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**Deconstructing the Deficit-thinking Paradigm in District and Campus Level Leadership to  
Close the Achievement Gap**

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**Deconstructing the Deficit-thinking Paradigm in District and Campus Level Leadership to**

**Close the Achievement Gap**

by

Bret D. Cormier, B.A., M.Ed.

**Treatise**

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Florita Ann Cormier, and my godfather, Ben “Gentle Ben” Simmons. My mother had the opportunity to attend the University of Texas at Austin in 1980 to earn her Ph.D. Due to the fact that she was a stay-at-home mom and a husband in the military, she was unable to take advantage of that opportunity. She always wanted to go back and earn the degree. So I am dedicating this to her because she was the one person in the family who always wanted the Ph.D., to earn a doctorate so that she could teach at the college level. Thank you, Mother, for all your love, prayers, and support. My godfather, who passed away in July of 2007, has always supported me since I started my first graduate degree in 1997. He always asked me when I was going to be Dr. Cormier. My godfather loved sports. The first year I started my Masters degree, I officiated football and basketball to supplement my income. He was not a huge fan of the University of Texas at Austin; his support ran more to Texas A & M. It was definitely going to be a stretch to get him to attend my graduation ceremony on campus. But he said that would be the only reason he would step on campus: to see me become a doctor. Unfortunately, on that day he won't be here. But every time I go to UT and as I continued to write this document and do this research, I felt he was with me, always asking me the same question: when are you going to finish this damn thing and move on with the rest of your life? I would just like to say thank you for believing in me, supporting me, and never doubting that I had what it took to graduate from the University of Texas at Austin.

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I've thought long and hard about what I would write on these pages, which I saved for last. In some ways, one would argue they should be the easiest pages to write. Others might argue, 'why are they even important? No one's even going to read it.' But I believe it symbolizes the conclusion of a long odyssey and marks the beginning of a brand new adventure. First, I would like to thank my family: my mother, my dad, my two brothers, Nicholas and Omar, and my niece, Isabella "Bella."

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# **Deconstructing the Deficit-Thinking Paradigm in District and Campus Level Leadership to Close the Achievement Gap**

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District and campus leaders face enormous challenges as they try to address the ever-widening achievement gap. With increased accountability, the achievement gap--which exists between students of color and students of poverty and their White, middle-class counterparts--is becoming impossible to ignore. Nationally, demographics are shifting toward a society of color and school campuses are following suit. Students are not getting easier to educate. Yet while schools across the nation bemoan their student populations as 'hard to educate,' there are some notable districts consistently having success with these student populations. However, there is almost no research on these schools. Their successes are nearly unknown to the educational world. Therefore, this study sought to examine the practices utilized on these campuses and the role of district and campus leadership in guiding the teachers of these student populations.

The theoretical framework was the deficit-thinking paradigm and the Effective Schools Correlates. The study investigated schools that (1) earned high ratings in their state accountability system (2) named Blue Ribbon Schools and (3) were Title I award winning schools because they had gone from low performing schools with few systems in place to high performing schools with many systems in place. The study focused on the Area Superintendent of Area 10 and two elementary principals.

This study was a mix method qualitative and quantitative study that involved only one urban school district: Martin Luther King Independent School District, one of the fifteen largest districts in the southwest part of the United States. This was a case study, which is an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an

individual, group, institution, or community. The case is a bounded, integrated system (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998). Data collection included interviews, observations, and a reflective journal.

Findings revealed that there are six prongs these schools had in common to go from low performing to high performing schools as well as earn distinction and awards. Acquiring these six prongs is called Creating a Culture of Success for Students of Color and Students of Poverty. There are also six conditions that permeate low performing schools; these schools once had these conditions on their campuses, but overcame them to become high performing. These conditions are called the Labyrinth of Solitude for Students of Color and Students of Poverty.

As school districts and schools attempt to create a culture of accountability where high expectations and a sense of urgency prevail--conditions necessary to close the achievement gap and move from the deficit-thinking paradigm and its deleterious impact on achievement toward the Normed-Opportunity Paradigm—universities and school districts can use this research data to help superintendents, central office personnel, campus principals, teachers, as well as prospective teachers and administrators to move schools and school districts forward and help close the achievement gap.



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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### Introduction and Background

“During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act” (Orwell, 1983).

One of the most pressing challenges that this nation faces as we begin this new century is helping all of America's diverse population of children meet the standards to live, learn, work, communicate, survive, and be productive citizens in the highly technological, global community of the twenty-first century. Within the lifetimes of today's teenagers, two of every five American workers will be African American or Hispanic; and the nation's economic and social future will depend critically on their skills (Hefner, 2004). Yet today, one out of every three students of color fails to obtain a high school diploma (Holzman, 2004). On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Grade 8 reading exam, 46% of African American public school students and 43% of Latino students scored “below basic.” Only 12% and 14% of these groups scored proficient or advanced (U.S. Department of Education, 2007; McGuinn, 2006; Mathis, 2005). Projecting the status quo forward produces a frightening picture. This disparity between the current skill proficiency of these groups and the level needed for economic and professional success is what educators refer to as the achievement gap. The achievement gap now measures four years: by the end of high school, African-American and Latino students have skills in literacy (reading) and numeracy

(mathematics) that are virtually identical to those of White students at the end of middle school (Lyman & Villani, 2004; Scherer, 2002-2003).

### **The Achievement Gap**

The term “achievement gap” refers to disparities in the academic achievement of specific groups of students (Coleman et al., 1966). Research on the achievement gap began in 1966 as a result of a little known obscure provision in the 1964 Civil Rights Act that called for a study of inequality of opportunity in education by “reason of race, color, religion, or natural origin.” James S. Coleman conducted what was then the second largest social science research project in history, which involved 600,000 children in 4,000 schools nationally, Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfield, and York (1966) wrote the *Equality of Educational Opportunity* or what is also known as The Coleman Report.

Although Coleman (1966) discovered that expenditures were not closely related to achievement, the report found that a student's achievement appears to be “strongly related to the educational backgrounds and aspirations of the other students in the school... Moreover, he found that “the most variation in the achievement of students occurred not between schools but within the same school. When put in schools of different social compositions, children from a given family background will achieve at quite different levels.” Put simply, at-risk students perform at higher levels when placed in schools with students who are traditionally expected to perform well. Coleman provided the bottom line of the effects of a child’s fellow students: “The educational resources provided by a child's fellow students are more important for his achievement

than are the resources provided by the school board.” The Coleman Report also concluded that “the social composition of the student body is more highly related to achievement, independent of the student's own social background, than is any school factor.” The other factor Coleman found that had a strong relationship to student achievement was the quality of teachers. Coleman explained, “Teacher quality is more important for minority pupil achievement than for that of the majority...if a minority pupil from a home without much educational strength is put with schoolmates with strong educational backgrounds, his achievement is likely to increase.”

The single conclusion that has now become infamous is Coleman’s conclusion that “family background is important for achievement; The relationship of family background to achievement does not diminish over years of schooling; Variations in school facilities, curriculum, and staff have little effect on achievement independent of family background.” What is lesser remembered from the report are the conclusions which show the factors educators can impact in these students. Coleman explains:

School factors that have the greatest influence (independent of family background) are the teachers’ characteristics, not the facilities and curriculum; A sense of control of the environment or a belief in the responsiveness of the environment were found to be highly related to achievement; Student, teacher, and principal attitudes appear to have stronger relationships to achievement.

The final conclusion Coleman asserts is one of the more compelling. He states, “Furthermore, the extent to which an individual feels that they have some control over their destinies influences his achievement. This self-concept principle or perception was a consequence of what an individual experiences in the larger society.”

Eventually the impact of the Colman Report was a spotlight on children of color and children of poverty. While many researchers have since rejected the Coleman Report (Barr & Parrett, 2007), its publication resulted in attention focused on the issue of the achievement gap as a result of its publication.

*The Deficit-Thinking Paradigm Explains the Gap*

The deficit-thinking model has been advanced to explain the failure of schools to address the achievement gap in performance among economically disadvantaged racial/ethnic students of color, largely African-American and Latino students (Valencia, 1997). As you review the literature about working with students of color and students of poverty, many districts have spent millions of dollars to implement systems to become data driven to better serve all sub groups, align curriculum to backwards map, build capacity in the organization by retaining teachers and administrators, developing programs to address cultural diversity, and have implemented different software programs to supplement instructional programs; yet, surprising there still is an achievement gap (Lyman & Villani, 2004; Jackson, 2003; Shields, 2003; Riester et al., 2002; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valverde & Scribner, 2001; Reyes et al., 1999; Haberman, 1999; Scheurich, 1998; Valencia, 1997; Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1995; Haberman, 1995.) According to Grissmer et al. (1998) during the 1970's and 1980's the achievement gap narrowed, but since 1988 the efforts to close the African-American/White achievement gap between African-American and White students has not gained ground. The gap actually widens over time as students move upward through the grade levels of school (Rothstein, 2004).

According to Valencia (1997), deficit-thinking assumes that students who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies (such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations). It also tends to view poor and working class children and their families (typically children and families of color) as predominately responsible for school failure (Valencia, 1997). There is literature dating back five centuries to conceptualize the deficit-thinking paradigm. The term deficit-thinking was developed by a small cadre of scholars in the 1960s while launching an assault on academics and politicians who asserted that the poor and people of color caused their own social, economic, and educational problems (Pearl, 1991; Valencia, 1997). Since then much has been written about deficit-thinking as a significant contributor to the achievement gap of children of color (Lyman & Villani, 2004; Shields, 2003; Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valverde & Scribner, 2001; Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1997; Haberman, 1999; Scheurich, 1998; Valencia, 1997; Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1995; Haberman, 1995.)

One of the explanations for how deficit-thinking contributes to maintaining the gap is differences in teacher expectations for different groups of students (Ferguson, 1998a; Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996; Rist, 1970; Roscigno, 1998; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). This would suggest that teachers' expectations of poor, African-American, Latino, and special education students' academic capacity are lower than those they hold for middle and upper middle class White students (Farkas, 1996; Farkas et al., 1990). Teacher expectations play a large role in how well students of color and students of poverty learn—and how they see their own opportunities and potential for learning.



Gay (2000) notes important ideas that relate to how teacher expectations influence student learning. Gay explains that when teachers don't have high expectations for students, it's an indicator of a lack of confidence in their own ability to instruct those students. "As a result [they] attribute students' failure to lack of intellect and deficient home lives. Teachers with strong self-confidence and feelings of efficacy in their teaching abilities have high expectations for all students."

### *Response to the Coleman Report*

After the publication of the Coleman Report, Ronald R. Edmonds, at the time Director of the Center for Urban Studies at Harvard University, responded vigorously. Although they acknowledged that family background does indeed impede academic success, Edmonds, and others, refused to accept Coleman's report as conclusive. They set out to find schools where kids from low income families were highly successful, and thereby prove that schools can and do make a difference (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Brophy & Good, 1986; Comer, 1980; Edmonds, 1980; Edmonds, 1979a; Edmonds, 1982; Edmonds, Comer, Billingsley, 1973; Edmonds & Frederickson, 1979; & Levine & Lezotte, 1990). Edmonds, and other researchers, looked at achievement data from schools in several major cities--schools where student populations were comprised of those from poverty backgrounds. Nationwide, they found schools where poor children were learning. Though these findings contradicted Coleman's conclusion, they (Edmonds, Brookover, Lezotte plus other school effectiveness researchers) were left without an answer as to why certain schools made a difference and others did not (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Brophy & Good, 1986; Comer, 1980; Edmonds, 1980; Edmonds, 1979a; Edmonds, 1982;

Edmonds, Comer, Billingsley, 1973; Edmonds & Frederickson, 1979; & Levine & Lezotte, 1990).

To answer this perplexing question, successful schools were compared with similar schools in like neighborhoods where children were not learning, or learning at a low level. Characteristics describing both types of schools were observed and documented. Edmonds (1969) put forth this basic conclusion of this comparative research: "Public schools can and do make a difference; Children from poverty backgrounds can learn at high levels as a result of public schools; There are unique characteristics and processes common to schools where all children are learning."

Because these characteristics, found in schools where all students learn, are correlated with student success--they are called correlates. This body of correlated information began what is now referred to as Effective Schools Research. Replication research conducted in recent years reaffirms these findings and the fact that these correlates describe schools where children are learning and do not describe schools where children are learning at a much lower level. This replication research has been conducted in all types of schools: suburban, rural, urban; high schools, middle schools, elementary schools; high socio-economic communities, middle class communities, and low socio-economic communities (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Brophy & Good, 1986; Comer, 1980; Edmonds, 1980; Edmonds, 1979a; Edmonds, 1982; Edmonds, Comer, Billingsley, 1973; Edmonds & Frederickson, 1979; & Levine & Lezotte, 1990).

### **The Effective Schools Correlates**

Through this movement came the seven characteristics that that became descriptions of effective schools known as the effective school correlates. Lezotte & Jacoby (1990) describe the effective school correlates as: 1.) Safe and Orderly Schools 2.) Climate of High Expectations 3.) Instructional Leadership 4.) Clear and Focused Mission 5.) Opportunity to Learn and Student Time on Task 6.) Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress and 7.) Home-School Relations. The seven Effective School Correlates later came to be grouped into first generation correlates as stated by (Edmonds, 1969; Edmonds, Comer, Billingsley, 1973; Edmonds, 1979a; Edmonds, 1980; & Edmonds, 1982) and the revised Effective School Correlates as stated by (Lezotte, 1991).

#### *Safe and Orderly Schools*

Safe and Orderly Schools refers specifically to school climate. The first generation correlate, Safe and Orderly Schools, describes schools with order and purpose. The atmosphere is described as “businesslike” and absent of the risk of physical harm. The second generation correlate emphasizes desirable behaviors such as cooperative learning teams and students helping each other. Lezotte recognizes that in order to have students work together, they must learn respect for diversity and democratic values. Multicultural education must be sustained and committed to in order to facilitate these conditions.

#### *Climate of High Expectations*

Climate of High Expectations is describes the belief that all students will perform up to a standard. The first generation correlate, Climate of High Expectations for Success, is described as a climate of expectation where all educators believe that all students can

learn and that belief is demonstrated in their actions. In the second generation, this correlate emphasizes the entire campus to epitomize high expectations, requiring cooperation of the entire campus rather than individual teachers working in isolation.

### *Instructional Leadership*

Instructional Leadership depicts the role of the principal as more hands-on and involved in the instruction and curriculum of their campus. The first generation correlate, Instructional Leadership, entails a principal as instructional leader who steadily communicates the educational mission to the educators and stakeholders. Second generation describes this correlate as the distribution of leadership through the adults on campus.

### *Clear and Focused Mission*

Clear and Focused Mission is an intuitive term; it represents concentrated effort and purpose of a school so that the events taking place in classrooms are geared toward the same mission. The first generation correlate, Clear and Focused Mission, refers to a plainly communicated mission, shared and committed to by the entire staff and evidenced through instruction, priorities, and procedures. The responsibility for student learning rests with the staff. In the second generation conception of this correlate, there is a clear shift toward balancing higher-level learning and basic skills. Curriculum is designed with this in mind and with an eye toward accountability. Teachers plan with the end in mind and utilize task analysis.

### *Opportunity to Learn and Student Time on Task*

Opportunity to Learn and Student Time on Task is the term Edmonds and Lezotte use to communicate the responsibility of educators to equip students with skills that empower the student to choose success. This correlate deals with the obligation of educators to passionately concern themselves with insuring students possess cognitive skills. The first generation correlate, Opportunity to Learn and Student Time on Task, is described as educators assign considerable instruction time to essential skills achieved through whole class, teacher-directed activities. Second generation correlate, Opportunity to Learn and Student Time on Task, is still time focused. But the emphasis is on streamlining curriculum to focus on the essentials. The focus is on mastery rather than “covering material.” Interdisciplinary curriculum is utilized.

### *Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress*

Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress expresses the need for educators to utilize frequent assessment to evaluate student mastery. The first generation correlate, Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress, is described as measuring academic progress frequently using an assortment of assessments. The results are utilized to enhance instruction. The second generation conception of this correlate is dependent upon technology to improve monitoring. Technology is also used to permit students to self-monitor. Authentic assessment becomes a focus. Alignment is center of the discussion. Teachers will ask “what’s worth knowing?” and “how will we know when they know it?”

### *Home-Schools Relations*

The Home-School Relations correlate refers to the practice of accepting the responsibility to educate all students regardless of the level or reliability of parental involvement. It also emphasizes the desirability of pursuing a high level of involvement of parents. The final first generation correlate, Home-Schools Relations, schools give parents ample possibilities to participate in the education of their children. Parents invest in and embrace the campus mission. In the second generation, this correlate focuses on authentic parent and school partnerships rather than simply parent presence. Trust and communication are keys to effective relations between school and home.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The achievement gap between students of different ethnic and economic groups has been debated by scholars and lamented by policymakers since it was first documented in 1966 by Coleman. The federal government developed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 to address the need for basic skill development and remediation of students (McGuinn, 2006). Much of the discussion about school reform in the U.S. in the past two decades has been about racial inequality. For example, President George W. Bush has promised that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)—signed into law January 8, the 8<sup>th</sup> reauthorization of (ESEA) and the expansion of high stakes testing—will end the inequalities caused by the “soft bigotry of low expectations” to close the historic achievement gap.

The literature suggests that if you are a student of color--or if you are poor--you are excluded from the social contract that links all other privileged citizens of the United States to a basic set of rights and responsibilities. Lipman (2004) states, “As students’

opportunities to learn and the nature of school knowledge are further differentiated by race, ethnicity, and class, public schooling is contributing to the production of identities closely aligned with the highly stratified workforce of the restructured economy.” This perspective is not a new one. In 1944, Dewey wrote about this same issue. Dewey states, “obviously, a society to which stratification into separate classes would be fatal must see to it that intellectual opportunities are accessible to all on equable and easy terms.” Our society must ensure that schools provide equal opportunity, because one of the purposes of education is to enable children to overcome the negative effects of social stratification.

Educational leaders need to overcome the negative effects of low expectations and deficit-thinking and claim responsibility for both student failure and success. The literature also refers to teachers as powerful influences in the learning process. It suggests that most teachers cannot tell you why a student is successful. When asked, they will offer up characteristics such as, ‘they’re affluent’ or ‘they’re Asian.’ When asked why a student is unsuccessful, they also cannot offer viable reasons. They will answer that the student is poor, has no parental involvement or is a student of color.

An important and potentially negative effect of low expectations and deficit-thinking is that often educators who suffer from this kind of thinking will limit their expectations for students based on their view of what intelligence is. In an academic setting, this creates a type of cognitive and cultural dissonance between what educators think exists and what actually exists. One could argue that this dissonance is a factor in the perpetuation of the achievement gap, so it would seem plausible to conclude that deficit-thinking has a deleterious effect on student achievement.

Our society must have public schools in which students of color and students of poverty have an opportunity to become part of a diverse and talented pool of aristocrats. There is a need to change the long held beliefs, attitudes, and values of superintendents, school boards, central office staffs, principals, teachers, parents, communities, and even students, which impact their behavior.

### **Purpose of Study**

Edmonds (1979) asked:

How many effective schools would you have to see to be persuaded of the educability of poor children? If your answer is more than one, then I submit that you have reasons of your own for preferring to believe that pupil performance derives from family background instead of school response to family background.

Edmonds raised the question, but others followed in asking it. Some urban schools and districts with high poverty and large numbers of ethnic, cultural, and linguistically diverse students have succeeded in raising achievement (Rothstein, 2004; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Ragland et al., 1999). These gains in achievement seem to suggest that schools do make a difference in reducing the achievement gap. This line of thinking implies that the gap is not necessarily the result of internal “deficits” of students who fail (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Valencia, 1997).

A primary motivation for this study is to examine the beliefs, values and practices of educators who were successful in following the Correlates of Effective Schools. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the attitudes, values, beliefs, professional practices, and professional behaviors of an area superintendent and two principals and to measure their impact and effectiveness in closing the achievement gap.



During the course of this study the researcher examined strategies that diminished low expectations and deficit-thinking in school leadership and in the teaching staff, which produced high achieving students.

### **Research Questions**

The guiding questions in this study are as follows:

1. How does the area superintendent address the school improvement process in creating high expectations and goal attainment aligned with the Effective School Correlates?
2. How does the principal address the school improvement process in creating high expectations and goal attainment aligned with the Effective School Correlates?

### **Methodology**

The approach to this study was mix method qualitative and quantitative research. This approach was guided by the guidelines provided by Merriam (1998 & 2002), Glesne (1998), Denzin and Lincoln (1998), and Creswell (1998). This was a case study, which is an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution, or community. The case is a bounded, integrated system (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998). By concentrating upon a single phenomenon or case, this approach seeks to describe the phenomenon in depth. The unit of analysis--not the topic of investigation--characterizes a case study. Since it is the unit of analysis that determines whether a study is a case study, other types of studies can be combined with the case study.

This methodology provides the means to explore the interactions between the area superintendent and the principals. The methodology provided the means to explore the interactions between the principals and the constituents they serve in their various roles that impact student achievement. The selection was done purposefully, not randomly; that is, these particular principals exhibit characteristics of interest to the researcher (Merriam, 2002). The principals were interviewed on three separate occasions. The researcher used open-ended and probing questions to provide the participants the opportunity to fully express themselves. These interviews were audio-taped with two tape recorders and notes were taken during each interview. A journal was utilized to record all relevant events discovered during the study.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Accountability*--is a concept in ethics with several meanings. It is often used synonymously with such concepts as answerability, enforcement, responsibility, blameworthiness, liability and other terms associated with the expectation of accounting. As an aspect of governance, it has been central to discussions related to problems in both the public and private (corporation) worlds (Wikipedia, 2007).

*Critical Pedagogy*--serves as a critical lens for teachers in promoting equity, student voice, and democratic structure; a critique of structural inequality and oppression (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995).

*Culture Capital*--represents ways of talking, acting and socializing, as well as language practices, values, and styles of dress and behavior that grant access to societal systems; behaviors, values and practices valued by the dominant society, determined

unconsciously by the dominant culture and used to promote success among certain groups in our society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1992).

*Cultural Deficit Theory*--view at which students or parents lack certain characteristics necessary to become successful in society (Hess & Shipman, 1965).

*Cultural Ecological Theory*--two sets of factors influence minority school performance: How society at large and the school treat minorities (system); and how minority groups respond to those treatments and to schooling (community forces) (Ogbu, 1990).

*Cultural Incongruence*--contends there is a mismatch between the culture of schools and students of color and those living in poverty (Hale-Benson, 1986).

*Cultural Mismatch Theory*--centers on the aspect that urban schools still cling to ethnocentric and euro-centric curricula. The culture of the school is different than the culture of the students and is recognized through its different values and beliefs (Villegas, 1988).

*Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*--uses the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant to and effective for students.... It teaches to and through strengths of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997).

