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The Efforts of K-12 School Principals to Increase Black Student Achievement

A Dissertation Presented

by

Kerry L. Moore

Submitted to the Graduate School of Education

Lesley University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Ph.D. Educational Studies

Educational Leadership Specialization

The Efforts of K-12 School Principals to Increase Black Student Achievement  
in Low-performing schools

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Ph.D. Educational Studies

Educational Leadership Specialization

**Approvals**

*In the judgment of the following signatories, this Dissertation meets the academic standards that have been established for the Doctor of Philosophy degree.*

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mom, Phobelyn H. Reid, who continually pushed me and made sure I took full advantage of every opportunity.

This work is dedicated to my husband, Andre Moore, who gave his unconditional love and support to the completion of this project.

This work is dedicated to my children, Justin, Melisha, and Andrea who I hope to inspire to be the best versions of themselves.

This work is dedicated to my dissertation committee, friends, family, and Fros who prayed for me, encouraged me, and listened to me as I worked over these past few years.

This work is dedicated to the millions of Black children in our country. Know there are people who believe in you and your success.

## Abstract

Policies typically hold schools accountable for student learning by isolating student groups within the school population to monitor academic achievement. Responsibility for ensuring academic growth and learning for all students often falls heavily upon the K-12 public school principal. This study investigated K-12 school principals' beliefs, prioritization, and execution of research-based strategies meant to increase Black student achievement as well as their efforts to implement these strategies, including factors and conditions promoting or inhibiting implementation. Three guiding questions informed this study: (1) To what degree do principals believe leading efforts to improve Black student achievement is a priority? (2) What are the ways K-12 school principals of low-performing schools report they lead efforts to increase student achievement? (3) What are the factors and conditions in low-performing schools that K-12 principals say inhibit and promote their efforts to increase achievement for the Black student population? Using a sequential explanatory method, quantitative data were collected from 12 principals through a questionnaire, with five of those principals providing qualitative data in separate follow-up interviews. The study's 10 findings identified principals' core beliefs regarding teaching and learning in their contextualized environments. Recommendations included using all data points available to identify the needs of the school, employing culturally relevant strategies to support Black student achievement, and building the capacity of teachers and staff to embark on and engage in cycles of improvement.

*Key words: accountability, public schools, K-12 principals, culturally relevant instruction, Black students*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	3
Purpose of the Study.....	6
Definition of Terms.....	9
Anticipated Contributions to the Field.....	11
Delimitations of the Study.....	11
Overview of Literature Review.....	14
Overview of Methodology.....	15
Chapter Outline.....	18
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....	20
History and Evolution of Educating Black People.....	21
Approaches to Teaching and Learning for Black Students.....	26
The Role of School Leadership in Improving Teaching and Learning.....	34
Factors and Conditions in Low-performing schools.....	45
Area of Consensus and Dispute.....	51
CHAPTER THREE: Methodology.....	58
Type of Study.....	58
Participants and Setting.....	60
Development of Instruments.....	63
Data Collection and Analysis.....	70
Delimitations and Limitations.....	75

CHAPTER FOUR: Findings.....	78
Data Collected for Guided Research Question #1.....	80
Data Collected for Guided Research Question #2.....	93
Data Collected for Guided Research Question #3.....	111
CHAPTER FIVE: Summary, Discussion, Future Research and Final Reflections.....	127
Discussion.....	131
Recommendations.....	141
Future Research.....	152
Final Reflections.....	157
References.....	159
Appendices.....	171
Appendix A: Draft Questionnaire.....	171
Appendix B: Draft Interview Protocol.....	184



## LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. (2018-19 North Carolina End of Grade Statewide English Language Arts (ELA)).....	48
Table 2. (2018-19 North Carolina End of Grade Statewide Math .....	48
Figure 1. (All Reporting Schools).....	79
Figure 2. (All Low-performing schools).....	79
Figure 3. (All Non-Low-performing schools).....	80
Table 3. (Importance of School-Based Instructional Strategies).....	85
Table 4. (Factors Supporting Academic Success).....	97
Table 5. (Frequency of Implementation of School-Based Instructional Strategies).....	98
Table 6. (Factors Impeding Academic Success).....	116

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

**Personal Background**

My passion for working with children began when I was 15 years old. As a counselor at a summer camp, I met a young man named Jacob. Jacob was growing up in foster care, experiencing developmental delays, and exhibiting behaviors that inhibited him from interacting with the other kids in the group. That summer I worked hard with Jacob to help him have a positive experience that he would remember for years to come. Fast-forward 3 years later, I decided to make a career out of my work with children by becoming a teacher. My focus shifted, as I wanted to serve Black students with experiences similar to mine: Black, smart, functioning in predominantly White schools but missing having Black teachers who believed in me and Black peers who learned alongside me. After working in private, charter, and public schools for over 20 years, I felt a call to work with students in low-performing schools. My desire was to give them the opportunities to learn and achieve through opportunities not readily afforded to them.

