaders make sense of the influences that contribute to such success. Leithwood (2012) noted that educational leaders have been identified as the catalysts in helping a school sustain success. Thus educational leaders as participants explained and made sense of the phenomenon from their perspectives (Merriam, 1998).

Other characteristics of qualitative research include (a) the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; (b) fieldwork; and (c) a focus on process, meaning, and understanding (Merriam, 1998). For this study, I was the data collector and analyzer, and I utilized fieldwork to collect data from the natural setting. Additionally, I constructed meaning of the phenomenon through participant perspectives. Because educational leaders have experienced and contributed to the phenomenon, I sought an in-depth and holistic understanding of the phenomenon from educational leaders who have been successful in sustaining achievement. Considering these characteristics that define qualitative research, qualitative research was the approach to answer the research question for this study.

Epistemology: Constructionism

Epistemology is the study of "how we know what we know" (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). The purpose of this study was to explore leaders' practices and actions that may influence sustained achievement. According to Crotty (1998), a constructionist belief is that knowledge is based on human practices and transmitted through social contexts. Additionally, human practices and social contexts are naturally dependent upon each other through everyday interactions between people and the language used to construct reality (Crotty, 1998). I explored the meaning of the phenomenon of sustaining achievement from leaders' perspectives of their reality using the

words they used to describe such reality. Also, I discovered meaning from observations of interactions and events that provided insight into leader practices such as professional learning communities. Furthermore, Crotty (1998) asserted that meaning from a constructionist perspective is "socially constructed" (p. 9), and people may construct meaning in different ways. Therefore, my role was to rely as much as possible on the participants' perspectives of the situation based on the language used by leaders from the data collection process to understand the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). An understanding of the phenomenon was described from listening to and transcribing what leaders and other participants said and did based on the interviews, observations, and document collection (Creswell, 2007).

Theoretical Framework: Interpretivism

A theoretical framework is the philosophical foundation and logic for the selected methodology in research (Crotty, 1998). Additionally, Merriam (1998) noted that the theoretical framework is based on how the researcher views the world. The interpretive approach is based on the assumption that access to reality is through language and shared meanings from social interaction (Crotty, 1998). For this study, I used interpretivism as a theoretical perspective to understand the unique perspectives of how leaders engage in sustaining student achievement and how they make sense of the common experience using interviews, observations, and document collection, which provide access to leaders' reality (Crotty, 1998). In seeking to understand how leaders made sense of the commonalities in experiences among the connected individuals, the interpretivist stance guided the plan of action for this study using qualitative methods to interpret words used by participants who describe their reality (Crotty, 1998). Furthermore, by exploring the experiences of leaders in sustaining achievement, I sought to uncover knowledge of practices

and actions used by leaders to advance the education field for leaders in schools with similar contexts.

Methodology

Case Study

"Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (Stake, 1995, p. xi). One feature of case study, as pointed out by Creswell (2007), is that case study explores the issue within a bounded system over time, and for this study leaders who influenced sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years was bound by time because achievement outcomes change from year to year. For example, schools can vary over time by their characteristics, such as demographics, which impact achievement outcomes and ultimately make unique cases of leaders in high-poverty schools sustaining achievement beyond two consecutive years.

Another feature of a qualitative case study noted by Merriam (2009) is that it is descriptive. The end results of a case study are the thick descriptions, which are "complete" descriptions of the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2009, p. 43). To achieve rich, thick descriptions, the researcher uses multiple sources to gather data (Creswell, 2012). For this case study, data were collected through multiple sources of information, including interviews, observations, and documents (Merriam, 2009). Because I explored the phenomenon, it was important to provide in-depth descriptions and insight into the issue (Merriam, 2009).

To answer the research question, two separate instrumental case studies were conducted of leaders of successful, high-poverty Title I public elementary schools in Colorado who were sustaining achievement beyond two consecutive years. Selecting two participant schools was necessary due to the need to report about the phenomenon in different environments (Stake,

1995). Focusing on the purpose of understanding the case, an instrumental case study served the function of providing insight into a particular issue. For this study, the issue of importance was how leaders in successful, high-poverty schools sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years. Often high-poverty schools are able to achieve success, but it is followed by a plateau or a regression (Hitt & Meyers, 2017). For this study, cases consisted of leaders in successful, high-poverty schools who were able to sustain achievement beyond two consecutive years in the state of Colorado. Such leaders are rare cases, and "There is much to learn from schools that demonstrate sustained improvement and those who lead them" (Hitt & Meyers, 2017, p. 1). In terms of this study, the leader position encompasses an educational leader who holds a responsibility for coaching, improving practices, and evaluating teachers (Green, 2009; Portin et al., 2009). The leader position consisted of principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches, because it was helpful to have perspectives about the phenomenon beyond the perspective of the principal. Additionally, the multiple-case study design was utilized to understand how the phenomenon occurs in different environments (Stake, 2006).

Merriam (2009) noted that the case study design has been useful for the education field due to the complex issues in education. The advantages of a case study for this research were to explore and describe the complexities as well as obtain access to participants with the information (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, case study was the design implemented to answer the research question of how leaders influence sustained achievement. The information obtained may provide information to implement reform policies, improve practices, and increase knowledge for the field of education, specifically leaders in schools with similar contexts.

Sampling

In qualitative sampling, the researcher must intentionally select participants who help enhance the understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). The sample selection was implemented prior to data collection (Creswell, 2012). I utilized purposeful sampling to select participants who were knowledgeable about the phenomenon, which for this research study were leaders of successful, high-poverty schools who were able to sustain achievement beyond two consecutive years (Creswell, 2012).

Purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling was used to identify high-poverty Title I schools that were able to sustain achievement to further understand the central phenomenon of sustaining achievement in high-poverty schools (Creswell, 2007). I applied three criteria to select the participant schools. The first criterion applied was based on having a free or reduced-priced lunch (FRL) population of 75% or greater as well as an average FRL population of 75% or greater for 2015, 2016, and 2017 because the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2016a) identified schools with FRL populations of 75% and above as high-poverty schools and populations change over time. The second criterion was that a school was a non-charter public elementary school, because elementary education serves as a critical foundation for success in later grades (Olsten, 2015) and charter schools do not operate under the same rules as public schools. For example, charter schools are exempt from certain state or local rules (NCES, 2018a). The order of the first two criteria mentioned was arbitrary because any order yielded the same results. After possible participant schools were identified, the order of the next steps was important, because applying the order strategically identified remaining participant schools. Initially, I proposed to use purposeful sampling to identify high-poverty, high-achieving Title I elementary schools in Colorado that were able to sustain achievement of at least 75% of points

on the academic achievement performance indicator as designated by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE, 2014) school performance framework. After applying these criteria, I was unable to find any schools in Colorado that qualified. Therefore, the third criterion was revised to be schools scoring above the Colorado state average on the state identified reading and math assessment beyond two consecutive years, specifically 2015, 2016, and 2017. For the respective years, the state of Colorado adopted the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career and Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) as the state assessment (CDE, 2016; Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career, 2016). I selected the two schools with the highest average achievement on the state reading and math assessment to answer the research question.

When I applied the first criterion of having a FRL population of 75% for the 2017–2018 school year to all schools in Colorado from a list of Title I schools obtained from the CDE (2018b), 333 schools qualified. Applying the criterion of being a traditional public, non-charter elementary school, 197 schools qualified (CDE, 2018b). I looked at the scores for the 197 schools in Schoolview on the CDE (2018a) website. Applying the criterion of sustaining achievement above the state average for 2015, 2016, and 2017, two schools qualified (CDE, 2018a). These same two schools met the criterion of maintaining an average FRL population of 75% or greater for each of the years 2015, 2016, and 2017 (because FRL populations can fluctuate year-to-year). Since 2014, the FRL population at both schools ranged from 74% to over 81% (CDE, 2018b). See Table 1 for more demographic information on the two schools.

Along with FRL, mobility rate is an important aspect to the demographic description of school as "research has demonstrated that high rates of student mobility are associated with a range of negative academic outcomes, both for students who leave their schools and those who

remain behind" (Finch, Lapsley, & Baker-Boudissa, 2009, para. 1). According to the CDE (2019), "Students must have a gap in attendance of more than 10 days for a move to be considered mobile" (para. 9). The annual mobility rate, since 2014, for the first case, Bear Park Elementary (BPE), had ranged from about 15% to over 31% (CDE, 2018a). The mobility rate for the second case, Rolling Plains Elementary (RPE), since 2014, had been around 30% (CDE, 2018a).

Table 1

Participant School Characteristics for 2015−2017

Characteristic	Bear Park Elementary	Rolling Plains Elementary
Enrollment	200-260	460-500
Average achievement for English language arts on state assessment 741 scale score range: 650-850	747	758
Average achievement for math on state assessment 736 scale score range: 650-850	746	751
Free reduced lunch	75-82%	70-85%
Minority students	39-45%	69-72%
English language learners	2-3%	12-15%
Individual education program	4-8%	8-12%
Mobility rate	15-31%	28-31%

Participants. I sought leaders as well as staff members who surrounded leaders. The leader position encompassed an educational leader who held a responsibility for coaching, improving practices, and evaluating teachers (Green, 2009; Portin et al., 2009). Additionally, teachers and staff who were not in a leader position were also included as participants because they were able to provide further insights into how leaders influence sustained achievement. Teachers consisted of primary and intermediate grade level teachers as well as teachers who served a specific role such as specialists or teachers who served students with disabilities to obtain a range of perspectives. To gain a further understanding of the phenomenon from participant perspectives, I asked the principal to identify other participant leaders and teachers within their building based on the criteria that they have maintained a leader position in the participant school.

Twelve participants were in this study who participated in interviews (six from each school). The participants included two principals, an assistant principal, a special education teacher, a social worker, a teaching and learning coach, a library-technology educator who also was the science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics (STEAM) educator, a reading interventionist, one first-grade teacher, one second-grade teacher, one third-grade teacher, and one fifth-grade teacher. The participant principals served as the principal at the school from 2015 to 2018. I was able to gain substantial information that is reflective of different leader perspectives as well as teachers' perspectives of the phenomenon, rather than being derived solely from the principals' perspective.

Data Collection

Data collection for a qualitative research approach includes multiple sources of data (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). For this study, multiple sources of data included observations,

interviews, and documents. The steps for the data collection process in relation to this study are described below.

Obtaining permission to be studied. Prior to data collection, I followed the procedures to obtain permission to be studied as outlined by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Northern Colorado and was granted permission (see Appendix A). Because the Institutional Review Board required permission from the site before granting approval to begin research, I directly contacted the principals in person (see Appendix B), seeking participation and permission to conduct research. Both principals agreed to participate. District approval was also necessary for both schools. I completed a district application to conduct research and both districts approved permission to conduct research quickly. After permission from the schools and the Institutional Review Board was granted, I asked each school principal to help identify other participant leaders within their school and sent invitations to participate to them as well. I was seeking teachers and staff members who were employed at the school from 2015 to 2018. Ten of the 12 participants met that criteria and the other two were identified as key informants by the principal and included. I let it be known that participation was voluntary and had them sign the informed consent forms upon agreeing to participate (See Appendix C). I protected their confidentiality following the Institutional Review Board procedures and protocols.

Observations. The observations consisted of two eight-hour visits per school on separate days and months. The initial visit to each school occurred in November and another visit in January to eliminate limitations due to the possibility of non-typical days. Observations included observing and recording descriptive field notes on strategies, practices, and approaches utilized by leaders (see Appendix D). The benefit of observations was gaining access to the cases, which provided an opportunity for rich, thick description of the phenomena (Merriam, 2009). The data

collection process began with the initial eight-hour observation of the entire school day in each school to become familiar with the natural setting as well as begin to build trust and rapport with participants (Merriam, 2009). During the initial observation I collected descriptive notes about the setting, which included what hallways looked and sounded like; description of the exterior of the building; daily routines; and student, teacher, staff, and principal interactions. Other observation hours were allocated to events such as a staff meeting, daily routines, informal principal walk-throughs, and end-of-day routines, because these events encompass building relationships and instructional leadership, which were identified as effective leader practices by Leithwood (2012).

Following the initial observation, the interview questions were e-mailed to participants and written responses were received and read. The subsequent observations occurred to prepare for follow-up interviews along with the final observation hours that occurred near the end of the research process to ensure that sufficient information was reached, which was when no new information was provided by participants, observations, or documents (Creswell, 2012). I utilized an observational protocol in hopes of obtaining detailed information about the physical setting (see Appendix E). Observations included careful notes about the setting of the schools and leadership actions and events listed above. Observations of daily routines encompassed the start of the day routines, informal principal walk-throughs, and end-of-the day routines in order to provide rich information about leader behaviors and practices that influence sustained achievement.

Interviews. For qualitative designs, interviews are a primary source of data (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, Vogt, Gardner, and Haeffele (2012) noted that research interviews are systematic methods to answer broad research questions and obtain a deeper understanding of the

topic. For this study, interviews served as organized conversations and a natural way of obtaining rich information (Vogt et al., 2012). Vogt et al. (2012) also mentioned the importance of selecting the type, approach, and procedures when conducting an interview. Thus the interview questions were e-mailed to the participants prior to the initial observation. To obtain information from participants' perspectives, each participant wrote their responses to the questions after the initial observation when they signed the consent form (Creswell, 2012).

I e-mailed the interview questions to the principals prior to the initial observation. The principal at one school sent the questions to the participants who all responded in writing after the initial observation. After the initial observation at the second school, participants signed consent forms and I e-mailed the interview questions to the participants to follow the same protocol as the first school. Five of the six participants responded in writing, and the other interview was conducted face-to-face. Having the initial observation prior to the initial interviews was important for access to information from participants. I read and used the written responses to prepare for the second round of observations and follow-up interviews. Holding the second round of observations after the initial interviews allowed time to make necessary changes to follow-up interviews if needed.

For the purpose of this study, one round of follow-up interviews with all participants was held individually face-to-face and ranged from 30 minutes to one hour. The interviews were conducted at the participant schools and held in private rooms. Follow-up interviews were audio recorded based on the permission of all participants. I implemented open-ended, semi-structured interviews using a protocol for follow-up interviews with all participants at the schools (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Follow-up interviews allowed me to gain deeper insight into the perspectives of the leaders who had the capacity to influence sustained achievement, which

was not discovered in full during the initial interview. The rationale for open-ended, semi-structured interviews was that they placed less structure on the interview to gain more flexibility (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, open-ended, semi-structured interviews allowed for true exploration through parameters that permit modification of questions based on obtained information during the interview (Merriam, 2009). In order to learn as much as possible about the personal views and experiences, the interview questions were more descriptive and/or exploratory in nature (Vogt et al., 2012). The follow-up interview questions depended on data collected from the second round of observations and initial responses of participants from the initial interviews. The interview topics included, but were not limited to, the following: leader roles, instruction, achievement, staffing, culture, mission and vision, professional development (PD), and stakeholder relationships. The interview questions are listed in the interview protocol in Appendix F. I conducted follow-up interviews to ensure in-depth descriptions from participant perspectives were captured (Merriam, 2009). Interviews provided a systematic yet flexible method of obtaining information from the participants' perspective of their lived experience with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

Document collection. Document collection included documents that were mentioned during the interview process or during observations. These documents pertained to how leaders influence sustained achievement, such as a lesson planning protocol, master schedule, and staff meeting agenda, because they were utilized by leaders to discuss student achievement or other factors that are related to student achievement. The information obtained from the document collection along with observations and interviews helped to further provide a rich, information about the phenomenon based on the participants' perspectives (Merriam, 2009).

Data Analysis

Merriam (1998), Stake (1995), and Creswell (2012) noted how qualitative data analysis can be overwhelming and put emphasis on the need for data management. To ensure a quality end product, Merriam (1998) identified analytic techniques for data management. Merriam (1998) asserted, "Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research" (p. 151). Similar to Merriam (1998), Vogt, Vogt, Gardner, and Haeffele (2014) suggested that preliminary analysis can improve the chances for "effective final analyses and interpretations" (p. 14). According to Stake (1995), analysis is giving meaning to the first impression. Data collection and analysis were a simultaneous activity and having a detailed system for data management helped me to adequately prepare and organize data, because I needed to be cognizant of data prior to analysis. I utilized thematic analysis, which included "segmenting the text" (Creswell, 2012, p. 473), coding the text, and developing a "small set of nonoverlapping themes" (Creswell, 2012, p. 473). Thematic analysis was useful for interpretation of people and activities (Creswell, 2012). Thematic analysis provided a holistic picture. To ensure effective analysis and interpretations of the data, I followed six steps listed by Creswell (2012): (a) preparing and organizing the data, (b) coding the data, (c) developing themes, (d) reporting the findings, (e) interpreting the findings, and (f) validating the accuracy of the findings.

Preparing and Organizing the Data

Preparing the data included paying attention to the goals and the purpose in conducting the research and focusing on the research question (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998; Vogt et al., 2014). To prepare the data for this study, I focused on interviews, observations, and document collection to provide necessary structure for organization (Vogt et al., 2014). An observation occurred prior to any interviews to familiarize myself with the natural setting and prepare for

interviews. During and after collecting data from the first observation, I reviewed the notes to make sense of the data obtained. To prepare for conducting interviews, I reviewed the observation notes to make any necessary adjustments to the interview topics or questions. Following the interview, I performed member checking with the transcriptions of the follow-up interviews to verify accuracy with each participant. Member checking involved verifying data with the participants (Creswell, 2012). The follow-up interviews were transcribed verbatim by me to maintain confidentiality (Vogt et al., 2014). Then, I read the transcriptions to check for accuracy as well as become familiar with the data. The data from observations, interviews, and documents were organized within tables in documents on my password protected computer by files according to categories such as observations, interviews, and document collection (Merriam, 1998).

Coding the Data

For the next step in the analysis process, the transcriptions of interviews, documents, and field notes from each school were analyzed as separate cases for patterns and significant themes through coding (Vogt et al., 2014). According to Saldaña (2009), the coding process consists of two cycles of coding. The purpose of first cycle coding was to understand general themes that emerged from the research. I open coded sentences, phrases, or single words that related to strategies, actions, and practices used by leaders (Vogt et al., 2014). Saldaña referred to this as descriptive coding or topic coding. The sentences, phrases, words, or single words were entered into tables in a document and then coded for similarities using descriptive coding.

The second coding cycle consisted of identifying patterns that emerge across the initial descriptive codes. The codes were developed based on similar words, sentences, or phrases to the literature review or similarities found in the data creating themes. During the second phase

the codes become more refined (Saldaña, 2009). Moreover, during analysis, Merriam (1998) recommended keeping track of your thoughts and rationale for decisions related to the codes and themes by notating them while you are in the process. The purpose was to document my thinking and be reflective during coding, which impacted the greater goal of developing themes (Merriam, 1998).

Developing Themes

According to Creswell (2012), "the use of themes is another way to analyze qualitative data" (p. 248). For this study, after the codes went through two cycles, the codes were reviewed until categories repeated themselves to develop themes (Saldaña, 2009). According to Saldaña, (2009), in the first cycle the data are coded and divided into categories. I used descriptive coding to identify topics within the data (Saldaña, 2009). Following this, the second cycle methods were more complex and required analytic skills such as "classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting, conceptualizing, and theory building" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 45). Merriam (1998) asserted that the themes should reflect of the purpose of the research because they are the answer to the research question.

Reporting the Findings

After themes were established, it was necessary to explain the findings in response to the research question (Creswell, 2012). Representing the findings, according to Creswell (2012), included utilizing narrative discussion, tables, and charts. The findings were "organized in a way to contribute to the reader's understanding of the case" (Stake, 1995, p. 122). Themes similar as those in Leithwood's (2012) Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) emerged, and I organized the findings into themes based on Leithwood's (2012) OLF and created new themes that emerged

that were not addressed by the OLF. Participants' words from the interviews were used as support for the themes along with themes from observations and document collection.

Interpreting the Findings

According to Creswell (2012), interpretations included making sense of the data, because qualitative research is interpretive research based on language and interactions of the researcher and the participants. I interpreted the themes for meaning and compared them to what was illuminated through the literature review (Creswell, 2012). Comparing them to literature helped support the findings obtained in this study (Creswell, 2012).

Validating the Findings

Merriam (1998) noted "that all research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner" (p. 198). Qualitative and quantitative research has different methods to validate the findings (Merriam, 1998). An essential part of qualitative research was ensuring that the findings were accurate and reliable (Creswell, 2012). This was especially important to ensure readers trust the findings (Merriam, 1998). To make sure that the findings were trustworthy, steps throughout the process of data collection and analysis were in place (Creswell, 2012). Stake (1995) noted that it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure accuracy and validation of the findings. I provided details for establishing trustworthiness within this study below.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is essential in qualitative research as a means to validate the findings (Merriam, 1998). In qualitative research, the findings are rich descriptions of the process that account for the steps the researcher takes (Merriam, 1998). According to Lincoln and Guba

(1985), establishing trustworthiness encompasses meeting the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined credibility as "the probability that credible findings will be produced" (p. 301). The techniques used to establish credibility for this research included increased engagement in the field, member checking, and triangulation of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish credibility, I spent prolonged engagement in the field noting rich information about the setting and establishing and building rapport with participants for a minimum of four days during several months (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, as interviews were a primary source of data, Vogt et al. (2012) asserted that establishing trust with the participants is essential for participants to feel safe and to share their answers. To establish trust with the participants, I conducted observations prior to any interviews which helped to increase their awareness of my presence. The location of the interview was also crucial in establishing trustworthiness, as it assisted in helping the participant to openly discuss matters (Vogt et al., 2012). I conducted interviews in private rooms at the school.

To ensure accuracy of the interviews, I utilized member checking with follow-up interviews and sent the transcribed interviews to participants for them to have an opportunity to correct errors to ensure accuracy (Creswell, 2012). I incorporated triangulation with the use of multiple sources of data such as interviews, observations, and document collection. I triangulated the data through interviewing and examining the information from all participant leaders at the participant school as compared to relying on interview data from only the principal. This included cross-checking or comparing data from multiple participant perspectives (Merriam, 2009) such as principals, assistant principals, instructional or learning coaches, teachers, and other staff members who surrounded the leaders within the school. I examined

information from observational field notes and documents to support themes, increase confidence in the findings, and further the understanding of the phenomenon (Vogt et al., 2012).