*Funds of knowledge*--cultural artifacts and bodies of knowledge that underlie household activities. Describes the information, methods of thinking and learning, and practical skills related to a community's everyday life (Gonzalez et al., 1993).

*Microaggression*--subtle forms of racism or bias (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

*Proactive Redundancy*-- proactive means having multiple back up processes or systems so that if one process fails, there is another to take its place. Redundancy means that there are two or more processes or systems focused on one goal. The cost of failure would be so high---the failure of our students, in our case--that multiple systems are built in to perform the same functions in case the primary system or the first backup system fails (Skrla & Scheurich, 2003).

*Social Capital*--refers to the collective value of all social networks who people know and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other. Norms of reciprocity (Bourdieu, 1983).

*Social Reproduction Theory*--identifies the barriers to social mobility; barriers that constrain without completely blocking lower and working class individuals' efforts to break into the upper reaches of class structure (MacLeod, 1987; Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

*Social Traps*—Long-standing practices that create intolerance within marginalized individuals for standard, accepted behaviors of dominant society (Messick & McClelland, 1983).

*Stereotype Threat*--students' belief that their performance will be publicly linked to their ethnicity or gender, thus potentially confirming existing negative stereotypes. This belief will negatively affect their performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

## **Significance of Study**

This study examined the impact that high expectations, creating a sense of urgency, and leadership had on the behavior, attitudes, values, and beliefs of principals in the development of strategies to address low academic and behavioral expectations that perpetuate the achievement gap. The study looked at the process of how a school is transformed from being a low-performing school with few appropriate functional systems to becoming an exemplary school that has numerous functional systems.

The study will contribute to the development of strategies districts use to positively influence the behaviors, attitudes, values and beliefs of school staff and increase student performance. This study will also contribute to the body of knowledge that superintendents, area, assistant, and associate superintendents, and principals can use to develop a process and implement systems for school improvement. The study has the potential to add to the effectiveness literature.

## **Assumptions**

This research was based on the assumption that all participants would answer any questions truthfully and completely. This required the researcher to develop a relationship of trust with the participants as well as provide an assurance of confidentiality, as discussed in chapter 3. Another assumption was that the interview protocol would successfully elicit participants' true perceptions. A key assumption was the fact that there is a link between the attitudes, values, beliefs, professional practices, and professional behaviors of superintendents and principals and effective schools.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The limitations are: 1.) the study took place in this single school district 2.) these schools receive additional funding due to a desegregation order trying to reach unitary status 3.) the use of incentive and merit pay 4.) the district has declared schools in this area as covenant schools that don't have to follow all district mandates 5.) only two campus leaders and one area superintendent were studied and 6.) other possible factors that contribute to the success of the campuses were not considered.

The design of the study will also pose certain limitations that are unique to qualitative research. As LeCompte and Preissle (1993) point out, "case study, bounded system, Smith (1978) states a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries." Qualitative research and case study methodology pose certain limitations that must be overcome by the use of techniques to insure the quality of the research (Lincoln, 1992). Generalizations cannot be reasonably made and the inability to make generalizations is considered a limitation of this qualitative study.

### **Design of the Study**

The length of time conducted for this study was only three months. It is possible a study that lasted longer and was larger in scope could provide different results. It is possible if the superintendent, board of trustees, central office administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the other principals' responses could be gathered, they could impact the study.

### **Subjects of Study**

This study was a mix method qualitative and quantitative study that involved only one urban school district: Martin Luther King Independent School District, one of the fifteen largest districts in the southwest part of the United States. The district serves 160,169 students: 63% Latino, 30% African-American, 5% Caucasian, and 1% Asian. More than 83% of the district is low socioeconomic status. Twenty-nine percent of the students are English Language Learners (ELL), and 63% of the district is considered at-risk. The district encompasses an area of over 351 square miles, in which over 70 different languages are spoken. One specific area of the six areas that comprise the school district--which is the poorest area of the district--serves primarily African-American and Latino, poor students.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter established the existence, history and definition of deficit-thinking, which has created a condition of education for a specific student population that calls to question the performance disparity educators refer to as ‘the achievement gap.’ It also introduces literature-based schools of thought that have influenced understandings in the cause of this condition: specifically, Coleman’s study. It discussed the study’s conclusions and its impact. It also describes the responses from researchers that challenged Coleman’s research on the causation of the achievement gap. The most notable response described was Edmond’s Effective School Correlates, which was discussed as well as description of each correlate and their impact. The researcher provided an overview of the study and a preview of its organization. The statement of the

problem, purpose of study, limitations, and methodology were presented in this chapter.

Two questions that guided this study were identified.



## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

“The equal treatment of unequal people is always unequal” (Jefferson, 1813).

#### **The Achievement Gap; Its Cause and Explanations, and Subsequent Perspectives**

The gap is widening in all school districts across the nation. After decades of shrinking, racial differences in achievement and graduation actually grew during the 1990s (Orfield & Gordon, 2001). Test results show that those who fail these mandated large-scale tests are likely to be disproportionately poor and African-American students (Hess and Brigham, 2000). Economically disadvantaged and African-American students have suffered severe consequences for not performing well on mandated assessments. Schools deny diplomas in disproportionate numbers to poor and students of color. Students of color and poor students are much more likely to drop out of school than to receive a diploma of little value, and more likely to not attend college (Hess and Brigham, 2000).

Singham (1998) explains that society has embraced “common and simplistic explanations that educators invoke to explain the persistence” of the gap. There is the “liberal interpretation, which claims that educational disparities are caused by socioeconomic disparities.” However, this explanation fails to justify the gaps that exist even among students of different races within the same socioeconomic class. There is the “conservative or sociopathological model, which says that because the Civil Rights Movement removed barriers to Black advancement, various social pathologies within the

Black community must be at fault.” This explanation is essentially asking people of color to simply act like White people. The “genetic model concludes that educational disparity is a fact of nature, the result of long-term evolutionary selection that has resulted in Blacks’ simply not having the same genetic smarts to compete equally with Whites.” This explanation fails to take into the account the wealth of scientific evidence debunking this notion. Some urban schools and districts with high poverty and large numbers of ethnic, cultural, and linguistically diverse students have succeeded in raising achievement (Rothstein, 2004; Skrla et al., 2000; Ragland et al., 1999). They have done so by designing instruction and assessment around standards, not tests; by devoting increased time to reading and math instruction; investing in high-quality teacher professional development; and involving parents in their school improvement efforts; designing quality summer programs (Skrla et al., 2000; Ragland et al., 1999; Grissmer et al., 1998). These gains in achievement seem to suggest that schools do make a difference in reducing the achievement gap by delivering better services to the students who need them. They also imply that the gap is not necessarily the result of internal “deficits” of students who fail (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Valencia, 1997).

Arciniega (1977) explains, “Public education has successfully shifted the blame onto the shoulders of the clients they purport to serve. They have pulled off the perfect crime. The fact that schools are geared primarily to serve White, middle-class clients is never questioned.” Singleton and Linton (2006) state, “Some Americans seem to believe that disparity and disproportionality in achievement among racial groups is inevitable. But this doesn’t explain why some schools achieve much better results than districts with

comparable demographics do.” Singleton and Linton further explain that when educators place the blame outwardly, they avoid “difficult self-assessment and [taking] responsibility.” The authors offer an alternative explanation for the gap: “we believe that the racial achievement gap exists and persists because fundamentally, schools are not designed to educate students of color, and educators lack the will, skills, knowledge, and capacity to affirm racial diversity.” Darling-Hammond (1997) explains the problem further, “the fundamental problem is that we have pushed the current system as far as it can go, and it cannot go far enough. We must re-create [the current system] so that it, in turn, reshapes the possibilities for the great majority of schools.”

#### *The Pervasiveness of the Gap*

There are two achievement gaps: urban and suburban, which operate at two levels: structure and practice. The first front is in urban schools. The most obvious issues are found in the schools with the largest minority enrollments (Evans, 2005). Many of these schools are--by almost any measure--less congenial to learning than others because, proportionally, they have more teachers who are inexperienced, poorly trained, and uncertified; more textbooks that are outdated; fewer computers; larger class sizes; and buildings that are in worse repair and more marked by violence (Evans, 2005).

The achievement gap has a second front. It persists among middle-class African-American and Latino students in suburban communities whose parents are professionals, and who attend schools that are well staffed and have ample resources (Evans, 2005). Yet here, too, the disparity in achievement is distressing.

To many critics, this is unmistakable proof that the gap stems from the way students are treated and taught in school and is not in fact the result of socio-economic status. Teachers, they argue, are too often racist--even if subtly and unconsciously--and too often parochial in their pedagogy (Evans, 2005). Teachers both expect too little of African-American and Latino students and give them too little outreach and support. Their methods fail to address individual differences and cultural and other factors that affect the learning styles, motivation, and behavior of Latino and African-American students, as well as students with special needs (Evans, 2005).

#### *School Readiness Inequality Due to Socioeconomic Factors*

Due to socio-economic factors, there are substantial inequalities in children's school readiness right from the beginning. Substantial numbers of African-American and Latino students begin kindergarten well behind other students in academic readiness (Evans, 2005). Low-income kindergartners (a group that includes large numbers of African-American and Latino children) typically start school at least a full year behind others in reading and with a vocabulary of 5,000 words (as opposed to 20,000 for their middle-class peers). The reason for this disparity is due in part to the fact that many don't attend preschool. The other factors causing this difference is because low-income parents speak, on average, much less to their children than do parents who are professionals (600 words per hour versus 2,100) and because low-income parents tend to read to their children much less than other parents do (Evans, 2005; Rothstein, 2004). There is a very practical reason for this as well: low-income parents are typically at home less due to the fact that they typically work more than one job. In virtually every country studied, there

is a strong correlation between students' literacy and the number of books in their homes. In some countries the literacy gap between the children of high- and low-status workers is even larger than it is in the U.S. (Rothstein, 2004). In low-income homes, there are less books and reading materials because there is less money to buy those items.

Poverty is associated with negative outcomes for children. It can impede a child's cognitive development and their ability to learn; it can contribute to behavioral, social, and emotional problems; and it can lead to poor health among children as well. The risks posed by poverty are greatest among children who experience poverty when they are young and among children who experience persistent and deep poverty (Rothstein, 2004). We can no longer afford to ignore child poverty in America.

One more important way a culture can sustain or perpetuate achievement gaps is to provide less than adequate funding which in turn will likely result in providing inadequate educational services to students of color and students of poverty.

#### *The Pervasiveness of Child Poverty*

How many children across the United States are poor or extremely poor? Child poverty is defined as children who live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level (FPL). *Extreme* child poverty is defined as children who live in families with incomes below *half* the FPL. Twelve million children live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level—which is about \$16,000 for a family of three and \$19,000 for a family of four. Perhaps more stunning is that 5 million children live in families having incomes of less than half the poverty level—and the numbers are rising. Yet research clearly shows that, on average, it takes an income of at least *twice the*

poverty level to cover a family's most basic expenses (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2004).

Poverty is especially prevalent among African-American and Latino children. Nationally, thirty-three percent of African-American children live in poor families. Nationally, twenty-eight percent of Latino children live in poor families. Nationally, only ten percent of White children live in poor families. Although African-American and Latino children are disproportionately likely to be poor, White children comprise the largest group of children living in poor families—35% of all poor children are White. Having immigrant parents increases a child's chances of being poor. Twenty-six percent of the children in immigrant families are poor; while only 16% of the children having two native-born parents are poor. Poverty rates are highest for young children. Twenty percent of children under age 6 live in poor families while 16% of children age 6 or older live in poor families. Millions of American children from low income families suffer from hardships such as hunger, poor nutrition, inadequate housing, and little to no access to quality health care; seventeen percent of households with children experience hunger or poor nutrition. Thirty six percent of low income families who rent their homes spend more than a third of their income on rent. Nearly one in 10 Americans—or 9% of the population—does not have a car. Many poor children lack health insurance. Nineteen percent of poor children lack health insurance.

On an intellectual level, we know that being raised in a low socio-economic status household impacts children. What we don't always process is just how pervasive that impact is. A lower socio-economic status household endures challenges inherent to their

condition that dominant culture families rarely face. Higher mobility rates, more time spent unsupervised and left to their own entertainment choices and a lack of availability of literature are all natural outcomes of a household deprived of adequate funds. More children raised in low socio-economic households live with single mothers, suffer from a lack of nutrition, and are more subject to the adverse effects of peer pressure.

*The Effects of the Summer Months on the Achievement Gap*

African-American students lose more ground during the summer months than their White peers (Rothstein, 2004). Summer loss merits much more attention than it has received (Allington and McGill-Franzen, 2003; Bracey, 2002; Entwisle & Alexander, 1992). When elementary students' progress is measured between September and May, most children are found to be advancing at a roughly similar rate (Allington and McGill-Franzen, 2003; Bracey, 2002; Entwisle & Alexander, 1992). However, when they are tested the following September, those from low-income families have regressed, while their middle-class and upper-middle-class peers have continued to make progress (Allington and McGill-Franzen, 2003; Bracey, 2002; Entwisle & Alexander, 1992). Even if teachers help low-income students advance at the same pace as the others during the school year, by the start of middle school the accumulated summer loss can amount to more than two full years in verbal achievement and nearly as much in math (Allington and McGill-Franzen, 2003; Bracey, 2002; Entwisle & Alexander, 1992).

The summertime gap can be narrowed by life-altering experiences like reading books for knowledge and leisure; traveling to different countries; reading travel guides

and fun facts about cities, states, and countries; visiting museums; and participating in enrichment summer programs.

### *How Race and Ethnicity Influence the Achievement Gap*

African-American and Latino students change schools much more often than other students. Between first and third grades, 27% of African-American students and 25% of Latino students change schools three or more times, while just 13% of White students change schools as often. In many urban classrooms, the turnover rate of students' approaches 50% per year, which significantly affects the learning of students who move and complicates the efforts of teachers to maintain continuity of instruction for those who don't (Barton, 2004; Barton, 2003; Barton & Coley, 1992).

African-American and Latino students watch much more TV than others students. Indeed, their viewing tends to be well above the levels that correlate with lower school performance, especially in reading. More than 40% of African-American students and more than 20% of Latino students watch more than six hours of TV per day, while just 13% of White students watch as much (Barton, 2004; Barton, 2003; Barton & Coley, 1992).

African-American students have lower levels of parent availability than White students or Asian American students. Only 38% of African-American students live with two parents versus 75% of White students (Barton, 2004; Barton, 2003; Barton & Coley, 1992). Many African-American students are living with single mothers and in poverty, a combination that puts children from any ethnic group at risk for--among other problems--



poor attendance and achievement and behavior problems (Barton, 2004; Barton, 2003; Barton & Coley, 1992).

African-American children have significantly higher rates of low birth weight and lead poisoning than White or Asian American children. Both conditions can seriously impair cognitive and academic functioning (Barton, 2004; Barton, 2003; Barton & Coley, 1992).

African-American and Latino adolescent peer cultures in some schools appear to exert a negative influence on performance (Barton, 2004; Barton, 2003; Barton & Coley, 1992). Specifically, these youth cultures can foster the attitude that using standard English, being smart, and working hard constitute a kind of sellout: acting too White (Barton, 2004; Barton, 2003; Barton & Coley, 1992). Jencks and Phillips (1988) talk about Fordam and Ogbu's thoughts on "acting white," "Academically successful African-American adolescents often said their classmates disparaged them for acting White. Many of these students reported that they had stopped working hard in order to avoid such taunts." This fear intensifies the gap because for these students academic accomplishment has a much higher social cost. Where this attitude prevails, it can discourage minority students, even those from middle-class homes with strong parental support in good suburban schools, from enrolling in challenging courses and investing effort in their work (Barton, 2004; Barton, 2003; Barton & Coley, 1992).

Steele and Aronson (1995) write "academically successful African-Americans worry that getting a low score on tests will confirm the stereotype that African-Americans are not academically talented. This kind of anxiety, they argue, can actually

impair successful African-Americans performance.” Steele and Aronson also suggest, “that anxiety about racial stereotypes and intellectual competence can sometimes depress able African-American students’ test performance. Steele believes that what he calls “stereotype threat” is mainly a problem for African-Americans who have an emotional investment in seeing themselves as good students. This also helps to explain why so many African-American students disidentify with school.”

*Social Reproduction Perpetuates the Role of Race and Ethnicity*

In most people’s minds, school is the great equalizer: theoretically school is supposed to provide a level playing field, which allows all to compete on an equal basis that would render social inequality superfluous (MacLeod, 1987). Reproduction theory would argue that schools actually reinforce social inequality while pretending to do just the opposite. The corresponding principle highlights the similarity between the social relations of production and personal interactions in schools (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). This specifically deals with the relationships of authority and control between administrators and teachers, teachers and students, students and students. Students and their work replicate the division of labor which dominates the workplace (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). They explain that there is a correlation between students’ powerlessness in schools in terms of curriculum and an employee’s lack of control over his job duties. We can also see the symmetry between the role of grades and the role of wages as motivators as well as the inherent competition between students and the competition between workers.

There are many structural differences among schools that support social reproduction. Schools that are in inner-city and rural communities that serve working-class, poor neighborhoods, and students of color tend to be more regimented, and favor direct instruction that places an emphasis on basic skills; they also tend to maximize rules that employ zero tolerance policies to emphasize behavioral control (MacLeod, 1987; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The contrast is that schools that are located in suburban communities serving middle class, upper middle class, and affluent students tend to offer more open classrooms favoring greater student participation; less direct supervision; greater variety of student electives; and typically a value system stressing internalized standards of control (MacLeod, 1987; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). These variations reflect the different expectations of administrators, teachers, and parents of students with different backgrounds. Working class and poor parents know from their job experiences that submission to authority is an important value for success in the workplace; parents expect their schools to reproduce those values (MacLeod, 1987; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Reflecting their position in the social division of labor, middle class and affluent parents would expect open schools for their children. The American educational system also functions at an ideological level to promote the attitudes, values, and beliefs of a capitalist, democratic society. The children of the poor attend schools in school districts where they are placed in learning tracks, which emphasize conformity and docility to prepare them for low status jobs (MacLeod, 1987; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The contrast is the children of the elite are allowed to study at their own pace under loose supervision, to make independent decisions, and internalize social norms; this prepares these students

to become the boss instead of being bossed (MacLeod, 1987; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The role of schools it could be argued exist largely to socialize students to replicate and reproduce the roles that their parents occupy in larger society.

The main factor in allowing schools to continue to engage in social reproduction is the research that states that schools make little difference in the cultivation and socialization of children. The prevailing erroneous belief that a student's family socio-economic status and cultural background more than anything else will predict educational outcomes (Payne, 1995; Jencks et al., 1972; Moynihan, 1965; Coleman et al., 1966) instead of the schools and teachers response to family background, which is in fact the principal determinant of student performance (Edmonds, 1980, 1982; Edmonds, Comer, Billingsley, 1973). The implication of these studies is that schools can do very little to increase the achievement of poor students and children of color (Edmonds, 1980; Edmonds, 1979).

Farkas and Beron (2001) build on this point, "social reproduction theory influences the parent and child's spoken vocabulary and grammar, reading and writing ability, mathematics related skills, aspirations, efforts, organizations, are central to the mechanisms by which social class position is passed from parent to child."

*Cultural capital and social reproduction.*

Culture capital is the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next (Bourdieu, 1992; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1983). Culture capital represents ways of talking, acting and socializing, as well as language practices, values, and styles of dress and behavior

(MacLeod, 1995). This notion is the centerpiece of the theory of cultural reproduction. Students from affluent families inherit substantially different cultural capital than do poor students and students of color. Schools often embody the class interest and the ideologies of the middle class; so sometimes these same schools unknowingly reward and validate the cultural capital of the dominate class while systematically devaluing the cultural capital of the poor (Bourdieu, 1992; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1983). Middle class and affluent students by virtue of schools valuing a certain linguistic and cultural repertoire that is acquired through family background as well; are provided a means of appropriation for success in school (Bourdieu, 1992; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1983).

These students engage in activities that the education system implicitly requires for students to be successful like reading books; visiting museums; attending concerts; going to the theatre; and going to the cinema, all of which allow you to acquire a certain familiarity with the dominate culture. Students whose families have little connection or exposure to these forms of culture capital are at a decided disadvantage (Bourdieu, 1992; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1983; Giroux, 1983). The conclusion that one is left to draw is that schools become trading posts for cultural capital that is parlayed into superior academic performance; which becomes economic capital by earning superior jobs. Schools reproduce social and structural inequality by dealing in the currency of academic credentials which legitimates this entire process (Bourdieu, 1992; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1983; Giroux, 1983).

### *Low Expectations and the Gap*

Even though not much time is spent by K-12 educators attempting to answer the question about what role race, ethnicity, and culture have on the process of schooling in any substantial way because of the explosive nature of the subject matter, clearly there is a link to educational outcomes (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Fordam & Ogbu, 1986). Uzzell, Poton & Ardila (2007) discuss Ferguson and Brown's (2000) examination of the role ethnicity and teacher expectations have on the achievement gap. They concluded that not only do teachers have lower expectations for minority students than for White students, but those expectations have a far greater effect on the achievement and functioning of African-American students than on dominant group students. They also found that often teachers' expectations for African-American students was based upon their past performance and behavior as a group. By choosing to base expectations on historical data rather than present potential, educators help propagate disparities in achievement. They concluded, "exhorting teachers to have more faith in African-American children's potential is unlikely to change their expectations, but professional development programs in which teachers actually see disadvantaged African-American children performing at a high level can make a difference."

Ferguson (1998a) notes three types of bias when examining teacher perception. He found that some teachers enjoy unconditional race neutrality. That is, they expect the same of students without regard for race. Other teachers employ conditional race neutrality. This refers to the practice of expecting the same from students with the same

scores and grades regardless of their race. Still other teachers base their decisions on unobserved potential, but those expectations are stipulated by past performance.

Ferguson (1998a) discusses the importance of noting that “full potential equals demonstrated plus latent potential.” Ferguson found that educators misjudge the latent potential of African-American students more often than the latent potential of White students. According to Ferguson, this practice has “perpetuated a myth of intellectual inferiority, perhaps genetically based. These falsehoods prop up an inequitable social hierarchy with African-Americans disproportionately represented at the bottom, [which] absolves schools of their fundamental responsibility to educate all children, no matter how deprived.”

The type of expectations as well as the belief of teachers has had a profound impact on the achievement of certain students that of course perpetuates the achievement gap. Cummins (1993) also notes the impact of teacher expectation and belief in student performance by noting that researchers have proposed that many students with “learning disabilities” are really the result of the exhaustive instruction received by students who are labeled “at risk.” This instruction induces a passive role and brings about learned helplessness. Research found that the practice of constantly correcting student miscues interferes with the inability of the student to focus on the actual meaning of the text they’re reading. Cummins went on to note that “the constant corrections fostered dependent behavior because students knew that whenever they paused at a word the teacher would automatically pronounce it for them.”