As a Black woman serving students for over 30 years, I have always been concerned with the education of Black students and have yet to see significant improvements in Black student achievement. In the classroom, I had control and autonomy with effective strategies. Once I came out of the classroom and had a greater level of responsibility as an administrator, my practices had an even greater impact on Black student achievement. My interest in this topic developed as my aspirations and dedication grew. In pursuing a position as a principal in a public school, I want to enter the position prepared and knowledgeable of the practices that would increase my effectiveness and enable me to see the difference I am making.

The procedural approach to this research topic has implications for me as a doctoral student, educator, leader, and active member of society. Knowing there are groups of students who look like me and are experiencing perpetual underperformance prompted me to act within my sphere of influence. As an educator, I am dedicated to providing educational experiences for Black students that help them make sense of their learning and society. My mission as an educator is to provide Black students in low-performing schools access to a fair and equitable education regardless of the circumstances of their lives or their school. My growth as an educator has been learning to engage Black students with their community in ways that elevate their thinking and the thinking of those around them. The research of this study is a component of my continued growth as I learn how we as a nation can better serve the needs of Black students.

With the enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) during the Obama Administration in 2015, federal authority over school reform moved from federal to state jurisdiction (Shoffner, 2016). This shift gave school districts the authority to tailor school reform efforts to specific populations based on school and community needs. Because of this legislation, Public School Units (PSUs) have the autonomy to address student achievement using effective research-based strategies. Knowing that Black students have the lowest rates of achievement in fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math content areas, I want to continue my growth and understanding in supporting K-12 principals in their efforts to increase black student achievement. As a school administrator, I want to change the trajectory of Black students, making them no longer the lowest performing group.

The purpose of schools is to “pass on traditions and knowledge, to prepare the young for a democratic life, to foster moral and intellectual growth, to enable individual and societal economic prosperity” (Rose, 2009 p. 32). As a parent to three children (all graduates of the North

Carolina public school system), it was important to me that my children and future grandchildren have positive school interactions, graduate with limitless career path options, and experience success as defined by us as a family unit. Therefore, I knew the steps to take as a parent to be involved and give support where needed. While my children graduated before the commencement of this research, many families like mine want the same experience for their children.

As a school leader in the public school system, it is my personal desire to see all students achieve and excel, eliminating any preconceived biases or predictions of their success. Attempts to right the wrongs and address the social consciousness and academic success of Black students and other students of color have not fully been realized. I have seen many school leaders operate “as color-blind, completely free of prejudice, unaware of their own assumptions about other racial groups” (Tatum, 2003 p. 84).

Now, however, with accountability standards for schools and school districts for student achievement, marginalized Black students are excluded from attaining increasing levels of achievement. As an employee of a public school system in which almost 40% of students are Black, I must strive for equal access to education fostering social and academic growth for all students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study was designed to explore the lack of achievement in the areas of reading and math for Black students attending public schools and how principals address their learning needs. As instructional leaders, K-12 school principals have local authority to implement effective strategies for school achievement. The approach the school principal takes as the instructional leader in choosing and implementing effective strategies for school achievement, specifically

how to address the learning needs of Black students, has a direct impact on whole-school student achievement. “School leadership is a crucial component to any reform of education, secondary only to the very act of teaching” (Khalifa et al., n.d. p. 1273). For this research, the school principal was defined as the highest decision-making authority found within the school building excluding the vice or assistant principal, dean of students, or any other administrative authority. Although the role of the principal is multifaceted, this research targeted the instructional leadership of the principal regarding strategies specifically intended to increase Black student achievement.