Dependability. Dependability in qualitative research is ensuring that the findings are consistent with the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Establishing dependability is part of ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because the researcher was the primary instrument in collecting data in qualitative research, it was important to keep notes about the research process and examine the records for accuracy. To establish dependability, I documented and examined the process of this research with detailed descriptions about data collection such as observations and interviews while utilizing observation and interview protocols in order to create an "inquiry audit" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 317) and "audit trail" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 p. 319). Finally, I was cognizant of potential bias and thus I reported a researcher stance (Merriam, 2009) as explained in Chapter I of this document and kept an open mind to not limit any potential findings as well as reported what participants said and did. The methods implemented in the research were steps to increase trustworthiness for a qualitative design.

Transferability. Transferability is based on the extent to which the results can be transferred, applied, or applied to other situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Establishing transferability is essential for allowing readers to decide if transfer of the findings is a possibility to their situation (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985). The purpose for this is to give the readers enough information to discern "how closely" their situation matches this study (Merriam, 1998, p. 211). To increase transferability of the findings, I included rich, information and purposeful sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Merriam (1998) concluded that purposeful sampling is used to select participants based on specific criteria to answer the research question. Finding participants who experienced the phenomenon was essential in order to provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon. I incorporated purposeful sampling as a measure for transferability. The findings from this study are not intended to generalize to educational leaders serving economically disadvantaged students as other variables can influence the findings. However, the findings may be of use to educational leaders in schools with similar contexts to this study.

Confirmability. Confirmability is associated with establishing objectivity in methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Objectivity is based on participants' perspectives, which are free from contamination or judgments from the researcher and based on the words and facts from the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the researcher needs to account and assess for influences such as the Hawthorne effect, where participants behave differently while under observation (Fernald, Coombs, DeAlleaume, West, & Parnes, 2012), and the Pygmalion effect, where expectations influence performance (Whitely, Sy, & Johnson, 2012). To do so, I observed the participants and the natural setting for two days at each school in an attempt to capture the natural essence of the participants and the environment and to not disrupt the natural setting. Additionally, I conducted interviews for one day at each school. In order to clarify words, terms, and thoughts, I conducted follow-up interviews in an attempt to fully capture participants' natural responses. To establish confirmability, I relied on the words of the participants from the observations and interviews to provide rich descriptions for a holistic picture.

Summary

A qualitative case study along with the mentioned data collection process was an appropriate method to answer the research question in this study because I sought an understanding of the phenomenon. In this chapter, constructionism was the epistemological stance mentioned to address how I constructed meaning of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the interpretive theoretical framework was applied to interpret the reality of the participants based on the language they used to describe the phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). Data collection methods included interviews, observations, and document collection for the purpose of providing readers with detailed descriptions of the phenomenon from the participant perspective (Merriam, 1998). Data analysis methods were discussed to explain the process used to validate and interpret findings (Creswell, 2012). The selected methods for data collection also contributed to a rich, information of the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives (Merriam, 1998). In qualitative research it is necessary to address the process to establish trustworthiness (Creswell, 2012). To establish trustworthiness within this study, I utilized triangulation of data through multiple sources, member checking, prolonged engagement in the field, and conduct interviews and observations on different days (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The results of this study may be used to help educational leaders in schools with similar contexts sustain achievement for economically disadvantaged students.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore and describe practices and actions used by educational leaders of two successful, high-poverty Title I elementary schools that influenced sustained achievement.

Q1 How do leaders influence sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years in successful, high-poverty Title I public elementary schools in Colorado?

To answer the research question, two separate instrumental case studies were conducted. The research results are presented using themes that emerged from data collection of observations, interviews, and documents based on the research question. In this chapter, I will describe each school as a separate case as well as the findings based on the themes that emerged through the data analysis for each school. For the purpose of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to refer to the participants and the schools.

The School: Bear Park Elementary

The setting description includes detailed information about the demographics and achievement scores of Bear Park Elementary (BPE) followed by rich descriptions of my observations of the staff and school environment. As a high-poverty Title I public elementary school located in Colorado, BPE served students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Located in a large urban district, BPE served fewer than 30,000 students. Since 2014, the student enrollment at BPE ranged from 260 to a little over 200 students with diverse demographics. During the 2017−2018 school year, approximately 250 students were enrolled; of the 250

students, slightly over 75% qualified for free and reduced lunch (FRL). Since 2014, the FRL population ranged from about 74% to over 81%, the English learner population ranged from 2% to over 3%, the minority student population ranged from about 39% to over 45%, and the number of students on individual education programs ranged from about 4% to over 8%.

The BPE staff had been successful at sustaining achievement above the Colorado state average beyond two consecutive years on the Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS). The scale scores for the CMAS range from 650 and 850 for English language arts and math. The Colorado state average achievement scores for the school years 2015−2016, 2016−2017, and 2017−2018 for English language arts and math were 741 and 736, respectively. The average achievement scores at BPE for the school years 2015−2017 for English language arts and math was 747 and 746, respectively. At BPE, science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics (STEAM) was a focus. With such success, BPE was recognized for excellence in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education by the state of Colorado.

My description of the setting includes a brief discussion about the staff, the inside of the school, the principal, the participants, and the leadership team. Prior to my first observation, I arranged and made an introductory visit to introduce myself and the study to the principal. For my first observation visit, I observed BPE from bell-to-bell on a Wednesday in November and a Friday in January. During my first observation, I was greeted with friendly smiles by two office secretaries and the principal. The principal gave me a typed schedule of times to meet the identified participants. The staff at BPE was ethnically diverse; however, a majority of staff identified as White females. Staff ranged in ages, experience, years at the school, education level, and years of service.

I walked throughout the hallways and noted that the walls were lined with colorful painted murals, student art work, and student work. Also, posters listing expectations for behavior were hanging up on the walls in the hallways. These expectations were written in student-friendly words with visuals that were specific to certain locations such as the playground and hallway. For example, the poster for behavior at recess included phrases and color pictures for "Being your Best" such as "Play fair and be a good sport" and "Take pride in our playground." I observed that students transitioned quietly in the hallways and walked in an organized line led by their teachers. Inside the classrooms, I noticed educators were with students either in small groups or a whole group. Learning targets and posters with strategies for effective reading were consistently posted in classrooms.

During the document collection, I discovered that the BPE mission statement mentioned learning through unique opportunities. The BPE mission statement was evident throughout interviews, observations, and documents. I heard about and observed some enriching opportunities that were offered to students, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Participants in the study were identified by the principal as teacher leaders or as teachers who met the criteria of a teacher leader or held a teacher position during the school years 2015−2017. There were six participants, one principal, three leaders who held a responsibility for coaching and improving practices, one primary teacher, and one intermediate teacher. Participants consisted of a majority of White females, with the exception of a male principal, and a range in ages, educational levels, years of service at BPE, and experience as educators (see Table 2).

Table 2

Bear Park Elementary Participant Pseudonyms and Positions

Pseudonym	Role	Range of Years at Bear Park Elementary
Tony	Principal	10–15
Emily	Teacher leader	15–20
Stacy	Teacher leader	3–5
Amanda	Primary teacher	1–5
Stephanie	Intermediate teacher	3–5
Elizabeth	Teacher leader	3–5

The BPE participants' dedication to education was evident as many members of the staff were eager to share their insights and assist me with any needs I had. The staff was aware of BPE's success, and they communicated a willingness to contribute to the study to improve education and help other struggling schools. Staff responses to participate in this study were received by the due date and, in most cases, earlier than the due date. Educators, including administrators, are often pressed for time, but the staff members at BPE were very patient and took time out of their day to talk to me.

The principal of BPE, Tony, was a physical education teacher in Alaska prior to being a principal. Upon my arrival to BPE, he welcomed me and offered his office to me as a place where I could leave all of my belongings. He patiently listened to me as I discussed the details of this research, and he agreed to participate. I felt that he sincerely valued the work I was doing and was willing to help. He was aware that conducting the observations meant long, early morning drives for me and offered to meet me halfway for any follow-up information. He

handed me his cell phone number in case I needed to clarify or obtain further information. Throughout the process of this study, the principal regularly reached out to check in with me.

The BPE staff had a building leadership team that consisted of one teacher from each grade level, support staff, and specials teachers. When asked how the building leadership team was formed, Emily, a teacher leader, responded that sometimes the principal selected a member from the grade level and sometimes the grade-level team decided who was going to be on the building leadership team at their leadership meeting in May. The building leadership team met once-a-month, and the team made decisions together for the building such as the state testing schedule. The information from the meetings was communicated through minutes that were sent out in e-mails, and building leadership team members were to share the information with their teammates. Emily said that the role of Tony had changed over the years; specifically, early on he made most of the decisions but now he sought more input from teachers through a distributed approach.

Bear Park Elementary Themes

Three themes emerged from the data collected at BPE. Each theme consisted of components and was listed under each theme. The first theme was a high-quality team that included the principal's role as the coach who utilized practices and actions such as keeping staff focused on student learning, holding staff accountable for student learning, and providing professional development (PD) opportunities. The second theme that emerged from the data entailed practices to maximize learning, which included prioritization, strategies for instructional practices, and consistency within BPE's systems. The third theme was a caring culture that encompassed ways staff cared about the whole child and ways the staff cared and supported each other at BPE. Table 3 displays a list of the themes.

Table 3

Bear Park Elementary Themes

Theme	Component		
	1	2	3
A high-quality team	The principal's role	Professional development	
Practices to maximize learning	Prioritization	Instructional practices	Consistency within systems
A caring culture	Staff care about the whole child	Staff care and support each other	

A High-Quality Team

Much of the success at BPE was attributed to developing a high-quality team. This included the principal's role in establishing a high-quality staff at BPE as well as strategies to improve the professional skills of staff. The principal's role involved practices such as keeping staff focused by utilizing multiple data sources and holding staff accountable for increasing student learning.

The principal's role. The interviews and observations revealed that Tony, the principal, had a role in developing a high-quality staff at BPE, similar to the role of a sports team coach. Successful coaches motivate sports teams, keep the team focused and model expected behaviors, attitudes, and practices. Coaches provide support in order to help everyone improve their team's skills, and they hold team members accountable for their performance. Tony stated, "Much of an effective leader's job is [to] hire the right people, keep the right people, and then keep them

motivated or don't demotivate them." Additionally, he mentioned that by keeping a high-quality staff, his role had changed to a helper because the staff knew what they were doing. He noted that being a helper meant that when staff were passionate about certain things, it was necessary to remove road blocks because it energized them. He cautioned, "You do not want to demotivate your high achievers. Sometimes we make that mistake as leaders. It is a more effective practice to provide direction and support and let them do their work." Tony believed that "once you get a high-level staff, learning can take place at much higher levels" and used this as a regular practice to influence student learning.

Tony's role as the principal included developing the staff at BPE through implementing a distributed leadership model to build capacity across the team. To Tony, being a coach meant not being the expert in all areas but instead finding and developing strengths in others. In the interviews, staff members mentioned having a "high-level capable staff" at building leadership team. Tony believed that having a high-level staff at BPE made it easier to implement a distributed leadership model because he could trust the work and efforts of staff. Tony stated, "Because we have high-level staff members, they are more than capable of leading." When asked about leadership at BPE, staff members mentioned that there were many leaders as well as a building leadership team. Elizabeth, a teacher leader, said, "We have very high-quality people in various leadership roles throughout the entire school and we are given the opportunity by [the principal] to make decisions in our own areas of expertise." Elizabeth explained that the principal was not the expert at BPE. She said,

> Multiple times I have seen him reach out to other experts in other areas for guidance and suggestions, which is a very responsible and effective way to function. Instead of

seeming as though he is the expert in all areas, he is comfortable seeking out others for input or direction when it's needed.

Similarly, Amanda, a primary teacher, stated, "I feel like almost everyone here seems like they have a role of some kind of leadership." At BPE, the principal's role in developing a capable staff included utilizing the collective strengths and expertise of each staff member to distribute leadership across the team, and providing leadership opportunities for staff.

Tony modeled expected behaviors, attitudes, and practices for the team at BPE to motivate and keep staff focused. Tony exemplified the attitude that learning was important by his readiness to teach a group of students every day. Tony said, "This takes time and commitment, but it shows that I am willing to contribute and that I value learning." He also mentioned how he thought staff perceived his willingness to teach a reading or math group every day. Tony stated, "I think the teachers appreciate that I teach a group because it is hard. It is challenging. I would recommend it to principals because it makes you part of the team." He added that teaching a group of students every day helped him to know the days when the students were "squirrely," or more restless or challenging, compared to typical days.

Keeping staff focused. The interview revealed that the principal's role in developing a high-quality team included keeping staff focused on student learning by communicating the vision through frequent analysis of student data. Tony said, "As principal, I have a clear focus: students learning as much as possible in a safe and friendly environment." Just as coaches use statistics to compare individual and team performance against other individuals and teams, Tony analyzed and discussed student data with BPE staff. This strategy was used as motivation to remind staff that success was happening. Stephanie, an intermediate teacher, said, "[The principal] is our cheerleader. He is very data driven, which in turn, helps keep us focused on

data we are producing." The principal as a cheerleader meant that he recognized the celebrations and encouraged the areas of growth.

By frequently utilizing multiple data sources, Tony made it clear to the staff that student learning was the main goal. Stephanie mentioned that focusing on the data contributed to staff helping each and every child reach their potential. Stephanie explained that Tony utilized past and current state, district, school, classroom, and individual student data to inform the staff on where they were currently performing and what the staff needed to achieve in order to be successful. Tony explained that BPE's average state percentile rank for math, English language arts, and science was a little lower than the 70th percentile. He said, "I think our goal is to get in the 70th and 80th percentile, so that we are a high-performing school." He further explained that BPE staff strove for this percentile, adding that it was a little bit of an "obsession." Tony discussed how BPE's data over the last seven years had shown that BPE had consistently performed well. He said, "Our school performance framework is almost always in the top 10 in our District and our average score of 70-plus the last seven years makes us [one of] the most consistently high performing schools in the state." Staff analyzed multiple sources and years of data using state, school performance framework, district, school, and classroom to create a complete picture of BPE's performance compared to solely looking at data from a single source and year. The BPE principal, as coach, used data to celebrate the strengths of the staff and set improvement goals while keeping the staff focused on the main goal of increasing student learning.

Holding staff members accountable for results. Holding staff members accountable for student learning results was a part of the principal's role in cultivating a high-performing team. According to the interviews, sometimes Tony had to move staff to different positions based on

the staff member's strengths, and sometimes Tony had to let staff members know that based on their performance, they would not get to be a part of the BPE team. Coaches of successful sports teams are skilled at identifying team members' strengths and areas that need additional practice based on data, and Tony used this strategy to hold staff members accountable.

At BPE, the principal used data as an accountability measure to manage and retain staff. Tony said, "Staff members do not get to stay at [BPE] unless they are contributing at a certain level whether they are teachers or support staff. As a principal, I have committed to showing courage in this area for the sake of the students and staff." Tony recognized the importance of his role as an instructional leader and clearly communicated that teaching at BPE was a privilege. He mentioned that he was aware that securing accountability meant that he had to make tough decisions. Tony said, "Teachers that get great data get more say in how instruction looks in their room. Teachers that are not demonstrating data are more tightly managed, or moved to a different grade, or not retained." The principal provided an example of this by sharing, "Last year I moved a new teacher in our building to a different grade level after Christmas because they were not making it happen. I could not afford to wait until the end of the year." He recognized that the strengths of that staff member were better utilized in a different grade level. Tony mentioned that holding staff accountable took courage, but it communicated what was expected at BPE. When asked about tightly managing teachers whose student performance data did not meet expectations, Tony said, "It means that I go in and observe more. We do more directing. Like, we want you to teach it this way or spend this many minutes on it. We are a little tighter with them" because of the importance for students to learn as much as possible. Emily voiced that holding staff accountable also included the principal providing teachers with growth plans and support, but if improvement was not seen, he did not keep teachers or staff

around. The principal at BPE, similar to coaches of successful sports teams, recognized and mobilized staff strengths as well as held staff accountable for their performance.

Professional development. According to BPE staff, developing a high-quality team encompassed improving the professional skills of staff members. Just as coaches provide opportunities for their players to improve their skills, Tony fostered a culture where staff valued improving their learning, and moreover, the staff was expected to continue to learn. Staff members mentioned PD as one important practice to improve the professional skills for staff. Through the interviews, it was evident that staff valued their learning. Stacy, a teacher leader, commented that the staff was "reflecting on ways they can be better." She added, "[Staff] are dedicated to being the best they can be." BPE staff had several methods for improving professional skills including various PD opportunities, professional learning communities, and peer observations.

Professional learning communities. The BPE staff referenced professional learning communities as one method of professional learning. During professional learning communities educators discussed progress toward a goal for student learning. Stephanie remarked that staff used professional learning communities to vertically and horizontally align curriculum across the grade levels. Emily mentioned that this year professional learning communities were focused on writing because writing was BPE's unified school improvement plan goal; staff looked at data and student growth focused on writing. Staff brought writing rubrics and student writing samples to show the principal and the teaching and learning coach how the students were progressing. Staff created assessments to identify what learning needed to be retaught, designed rubrics for the different genres of writing, and planned instruction using the district writing scope and sequence. A room with a wall where every grade level had a scored student-writing

exemplar along with the rubric displayed was accessible to all staff. To further support aligning learning with the writing goal, Emily reported that staff looked at grammar and spelling data and research showing the most used words in writing to create a 100-word "must learn" spelling test.

Peer observations. Peer observations were used to improve the professional skills of BPE staff. Emily said, "We have a philosophy that we have lots of great teachers in our building doing great things, so we do not have to take teachers out of the building to go and observe." Emily discussed that leaders, such as the principal or the teaching and learning coach, covered teachers' groups so that teachers could observe or model skills or strategies for the interventionists to utilize who were working with their students. Emily provided a specific example of peer observations that included leadership covering the second-grade teacher's class because the second-grade teacher wanted to observe third-grade math. The purpose was to understand what needed to be taught to better prepare the second graders for third grade.

Other various PD opportunities staff briefly mentioned included training from the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts through their arts integration program, implementing district initiatives, and reading articles and books. At BPE, the principal's role in developing a high-quality team was similar to the role of a coach of successful sports teams, which encompassed practices such as keeping the staff focused on the goal, holding staff members accountable, and providing opportunities to improve professional skills of staff members through professional learning communities and peer observations.

Practices to Maximize Learning

The second theme to emerge from the interviews was practices to maximize learning. This described BPE's priorities, instructional practices, and consistencies within systems to maximize student learning. Priorities at BPE included having high expectations for learning and

behavior and valuing every minute available for student learning during the school day. Instructional practices consisted of involving staff beyond the classroom teacher for teaching students, using active engagement strategies, providing enriching learning opportunities, extending learning opportunities beyond the school day, and accessing a problem-solving team. The BPE staff members discussed consistency within systems that encompassed instructional agreements, data use, reading strategies, and behavior systems.

Priorities. The interviews revealed that staff prioritized maximized learning by having an intense focus on learning. The BPE staff members repeatedly discussed having high expectations for all, valuing every minute of the school day to maximize learning and achieving the highest learning possible.

Having high expectations. The interviews evidenced that BPE had high expectations for the school and for students. Tony spoke about high standards, asserting that "[BPE] expects to be a top-level school each year. Although we are a high-poverty school we expect to be competing with the top schools in the district and the top Title I schools in the state." Similar to Tony, Elizabeth, a teacher leader, commented,

> Expectations for learning are very high every day. We have a very competent group of teachers in our school who keep the bar held high for students to achieve their best potential. I believe that our students perform as well as they do because they are expected to do so and the teachers truly believe in them**.**

For BPE staff, part of high expectations for learning and working hard included being firm with students in a loving way. Several staff members iterated that they were "warm demanders." Tony explained,

> Being a warm demander means that we care about kids and they are important to us. We know that they have a lot to learn. At the same time we make sure that we are pushing them and making sure they are working hard. We are kind [of] tough on them. We are demanding that we want high quality work. We want them to be engaged and focused. At the same time knowing that they feel like we care about them and are doing that for a good reason. We want our kids to be readers, writers, and mathematicians. We want them to learn to navigate through life and be successful. Not get in trouble. Have fun in school but know that there [are] boundaries.

Holding high expectations included making sure students were working hard. Tony found research that said the most successful people were those who were not necessarily the most talented but tried the hardest, so since 2007, staff focused on developing students' effort and grit. Developing students' effort meant fostering a willingness to try through motivation. Tony shared an inspiring article with students about a football player who once was overweight and lazy, and he worked hard to become great. Tony explained to the students that they could do the same thing by working hard.

The BPE staff held high standards for students and student learning by communicating clear expectations. According to Stacy, "We just expect that they will succeed, and if they are not [succeeding], then we find ways that they can succeed." Stacy added that staff required all staff and students to do their job when they were at school: "The students are expected to learn, we are expected to teach, and teachers/students learn together." The staff believed that students performed well because of holding high expectations, which was a priority for staff to maximize learning.

Valuing every minute. Several BPE staff members in the interviews mentioned the priority of valuing every minute available within the school day for learning. Each participant varied their words slightly. Elizabeth explained, "Our teachers take teaching very seriously and are dedicated to making sure their students learn. They value every minute they have with the kids and are protective of their teaching time with them." All but one staff member interviewed asserted a mantra of valuing "every minute." The other participant remarked that "Tony always says, "Learn as much as you can every day," which was another variation of valuing every minute focused on learning. Tony said, "Every minute, every lesson counts." Similar to Tony, Stephanie shared, "Be jealous of any second we lose from instruction." The principal elaborated on the importance of valuing every minute and the impacts on learning. Tony asserted,

> Because the school day is so short, you have to value every minute. So, if you have that every-day, every-lesson-counts mentality you tend to get more learning done. If you did not you pack in as much as you could, then you missed out on a chance. It is a little bit of that obsessive compulsive every-minute-counts, all the little details count.

Not only did the principal place value on every minute, so did BPE teachers. Emily shared an example of how teachers followed every-minute-counts in the classroom. She said, "When students are waiting in line, teachers will be doing flashcards, or let's spell, etc." The BPE staff was intentional that every minute available during the school day was used for student learning.