### *Lack of Educators Valuing Students' Community Norms Supports the Gap*

There is a large disconnect between the students in public schools and the teachers and administrators who serve them. Some major assumptions between the schools and the communities the schools reside in and the families and students they serve are the students don't care about their education, the parents don't know enough about education so they don't value education or educators so, therefore, the educators that make up the school need to determine what the parents and students need to be successful to escape the environment they live in. That is a large part of the problem. There is an inferiority complex that permeates these communities because of the depressed circumstances, but that also impacts the quality and delivery of service the school provides. The disconnect is the schools provides the service the same way they would in a suburban community, rural community, without any regard for the culture of the community, but the overriding belief is we ultimately won't be successful because of the community and the environment the parents and the students live in. There is a name for this way of thinking: it is called social reproduction, the child's inheritance of the parents' social class.

### **Equity Traps and Their Impact on Student Achievement**

McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) call the prongs of the deficit-thinking paradigm equity traps, which they describe as “patterns of thinking and behavior that ‘trap’ the possibilities for creating equitable schools for children of color. In other words, they trap equity. [They] are often reinforced among administrators and teachers through formal and informal communication, assumptions, and beliefs.”



There are four defined equity traps: the Deficit View; Racial Erasure; Employment and Avoidance of the Gaze; and Paralogic Beliefs and Behaviors (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004).

### *The Deficit View*

The Deficit View is attributing students' lack of success to their background. Teachers perceive that students have "inherent or endogenous deficits, such as cultural inadequacies, lack of motivation, poor behavior, or failed families and communities" (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p.605). It is the practice of viewing students and their families as possessing deficits that have occurred as a result of being brought up within a community in the throes of generations of deficit behaviors, values, and beliefs. The Deficit View is drawn directly from the work done on deficit-thinking (Valencia, 1997).

### *Racial Erasure*

Racial Erasure stems from the misguided belief that the key to overcoming and expunging racism is to refuse to acknowledge race whatsoever. It is taken from the work of bell hooks, who defined *racial erasure* as "the sentimental idea . . . that racism would cease to exist if everyone would just forget about race and just see each other as human beings who are the same" (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p.604). These teachers may make the claim that they are "colorblind." This is often evidenced in the oft-seen response of teachers, who when asked why their students of color are performing poorly, that race has absolutely no role in the disparity. They may even place the blame on class in an effort to deny race, and by proxy, deny their own racism. Yet these same teachers will reveal their inherent racism when pressed to speak about their students. McKenzie &

Scheurich (2004) provide an example of a teacher who claims not to believe that race is an issue. Instead, she said, “I see, ooh, mom is a prostitute and has left him alone for 4 days now. I don’t see the color as being the issue. I think that a lot of the issues come from the fact that they are in a Black situation over here, where these kinds of attitudes are constant all the time.” McKenzie & Scheurich point out that while the teacher claims the issue isn’t race, she goes on to attribute a negative situation as a ‘Black’ situation. They describe this behavior as ‘racing’ the child. They explain that “she tries to say she is not racing the child but then turns around and clearly races the child.”

#### *Employment and Avoidance of the Gaze*

Avoidance and Employment of the Gaze is taken from Foucault’s work. He defined the gaze as surveillance for the purpose of controlling behavior (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Avoiding the gaze can be seen in the practice of teachers who leave affluent schools to work in low-income schools in order to “avoid always being watched by the administrators and parents like they were at their previous middle-income schools” (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p.620). Not only do teachers flee affluent schools to avoid being watched in terms of their teaching practices, but to avoid their in class behaviors from being scrutinized. McKenzie & Scheurich (2004) explained that these teachers reported that “their avoidance of the gaze allowed them to treat their children in ways they could not have treated middle-class White children.” Employment of the gaze can be seen in the way it is used “in norming the behavior of the teachers that spoke out in ways that could disrupt the deficit discourse of the teachers” (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p.621). In other words, when teachers speak about their students or the students’

families in positive ways, the other teachers around them will counter with negative stories or otherwise let that teacher know that they expect her to hold the same deficit beliefs they do.

### *Paralogic Beliefs and Behaviors*

Paralogic Beliefs and Behaviors, a paralogism, which is derived from the medical literature, exists when a conclusion is drawn from premises that logically do not warrant that conclusion. In other words, it is false reasoning that involves self-deception (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Simply put, it is “drawing a conclusion from a false premise” (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p.623). An example provided by McKenzie & Scheurich is that teachers in their study initially examined their own behaviors and admitted their own shortcomings. However, they went on to blame their negative behaviors--described these behaviors as losing control, screaming at their students, and, in general, treating the students in disrespectful ways—on the students themselves.

McKenzie & Scheurich (2004) believe two of the four equity traps: the Deficit View and Paralogic Beliefs and Behaviors are the more pernicious. These two “equity traps” are by far the most destructive because teachers, principals, and parents have direct contact with students everyday; so if they are hindered by these equity traps it really won’t matter what type of interventions are made, even ones that are supported by scientific research. The student’s impact or gains would only be negligible.

### *Equity Traps and Their Relationship to Deficit-Thinking*

Equity traps in general and the deficit view in particular, do not allow for the educators to ask the students or parents of students how to serve them; since many of the

technical supports implemented by the district have helped, but without addressing what educators don't know about educating children of color and children of poverty, equity traps, and the deficit-thinking paradigm, it will be difficult to close the achievement gap (Cormier, 2006). Wisdom, knowledge, and research suggest that educators must create a community of learners where the whole village comes together to learn how to teach Other People's Children (Delpit, 1996). It's the deficit view that prevents the educators in the school from reaching out to the parents because the school and the district don't see the parents as a resource as they would be viewed if they were from a school that had a culture of success, or if the school was situated in an affluent neighborhood (Cormier, 2006; Cormier et al., 2005).

The parents are not viewed as co-teachers in this enterprise known as education; they are viewed as the largest part of the problem. That is why deficit-thinking and equity traps are so pernicious. Not only have many educators problemitized the students they teach, they have also problemitized the parents and communities where the students come from. It is extremely important that educators remember that all parents want their children to be successful, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, or class. Once this becomes the most prevalent belief in education, our response to student's family background will largely not determine their ability to successfully matriculate the K-12 public school system.

Students of color and students of poverty have been and continue to be substantially overrepresented among those who experience academic problems; school failure; reading below grade level; dropping out of school; attendance problems;

overrepresentation in Special Education; under representation in Gifted and Talented (GT), magnet programs, honors classes, Advance Placement classes (AP), and International Baccalaureate Programs (IB) (Valencia, 1997). These students are prime targets of the deficit-thinking intellectual discourse and school interventions (Valencia, 1997). Of the many conceptual frameworks that have been advanced to explain school failure among low income, students of color, the deficit-thinking theory has held the longest currency among scholars, educators, and policymakers (Valencia, 1997).

Students of color and students of poverty are often exposed to less rigorous curricula (Barton, 2004), employ fewer experienced teachers (Barton, 2004; Rank, 2004), have higher student-to-teacher ratios (Barton, 2003; Karoly, 2001), offer lower teacher salaries (Karoly, 2001), have larger class sizes (Barton, 2003), and receive less funding (Carey, 2005; Kozol, 1992) than low-poverty schools. In short, deficit-thinking overwhelmingly locates school failure causes in students and their families.

### **Deficit-Thinking Resurges**

There seems to be mounting evidence that deficit-thinking is experiencing a resurgence in current educational thought and practice. Herrnstein and Murray (1994) argue in *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* that “intelligence exists and is accurately measurable across racial, language, and national boundaries.” Herrnstein and Murray believe IQ is due largely to environmental disadvantages.

Their main point is that the inheritability of intelligence can lead to a rigid class stratification in a meritocratic society. Achieving equal opportunity in education might

well lead to greater inequalities in society than we now suffer, he argues; the more easily the intelligent and able individuals can rise in society and displace dull ones—of any color—the more important inherited differences will become (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Valencia, 1997). In Herrnstein and Murray's view, schools should use tests to uncover children's inherited strengths and build on them, instead of acting as a pipeline through which society tries to generate talent where there is none. Those not gifted should learn a trade (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994)

This line of thinking is similar to the 1920's hereditarian thought in which racial/ethnic differences in intelligence were believed to be genetically based (Valencia, 1997). Historically, the confluence of ideology and science makes a volatile union in understanding educational problems as well as the needs of economically disadvantaged, socially segregated groups (Valencia, 1997). This type of deficit-thinking produced the assertion that the average 15-point IQ difference found between American African-Americans and Whites is due to inherited superiority. Of the factors that determine IQ, Jensen contended, 80% are hereditary and only 20% environmental (Jensen, 1969).

#### *The Six Prongs of the Deficit-Thinking Paradigm*

The six prongs of the deficit-thinking paradigm are (Valencia, 1997; Foley, 1997; Menchaca, 1997; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997; Pearl, 1997; Bourdieu, 1992; Ryan, 1971; Lewis, 1966; Lewis, 1965; Lewis, 1961): the process of blaming the victim; a form of oppression; a model of educability; Heterodoxy, Orthodoxy, and deficit-thinking; the culture of poverty; cultural and accumulated environmental deficits.

#### *Blaming the Victim*

The process of blaming the victim...in education, we have programs of 'compensatory education' to build up the skills and attitudes of the ghetto child, rather than effecting structural changes in the school (Ryan, 1971). Typically what happens in schools, it seems, is sometimes educators forget it is their responsibility to teach the children in their charge, not just teach the students who best fit the description of what students should be or the students that we have had the most success with. According to Ryan (1971) "the shorthand phrase is cultural deprivation, which, to those in the know, conveys what they allege to be inside information: that the poor child carries a scanty pack of cultural baggage as he enters school."

They say, 'if you can manage to get him to sit in a chair then he could learn,' and this failure to even sit in the chair, of course, accounts for his failure to learn much in school (Ryan, 1971). Ryan says educators are asking questions like, "What is the culturally deprived child doing in school? What is wrong with this victim?" Ryan contends that educators are asking the wrong questions. He wonders why no one is asking questions about the "collapsing buildings and torn textbooks, the frightened, insensitive teachers, the six additional desks in the room, the relentless segregation, the callous administrator, the irrelevant curriculum, the bigoted or cowardly members of the school board, the insulting history book." The questions that educators haven't asked have more impact on the "culturally disadvantaged child's" educational outcomes than the questions that they *are* asking.

A grandparent of a Head Start student in rural Louisiana observed years ago how people tend to have inappropriate assumptions and expectations. She said, "if the

corn don't grow, nobody don't ask what's wrong with the corn” (Perry, 2004, p.9). So when students—or the schools they attend, or the districts those schools are located in—aren’t successful, our reform efforts probably should not begin with the students, but should begin with looking for solutions among adults. That is the way many educators have been working with students that have placed in the category of being hard to educate.

### *A Form of Oppression*

Deficit-thinking is a form of oppression—that is, the cruel and unjust use of authority and power to keep a group of people in their place (Menchaca, 1997). One such use is what Valenzuela (1999) calls subtractive schooling. Valenzuela explains subtractive schooling as a process by which schools “subtract resources” from students of color in two major ways. One way is subtractively assimilationist policies and practices that are designed to divest Mexican students of their culture and language (Valenzuela, 1999). Valenzuela (1999) sums up this idea:

sometimes we as educators are our own worst enemies because we are so passionate and committed to the job of working with children and families we don’t stop to consider the impact the choices we make, the methods we employ, and the labels we create for students will have on children and families. (p. 155).

Freire explains the dangers of oppression, “Education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression.”

### *The Model of Educability*

Low performance reinforces deficit views of these children and their families and becomes a driving force behind what is known as a model of educability (Valencia,



1997). This is described as a ubiquitous description-explanation-prediction-prescription cycle in U.S. public schools (Valencia, 1997). In other words, first, educators assume deficits, deficiencies, limitations, and shortcomings in children of color and children from low-income homes; next, educators explain these deficits by locating them in such factors as limited intelligence or dysfunctional families; then, educators predict the perpetuation and accumulation of the deficits; and finally, educators prescribe educational interventions designed to remediate deficits (Valencia, 1997). This cycle has become self-perpetuating as the system in place in traditional U.S. schools, by design, produces failure for some students (Valencia, 1997).

What does a successful student look like? The question is a difficult one depending upon whom you ask. In the mind of many educators we would like to believe we know what a successful student would look like, what type of family they were born into, and what type of community they live in (Delpit, 1996; Delpit, 1993). Since those notions are rooted in our own beliefs of what those students would look like, sound like, and how they would speak; it's possible that we are not serving all students equitably.

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) describe the Pygmalion effect, Rosenthal effect, or more commonly known as the teacher-expectancy effect refers to situations in which students perform better than other students simply because they are expected to do so. A now nearly infamous vignette that illustrates this phenomenon involves a teacher who discovered what she thought was a list of her students' IQ scores on her principal's desk. The scores were shockingly high. Because of her belief in her students' intellect in the face of such incredible data, she held high expectations for her students and required of

them work at a level they were unaccustomed to. Despite their bewilderment at their teacher's expectations, the students completed the work. When her principal questioned how she had gotten the students to do such high quality work and to behave so well when their previous teachers had been unable to get the same results, she informed him that her expectations were simply in line with the high IQs of her students. Her principal informed her that she was mistaken. He explained that these students possessed the lowest scores in the school. He asked why she thought the students' IQs were high and she pulled out the list of students with the scores listed beside their names. The principal laughed as he congratulated her success, but told her before he exited her room that the numbers beside those students' names were in fact their locker numbers, not their IQ scores.

#### *Heterodoxy and Orthodoxy and Deficit-Thinking*

Valencia explains that "historically, the deficit thinking model has rested on orthodoxy." The term orthodoxy comes from doxa, which refers to the dominate society norms, which are "beyond question." Heterodoxy is "unconventional opinions, dissent and nonconformity." The dominant group is always invested in maintaining the orthodoxy, or accepted truths and norms and deficit-thinking depends upon this. Valencia explains, "deficit thinking shuts debate. Deficit thinking has no room for heterodoxy. Deficit thinking allows no room for rival interpretations of the same data." Essentially, it's the existence of orthodoxy and its stranglehold on the systems that run schools and society at large that squelch heterodoxy and perpetuate deficit thinking.

### *The Culture of Poverty*

Oscar Lewis conceptualized the culture of poverty theory. He hypothesized that people living in poverty tend to create a unique, self-sustaining life-style or way of life marked by a host of negative values, norms, and social practices. The culture of poverty that is allegedly passed on to successive generations consisted of 70 traits which can be compressed into four clusters: 1.) basic attitudes, values, and character structure of poor people; 2.) the nature of the poor's family system; 3.) the nature of the slum community; and 4.) the poor's social and civic relationship within the larger society (Lewis, 1965).

Lewis explained:

There are cultural traits of the poor that create powerful images of a group of people that are largely lazy; fatalistic; hedonistic; violent; common law unions; dysfunctional families; female centered families; chronic unemployment; distrustful of the police and politicians; and no participation in civil events. (p. 165).

The parents in poor families are characterized as being nonverbal; impulsive; authoritarian; with parenting styles that supposedly retard intellectual development (Valencia, 1997; Payne, 1995; Hess & Shipman, 1967; Lewis, 1966; Hess & Shipman, 1965; Lewis, 1965; Lewis, 1961; Lewis, 1959). The lifestyle of the poor is considered inferior to mainstream dominant life, which is why they are impoverished. This image of the poor has allowed policymakers and the general public with a nontechnical, yet scientific way to categorize and characterize the poor (Valencia, 1997). Lewis (1965) stated the culture of poverty is pervasive and tends to propagate itself. He went on to say that by the time they were six or seven years old, children raised in poverty had “absorbed the basic attitudes and values of the subculture. Thereafter they are

psychologically unready to take full advantage of changing conditions or improving opportunities that may develop in their lifetimes.”

*Cultural and Accumulated Environmental Deficits*

Cultural and accumulated environmental deficits are based on cognitive developmental theory, which contends that cultural and accumulated environmental deficits in the early year’s leads to irreversible cognitive deficits. This model really examines the way people live life in common values, parenting patterns, ways at looking at the world, and the distinctive way language is used (Pearl, 1997a).

If the differences in student achievement were not genetic, then they had to be the result of a deficit; no one believed it could possibly be caused by persistent unequal treatment—both individual bias as well as institutional bias (Pearl, 1997a; Valencia, 1997). This way of thinking led to the cultural deprivation model in the 1960s, also known as cultural disadvantage model or social pathology model, which singled out the family unit as a cause of educational deficiencies (Foley, 1997; Pearl, 1997a; Valencia, 1997; Foley, 1991). The key to this framework is to blame the family unit—father, mother, or the home environment—as the carrier of this pathology (Foley, 1997; Pearl, 1997b; Valencia, 1997; Foley, 1991). The father is described as inadequate because he is considered to be an abusive or neglectful parent who always uses physical punishment of the children, uses and abuses drugs or alcohol, cannot provide for his family, or is sexually promiscuous (Foley, 1997; Pearl, 1997b; Valencia, 1997; Foley, 1991). The mother is characterized as equally inadequate because she is a poor teacher of the children because she does not read to them, she does not communicate the value of

education and the importance of high academic achievement, and sporadically showing affection (Foley, 1997; Pearl, 1997b; Valencia, 1997; Foley, 1991). This type of family environment is incapable of providing the type of support students need to function in an optimal learning environment (Foley, 1997; Pearl, 1997a; Valencia, 1997; Foley, 1991). The offspring that these type of parents would produce are cognitively underdeveloped, anti-intellectual, possessing restricted vocabulary, poor linguistic system, pathological personality traits, fatalistic, mistrustful, low self-esteem, poor impulse control, as well as the inability to distinguish right from wrong (Foley, 1997; Pearl, 1997a; Valencia, 1997; Foley, 1991).

### **The Complexity and Prevalence of the Second Prong: A Form of Oppression**

Each prong of the deficit-thinking paradigm is complex, but the second prong, a form of oppression, can prove quite pervasive. Teachers can unwittingly create oppression in their classrooms as a result of their own fear. Many educators perpetuate oppression through a well-meaning attempt to avoid racism. The antidote to an oppressive environment is authentic relationships, but often educators inadvertently create this prong when they confuse pity for relationships.

#### *Teacher Fear Can Create Oppression*

In the sixth J.K. Rowling novel in the seven novel Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* and the wise headmaster of Hogwarts, Harry's mentor and guide, Albus Dumbledore, was trying to teach this very lesson to Harry Potter. Dumbledore tells Harry that Voldemort had crafted his worst adversary "just as tyrants everywhere do! Have you any idea how much tyrants fear the people they oppress? All of

them realize that, one day, amongst their many victims, there is sure to be one who rises against them!”

This is an important lesson to learn because educators also feel fear (Delpit, 1996). One of most educators’ greatest fears is the fear of losing control of the classroom. Many teachers spend hours planning lessons for the students they teach with one special caveat: the lesson objectives will be difficult to reach if the teacher has a difficult time maintaining classroom discipline. If the lesson is engaging, discipline problems will be minimal (Marzano, 2003; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). This can all be avoided if teachers choose curriculum and lessons that are relevant to their students’ lives. Palmer (1998) found “lesson plans that encourage students to make connections between the material presented and their lives enhance learning.”

Another chief fear many educators harbor is that of not having all of the answers (Delpit, 1996). This leads to teachers relying on two approaches: teachers retaining control in the classroom and the transmission method of instruction, which is the dominant method in North American schools. Cummins (1993) states: two major pedagogical orientations can be distinguished. These differ in the extent to which the teacher retains exclusive control over classroom interaction as opposed to sharing some of this control with students. Cummins (1993) goes on to further state that the “basic premise of the transmission model is that the teacher’s task is to impart knowledge that she or he possess to students who do not yet have these skills. This implies that the teacher initiates and controls the interaction.” These ideas echo the work of Freire, who described this method as the banking approach, which means that teachers lecture or have

students read from a textbook before appraising how well the students can call back the knowledge. Freire illustrates the method by comparing it to the process of banking, “essentially, the teacher puts data in the “bank” or the mind of a student and demands the student simply recall that data.” According to Freire, this reduces education to the act of depositing: “the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.” Freire conjectures that this method is a tactic devised by the dominant class to keep those who have been marginalized from “gaining a true understanding of their history, their communities, their collective plight, or even themselves.”

Freire explains that if teachers want to increase their effectiveness as educators, they must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of men in their relations with the world. Haberman (1991) discusses characteristics of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed as the condition in which the teacher is knowledgeable but the “students know nothing.” The students’ role is severely reduced so that they have only “the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher.” He describes educators who pick out curriculum based upon their own whims and without regard for the students, who must simply adapt to the course content. In these classrooms, Haberman explains “the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority.” Freire (1972) advises instead the problem posing method, which he describes as “a radically different approach to teaching and learning. As they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, they will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge.”

The biggest reason these two approaches are a problem is that they are unsuccessful with students of color and students of poverty. A different classroom climate is necessary for teachers to be successful with those students. There has to be dialogue, discussion, students working in cooperative groups, and students thinking and writing critically rather than simply regurgitating the opinions of the teacher as fact (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). In order to be successful using these techniques, teachers must be able to relinquish a fair amount of control in the classroom and the teacher's expectations must be high. None of this can take place without a caring, trusting relationship between the teacher and students (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Duncan-Andrade, 2006a; Valenzuela, 1999).

The greatest problem in education is that educators know how to teach in ways that can keep some students from learning most anything (Edmonds, 1980; Edmonds, 1979). This can manifest itself by presenting information to students in one way like direct instruction; assessing students ability using only certain types of batteries; classroom practices and policies that are in conflict with various learning modalities; creating power and authority dynamics between teacher and student which are largely value conflicts; use of zero tolerance behavior paradigms; and classrooms that have unequal expectations about class work, homework, quizzes, and tests (Ferguson, 1998a; Ferguson, 1998b; Delpit, 1996; Delpit, 1993; Edmonds, 1980; Edmonds, 1979). Many educators choose to proceed this way even when dealing with students of color and students of poverty (Edmonds, 1980). Educators often continue to call only on those students they expect to know the answers—typically out of a desire to avoid



embarrassing lower performing students. However, Bartley, Sutton, Swihart, and Thiery (1999) found that “Hispanic students’ grades improved more than 10% per year when students were given equal opportunities to respond. Schoolwork turned in by students increased 15% as a result of having equitable opportunities to respond in class.”