Legislation, policies, and instructional practices have been written and revised to create accountability and support for United States public school students. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was revised multiple times to the more current Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) signed by President Barak Obama in 2015. The crux of this legislation puts measures in place to ensure academic achievement for all students. National accountability for student achievement trickles down to the local level giving K-12 principals “bureaucratic, managerial, instructional, and community responsibilities” in schools (Kafka, 2009 p. 324). Although the role of the school principal is inclusive of micro-and macro-political arenas, the focus of this research was the school principal as an instructional leader and their efforts to increase Black student achievement. Reform efforts must target interventions to marginalized student subgroups not proficient in the content areas of reading and math. Prioritizing learning for these subgroups is the responsibility of local educational institutions.

With every revision, accountability measures are in place for whole-school and student-subgroup achievement to gauge how schools are educating students. Subgroups include economically disadvantaged students, students from each major racial and ethnic group, children

with disabilities (as defined in ESEA section 8101[4]), and English learners (as defined in ESEA section 8101[20]). Some students overlap in subgroups, but of all subgroups, Black students have the lowest achievement rate in the nation based on fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math scores according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Because of legislation and a more refined look at achievement, schools around the country are designated as low performing due in part to the low academic performance of subgroup populations. ESEA “focused on improving the quality of schools for low-income and minority students throughout the country” (Kilty, 2015 p. 325), requiring schools to single out subgroup data rather than solely focusing on whole-school achievement as they had in the past. ESEA legislation “was amended four times between 1965 and 1980, with each iteration of the law providing more precise prescriptions about the use of Title I funds,” funding devoted to subgroup achievement (Hunt Institute, 2016, p. 1). From 1981 to 1988, The Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981 (ECIA) reduced Title 1 funding designated for low-performing schools (Hunt Institute, 2016), until the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA) refined requirements for Title 1 and kept federal focus on standards-based reform.

The academic needs of Black students in schools are met by varying degrees of efforts put forth by principals in these schools. Efforts can vary based on how important the principal believes they are, the frequency of implementation, and factors and conditions affecting implementation. Therefore, it is important for K-12 school principals to be aware of the needs of the populations in their school, the effective strategies that enhance the academic achievement of these populations, and the degree to which these efforts are being directed appropriately.

### **Purpose of Study**

The instructional leadership of a school is guided by the principal and has a direct impact on student achievement. Principals “risk losing students (and thus funding) if their test scores do not improve” and their “individual importance in the success or failure of a school has seemingly increased” (Kafka, 2009 p. 329). The principal is instrumental in designing an instructional plan for the school and taking into consideration the learning needs of all students, regardless of race, culture, or ability. While there are multiple subgroups requiring attention to improve academic achievement, the focus of this study was to show the efforts of school principals to increase Black student achievement in K-12 public schools. The research in this study (a) determined the degrees to which K-12 principals consider the improvement of Black student achievement a priority, (b) explored ways K-12 school principals lead efforts to improve Black student achievement, and (c) examined the factors and conditions that inhibit and promote efforts to improve Black student achievement.

Racism is embedded in the practices of our schools with school staff knowingly or unknowingly participating in practices hurting Black student achievement (DeMatthews, 2018). This reality increases the need for principals to create “a positive culture to improve the organizational performance of their schools” with race as a consideration (Hollingworth et al., n.d., p. 1021). Due to historical and structural barriers impacting Black student achievement and increased accountability placed on schools, this research began by focusing on the degree to which K-12 principals understood their role to target Black student achievement.

When a principal demonstrates culturally responsive leadership, their behavior “influences the school context and addresses the cultural needs of the students, parents, and teachers” (Khalifa et al., p. 1274). Prior to integration, the status and authority of the Black

school principal allowed them to make decisions based on the best interests of students as a reflection of community needs. Tillman (2004) writes, “These individuals held themselves accountable for the academic achievement of Black children and adults who attended all-Black public and private schools” (p. 110). Because of this personal and professional responsibility, principals were able to isolate race as a factor in school improvement and implemented strategies to increase Black student achievement.

As they did pre-integration, some schools began using strategies rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a means to increase achievement among Black students. Strategies rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT) isolate race and can be used to identify and mitigate barriers to achievement Black students may face. Instructional leaders can integrate CRT in education for reforming and transforming the American educational system as a means to increase Black student achievement. Using CRT in education when creating an instructional program in schools is essential because “for many African American students, learning is best facilitated when pedagogy and content are culturally relevant to their identity development incorporate communal/relationship centered values and interactions” (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 142). CRT in education would include using culturally relevant instructional strategies to build understanding of the curriculum and using the students’ background knowledge and experiences to increase achievement.