Valuing every minute of student learning meant limiting disruptions during learning and being intentional. Tony added, "Instructional minutes are scheduled and protected." Staff discussed a few examples of how instructional minutes were safeguarded. Tony said, "Protect staff and students from un-important assemblies and promotions." He added, "Where many school[s] have an assembly, [BPE] does not. People are allowed to meet with our kids at lunch if

they have information to share, like Cub Scouts." Also, staff at BPE was intentional about daily announcements. Tony noted that staff minimized any interruptions by limiting announcements to Friday mornings. Furthermore, Tony was deliberate about the role of staff members and the impact on learning. Tony stated, "Protect staff from tasks that someone else can do. Make sure their main focus is teaching." The BPE staff valued and utilized every minute of the school day and as a result, learning was maximized compared to learning being lost on minutes that were not learning opportunities.

By valuing every minute of learning, BPE purposely prioritized reading instruction to maximize learning. During the interviews, Tony said, "Reading workshop groups are rarely cancelled. If a reading interventionist has to miss a day, we either find a sub or school staff teaches the group including the principal." Emily spoke about the specific structures in place to implement small groups. She said, "That is pretty sacred time. We do not try to interrupt that with assemblies or anything so that every grade is getting that at least four times a week." Emily stated that BPE staff used dynamic indicator of basic early literacy skills (DIBELS) data to assign kids to groups. She mentioned that there was an interventionist specifically for students with a significant reading deficiency according to DIBELS data. Emily noted that kids receiving services from the interventionist were pulled a few times during the day for intense academic services for specific reading skills. These students would get extra interventions and the other interventionists pulled groups while the teachers were holding their groups. Emily indicated that the purpose of interventions was to create small groups so that students were getting more individualized instruction. Also, Emily mentioned using money to hire reading interventionists so that students were able to receive individualized reading instruction. By eliminating

interruptions during reading and providing small-group instruction, BPE staff protected reading time to ensure maximum time spent on reading.

Instructional practices. During the interviews, BPE staff named several instructional practices to maximize learning. Instructional practices included rearranging classroom structures, involving staff beyond classroom teachers in student learning, using active engagement strategies, providing enriching learning opportunities, integrating arts and music into instruction, extending learning opportunities beyond the school day, and accessing a problem-solving team. Tony discussed different classroom structures to best support each student's academic needs, such as departmentalizing, combination classes or hiring a teacher for two hours a day to reduce class size. Departmentalization is an instructional practice where students are ability grouped and classroom teachers teach specific subjects to the entire grade. Tony mentioned that fifth grade and second grade used a departmental structure. Combination classes included mixing different grade-level students in one class. For example, Tony shared that they had high fourth-grade students who did math with fifth-grade students.

Involving staff beyond classroom teachers in student learning. Involving staff beyond classroom teachers meant the principal and secretaries taught small groups of students. As mentioned above, Tony spoke about how he taught a reading or math group each day. He usually taught a fourth- or fifth-grade group for one hour on Fridays because that was what he used to teach, and those grades had state growth scores that he used as higher leverage to impact BPE state scores. Tony said, "It helps academically and helps keep me involved." Stephanie echoed how the principal taught a small group of struggling readers so that he stayed connected to the classroom and to teaching.

The BPE staff included other staff besides classroom teachers in student learning. Secretaries took turns teaching a small group of fifth-grade writing for a half an hour a day, and Tony shared that BPE had the highest writing scores they had ever had in fifth grade. Tony also mentioned that their teaching and learning coach taught a small group of students for kindergarten and first grade. According to BPE staff, having all staff be a part of student learning was a strategy that maximized learning by creating smaller teacher to student ratios so that staff were better able to meet the learning needs of each student.

Using active engagement strategies. Staff participants mentioned using active engagement strategies to maximize learning. Emily said, "Our teachers use active engagement strategies so every student is participating." Emily further explained what this looked like in the classroom. She said teachers asked a question that was meant for every student in the room and after having "think time," every student had to show their answer. Emily mentioned some ways that students showed their thinking, including "pair and share, and thumbs up," and when students had the answer, all students responded at the same time. Emily also mentioned that if there were several students not responding, then teachers said, "Let's try that again," to provide a second learning opportunity so that all students were participating. Emily said that active engagement was ensuring that "everyone has to work their brain," and teachers gave feedback on the answers that students provided. One area of caution for student learning came from Tony, who stated, "I will tell you that there are kids that are expert fake learners. They will sit in your room all day and look at you like they are listening but they are not really, and they have been doing it for years." Tony mentioned the importance of having systems set up so that all students were engaged in active learning. Implementing active engagement strategies was a way to

ensure that all students were participating in thinking and showing their thinking, thereby maximizing learning for all students.

Enriching learning opportunities (science, technology, engineering, art and math). In the participant interviews, several staff members expressed that they were proud of the enriching STEAM learning opportunities offered at BPE during and after school. During my observations, I saw some of the enriching learning opportunities such as robotics, coding, a kindergarten class learning a unique music program, and an art class. Stacy explained that last year all of the classrooms received a robot to learn about robotics that was taught by the STEAM coordinator. During my observations, I noticed that the library had several books on display for students of all ages about coding, engineering, and robots. I also noted student work on STEAM challenges posted outside of classrooms, which included a question and students had to demonstrate their thinking through drawing and writing. The BPE staff offered a unique music program to their students. The music program was implemented for kindergarten through third grade about 10 years ago to help students hear sounds, pay attention to detail, and form habits of the mind like concentration. Tony said, "[The music program] could be one reason that we score so high academically at our school." Emily stated that the unique music program was originally thought to help increase phoneme awareness skills for students, but she thought it was also increasing math skills.

Integrating art and music into classroom instruction was another way BPE enriched learning to maximize learning. Tony said that staff attended trainings from the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts to learn how to integrate art and music into instruction. Tony explained that movement and music were important parts of instruction at BPE. He noted an example using vocabulary words as a performing arts activity. He said the kids decided what

kind of motion they wanted to do and when they practiced that word during the week, they said it out loud, said the definition, and did the motion that went with it. Tony said, "It is another way to help kids learn the material." He shared another example, the water cycle, and how acting it out was a way to help students remember how the water cycle worked. He said, "It adds a kinesthetic thing to it that helps kids learn by moving." By integrating music and art into subjects, BPE staff helped students learn and remember the material in an efficient method compared to spending time for each subject separately.

Staff members articulated the importance of offering enhanced learning opportunities to maximize student learning for those who otherwise may not have been as interested in learning because it motivated them to learn beyond reading, writing, and math. Stacy mentioned that students could experience and explore various strengths through the STEAM opportunities provided at BPE that they might not have had the chance to do so. Amanda mentioned that BPE put emphasis on arts, which probably helped numerous kids who otherwise would not have cared about school. She said, "If you only did reading and math and you are not good at reading and math, then kids have no reason to want to come to school." Similarly Stacy added, "I know I hated school and it was really boring. Sports was what drew me in and any way I can try to get them excited. When they see me in the hallway they are like, 'Is robotics today?' They are so excited for it." The BPE staff was proud to enhance learning and understood the importance for their students. Every student may not have excelled in reading, writing, and math, so to make learning enticing to all students, staff provided STEAM activities to maximize learning.

Extending learning opportunities beyond the school day. The BPE staff extended learning opportunities beyond the school day as a strategy to maximize learning. Stacy commented that BPE students continued on to schools with other kids who were from homes

with higher socioeconomic status. As a result, she felt "a great need" to provide BPE students with higher-level instruction and more opportunities to close the gap. Staff commented that they extended learning opportunities by holding academic and enrichment clubs at lunch time or after school. Stacy mentioned that she held a club at lunch: "Outside of STEAM class, I provide a students working to advance technology team at lunchtime once a week." Stephanie shared about a lunch club called the Super Hero Reading Club that was created by another staff member who was an aide. The Super Hero Reading Club was held during lunch for second graders who were not meeting academic goals. She said the students came two times a week, were allowed to self-select books to read, and then answered questions. After reading 25 books, there was a celebration for students.

The BPE staff mentioned that there were clubs after school that focused on academics and enrichment. Tony stated, "When a lot of first grade readers were behind, the grade-level team started an after school reading club to increase reading minutes." The BPE staff understood the necessity of providing learning opportunities beyond the school day to close learning gaps. Emily mentioned the after-school club included a science club, fifth grade multiplication club, fourth grade writing and math clubs in order to give student a little more practice before state testing.

Staff provided enriching after-school clubs, and Stacy said that they were "primarily engineering, coding, robotics" clubs. Similarly, Elizabeth said,

> When students discover something within them that they are "good" at–, it can have an incredible impact on their self-esteem, confidence, and how they function in other areas at school. Students who struggle in reading or math can totally excel in tech [technology] or music areas when given the opportunity.

The enrichment clubs were focused on helping students find their strengths and enjoyment in learning. Stacy commented, "We want them to have fun. That is why we do our clubs and programs and different opportunities." Stacy mentioned the clubs included a biking, gymnastics, choir, robotics, animation studio, sculpture, story and STEAM. She discussed how the second-grade teachers created a club called a friendship club for students who were shy and had a hard time making friends. These students came together and engaged in art activities. She added that there was a game club so that students knew how to play games in small groups with other kids.

Stacy and Emily mentioned family nights, an extended learning opportunity beyond the school day that focused on STEAM at BPE. Although Stacy mentioned family nights, Emily was the only participant to discuss its specific details. Emily noted that the older kids who used to attend BPE came with their parents. She emphasized that it was not just the fourth-grade student who came with their parent, the whole family came. In an upcoming family night in January, the robots were to be on display along with some of the different STEAM activities that the kids really enjoyed. Additionally, Emily mentioned that BPE had an art night where parents could walk the halls to see the students' art work, and there was a musical in the fall for third through fifth grade. She said, "It is all hands on and the kids interact with the parents doing the different challenges." Family nights helped maximize learning because families were more familiar with what their child was learning.

Accessing a problem-solving team. Despite the instructional practices used at BPE to maximize student learning mentioned above, occasionally some students were not showing growth. According to Emily, when students were not demonstrating growth at BPE, staff turned to a problem-solving team where a group of educators came together to help teachers with instructional and behavioral practices for students at any academic level, either low or high. She

mentioned that this team was there to help the teacher determine the next steps for students. Sometimes, next steps were simply reassurance that the teacher was utilizing the most appropriate strategy and needed to continue doing the same thing. Staff at BPE recognized that sometimes the instructional strategies shared in the interviews did not work for each learner, so using the problem-solving team helped educators find strategies for struggling students and other strategies to help motivate learners.

Staff at BPE had a tenacious focus on learning and used various strategies to meet the different needs of each student as well as to foster an excitement for learning to maximize learning. Instructional practices used by staff at BPE to maximize learning included involving staff besides classroom teachers in student learning, using active engagement, providing enriching learning through integration of STEAM, extending learning opportunities beyond the school day, and accessing a problem-solving team.

Consistency within systems. Interviews, observations, and documents collected showed that consistency within systems at BPE was a strategy that contributed to maximizing learning. Tony said, "We have a number of systems that we use schoolwide that keeps us all on the same page." He discussed the importance of the first week of the school year that focused on staff agreeing to track certain data and teach routines and procedures. He gave a title to this week based on how many days there were in the first week, for example, "Seven Days to Success" or "Five Days to be Fantastic." He provided an example of teaching lining up as a classroom routine. Tony explained that BPE students had a line order, and when staff directed students to line up, students stood in their spot, such as fifth in line, so that no one was fighting about one spot. He added that the expectation in line was that they were safe, straight, and smiling. Staff at BPE used a common approach to get students ready to listen: a /ch/ sound with various beats.

Other consistent approaches within systems included staff agreeing to use the same approach with instructional agreements, data use, reading strategies, and behavior systems.

Instructional agreements. Staff at BPE mentioned following instructional agreements with an emphasis on reading. Tony said, "We have agreed to be very purposeful with learning targets, active engagement, and positive behavior management and social emotional learning." In regard to learning targets, Tony explained that it was important for teachers to be really clear about what students were learning at the beginning, middle, and end of the lesson. Tony, like a coach of a sports team, used a football analogy to explain learning targets:

> It is almost like a football coach when he is running plays. Here is the play we are running and you stay with that play for five to six repetitions because you want to make sure everybody knows exactly what to do. The goal is to make it clear to the learner what they are supposed to be learning.

Tony recognized the importance of staff being clear and using the same learning target for a few lessons.

Consistency in reading strategies was evident during observations. While walking in classrooms, I noticed posters in classrooms that displayed strategies effective readers utilized such as question and answer relationships and elements of literature and non-fiction. One artifact I was given was a "Plan (Goal), Do (Strategy), Study (What happened)" lesson template that classroom teachers used when they planned with the interventionists. The consistent systems in reading helped staff and students maximize learning because staff knew how to support readers and students knew what to expect all year in each grade. Stacy discussed how consistency in the classrooms maximized learning. She said, "Our kids know what to expect when they come to school and then that opens their brain for learning." Consistency in

instructional agreements was a strategy to help maximize learning because learners knew what to expect, what they were learning, and what was expected of them.

Data use. The BPE staff commented about analyzing common sources of data that were used consistently throughout the school and the school district. Emily said that "Data Days" were a regular once-a-month practice for grade-level teachers and interventionists to analyze a common set of kindergarten through fifth grade DIBELS reading data and to monitor students' growth according to progress on the DIBELS test. Emily commented that students identified as making inadequate growth were progress monitored every two weeks, students identified as average growth were progress monitored every three weeks, and students identified as typical or above average growth were monitored once a month. She also said that staff members could access a shared drive for data from home and explained how that had been helpful. The same data on the shared drive were also displayed in the interventionist room that was accessible to all staff.

Behavior systems. Consistency in behavior systems was evident in the observations and the interviews. Elizabeth said, "We have a strong PBIS [positive behavior interventions and support] system in place and continually work to improve and try new approaches as the needs of the kids change." Emily further explained that Cub Five: Making Tracks to Success was the title of their PBIS system at BPE which included: "Be Respectful, Be Responsible, Be Ready, Be Your Best, and Be Caring." Staff commonly referred to this system as Cub Five with each other and students. During my observations, I noted the Cub Five posters with explanations of expectations for specific locations were displayed with student-friendly language and pictures in the hallways throughout the entire building, creating a consistent message to staff and students about what was clearly expected. Emily explained that the kids earned Cub prints for

demonstrating any one of the Cub Five criteria, and she showed me a Cub print, which was a small piece of paper. The students collected the Cub prints and traded them in for rewards. Furthermore to support consistency, Emily stated that "teachers do lessons focused on a positive-behavior skill to promote those different traits to support the [Club] Five." Tony mentioned that there were PBIS systems that really helped keep kids engaged throughout the day, and if students were engaged, they were going to learn more. The consistent expectations for behavior were clear for staff and students so that any disruptive behavior was minimized and learning could be maximized.

A Caring Culture

The third theme of a caring culture encompassed the idea that staff care about the whole child, and staff cared and supported each other. Staff took time for each other and their students and families to build and strengthen relationships as well as address challenges of poverty that confronted their students and families. During interviews, staff discussed several examples of how staff cared about everyone at BPE.

Staff care about the whole child. From the interviews, it was clear that staff worked together to genuinely care about students and develop the whole child. Emily said, "The staff works as a team helping all students." Caring about the whole child meant developing their cognitive, social-emotional, and physical needs. Elizabeth stated, "We have an amazing staff at [Bear Park] who truly care about our kids." The staff's genuine care was expressed through being "warm demanders," which meant letting students know that the staff loved and cared about them but they were also holding students accountable for their work and behavior. Elizabeth said, "So many staff go above and beyond to help our kids. I am proud to work with people who love our students the way they do." Staff exceeded expectations by using their lunch hour or

staying after school to hold clubs for students and taking the time to implement various efforts to develop social-emotional and physical needs of students.

Different approaches. During the interviews, staff at BPE illuminated a need for different approaches to behavior management for some individual students. Staff cared about the whole child while developing their emotional and social skills by recognizing and providing for students' individual needs. Elizabeth thought that BPE staff was great at working with students whose behavior, needs, and learning styles varied. She recognized that students had different needs from each other. She stated, "They need a variety of things that help them learn. Our teachers and staff are really good about meeting where kids are and not forcing them to be like other kids in the class." Utilizing different approaches to behavior demonstrated that BPE staff understood that each student was an individual and that students needed various approaches to help them be successful.

Staff at BPE understood that some students at BPE dealt with various mental or physical pain outside of school that impacted learning. Staff cared about the whole child by being mindful and implementing strategies to help students' development, specifically their cognitive and emotional development. The staff was learning about the effects of mental or physical pain on the brain and how this impacted the way students learned. Stephanie shared an example of how staff understood the impact of trauma on students and learning: "How can I teach a child who is worried about eating tomorrow or [if] their parent is in jail, and how to make the education tailored to them to how they are going [to] learn?" Tony mentioned that morning meetings and therapy dogs were some of the trauma-based strategies used by BPE staff to better help connect students to learning. He commented that BPE staff tried to help kids cope with stress and things they were dealing with, and morning meetings were time for students to share

things with their teacher. Tony stated, "We feel like if they do that they are more able to learn and absorb stuff." The staff highlighted that students in high-poverty schools often experienced mental or physical pain, so it was a necessity for staff to take the efforts to make education tailored to meet students' needs who had experienced trauma.

Positive behavior. Staff interviewed affirmed that a focus on positive behavior from students was a part of a caring and safe culture. Staff reported allocating time to develop the whole child by explicitly teaching positive behavior expectations and social-emotional skills. One example was through the BPE Cub Five positive behavior system. Staff mentioned that students collected the Cub prints and traded them in for rewards such as sitting by a friend. Emily also mentioned that the most sought-after reward was eating lunch with the teacher. Emily said, "It's like that they do not need tangible things. They want adult attention." When BPE teachers provided students with their time, they were demonstrating efforts of a caring culture and supporting the whole child.

Tony articulated a similar focus on positive behavior by establishing a culture where it was cool to be good. He recognized that sometimes the kids who got in trouble frequently were often the ones who got the attention. Tony noted that the staff came up with ways to recognize and celebrate kids who were doing what they were supposed to. He said,

> At the end of each quarter we have a No Referral Celebration. If you didn't get any referrals you have a menu of choices: You can get a couple of Dojo points, a couple chocolate chip cookies made by my wife and I, or you can go to the dance party, which we do at the end of the day.

Dojo points were earned by students within a communication app that connected parents and students to their classroom teacher. The benefits of focusing on positive behavior not only

attributed to a caring culture, but increased learning as well because instruction time was not spent on attending to behavior problems. From the staff interviews, it was illuminated that focusing on positive behavior from students was an important part of creating a caring culture that celebrated doing the right thing, which helped everyone feel safe.

Relationships. To care about the whole child, staff built relationships with students and families. Elizabeth stated, "Our students have so much going on in their lives outside school hours that we cannot control, but the second they walk in our doors we know we can provide them with a safe, caring and loving environment." Additionally, she said, "Building trusting, caring relationships with our students has been one of the most impactful ways that we have been able to reach the students that attend [BPE]." For staff, reaching the students meant connecting with them so that learning could happen. She asserted, "The key is to focus on relationships with kids. Creating relationships with kids can help create a safe environment to be able for them to feel safe and do their best learning." Elizabeth made the connection that building relationships created a caring culture to foster learning.

Restorative justice practices were a part of BPE staff's caring about the whole child, specifically their emotional well-being because staff and students worked together as a team to restore relationships. Staff members took the time to help students work through problems. Tony explained restorative justice: "Students have to think about how to make things right with the person that wronged them. We are more about making things right with each other instead of giving them punishments." Also, Elizabeth articulated that "restorative justice practices are about making it right. Research says that suspension doesn't work. It doesn't fix the issue and teach them what they need to learn." She explained how restorative justice was different compared to traditional approaches by stating that suspension may be a part of the discipline

process but there was more to it, such as sitting the kids down and talking about how they were feeling during the time or how it made each other feel. According to Elizabeth, restorative justice practices included helping students think about how their actions made the classroom feel and how that affected the school.

Using restorative justice included repairing the relationship and working through how to repair it. Tony shared a scenario at BPE involving restorative justice practices. He said there were two boys, one of whom put his hands on the other student's neck while the other student kicked him. Tony explained that they were normally friends. He said that typically he would have written a referral for the incident, but instead, he met with them and said they needed to make it right with each other. According to Tony, the students talked and fixed the problem and they did not have any more issues.

Similarly, Elizabeth mentioned a scenario where restorative justice practices were used with one particular student who had problems with behavior. She explained that the principal sat down with this student and another student who was involved in an incident. They talked until the issue was settled without any more behavior issues. Elizabeth said, "Last year, he would do something, get a referral, and get suspended and it would continue. We are seeing small improvements." Reflecting on utilizing restorative justice, Tony stated, "We have had some good luck with it. We are trying it and we're trying to have that mentality more. It seems to be working especially for the older kids." Restorative justice practices focused on repairing relationships, and staff perceived them as effective in improving behaviors involving relationships that positively impacted the caring culture. The BPE staff understood that relationships with students were essential to a safe, caring, and trusting environment for each student.

Staff not only built relationships with students but also with BPE families. Elizabeth primarily discussed how the school counselor or social worker played a pivotal role in helping to care for families. Emily reported that the counselor's role was to build relationships with the students and their families, so they were able to trust staff and have a safe person and place to be able to come to in times of need. When asked how relationships were built with families, Elizabeth stated, "They [staff] provide resources to families that come in struggling. Multiple times they are offered coffee in the front office." She suggested that families knew that the staff was there to help them and their kids. She mentioned that the understanding was built through communication. She added, "If there was a concern with a kiddo, we handle it very gently." This included having the parents come in, initiating phone conversations, offering to help in whatever ways staff could, being flexible, and working with families. Elizabeth continued that "if parents are on the verge of losing their job because they were having to come get their kids all of the time, we do what we can to keep them here." She reiterated that staff managed the best they could, and their families appreciated that. They knew that the staff was there for them.

Stacy commented on building a partnership with families by saying, "We treat our families like they are a huge part of what we do, which sets a huge precedence." Additionally, staff establishing relationships with families included providing resources such as sending books home. Stephanie stated, "Many of our families do not own books," so staff took time to make sure that students had books at home. Staff at BPE cared about their families by using a team approach and by being flexible and working with families to help support students using a team approach.

***Addressing challenges of poverty*.** Caring about the whole child included addressing challenges of poverty that impacted students and their families. Tony shared an example of caring about the whole child, specifically their physical needs:

> The effects of poverty are real and can present great challenges. Kids experience so much trauma in their lives from lack of proper nutrition to homelessness to unpredictable and high stress days. This can create a lack of focus, a nervousness, and social challenges.