Duncan-Andrade (2007) explains three types of teachers prevalent in urban schools—schools where most students of color and students of poverty attend. These are schools where Duncan-Andrade says “failure seems intractable.” Duncan-Andrade explains that the existence of this paradigm “is the reason that achievement results for virtually every urban school serving poor and non-White children can be predicted even before the school year begins.” The Gangsta teachers sit on one side of the spectrum. “These are teachers that have a deep resentment for most. They aggressively advocate for ineffective and repressive school policies. In staff meetings, these teachers deliberately sidetrack or bully forthright discussions of racism, structural inequalities, and social and economic justice.” Clearly, Gangsta teachers create a culture of oppression in their classroom. Duncan-Andrade explains that these teachers are “present in virtually every school where students are suffering.”

Wanksters is the term Duncan-Andrade gives to the majority of our teachers. These are the teachers sitting in the center of the spectrum are the Wanksters. Duncan-Andrade describes them not as evil, but as “the result of a natural human instinct: self-protection. They do not tip the school in either direction. They end up blindly following the latest curriculum reforms and student discipline fads.” Duncan-Andrade explains that there are always a few Ridas in schools. Ridas sit on the opposite end of the spectrum

from the Gangstas. The name is taken from a popular social expression for a person who can be counted upon during times of acute duress. The term derived from the phrase “ride or die,” which refers to the compulsion to die rather than let the people closest to you down. These teachers are reliably successful with a wide range of students. Through the deep emotional investment they risk with the bulk of their students allows them to challenge learners. The result is remarkable achievement and effort from their students. These teachers are often isolated and see the campus structure as morally bankrupt. They hesitate to take on any duties that divert their time and energy from the direct service of their students. Duncan-Andrade explains that “it is often the case that Ridas stay at ‘failing’ schools because it is the only logical path they see to work with the young people they care so deeply about while still being able to pay their own bills.”

But Ridas are few and far between. The philosophy of many teachers is more of the controlling traditional type of teaching (Fay & Funk, 1995). Teaching with Love & Logic would say there are teachers that are “helicopters because they rotate their lives around their students, do the students thinking for them, or whirl, whine, and complain. They make statements like “why can’t you remember your homework?” “I’ll think through that problem for you.” The hidden message is ‘you are helpless; you are unable to handle the hurdles in your life so I have to rescue you.’ The drill sergeant barks out orders and calls out their lists, turns up the volume and threatens, or commands their troops to follow their instructions. What they are saying is “don’t talk that way in my classroom!” “Don’t leave without your pass!” “Hand me your planner!”<sup>i</sup> The hidden message is ‘I know better than you what’s good for you, you can’t think for yourself,

follow my orders and you'll be fine.' Sadker and Sadker (1985) found that "minorities and low achievers are frequently ignored, interrupted, spoken to harshly, reprimanded, and given little encouragement."

According to Gay (2000) these students "are called on less frequently, praised less often, reprimanded more often and punished more severely, given answers more frequently by teachers, not encouraged to elaborate on statements, and rewarded for following rules and regulations and for being nice." This insight Gay provides is critical because it illustrates teachers' fear of some students of color and students of poverty (Duncan-Andrade, 2006a; Messick & McClelland, 1983). The fear of these students in the oppression created by the treatment they endure in the classroom. Especially telling should be the statement teachers reward students for being nice. We reward behavior we want to encourage and behavior that we didn't expect. We reward the behavior because we believe without the reward the behavior will not continue. An oppressive environment would be created when students realize they are being treated differently from other students because of academic and behavioral expectations; which create social traps (Messick & McClelland, 1983).

#### *Lack of Acknowledgement of Ethnic Identity is a Form of Oppression*

Ethnic identity is an enduring fundamental aspect of a person's social identity that derives from his or her knowledge of membership in an ethnic group and feelings associated with that membership (Phinney, 1996). It includes more than race and shared ancestry, referring also to beliefs, ways of communicating, attitudes, values and behavioral norms shared by a culture (Keefe, 1992; Knight, Bernal, Garza, & Cota,

1993). Ethnic identity has been found to affect goal setting, regulating behavior, serving as a reference point for evaluating oneself, and helping establish self-understanding, and self-esteem (Porter & Washington, 1993).

Many teachers often comment they don't see color; they only see students (The Diversity Kit, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Delpit, 1996). This is a common statement because teachers often feel like they have to say that or be thought of as being prejudiced (The Diversity Kit, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Delpit, 1996). Singleton and Linton explain, "White Americans have been raised to believe that it is racist to notice race. Thus, talking about race is viewed by many White educators as inappropriate, particularly while in mixed racial company." But colorblind teachers are committing a disservice to their students. Singleton and Linton explain, "Educators cannot effectively implement a culturally responsive strategy if they believe themselves to be color-blind or are simply unwilling to examine race."

Howard (1999) relates this incident to illustrate the detrimental effects of teachers claiming to not see color. He explained that when a teacher referred to being colorblind as a good quality, he "turned and asked, 'Jessie, if I tell you I don't see your color, how does that make you feel?' His response was, 'You don't see me.'" He described the emotional response on the part of the teacher who'd just come to the painful realization that she had "denied the authentic experience of people whose experiences of reality were different from hers."

When teachers refuse to acknowledge race, they are communicating negatives things to students. Singleton and Linton expand on the problem, “many schools have a code of silence about race and ethnicity, a value system that says it’s best to be color-blind. In a color-blind school, there is no safe place for someone of color.” Singleton and Linton explain, “Schooling as a process is difficult enough without depersonalizing the experience and leaving educators, students, and their families emotionally disconnected.” When teachers cannot be real about race, they inhibit the opportunity to develop authentic relationships with students.

*Authentic Relationships Between Students and Teachers Deters Oppression*

“They say I got to learn, but nobody’s there to teach me,  
If they can’t understand it, how can they reach me?  
I guess they can’t; I guess they won’t; I guess they front;  
That’s why I know my life is out of luck, fool.”  
--Coolio, “Gangsta’s Paradise”

Classrooms can be loving places where all students can be successful or some of them can be as horrific as the worst prisons in the United States; one of the reasons that prison guards hate their jobs is because they also come to hate the prisoners that they are responsible for guarding. They cease to see them as humans or equals. In order for authentic relationships to take place, there must be caring.

Gay (2000) reports “caring relationships have the following qualities: patience, persistence, facilitation, validation, and empowerment for participants. Uncaring relationships, on the other hand are characterized by impatience, intolerance, dictations, and control.”

That cognitive development is embedded in the context of social relationships has become a widely held belief (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989; Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1985b; Goldstein, 1999). In this view of cognition, interaction with others is the crucible of intellectual development; Rogoff (1990) states, “understanding happens between people; it can’t be attributed to one individual or the other.” The reason for an emphasis being placed on relationships is because through that connection trust can be built between teachers and students. An emphasis on meaningful interpersonal interaction could imply affective factors play a central role in intellectual growth and development (Dean, 1994).

Parents and students frequently tell administrators that teachers don’t care about them; They say, ‘teachers don’t care if we learn!’ Educators can sometimes become so focused on the mission of advancing students to the next grade—or in the current testing climate--trying to get students to pass the Texas Academic Knowledge & Skills (TAKS) state standardized “high stakes” assessments, they don’t sometimes stop and think about how students might respond or react to the high pressure environment that is created in school. And often teachers derail authentic relationships without meaning to. Often students of color bring an incident of racism to a teacher they trust, only to have that teacher devalue their experience or simply downplay the incident. Singleton and Linton (2006) point out that “just refusing to acknowledge a student’s experience of racism is damaging. ‘Aren’t you exaggerating a little?’ causes people of color to grow silent and no longer speak their truth.” Teachers need to educate themselves about the realities of their students’ lives. Singleton and Linton (2006) describe teachers who believe the love and

care they feel overrides their actual knowledge about their students' lives. These teachers experience a "huge shift in [their] own consciousness...[by] separating the fact that [they] cared from what [they] actually knew."

As Rogoff (1986) states, "in order to communicate successfully, the adult and child must find a common ground of knowledge and skills. Otherwise the two people would be unable to share a common reference point, and understanding would not occur." Vygotsky and Luria (1994) "make clear the fundamental importance of one on one interpersonal relationships to learning and development: the zone of proximal development is also a relational zone. Relationships are the main route to intellectual development."

#### *Pity Isn't the Same Thing as a Relationship*

Relationships must take place within the presence of caring. When discussing the notion of caring it's important to distinguish between what we as educators sometimes believe caring is: when a student tells you his or her mother might have overdosed on crack, his father is in prison, so he or she is living with his grandparents, aunts, and uncles, switching locales every few days, as an adult, our heart immediately wants to reach out and save the child from such dire straits. But we also begin to have lower expectations for the child because we pity them. Pitying students is never good because it makes us feel superior to the child because of their issue (Valenzuela, 1999).

During another conversation I was having with Dr. Lott about this subject, he reminded me "children living with difficult situations should be nothing new to educators. Sometimes we believe these students need a social worker! They don't need a

social worker; you'd better believe they need a teacher! That's really the only positive opportunity they will have to alter their living conditions." This type of mentality is what a colleague of mine calls being a "missionary colonizer" when working with children of color and children of poverty. These teachers believe that students need pity because of a difficult situation so it is more important to love them than to teach them as well as hold them accountable.

Noddings (1984) discusses the term of caring not as an attribute or personality trait, but a moral relation. "Caring is not something you are, but something you engage in, something you do. Every interaction provides one with an opportunity to enter into a caring relation. When the one caring is feeling with the cared for, his motives become her motives."

As Noddings puts it, motivational displacement "involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference and into the other's." In determining the appropriate caring response, the one caring does not give the cared for what she would want were she in his situation, but attempts to feel what the cared for feels in order to discern what he himself would want. The one caring takes into consideration the other's wants, desires, and goals, which she has discerned as a result of her receptivity, and reflects upon both his objective needs and what he expects of her (Goldstein, 1999).

Noddings (1984) reminds us that "a caring teacher's practices are informed both by an understanding of what must be done and by a sense of what ought to be. "If I care about students who are attempting to solve a problem, I must do two things: I must make the problem my own, receive it intellectually, immerse myself in it; I must also bring the



students into proximity, receive such students personally.” Vare and Miller (2000) found that “care is a critical component in schools. Students need it to thrive.”

Students will respond and achieve in the classroom with the challenges that teachers set forth. If students are treated as if they are low achievers, then they will behave and perform as such (Ferguson, 1998a; Ferguson, 1998b). However, if students are treated as if they are all academically gifted, then they will achieve as gifted students and behave in the manner in which their teachers should expect. Furthermore, students are gifted, and it is the responsibility of educators to figure out how to tap into what sparks the interest in each of our students (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Delpit, 1996). This is difficult to create in a classroom of 30 different learners, but this also helps students achieve. In order to have the most optimal learning experiences in the classroom, educators must challenge themselves to discover how to teach students in the most productive manner that is conducive to their style of learning (The Diversity Kit, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1997).

### **Deficit-Thinking’s Impact on Policy Recommendations**

This type of deficit-thinking led to specific policy recommendations for educating the deprived child. A detailed language program to improve the linguistic deprivation of poor African-Americans was created (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966). Many of the schooling programs used the compensatory approach, like Operation Head Start and the Elementary School and Secondary Act (ESEA), 1965 both federal programs. These programs were almost exclusively early intervention strategies with clear deficit-thinking messages (Pearl, 1997a; Pearl, 1991). Pearl (1991) explains the prevailing justification

for the gap is accumulated environmental deficit, which he describes as the theory that “students entered school with a build-up of handicaps incurred in early formative years that would be irreversible unless significant action was taken when children were very young.”

To build on this point Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Harvard academic that President Kennedy appointed as Special Assistant to the Secretary of Labor, who became a key player in the development on the war on poverty. Moynihan (1965) blames a weak family structure and states that “once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of the most of the aberrant, inadequate or anti-social behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation.” This type of thinking about the poor in general—as well as African-Americans in particular—has had long-standing ramifications on the way that policy is developed; the way educators view the problems of the poor; the way the public characterizes the African-American family; much of this view lead to the creation of Title I programs and NCLB, which is part of ESEA (McGuinn, 2006).

### **The Impact Superintendents and Campus Leaders Have on Closing the Achievement Gap**

#### *Leadership’s Responsibility*

The leadership in the district must address its employees’ attitudes, values, and beliefs, many of which are supported, justified, and rationalized by deficit-thinking models. Cormier (2003) posits the role of superintendent “must perform a balancing act between internal and external forces over which he or she has little control. The position’s political side is complicated by constituents’ views about the importance of

education and the relations of schools to the political process. A superintendent is generally perceived as a teacher, a scholar, a leader, an expert, and as a guardian of the community's children." The superintendent must satisfy constituencies such as students, parents, teachers, principals, the community, and the school board. How these constituencies perceive the superintendent determines his success and longevity in the school district. The only way for a superintendent to be successful with academic achievement, which, according to Estes (2004), is the principle charge of the office is to address these issues. Estes states the primary task "is to practice the moral and ethical responsibility of providing students an equal life chance."

### *Superintendents face the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Crisis*

According to Skrla and Scheurich (2001) the problem lies in the fact that even superintendents of schools that serve students of color and students of poverty don't themselves truly believe that all children can learn. They explain that "because of the insidiously pervasive deficit-thinking, these superintendents tend to view the broad-scale underperformance of children of color and children from low-income homes in their schools as inevitable, something that is not within their power to change." Coleman and LaRocque (1990) further illustrate this point by pointing out that the pervasiveness of deficit-thinking in our schools "is compounded by the dominate view of the superintendency that holds that women and men in these positions do not have a direct impact on instructional matters or on student learning in any case." Berry and Achilles (1999) further expand on this point when they explain that in general the belief is that "the superintendent's more appropriate roles are tending to the political, cultural, financial,

and logistical domains of schooling, leaving teaching and learning to campuses, which are viewed as properly the sites of school reform.”

The overwhelming majority of U.S. superintendents are White and male (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000), and it is likely that deficit views of children of color and children from low-income homes have been reinforced by these superintendents’ own prior experiences as teachers and campus leaders. Even superintendents of color (who know that children of color can be highly successful because they themselves were those children) are influenced by and have to contend with the deficit-thinking that suffuses every part of U.S. public schooling (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 1999).

In the absence of a state accountability system that requires disaggregation of data, superintendents who take on the challenge of addressing educational inequity (and thus resist the dominance of deficit-thinking that explains away or views inequalities in student achievement as natural) often find themselves embroiled in local political controversy, and these superintendents must expend considerable political capital maintaining support for confronting inequity along racial and socioeconomic class lines.

The role of the superintendent as a leader is difficult to negotiate because as Riehl (2000) explains that the intricate beliefs and values of schools “find legitimacy through their acceptance by the broader public. Schools are, in effect, constructed around the meanings that people hold about them.” Due to this, Riehl explains that true change doesn’t happen due to structural and procedural changes, but when internal and external persons “construct new understandings about what the change means. In this regard the

role of leadership is crucial. Although meanings are negotiated socially--that is through a shared process--leaders typically have additional power in defining situations and their meanings.”

### *Leadership Challenges in Urban Districts*

Changing these negative and destructive patterns and educating everyone’s child so that they achieve at high levels has been shown to be a formidable task (Delpit, 1996; Weis & Fine, 1993; Howard, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1997, 2001; McKenzie & Scheurich; 2004). According to McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) “this task requires those in schools to rethink and restructure what expectations they hold for all students, how their schools are organized to support teaching and learning, what curricula will be implemented, what practices include and exclude students, and how instruction will be delivered and assessed.”

### *The Importance of the Leadership of the Superintendent and Principals*

To accomplish this rethinking and restructuring of schools requires strong, focused, insightful, skilled leadership, specifically the leadership of the superintendent as well as the school principal. There is significant research that indicates that there is a positive relationship between leadership and student achievement (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Scheurich, 2002; Cuban, L., Sachs, J. & Sachs, R., 2001; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Riehl, 2000; Hallinger, & Heck, 1998). That positive relationship between leadership and student achievement must begin with the superintendent and the board of trustees of the school district. There is a virtual absence of reported data on how district leader--particularly the superintendent--successfully engage their organizations in

fundamental reforms (Johnson, 1996). Despite the pivotal role the superintendent plays in interpreting, leveraging, and implementing reform, little attention has been directed to the influence of district leadership, in particular that of the superintendent (Adams & Kirst, 1999; Holdaway & Genge, 1995; Johnson, 1996; Leithwood, 1995) in creating a high-achieving school district. Rather, concentration upon the local school site and the principal's leadership dominates the research (Cuban, 1984; Leithwood, 1995).

The mission and the vision statement of the school district must reflect the goal of addressing solutions for what Valencia (1997) calls "the popular 'at-risk' construct, now entrenched in educational circles, which view poor and working class children and their families (typically of color) as predominantly responsible for school failure, while frequently holding structural inequality blameless." This theory does an excellent job of outlining a model that is still prevalent in education even though it has had limited success. This low performance reinforces deficit views of these children and their families (Valencia, 1997).

#### *Embracing a Vision is the Key to Improving Schools*

According to Bennis & Nanus (1985), "vision is a target that beckons." It is important because it creates an image in everyone's mind of the attainable, future state of the organization. Vision infuses meaning and purpose into the workplace and, according to Sergiovanni (1990), establishes the basis for a covenant of values that connects people to purposes and to each other through shared commitments. According to Senge (1990), much of the leverage required to change people's belief systems and practices lies in the

ability of the leader to challenge the mental models of members of the organization in order to gain more insightful understandings about the current reality.

*Superintendents Tasked with Bringing Vision to Campuses*

In the past, school effectiveness literature has tended to focus on the school as the unit of change and the leadership of the principal as the primary agent of change (Cawelti, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Ferguson, 1998a; Fullan, 1991; Musella, 1995; Reyes & Scribner, 1996). Using the school as the unit of change without considering the sources of change and support from the district fails to acknowledge the relationship that must exist between schools and district level leadership--particularly the leadership of the superintendent--for school improvement to occur (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998; Elmore, 2000; Elmore & Burney, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Huberman & Miles, 1984; Lambert, 2003; LaRoque & Coleman, 1989; Johnson, 1996).

Johnson (1996) concludes that superintendents must be “teachers” in three domains of leadership: educational, political, and managerial. Superintendents do this through modeling, coaching, and building the capacity of principals, teachers, and others. Superintendents model their expectations and priorities by articulating their beliefs and values to school staff and parents, and by using direct statements to principals and teachers to communicate district expectations for job performance. For example, superintendents model a district focus on instruction and student performance by bringing the district's attention back to the importance of learning at every opportunity (Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000).

In schools, the successful initiation of change rarely occurs without an advocate, and the most powerful one in the school district is the superintendent, especially when working in concert with the school board and state-mandated policy (Fullan, 2001; Huberman & Miles, 1984; LaRoque & Coleman, 1989; Murphy & Hallinger, 1986; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000). Although individual teachers and single schools can bring about change without the support of central administration, bringing change to scale across entire districts will not happen without the support of district leadership (Fullan, 2001). Superintendents are in a unique position in the environment of reform. In the midst of this politically charged environment, school superintendents serve as the fulcrum between the external pressures of state-mandated policy and the internal environments of their school districts (Wills & Petersen, 1995). As chief executive officer, the superintendent plays a critical role in the restructuring process (Holdaway & Genge, 1995). He or she assesses the organizational need for change, markets a compelling vision to the school community, interprets the reform agenda, selects implementation strategies that are aligned with the context, culture, and values of the school community (Fullan, 2001; Johnson, 1996), creates access to human and fiscal resources to support a change, and provides leadership to the district in negotiating the hazardous journey of change (Leithwood, 1995; Musella, 1995).

*The Power of a Superintendent's Influence Over the Achievement Gap*

In *The Results Field book: Practical Strategies from Dramatically Improved Schools*, Schmoker (2001) profiled the Brazosport Independent School District (BISD), 60 miles south of Houston, Texas and its Superintendent of Schools at the time, Dr.



Gerald Anderson. During the time of the survey, 43 percent (43%) of the families in BISD lived below the poverty line. The proportion of lower socially economic students ranged from 7% to 85% (Schmoker, 2001). In 1992, the district was embarrassed to discover that half of the schools were labeled Accredited or warned by the Texas State Board of Education (Davenport, 2006; Davenport & Anderson, 2002; Schmoker, 2001; Schmoker, 1999). Yet five short years later every one of the district's 18 schools earned Exemplary status under the TEA accountability rating system—meaning that 90% or more of every subgroup (White, African-American, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged) had achieved mastery on the Texas Academic Assessment of Skills (TAAS) in reading, writing, and math (Davenport, 2006; Davenport & Anderson, 2002; Schmoker, 2001; Schmoker, 1999).

Dr. Anderson discussed the process of how BISD was able to eradicate the achievement gap by moving from the Deficit-thinking paradigm to the Normed-Opportunity Paradigm (see chapter 5). Initially this was not his mindset. Dr. Anderson says, “I probably could have been considered just your normal superintendent that thought if you won the state championship in football and all sort of stuff like that, that was the most important thing!” The process of change began at his first school board meeting when a group of low socioeconomic status parents brought data to the public forum and asked, “why are the students in Freeport not performing at the same level as the students in Lake Jackson, which is a middle and upper class socioeconomic community?” Dr. Anderson discusses his reflection on this board meeting, “We have been conditioned to think some students just aren't going to do as well as other kids

because they don't have the support at home...The significance of that incident is that it motivated us; it focused us on addressing the issue." Anderson stated that he realized that the district would need to adopt a new philosophy about the education of all of the district's students. That philosophy was driven by these two statements: "all children can learn. Excuses for low academic performance based on socioeconomic or racial differences are unacceptable." He explained the shift: "the old paradigm was 'I taught it, but they didn't get it.' The new paradigm is 'maybe I didn't teach it the right way.'" Dr. Anderson explained that they removed the competitive nature that had previously plagued them. "We don't do that anymore. It's what did we do well? What didn't we do well? How can we work together to do it differently?"

Dr. Anderson discussed his challenges of trying to implement this new system with the BISD school board by explaining that members of the board don't always comprehend the true complexity of being committed to all children learning. "They don't understand how much work it takes to do what it is that we're doing. They don't see the significance of ...doing things right at the expense of doing the right thing." Dr. Anderson provided the example of a Central Office administrator's views on the direction of the education of the students in BISD. "Administrators in the district felt noble about working in high poverty schools because they kept the children warm and safe and that they thought the poor academic performance of the students was inevitable and not anyone's fault."

Other superintendents have had similar experiences. Singleton and Linton (2006) told of Dr. Neil G. Pedersen, a White superintendent, and Dr. Nettie Collins-Hart, a Black

assistant superintendent, both in Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools in North Carolina, worked to “move past the culture of silence toward effective interracial conversations about how race impacts student achievement.” Dr. Collins-Hart explained:

We had to begin to look at the things we hadn’t talked about and race, in a very sensitive and direct way, was the one thing we hadn’t dealt with...I think at first the biggest challenge for me personally was getting used to the idea that we were going to talk candidly about race. (p. 109).