K-12 principals integrating CRT in education is critical for increasing Black student achievement, as there is “a strong correlation between school leaders and student achievement” (Brown et al., 2017, p. 68). With so many areas to focus on for academic improvement in schools, principals must be prepared and knowledgeable in determining the specific and targeted strategies for the school. Schools can use CRT as a lens for developing practices that empower



Black students “to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender” and achieve academic success (Creswell, 2017, p. 74).

Efforts and strategies outlining and targeting the needs of Black students may vary, but the prioritization of efforts put forth by K-12 school principals can be affected by factors that promote or inhibit implementation. Factors can be individual or bound by the school community, school district, state, or federal guidelines. This research identified and highlighted those factors and conditions to help K-12 school principals provide effective instructional leadership in their respective schools.

This study also investigated how principals prioritized Black student achievement, isolated their approaches to target Black student achievement, and uncovered the factors and conditions that inhibited and promoted efforts to isolate and address the needs of Black students in low-performing schools. To bring intentional focus to the research, a set of guiding research questions were used which are outlined in the following section.

### **Guiding Research Questions**

This study investigated K-12 school principals’ beliefs, prioritization, and execution of research-based strategies meant to increase Black student achievement. It also investigated their efforts to implement these strategies, including factors and conditions promoting or inhibiting implementation. The following research questions were used to focus the research, organize the data for the research, and present the collected and analyzed data. The Guiding Research Questions (GRQ) were:

GRQ #1: To what degree do principals believe leading efforts to improve Black student achievement is a priority?

GRQ #2: What are the various ways K-12 school principals of low- performing schools

report they lead efforts to increase student achievement?

GRQ #3: What are the factors and conditions in low-performing schools that K-12 principals say inhibit and promote their efforts to increase achievement for the Black student population?

Use of these three questions uncovered the perceptions, efforts, and actions of K-12 school principals as they targeted school-wide achievement and Black student achievement in low-performing schools.

### **Definition of Terms**

To avoid ambiguity in the use of these terms in the study, discussion and definitions for the following are provided:

#### **Achievement**

For the purposes of this study, “Achievement” speaks to the academic proficiency of students enrolled in K-12 schools. Academic proficiency is measured by end-of-grade or end-of-course cumulative testing. Students obtaining a level 3 or above on North Carolina state tests are considered proficient.

#### **“Black” and “African American”**

These terms are used interchangeably within the text of this research. Authors and individuals have different beliefs and preferences as to what term to use when describing this subgroup. While the term “African-American” may be specific to one ethnic group, the term “Black” is meant to be inclusive of African Americans, those of West Indian, Haitian, and African nations, or any other country of origin to which the individual identifies. Individuals of mixed race who identify as “Black” are also considered for this study.

### **Critical Race Theory in Education**

CRT in education requires race to be acknowledged as a social construct that affects student learning in addition to gender and class (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The research continues to be complicated because as a social construct, it is difficult to decipher where race, class, and gender collectively begin, end, and impact student learning. “Although both class and gender can and do intersect race, as stand-alone variables they do not explain all of the educational achievement differences apparent between Whites and students of color” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995 p. 51). Comparisons of lower- and middle-class Black students to their White counterparts still garnish the same outcomes making race the delineating factor (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

### **Culturally Relevant Strategies**

Culturally relevant instructional strategies and concepts have proven to increase academic achievement among Black students when implemented effectively within schools. For Black students, culturally relevant strategies ensure learning, reduce the racialized achievement gap, and leave students with a positive self-image. The intention is to empower “students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 2009 p. 20).

### **Low-performing schools**

According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, “low-performing schools are those that receive a school performance grade of D or F and a school growth score of ‘met expected growth’ or ‘not met expected growth’ as defined by G.S. 115C-83.15.” (G.S. 115C-105.37[a]). The ratings of North Carolina schools include levels of proficiency and rates of growth for the total school and subgroups as required by ESSA.

### **Anticipated Contributions to the Field**

This research identified and informed the efforts and approaches of instructional leadership in low-performing and non-low-performing schools intended to positively impact Black student achievement. Intentional and unintentional benefits of changing research in the field of education and whole-school communities are expected. These benefits include strategies for the instructional leadership of school principals, approaches for total school and Black student achievement, and increased teacher efficacy. Stakeholders in this field of study include principals in K-12 public schools and teaching and instructional staff. The work of these stakeholders is integral to the work of public schools educating Black students, and they would benefit from the practices highlighted in this study.