Similar to Tony, several staff members commented about the challenges of poverty and the impact on meeting the basic needs for BPE students. Caring for students in a high-poverty school meant meeting the basic needs of each child such as food, clothing, attention, and sleep. Staff took time to establish partnerships within the community that could provide resources like backpacks, clothes, and food for students and families. When asked to tell more about the community partnerships that offered help, Elizabeth said that the neighborhood church offered to help families during Christmas, and other organizations like Salvation Army offered to help families during Thanksgiving and Christmas. Elizabeth asserted that the social worker's role was to connect families to resources such as pediatricians. Community partnerships were essential resources to address the challenges of poverty for students, but it also included resources for the family.

Meeting the physical needs of students meant that staff had an understanding that poverty could cause stress and limitations for students. Elizabeth mentioned,

> If a student is seeking attention, I strive to make special time for that student to show them they are valued. If a student is crying and needing support and reassurance from a

safe adult, I will provide that with a calm space to talk or a supportive hug and words of encouragement.

Elizabeth noted that all of the staff did these things every day with their students. She asserted that the staff was aware that school was often the safest, most consistent, caring, and best place for students to be. She said that she referred back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs when she was talking with teachers about students' needs. She mentioned that it was a reminder that students were not able to access their learning brain until some of their basic needs were met. In these ways, BPE teachers created a caring culture by exceeding the role of a teacher to care for their students.

Staff care and support each other. All interviewed participants commented on how the staff cared about each other. During my observations and interviews it was evident that staff felt like family. I walked into the staff lounge during my observations and several staff members were eating together. I heard laughing and conversations about their lives outside of school. Emily said, "It feels like it is a family when you come here, you are concerned about everybody. You're excited about things that happen in their personal life and school life." The BPE staff care about each other.

The BPE staff supported each other as professionals. Amanda shared that she felt cared for when she was a new staff member at BPE. She said, "Walking in, right away I knew who the leaders were because they came in and checked on me right away." As professionals, staff supported each other for their students. During the interview, Stacy said, "[Staff] are dedicated to their students and to each other." Staff at BPE commented about how staff helped each other to support students. Elizabeth said, "We all work well together and step up to help one another whenever it is needed." Emily also commented on staff being there for each other. She stated

that staff helped support each other, and whenever a staff member was having a difficult time with a student, staff gave the teacher a break. Emily shared that staff listened to others who needed to vent. Additionally, staff was willing to support each other outside of their designated role. Amanda said, "Everyone goes above and beyond what needs to be done." She shared about a staff member who came into her class to help students who were assigned to her but that the staff member would often assist students not assigned to her who needed support. Furthermore, staff was willing to teach different grade levels because of the impact on student learning. Tony shared about a time when a staff member agreed to move to a different grade level in the middle of the year for the benefit of the school. He stated, "That is the kind of team we have here." At BPE there was an overwhelming sense of a caring culture where staff care about each other and were willing to do what it took to support each other and student learning.

Summary of Findings for Bear Park Elementary

In summary, the principal, with the role as team coach at BPE, focused on developing a high-quality team by utilizing practices and actions such as keeping staff focused on student learning, holding staff accountable for student learning by having the courage to not retain ineffective staff, and offering PD opportunities. Staff at BPE had priorities, used specific instructional practices, and provided consistency within systems to maximize learning. Staff priorities included holding high expectations and valuing every minute of learning during the school day. Instructional practices to maximize learning included involving staff in addition to classroom teachers in student learning, using active engagement, enriching learning opportunities (STEAM), extending learning opportunities beyond the school day, and accessing a problem-solving team. Providing consistency within systems included instructional agreements, data, and

behavior systems. Lastly, a caring culture encompassed staff caring for the whole child by building relationships with students and family, as well as staff caring and supporting each other.

The School: Rolling Plains Elementary

Rolling Plains Elementary (RPE) was a high-poverty Title I public elementary school located in Colorado serving students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Located in a medium-sized urban district, RPE served fewer than 15,000 students. Since 2014, the student enrollment at RPE was over 400 students and the FRL population had ranged from about 70% to over 80%. The English learner population was around 15%, the minority student population was around 70%, and the number of students on Individual Education Programs was about 10%.

Also, RPE was successful at sustaining achievement above the Colorado state average beyond two consecutive years on the CMAS. The scale scores for the CMAS ranged from 650 and 850 for English language arts and math. The Colorado state average achievement score for English language arts and math for the school years 2015−2016, 2016−2017, and 2017−2018 was 741 and 736, respectively. For the school years 2015 to 2017, RPE's average achievement score for English language arts and math was 758 and 751, respectively. Additionally, RPE had received national and state awards for excellence over the past several years.

My description of the setting includes a brief discussion about the staff, the inside of the school, the principal, the participants, and the leadership team. Prior to my first observation, I arranged and made an introductory visit to introduce myself and my study to the principal. For my first observation visit, I observed RPE from bell-to-bell on a Thursday in November and a Monday in January. During my first observation, I noticed the staff at RPE were welcoming, friendly, and focused on their work as they visited the front office. Staff quickly came and went out of the front office with a smile, and said, "Hi" to guests who entered the front office. Staff at

RPE was an ethnically diverse mix of White people and a few people of color, with a majority of staff being females. The staff ranged in ages, experience, years of service at the school, education level, and years of service in education.

I walked through the hallways and noted the vibrant posters with inspiring positive messages that lined the office walls accompanied by all of the awards the school had received. One poster with a quote by Kid President stated, "You were made to be great." The lounge was the staff hub in the school. It was spacious with a white-board calendar that spanned across an entire wall. The lounge tables were topped with multicolored, motivational paper messages and the staff lounge bulletin board stated, "remember your why," and included other stated words like "inspiring change," "molding minds," and "celebrating diversity," to name a few.

I observed that students in the hallways transitioned quietly and walked in an organized line led by their teachers. In the hallways and lunchroom, walls were lined with colored posters similar to the front office. Behavior expectations were posted throughout the building as well as the RPE mission and vision. My initial observation occurred in the fall, so the décor was fall themed. Outside of every classroom door, student writing that demonstrated math, along with the correlating academic standard, were creatively displayed with a saying on decorated bulletin boards in the hallway. For example, some classes had story problems that were written by students. Connecting to the fall theme, one kindergarten bulletin board stated, "We're batty about math," and students wrote numbers on a paper that was attached to a student-made animal bat. Below the bats were paper pumpkins with real seeds and students wrote a sentence stating how many seeds were inside of the pumpkin. Classroom doors were decorated in a theme that cleverly embraced each classmate into the themed décor. For example, one first-grade classroom door stated, "First-grade is boo-tiful," and a photo of each student was under a ghost that the

student had designed. The computer lab had a bulletin board that stated, “Let it snow” and displayed student examples of codes to create snowflakes as well as the academic standard for technology. My observations revealed that staff at RPE invested time to artistically showcase student learning throughout their building.

Inside classrooms, I noticed teachers were with students either in small groups or a whole group. Learning goals for different subjects and where students were in their progress toward each learning goal were posted on the walls of the classrooms in themed bulletin boards or posters. For example, one bulletin board stated, “Reach for the Stars,” with numbered rocket ships captioned, “I know numbers zero to ten.” An alien was used for each student’s placement so that they knew where they were and where they needed to go to meet or exceed the academic standard. Inside all classrooms, I observed that the standard, the objective, and demonstration of learning for each subject was posted. The demonstration of learning was written with measurable objectives. The mission statement that spoke about growing all learners was displayed throughout the building along with behavior expectations. After observing, speaking with, and interviewing the staff at RPE, I was inspired by the welcoming staff, their words, and the messages on the posters.

Participants in the study were identified by the principal as leaders or teachers based on the criteria that they had maintained a leader or teaching position during the school years 2015−2017. There were six participants who consisted of one principal, one assistant principal, two teacher leaders who held a responsibility for coaching and improving practices, one primary teacher, and one intermediate teacher. The participant staff consisted of a majority of White females ranging in ages, educational levels, years of service at RPE, and experience as educators. Table 4 displays a list of the participants, their role, and years of service at RPE.

Table 4

Rolling Plains Elementary Participant Pseudonyms and Positions

Pseudonym	Role	Range of years at Rolling Plains Elementary
Carol	Principal	5–10
Jeannie	Assistant principal	3–5
Michelle	Teacher leader	3–5
Kris	Teacher leader	5–10
Donna	Primary teacher	1–5
Sabrina	Intermediate teacher	5–10

During my initial contact with office staff, I was informed that people frequently sought to visit RPE because they were interested in the success of the school. Despite being busy and having regular visitors in their school, the participants' willingness to take part in my research and offering to assist me if I had any needs showed they were dedicated to improving education. Regardless of frequent visitors, the staff continued to operate business as usual. During the interviews, I observed that the participants were proud of their school and their success. The staff patiently answered my questions and was willing to take more time out of their busy day to assist in follow-up questions.

The principal of RPE, Carol, stated that all of her time spent as a principal was at RPE. She also spent four years as assistant principal prior to accepting the principal position. She shared that she was very proud of her staff and school. She mentioned that people continually asked to visit the school, and she was extremely open to helping others learn about the success

experienced at RPE. After the interviews and observations, she reached out to me a few times regarding the findings of this study. The principal seemed genuinely dedicated to advancing education, so she was excited for the results.

Participants described leadership as teacher leaders and administrators who included the principal and the assistant principal. Carol and Jeannie, the assistant principal, had worked together for four years. Carol spoke about their relationship by saying, "We complement each other because we are opposites." She explained that their individual strengths and weaknesses balance each other to make a "good combination." The RPE leadership team included administration and teacher leaders. Participants did not discuss specific structures or details about their leadership team but mentioned that all teachers held a leadership role, which was part of their evaluation.

Rolling Plains Elementary Themes

Three themes emerged from the data collected at RPE and were arranged in no particular order. The first theme was systems for learning, and this consisted of an interdependent learning system with the district's and principal's role leveraging district systems to increase student achievement along with PD opportunities to advance skills for staff. The second theme was functioning as team, and this focused on how the staff operated as a team through collaboration, departmentalization, and data utilization. The third theme was student-focused staff which included strategies RPE staff used to build relationships, teach skills beyond academics, and address challenges of poverty. Table 5 displays a list of the themes.

Table 5

Rolling Plains Elementary Themes

Theme	Component		
	1	2	3
Systems for learning	District's role	Principal's role	Professional development
Functioning as a team	Collaboration	Departmentalization	Data use
Student-focused staff	Building relationships	Teaching social-emotional skills	Addressing challenges of poverty

Systems for Learning

Many of the RPE participants discussed a district-wide interdependent system focused on learning. The interdependent system was structured so that stakeholders individually and collectively depended on one another. The system was referred to as pay-for-performance (PFP), a district pay structure explicitly designed for educators in the district, where pay was tied to producing specific outcomes such as student achievement. The RPE PFP system was designed to help increase staff skills and leadership capacity and to retain staff, all of which are strategies that can increase student learning. This could result in employees, according to their evaluation score on a rubric, receiving a financial incentive for the higher student learning outcomes. The participants shared that having a leadership role, like being a teacher leader or leading PD, helped staff increase their skills and leadership capacity, was a substantial part of the evaluation rubric. Additionally, within the PFP design, there were programs that honored

teachers who demonstrated excellence in student achievement and offered teachers with opportunities to teach halftime and coach halftime. Coaching halftime included helping newer teachers or other teachers with strategies to increase the effectiveness of their instruction or skills.

Both the district administration and the principal had roles in managing the PFP program. Participants stated that the PFP system created an interdependence between the district, staff, and students. For example, participants mentioned that school staff utilized the district processes as individual teachers for their individual scores to increase their pay and as a collective staff for their scores as a school, and the district staff utilized school personnel to produce desired academic outcomes. Students relied on teachers to facilitate lessons and teachers relied on students to be leaders of their own learning. At RPE, the interdependent PFP system fostered a culture of learning for all with a focus on the district's and principal's roles for improving professional skills for staff in order to more effectively increase student learning.

District's role. Participant staff members at RPE commented about the district's role in supporting the PFP interdependent system and that included providing teacher-advancement programs and accountability resources and structures to staff. The PFP system was designed to help staff increase their skills and receive an incentive. According to RPE staff participants, the Accomplished Teacher district program was a process that recognized successful teachers with an honor based on a rubric and a financial incentive. Carol stated that it was a "rigorous" process, and in order to begin the process, teachers must have had at least three years in the district as well as high data. She added that the process entailed a six-week period where a team conducted unannounced observations focused on different characteristics within the classroom using a rubric. She stated that after the observations were complete, the teacher was interviewed

to discuss their accomplishments. Carol said that if the teacher earned Accomplished Teacher title, the teacher received a monetary incentive. The district offered another program that allowed teachers to be half-time teachers and half-time coaches in order to honor and help increase skills for other teachers.

The district's role also included providing staff with accountability tools such as district-created common assessments across the district. Regarding the district curriculum, Jeannie, the assistant principal, said, "We are fortunate. We have the district CBMs [curriculum based measures]. We just had those in December and so now we are using that as a mid-point before we go into CMAS [Colorado Measures of Academic Success]." Sabrina, an intermediate teacher, echoed the same feeling as Jeannie, saying, "We are lucky to have district-created assessments aligned with state expectations beginning in kinder. This gives as a panoramic view of our students' strengths and weaknesses." Staff mentioned using a state adopted reading assessment known as DIBELS. Jeannie mentioned that the district provided other curriculum resources like curriculum maps to guide teachers. Jeannie stated that administration wanted teachers to follow the maps when designing lessons to ensure student success and to find ways to engage students.

The district's role entailed a system of accountability within PFP systems for staff as individuals as well as for staff collectively for school performance of student learning and a system of support for teachers. Several staff members mentioned that the district-incentive program influenced accountability. Michelle, a teacher leader, said that the staff was held accountable by the district on a multi-component system represented by a pie chart. Part of the system was based on formal and informal teacher evaluations and RPE's performance on state and district testing. Michelle mentioned that the district testing was based on the district-created

assessments. She added that staff used the data from district testing that was discussed at grade-level meetings to compare their scores to the district. According to Michelle, the other part of the accountability and performance rating of the school was based on the how staff reached out to the community and built partnerships.

The data analysis was also a form of accountability to support teachers who were not meeting expectations. When asked what happened when a teacher did not perform as expected, Michelle stated that the district conducted a two-year review. She said, "If you do not meet it [performance expectations], then you fall in the category of needing more support and [will] be put on a plan." She added that the teacher would be paired with another teacher for support. Michelle made a connection that the process was similar to when students did not understand something. She said, "Then we need to reevaluate the situation, and how can we help them [teachers] to get where their students are achieving?" The district's role within the PFP system was providing a system for programs to help advance teachers in pay and honorary positions, a system for providing staff with accountability tools such as common assessments and curriculum resources, a system of accountability for staff based on a rubric, and systems to support teachers who were not meeting expectations.

The principal's role. The principal at RPE, Carol, leveraged the PFP system to grow leaders and implemented distributed leadership to increase student achievement. She mentioned that part of her role in the PFP system to increase teachers' skills and leadership was assisting them in the Accomplished Teacher process. According to Carol, part of her evaluation as a principal was growing teachers into leaders, of which she stated she was very proud to grow teachers. She had four teachers complete the Accomplished Teacher process and three more were about to enter the process. She added that her role was to talk to staff who wanted to apply

to ensure they were ready for the "grueling" process and to assist in turning in the application packet. The PFP program applied to the principal as well. Carol said that her evaluation was based on the school's performance data. She stated that it was in her best interest to "coach" teachers. When asked to tell more about coaching teachers, Carol stated that it started with a 10- to 15-minute informal observation focused on five teacher performance standards, and then she provided feedback to the teacher. Together, the principal and the teacher picked one or two areas for improvement such as planning, delivery of instruction, or classroom management. She added that modeling was provided if the teacher wanted to see how to implement any part of the feedback. Carol explained that the next observation focused on the areas of improvement that they agreed on and when those areas improved, they added one more item to improve and continued the coaching process.

Another aspect of the principal's role in systems for learning at RPE included utilizing a distributed leadership model to build capacity for staff. Staff members at RPE discussed having leadership support from administrators and teacher leaders. Sabrina, stated, "We have several teacher leaders in the building." It was never difficult to find someone to head a committee, or a club, or serve at the district level because the staff was passionate about education and about having their voices be part of decision-making processes. Michelle described leadership as being "solution oriented and providing support and mentorship" for teachers who struggled to meet expectations. Sabrina stated that administration trusted teachers as experts in their field, and they did not try to micromanage or control everything teachers did. For example, Sabrina mentioned that leadership was always supportive if staff wanted to implement an idea that was backed by research and presented the benefits to leadership for a change in instruction, classroom, and set-up. She added that leadership encouraged staff to change the status quo. Sabrina also mentioned

that everyone at RPE took on leadership roles. She shared that being in a district with a PFP program and with leadership as a "major component of our rubric" was helpful in getting other teachers to take on a leadership role; however, she mentioned that staff also took on leadership roles because they believed in each other and wanted the best for their students. Within the PFP systems at RPE, the principal's role included coaching teachers to improve their skills, implementing distributed leadership, and leveraging PFP systems for evaluations and rubrics to build leadership capacity.

Professional development opportunities. At RPE, systems for learning for staff included PD opportunities and a continuous improvement focus. Michelle stated that the RPE mission focused on growing all learners and included growing teachers through PD. Kris, a teacher leader, said that the district offered PD, and other PD opportunities existed outside of the district to help staff stay current on trends in education. Sabrina added that the district was "amazing" about offering PD and stated that staff did not have to go to all of the PD but could pick what PD to attend. She added that if staff found a PD they were interested in, the administration was really great about investing in professional learning for staff. Michelle mentioned that leadership informed teachers about PD trainings. Another learning opportunity for RPE staff was using information from evaluations. Michelle shared that leaders used formal and informal evaluations to provide feedback to teachers to help them continue their learning.

Staff at RPE discussed continuous improvement focus as one more way to maximize their instructional capacity to increase student learning. Continuous improvement focus included putting thought into student learning and making decisions to continue, modify, or stop practices in order to produce better outcomes. Jeannie said, "We are currently revamping what we have been doing because we didn't like our scores, so we are problem solving. It didn't work. Before

we move on, let's change and improve things." For example, Jeannie discussed that staff used to integrate reading and writing because that was what students were tested on, but then the staff discovered that the writing was not as strong. According to Jeannie, the problem was that the kids had good ideas, but those ideas were not organized or structured and became random thoughts on a paper. As a result of this discovery, Jeannie said, "We are going back to basics. We are doing direct instruction of writing. We are going back to basic paragraph writing going back to basics instead of putting too much on them." Continuous improvement for RPE staff members meant looking at their students' data and making necessary instructional changes.

Michelle commented that continuous improvement focus also included having a growth mindset. She said that sometimes teaching could be discouraging, but teachers should instead focus on being able to be successful with more training or more coaching. She added that the PFP program helped her to personally strive for a higher level of excellence and accept feedback more constructively. Staff also reflected on data. Jeannie discussed the staff looking at data to find their strengths and challenges. Jeannie stated, "You never take on the attitude, 'I am perfect, we're done.' It is what else can we do, how can we get better, how else can we get these students to be successful?" Carol also mentioned that staff was focused on continuous improvement, stating that if a teacher was seeking growth, the teacher needed opportunities to grow. She said, "Even if it is not right or it failed, you still come back and talk about what went well and what you could have changed to make it better." She believed that making mistakes and growing from them contributed to sustained achievement.

The RPE staff members conveyed that they valued opportunities to increase their learning and had a growth mindset. Kris said, "We strive to be the best that we can be." Similar to Kris, Michelle stated that her philosophy was to never stop learning. The RPE staff saw themselves as

role models of learning for their students. Michelle said, "You are continuing to grow and learn no matter your age, stage, phase of life, and degree. Having that mindset can be infectious to your students and bring that to life in the classroom." Sabrina commented that improving professional skills was an ongoing process and that the circumstances changed from year to year as the demographics at RPE always changed. She added that because the staff was aware of the demographic changes, they tried to stay current, read relevant research, and met their learners and community where they were.

Systems for learning were evident through the PFP interdependent system where the district's role was to provide staff with teacher-advancement programs, accountability tools for staff such as common assessments and curriculum resources, accountability systems for individual teachers and the collective staff, and supports for teachers not meeting expectations. The principal's role entailed leveraging PFP systems and coaching teachers to improve their skills and implementing a distributive leadership model. Both the district's and the principal's role included leveraging the PFP systems for accountability of staff for student learning as well as providing PD opportunities.

Functioning as a Team

The second theme, functioning as a team, included staff caring for each other, collaborating, and using a departmental structure as an instructional model. During interviews, several RPE staff members discussed working together as a team. Jeannie said, "We are successful because of the teamwork approach and the willingness to help each other." At RPE, functioning as a team included staff caring about the lives of each other outside of school. Carol discussed that if a staff member had a crisis at home, they were there for each other; thus having

the support of each other created a safe collaborative working environment. Carol added that staff wanted to remain working at RPE because of the teamwork.

Collaboration. Several staff members in the interviews commented about the collaboration between staff members. Michelle said that being collaborative included staff reaching out to other staff like the culturally linguistically diverse teacher, reading interventionist, leadership, and special education teacher. Kris also mentioned staff at RPE was "cohesive and open to having dialogues." Kris discussed the benefits of collaboration, such as "opening lines of communication where teachers did not feel threatened," minimizing frustration, and communicating clearly. Michelle noted that the principal made recommendations for staff to go to other staff when they needed support with students. Additionally, staff at RPE collaborated with staff at other schools. Jeannie said, "Our counselor always talks to the high schools [and] gets ideas. We get volunteers for our science night from high schools. We get middle schools in here for the community events." Collaboration at RPE encompassed working with a variety of staff in efforts to better support students.

Staff also collaborated through vertical articulation of student learning. Michelle discussed using vertical articulation across grade levels during professional learning communities time, which provided staff with information on what students needed to master in their current grade in order to be successful and proceed to the next grade. For example, Kris who worked with kindergarten through third grade said, "I will look at vertical alignment, and look at what is the end-of-year expectations for a kindergartener to beginning of year first grader." Similarly, Sabrina said, "It starts in kindergarten. Everything we do builds on top of each other and we realize that we all have to support each other. Everything is us together." The RPE staff worked hard to vertically align the curriculum a few years ago. Sabrina mentioned

that staff reconvened at the beginning of each year to ensure that the hard work on the curriculum was carried over and that staff continued to have vertical conversations. Sabrina explained a typical question during the vertical conversation might be, "How are you teaching main idea? Short constructed response? What are your steps for solving three-digit multiplication?" The RPE staff viewed collaboration as necessary for vertical articulation, which impacted student learning.