Dr. Pedersen elaborated as well:

It is uncomfortable being the superintendent of a district and to talk about the issue of institutional racism knowing that you are the leader of that organization and what that may say about you personally. That makes me uncomfortable because I have to reflect on what role I have in perpetuating policies and practices that need to be changed. (p. 110).

*The process of changing Brasosport ISD.*

After the school board meeting, one of the board of trustees members, who worked at Dow Chemical, came to Dr. Anderson to say, “Jerry, if we ran our business the way that you run this district we would be out of business in a year. You need to stop making excuses and find a way to teach these children.” (Davenport & Anderson, 2002, p.15).

He was about to change the very culture of the district. The first step in changing the culture of the district was changing the expectations for children on the south side of the district. Those students would have to demonstrate a certain level of mastery in reading, writing, and mathematics (Davenport, 2006; Davenport & Anderson, 2002; Schmoker, 2001; Schmoker, 1999; Schmoker & Wilson, 1993). The district was going to have to be able to teach the type of student that they had not been successful with before. These were not the students that exist in the dreams of teachers and administrators; this

was every single child in the district. Anderson says this was difficult to admit as a district level staff. Even worse was admitting the district held different expectations for different students (Davenport, 2006; Davenport & Anderson, 2002; Schmoker, 2001; Schmoker, 1999; Schmoker & Wilson, 1993). The next step the district took was to define what the school district was in the business of doing, which meant they had to create a new vision. The creation had to involve the entire district; so they developed a framework that included what would be the strengths and barriers to achieving the vision. After a lengthy process they chose Brazosport ISD 2000: An Exemplary School District (Davenport, 2006; Davenport & Anderson, 2002; Schmoker, 2001; Schmoker, 1999; Schmoker & Wilson, 1993). In addition to the new vision statement, they developed a three-to-five year plan of objectives to outline how they planned to achieve their vision.

They started piloting changes at their lowest performing elementary school. Significant gains were made in their first year. The next year, they continued the process at the pilot campus and implemented it at another elementary campus. They expanded the model to include consistency in delivery of instruction, building on the strengths of others, common planning time, and modeling effective teaching behaviors (Davenport, 2006; Davenport & Anderson, 2002; Schmoker, 2001; Schmoker, 1999; Schmoker & Wilson, 1993). After the five year cycle, principals on the north side of the district began to come to the south side of the district to find out what they were doing. Anderson was named Superintendent of the Year by the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB)/Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) (Davenport, 2006;

Davenport & Anderson, 2002; Schmoker, 2001; Schmoker, 1999; Schmoker & Wilson, 1993).

The Brazosport story highlights the importance and impact of a superintendent, brave enough to step forward and truly lead his district. The caveat to their success is that it would not have been possible if they had not confronted their own deficit-thinking in the form of low academic expectations as well as their willingness to admit that, in spite of their good intentions, the education and training they were offering was not adequate to the task of educating all children. Good intentions without skill, will, beliefs, acumen, effective instruction, and visionary leadership are a lot like a boat on dry land: you are not going to move toward your destination. Without these things, schools and school districts will be plagued by naiveté and inertia when it comes to the education of all their students.

### **Summary**

This chapter reviewed the extensive literature explaining the numerous factors impacting the achievement gap. It also detailed the pervasiveness of the achievement gap. The nuances of the complex factors perpetuating the gap were outlined: how socioeconomic factors lessen school readiness; achievement loss during summer months; social factors, race and ethnicity; low expectations; lack of valuing the students' community; and equity traps. The deficit-thinking paradigm and its six prongs were detailed. The complexity of the second prong, a form of oppression, was explained in detail. This chapter also discusses the impact of superintendents and campus leaders in closing the achievement gap.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

“Children learn more from what you are than what you teach” (Dubois, 1903).

The approach to this study was mix method qualitative and quantitative research. This approach was guided by the guidelines provided by Merriam (1998 & 2002), Glesne (1998), Denzin and Lincoln (1998), and Creswell (1998). This was a case study, which is an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution, or community. The case is a bounded, integrated system (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998). By concentrating upon a single phenomenon or case, this approach seeks to describe the phenomenon in depth. The unit of analysis--not the topic of investigation--characterizes a case study. Since it is the unit of analysis that determines whether a study is a case study, other types of studies can be combined with the case study.

This methodology provides the means to explore the interactions between the area superintendent and the principals. The methodology provided the means to explore the interactions between the principals and the constituents they serve in their various roles that impact student achievement. The selection was done purposefully, not randomly; that is, these particular principals exhibit characteristics of interest to the researcher (Merriam, 2002). The principals were interviewed on three separate occasions. The researcher used open-ended and probing questions to provide the participants the opportunity to fully express themselves. These interviews were audio-taped with two tape

recorders and notes were taken during each interview. A journal was utilized to record all relevant events discovered during the study.

The deficit-thinking paradigm has not been used to analyze the behavior of educators in this context before. The deficit-thinking paradigm has six different prongs: blaming the victim; a form of oppression; a model of educability; Heterodoxy and Orthodoxy; a culture of poverty; and cultural and accumulated environmental deficits (Valencia, 1997; Foley, 1997; Menchaca, 1997; Valencia and Solorzano; Pearl, 1997; Bourdieu, 1992; Ryan, 1971; Lewis, 1966; Lewis, 1965; Lewis, 1961).

The effective school correlates have not been used in conjunction with the deficit-thinking paradigm to assist in the analysis of the behavior of area superintendent and principals in their environment as well as a professional context. There are seven correlates of effective schools: (Edmonds, 1980; Edmonds, 1979a; Edmonds, 1982; Edmonds, Comer, Billingsley, 1973; Edmonds & Frederickson, 1979; & Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Lezotte, 1991): Safe and Orderly Environment; Climate of High Expectations for Success; Instructional Leadership; Clear and Focused Mission; Opportunity to Learn and Student Time on Task; Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress; Home-School Relations.

Specifically, the researcher will describe the philosophy of the area superintendent and the principals when working with children of color and children of poverty and describe the high expectations of educators in the building while creating a culture of success for students of color and students of poverty. The study examined the area superintendent's and principals' leadership behaviors: setting the expectations for

teachers and students; working with parents; addressing cultural competencies of teachers; cultural incongruence of policies of the district; measuring the progress of students beyond standardized testing data; culturally relevant instructional strategies; use of student and parent funds of knowledge to connect learning to life; and professional development for administrators; faculty; and staff. This study provided insights about children of color and children of poverty, their parents, the communities they reside in, and the beliefs of the educators who work them. The design methodology, selection of participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis process are discussed in this chapter. In order to accomplish these research goals, this qualitative and quantitative study will focus on two research questions:

1. How does the area superintendent address the school improvement process in creating high expectations and goal attainment aligned with the Effective School Correlates?
2. How does the principal address the school improvement process in creating high expectations and goal attainment aligned with the Effective School Correlates?

### **Data Collection**

The responses of the area superintendent and the principals are coded to properly put their attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors in the appropriate context of the theoretical framework of the deficit-thinking paradigm and the effective school correlates.



First, district leaders created a sense of urgency for the improvement of academic achievement in their communities (Ragland et al., 1999). Secondly, the district leaders created an environment in which improving academic instruction became a responsibility shared by everyone at school (Ragland et al., 1999). Principals knew they were expected to provide a quality of instructional leadership that would lead to the attainment of specific academic goals (Ragland et al., 1999). Expectations were clear. Finally, district leaders recognized that high expectations needed to be accompanied by high quality support (Ragland et al., 1999).

In order to accomplish the goals of this study—and answer the research questions—a qualitative study is considered to be appropriate by the researcher. Merriam (1998) suggests that “qualitative research is based on the contention that reality is constructed by the interactions of individuals with their social environment.” Therefore, the emphasis of qualitative research is an understanding of the meaning that individuals have constructed from their experiences (Creswell, 1998). For the study, a single case study was utilized. This is defined as a single case study because the participants are from two campuses within the same school district, and have similar student demographics. This approach will be based on the principles of case study research that is designed to capture the richness of the interactions and experiences of the participants in the study (Creswell, 1998). This methodology will provide the means to thoroughly explore the interactions between the area superintendent and the principals as well as the interactions between principals, teachers, and students to examine the process of overcoming the deficit-thinking paradigm. Sherman & Web (1998) state that the use of qualitative research

methods “allow the researcher to understand what is going on, allows the participants to speak for themselves, provides the researcher with a holistic view of what is being said and observed, and it also requires the researcher to evaluate what is going on.”

The researcher, interviews, questionnaire, personal observations, and written documents provided additional data for this study. The purpose of this study is to examine how an area superintendent and the principals who are supervised by the area superintendent overcome the deficit-thinking paradigm as well as their own deficit-thinking to close the achievement gap for children of color and children of poverty. As part of my research, I spent four days with the principals on the campus as well as the community, where I was on campus or around the campus all day, I also spoke with the teachers, sat in on meetings, observed classes, tutoring sessions, walked the community with the principal as well as other campus leaders as we visited parents near the campus.

The criteria used to select the school district and campuses within the district are as follows:

1. The district was a large urban district that was at least 40% students of color and 40% students of poverty;
2. The campuses had to be successful for a least three years in the state Academic Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) era; not Texas Academic Assessment of Skills (TAAS);
3. The campuses to study are all African-American; all Latino; or a combination of both, with a small percentage of White students;

4. The campuses had also earned awards of distinction beyond a state accountability rating of Recognized or Exemplary.

During the course of this study the researcher used interviews, a questionnaire, observations, a reflective journal, and written documents. Through the use of the interviews the researcher was able to explore the strategies used to create a culture of success working with groups of students that have been historically difficult to educate. The researcher engaged in multiple interviews so that the structure of the interviews was collaboratively designed and redesigned. It was the hope of this researcher that the use of multiple interviews would cultivate a richness of information.

In order to create an in depth case study, the researcher observed the area superintendent and the principals in meetings. A reflective journal was used to capture how the researcher was affected by the fieldwork and the field relationships. The questionnaires were developed to answer the four questions for the study. The questionnaires allowed the participants to begin their reflection of the deficit-thinking paradigm and its effect on the achievement gap. The questions focused on creating a culture of success, high expectations of teachers, parents, and students, and instructional and behavioral strategies used with students of color and students of poverty. Responses were analyzed to capture dominant themes and to develop future areas to examine during interviews. Classer & Strauss (1967) posit that this approach “allows the researcher to conduct an ongoing comparative analysis of the data.” The initial responses made it possible to analyze the responses using the deficit-thinking paradigm and the effective schools correlates as a model.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis involves organizing what has been seen, heard, and read so that sense can be made of what the researcher has learned (Glense, 1998). The researcher sought to describe, create explanations, and link stories to other stories in order to accomplish collected data (Denzin, 1989; Merriam, 1988; Guba, 1985). In addition, the researcher used the constant analysis method to analyze the data (Goetz & Lecompte, 1984). In the early data analysis the researcher analyzed the data simultaneously with the data collection so that the study could be focused and shaped as it proceeded (Glense (1998). It was important that the researcher consistently reflected on collected data. The researcher endeavored to systematically organize the data, write self-directed memos, developed analytic files, write monthly reports, and develop rudimentary coding schemes.

In later data analysis, the researcher ferreted out the themes and patterns that gave shape to the data. Differences of interpretation were addressed to ensure a reliable and trustworthy interpretation of the findings (Merriam, 1998). Furthermore, there was a consistency of judgment to determine code development and its application to data analysis (Boyatziz, 1998).

Three interviews, which addressed the research questions and lasted one to three hours, were conducted with each participant during the 2007-2008 school year. The researcher sought to encourage an open exchange of information that would generate honest answers to set the stage for the future interviews. An interview protocol was

developed to record responses to the interviewee's comments. In addition, a tape recorder with an acoustic sensitive microphone was used as suggested by Creswell (1998).

The initial interview was used to develop a rapport to build a relationship with the participants. This time was spent developing a level of trust that would facilitate an open sharing of life experiences. The interview was used to gain a better understanding of the participant's view of the deficit-thinking paradigm and the effective school correlates research as well as low expectations and its effect on the achievement gap. The interview also focused on the process of creating a culture of success; high expectations of teachers, parents, and students; whether it was important that students of color be taught by educators of color; and instructional and behavioral strategies used with students of color and students of poverty. The second interview followed up with the participants to further explore the themes discussed. The researcher also had the opportunity to gain greater clarification on any unexplored questions. The interview helped the researcher gain greater insight into the complexities of working in schools populated by students of color and students of poverty. In the third interview the researcher sought to obtain greater clarification of the strategies used to combat deficit-thinking as well as the effective schools research and the process used to create a culture of success.

### **Data Sources**

This study was a mix method qualitative and quantitative study that involved only one urban school district: Martin Luther King Independent School District, one of the fifteen largest districts in the southwest part of the United States. The district serves 160,169 students: 63% Latino, 30% African-American, 5% Caucasian, and 1% Asian.

More than 83% of the district is low socioeconomic status. Twenty-nine percent of the students are English Language Learners (ELL), and 63% of the district is considered at-risk. The district encompasses an area of over 351 square miles, in which over 70 different languages are spoken. One specific area of the six areas that comprise the school district--which is the poorest area of the district--serves primarily African-American and Latino, poor students.

The two campuses that were studied were: Thurgood Marshall Learning Community, named a National Demonstration Site in 2001; and Hannibal Learning Community, named a National Demonstration Site in 2002.

The Martin Luther King Independent School District's Learning Communities, located in the East, South, and West part of the city, were originally court-ordered efforts to return disadvantaged, inner-city, students of color to their neighborhood schools and provide quality educational programs with supplementary funds. The Learning Communities represent an alternative to the district's previously attempted vehicle of providing transportation to distant sites as a remedy for a better educational opportunity. The concept of the Learning Communities is based upon the philosophy that a history of educational deprivation under conditions of poverty can be overcome. Specifically, the purpose of the Learning Communities is to provide special programs with educational concepts different from those in other schools in the district. Each Learning Community is expected to provide innovative and creative instructional strategies to accelerate student learning so that the achievement difference between minority and majority students will be narrowed. The target population for this program is all neighborhood

children in Grades 4-8 living in the target school's attendance zone. There are 14 intermediate Learning Communities (Grades 4-6) and 2 middle Learning Communities (7-8). Eight Communities are located in the Southern part of the city, 5 in the Western part of the city and 3 in the Eastern part of the city.

The demographics of Thurgood Marshall Learning Community are 66% African-American, 16% Latino, 0% Asian, .7% Native American, and 0% Caucasian. The campus is 98% low socioeconomic status. That makes it a Title I campus. Thurgood Marshall is a pre-kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade campus that serves 142 students; 16% of those are English Language Learners (ELLs). The campus is 38% at-risk. The principal of Thurgood Marshall is African-American; 100% of the teachers are African-American, 0% are Caucasian, and 0% are Latino. Fourteen percent of the teachers at Thurgood Marshall are male and 86% of the teachers are female. Twenty-one percent of the teachers have 1-5 years experience. Fourteen percent of the teachers have 6-10 years experience. Forty-six percent of the teachers have 11-20 years experience, and 18% have over 20 years experience. The campus earned an accountability rating of Exemplary for the 2006-2007 school year. The campus earned Gold Performance Acknowledgements: Commended on Reading/ELA (English Language Arts) and Commended on Mathematics (TEA, 2007).

The demographics of Hannibal Learning Community are 74% African-American, 26% Latino, 0% Asian, 0% Native American, and 0% Caucasian. The campus is 95% low socioeconomic status. That makes it a Title I campus. Hannibal is a pre-kindergarten through 6th grade campus that serves 175 students; 13% of those are ELLs. The campus is 39% at-risk. The principal of Hannibal is African-American. Ninety-three percent of

the teachers are African-American. Seven percent are Caucasian, and 0% are Latino. Thirty-seven percent of the teachers at Hannibal are male and 63% of the teachers are female. Four percent of the teachers are beginning teachers. Forty-one percent of the teachers have 1-5 years experience. Eleven percent of the teachers have 6-10 years experience. Nineteen percent of the teachers have 11-20 years experience, and 26% have over 20 years experience. The campus earned an accountability rating of Recognized for the 2006-2007 school year. The campus earned Gold Performance Acknowledgements: Commended on Reading/ELA (English Language Arts), Commended on Writing, Commended on Mathematics, Commended on Science, and Comparable Improvement: Reading/ELA and Mathematics (TEA, 2007).

#### *Selection Criteria for the Campuses*

Qualitative researchers should purposefully select their participants (Patton, 1990). To this end, the campuses were chosen because they were largely children of color and children of poverty, as well as a large faculty/staff largely made up of people of color. The biggest reason to study these schools was because the fact that they had every conceivable spoken and unspoken reason to not be successful with the students they serve, the parents they work with, and the communities the schools reside in, yet they continue to defy the odds.

#### **Trustworthiness**

The researcher clearly understands the importance of having his interpretation be trustworthy, and endeavored to establish trustworthiness. The researcher used the Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggestion “to have longer engagement, spending more time on site,



and persistent observations focusing in detail on those elements that are most relevant to the study are essential to establishing credibility.” The researcher conducted multiple interviews and observations of the participants on site to satisfy the prolonged engagement suggestion, and the study lasted one to three months during the 2007-2008 school year.

In order to ensure credibility, the following steps recommended by Jones (2001) were followed: “the proposal was submitted to the doctoral committee for review prior to conducting interviews and coding data; the data was obtained from a variety of sources; members of the committee had several opportunities to analyze collected data and provide guidance to the researcher; member checks were conducted with all participants by providing them with transcriptions of the interviews, and feedback was requested in regards to their accuracy; multiple methods were utilized to collect and analyze data to ensure triangulation. It was the researchers’ responsibility to be aware of his biases, and his own subjectivity so that interpretations can be trustworthy.”

### **Delimitations and Limitations of the Study**

The limitations are: 1.) the study took place in this single school district 2.) these schools receive additional funding due to a desegregation order trying to reach unitary status 3.) the use of incentive and merit pay 4.) the district has declared schools in this area as covenant schools that don’t have to follow all district mandates 5.) only two campus leaders and one area superintendent were studied and 6.) other possible factors that contribute to the success of the campuses were not considered.

The design of the study will also pose certain limitations that are unique to qualitative research. As LeCompte and Preissle (1993) point out, “case study, bounded system, Smith (1978) states a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries.” Qualitative research and case study methodology pose certain limitations that must be overcome by the use of techniques to insure the quality of the research (Lincoln, 1992). Generalizations cannot be reasonably made and the inability to make generalizations is considered a limitation of this qualitative study.

### **Assumptions**

This research was based on the assumption that all participants would answer any questions truthfully and completely. This required the researcher to develop a relationship of trust with the participants as well as provide an assurance of confidentiality, as discussed in chapter 3. Another assumption was that the interview protocol would successfully elicit participants’ true perceptions. A key assumption was the fact that there is a link between the attitudes, values, beliefs, professional practices, and professional behaviors of superintendents and principals and effective schools.

### **Summary**

Qualitative research approach was used in this study to provide the researcher with the opportunity to obtain rich, in-depth, relevant data that enabled the researcher to accomplish the goals of the study. It was not possible at the beginning of the study to anticipate the many challenges that occurred during the course of the study, but the findings may prove useful to district and campus leaders, as well as teachers. The two theoretical frameworks that were used to conduct this study could prove to be an effective

way to tell a district's story as well as counter a typical district's narrative of failure about children of color and children of poverty.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

“Education is supposed to be the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery” (Mann, 1848).

The intent of this chapter is to present the researchers findings on the area superintendent and two principals. This chapter begins with the description of the two theoretical frameworks that were used to assist in the triangulation of the data; four categories that were used to code the data; the leadership of the area superintendent and the principals. Finally, appears a summation of the themes emerging from a comparison of the interviews to answer the two guiding questions:

The guiding questions in this study are as follows:

1. How does the area superintendent address the school improvement process in creating high expectations and goal attainment aligned with the Effective School Correlates?
2. How does the principal address the school improvement process in creating high expectations and goal attainment aligned with the Effective School Correlates?

The criteria used to select the school district and campuses within the district are as follows:

1. The district was a large urban district that was at least 40% students of color and 40% students of poverty;

2. The campuses had to be successful for a least three years in the state Academic Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) era; not Texas Academic Assessment of Skills (TAAS);
3. The campuses to study are all African-American; all Latino; or a combination of both, with a small percentage of White students;
4. The campuses had also earned awards of distinction beyond a state accountability rating of Recognized or Exemplary.

### *The Theoretical Frameworks*

As stated earlier, the deficit-thinking paradigm was used to provide an understanding of the attitudes, values, beliefs, behaviors, and professional practice of the area superintendent and the principals who work in an ethnically diverse school district. The deficit-thinking paradigm has not been used to analyze the behavior of educators in this context before. The deficit-thinking paradigm has six different prongs: (Valencia, 1997; Foley, 1997; Menchaca, 1997; Valencia and Solorzano; Pearl, 1997; Bourdieu, 1992; Ryan, 1971; Lewis, 1966; Lewis, 1965; Lewis, 1961): blaming the victim; a form of oppression; a model of educability; Heterodoxy and Orthodoxy; a culture of poverty; and cultural and accumulated environmental deficits.

The second lens that this data was analyzed through is the research of the effective school correlates to provide a greater understanding of their behavior, professional practice, the process of school improvement, and strategies used to close the achievement gap. The effective school correlates have not been used in conjunction with the deficit-thinking paradigm to assist in the analysis of the behavior of area

superintendent and principals in their environment as well as a professional context. There are seven correlates of effective schools: (Edmonds, 1980; Edmonds, 1979a; Edmonds, 1982; Edmonds, Comer, Billingsley, 1973; Edmonds & Frederickson, 1979; & Levine & Lezotte, 1990): Safe and Orderly Environment; Climate of High Expectations for Success; Instructional Leadership; Clear and Focused Mission; Opportunity to Learn and Student Time on Task; Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress; Home-School Relations.

### **Data Sources**

The two campuses that were studied were: Thurgood Marshall Learning Community, named a National Demonstration Site in 2001; and Hannibal Learning Community, named a National Demonstration Site in 2002.

The Martin Luther King Independent School District's Learning Communities, located in the East, South, and West part of the city, were originally court-ordered efforts to return disadvantaged, inner-city, students of color to their neighborhood schools and provide quality educational programs with supplementary funds. The Learning Communities represent an alternative to the district's previously attempted vehicle of providing transportation to distant campuses as a remedy for a lack of quality educational opportunities. The concept of the Learning Communities is based upon the philosophy that a history of educational deprivation under conditions of poverty can be overcome. Specifically, the purpose of the Learning Communities is to provide special programs with educational concepts different from those in other schools in the district. Each Learning Community is expected to provide innovative and creative instructional

strategies to accelerate student learning so that the achievement difference between minority and majority students will be narrowed. The target population for this program is all Grades 4-8 neighborhood children in living in the target school's attendance zone. There are 14 intermediate Learning Communities (Grades 4-6) and 2 middle Learning Communities (7-8). Eight Communities are located in the Southern part of the city, 5 in the Western part of the city and 3 in the Eastern part of the city.