The foundation of this study is the extant literature on effective strategies of K-12 school principals for school improvement, the efforts of K-12 school principals towards school improvement, and the gaps between principal efforts and principals' practices in schools. The contribution to the field of education is to highlight effective practice and offer a bridge between theory and practice of culturally relevant practices in schools to support Black student achievement.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

This study focused on the individual actions of principals affecting students in a designated geographical location. The confines of this study isolated the principals' roles as instructional leaders in low-performing public schools located in urban areas of North Carolina. Using qualitative methods within "a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time" (Creswell, 2016, p. 173), this study researched the efforts of K-12 principals to improve Black student achievement in low-performing schools and non-low-

performing public schools. The delimitation outside the bounded system included the instructional leadership of principals to improve Black student achievement, not including private or charter schools. Classroom teachers and other instructional staff and their efforts to address Black student achievement as well as the efforts to address academic needs of other student subgroups were not considered in this study.

Effective leadership encompasses instructional and transformational leadership, with priorities, actions, and approaches having an impact on student achievement. In public schools where Black students are not achieving at high rates, principal actions impact both this subgroup and whole-school achievement rates. Hallinger and Leithwood (1998) state, “Predominant notions of the principal’s role have evolved from manager, to street-level bureaucrat, to change agent, to instructional manager, to instructional leader, to transformational leader” (p. 137).

Although principals are primarily responsible for student learning, the breadth and depth of their responsibilities may lead them to rely on other staff for support. Indeed, many low-performing schools employ instructional coaches or facilitators under the direction and supervision of the school principal. This study, however, did not consider the efforts of these individuals given that principals’ involvement with instructional personnel and practices can vary. This delimitation was not intended to suggest that principals as instructional leaders make decisions about instruction in isolation. Personal interviews with principals may reveal a broader, more thorough picture of the instructional leadership of the school.

Efforts to address Black student achievement are not only an issue in low-performing schools but are also present in schools across the nation. School integration and districting policies, along with improved economic mobility have created increased diversity in schools across the nation. According to the 2019 report from NAEP, the achievement rates for Black

students in all schools, including low- and high-achieving schools, remain a concern. The delimitation noted in this study is the omission of private and charter settings, even though Black student achievement data from these schools reflect the need for intervention. Flexibility and instructional practices in private, charter, and higher-performing schools may be similar or different to those in designated low-performing schools; however, the instructional practices to increase Black student achievement in these schools were not addressed in this study.

Subgroups targeted in ESEA and ESSA require specific interventions similar and/or different to the strategies targeting the learning styles of Black students. While the need for interventions for all students not reaching academic achievement remains a priority, race as a social construct in our nation must be acknowledged as having a continued devastating impact on academic achievement for Black students. “All CRT research within education must centralize race and racism, including intersections with other forms of subordination such as gender, class, and citizenship” (Howard & Navarro, 2016 p. 258). Delimitations of this study also included other student groups even though these groups similarly lag in achievement. This study confined its attention to the matter of Black student achievement even though overlap in other subgroups may include Black students who are learning the English language because of immigration, economically disadvantaged, and/or those identified as students with disabilities. This study did not consider this subgroup data but instead looked only at Black student achievement in isolation.

Leading theorists Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explained how specially designed instruction using CRT in education for Black students to increase achievement was like instructional strategies specially designed for other subgroups. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) write, “Multicultural education has been conceptualized as a reform movement designed to effect

change in the ‘school and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and other social-class groups will experience educational equality’” (p. 61). CRT in education is an investigation to show how race has affected education in the United States (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and how by using CRT in education, race can have a positive impact. Historical patterns and some current instructional practices have eliminated race as causing a lack of proficiency leading to cultural practices being isolated, blamed, and/or devalued, separating the practices from educational expectations. This study brackets cultural practices to assess their impact on Black student achievement.

Finally, neither family demographic data, community response data, nor teaching practices were addressed in this study, although these components can have an impact on achievement in low-performing schools.

### **Overview of the Literature Review**

The research presented in the literature review begins with historical context related to the issue of Black student achievement in the United States educational system. Building on the historical context, the review will distinguish and highlight efforts specific to Black student achievement. With the weight of school-based achievement efforts placed on school principals, the literature presented addresses the role of the school principal as instructional leader and the factors and conditions affecting the principals’ ability to prioritize and increase Black student achievement. The organizational structure of the review begins with (a) History and Evolution of Educating Black People, (b) Approaches to Teaching and Learning for Black students, (c) The Role of School Leadership in Improving Teaching and Learning, (d) Colorblind Ideology, and (d) Factors and Condition in Low-performing schools. Through the content presented, one should be able to understand instructional leadership and effective school improvement efforts

implemented by principals. This includes how CRT in education can be used specifically to improve student learning experiences for Black students, moving them closer towards academic proficiency and achievement.