According to RPE staff, an additional aspect of collaboration included setting and having common expectations for students and staff. Sabrina discussed details about collaborating across a team and the impact on their expectations for students. Sabrina said, "High expectations goes back to the teamwork approach. We all have to be on the same page when it comes to behavior and academic expectations." She added that having a shared understanding required staff to frequently talk and communicate and regularly collaborate aligned consisted expectations across RPE staff. Sabrina elaborated, "I think it helps when you have a team that knows what everybody's expectations are." For example, Sabrina discussed not letting students wear the hood attached to their clothing in school because it covered their head and if one staff member allowed it, then students thought they could do it everywhere. Sabrina cautioned the importance of taking the time with the team at the beginning of the year to front load expectations and negotiate in order to have a common understanding. Carol said that if any one went into any classroom, they were going to see a "tight ship" as far as classroom management. It was an expectation across the school that students followed the rules and staff enforced the rules in a loving kind way. Carol noted that staff was firm and consistent in a caring way and that the disruptive behaviors were minimal.

Michelle commented that expectations for staff started with professional attire. I observed that staff wore casual dresses, semi-formal pants and sweaters. She discussed that staff exuded high expectations by modeling excellence for their students and families. Michelle added,

> We hold ourselves up to the upmost highest expectations and it transcends into the classroom. I feel like that transcends from leadership down into staff and then into our students, and that develops the culture of excellence for the entire school by having those expectations.

Similarly, Donna, who was a primary teacher, discussed common expectations for teachers: (a) writing in every subject, including math, (b) bell- to-bell instruction, (c) staff collaboration with teachers who taught other subject content areas, (d) staff planning together, (e) staff attending PD, and (f) reflection. Inside Jeannie's office were the non-negotiables for staff:

1. Students and teachers will be held accountable for the entire duration of the instructional period from bell-to-bell.
2. All standards, objectives, and demonstration of learnings will be aligned and posted for student access. The tasks/activities will be aligned with the objectives and demonstration of learning.
3. There will be writing in all content areas. Students will demonstrate their understanding and justify their thinking in all content areas (levels of writing will depend on grade-level skill requirements).

The RPE staff operated as a team through increased collaboration and vertical alignment which allowed them to have common, clear expectations for staff.

Departmentalization. Through collaboration and teamwork, staff at RPE used the departmental structure for instruction. Their departmentalizing structure encompassed each grade-level teacher only teaching one or two content areas to all students in the grade level. According to RPE staff, using the departmental structure allowed teachers to develop a level of mastery within a content area that they taught and (a) collaborate with teammates who taught the same subjects and (b) collaborate with the teammate who taught the same students. When asked about the details of implementing the departmental model at RPE, Donna commented that each teacher had their homeroom students, and the students were divided in half based on their reading ability. She added that sometimes teachers used students' math ability as a measure to assign students to a certain homeroom. While she was teaching the lower-level ability students, the other grade-level teacher was teaching math and science for the higher-level ability students. Then teachers switched groups in the afternoon. Additionally, Donna stated that the teachers were constantly moving kids based on their abilities and the "bubble" students were moved a lot as teachers tried to find the "magic" place for them. Bubble students were students in between the high and low group, and the ideal place for them was where instruction was not too high or low for them.

Michelle commented that teaching science and social studies as a departmentalized team helped her to focus on two content areas as opposed to trying to master all content areas. Michelle added that the building expectation was to incorporate writing across all of the content areas including science and math; thus an interdependence between all teachers was created where teachers worked together with the same group of students with the same content focus. Departmentalization as an instructional model required teamwork from teachers. Donna explained that it was essential for grade-level teams to be strong in order for it to work. She said,

"Whoever is also teaching ELA [English language arts], I have to work closely with them because we plan together, and obviously whoever I am sharing kids with, we have the same kids, so we have to work really closely together."

Implementing the departmental structure contributed to RPE staff operating as a team where teachers worked closely together creating an interdependence between teachers. Operating as a team meant staff worked together to solve problems without having to rely solely on administration. Donna said, "Not to harp on this teamwork thing but that is very much a priority that we are working together to problem solve." She noted that she felt supported by administration that gave teachers autonomy to decide what was best for their grade level. Donna stated, "I think that admin [administration] trusts teachers to do what is best for their kids [and that trust] is part of why that collaboration happens." Furthermore, Donna added that because of collaborating through departmentalizing, staff members did not have to rely solely on administration; instead, they could go to several other teachers to ask for help, and they would be very willing to help. According to RPE staff, departmentalizing as a school-wide instructional model allowed teachers to function as a team across all grade levels through collaboration, vertical alignment, and helping teachers become masters of their content.

Data use. The RPE staff had a collective teamwork approach to data by using the departmentalizing model to work better together to solve problems and to increase ownership of data together as a school. Michelle stated that the staff used various data from reading to science and to all content areas. Sabrina mentioned that all staff took ownership of the data for all students. She explained that recently the math teachers met and the reading teachers met to analyze the district mid-year data to identify strengths and challenges. Part of the discussion focused on how staff could help third graders become better at specific standards. Kris added

that staff looked at norms to see where the students should be achieving at the district level and nationally and how staff helped the students to keep achieving or exceeding the benchmarks. Michelle discussed tracking DIBELS reading data and Pathways of Progress, a new feature within DIBELS that gave a visual representation of students' progress and was used to help students track their progress. Michelle said, "Part of the data is making the kids aware and having them take ownership of their achievement." Not all of the accountability of data fell on the teachers, however; instead, RPE staff members included students in taking ownership of their achievement.

The RPE staff used data in vertical alignment conversations. Sabrina shared that staff had an online digital data board to see how students performed in third, fourth, and fifth grade. Sabrina added that she could look back at DIBELS, state, and district scores to identify trends in learning; furthermore, she needed to pay attention to the trends at the student level. She said, "For every kid, we want to make sure that they are showing growth." The RPE staff created a One Drive spreadsheet so that all staff members could edit, fill in information, and review all of the student information from over the years on one spreadsheet. Additionally, Sabrina said that after they received assessment data, staff had vertical alignment conversations with teams including kindergarten through fifth-grade English language arts, kindergarten through fifth-grade science, and kindergarten through fifth-grade math to analyze student data at all levels. Carol commented that staff regularly analyzed data from district, school, grade, and student levels. She believed RPE was able to sustain achievement because the data were kindergarten through fifth grade.

Staff at RPE functioning as a team meant that they cared about each other, collaborated, implemented departmentalization as an instructional model, and analyzed grade-level and

vertical data across all content. Through collaboration staff was able to vertically align student learning and had common clear expectations for staff and students. By using departmentalization all teachers worked closely together, such as grade-level teachers and teachers of similar content. As a team, all staff took ownership and responsibility for data because RPE staff recognized the importance of working together as a team to help students achieve.

Student-Focused Staff

The theme of student-focused RPE staff included valuing students and their learning, utilizing practices for building relationships, teaching social-emotional skills, having high expectations, and addressing poverty and support for the families. During the interviews, staff at RPE stated that they valued students and their learning and focused on their students by exceeding expectations. Carol explained, "We have them for eight hours. You want to make that their best eight hours of their day." Staff was dedicated to the time they had with their students to better support students. Jeannie said, "Our teachers really go above and beyond." Similarly, Donna said, "The teachers could just give enough or go above and beyond, and I feel like the teachers here have always gone above and beyond what they needed to, to be there for their kids." The RPE staff was student focused and exceeded expectations for their students by spending time to meet their academic and social-emotional needs.

The RPE staff noted that they valued students' learning and students' needs. Kris said, "Because we place so much value on our students, we continue to research and implement additional best practices that not only contribute to a high-quality education delivery but those that focus on each students' diverse academic needs." Carol noted that the teachers played a huge role in making the kids successful and they wanted every kid to feel successful. She added

that the paraprofessional staff supported kids just like teachers by pulling groups, meeting with kids, and testing kids. Furthermore, Carol shared that the ladies in the office helped not just with sick kids, but kids who had behavior problems.

Valuing student learning and being student focused meant teachers embraced the role of a facilitator of student learning and held students accountable for their learning. Sabrina said, "Student-led classrooms is a big part of our rubric." When asked to tell more about student-led classrooms, Sabrina stated that it meant students took ownership of their learning in order to understand their strengths and weaknesses, to connect the standards to their learning targets, and to encourage students to do the "heavy lifting" in a lesson. In student-led classrooms, the teacher was a facilitator of knowledge compared to imparting knowledge to students. Sabrina said, "I am letting students be hands on, problem solve, and collaborate. I am giving them a mission and telling them what I want the end result to be and letting them figure out how to get there using different resources." Similar to Sabrina, Kris added that staff held students to a high standard and encouraged them to try their very best. Kris explained what staff would tell their students, "We cannot make you do anything but that is on you. You are responsible for your education. If you are not trying, you are only hurting yourself." Holding students accountable meant placing the responsibility of learning on the learner. Jeannie added, "We are always asking our teachers, 'How can you get students involved? How can we get students to carry the work load?' It is getting teachers to think about the engagement, the student work-load, and it is always getting kids to think deeper." As a team, RPE staff was student focused and valued their students, which was evidenced by investing time to go above and beyond to meet the needs of every student and increase students' ownership of their own learning.

Building relationships. For RPE, being student focused included practices that built relationships with students. Sabrina discussed how departmentalization helped build relationships with all students within each grade level because all of the teachers taught every student within the grade level. She discussed that RPE had a low mobility rate for students so teachers knew brothers, sisters, cousins, and aunts. Sabrina added that parents knew that teachers were going to say "hi" and ask about the things going on in their lives. Sabrina said, "It is really great to build those relationships out on the playground during duty or in the carpool lane. It brings the community-feel here because it is like that with all of the teachers." Kris noted that students needed to see staff in the public environment and not just at school. Kris added that staff tried to attend student events outside of school. Kris said, "It increases relationship[s] with staff and students. If we cannot have relationships with our students, we are in a difficult situation." Staff mentioned departmentalization, time on duty, and attendance at outside events as opportunities to build relationships with students.

Carol spoke about relationships and the staff offering a "wrap-around mother service" meaning, staff took care of students similar to a mother, including asking questions about their feelings. She said that because she had been at RPE for a while, she had great relationships with all of the kids and families. She said, "I make it my goal every year to know every kid's first name and one little fact about them because they want to be called by their names." Carol shared that success to her was relationships with students. She said, "So success yes, it is sometimes the numbers, the awards, and everything. But to me, more success is building a relationship with a kid and having a staff that does the same thing. We all believe in the same philosophy." Teachers were not the only staff building relationships with students; Carol added that staff in the lunchroom made an effort to meet the kids and build relationships with them. According to

RPE staff, students were important, and they took time and opportunities to build relationships with their students to better meet each of their needs.

Teaching social-emotional skills. At RPE, staff realized that a substantial amount of time during the school day was spent focusing on increasing students' academic performance and recognized a need to allocate time for developing their social-emotional skills. Kris commented about the need to develop social-emotional skills due to an increased use in technology: "We know now that technology is the overriding factor and these kids do not do what they did 20 years ago. They're on technology so we try to integrate more social skills." At RPE, developing social-emotional skills included implementing restorative justice practices. Kris explained that RPE received a grant for restorative justice practices to aid in developing social skills for students because the PFP incentive program was mainly focused on furthering academic achievement. Donna added that part of restorative justice was giving students a safe place where they could talk to each other or to staff. The RPE staff invested resources, such as time and money, in programs to support social-emotional skills like restorative justice that helped students learn to work through challenges in a safe place.

Addressing challenges of poverty. Staff at RPE mentioned strategies to address the challenges of poverty such as having high expectations, focusing on attendance, providing resources to meet the physical needs of students, building community partnerships, and supporting RPE families. Kris said, "Many of the challenges we face at [RPE] revolve around dysfunctional families, homelessness, and the lack of basic needs of their students being met." Even though RPE staff recognized that the challenges of poverty might impact learning, Jeannie stated that staff could not use that as an excuse to not meet high academic and behavior standards. The expectations, Kris explained, were the same for every student who walked

through the doors at RPE "regardless of a student's ethnicity, socio-economic status, or cultural difference." This included instilling a desire in each student to try and do their very best regardless of ability level. Similarly, Sabrina said,

> These kids have been through things that I have not been through. At the end of the day they do not need pity. They need someone to listen to them [and] to say, "You are going to rise above that and you still have to perform; you still have to show up. We still believe that you can reach a high standard. You can be proficient and advanced in any subject that you are learning."

Carol commented that the perception was that RPE students were not going to perform like students in other affluent districts because RPE was in a lower socioeconomic area, but RPE students had out performed some of the schools.

The RPE staff held high expectations for student behavior that aligned with rules and policies set by the school and the district. Carol shared that the high academic achievement of RPE was because staff managed behavior so they could focus on academics. Similar to Carol, Michelle said, "Students adhere to classroom and school rules which limit disruptions within the classroom, which in turn will lead to more student engagement, and learning." According to RPE staff participants, having high expectations for behavior contributed to student learning.

The RPE staff had high expectations for daily attendance and stated that was a challenge for their population. Sabrina said that RPE had an attendance contest throughout the year and especially during state assessments. She added that the students had incentives for perfect attendance, including an award ceremony every quarter and at the end of the year where kids could earn iPads for having perfect attendance for the whole year. She stated that when she first started teaching at RPE, maybe one student received an iPad. Now, maybe 10 students received

one. She iterated the importance of communicating to students that attending school was important, talking about attendance with families, and putting it in daily communication to help address the daily attendance challenge. Staff understood that high expectations for behavior and the importance for students to be at school increased learning.

Another strategy to address the challenges of poverty was to meet the physical needs of students by providing resources to students and families. As a Title I school, RPE fluctuated between 70 % and 85 % of the student population qualifying for FRL. To help meet the physical needs of students while at school, staff mentioned that the school provided resources such as breakfast and lunch to the students. As mentioned previously, Kris explained that staff "worked around" the challenges of broken families, not having a place to live, and other essential needs of students and families who were lacking resources or access to resources. Sabrina shared that some of the background stories were tough. Donna added that some students came to school dirty or their hair was not combed, so she would provide a brush for them. Donna said, "I think for me as a classroom teacher, it is about the whole child. If they are not being taken care of at their basic levels it is really hard to teach them." Michelle commented that the school counselor reached out to several community resources in order to acquire backpacks, coats, and clothing for students. Additionally, Kris noted that staff offered counseling services to those families who reached out. Providing food, clothing, and counseling services were strategies used by RPE staff to address students' basic needs that may go unmet because of poverty, which could impact learning.

The RPE staff reported supporting RPE families by having family nights throughout the school year. According to RPE staff, they held a STEM night with a science fair. Community members such as those from a local power company and chemical lab came to these nights to

create awareness about different job opportunities in the community, because families might otherwise not have the opportunity to participate in such experiences or know what jobs were in their community. Sabrina stated that these opportunities might change the trajectory of students' lives and instill a desire in them to pursue a STEM-related career. The RPE staff members also mentioned a cultural night where families came together to learn about different cultures around the world.

Staff at RPE actively sought out partnerships within the community to help provide resources to meet each student's needs. Sabrina stated that one community partnership delivered Bristlebots to the fourth-grade science class. Another community partnership entailed students spending a day with engineers to build a robot and do various STEM challenges. Additionally, another community partnership involved an astronaut coming to the school.

To reiterate, staff were student focused. Staff valued students and their learning which meant that teachers took the role of a facilitator in learning and classrooms were student led. Staff invested time to build relationships with students and taught skills beyond academics such as social-emotional skills. To further support students, staff addressed the challenges of poverty for students at RPE by not letting poverty challenges be used as an excuse to hold anything but high expectations for learning, behavior, and attendance. Furthermore, staff invested in relationships with the community to support families with resources and provided opportunities for family involvement through family nights.

Summary of Findings for Rolling Plains Elementary

Systems for learning were evident in the PFP interdependent system and the district and principal had pivotal roles within this system. The district's role entailed managing learning through providing programs and resources such as the Accredited Teacher program and

curriculum-based assessments. The principal's role encompassed coaching teachers. Both the district's and principal's role included holding staff and students accountable and offering PD opportunities. Staff at RPE functioned as a team through caring about each other, collaborating on vertical alignment and expectations, implementing departmentalizing as an instructional model that allowed teachers to work closely together, and taking ownership of data collectively as team. Lastly, RPE staff was student focused. Staff valued their students and their learning, and teachers were facilitators in student-led classrooms. Staff went above and beyond to meet each student's needs by building relationships, teaching social-emotional skills, and addressing challenges of poverty through offering family nights to connect with families and community partnerships, which provided resources to students and families.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

Educational policies are created to ensure that every student succeeds. More specifically, policies have been created to address achievement gaps for student populations who have been identified as at risk for not meeting educational goals. Though many high-poverty Title I schools have increased their student achievement over a one-year period, this growth is often followed by a plateau or regression, and far fewer have been able to maintain an increase in student achievement beyond two consecutive years (Hitt & Meyers, 2017). Because of these trends, the intent of this study was to identify leader practices and actions that may contribute to sustained achievement in high-poverty Title I schools.

Through qualitative multiple case study design, I explored and described the practices and actions used by leaders of two successful, high-poverty Title I public elementary schools in Colorado who influenced sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years. Because research has identified effective leadership as significant to the success of a school (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Portin et al., 2009; Waters et al., 2003), it was important to glean insights on perspectives, practices, and actions from leaders in successful high-poverty schools. Data were collected from interviews, observations, and artifacts from two schools that scored above the Colorado state average on the state reading and math assessment beyond two years. The following research question guided the investigation:

Q1 How do leaders influence sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years in successful, high-poverty Title I public elementary schools in Colorado?

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings, share implications, and present recommendations for research.

Summary of Themes

The findings consisted of three themes from each school (see Table 6). For Bear Park Elementary (BPE), theme one encompassed a high-quality team with a focus on the principal's role, which was similar to the role of a coach of a sports team. The principal's role entailed utilizing practices and actions such as implementing shared leadership, providing professional development (PD) opportunities, and holding staff accountable for student learning. Theme two, maximizing learning, consisted of staff at BPE who had priorities, used instructional practices, and provided consistency within systems. Staff priorities included holding high expectations and valuing every minute of learning during the school day. Instructional practices to maximize learning included using active engagement, offering enriching learning opportunities (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics [STEAM]), extending learning opportunities beyond the school day, and accessing a problem-solving team. Providing consistency within systems included instructional agreements, data, and behavior systems. Theme three, a caring culture, included staff caring for the whole child by building relationships with students and families, as well as staff caring and supporting each other.

For Rolling Plains Elementary (RPE), systems for learning, theme one, encompassed the principal's and district role in supervising learning through a district interdependent pay-for-performance (PFP) system, providing PD opportunities, and holding staff and students accountable. Theme two, functioning as a team, consisted of caring about each other, collaborating, and utilizing departmentalizing as an instructional model. Theme three, student-focused staff, entailed RPE staff who valued their students and were willing to go above and

beyond. Staff built relationships with stakeholders, taught social-emotional skills, and addressed challenges of poverty by providing resources to meet the needs of students and families.

Table 6

Summary of Bear Park Elementary and Rolling Plains Elementary Themes

School	Theme		
	1	2	3
Bear Park Elementary	A high quality team	Practices to maximize learning	A caring culture
Rolling Plains Elementary	Systems for learning	Functioning as a team	Student-focused staff

Discussion of the Findings

Much of the previous research on Title I schools focused on practices used by principals across the United States at successful, high-poverty elementary, middle, and high schools. Other research focused on principals and teachers; however, leadership can also include assistant principals, instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and parents. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2016a) defined high-poverty schools as schools that have a population of at least 75% of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch (FRL); although, much of the research on high-poverty Title I schools included schools with a student population of 50% and above who qualified for FRL. This study extended research on Tittle I schools by specifically looking at leader practices and actions in high-poverty Title I public elementary

schools that sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years in Colorado and found the significance of leaders use of systems.

Systems

The data from the multiple case study on two high-poverty Title I schools, BPE and RPE, revealed how leaders utilized systems to influence sustained achievement. Several researchers have identified the importance of systems in education (Chenoweth, 2017; Fullan, 2004; Leithwood, 2012; Shaked & Schechter, 2017). In early research on systems thinking, Senge (1990) pointed out the importance of systems thinking as an approach for leaders of corporations to transform organizations into learning organizations. Furthering systems research and the connection to leadership in education, Fullan (2004) stated that the key to sustained improvement was connected to "systems thinking" (p. 2). Leithwood (2012) identified practices of successful school leaders in the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) and included two additional sections on systems. The first section was focused on characteristics of high-performing school systems utilizing Leithwood's (2012) district effectiveness framework, and the second section included system-level leadership practices by "system-level individuals and small groups exercising leadership" (p. 32). Chenoweth (2017) identified the power of systems or processes for school improvement. Additionally, Shaked and Schechter (2017) researched "systems thinking" to provide a "holistic" (p. ix) approach to school leadership. Shaked and Schechter defined systems thinking as "seeing the whole beyond the parts, and seeing the parts in the context of the whole" (p. vii). Schools are complex and a systems thinking approach involves analysis of how the parts or components work together successfully through coordination and continuous improvement in terms of the whole (Shaked & Schechter, 2017). In this study, a system is an organized approach to alignment of implementing practices or programs with continuous improvement in terms of

the organization as a whole. The BPE and RPE principals were system thinkers and intentionally utilized interdependent systems that were similar in each school: instructional leadership, a caring culture focused on students, and instructional practices to increase student learning (see Figure 1). The systems, as the parts, aligned to increase student learning, as the whole, through intentional organization and consistency; however, one noteworthy difference between the two schools' systems was a district PFP system, which will be discussed in the next section.