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### **Overview of the Findings**

There are two elementary principals whose campuses earned the distinction of being named National Demonstration Sites (DSP) for African and African-American learners by the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE). A demonstration school has effective school leadership at every level including administrators, staff, students, and community and parents. There are organizational structures for practice



and professional growth programs to develop leadership for persons in all of these groups.

A note about Area 10 in general and learning communities in particular is that they are under a district Covenant. Years ago, an insightful superintendent realized that many of the district initiatives, mandates, policies and practices were not having impact with students of color and students of poverty so they became Covenant schools. That means that those schools got more money, plus they were exempt from district initiatives that have not proven to be successful. This philosophy has continued from superintendent to superintendent, but most importantly it has proven to be successful. Another area to highlight is most of the textbooks and programs they use are similar to what is used by most large urban districts in this part of the country, yet they have had greater results. It is critically important that they assess all of their students reading levels so they know how to serve them. The merit pay that the teachers receive for the growth of their students per year is linked to getting an accurate reading level as well as paying teachers to be effective with all students.

The vision that guides MLK ISD and Area 10 is to be the best urban district in the United States. The core beliefs that guide the work that they do:

- We believe that every student can perform at or above grade level and graduate college and workforce ready to compete in the global economy;
- We believe that educators have the most powerful impact on student achievement;
- We believe that educational equity and excellence will eliminate the achievement gap;
- We believe that every student must be educated in a safe, welcoming, effective and innovative learning environment;
- We believe our school district must be a model for sound fiscal responsibility and integrity;

- We believe that engaged parents and guardians impact a student’s academic and personal development and;
- We believe that a supportive community is fundamental to achieving and sustaining our success.

As a result of the core beliefs there are certain commitments that are associated with those beliefs:

- We believe that every student can perform at or above grade level and graduate college and be workforce ready to compete in the global economy; therefore we commit to:
  - Support the learning conditions and provide the resources needed for all students to reach high academic levels.
  - Setting college readiness as the standard pre-K-12 for all students.
- We believe that educators have the most powerful impact on student achievement; therefore we commit to:
  - Support the efforts to recruit, retain and reward highly effective teachers and principals to ensure that students have access to expert instruction.
  - Allocate the resources needed to equip principals and teachers with the skills to provide effective leadership and instruction that results in student achievement.
- We believe that educational equity and excellence will eliminate the achievement gap; therefore we commit to:
  - Provide all students with equal access to a rigorous and challenging academic curriculum
  - Promote an educational system that supports targeted effort toward academically rigorous learning for all students and student groups.
  - Allocate the necessary resources to ensure equitable access to rigorous learning, thus eliminating the achievement gap.
- We believe that every student must be educated in a safe, welcoming, effective and innovative learning environment; therefore we commit to:
  - Provide for safe and secure learning environments that support civility, respect, and academic achievement of all students.
  - Adopt a code of conduct and ensure policies and procedures are followed.
- We believe our school district must be a model for integrity and fiscal responsibility; therefore, we commit to:
  - Support staff training on the ethical practices and the investigation of all reported ethical issues.

- Adopt sound legal and fiscal policies governing the management of the district.
- Require and monitor fiscal controls and hold all staff, vendors and contractors accountable.
- We believe that engaged parents and guardians impact a student’s academic and personal development; therefore we commit to:
  - Support programs that inform and engage parents in the academic and social development of their children (students).
  - Adopt a framework for public school parental choice at the secondary level.
- We believe that a supportive community is fundamental to achieving and sustaining our success; therefore we commit to:
  - Support partnerships with community, business, civic and faith-based organizations for achieving excellence.
  - Engage the community’s support in achieving the district’s vision.

I went to speak with Brenda Walker-Johnson, Area Superintendent of Martin Luther King (MLK), in Area 10 of the district. The forty-three schools she supervises are in the most economically deprived areas of the city and serve more than 23,000 students. Yet, her schools are among the highest performing in the district; many of them have received both state and national recognition. A few years ago, Johnson was inducted into the NABSE Hall of Fame.

As Walker-Johnson spoke, themes emerged throughout her insightful responses. The philosophy that drives the campuses in Area 10 is juxtaposed between the dual lenses of the deficit-thinking paradigm and the effective schools research. In particular this philosophy directly addresses the prong, the process of blaming the victim, the first prong of the deficit-thinking paradigm as well as building on Climate of High Expectations for Success, the second correlate of effective schools.

## **High Expectations Linked to Needs, Data, and Results**

The responses below emerge under the theme of expectations. These responses are viewed through the lenses of first and third prong of the deficit-thinking paradigm, Process of Blaming the Victim and a Model of Educability and the first and fourth correlates, Climate of High Expectations and Clear and Focused Mission.

I think it's more the approach than it is resources, because people always want to think, 'well if only I had.' Well, you really have everything that you need. If you believe that kids of color can learn--which I happen to believe that they can, they can learn as much as anybody else and they can learn to the extent that we have the capacity to teach them. So, [the responsibility] is on our side of the equation.

Walker-Johnson refuses to shift the responsibility for educating kids onto which resources the school possesses, but rather leaves the responsibility solely on the shoulders of the system and the people within it.

You know, everybody says that all kids can learn, but do you really believe that? And if you believe that, then you structure schools and school environments like you believe that kids are the center of everything, and you set a very rigorous and high standard for the kids, because they will reach whatever we put out there for them. They will either go as high or as mediocre, or as low as our expectations are for them, and kids, like dogs, they can sniff all phoniness in a New York minute.

Walker-Johnson doesn't just set high expectations and assume that simply expecting something will make it happen. She puts people in place that truly believe in the mission and have the skills to get the job done.

There are no magic bullets. It is true: if you believe kids can learn and work towards that end, it will happen. If you have doubts about their ability to learn at the optimal levels, trust me, you will get what you believe. We happen to believe in Area 10 that if kids are not learning, then we, the adults, are not doing something right and we need to regroup to get it right. It's just that simple and just that complex.

Walker-Johnson emphasizes the importance of competition in reaching the high expectations set.

I like people who are very, very competitive; they don't like being second to anybody or anything. I like principals who have a great deal of compassion and

caring for kids, that they see any child as if they were they're very own, which means they're going to fight that much harder to make sure those kids get everything that they can get. I like principals who will steal anything from anybody. My principals are thieves. They go to conferences and schools and if they see a good idea they will steal it in a New York minute. So, I like principals who are thieves of knowledge.

Ms. Johnson's leadership philosophy stems from the Normed-Opportunity Paradigm (see chapter 5). She rejects the deficit-thinking paradigm, all six prongs. She also rejects a common refrain heard loudly and often in schools, which is, "I taught it, but the kids didn't get it!" She makes it well known that when children don't learn, it is the adults who are at fault, not students, not parents.

She puts the quality people she hires firmly in charge.

I was a principal; I had no intention of running another school, and I'm certainly not going to run 42 schools, which is why I try to hire the best.

In terms of autonomy, principals have a great deal of latitude, and when I say latitude...and not total autonomy because there are board policies and state laws and all that stuff, that kind of puts them in a box...but to the extent that they are following policy and state law, they can do anything, and I do mean anything, to move campuses.

However, with that autonomy comes tremendous responsibility.

They lose that right when they aren't moving campuses, and then they will have one year for us to walk hand-in-hand together, and if they can't do it then they won't be recommended to come back as a principal in Area 10. And they know it; that's no secret to anybody.

Walker-Johnson points out the urgency of the task of educating kids.

We're in the kid business: that's a precious commodity. We're not the Ford Motor Company; we don't have a recall opportunity to get it right. You've got to get it right the first time with kids.

Children don't have the time to wait for adults to learn their job. If you've lost a whole bunch of kids this year, and I'm giving you the chance to show that that was a fluke year, why would I let you come back a third year to mess up the lives of more kids? Hopefully, the principals take that same tactic with their teachers.

A critical component of rejecting the deficit-thinking paradigm is stating that your students--the clients that you serve--are the most precious commodity that you have. This is demonstrated through having the expectation for principals and teachers that they will serve their populations. Because those that can't serve their population of students know that they will lose the opportunity to do so. Those increased expectations create the sense of urgency needed to close the achievement gap.

### **Outcome Based Caring**

The responses below emerge under the theme of caring. These responses are viewed through the lenses of the second prong of the deficit-thinking paradigm, a form of oppression, and the first correlate of effective schools, Safe and Orderly Schools.

I like folks who stand tall and are very clear about who they are, because if you don't have a sense of self, you can't give a sense of self to kids. Now, I don't ask, 'can you teach children of color, can you teach children of poverty?' I wonder do you fundamentally care about children; do you fundamentally care about yourself? That's what I look for. They know the craft of schooling and care tremendously about the kids and staff. They are competitive, take pride in being number one, and work around-the-clock to be the best. These people are charismatic and have vision, as well as a sense of mission.

Walker-Johnson communicates the most important caring leaders can do for students: take care in who they hire. The best work cannot be done without the best people on hand to do it.

### **Culture of Valued Differences**

The responses below emerge under the theme of valued differences. These responses are viewed through the lenses of the fifth and sixth prongs of the deficit-thinking paradigm, culture of poverty and cultural and accumulated deficits, and the

fourth, fifth, and seventh correlates of effective schools, Clear and Focused Mission, Opportunity to Learn, and Home-School Relations.

Each school is in many ways an oasis to our community, and our principals recognize the value of reaching out to strengthen community ties to help their kids succeed. Students are required to engage in community projects twice a year.

For Walker-Johnson, a culture of valued differences is the answer to teacher retention.

Why would a staff want to go anywhere if you're successful? Success breeds success. People are always talking about, 'oh we've got problems with teacher retention.' The best teacher retention program is success. And though those are probably some of the hardest working faculty that you're going to find, but when you work hard and you see the results of your hard work immediately, you just kind of get caught up in it. They have very little turnover... Yeah, just from the last three years we've noticed we have not had much teacher turnover.

A culture of valued differences is a place people want to work.

In fact, a lot of people try to come back and I have this thing about, well you know, you left the farm. You thought the grass was greener on the other side. No, serious, the last two teachers all the time, 'Ms. Johnson, I want to come back to Area 10,' and I say, 'you do? Well, you were just so anxious to get out.' 'But it's just not the same,' and I say, 'I know!'

A key component of creating that sense of urgency is creating the Culture of Success (see chapter 5) so that the expectation from the people in the organization is the same level or an even greater level of success. As you bring new people into the organization, it helps to know that there are people they can learn from. They deficit-thinking paradigm seems to stem from not having these types of systems in place; therefore, it is easy to fall back on a certain set of beliefs.

### **Parent Trust**

The responses below emerge under the theme of trust. These responses are viewed through the lenses of the fourth prong of the deficit-thinking paradigm,

heterodoxy, orthodoxy and deficit-thinking, and the sixth and seventh correlate of effective schools, Frequent Monitoring and Home-School Relations.

Walker-Johnson is willing to conceptualize parent involvement in a different way.

Yeah, well we don't get caught up with, 'if the parents don't show up then let their children stay home.' That's a fallacious notion to begin with; so they show up, what are you going to do with them? If every parent of every child showed up at the schoolhouse, we wouldn't know what to do with them. We wouldn't, so we need to stop talking about how we want the parents to come.

Walker-Johnson recognizes the contribution parents do make and its value.

What I want parents to do is to before Johnny walks out that door in the morning, say to Johnny, 'I expect you to learn something new this day.' And when Johnny walks out that door I want the parents to say, 'you will respect the adults that you come into contact with on the way to school, during school, and after school.' I want parents to say when Johnny leaves that home that 'you are representative of this home; you will carry yourself with dignity as a representative of this family.' I want parents when Johnny comes home to ask him, 'tell me what you learned new today.' And if Johnny consistently says, 'I ain't learned nothing new,' then that parent needs to have a conversation with the principal. If Johnny comes home every day saying, 'I ain't learning nothing new in your school,' what's the problem?

I want the parents to ensure that Johnny has some space at home, meaning time and a place where Johnny can read – they're got to read something every day whether they have assigned homework or not. They've got homework every day whether its assigned homework or not. That's the kind of parent involvement that I want; we know that will work.

Walker-Johnson clarifies the importance of authentic involvement.

I don't need them to come running up to the schoolhouse. Now, we keep an open door policy, should they want to come to the schoolhouse to assure that Johnny will be a successful student. That's what people keep talking about, 'my parents are not involved,' well, what do you want them to do? 'Well, my parent's just don't come.' Well, what are you going to do with them if they come?

Walker-Johnson discusses the biggest way parents can support the efforts of schools.

[Kids need] a thirst for knowledge—the love of learning from the community. When I was growing up and report cards came out, there were ten folks asking how you did. I don't see the same thing happening today, but more than ever, students



need positive encouragement to do well in school. We need people to be cheerleaders for public education.

Walker-Johnson rejects the deficit-thinking paradigm through her willingness to alter her definition of parental involvement. By allowing herself to embrace a wider view of parent involvement, Walker-Johnson earns the trust of the community by demonstrating her own trust in the parents of her students.

### **Optimal Learning Environments**

The responses below emerge under the theme of environment. These responses are viewed through the lenses of the first and third prong of the deficit-thinking paradigm, blaming the victim and a model of educability, and the third and sixth correlates of effective schools, Instructional Leadership and Frequent Monitoring.

Walker-Johnson looks at the role of leadership in creating an optimal learning environment.

Do we have the capacity to teach kids? It's not whether kids can learn or not, and that's where I spend my time: on the capacity of adults to be effective with kids. That includes principal leaders and teachers as well. Area 10, we have the saying, so goes the principal, so goes the school. You cannot have a good principal with bad leadership; it's just that simple. So, I spend a lot of time in leadership development with principals, making sure, firstly, to pick the very, very best people that I can pick as principals and then do a lot of developing of those leadership skills.

Walker-Johnson also speaks to the importance of teachers in creating that environment.

Secondly, again, on the capacity side of the equation, is looking at teachers; we do a lot of teacher training. The schools do a lot; we do a lot as an area. We don't believe in the training of trainer's model; we bring every teacher in.

She recognizes the importance of collaboration. An individual cannot create the environment alone.

All of the science teachers are here today, each grade level. You can make sure all of your teachers hear the information and receive it, because if you do a trainers' training model they're only getting what somebody else thought they heard and not necessarily the [correct] information. It doesn't work. It's just real simple. It doesn't work, and why people are still doing it is beyond me.

Walker-Johnson acknowledges that having the right people in the building is the first step.

Oh, I like very, very smart people. Dumb people can't help kids. I mean, they really can't. Those folks are mediocre in their own knowledge-base and understanding and capacity. You can't take a child, or anybody, any further than you yourself can go. So, I like really smart people.

Walker-Johnson reveals her method for finding great people.

[I find good teachers and leaders] through conversation, through observation. I kind of raise my own principals. Many of the principals, well maybe most, in Area 10 have come through Area 10. Been working with them, training them...they've been Assistant Principals or Deans or lead reading teachers. So, we kind of like getting our home grown folks, because they know what the expectation is.

Walker-Johnson expects her employees to be just as ferociously committed as she is.

I like workaholics; most of my principals are workaholics; they never go home. To do this job, you need to see it as a mission, and when you are on a mission, there are never enough hours in the day. I had to learn that the hard way, but you need to make time to refresh yourself. You must plan your work and work your plan. When kids come back to school in August, you can't shoot from the hip and see what happens, you need to start planning in June.

Walker-Johnson addresses the role of leadership in keeping good people.

The other thing I'd say to someone in a leadership role is that you have to take care of your people. They need stroking and reinforcement. I hold drawings in meetings and everyone gets so excited that they turn into little kids. It could be Popsicle sticks that I'm giving away, but it gets people energized. They are all people, with all the drama that goes along with being a person. As a leader you are there to pick them up when they need it. You need to take care of your people so they can take care of the students.

Walker-Johnson explains the key to planning.

Be sure to let data help with planning. We'll look at things like teacher absences that may indicate why scores are down. Data can be your best friend or your worst enemy when test scores are printed in the paper. Do yourself a favor and use data in your pre-planning.

She identified principals who work exclusively with students of color and students of poverty. They are given time to develop a toolkit, to ask questions, to develop skill and acumen with this population before they are promoted. They have also been in leadership positions where they can lead, teach, and guide. She discusses expectations and the type of training they provide teachers so that they will be equipped to accomplish their mission.

### **Opportunity to Learn**

The responses below emerge under the theme of opportunity. These responses are viewed through the lenses of the third prong of the deficit-thinking paradigm, a model of educability, and the second and third correlate of effective schools, Climate of High Expectations and Instructional Leadership.

School leaders need a burning desire for the well being of kids, and too often, we let too many kids just get by. Whether you're at the top or bottom, you'll always have another mountain to climb. Struggling schools need to meet AYP. Successful schools will want to win Blue Ribbon awards. It's our commitment to the mission of education that will allow us to reach the top of each mountain. Thomas Jefferson said, 'we do not have democracy without educated people.' The democracy we enjoy is precious, but fragile. The very survival of this thing called America depends on how we succeed in, and serve, public education.

Walker-Johnson talks about the importance of leadership in schools.

It really comes down to...moving schools really comes down to leadership. You cannot get away from leadership. Faculties can overcome a bad principal or bad leadership for maybe one or two years. They can coast on the coattails and work of a previous good principal, but a bad principal will destroy a school. Give it two years and it's gone. So, it comes down to leadership. It's just as I said in a speech

one year, 'it's just that simple and it's just that complex.' I hang my hat on leadership; I don't fool with programs because everybody's got a program to sell. Everybody's got to measure up and whatever else is out there: go make all the difference they want.

The philosophy that Ms. Walker-Johnson puts forth is direct, but refreshing. You know where you stand with her. You know that there is a clear sense of urgency, and high expectations that are linked to results.

After multiple visits to see Ms. Walker-Johnson, I went to visit all five Learning Communities. I met all of the current principals as well as the previous principals who were still in the area, who lead these campuses now. At the time, only two of the principals were still on their campus when it was named a DSP. Now no principal still remains on their campus. Ms. Walker-Johnson moved the other principals to campuses that had a greater need for their leadership acumen in taking a low performing campus with few systems to become a high performing campus with many systems. Visiting these campuses that were filled with African American educators, parents, and students inspired me. I felt safe visiting some of the most impoverished communities that this part of the country offered. Before going in, just looking at these schools from the outside, you would be surprised that they were rich environments that had optimal learning taking place. All of the schools were built in the late 50's and early 60's, except for the oldest which was built in 1947. The schools had the old window air conditioning units.

One school was right across the street from a crack house whose residents were on the corner during my first visit. When the principal came to welcome me to the building, she spoke to all three gentlemen, she knew their names and they knew her. She

introduced me to them, told them that I was conducting a study on the campus and that I was an important man. Two of the men put down their 40's (Old English Malt Liquor/beer) to shake my hand and to welcome me to the school. As I visited other campuses--one next to the poorest housing project in the city that only served single mothers and their children, to the other that was right next to the park where drugs deals went on 24 hours a day—I was touched and inspired despite the troubling exteriors of these institutions. The reason I highlight these things is to provide a picture of the communities these schools are in before I share some of the principals' insights about their schools and the communities that they serve, live in, and work in. I always felt safe; I was enriched and stirred by what I saw as I conducted this research. As you read through the following passages you will see the different themes that emerged bolded as I group what I learned from these highly effective campus leaders.

I went in to my research on these campuses expecting to find that because of the leadership provided by Walker-Johnson, the ability, talents, and success of the campus leaders that Area 10 would be free of deficit-thinking, which unfortunately was not the case. These campuses are not free of deficit-thinking, nor are they free of educators who sometimes respond to the same stereotypes, caricatures, or groupthink, but the caveat to this is that some of these deficit-thinking attitudes, values, and beliefs did not seem to have a significant impact on their behavior and professional practice. The principals may make statements that some—including this researcher as well as other readers—may classify as deficit, but I found no evidence that these views were ever communicated to students and parents, neither verbally nor through their actions and practices.

The principals automatically begin to echo similar leadership sentiments as their area superintendent Walker-Johnson. They both discuss a no excuses attitude; they are both aware of how social issues affect the achievement gap, which impacts student learning. They are both also quick to highlight their faculty/staff, their parents, their communities, and how they see their students as their most precious commodities. I found it quite interesting that when the principals had the opportunity to discuss themselves; they instead took the time to discuss their faculty. I asked the principals to tell me about why they believed that they have had the success that they have had. I also asked them to tell me more about what they do with their literacy and numeracy programs.

### **Example of Deficit-Thinking of Principal #2**

When we have dinners and things, we show them the other side of the street to keep them from stealing our cars or doing something.

Prior to the principal making this statement, I'd been lulled into believing that these professionals truly lacked deficit-thinking. I had begun to think there could truly be people with a total absence of deficit-thinking. This statement stunned me, but ultimately made me realize that we all have some deficit-thinking under which we function every day, regardless of how learned, how experienced, how well meaning we may be. The difference between these professionals and the masses is that these principals have found a way to function in a way that best serves kids in spite of any deficit-thinking they may be laboring under.

## Conclusions

I think what struck me the most about the principals that I met, as well as the two that I studied is that they were consummate leaders. They were the actual embodiment of leadership and success. When I listen to them speak, watched them interact with their faculty, their staff, or the students, I was inspired. I wanted to come to work for them or work for the Area Superintendent Walker-Johnson. The work that is being done in Area 10 is outstanding.

I also asked Principal #1 about the area superintendent in Area 10 of Martin Luther King (MLK) Independent School District, Brenda Walker-Johnson. The question I really wanted him to answer was with the prevalence of deficit-thinking--which permeates most educational practice--why did he believe that Brenda Walker-Johnson was successful where so many other leaders have failed. I also wanted to know what leadership traits, behaviors, and strategies that she possesses that allow her to overcome the deficit-thinking paradigm. He responded that Walker-Johnson's expectations are very clear. "She expects results and she doesn't expect excuses. She believes children can learn and she expects you to believe it too. She sees a structured program as being central." He explained that knowing what to expect from Walker-Johnson was a key part of her success. "So I know if I'm at her school teaching, I can't be distracted while my kids are in this classroom. She don't harbor foolishness. You know where you stand." He also talked about how focused Walker-Johnson is. "They get resources, like you said, but they're not any kind of resources. [They've] been determined through some kind of needs assessment [and] are focused on what happens in the teaching/learning experience." He

pointed out her relations between the home and school. “She’s got some relationships with the external community that most people in the district don’t have. People support her consistently.” The other point he made about Walker-Johnson was that her commitment to getting the job done outweighs any personal issues. “You know that if you don’t meet your goals, you could be the greatest person in the world, but she’s going to question whether or not you need to be over there. And it’s not personal.”