Through the literature, a picture of effective and non-effective efforts of K-12 school principals is presented demonstrating how they address student achievement in schools. By identifying the variables that affect implementation, the literature review provides a set of behaviors acceptable to promote Black student achievement.

### **Overview of Methodology**

For this research, a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design approach was used, as “neither quantitative nor qualitative methods were sufficient, by themselves, to capture the trends and details of a situation” (Ivankova et al., 2006 p.3). Both quantitative and qualitative data derived from a questionnaire and qualitative data gathered from interviews to articulate trends and formulate themes were utilized. Information was gathered from principals to extract their perceptions of their roles as instructional leaders, their experiences, and the consequences when effective and non-effective strategies had been implemented. As well, the factors and conditions of a low-performing school that inhibited and promoted the implementation of strategies in low-performing schools that impacted Black student achievement were considered.

From the questionnaire and the subsequent interviews, a collective case study was conducted. The research method was chosen intentionally to isolate how K-12 school principals addressed the needs of Black students in low-performing schools. Because “case study research involves the study of a case (or cases) within a real-life, contemporary context or setting” (Creswell & Poth 2016 p. 173), the North Carolina definition of low-performing schools was used to create the context in which K-12 school principals operated as instructional leaders. For



this study, 12 principals identified factors and conditions, cultures, practices, and policies implemented and supported by the K-12 school principals in low-performing schools.

The data collected and analyzed identified themes through inductive and deductive reasoning (Creswell & Poth 2016). The multiple participants identified for the study were K-12 school principals in the Raleigh-Durham area of North Carolina area leading to a cross-case comparison (Gibbs, 2012) among the chosen principals to identify trends.

To address Guiding Research Question #1, initial data identifying the efforts of K-12 school principals were collected using a questionnaire to understand the degree to which principals prioritized efforts for Black student achievement and the frequency of practices supporting culturally relevant instruction in their school. This questionnaire gathered demographic information and quantitative data using two separate 4-point Likert scales. The qualifiers on the Likert scale ranged from (1) equaling *highly agree* to (4) equaling *highly disagree* and (1) equaling *always* to (4) equaling *never to address frequency*. The questionnaire ended with multiple-choice questions to assess principal prioritization of strategies, factors and conditions promoting and inhibiting success and an open-ended question to obtain principals' beliefs about strategies to improve Black student achievement. The data from this tool was analyzed to assess the degree to which they value, understand, and prioritize academic improvement efforts for all students, especially for Black students. From the respondents of the questionnaire, five participants indicated consent to contact for a further interview.

For K-12 school principals who agreed that strategies to increase Black student achievement should be a priority for K-12 school principals, Guiding Research Question #2 addressed how this select group of K-12 school principals reported their efforts to improve student achievement. The question addressed school-wide initiatives as well as efforts

specifically targeted at Black students. Respondents to this question were asked to share artifacts documenting their efforts such as Professional Learning Committee (PLC) agendas and notes, faculty meeting agendas and notes, emails, memos, and any other pertinent artifacts.

The questionnaire and evaluation of the interviews and artifacts gave insight to Guiding Research Question #3 regarding the factors and conditions that promote or inhibit implementation of efforts to increase Black student achievement. Understanding these factors and conditions provided insight into how K-12 school principals, districts, or states might interrupt the lack of proficiency among Black students. By showing how K-12 school principals increased Black student achievement in low-performing schools, this study identified practices and policies that currently exist in schools and the added steps that can be taken to increase achievement. The data collected and analyzed identified themes through inductive and deductive reasoning (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The multiple participants identified for the study were K-12 school principals of public schools in the Raleigh-Durham area of North Carolina area, which led to a cross-case comparison (Gibbs, 2012) among the chosen principals to identify trends. Examination of the factors and conditions that inhibit and promote implementation of strategies effective when leading school improvement efforts school-wide and for Black students was used to address Guiding Research Question #3.