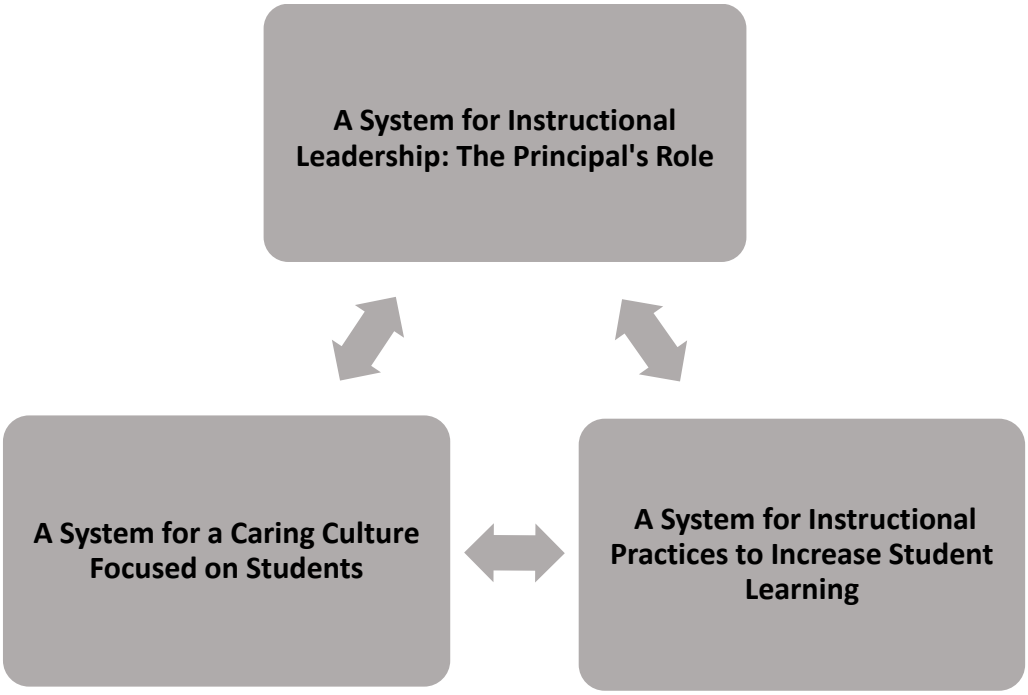

Figure 1. Bear Park Elementary and Rolling Plains Elementary interdependent systems flowchart.

A system for instructional leadership: The principal's role. The findings from this study revealed a major factor contributing to sustained success in the two high-poverty Title I schools: Principals intentionally utilized a system for instructional leadership to build capacity across staff. Shaked and Schechter (2017) discussed the challenges of school principals in an era

of accountability: “School principals are expected to demonstrate positive results in terms of their students’ achievements, and align all aspects of schooling to support the goal of improving instruction in order to ensure all students’ success” (p. ix). The findings from this study illuminated the importance of the principal’s role in an instructional leadership system at each school, but the approaches used by each principal were distinctly different.

The principals at BPE and RPE were instructional leaders who utilized systems with distinct approaches, and their principal roles as instructional leaders were consistent with the findings of successful leaders in Leithwood’s (2012) OLF. As described in the literature review, Leithwood (2012) found that instructional leadership was associated with improving instructional practices. At BPE, Tony’s role as the principal and instructional leader resembled the role of a coach of a sports team, and much of his instructional leadership actions were focused on utilizing systems for distributed leadership, PD, and accountability to develop a high-quality team. However, at RPE, the principal Carol and the district PFP system influenced the instructional leadership system. Carol’s role included leveraging the district PFP system to build instructional capacity across the school staff. The district PFP system included systems to develop staff and hold staff accountable. Leithwood (2010) reported similar findings in a review of 31 studies that identified the role of district leadership in student performance in successful school districts that had closed the achievement gap for students in “challenging circumstances” (p. 245). The BPE’s and RPE’s instructional leadership system aligned with Leithwood’s (2012) OLF that listed distributed leadership, PD, and accountability as practices used by successful leaders.

Distributing leadership. Both principals utilized distributed or shared leadership as a system to increase the capacity of staff. Participants at BPE and RPE noted having several

leaders in the building such as teacher leaders and a leadership team. Leithwood (2012) stated that high performance was supported "when the school system encourages coordinated forms of leadership distribution throughout the school system and its schools" (p. 36). Moreover, Chenoweth (2017) documented a need for a leadership system "that prepares people within the school to both take responsibility for systems (such as the master schedule) and to take on leadership roles in other schools" (p. 33). Chenoweth added that successful systems "develop leaders who help build, monitor, and evaluate the systems" (p. 193). The principal at BPE and the principal at RPE shared that the system to distribute leadership included allowing and supporting any strategy that teachers wanted to implement if teachers were able to provide data to prove the strategy was effective. Additionally, Chenoweth documented the importance of systems that recruit and train leaders at the school and district level. Carol's role at RPE of leveraging the district's PFP system meant increasing staff skills and leadership by assisting staff in the district's Accomplished Teacher process specifically designed for PFP. Furthermore, staff at RPE was required to hold a leadership role as part of the rubric in the PFP system. However, at BPE, shared leadership entailed Tony not being the sole expert but instead finding and developing strengths in others and providing opportunities for staff to participate in the decision-making process. Tony discussed how his role had changed over the years to more of a servant leader who served others by listening and involving others in decisions for the building. At BPE, systems were co-developed between the principal and staff through distributed leadership. Participants in this study mentioned that shared leadership was implemented and valued in both schools as a practice to build capacity across their teams. Leithwood (2012) found that part of the instructional leadership role encompassed implementing shared or distributed leadership to build instructional capacity of staff. The principal at BPE and RPE used shared leadership to

increase staff skills, confirming Leithwood's (2012) findings; however, Carol at RPE leveraged the district's PFP system.

Professional development. Instructional leaders within this study had systems for PD to increase staff skills. Research identified PD as vital to increasing student achievement (Martinez, 2011). Leithwood (2012) named stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff in the OLF. Chenoweth (2017) noted the need for "a system of careful professional support for teachers to help them improve their instruction" (p. 54). At RPE and BPE, the participants discussed that the PD systems included offering PD as well as providing resources to support PD like time, money, and people. In six high-poverty, high-performing schools, Reinhorn et al. (2017) found that improving teachers' practices included an integrated approach of evaluations, instructional coaching, teacher teams, whole school PD, peer observations, and feedback. Staff members at both schools discussed valuing their professional learning and listed several methods of PD. At RPE, staff mentioned the district and teacher leaders within their building provided PD opportunities. In a mixed-methods study on three high-performing districts that identified characteristics that affect student achievement, Leithwood and Azah (2017) reported that districts provided PD opportunities for all staff and allocated a majority of PD resources to "school-embedded" opportunities (p. 42). Additionally, Boland et al. (2012) pointed out in earlier research on successful high-poverty Title I schools that principals and teacher leaders led PD for their building. The RPE staff mentioned that staff had access to coaches who went into classes to model or help coach teachers through a lesson. Such practices affirmed Brady's (2016) findings that teachers having access to a coach influenced the success of a high-poverty school.

At BPE, PD systems were in place and kept simple to provide opportunities that included using professional learning communities and trainings from external sources to strengthen

implementation of strategies that were already in use. Staff at BPE shared that collaboration and vertical alignment conversations happened at professional learning communities. Chenoweth (2017) documented a need for "a system that provides common planning time for grade-level teachers" (p. 103). Additionally, Ward (2013) documented providing release time for teachers to participate in professional learning communities, and Cohen (2015) noted that professional learning communities were essential to establishing a collaborative and professional environment. Furthermore, Leithwood (2010) noted that principals planned and organized PD focused on "specific instructional issues in their building" (p. 265), and Boland et al. (2012) contended that PD aligned with improving the school's instructional goals. As corroborated by literature, BPE staff focused their PD to support their instructional goals and was a contributing factor to their success.

Staff at both schools stated that PD systems included peer observations. Research on successful high-poverty schools from Reinhorn et al. (2017) and Ward (2013) found that peer observations were a practice to support PD. Chenoweth (2017) noted the need for a PD system to "observe and provide support to teachers" (p. 81). The BPE staff mentioned that leadership members covered classes so staff could take part in peer observations. Moreover, Chenoweth mentioned the importance of having systems that monitored individual teacher and principal growth from leaders (p. 178). Chenoweth added that PD systems should be focused on providing "powerful learning experiences" and "what they looked like and sounded like" (p. 126), helping teachers improve instruction and ensuring that teachers have dedicated time during the school day for PD (p. 33). As corroborated in literature and this study, principals have an organized process to allocate resources for an integrated approach to professional learning in terms of the school's goals.

Accountability. Principals in this study were instructional leaders who had systems for accountability of student learning. Participants at both schools noted accountability systems for staff and students. Chenoweth (2017) identified a need for "a system of monitoring that empowers folks but also holds them accountable" (p. 140). Leithwood (2010) found that high-performing districts used data for accountability purposes (p. 254). At RPE, accountability systems included the principal's role utilizing the district PFP evaluation process and data to evaluate teachers as individuals as well as collectively. Jensen (2009) asserted that teachers must be accountable for learning through evaluations. Within the PFP accountability system, RPE staff who met or exceeded accountability expectations were incentivized, and staff who did not meet accountability expectations were provided with support systems to increase their instructional effectiveness. The RPE staff highly regarded the PFP accountability system; however, at BPE, the principal held the primary role in holding staff accountable and emphasized that working at BPE was a privilege. Tony's role in holding staff accountable resembled the coach of a sports team because he shared data so that staff could measure their success, and he retained strong performers by recognizing the strengths of staff members and strategically placing them in positions to better support student achievement. This included the principal having the courage to dismiss, move, or ask staff to move to another grade level based on the staff member's strengths in order for students to succeed. Staff appreciated this because it upheld the high-quality team culture; although, Tony cautioned doing this on a case-by-case in order to not demotivate staff. This strategy was supported in research from Jensen (2009) who documented a strategy to increase teachers' acceptance of accountability by purposefully placing teachers in their roles. Holding staff accountable is supported in the literature and this study;

however, the RPE accountability system was more comprehensive, and stakeholders may consider intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for staff.

To reiterate, the findings of this study of two effective high-poverty Title I schools indicated that principals had pivotal roles as instructional leaders who utilized district and school systems to allocate resources for increasing the instructional capacity of staff through providing resources and opportunities for various PD, embracing shared leadership where staff participated in shared-decision making, and holding staff accountable. The principals used similar systems to support the instructional leadership system that is consistent with literature; however, one principal's approach included leveraging district systems.

A System for a Caring Culture Focused on Students

A caring culture focused on students was identified as a second system for sustaining achievement in the two high-poverty Title I schools. A caring culture encompassed systems for building relationships and addressing the challenges of poverty to help meet student needs by establishing community partnerships.

Building relationships. Leaders at BPE and RPE had systems for building relationships with each other, students, and families. Leithwood (2012) titled relationships as the fourth domain in the district effectiveness framework and called attention to "relationships within the central office, between the central office and its schools, parents, local community groups, and Ministry of Education" (p. 37). Chenoweth (2017) discussed that successful schools had systems that built relationships across staff through collaboration and social events. Specifically, at one school Chenoweth researched, staff had dinner together before any school event. At BPE and RPE, participant staff commented that the staff went above and beyond and functioned as a team to support each other and students. At BPE, I observed staff eating lunch together in the lounge.

They spoke about supporting each other at school and outside of school. Staff at RPE reported similar sentiments of supporting each other at school and outside of school. Both BPE and RPE staff built relationships with each other, but they also built relationships with students and their families, often exceeding expectations of typical teachers to support students.

Students. Systems for building relationships with students were a primary focus for staff at both schools in this study. According to Jensen (2009) building relationships included supportive relationships for staff and students. At BPE and RPE, systems to strengthen relationships with students included using restorative justice and trauma informed practices. Chenoweth (2017) reported that a principal in a successful high-poverty school utilized restorative justice practices to help connect students to school through relationships. The RPE staff stated that they provided "wrap around motherly services," meaning the staff took care of students similar to a mother such as asking questions about students' feelings. Chenoweth added that educators built systems to develop relationships, particularly with students having problems, stressing the importance that at least "one adult expresses confidence" and offers support so that the student can "overcome obstacles" (p. 196). Both BPE and RPE staff utilized restorative justice practices to help develop social-emotional skills in students and to help them learn how to better repair relationships through systems to strengthen relationship with their students. Also, staff members at both schools in this study reported the importance of implementing trauma-informed practices because the effects of poverty presented challenges with their students who often experienced trauma. Relationships were supported in literature and this study, and participants in this study emphasized the importance of caring for the whole child.

Families. At BPE and RPE, families were an important stakeholder, and staff took time to build relationships by involving them in school. Leithwood (2012) documented in OLF that

high performance was more likely to occur when school systems equipped staff with opportunities to (a) build capacity to engage parents in schools, (b) assist parents in creating conditions for learning at home and at school, and (c) have a formal policy on parent engagement that was frequently monitored. The BPE and RPE participant staff mentioned that family nights were one way to build relationships with families and to connect families to student learning. Both schools discussed holding science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)-focused family nights. The RPE staff mentioned having experts within their community, like astronauts, attend family nights and programs held during the day. They also held a cultural family night.

Addressing the challenges of poverty. Systems for addressing the challenges of poverty for BPE and RPE students included having high expectations and partnering with the community to better provide resources to meet student's and families' needs.

High expectations. Both BPE and RPE had systems for high expectations of academics and behavior, and participants had the mindset that all students could achieve. Students in poverty often have limited access to resources, such as preschool, and there are implications for learning (Berliner, 2009; Brady, 2016; Coleman, 1966; Hattie, 2009; Jensen, 2009) that contribute to the achievement gap between students in poverty and their counterparts. It is often reported that staff in high-poverty schools have low expectations of students (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Cohen, 2015). Leithwood (2012) cited that "high-performing school systems" created shared beliefs about student learning and focused on increasing achievement while nurturing student engagement and well-being through "ambitious but realistic" performance standards (p. 33). The BPE staff referred to themselves as "warm demanders," meaning staff pushed students to work hard but students knew that staff put demands on them because they cared about them.

Chenoweth (2017) found that high expectation systems included offering classes to preview material for students who might struggle with grade-level material in the master schedule.

Participants from both schools emphasized that behavior expectations were connected to an increase in learning. Chenoweth (2017) noted a need for "a system of discipline that focuses on helping students learn what is expected of them and builds relationships" (p. 103). The BPE staff mentioned utilizing behavior systems where expectations were clear and posted for students, specifically the positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) model, to increase desired behaviors from students. Prior studies on leaders in successful high-poverty schools corroborated the importance of having a PBIS system (Brady, 2016; Chenoweth, 2017). Chenoweth noted successful schools had "a discipline system that uses consequences to educate students, not punish them into dropping out" (p. 33). Chenoweth added the importance of "a system to identify students with behavioral issues and a behavioral instructional support team to provide help to teachers" (p. 131) as well as a system to monitor behavior. Additionally, Chenoweth found that at one school where the principal had to meet with students and parents regarding discipline issues, the principal discussed the students' data against benchmarks and an action plan to help the students succeed. The focus of the meeting was on academics and "discipline was a means to fulfill those needs" (Chenoweth, 2017, p. 187). At RPE, high expectations included a requirement that students attended school every day. Student attendance is often problematic for students in high-poverty schools (Jensen, 2009), so RPE staff created an attendance contest with rewards that students were motivated by, such as iPads. Participants at both schools within this study made it clear that they believed their students could reach their high expectations for academics and behavior.

Establishing community partnerships. Staff at both schools shared that they had systems to establish community partnerships. Leithwood (2012) focused on relationships with community groups and asserted that in high performing school systems (a) community groups were recognized for their efforts and consulted on decisions that impacted the community, (b) experts were used as instructional resources, and (c) community relationships to schools were "nurtured for support for publically funded education" (p. 38). Previous research on leaders in high-poverty schools supported the use of community partnerships to help address the challenges of poverty for student learning (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Edmonds, 1979; Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012). Students in high-poverty schools often face challenges of having their basic needs met (Jensen, 2009). The community partnerships with BPE and with RPE provided resources to help meet students' and families' needs, such as backpacks, clothing, and food. This study showed that staff at both schools recognized the importance of systems to have students' basic needs met, but such challenges were no excuse for not reaching high-academic standards.

The findings from this study and previous literature highlighted that leaders in high-poverty schools have systems for a caring culture that fostered relationships between all stakeholders. Specifically, relationships were built between staff, students and staff, families, and the community. Absent in literature were the findings from this study that noted that relationships between staff created a culture where staff functioned as a team and went beyond expectations to help each other and students. Present in literature and identified in this study was the importance of a relationship with the central office (Leithwood, 2012). For the high-poverty Title I schools in this study and cited in previous literature, systems for holding high academic and behavior expectations as well as systems for addressing challenges of poverty were elements of a caring culture that focused on students and led to sustaining success.

A System for Instructional Practices to Increase Student Learning

A system for instructional practices designed to increase student learning was a contributing factor used by staff in this study on high-poverty Title I schools sustaining achievement. Both BPE and RPE intentionally put systems in place to increase student learning such as maximizing structures and resource, providing enriching learning opportunities, utilizing common data, and implementing common approaches.

Maximizing structures and resources to increase learning. Participants in the study noted systems that maximized structures and resources to increase learning. Valuing every minute of the school day and extending the school day were important to staff at both schools. Chenoweth (2017) discussed the importance of master schedule systems that were designed to keep the allocated time within the school day and functions of the school focused on learning and identified a need for systems for master schedules that have "uninterrupted instruction in reading, math, science, and social studies" (p. 140).

Both BPE and RPE valued every minute of the school day with expectation of bell-to-bell instruction. Research on successful high-poverty schools (Brady, 2016; Carter, 2000) showed that teaching bell-to-bell was a strategy used by principals. For staff at BPE, every participant mentioned that valuing every minute of the school day was a priority. An every-minute-counts mentality at BPE included the expectation that all students were engaged and limiting interruptions to learning such as announcements and assemblies. Limiting interruptions to learning was consistent with the Boland et al. (2012) findings in successful high-poverty schools. Additionally, staff at both schools discussed systems to extend the school day to provide additional learning opportunities for their students. Similarly, Brady (2016), Carter (2000), and

Chenoweth (2017) noted that principals in high-poverty schools utilized systems for after-schools hours to extend the school day to increase student learning. For students with gaps in academics, BPE staff participants discussed after school academic clubs for reading, multiplication, and writing, and RPE staff participants mentioned providing tutoring for students after school three days a week.

Staff at both schools reported that they used departmentalizing as an instructional system. Through the departmentalizing system, staff focused on teaching one or two subjects compared to a traditional elementary schools where teachers teach all core subjects. At BPE, departmentalizing was used in fifth and second grade; whereas, RPE used departmentalizing for the whole school. The literature had mixed reviews on using departmentalizing in elementary schools. In one quantitative study on the effects of departmentalized versus traditional settings on fifth graders' math and reading achievement, Yearwood (2011) found that "students who received instruction in departmentalized settings achieved a higher mean score on the 2010 reading and math" state test (p. 119). In another study on departmentalizing in elementary, Chang, Muñoz, and Koshewa (2008) suggested that "departmentalizing may not be developmentally appropriate for younger children" (p. 140). The authors noted that the departmentalized group of students were "more likely to feel less connected to school" than students in self-contained classrooms (p. 140). The RPE staff mentioned that departmentalizing increased collaboration and contributed to the staff operating as a team. Previous research on strategies used in successful high-poverty schools supported the necessity of collaboration for staff (Chenoweth, 2017; Cohen, 2015; Leithwood, 2012). Chenoweth (2017) discussed the importance of a system for the master schedule to provide common plan time for grade-level teachers and instructional leadership teams to meet together as well as specialists meet with

classroom teachers. Through departmentalization, RPE staff collaborated vertically across kindergarten and fifth grade within same content and same grade-level teachers. Also, grade-level teachers collaborated with specialist teachers that service individual students' educational needs.

Providing enriching learning opportunities. Staff at both schools communicated about systems to provide enriching learning opportunities during and after the school day. Previous research on successful high-poverty schools identified providing enriching opportunities as a successful strategy to support students (Brady, 2016; Chenoweth, 2017; Jensen, 2009). Chenoweth (2017) reported that leaders of high schools focus on creating a master schedule that "ensures students are in challenging classes with additional support as needed" (p. 54). As noted earlier, the discussion of the master schedule focused on the importance of allocating time, and here Chenoweth called attention to the importance of making sure that enriching learning opportunities are provided in the master schedule. Leithwood (2012) reported that curriculum and instruction "system staff and school staff work together to help provide all students with engaging forms of instruction" (p. 33). Enriching opportunities at BPE and RPE focused on STEM. Gorski (2013) named several strategies to support instruction for students in poverty, such as incorporating music, art, and theater across the curriculum and incorporating movement and exercise into teaching and learning. The BPE staff used a library-technology position where this staff member managed the library but also went into classrooms to teach small groups of students STEAM activities. Staff at BPE expressed the importance of providing enriching opportunities because they motivated students beyond reading, writing, and math. The BPE participants emphasized the arts along with STEM and implemented a unique music program for

kindergarten through third grade, and some afterschool clubs. Similarly, RPE participants noted the use of afterschool clubs.

Using data to monitor student learning. The BPE and RPE staff had systems to analyze and progress monitor student data to increase student learning. Leithwood (2010) identified that a characteristic of high-performing districts was their use of evidence for planning, organization learning, and accountability; specifically these districts developed efficient district information management systems. Both BPE and RPE staff had systems to utilize common sets of data, such as the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), an elementary reading assessment tool, to measure student achievement and growth and aide in vertical alignment. Chenoweth (2017) added the necessity for a system of collaboration focused on assessments and "standards, curriculum, and studying data" (p. 103). To keep staff focused on learning, the principal at BPE analyzed past data and different data sources such as Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) and DIBELS to compare BPE's performance against state and other schools' performance. The RPE staff had CMAS and DIBELS data; however, they also utilized their data from district created assessments that gave them more common data to analyze. Many leaders understand that waiting for the previous years' state data limit their ability to make necessary adjustments to instruction, so BPE and RPE staff valued having timely, consistent district data to analyze. Furthermore, Chenoweth asserted the importance of systems to monitor and communicate student learning progress to teachers, students, and parents. The RPE participants commented that students take ownership and understand their strengths and challenges as a learner in their student-led classrooms that were part of the PFP rubric. This strategy was used to monitor and communicate student learning between the teacher and the

learner. Chenoweth along with the findings from both schools in this study supported the necessity of monitoring data.