I really thought a lot about what Principal #1 was saying about Brenda Walker-Johnson. She had high standards; she had measurable, observable expectations; and she also expected principals to be leaders. She had high expectations; she also had a plan that involved the principals, teachers, and students. He made it clear that the unit of analysis in her mind was the child.

Principal #1’s analysis of Walker-Johnson reminded me of the conclusions Collins (2001) presented in *Good to Great* about Level 5 leaders. Collins describes Level 5 leaders as people who are steeped in getting the right people on board. They concern themselves with having the right staff rather than the right mission. They understand that without the right people, nothing can be accomplished. They are also immersed in the brutal facts. They are not afraid to confront the truth no matter how unpleasant. The leaders cultivate a culture of discipline, which means hierarchy takes a backseat because the people working for you are self-disciplined. Level 5 leaders are specific and selective about their resources, especially technology. And they do not rely on their resources to determine their greatness. These leaders understand that greatness is not achieved through a dramatic moment, but rather it is like “relentlessly pushing a giant heavy flywheel in



one direction, turn upon turn, building momentum until a point of breakthrough and beyond.” Collins explained that Level 5 leaders are not enormous personalities; they “about ferocious resolve, an almost stoic determination to do whatever needs to be done.” He describes these people are “fanatically driven, infected with an incurable need to produce results. They will sell the mills or fire their brother if that’s what it takes.”

And he exerts the Hedgehog Concept, which refers to “transcending the curse of competence.” The Hedgehog Concept comes from the Isaiah Berlin essay “The Hedgehog and the Fox.” The fox is sleek and eye-catching. He is busy, circling and reformulating his attack. The fox is good at many things, but his thinking is diffused and unfocused. The hedgehog is dowdy and unassuming. He is focused and consistent. The hedgehog is very good at one thing and he is organized in his thought. He is focused and “reduces all challenges and dilemmas to simple ideas.” They are about simplicity. And in the battle between the fox and the hedgehog, the hedgehog will always win. The hedgehog will focus on a complex problem and devise a simple solution, which serves as the mission. By staying focused on a mission and staying the course, the hedgehog excels. Collins provided the contrast between Walgreens, a hedgehog company, and Eckerd’s, a fox company. Walgreens focused on a single mission: convenience and high-profit return. Walgreen clustered stores so that no one would need to go very far to reach their stores. Their approach to building stores was focused and consistent. Eckerd’s approach to opening stores was a hodgepodge. Eckerd’s diffused their energy, even opening a video market. Walgreens has grown to a sustained, great company using their very focused, simple approach. Collins broke it down saying, “all the good-to-great

companies attained a very simple concept that they used as a frame of reference for all their decisions and this understanding coincided with breakthrough results.”

### **Summary**

The time that I was able to spend with Brenda Walker-Johnson was outstanding because she embodies success. She is an excellent leader, a direct communicator; she will let you know where she stands on the important issues of the education of children. The organization is well run; she provides the vision and the mission for her principals. I learned a tremendous amount from the time that I was able to spend with her. The opportunity to visit all of the (DSP) sites, to meet the principals, and the two that were able to participate in the study was an incredible learning experience.

A pattern emerged throughout this research regarding the importance of quality leadership, the traits of successful school leaders for students of color and poverty, and the importance of defeating deficit-thinking. These successful schools shared obvious traits: the values leadership espoused were evident throughout the building; leadership advocated a no excuses attitude; data drove decision-making; relationships framed everything else; all had strong literacy and numeracy programs; and above all, the campuses all embraced a competitive attitude.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

“There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle than to initiate a new world order of things” (Machiavelli, 1908).

“We can't solve problems using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them” (Einstein, 1993).

#### Introduction

Despite all of the focus, research, and resources aimed at solving the achievement gap, its presence remains. Clearly, this is the largest problem we face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Deficit-thinking has long been used to explain away the achievement gap and remove the responsibility from the system and the educators within in it. Singleton and Linton (2006) further explain that when educators place the blame outwardly, they avoid “difficult self-assessment and [taking] responsibility.”

However, the existence of schools consistently successful with students typically seen as “hard to educate” calls that entire line of thinking into question. There must be a shift in the questions we ask. Rather than asking “why can't these students learn?” we must ask “why can't we teach these students?” The term “hard to educate” is appropriate because the research indicates one of the factors critical to their success is a relationship with their teacher. A relationship between the teacher and the student requires authenticity on the part of the teacher. Most people aren't truly authentic and it's not a trait you can simply adopt tomorrow. Authenticity isn't a trait that's especially valued in dominant society. On the contrary, we're typically encouraged to hide our true selves and assume a more acceptable public persona. Zaltz (2003) says, “educators must learn to

examine their own behaviour and take responsibility for ensuring that it is authentic. This will contribute to the quality of the educational process, and to positive social change.”

Duncan-Andrade (2006a) describes the best teachers with students of color and students of poverty as “They risk deep emotional involvement with the great majority of their students and they are sometimes hurt because of those investments. The depth of their relationships with students allows them to challenge students and get notable effort and achievement.”

The research aimed to examine the practices of those who are successful teaching students, who were they at other schools they would in all likelihood be students with academic gaps. The practices of these educators clearly outlined a common set of beliefs, which informed their practices. A clear pattern emerged among these professionals, a pattern which appears to be the basis of their success with students of color and students of poverty.

### **Creating Cultures of Success for Students of Color and Students of Poverty**

After I completed my study of the (DSP) sites, I was reviewing my transcripts, field notes, reflections, and observations as I was attempting to write and report the findings. As I was doing this I remembered an exercise and a discussion that we had during my first year in the doctoral program at UT. We were discussing school districts and superintendents, and the belief that if superintendents were people who had earned a doctoral degree, had comparable training and ability, and resources, why were urban districts not more successful? Logic would indicate that with all this training and resources, these districts should be infinitely successful. As my group continued this

discussion, I asked if the UT football team would win a national championship before all of us graduated. I said that we could extrapolate this discussion that we were having about superintendents to division I football coaches. The point I was making was that the same logic would indicate that Coach Mack Brown should have the same opportunity to win a championship as Oklahoma (OU) head football coach, Bob Stoops. We discussed that both UT and OU had comparable head coaches, comparable facilities, comparable staffs, comparable athletes and players, so if all of this was true, why had UT not won a championship since 1970 at the time that this discussion took place and of course by our same logic why were some urban superintendents successful why others were not?

#### *Six Prongs of Creating Cultures of Success*

As I conducted my visits as well as while trying to summarize my results I knew that there were many things that were different about these schools than the many others that I encountered. That conversation continued to resonate with me. The more I reviewed the notes I realized that the sites had a certain culture that allowed for as well as created success for students of color and students of poverty. Hence the name Creating Cultures of Success for Students of Color and Students of Poverty. There are six prongs that make-up Creating Cultures of Success for Students of Color and Students of Poverty.

#### *High Expectations Linked to Needs, Data, and Results*

This first prong is the foundation that everything is based on. As the change began in Area 10 and the schools in Area 10 its basis was in this. The first prong is High Expectations Linked to Needs, Data, and Results--all members of the learning

community (administrators, teachers, students, parents) create accountability to one another so the expectations can be linked to actual measurable, observable outcomes. A community that values learning realizes by working together we can solve any problem. Meier (2002) statement supports Walker-Johnson's guiding principle, "the question is not, is it possible to educate all children well? But rather, do we want to do it badly enough?" This is a critical point because the unit of analysis for the school--as well as the success of the school--is student success. As Collins (2001) posits, "Leadership is about vision. But leadership is equally about creating a climate where the truth is heard about the brutal facts confronted." An important point to note is that student success as well as teacher effectiveness is linked to a measurable, observable outcomes.

### *Outcome Based Caring*

The second prong of Creating Cultures of Success is Outcome Based Caring-- authentic caring versus aesthetic caring, which involves motivational displacement. Motivational displacement involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference and into the other person's. In determining the appropriate caring response, the one-caring does not give the cared for what she would want were she in his situation, but attempts to feel what the cared for feels in order to discern what he himself would want. The one caring takes into consideration the other's wants, desires, and goals, which she apprehended as a result of her receptivity, and reflects upon both his objective needs and what he expects of her (Valenzuela, 1999; Noddings, 1984, Goldstein, 1999). The leader, principals, faculty and staff, love the students that they work with. They accept their students where they are; they understand what they need so they provide it. They don't

believe having to do these things is beneath them; they understand their students have the ability to be successful. The key is that support in Area 10 looks different than it does in other schools.

### *Critical Literacy and Critical Numeracy*

The third prong of Creating Cultures of Success is Critical Literacy and Critical Numeracy—at the primary level, placing an emphasis on literacy that continues to the elementary level, to the intermediate level, through the secondary level. This begins to help close the already existing achievement gap present when non middle or upper class children enter kindergarten. There teachers successfully support their students during literacy instruction by linking students' previous contributions to new knowledge. Focusing on literacy skills is key to student success across their academic experience. "Underdeveloped literacy skills are the number one reason why students are retained, assigned to special education, given long-term remedial services, and why they fail to graduate from high school" (Ferrandino & Tirozzi, 2004, as cited in Schmoker, 2007, p.488). The need for literacy skills doesn't end once students exit school. "Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives" (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 99). Focusing on literacy skills is one of the most valuable things teachers can do for today's students. As Odden & Kelley (2002) write, "effective teaching is quite different from the teaching that is typically found in most classrooms." That is what I observed in Area 10 time and time again: effective teaching.

### *Culture of Valued Differences*

The fourth prong of Creating Cultures of Success is a Culture of Valued Differences--developing the cultural competencies of teachers, staff, and administrators. That includes more than race and shared ancestry, but refers also to beliefs, ways of communicating, attitudes, values and behavioral norms shared by culture (Keefe, 1992; Knight, Bernal, Garza, & Cota, 1993). A key point to note is that ethnic identity has been found to affect goals set, regulate behavior, serve as a reference point for evaluating oneself, and help establish self-understanding, and self-esteem (Porter & Washington, 1993).

Clearly, this is a key point in the success in Area 10: the fact that the people in the Area have a certain skill set, and it is exactly that: a skill set. The knowledge that principals, faculty, and staff have, the belief, the attitude, the work ethic, the selflessness and the compassion, as well as the ability to convey critical concepts in the classroom to ensure that students will learn.

### *Parent Trust*

The fifth prong of Creating a Culture of Success is Parent Trust--parents and community trust versus how schools would define involvement. Parent involvement looks very different in Area 10, but it is there. Schools meet with parents at home, churches, football and basketball games; they wash clothes at school for students as well as provide meals. The critical component is once parents and the community know their



students are psychologically safe, they will provide you their blessing to teach their children and move them forward.

The prevailing erroneous belief that more than anything else a student's family socio-economic status and cultural background will predict educational outcomes (Payne, 1995; Jencks et al., 1972; Moynihan, 1965; Coleman et al., 1966) instead of the schools and teachers response to family background, which is in fact the principal determinant of student performance (Edmonds, 1980, 1982; Edmonds, Comer, Billingsley, 1973). This prong is an extremely important prong because of the amount of debate that parent involvement generates in educational circles. I like the approach of Walker-Johnson, as well as her principals in Area 10. They discussed this time and time again as the schools went from low performing schools to Recognized, to Exemplary, to Title I award winner, to Blue Ribbon winner, to finally NASBE (DSP) sites. The parents' relationship with the schools changed, not to say they spent anymore time there than before, but they felt differently about the competence of the certified, licensed professionals in the building. The covenant of broken trust had been repaired. That is the parent interest/involvement that Brenda Walker-Johnson wants as well as demands.

### *Optimal Learning Environments*

The sixth and final prong of Creating a Culture of Success is Optimal Learning Environments--developing culturally resonant instructional strategies linked to learning modalities to create optimal learning. This is defined as creating equity; all children should have an intellectually challenging education, including the necessary human and material resources. Agency—education should support students' ability to act on and

change personal conditions and social injustice. Cultural relevance—educators should use students’ to support academic success, help students create meaning, develop sociopolitical consciousness, and challenge unjust conditions. Critical literacy—students’ need tools to examine knowledge and their own experience critically and to analyze relationships between ideas and socio-historical contexts (Lipman, 2004).

This prong is an important prong because it builds on the previous five, but more importantly it is the basis upon which all other critical factors are built. If you cannot communicate to the student of color and the student of poverty that you value them, that you know their needs and are trying to meet them, and that you value their background and milieu, then nothing else matters. You will never build a covenant of trust with the student if you have no real understanding of this:

“They say I got to learn, but nobody’s there to teach me,  
If they can’t understand it, how can they reach me?  
I guess they can’t; I guess they won’t; I guess they front;  
That’s why I know my life is out of luck, fool.”  
--Coolio, “Gangsta’s Paradise”

You’re not going to get the buy-in from the student, which ultimately means nothing else you do really matters. The most competent, creative, innovative teacher in the building will be ineffective with students of color and students of poverty if she cannot convey this to the student. It is the basis upon which the relationship is built. That relationship is key to opening the educational potential of the student. Despite their best intentions, skill, acumen, and desire, if there is no understanding of this basic principle, the totality of a teachers’ or administrators’ toolkit will be as insignificant as a boat on dry land.

## **The Labyrinth of Solitude for Students of Color and Students of Poverty**

The thing that Walker-Johnson as well as her principals' impressed upon me as I conducted my study was that there were a set of behaviors, a set of beliefs, an analysis of current operating systems, a clear mission, a clear vision, and an organizational set of behaviors, norms, and protocols that must be present when trying to transform a school, an area of a district, or the entire district from a low performing or underperforming system to high performing one.

### *The History Behind the Creation of the Term*

I am a student of Greek and Roman history. As I thought about how to convey the information that was shared with me I thought of two Greek myths. The first story that I thought about was the story of Sisyphus in Greek mythology, son of Aeolus and founder and king of Corinth (Camus, 1991). Sisyphus was renowned for his cunning; he was said to have outwitted even Death. For his disrespect to Zeus, he was condemned to eternal punishment in Tartarus (Camus, 1991). There he eternally pushed a heavy rock to the top of a steep hill, where it would always roll down again (Camus, 1991). The reason that this visual is important is because when students fail in low performing schools, if there is no diagnosis of why they failed--or if that diagnosis is inaccurate--often times the school would offer more of the same. Walker-Johnson told me that when she came to MLK, when students failed they were often double blocked at the high school or made to repeat the grade at the elementary or middle school level. Hence, there he eternally

pushed a heavy rock to the top of a steep hill, where it would always roll down again (Camus, 1991).

The second Greek myth that came to mind was the story of Theseus and the Minotaur. In Greek mythology, the Labyrinth was an elaborate structure designed and built by the legendary artificer, Daedalus, for King Minos of Crete at Knossos (Camus, 1991). Its function was to hold the Minotaur, a creature that was half-man and half-bull and was eventually killed by the Athenian hero, Theseus (Camus, 1991). Daedalus, had made the Labyrinth so cunningly that he himself could barely escape it after he built it. Theseus was aided by Ariadne, who provided him with a fateful thread (Camus, 1991). The term labyrinth is often used interchangeably with maze, but modern scholars of the subject use a stricter definition. For them, a maze is a tour puzzle, in the form of a complex branching passage with choices of path and direction (Camus, 1991). A labyrinth has an unambiguous through-route to the center and back and is not designed to be difficult to navigate (Camus, 1991). Even though the labyrinth was not designed to be difficult to navigate, each year twenty men attempted to slay the Minotaur so that ten maidens would not have to be sacrificed. This went on for years. It wasn't until Theseus was able to slay the beast that this reign of terror ended. However, he was only able to navigate the labyrinth with the help of Ariadne. He didn't succeed alone (Camus, 1991).

The reason that this myth sprang to mind is that students of color and students of poverty are attempting to navigate schools that have been normed by the dominant culture, based on middle class norms. If you have not been socialized or don't have the right toolkit (thread) or the right guide (Ariadne) then you will run right into the Minotaur

(standardized tests, zero tolerance policies, cultural incongruence) which means you can't successfully navigate the labyrinth (graduation, pass the state standardized tests, take, pass IB/AP courses and exams to earn college credit), but for many of these students they feel they make this journey alone: hence the name, the Labyrinth of Solitude.

*The Reality of the Labyrinth of Solitude*

For students of the dominant class, the same system isn't a labyrinth at all. The system is a clear pattern with predictable outcomes because the system operates based on their own cultural norms. They don't need anyone to help them navigate it, because it's an extremely familiar way of interacting and communicating for those students. Those students possess cultural capital that can easily be spent in the system. For students of color and students of poverty, the same system is like being dropped in a foreign country with no map, no local currency, and no ability to speak the language. The continued existence of the systems we use in schools employs deficit-thinking because when students aren't successful, we bemoan their lack of responsibility—evidenced by the fact that they didn't use the systems in place—and the lack of parental caring—also evidenced by the fact that the parents didn't come in and walk the steps of the system. We never stop to address the fact that the system itself isn't always conducive to the culture of our parents or students. I spoke with a parent who couldn't register her child for school in a new district because the hours of registration were nine a.m. to eleven a.m. and one p.m. to four p.m. The school was closed from eleven a.m. to one p.m. for lunch. This woman could only come during her lunch hour. Despite her explanation to the school, no exception was made for this parent. The school staff seemed baffled by her

request and shook their heads when she explained she couldn't come in during the scheduled hours. How often do we as educators set up systems like this one and then demonize the parents who can't come in and meet their child's needs because of the way we've set up the system?

### *The Six Conditions*

There are six existing conditions that make up the Labyrinth of Solitude for Students of Color and Students of Poverty, which is the exact opposite of Creating Cultures of Success for Students of Color and Students of Poverty. These conditions would make it quite difficult, if not impossible for a campus or district to move from a low performing system into a high performing one.

#### *Lack of Diversity of Instructional Practice*

The first existing condition is Lack of Diversity of Instructional Practice-- Standardization of monocultural instructional practices as best practices for all students. The school runs on middle and upper middle class values, norms, and mores. The cultural capital, social capital and cultural repertoire sometimes are not inclusive for the cultural, ethnic, racial, linguistic, gender, and social economic groups that populate the school. Schools, as well as their communities, in all their complexity—their failings, inadequacies, strong points, superb and weak teachers, ethical commitments to collective uplift, their energy, demoralization, courage, potential, and setbacks—were blended, homogenized, and reduced to a stanine score and a narrow business model of success or failure (Lipman, 2004). This condition really can be reduced to a lack of diversity of thought or group think. This correlates to the deficit-thinking paradigm with the first,

third, and fourth prongs: the process blame the victim, a model of educability, and heterodoxy, orthodoxy, and deficit-thinking.

#### *Test-Focused*

The second condition is Test Focused--Emphasis on state standardized tests and district benchmarks becomes the instructional focus so students are discussed in binary terms: students who will pass the test and students who will fail the test. It is what Lipman (2004) calls the technical rationality and efficiency, where educational processes are standardized by central office administrators, centrally prescribed, and scripted by the district assessment center, and subject to accounting measures are substituted for the complex ethical and social processes of education. This is lived through test-prep drills, educational triage, and semi-scripted curricula (Lipman, 2004). In MLK ISD this had become the prescribed method of intervention in the low performing school. This correlates with the deficit-thinking paradigm with the second prong: a form of oppression.

#### *Test Tunnel Vision*

The third existing condition is Test Tunnel Vision-- there is no real academic focus on the achievement gap, skill gaps and skill deficits in the areas of literacy and numeracy, only the standardized test achievement gap meaning students who pass versus students who fail as well as how close are they to the passing standard. There is no real focus on the actual achievement gap; there is no effort to build skill and conceptual development in the areas of literacy and numeracy. Most standardized tests assess skills or basic knowledge (Valencia, 1991; Valencia, 1997). A lack of authentic learning

experiences that will lead to advanced educational opportunities that will impact the material conditions of their lives. Yet, Walker-Johnson told me MLK ISD was committed to this discursive practice, which is a set of interlocking beliefs and congruent practices that work to maintain a particular outlook about an idea or method (Foucault, 1972, English, 2002). This correlates with the deficit-thinking paradigm with the second prong: a form of oppression.

#### *Narrow Definition of Parent Involvement*

The fourth existing condition is A Narrow Definition of Parent Involvement-- Parent involvement as defined by (Epstein, 1991) is six types of involvement models, which characterizes parents support as defined by the middle and upper class norms. That eliminates many parents of different ethnic, cultural, economic experiences. She describes the six types of involvement as: Parenting, which is assisting families with the activities surrounding child-rearing; Communicating, which refers to communicating with parents about programs through schools and progress of students; Volunteering, which involves recruitment and training so that parents can volunteer to support school programs; Learning at Home, which refers to the behaviors that take place at home that support schoolwork; and Decision Making, which describes families participating in school decisions rather than simply adjusting to those decisions.

The problems with these descriptions in a place like Area 10 of MLK ISD is that their parent population is not middle class; they are poor, largely not married--single mothers and grandmothers--and many of the mothers are under the age of thirty. Their involvement looks quite different yet it has not been acknowledged district wide.



However, it has been acknowledged and is appreciated by the faculty, staff, and administrators of Area 10. This correlates with the deficit-thinking paradigm with the first, fifth and sixth prongs: the process of blaming the victim, the culture of poverty, and cultural and accumulated environmental deficits.

#### *Lack of Meaningful Monitoring System*

The fifth existing condition is Lack of Meaningful Monitoring Systems--an over emphasis on technical efficiency to address the academic, social, and psychological needs of all students which creates the policies that promote a panoptic order of intense monitoring and surveillance (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Often the monitoring systems that are put in place are not monitoring behaviors that directly impact student achievement. Central office administrators monitor principals; principals monitor teachers; teachers and staff monitor students and feel the need to monitor their students parents. It is important to be clear that this is not a policy that promotes engaged public attention to the inequality in the system; nor is it a policy that encourages collective examination of the problems in public schools. Top-down accountability also shifts responsibility for the failure of public education from the state to individuals (Lipman, 2004; Katz, 2001). This correlates with the deficit-thinking paradigm with the fourth prong: heterodoxy, orthodoxy, and deficit-thinking.

#### *Overvaluing of Conformity*

The sixth existing condition is The Overvaluing of Conformity--a lack of true attention and acknowledgement of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, socio-economic differences of students. The prioritizing of intellectual resources in the information society means

that cultural factors have great importance...As a consequence of the dual model of society, education...is becoming an increasingly important criterion for determining who joins which group. The educational curriculum, therefore, has become a factor in the process of social dualization, the selection of the fittest (Flecha, 1999). In 2008, the accountability system has become more rigorous at the state and federal level, as it now includes all sub groups to now include African American, Latino, White, Asian, Economically disadvantaged, English Language Learners, Special education students, and is now looking at how students are performing by gender. It becomes critically important to consider all of these groups as districts develop their student interventions. This correlates with the deficit-thinking paradigm with the first, third, and fourth prongs: the process of blaming the victim, a model of educability, and heterodoxy, orthodoxy, and deficit-thinking.