Implementing common, consistent approaches. The interviews and observations evidenced that RPE and BPE used systems to implement common consistent approaches to learning and behavior in each school. Such consistencies encompassed following common instructional agreements, analyzing common sets of data, and implementing common behavior expectations and approaches. Goodwin's (2010) research focused on "changing the odds for underserved students" (p. 54) through strategies like using consistent approaches to learning. The BPE principal, Tony stated he used these same strategies. At BPE, consistency within systems included all staff focused on teaching students consistent procedures and routines at the beginning of the year by following common instructional agreements such as learning targets, using the same reading strategies, and accessing a universal behavior system. Chenoweth (2017) asserted the importance of improving instruction through all staff knowing the established morning routines for students to ensure they were entering the school and classrooms "ready to learn" (p. 201). During the observations at BPE, I saw the same reading strategy posters in classrooms, and staff at BPE reported using the same reading lesson plan template: Plan (Goal), Do (Strategy), Study (What happened). Similarly, at RPE, consistency was evident with learning targets posted in all classrooms and included demonstration of learning criteria. The The Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL, 2005) authors mentioned that "high-performing districts define what good teaching looks like" (p. 54) and "ensure consistent use of research-based strategies in every classroom" (p. 54). Another consistent system across RPE and BPE staff was teachers' use of common sets of data on assessments to analyze student learning, as mentioned earlier. Other research by Brady (2016) identified common formative assessments

across grade levels as an effective strategy in high-poverty schools. Likewise, Reeves (2007) noted the importance of having a clear common definition of proficiency for leaders, staff, and students in successful high-poverty schools. Having common sets of data provided staff with more opportunities to assess student learning in real time and vertically align instruction to increase student learning.

Systems for common behavior expectations and approaches were in place at BPE and RPE. The BPE staff expressed using the PBIS model. They affirmed a focus on positive behavior expectations from students and consistency within the behavior system. Utilizing consistent approaches within systems such as the PBIS model has been supported in other research on successful high-poverty schools (Brady, 2016; Olsten, 2015). From my observations at RPE and BPE, I noted behavior posters with expectations on the walls throughout the building. Consistency in instruction, expectations, and assessment were used in the schools in this study and supported in literature as a contributing factor to success.

In sum, the literature and data from the two schools revealed the importance of systems at the district and school, such as an instructional leadership system to build the capacity of staff. The RPE district systems played a pivotal role in the success of other systems. Both schools had systems for PD, distributed leadership, and accountability for staff; specifically, the BPE principal used courage to retain strong performers and dismiss ineffective staff. A system for a caring culture includes building relationships with stakeholders and addressing challenges of poverty for students by having high expectations for academics and behavior. Not mentioned in the literature on relationships but illuminated in the two schools was staff who went above and beyond to support each other and students. Lastly, literature corroborated the use of instructional systems to maximize learning with the attitude that every minute counts, provide enriching

learning opportunities during and after school to engage every student, and implement consistent approaches or alignment of instruction, expectations, and common data sets as used by the two high-poverty schools. With these two schools, it was evident that principals were systems thinkers who utilized systems holistically to support students and sustain achievement. The systems and subsystems used by leaders of the schools in this study are displayed in Table 7.

Table 7

Bear Park Elementary and Rolling Plains Elementary Systems and Subsystems

System	Subsystem			
	1	2	3	4
A system for instructional leadership: The principal's role	Shared leadership	Professional development	Accountability	
A system for a caring culture focused on students	Building relationships	Addressing challenges of poverty		
A system for instructional practices to increase student learning	Maximizing structures and resources to increase learning	Providing enriching learning opportunities	Using data to monitor student learning	Implementing common, consistent approaches

Implications for Policy, Practices, and Further Research

Over the past 60 years, educational policies have been created to remedy the achievement gap. The most recent policy was the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act that identified a goal for all students to succeed, yet this has not been met. Although there has been limited research on high-poverty Title I schools that sustain success beyond two years, there are strategies that have been identified in research as effective for educational leaders in successful high-poverty schools. In an effort to help all students succeed, implications based off of this research's findings are provided for policy and practices of educational leaders wanting sustained achievement in successful high-poverty schools.

Policy

An implication for federal and state policymakers is to continue policies that provide funds to schools to support at-risk learners in high-poverty schools in order to meet students' basic needs. The funds are necessary for schools with large populations of students experiencing poverty to provide students with meals for breakfast and lunch. Participants from this study stated the importance of meeting students' basic needs, such as food, in order for students to access learning.

An implication for state and national policymakers is to continue policies for common performance measures such as testing to provide educators and students with data. Chenoweth (2017) noted that tests scores do not provide a complete representation of a school's performance; however, test scores provide schools with a benchmark to know how their students are performing. Student performance test scores are necessary for school leaders and educators to compare scores against state and national benchmarks and monitor student progress.

Leithwood (2012) noted data use as an effective practice and participants in both high-poverty schools discussed data use as a contribution to their success.

An implication for policy for school districts administrators and Board of Education members is to implement a hiring policy to retain and support leaders and educators. Young (2018) stated that teacher retention affects student achievement, and there are a plethora of reasons or situations to consider. According to Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2013), the impact on student achievement depends on the teacher being replaced. Ronfeldt et al. added that if an effective teacher replaced the ineffective teacher, the outcome on student achievement was positive; however, if the replacement teacher was ineffective, then the impact was negative. Furthermore, there are studies documenting impacts of principal turnover on student achievement. Hanselman, Grigg, Bruch, and Gamoran (2016) noted that staff turnover impacts "social resources" (p. 1) like relationships and trust between principal and teacher and teacher-to-teacher, which can hinder a cohesive professional community and instructional resources depending on if the school has low or high social resources. Hanselman et al. cited that turnover may be beneficial in schools with low social resources and "detrimental for schools with strong leadership and teaching community" (p. 31). Despite turnover, Louis and Kruse (1995) identified one school with strong school norms where staff has a systemic process to help assimilate new teachers to the norms. The principal at BPE mentioned hiring well, not retaining ineffective staff, and creating a culture where it was a privilege to work at the school affected student achievement. The principal at RPE leveraged the district PFP system that was designed to retain staff. The fact that the principals at BPE and RPE were principals at the schools for more than five years cannot be ignored. In order for systems to reach high implementation, consistent personnel are needed to oversee alignment of parts or systems to the whole with

continuous improvement. It is also suggested for district Board of Education personnel continue policies that support achievement for at-risk learners such as providing common assessments or performance tests, resources for enrichment, and extra support for students with gaps in learning. A district instructional policy for implementing district-wide common assessments can allow principals to leverage and assist staff in collecting and analyzing common, vertically-aligned, timely data for core subjects. A district instructional policy for allocating resources for enrichment can be used to extend the school day to provide enriching clubs, and resources for extra support can be used to hire interventionists to create smaller student groups for more individualized instruction for high-poverty schools.

Practices

Based on the findings from this research study and several other studies on leadership in high-poverty schools, there are implications for educational leaders' practices in schools with challenging contexts. It is suggested that educational leaders have a holistic approach to systems that support their role as an instructional leader, foster a caring culture focused on students, and increase student learning and the necessary components within the systems. There are several similarities between the findings and implications for educational leaders because of the corroboration between this study and high-poverty literature.

A system for instructional leadership. One implication for principals is utilizing a system for instructional leadership as highlighted in the literature and the findings from this study. As instructional leaders, principals in low performing high-poverty schools could benefit from (a) beginning the improvement process with a review of state data to understand the school's performance and (b) a willingness to do whatever it takes until success is reached. Next, principals can apply their role as an instructional leader to develop a high-quality team

through shared leadership, PD, and accountability to build capacity of staff. According to Leithwood (2012) and this study, shared leadership is one way for leaders to increase staff skills through participation in leadership roles and decision making. Shared leadership can contribute to increased buy in of initiatives or innovative ways to support student achievement. Another way to increase capacity of staff is a system for providing PD opportunities and resources for staff that are based on data and support school goals. The PD opportunities can be used to align systems across staff. Reeves (2003) reported all staff, including bus drivers and cafeteria workers, were invited to attend PD because students usually begin their day with interactions from these staff members. Though there was evidence to support systems for PD, educational leaders can consider Reeves' (2003) finding and include all staff who work with students, in addition to classroom teachers, in PD. A system for accountability for learning is a practice for instructional leaders of successful high-poverty schools that includes moving staff to positions based on their strengths and having the courage to dismiss ineffective staff. When making decisions regarding accountability and teacher placement based on staff strengths, it is suggested that principals keep in mind that the decision does not demotivate staff. It is important for educational leaders to remember that accountability can include systems to support teachers who need further instructional guidance. Principals, as instructional leaders, have the responsibility to convey that it is a privilege to teach at the school and that they are willing to do whatever it takes to support students.

Systems to support a caring culture focused on students. The second implication for educational leaders' practices is to utilize a system for a caring culture with components to build relationships with stakeholders and address challenges of poverty for students and their families. The findings from this study and the literature correlate with the importance of relationships

(Leithwood, 2012) and success for students in high-poverty schools; however, BPE and RPE participants emphasized caring for the whole child. Thus by fostering a caring culture focused on students, educational leaders can develop the whole child through social-emotional skills as a strategy cited by Jensen (2009). Educational leaders can consider using restorative justice and trauma-informed practices to help teach students about relationships. These practices help students learn to work together to restore relationships, and help staff with techniques to address brain development and behaviors resulting from trauma that students in poverty often experience. Challenging behavior can often take precedent over learning and these practices are helpful to give staff and students tools to keep the focus on learning. It is suggested that educational leaders model exceeding expectations to foster a caring culture for staff. Participants mentioned that staff functioned as a team and that staff including the principal, went above and beyond to support staff and students. For example, the principal regularly teaches a small group of students. To build relationships with families, educational leaders can hold family nights focused on showcasing student learning, which is a way to connect staff, students, and families together.

In a caring culture, educational leaders have a system to address challenges of poverty by holding high academic and behavior expectations of students. The findings from this study and Leithwood's (2012) literature suggest that having high expectations was a contributing factor to success in high-poverty schools. The RPE participants discussed the importance of including modeling high expectations through staff wearing professional business attire. The BPE participants discussed high expectations include each student learning as much as they can every day. Additionally, this study emphasized providing for students' basic needs but was not mentioned in the literature. Educational leaders should consider providing necessary resources

for students and their families to help meet their basic needs through community partnerships. Furthermore, attendance is often problematic in high-poverty schools and educational leaders may consider implementing a system to support attendance similar to RPE. It is difficult to increase achievement for students who are not in school. Efforts to care for the whole child support student success.

Systems for instructional practices to increase student learning. The last implication for educational leaders is utilizing systems for instructional practices to increase student learning by maximizing resources, providing enriching learning opportunities, and implementing consistent approaches. Maximizing resources includes a focused mindset that every minute counts and tenacious efforts to obtain resources for high student learning expectations: before and after school clubs, summer tutoring, and winning grants. In conjunction with findings from this study, Chenoweth (2017) and Jensen (2009) noted enriching opportunities and Hagelskamp and DiStasi (2012) mentioned extending the school day as effective practices. Therefore, it is suggested that educational leaders provide enriching learning opportunities focused on STEAM during and after the school day to engage every student. Leaders in successful high-poverty schools provide enriching opportunities. This can make having the need for systems that support attendance irrelevant because students may be motivated to come to school for the enriching opportunities in addition to reading, writing, and math that might otherwise not interest students.

Consistent approaches were found to be effective in high-poverty schools by McREL (2005), Chenoweth (2017), and BPE and RPE participants. Educational leaders should consider implementing systems for common approaches such as following universal instructional agreements, which could include learning targets, reading strategies, data use, and a school-wide behavior system. Common instructional agreements help keep staff focused, and students know

what to expect so learning can be maximized. With learning targets, teachers are clear about what students are learning, which is helpful for students and teachers. The principal at BPE discussed staying with the same learning target for a few lessons until the students understood what they were supposed to be learning. Another component for consistency systems is analysis of common data sets. Data use is an effective strategy used by leaders in high-poverty schools (Leithwood, 2012); however, this study highlighted the importance of using common data. It is suggested that educational leaders use data that are common across the school and the district to frequently monitor student progress. Waiting for state data does not provide staff with timely feedback for continuous improvement on instructional practices, so having common data across the district and school allows for vertical alignment across the grades and subjects. Lastly, there is a need for a universal behavior system that emphasizes positive behavior and clear expectations for staff and students to help keep the focus on learning. The BPE principal discussed creating a culture where students who were doing the right thing were celebrated, recognized, and given a menu of reward options to choose from. Although this idea was not mentioned in literature, Tony explained that he was involving staff beyond the classroom teachers in student learning, including the principal, to maximize achievement. He mentioned that the benefits included supporting teachers and increasing student learning. Principals in high-poverty schools are confronted with a daunting task, and the findings from this study provided leaders with systems supported in literature to help all students succeed.

Future Research

This study answered the research question specific to this study with the identification of educational leaders' use of systems in high-poverty Title I elementary schools in Colorado that are sustaining achievement; however, policymakers, educators, and leaders are continually

evolving and seeking improvement in order for every student to succeed. More specifically, administrators and educators in high-poverty Title I schools could benefit from continued research by extending this research. Leithwood (2012) and Chenoweth (2017) documented the importance of systems in successful schools with challenging school contexts. There are questions about systems that might provide beneficial information to education leaders: What is happening in schools that are not successful that report use of systems? Are there other systems not mentioned in this study that are essential to success? What are successful high-poverty schools doing that do not use systems? Will implementing systems contribute to sustained success? What time frame is needed for principals to begin to sustain achievement? What would it take for a low-performing high-poverty school to become a high-performing school? Educational leaders could benefit from further research to investigate if a high-poverty Title I elementary school unable to sustain achievement beyond two years could sustain achievement beyond two years by leaders implementing systems. Also, educational leaders may benefit from further research to investigate a comparison of systems used by leaders in a low-poverty, high-performing elementary school that is sustaining success and a high-poverty, successful Title I school sustaining success to identify similarities and differences in systems that impact student achievement. Educational leaders could benefit from this extended research on successful high-poverty Title I elementary schools use of an increased knowledge of systems that impact student achievement to sustain above average student achievement.

One other area for promising research is departmentalizing in high-poverty schools. The BPE and RPE staff participants stated that they used departmentalization and the myriad of benefits. Furthermore, departmentalizing can be used to implement common instructional practices across the grades and subjects. However, there are mixed reviews on

departmentalizing in elementary schools. Chenoweth (2017) documented that a principal "ended" departmentalizing because too much time was spent on transitions (p. 154). Educational leaders could benefit from further research on departmentalizing as an instructional practice for high-poverty schools.

Another area for future research is PFP systems in high-poverty schools. According to Podgursky and Springer (2011), there are mixed results on the outcomes for student achievement. Research on PFP revealed mixed outcomes because of the variabilities across district size, difficulty to attract teachers to urban areas, union involvement, measures, and size of incentive (Podgursky & Springer, 2011). A study conducted by Springer and Winters (2009) on the implementation of financial incentives to teachers serving disadvantaged students in New York City showed that there was "little to no impact on student proficiency or school environment in its first year" (Sec. Executive summary). At RPE, the PFP plan was adopted by the district in 2010−2011 school year because five years prior, the district was in the 10th percentile of the state. The RPE staff reported that the goal of the PFP program was to retain teachers and increase achievement through providing systems such as honoring teachers who demonstrated excellence in student achievement and building leadership capacity by offering teachers with opportunities to teach halftime and coach halftime. However, I read in the news that midway through the 2018−2019 school year, personnel from the RPE district announced suspending the PFP because it was not working as planned, so personnel in RPE's district were reportedly working on a new compensation model. Policymakers have a responsibility to ensure systems support student achievement.

Limitations

Specific methodologies were used to ensure the study's trustworthiness, but there were limitations that existed and must be acknowledged and discussed (Creswell, 2012). The limitations of this study included a focus on two Colorado elementary schools. Because of the focus on two elementary schools in the state of Colorado, transferability of the findings may not be applicable to middle and high school or other elementary schools with different contexts. The purpose of this study was to provide rich, information about the two cases. The results will be left to the reader (Merriam, 1998). Other limitations included the principals providing the list of participants and my own status as a teacher employed in a Title I school. Also, because I am the instrument of data collection and the interpreter, the steps to increase trustworthiness included member checking and triangulation of data through multiple sources. Furthermore, because I was employed in a Title I school during the time of the study, there was personal interest in this study that had implications for researcher bias. I was aware of my limitation of being employed in a high-poverty Title I school and minimized bias by keeping my assumptions at bay and keeping an open mind to report what participants said and did. I also followed the research process outlined in the methodology section.

Conclusion

The multiple case study design entailed a holistic description of how leaders in high-poverty Title I schools influence sustained achievement and revealed leaders' use of systems. A system for instructional leadership included district and school systems to build staff capacity that were pivotal for implementing systems for shared leadership that entailed the principal not being the sole expert of educational practices and staff embracing decision-making opportunities, providing enriching PD opportunities, and holding staff accountable for student learning by

retaining strong performers and having courage to dismiss ineffective staff. Leaders fostered a caring culture focused on students where systems enabled staff to build relationships between each other, students, and families to develop the whole child. Leaders addressed challenges of poverty by having high academic and behavior expectations and by establishing community partnerships to better address students' needs. Furthermore, leaders implemented systems to increase student learning including maximizing structures and resources, providing enriching learning opportunities, utilizing data, and implementing common consistent approaches. Maximizing learning systems encompassed the mindset of valuing every minute of the school day, departmentalizing, and extending the school day to provide enrichment and additional learning opportunities for students with gaps in their learning. Systems were in place to provide enriching learning opportunities for students focused on STEAM activities, utilize data to increase student achievement, and implement common consistent approaches. Common consistent approaches included alignment of routines, reading strategies, behavior systems, and common data to help vertically align instruction and increased opportunities to assess student learning. Leaders use of such systems named here have potential to help leaders in high-poverty Title I schools sustain achievement to ultimately ensure all students' success and improve students' outcomes in life with increased opportunities.

I learned invaluable information from conducting this research on two unique schools. Prior to this study, I did not believe that it was possible for high-poverty schools to succeed. Then I discovered these two schools. From the observations and interviews the principals, staff, and wall of the two schools inspired me after an exceptionally challenging year in the classroom. I was provided empirical evidence through the similarities across the two schools that high-poverty Title I schools could indeed succeed. At the end of this process, I reflected upon being

in a Title I school and I could see the benefit of the use of these systems for staff and students. I thought back to the administrator who experienced success with student achievement in my building and could identify that she created systems for instruction by implementing a common approach to reading and a system to identify and support students with testing accommodations. It is my hope that this study inspire policymakers, educational leaders, staff, and future researchers, and that all students succeed.

REFERENCES

Advancement Via Individual Determination. (2018). *AVID*. Retrieved from http://www.avid.org/

Alliance for Excellent Education. (2018). *The high cost of high school dropouts*. Retrieved from https://all4ed.org/take-action/action-academy/the-economic-case-for-reducing-the-high-school-dropout-rate/

American Psychological Association. (2017). *Education and socioeconomic status*. Retrieved from http://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications /education.aspx

Anderson, A. B., & DeCesare, D. (2007). *Profiles of success: Eight Colorado schools that are closing the achievement gap*. Denver, CO: Donnell-Kay Foundation. Retrieved from http://apaconsulting.net/~apa/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/11-eight-co-schools.pdf

Aud, S., Hussar, W., Planty, M., Snyder, T., Bianco, K., Fox, M., & Drake, L. (2010). *The condition of education 2010* (NCES 2010-028). Retrieved from National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education website: https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010028.pdf

Barr, R. D., & Parrett, W. H. (2007). *The kids left behind: Catching up the underachieving children of poverty.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Berliner, D. C. (2009). *Poverty and potential: Out-of-school factors and school success.* Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED507359.pdf

Boland, T., Mohajeri-Nelson, N., Pearson, A., & Aldinger, M. (2012). *High growth Title I schools study: Summary report*. Retrieved from Colorado Department of Education website: https://www.cde.state.co.us/fedprograms/dl/dperevalrpts-tiahgschsbestfirst-lead-rep-schculturesumrpt2#page=6

Brady, G. (2016). *Educational practices of administrators and teachers in a high performing Title I school that improves student performance*. (Doctoral dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro). Retrieved from https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg /f/Brady_uncg_0154D_11919.pdf

Briggs, A. R., Coleman, M., & Morrison, M. (2012). *Research methods in educational leadership & management.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

Buttram, J. L., & Farley-Ripple, E. N. (2016). The role of principals in professional learning communities. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 15*(2), 192-220. doi:10.1080/15700763.2015.1039136

Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (n.d.). *Recovery: Job growth and education requirements through 2020* [executive summary]. Retrieved from Georgetown University, Georgetown Public Policy Institute, Center on Education and Workforce website: https://1gyhoq479ufd3yna29x7ubjn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Recovery2020.ES_.Web_.pdf

Carter, S. C. (2000). *No excuses: Lessons from 21 high-performing, high poverty schools.* Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED440170.pdf

Chang, F. C., Muñoz, M. A., & Koshewa, S. (2008). Evaluating the impact of departmentalization on elementary school students. *Planning and Changing, 39*(3), 131-145. Retrieved from https://education.illinoisstate.edu/planning

Chenoweth, K. (2017). *Schools that succeed: How educators marshal the power of systems for improvement.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Cohen, M. (2015). *Principal leadership in high-performing, high-poverty elementary schools.* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nebraska - Lincoln). Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent .cgi?article =1252&context=cehsedaddiss

Coleman, J. S. (1966). *Equality of educational opportunity* (*Coleman) study (EEOS).* Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Collegeboard. (2017a). *Frequently asked questions*. Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web /20080325225035/http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/about/sat/FAQ.html#quest14

Collegeboard. (2017b). *Search results: Globally recognized college admission*. Retrieved from https://www.google.com/url?q=https: //www.collegeboard .org/search?tp%3Dusearch%26x%3D15%26x1%3Dt4%26y%3D13%26searchType%3Dsatsite%26word%3DSAT%2Ba%2Bglobally%2Brecognized%2Bcollege%2Badmission%2Btest&sa=D&ust=1497036131261000&usg=AFQjCNF4jAXG8tW0-UeZHo5NlNBMn1GoUQ

Colorado Department of Education. (2014). *Unified improvement planning handbook*. Retrieved from http://www.cde.state.co.us/uip/20142015uiphandbook

Colorado Department of Education. (2015). *High achieving schools study: Executive summary.* Retrieved from https://www.cde.state.co.us/fedprograms /hasexecsum

Colorado Department of Education. (2016). *CMAS-English language arts and mathematics assessments (PARCC) archive*. Retrieved http://www.cde.state.co.us/assessment /newassess-parcc

Colorado Department of Education. (2017). *Colorado READ Act*: *Information for parents.* Retrieved from https://www.cde.state.co.us /communications /20170710readactfactsheet

Colorado Department of Education. (2018a). *Schoolview*. Retrieved from http://www2.cde.state .co.us/schoolview/dish/dashboard.asp

Colorado Department of Education. (2018b). *Title I-A school lists*. Retrieved from http://www.cde.state.co.us/fedprograms/dper/tiaschlst.asp

Colorado Department of Education. (2019). *Mobility/ stability statistics-FAQs*. Retrieved from https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/mobility-stabilitycurrentfaq

Commission on No Child Left Behind. (2007). *Beyond NCLB: Fulfilling the promise to our nation's children.* Retrieved from The Aspen Institute website: https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/files/content/docs/nclb/NCLB_Book.pdf

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five Traditions* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Danielsongroup. (2018). *The framework*. Retrieved from http://www.danielsongroup .org/framework/

DuFour, R. [Richard], DuFour, R. [Rebecca], & Eaker, R. (2008). *Revisiting professional learning communities at work: New insights for improving schools.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Edmonds, R. R. (1979). Effective schools for urban poor. *Educational Leadership, 37*(2), 15-23. Retrieved from http://c2.midwayisd.org/cms/lib/TX01000662 /Centricity/Domain/8 /2.%20Edmonds%20Effective%20Schools%20Movement.pdf

Education Trust. (1999). *Dispelling the myth: High poverty schools exceeding expectations.* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ737684.pdf

Fernald, D., Coombs, L., DeAlleaume, L., West, D., & Parnes, B. (2012). An assessment of the Hawthorne effect in practice-based research. *Journal of the American board of family medicine, 25*(1), *83-86.* Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.3122/jabfm.2012.01.110019

Finch, H., Lapsley, D., & Baker-Boudissa, M. (2009). A survival analysis of student mobility and retention in Indiana charter schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 17,* 18. https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v17n18.2009

Fullan, M. (2004). *Leadership & sustainability: System thinkers in action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. Retrieved from http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc /download?doi=10.1.1.475.4622&rep=rep1&type=pdf

Goals 2000: Educate America Act. Pub. L. No. 103-227 § 301 *et seq*. (1994).

Gonzales, C. (2016). *Leadership styles of successful principals in Title I elementary schools* (Doctoral dissertation, Ball State University). Retrieved from http://cardinalscholar.bsu .edu/bitstream/handle/123456789/200162/GonzalesC_2016-2_BODY.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Goodwin, B. (2010). Changing the odds for student success: What matters most. Denver, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning. Retrieved from https://www.mcrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/CTOPub.pdf

Gorski, P. C. (2013). *Reaching and teaching students in poverty: Strategies for erasing the opportunity gap.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Green, R. L. (2009). *Practicing the art of leadership: A problem-based approach to implementing the ISLLC standards* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.

Hagelskamp, C., & DiStasi, C. (2012). *Failure is not an option: How principals, teachers, students and parents from Ohio's High-achieving, high-poverty schools explain their success.* Retrieved from Public Agenda website: http://www.publicagenda.org /pages/failure-is-not-an-option

Hallinger, P. (2003). Leading educational change: Reflections on the practice of instructional and transformational leadership. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 33*(3), 329-351. doi:l0.1080/0305764032000122005

Hanselman, P., Grigg, J., Bruch, S., & Gamoran, A. (2016). The consequences of principal and teacher turnover for school social resources. *Research in the Sociology of Education, 19*, 49–89. https:// doi.org/10.1108/S1479-353920150000019004

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement.* New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis.

Hitt, D. H., & Meyers, C. V. (2017). *Promising leadership practices for rapid school improvement that lasts*. San Francisco, CA: West Ed.

Jacobson, S. L., Brooks, S., Giles, C., Johnson, L., & Ylimaki, R. (2007). Successful leadership in three high-poverty urban elementary schools. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 6*(4), 291-317. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700760701431553

Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Kannapel, P. J., Clements, S. K., Taylor, D., & Hibpshman, T. (2005). *Inside the black box of high-performing, high-poverty schools: A report of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence*. Retrieved from Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence website: http://www.prichardcommittee.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Inside-the-Black-Box.pdf

Kochan, T. A., & Riordan, C. A. (2016). Employment relations and growing income inequality: Causes and potential options for its reversal. *Journal of Industry Relations, 58*(3), 420-440. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1177 /0022185616634337

Leithwood, K. K. (2010). Characteristics of school districts that are exceptionally effective in closing the achievement gap. *Leadership & Policy In Schools*, *9*(3), 245-291. doi:10.1080/15700761003731500

Leithwood, K. K. (2012). *The Ontario leadership framework 2012.* Toronto, CA: Institute for Educational Leadership.

Leithwood, K., & Azah, V. (2017). Characteristics of High-Performing School Districts. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 16(1), 27-53. https://doi.org/10.1080 /15700763.2016.1197282

Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning: Executive summary*. St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Louis, K. S., & Kruse, S. D. (1995). *Professionalism and community: Perspectives on reforming urban schools* [pdf]. Retrieved from Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research, Madison: files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED379384.pdf

Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K. L., & Anderson, S. E. (2010). *Learning from leadership project: Investigating the links to improved student learning.* St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota.

Martinez, H. D. (2011). *School level resource allocation to improve student performance: A case study of Orange County and Los Angeles county Title I elementary schools* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global; ProQuest Education Journals. (UNI No. 884311955)

Masewicz, S. M. (2010). *School principals: Illuminating the behaviors and practices of effective school principals in challenging public school context*s (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; ProQuest Education Journals. (UMI N. 758431438)

McKinsey & Company, Social Sector Office. (2009). *The economic impact of the achievement gap in America's schools* [report]. Retrieved from http://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/ACHIEVEMENT _GAP_REPORT_20090512.pdf

Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S. (2009). *Qualitative research; A guide to design and implementation* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning. (2005). *Schools that "beat the odds".* Aurora, CO: Author. Retrieved from https://www.cde.state.co.us /dropoutprevention/cgpschoolthatbeattheodds

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

National Center for Education Statistics. (1994*). NAEP 1994 Trends in academic progress*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard//pdf /main1994/97095a.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics. (2003). *Overview of state education reforms: 1990 to 2000*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2003/2003020.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics. (2016a). *Concentration of public school students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.* Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs /coe/indicator_clb.asp

National Center for Education Statistics. (2016b). *Family characteristics of school-age children.* Retrieved from: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_cce.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics. (2016c). 2*013 Reading assessment report card: summary data tables with additional detail for average scores and achievement levels for states and jurisdictions*. Retrieved from https://www.nationsreportcard.gov /reading_math_2013/files/Results_Appendix_Reading.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics. (2018a). *Fast facts: Charter schools.* Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=30

National Center for Education Statistics. (2018b). *2015 Mathematics grades 4 and 8 assessment report cards: Summary data tables for national and state average scores and achievement level results.* Retrieved from https://www.nationsreportcard.gov /reading_math_2015/files/2015_Results_Appendix_Math.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics. (2018c). *Public high school 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR), by selected student characteristics and state: 2010-11through 2014-15.* Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs /digest/d16/tables/dt16_219.46.asp

National Center for Education Statistics. (2018d). *2015 Reading grades 4 and 8 assessment report cards: summary data tables for national and state average scores and achievement level results.* Retrieved from https://www.nationsreportcard.gov /reading_math_2015/files/2015_Results_Appendix_Reading.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics. (2018e). *SAT mean scores and percentage distribution of college-bound seniors by selected student characteristics, selected years, 1995-96 through 2011-12.* Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest /d12/tables/dt12_173.asp

National Center for Education Statistics. (2018f). *The condition of education 2017*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017144.pdf

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk* [report]. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html

National Title I Association. (2017). *About Title I.* Retrieved from http://www.titlei.org /about/titlei

Neimeier, C. K. (2012).*Factors influencing student achievement at a high-performing Title I elementary school* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (UMI No. 1020617009)

Odden, A. R., & Picus, L. O. (2008). *School finance: A policy perspective* (5th ed). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

Olsten, N. (2015). High-value leadership: Principals of high-performing, high-poverty schools (Doctoral dissertation, Seattle University). Retrieved from https://search.proquest.com /openview/871402b6ce3230dab8585bb2e78211b2/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Owens, D. D. (2015). *Friedmanomics*, school vouchers, and choice. In *The Origins of the Common Core* (pp. 65-89). New York, NY. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137482686_3

Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career. (2016). *About.* Retrieved from http://www.parcconline.org

Podgursky, M., & Springer, M. (2011). Teacher Compensation Systems in the United States K-12 Public School System. *National Tax Journal*. *64*(1) 165-192. 10.2307/41862563. https://doi.org/10.17310/ntj.2011.1.07

Porter, H. J. (2009). *The elementary principal and academic achievement of English language learners: A case study* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Education Database; ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. (UMI No. 577575973)

Portin, B. S., Knapp, M. S., Dareff, S., Feldman, S., Russell, F. A., Samuelson, C., & Yeh, T. L. (2009). *Leadership for learning improvement in urban schools.* Seattle, WA: University of Washington.

Reeves, D. B. (2003). *High performance in high poverty schools: 90/90/90 and beyond*. Retrieved from http://www.lmsvschools.org/cms/lib2/CA01001633 /Centricity/Domain/566/90%20Schools.pdf

Reeves, D. B. (2007). The principal and proficiency: The essential leadership role in improving student achievement. *Leadership Compass, 4(*3), 1-3. Retrieved from http://www.naesp.org/leadership-compass-archives-0

Reinhorn, S. K., Johnson, S. M., & Simon, N. S. (2017). Investing in development: Six high-performing, high-poverty schools implement the Massachusetts teacher evaluation policy. *Educational evaluation and policy analysis, 39*(3), 383-406. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373717690605

Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2013). How teacher turnover harms student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal, 50*(1), 4-36. http://dx.doi.org.unco.idm.oclc.org/10.3102/0002831212463813

Rothstein, R. (2004). *Class and schools*: *Using social, economic, and education reform to close the black-white achievement gap*. Washington DC: Economic Policy Institute.

Rousmaniere, K. (2013). *The principal's office: A social history of the American school principal*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press

Saez, E. (2015). *Striking it richer: The evolution of top incomes in the United States (Updated with 2013 preliminary estimates)*. Retrieved from University of California, Berkley, Econometrics Laboratory website: https://eml.berkeley.edu/~saez/saez-UStopincomes-2013.pdf

Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Retrieved from http://stevescollection.weebly.com/uploads/1/3/8/6/13866629/saldana_2009_the-coding-manual-for-qualitative-researchers.pdf

Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline*: *The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Shaked, H., & Schechter, C. (2017). *Systems thinking for school leaders: Holistic leadership for excellence in education*. New York, NY: Springer International.

Spillane, J., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. (2001). Investigating school leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Educational Researcher, 30*(3), 23-28. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/3594470

Springer, M. G., & Winters, M. (2009). New York City's school-wide bonus pay program*:* Early evidence from a randomized trial. (NCPI Working Paper No. 2009-02). Nashville, TN. National Center on Performance.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research.* Thousand Oak, CA: Sage.

Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. Retrieved from https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=rQWT5aDHiZYC&oi=fnd&pg=P'T21&dq=multiple+case+study&ots=IGfPHxFvAq&sig=PcRjsuGbGd75EqIgEZuNGbcZKMk#v=onepage&q=multiple%20case%20study&f=false

Thompson, T. G., & Barnes, R. E. (2007). *Beyond NCLB: Fulfilling the promise to our nation's children* [report]. Retrieved from The Aspen Institute website: https://assets.aspeninstitute.org /content/uploads/files/content/docs/nclb/NCLB_Book.pdf

U.S. Department of Education. (1965). *Title I: Improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged*. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02 /pg1.html

U.S. Department of Education. (2001). *Introduction: No child left behind*. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/index.html?exp=5

U.S. Department of Education. (2009). *Race to the top program: Executive summary*. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf

U.S. Department of Education. (2016a). *Every student succeeds act (ESSA)*. Retrieved from http://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn

U.S. Department of Education. (2016b). *Race to the top*. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase-3-year-3-report.pdf

U.S. Department of Education. (2016c). *Improving basic programs operated by local educational agencies (Title I, Part A)*. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov /programs/titleiparta/index.html

U.S. Department of Education. (2018a). *Improving America's schools act*. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/offices/OESE/archives/legislation/ESEA /brochure/iasa-bro.html

U.S. Department of Education. (2018b). *Choices for parents*. Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/nclb/choice/index.html

U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. (1959). *National Defense Education Act.* Retrieved from http://wwwedu.oulu.fi/tohtorikoulutus /jarjestettava_opetus /Troehler/NDEA_1958.pdf

Vinovskis, M. A. (1999). *The road to Charlottesville; The 1989 education summit.* Retrieved from University of Michigan, National Education Goals Panel website: https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/negp/reports/negp30.pdf

Vogt, W. P., Gardner, D. C., & Haeffele, L. M. (2012). *When to use what research design.* New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Vogt, W. P., Vogt, E. R., Gardner, D. C., & Haeffele, L. M. (2014). *Selecting the right analyses for your data: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Ward, C. J. (2013). Why leadership matters: One school's journey to success. *Educational Leadership and Administration, 24,* 62-74. Retrieved from http://journals .sagepub.com/home/ema

Waters, T., Marzano, R. J., & McNulty, B. (2003). *Balanced leadership: What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement*. Aurora, CO: Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning.

Whitely, P., Sy, T., & Johnson, S. (2012). Leader's conceptions of followers: implications for naturally occurring Pygmalion effects. *The Leadership Quarterly, 23*(5). 822–834. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016 /j.leaqua.2012.03.006

Yearwood, C. (2011). *Effects of departmentalized versus traditional settings on fifth Graders' math and reading achievement* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. (Order No. 3466307)

Young, S. (2018). Teacher retention and student achievement: How to hire and retain effective teachers. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin, 84*(3), 16–21. Retrieved from https://www.dkg.org

APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

DATE:	October 18, 2018
TO:	Jennifer Fodness
FROM:	University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB
PROJECT TITLE:	[1325123-1] Educational Leaders' Role in Sustained Achievement in Successful, High-Poverty, Title I Elementary Schools: A Case study on practices and actions leaders take.
SUBMISSION TYPE:	New Project
ACTION:	APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE:	October 18, 2018
EXPIRATION DATE:	October 18, 2022

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

Jennifer -

Thank you for a thorough and clear IRB application. Your protocols and materials are verified/approved exempt. You may proceed with participant recruitment and data collection using these approved materials. Please note the following as you proceed:

1) File any district/school permission documentation associated with this research obtained after this approval as an amendment/modification to this application in IRBnet.

2) Your may NOT interact with or collect any specific information about individual children/students in any of the schools where your data collection occurs as this study is verified/approved in the exempt category (which is not inclusive of research with children) and did not include protocols for such collection of information.

Best wishes with this interesting and relevant research and don't hesitate to contact me with any IRB-related qeustions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Dr. Megan Stellino, UNC IRB Co-Chair

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Morse at 970-351-1910 or nicole.morse@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

APPENDIX B

SCRIPT FOR INITIAL CONTACT WITH PARTICIPANTS

Script for Initial Contact with Participants

Email Letter to Participate

Date:

Dear ( )

Your school was one of two elementary schools in the state of Colorado with high-poverty that exceeded the state average over three years in reading and math assessments. Because of the unique success experienced at your school, I am seeking permission for you and your staff to in a research study to investigate why your school is so successful. It is my hope that this research can shed light on your success so other schools can benefit from learning about your program.

I am a doctoral student at the University of Northern Colorado as well as an educator in a high-poverty school. I am conducting research designed to explore how leaders influence sustained achievement in a Title I elementary school. Participation in this research process would include a minimum of four site visits for the purpose of observing and interviewing leaders and staff from your building. First, I would like to set up a time to meet with you and introduce myself. Upon your approval, I would introduce myself to staff, and let them know that I will be there observing their school and may be interviewing them later if they chose to voluntarily participate. Third, I would conduct an initial observation focused on the school setting, and invite staff to participate in interviews which will be held on a separate day. Finally, other observations could include leadership events such as staff meetings and if necessary, I may schedule follow up interviews.

Each interview will not be more than one hour. The interviews will be held in person with your permission and with your permission will be audio recorded. The recorded audio will be destroyed after the interview has been transcribed. No personal identifying information will be used in any materials created. The data collected will be put on a computer that is password protected to restrict access beyond listed researcher. The information will be published in my dissertation.

The information obtained from this research has potential for leaders in schools with similar contexts to help sustain achievement for economically disadvantaged students.

I invite you to participate in this research, as it is voluntary. If you are willing please reply to the contact information listed below with times that will work best for you. Thank you so much for your time and support. I hope you have a great day!

Kindly,
Jennifer Fodness
xxx-xxx-xxxx
fodn0082@bears.unco.edu

APPENDIX C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: **Educational Leaders' Role in Sustained Achievement in Successful, High-Poverty Title I Elementary Schools: A Case study on practices and actions leaders take.**

Researcher: Jennifer Fodness, University of Northern Colorado, Doctoral Candidate

Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx

Email: fodn0082@bears.unco.edu

Research advisors: Dr. Michael Cohen, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Dr. Amie Cieminski, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Phone: 970-351-2960 Email: Michael.cohen@unco.edu
Phone: 970-351-1853 Email: amie.cieminski@unco.edu

I am Jennifer Fodness, a doctoral candidate at the University Northern Colorado. I am conducting research on successful, high-poverty Title I elementary schools that sustain achievement in Colorado. You have been selected as a candidate to participate in this research study based on being a leader in a high-performance in a high-poverty Title I elementary school that has sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years.

 (participant initials here)_____

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore and describe practices and actions used by educational leaders of successful, high-poverty schools that influence sustained achievement. This study aims to provide educational leaders, particularly those in academically challenged high-poverty, Title I schools with similar contexts with insights on strategies and actions and use them as a guide for school improvement efforts so all students are successful. I plan to collect data regarding leaders' influence on sustained achievement. I hope to learn more about the practice and actions leaders utilize that contribute to sustained achievement. The findings of the study may be used to help administrators and educators in schools with similar contexts implement practices and actions to sustain student achievement in their schools.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will interview you for about one hour. Questions may include topics about leaders' actions and practices but are not limited to: Tell me something that makes you proud to be a leader in this school? What makes your school successful? After our interview, I will analyze all of the interviews together by sorting them into central ideas (themes). If necessary, I may ask you to participate in a follow-up interview. I will send you your transcribed interviews to ensure accuracy. Although I cannot guarantee confidentiality, I will take the following steps to protect your confidentiality:

1. I will enter your response into an electronic program using only a pseudonym.
2. The electronic program I use will be password protected.

3. I will delete your responses and transcripts three years after the study is completed. Any papers or publications that result from this research will use pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

4. If you want me to, I will provide you the final paper.

This study does not provoke any foreseeable risks and/or discomfort to you. You may share personal and private information regarding their opinions, experiences, and feelings toward students and schools in close proximity to your work environment. You may benefit by reflecting and answering my questions.

 (participant initials here)_____

I hope to use the findings from the study to provide suggestions for implementing practices and actions used by leaders as a support for sustained student achievement.

The potential benefit for participants is to share their experience in related fields. If the study leads to publication, participants' opinions can positively impact more educators in education settings pertaining to practices and actions used by leaders as a support for sustained student achievement.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time.
Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse at the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Fodness

XXX-XXX-XXXX

fodn0082@bears.unco.edu

If you agree to participate in this study please sign below:

_____

Subject's Signature Date

_____

Researcher's Signature Date

APPENDIX D

LEADERSHIP OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Leadership Observation Protocol

Date of Observation: _____

Observation times: _____ to_____

Location: _____ Leadership event: _____

Strategies, practices, and actions observed

APPENDIX E

SCHOOL SETTING OBSERVATIONAL PROTOCOL

School Setting Observational Protocol

Date:_____

Time:_____

	Notes
Students	
Staff	
Principal	
Hallways	
Walls	
Exterior	

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

Date:

Time:

Place:

Participant:

I am Jennifer Fodness, a doctoral candidate at the University Northern Colorado. I am conducting research on successful, high-poverty Title I public elementary schools that sustain achievement in Colorado. You have been selected as a candidate to participate in this research study based on being a leader or teacher in a successful high-poverty Title I public elementary school that has sustained achievement beyond two consecutive years. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore and describe practices and actions used by educational leaders of successful, high-poverty schools that influence sustained achievement. This study aims to provide educational leaders, particularly those in academically challenged high-poverty, Title I schools with insights on strategies and actions and use them as a guide for school improvement efforts for schools with similar contexts so all students succeed.

The data from this interview will be kept confidential. After the interview, I will transcribe the interviews and email you a copy to ensure accuracy. Then, the transcriptions will be coded and analyzed for themes.

The interview will not take longer than one hour. Please read and sign the consent form before we proceed. With your permission, I will audio record the interview as a measure to ensure accuracy. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview.

Principal Questions:

1. Tell me something that makes you proud to be a leader in this school?
2. What makes your school successful?
3. Tell me about leadership within your school. What does it look and sound like?
4. Tell me about leader practices or actions that influence sustained achievement.
5. What are the priorities at your school?
6. What are the expectations for learning at your school?
7. How are you dealing with the challenges of poverty?

8. What advice would you give other leaders in high-poverty Title I schools?
9. Is there anything you would like to share that I have not asked about?

Teacher/Staff Questions:

1. Tell me something that makes you proud to be an educator in this school?
2. What makes your school successful?
3. Tell me about leadership within your school. What does it look and sound like?
4. Tell me about leader practices or actions that influence sustained achievement.
5. What are the school priorities at your school?
6. What are the expectations for learning at your school?
7. How are you dealing with the challenges of poverty and what actions did leadership take to overcome these challenges?
8. What advice would you give leaders in high-poverty Title I schools?
9. How long you have been employed at the school and what is your current position?
10. Is there anything you would like to share that I have not asked about?

Thank you for your time, I will transcribe the interviews and send back to you to ensure accuracy.