### **Normed-Opportunity Paradigm**

The difference between leaders like Walker-Johnson, who are successful with high populations of students of color and students of poverty, and other school leaders, whose at-risk students demonstrate markedly less success is the employment of what I call the Normed-Opportunity Paradigm. The Normed-Opportunity Paradigm refers to the belief system that students of color and students from homes of poverty do not in fact harbor inherent deficits that cause them to be unteachable or that limit their success; this is completely opposite to the deficit-thinking paradigm. Instead, people who embrace the Normed-Opportunity Paradigm recognize that the difference between the performance of students of color and students and poverty and students of the dominant culture in terms

of their educational achievement is merely a lack of experiences common to the dominant class. Additionally, these educators realize that these students possess a set of experiences that the dominant class do not possess and this unique experience base does in fact have benefits and can in fact inform and serve the student through critical thinking skills and problem solving ability.

Educators tend to address their classes while looking through a lens of assumed experiences and norms. This set of assumed experiences and norms is that of the dominant class: middle class, White America. The problem arises when the teacher has students in her classroom for whom these experiences are not the norm. These students have a completely different set of standards and customs in their community and family. When the teacher assigns work or teaches a concept that rests upon the foundation of this assumed set of experiences, a divergence appears: the student cannot meet the expectations of the assignment or cannot grasp the concept because they lack context. Yet the teacher continues to function as though the student knows precisely to what the teacher is referring, never considering the vast differences in the experience base of the student and the teacher, or the dominant group at large. Additionally, the student will likely either not consistently or rarely demonstrate their true academic potential when in the dominant group normed classroom, where they can never feel at ease. They operate in a continual state of disquiet and fear. It's absurd to think that anyone could truly demonstrate their ability or learn at optimal levels in such an environment.

Educators claim to *know* a student's background, but they don't internalize what that truly means. They discuss the student's one-parent background, but never stop to

process all the ways this makes the student's bank of experiences wholly different from their classmates. All the while, the teacher continues to hold the student responsible for not understanding the concepts based upon shared knowledge of an assumed set of experiences or not performing the assignment to the expectations based upon the response of someone with the same assumed set of experiences. A student from a single parent home, for example, has a completely different view of the world. Dinnertime looks very different than the student from the dominant culture's home. The expectations in the home are likely vastly different in terms of the responsibilities the student shoulders at home to assist her family. The amount of time devoted to the student by the parent is likely much less, not because of a lack of caring or concern, but a sheer lack of resources.

The student may come to school on equal educational footing with their peers and may perhaps be unaware of the differences between herself and her classmates. However, over time the educational system communicates a clear message that not only is the student quite different than their dominant group peers, they are lacking and inferior. The differences are announced to the student in numerous ways. These announcements are for the most part subtle--and unintentional on the part of the educator--but pronounced to the student themselves. The perennial "What I did on my summer vacation" essays are a perfect example. The assignment itself assumes an entire set of norms: parents with time off and disposable income. Each September brings a fresh opportunity for embarrassment, shame, and agitation for poor students in classrooms across the country. When the student's peers all write similar essays about trips and rich experiences, and

the student from a home of poverty must write that they babysat their siblings all summer while their single mother worked all day, a clear delineation is made for the student.

Each time a project is assigned and the students from the dominant group complete the work with a parent watching over them, assisting them, gathering materials for them, and then the projects are hung alongside the student from a home of poverty, whose mother couldn't sit beside the student to guide the work and offer assistance and who perhaps couldn't gather the materials for the student, a blatant difference is publicized right there in the hallway.

Additionally, judgments are often made about the student's home culture through statements and policies put forth by the teacher. For the student, this experience doesn't end with public school. When an instructor announces that the group is going to establish group norms and one of those norms is, for example, raising your hand before you speak, the instructor is making a judgment about the communication style of the student's home. When the student is chastised for not observing the norm—usually because the student is attempting to contribute to the discussion with enthusiasm and passion—the instructor is communicating her disapproval of the student's cultural norms. I spoke to a teacher, whose background is that of being a student of poverty. She spoke about the frustration of being the student in the room who is constantly being reminded of the group norms. “Really, I just want to tell the ‘group’ that maybe they need to get used to my norms and they wouldn't *need* to raise their hand to speak. They could just jump in like I do. It's like I am constantly penalized because I am more assertive, more excited, and more comfortable speaking in a group than my peers are.” As educators, we communicate the

inadequacy of anyone whose norms are different from the dominant group in a myriad of ways.

Although educators pretend not to notice and students from the dominant group may politely avoid commenting, the difference is clear to the student from a home of poverty. And rather than process the true reality of the student's home life, educators instead assume the parent doesn't care about the child's education and that the child simply doesn't care enough about the assignment to do better work.

When teachers introduce a new concept using a frame of reference they assume everyone in the room shares (assumed experiences and norms), the student without those experiences lacks the context to fully grasp the new information. When an educator presents new information and ties it to something they believe to be familiar to their students, they alienate the students for whom these experiences are not a norm. For example, a teacher explains something by using the example of 'daddy coming home with his briefcase,' thinking she is using a touchstone. The student who lacks these Normed-Opportunities is puzzled and takes longer to catch onto the new material. Yet the educator rarely realizes the reason the student is struggling. Or if this fact does occur to the teacher, it only causes them to see the student from a deficit viewpoint. No student has the same life or educational experience; this is not to be viewed as yet another difference or excuse or label to be used. This is really to begin to understand how unique it is to educate students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century versus the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This cycle grows from the Deficit-Thinking Paradigm. A person operating under the Normed-Opportunity Paradigm, however, recognizes that what looks like deficits to

others are really that everyone's life experience is unique. It has been common place to assume that even though districts as well as the school that reside in them discuss the increasing diversity in terms of ethnic, racial, and socio-economically, but very few have realized what this means, so when there are differences, many are assumed or presumed to be deficits. A Normed-Opportunity Paradigm Thinker realizes that it is time to really develop cultural competencies that highlight the various types of differences that students in 2009 and beyond will bring to the schoolhouse. It is time for educators to accept that everyone has a set of challenges to carry, not just the obvious challenges of the students of color and students of poverty. The very students that we dismiss as being 'fine' also have challenges to overcome. Further, we as educators have a job: to educate *all* children. How we feel about the background, norms, values, and challenges of those students is irrelevant. If we've been called to teach, then we must take our charge seriously. It is time to roll up our sleeves and begin the business of truly educating all students. I believe this piece by Walker (2004) really illustrates this point:

She spoke slowly, her voice coated with the weight of the truth. "Briley, life is simple. There hain't no mystery a'tall. Your job is carry your basket. Now some folk's baskets are right purty, all shiny and new looking, small and easy to carry. Not nobody I knowed, but they's some people whose baskets are like that. Most folks have an odd shaped basket: heavy, awkward to carry, a burden. Don't matter. Your job to carry it just the same. You got to keep on walking with that basket. You cain't stop for no reason, you hear? You just keep walking. You go on and cry a little if you need to. Hell, Briley, scream and yell if that makes it lighter for a minute. But you cain't stop walking and you cain't put that basket down neither. You put that basket down, girl, you won't never pick it back up. It'll seem too heavy fer you to carry if you do that. You can walk slower. You can walk beside somebody else carrying their basket, makes it a whole lot less lonely on a body, that's fer sure. But either way: you got a basket to carry, just like everybody else. Cain't nobody carry it fer you."

Briley studied Axie's face before responding, "But, mamaw, what if I don't want the basket I'm carrying? What if I want a different basket?"

Axie snorted. "Shit, girl, what ever gave you the idea that what you want has a damn thing to do with what *is*? How you *feel* about it don't play a fiddle in hell with what your job is. Your job is the basket. You carry the one you're given." Axie turned her back on Briley and walked off into the tomato plants. Briley watched as the broad woman plucked a ripe tomato from the vine, rubbed it briskly against her housedress and then brought to her mouth and bit into it like an apple. (p. 165).

In order to begin the enormous task of truly providing a quality education for all students, we must examine our own values, beliefs, and practices. We must also begin to shift our outlook so that we can truly meet the students' needs. The first step is to accept the student where they are, rather than expect the students to come prepared to meet our dominant culture ideals.

The Normed-Opportunity Paradigm, I believe can begin to provide a frame work so that we are able to evolve past the Deficit-Thinking Paradigm. This of course will require more research, but I believe that this will begin to lay a foundation.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

I believe that the implications for the researcher are that these schools require further research. This study of the two sites was quite rich so I believe that I would like to study the other 18 sites as well as to visit these two sites again. I believe that there should be further study of schools as well as districts that have gone from low performing to high performing. This would also include schools who are Title I award winning schools because to earn this award you have to go from a low performing school to a high performing school.



The other area that I believe should continue to be researched is the leadership link between the superintendent, the deputy, area, associate, or assistant superintendent and the relationship with their campus principals at the elementary, middle, or high school level. The expectations of the district for their students of color and students of poverty through the lens of the effective schools correlates are also something to be studied in greater detail. The achievement gap and its link to the deficit-thinking paradigm should also continue to be studied because there isn't a significant amount of research in this area. Brenda Walker-Johnson and her principals spoke often about competition as they approached their leadership, and that is what they communicated to teachers, students, and parents. I think back to the conversation that I was having about football teams in the Big 12 conference about why certain teams are more successful than others. I read three books on the New England Patriots and one on Coach Mack Brown and the Texas Longhorns because I believe there are many similarities between running a football team and a school or school district. I've noticed in football teams that it takes time to develop a culture, to hire the right people, to get the team dynamic built, to go from losing to winning. So it is with turning a school around. It takes time to ensure you have the right people on campus and the right team in place. It takes time to create a culture of success and turn the school around. I believe there should be research in this area.

### **PERSONAL REFLECTIONS**

I began writing my dissertation in the fall of 2005 because I hoped to have it completed in the spring of 2006. Life, work, and circumstance prevented that from

happening. At times I was frustrated that I didn't meet my personal goal, but in retrospect I learned more about research; was able to spend time with my committee; I changed my research methodology so the additional time allowed me to do more reading, which I believe allowed the writing to be stronger, the questions to be more thought provoking, and my knowledge and understanding of these highly complex topics more commanding due to the additional time. I enjoyed the study, but I am still surprised that in that time, that there was no published research on NABSE or their (DSP) sites.

### **SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION**

It is of critical importance to continue to study the achievement gap as well as its link to the deficit-thinking paradigm and its relationship to the effective school correlates. There is much to learn by the continued study of the NABSE (DSP) sites because they have been low performing schools that have moved to high performing schools. Brenda Walker-Johnson, and the principals of the (DSP) sites were all African American leaders, which I really didn't highlight as an individual characteristic of their leadership, but I mention it now because that is another trait they bring to this study in addition to their knowledge of developing systems, working with students and families, data, holding teachers and administrators accountable, and organizational transformation there is fertile ground to explore as we move forward with the study of students of color and students of poverty.

#### *Theoretical Implications*

The use of the deficit-thinking paradigm and the effective school correlates as the dual lenses to view the achievement gap first allows for the opportunity to broaden the

definition from standardized tests to discuss the educational as well as social implications on student achievement. This is a unique set of lenses to view the achievement gap, leaders, teachers, and school districts. I believe that this should continue to help explore the numerous factors that impact the teaching and learning of students of color and students of poverty.

**Note**

1. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

## APPENDIX A

Address line 1  
Address line 2  
City,  
State/Province  
Postal Code  
Email

Dr. Jody Jensen, Ph.D.  
The University of Texas at Austin  
Department of Kinesiology and Health Education, College of Education  
1 University Station D3700  
Austin, TX 78712

jlj@mail.utexas.edu

Dear Dr. Jensen:

The purpose of this letter is to grant Bret D. Cormier, a doctoral candidate at the University of Texas at Austin permission to conduct research at Dallas Independent School District (EPISD). The project, Deconstructing the Deficit-thinking Paradigm in District and Campus Level Leadership to Close the Achievement Gap: A History and Study of the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) National Demonstration Sites (DSP), entails individual interviews with four individuals: two principals, one area superintendent and one college professor. The study will take place at Dallas ISD and Texas Southern University during the Summer 2008 semester. The purpose of this study is contribute to research that will highlight the process of schools going from being low performance to being exemplary as well as providing more information on NASBE National Demonstration Sites. DISD was selected because it is the one district in the United States with the most Demonstration Sites (DSP). The results of the study will be shared with the school district's officials. This may be done in a superintendent's cabinet meeting or at a school board meeting.

Sincerely,

Bret D. Cormier

I, Jody Jensen, do hereby grant permission for Bret D. Cormier., to conduct the project titled Deconstructing the Deficit-thinking Paradigm in District and Campus Level Leadership to Close the Achievement Gap: A History and Study of the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) National Demonstration Sites (DSP).

---

Signature

Date

APPENDIX B  
**Agreement to Participate Letter**

Area Superintendent of Area  
ISD  
(Date)

Dear Area Superintendent:

The purpose of this letter is to request the participation of your district in Deconstructing the Deficit-thinking Paradigm in District and Campus Level Leadership to Close the Achievement Gap: A History and Study of the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) National Demonstration Sites (DSP). By participating in this study, the school district will contribute to research that will highlight the process of schools going from being low performance to being exemplary as well as providing more information on NASBE National Demonstration Sites. If you agree to participate in the research study, you are committing to the following:

I would like to schedule two visits in (Date) and two additional visits through (Date). The visits and interviews will be scheduled through your office. I am interested in conducting interviews with you, principals of demonstration sites, as well as some of their faculty and staff. All of the data collection will be conducted in a manner that causes minimal interference to the operation of schools.

The results of this study will be disseminated in a variety of formats to enable other educators in Texas to benefit from the experiences, knowledge, and expertise of the district.

Should you agree to participate in this research, please sign the “Agreement to Participate” form below. If you have questions regarding the study, please contact Bret D. Cormier at (phone number) and (e-mail address).

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
Bret D. Cormier  
Doctoral Candidate  
The University of Texas at Austin

---

**Agreement to Participate**

This is to affirm that the Independent School District is willing to participate in the dissertation study focused on Deconstructing the Deficit-thinking Paradigm in District and Campus Level Leadership to Close the Achievement Gap: A History and Study of the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) National Demonstration Sites (DSP).

---

Signature of Area Superintendent

Date

APPENDIX C

**Agreement to Participate Letter**

Dean of College  
University  
(Date)

Dear Dean of College

The purpose of this letter is to request the participation of your district in Deconstructing the Deficit-thinking Paradigm in District and Campus Level Leadership to Close the Achievement Gap: A History and Study of the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) National Demonstration Sites (DSP). By participating in this study, the school district will contribute to research that will highlight the process of schools going from being low performance to being exemplary as well as providing more information on NASBE National Demonstration Sites. If you agree to participate in the research study, you are committing to the following:

I would like to schedule two visits in (Date) and two additional visits through (Date). The visits and interviews will be scheduled through your office. I am interested in conducting interviews with you, principals of demonstration sites, as well as some of their faculty and staff. All of the data collection will be conducted in a manner that causes minimal interference to the operation of schools.

The results of this study will be disseminated in a variety of formats to enable other educators in Texas to benefit from the experiences, knowledge, and expertise of the district.

Should you agree to participate in this research, please sign the “Agreement to Participate” form below. If you have questions regarding the study, please contact Bret D. Cormier at (phone number) and (e-mail address).

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
Bret D. Cormier  
Doctoral Candidate  
The University of Texas at Austin

---

Agreement to Participate

This is to affirm that the Independent School District is willing to participate in the dissertation study focused on Deconstructing the Deficit-thinking Paradigm in District and Campus Level Leadership to Close the Achievement Gap: A History and Study of the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) National Demonstration Sites (DSP).

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Signature of Dean of College

Date

**APPENDIX D**  
**Agreement to Participate Letter**

Principal  
ISD  
(Date)

Dear Principal:

The purpose of this letter is to request the participation of your district in Deconstructing the Deficit-thinking Paradigm in District and Campus Level Leadership to Close the Achievement Gap: A History and Study of the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) National Demonstration Sites (DSP). By participating in this study, the school district will contribute to research that will highlight the process of schools going from being low performance to being exemplary as well as providing more information on NASBE National Demonstration Sites. If you agree to participate in the research study, you are committing to the following:

I would like to schedule two visits in (Date) and two additional visits through (Date). The visits and interviews will be scheduled through your office. I am interested in conducting interviews with you, principals of demonstration sites, as well as some of their faculty and staff. All of the data collection will be conducted in a manner that causes minimal interference to the operation of schools.

The results of this study will be disseminated in a variety of formats to enable other educators in Texas to benefit from the experiences, knowledge, and expertise of the district.

Should you agree to participate in this research, please sign the “Agreement to Participate” form below. If you have questions regarding the study, please contact Bret D. Cormier at (phone number) and (e-mail address).

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
Bret D. Cormier  
Doctoral Candidate  
The University of Texas at Austin

---

Agreement to Participate

This is to affirm that the Independent School District is willing to participate in the dissertation study focused on Deconstructing the Deficit-thinking Paradigm in District and Campus Level Leadership to Close the Achievement Gap: A History and Study of the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) National Demonstration Sites (DSP).

---

Signature of Principal

Date

**APPENDIX E**  
**Informed Consent Form**

You are invited to participate in a study of the Deconstructing the Deficit-thinking Paradigm in District and Campus Level Leadership to Close the Achievement Gap: A History and Study of the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) National Demonstration Sites (DSP) \_\_\_\_\_ISD. My name is Bret D. Cormier. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Texas at Austin in the Educational Administration Department and a fellow in the fourth cycle of the Executive Leadership Program/Cooperative Superintendency Program. This research project is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for my doctoral dissertation.

The purpose of my research is to examine the highlight the process of schools going from being low performance to being exemplary as well as providing more information on NASBE National Demonstration Sites. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you hold the position of and have been an employee on this campus during this process.

If you decide to participate, I will interview you using an open-ended questionnaire. The interview will be audiotaped over a period of approximately one hour and a half. The taped interview will then be transcribed and coded. At the conclusion of the study, the audiotapes will be destroyed. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Data collection for this study will take place between (Date) and (Date).

Your participation is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your future relations with The University of Texas at Austin. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time. If you have questions during my visit, please ask me. If questions arise at a later time, you may contact Dr. Ruben D. Olivarez, my faculty sponsor, or myself at the address listed below. Enclosed is an additional copy of this form for you to keep.

Bret D. Cormier	Dr. Ruben D. Olivarez
Address	L. D. Haskew Centennial Professor in Public School Administration
Address	The University of Texas at Austin
Phone	Department of Educational Administration, College of Education
E-mail	1 University Station D5400
	Austin, TX 78712
	rolivarez@austin.utexas.edu

I agree to participate in this study and give my permission for the interviews to be tape-recorded.

---

Signature of Participant

Date



## **APPENDIX F**

### **Interview Protocols**

Why is there an achievement gap between African American, Latinos, and Caucasians?  
What are the conditions creating this gap?

Are you familiar with the Deficit-Thinking Paradigm? If you are aware of it do you think that it has an impact on student achievement gap?

Is this achievement gap between these sub groups related only to possible cognitive or motivational deficiencies?

Is the achievement gap between sub groups more of a social gap than an achievement gap? Is it a lack of a high expectation gap? Or all?

What role does race, ethnicity, and culture have on the achievement gap or the social gap? Do these factors influence achievement?

How do you create a climate that demands high expectations for students, faculty, and staff? How do you create a sense of urgency to close the achievement gap?

Describe the process or steps that are necessary to move a school or district from low performing to high performing? What systems are necessary to develop? What are the biggest barriers and obstacles?

Has the lack of sound culturally relevant instructional strategies led to over identification in Special Education for students of color and students of poverty?

What does the school teach students, parents, faculty/staff about race, ethnicity, and culture in school? About parents? About the community?

What role does the district; campuses, administrators, faculty/staff perceptions and beliefs of students they educate have on the achievement gap?

What role does the district; campuses, administrators, faculty/staff perceptions and beliefs of parents of the students they educate have on the achievement gap?

What role does the district; campuses, administrators, faculty/staff perceptions and beliefs of the communities and community resources of the parents and students they educate have on the achievement gap?

What role does the district; campuses, administrators, faculty/staff play in creating the achievement gap?

Is the district, campuses, administrators, faculty/staff having conversations and creating space for conversations around issues of: cultural, gender, socioeconomic stereotypes, monocultural instructional methodologies, ignorance of cultural competent instructional strategies, social and community distance, biased or non valid monocultural research, and instructional racism or barriers?

Are the right questions about student achievement being asked not only about what students and parents don't know, but also about what administrators, faculty/staffs don't know?

Is the district; campuses, administrators, faculty/staff investing in the identity transformation of internal/external stakeholders? Or is the investment in technical applications and assessment data?

What communities' resources have been identified to address the achievement gap? Is there power/answers to the problems in the community? Does the power/answer to problems reside in the community?

Has the district fully engaged the College & University about the achievement gap? Do they have a substantial investment in the outcomes for all students?

Do you believe that you have to be an educator of color to be effective with students of color?

Do you believe that you would have had to grow up poor to effectively educate students who are poor?

What is the best way to impact or influence that attitudes, values, and beliefs, of the people around you? Teachers? Staff? Students? Parents? Community?

**APPENDIX G**  
**Survey Questions**

**Gender** \_\_\_\_\_

**Ethnicity** \_\_\_\_\_

**Background**

How long have you been in the field of education? (Cities, states, and countries)

As a teacher?

As a counselor?

As a librarian?

As a specialist?

As a coach?

As an administrator?

At what levels have you worked? How many years? (Elementary, Middle, High)

What subjects have you taught? What would you consider to be your strongest subject?

What would you consider to be your weakest subject?

What types of campuses have you worked on? (Largely affluent, impoverished, African American, Caucasian, Latino, Asian, other ethnicities, lower socioeconomic, English Language Learners, rural, urban, suburban, demographics)

Describe your family? (Brothers, Sisters, birth order, educational attainment of parents, other family members)

What would you consider to be the philosophy of your family? (What are truths the family believes that you all consider to be sacred)

What city, state, or country were you born in? (Describe the way you view the areas you were born and raised in)

### **Educational Attainment**

Where did you go to school? (City, state, and country)

Elementary?

Middle School?

High School?

Undergraduate?

Masters?

Masters plus?

Doctorate?

Post Doctoral?

Describe the environments you were educated in? (Largely affluent, impoverished, African American, Caucasian, Latino, Asian, other ethnicities, lower socioeconomic, English Language Learners, rural, urban, suburban, demographics)

When you went to college you wanted to be....Why?

### **Philosophy of Education**

Why did you become an educator?

What do you really believe about teaching and learning?

How would you respond to the “I believe all kids can learn” statement?

What is your greatest challenge as an educator?

What is your greatest joy as an educator?

What would you consider to be critical professional development/training that has been an integral part of your success?



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