Interviews with the participants resulted in the collection of narrative data from the individual principals on how they led efforts to improve student achievement and the consequences and challenges faced when doing so. Since the focus was on the role of the school principal, teachers and students were included in the research as part of the total school environment but were excluded from questionnaires, interviews, or any form of one-to-one or group interactions.

The questionnaire and interview questions addressing Guiding Research Questions #1, #2, and #3 can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively.

### **Chapter Outline**

The proposed dissertation will follow the descriptions of the following chapters:

- **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION** consists of the personal background of the researcher, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, guiding questions, the definition of terms, anticipated contributions of the study, and delimitations of the study.
- **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW** is comprised of a literature review of the pertinent components of the study. The structure of the content presented in the literature review begins with (a) History and Evolution of Educating Black People, (b) Approaches to Teaching and Learning for Black students, (c) The Role of School Leadership in Improving Teaching and Learning, (d) Colorblind Ideology, and (d) Factors and Condition in Low-Performing Schools.
- **CHAPTER THREE: METHOD** includes an explanation of the design of the study, including a description and validation of the collective case study approach to research and analysis of the data. This chapter covers study design and execution and includes explanations about the questionnaire instrument, interview protocol and data collection method and storage, descriptions and demographics of the school principal participants, and data collected about the school. This chapter also explores any biases held by the researcher.
- **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS** presents the data collected, analyzed, and coded from the questionnaires completed by K-12 school principals, interviews of select K-12 school principals, and artifacts from the school environments. Data is presented using tables as

well as descriptive paragraphs and including excerpts from interviews highlighting themes that appeared from the research and analysis of the data. The guiding research questions are used to organize the presentation of the data.

- CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, FUTURE RESEARCH AND FINAL REFLECTIONS will include a summary of Chapters One through Four, a discussion of the findings with recommendations and implications for future research within the field of academic achievement for Black students and other areas of scholarship.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**Introduction**

Investigating the efforts of K-12 school principals in low-performing schools, this study reflects on historical context and current practices to understand the social and academic needs of Black students as well as the responsibility of the school principal as an instructional leader. This literature review provides historical context on the education of Black students; identifies approaches to teaching and learning, including the role and responsibilities of school principals to increase Black student achievement in low-performing schools; and informs the reader of factors and conditions in low-performing schools.

By highlighting the work of chief researchers in the field of effective teaching and learning practices for Black students, this literature review provides relevant context for answering the Guiding Research Questions that informed this study. The guiding research questions of the study are:

GRQ #1: To what degree do principals believe leading efforts to improve Black student achievement is a priority?

GRQ #2: What are the various ways K-12 school principals of low-performing schools report they lead efforts to increase student achievement?

GRQ #3: What are the factors and conditions in low-performing schools that K-12 principals say inhibit and promote their efforts to increase achievement for the Black student population?

This chapter is organized using level headings titled The History and Evolution of Educating Blacks in America, Approaches to Teaching and Learning for Black Students, The

Role of School Leadership in Improving Teaching and Learning, Factors and Conditions in Low-Performing Schools, Area of Consensus and Dispute, and concluded with a Summary.

### **The History and Evolution of Educating Black People**

Research informing Guiding Research Question #1, which assesses the degree principals believe Black student achievement is a priority, is supported by building background knowledge on the education of Black students in the United States. The historical context is used to explain the development of strategies intended for Black students to access academic achievement and the principal's role as an instructional leader to lead efforts intended to improve outcomes for Black students. Beginning with slavery and racial integration in public schools, and then moving to practices that are more current, this research is particularly important in framing what the focus has been when educating Black students in the United States to its current state.

Before assessing the efforts of K-12 principals, it is important to look at the evolution of Black student education in America. This section chronicles the structures in American history purposed to educate Black people, beginning with access to education during and post-slavery. Educational models available to Black students fluctuated for Black people in the U.S., as did the responsibilities of school leadership. The literature provided in this section revisits the history of education in the U.S. and the impact it has had on Black students, school leadership, and whole-school achievement.

#### **Educating Black People in the U. S.**

When Black Africans were brought to this country as slave labor, their learning priorities did not include a focus on academics. There was a distinct difference between academic instruction and vocational demands. Most enslaved Blacks were illiterate by intentional design. Instances in which teaching slaves to read and write was acceptable or permissible were difficult

and almost impossible because of the lack of trust and community between the slaves and the slave owners (Thomas, 1979). Levine and Levine (2014) discuss the illegality of educating Black enslaved people unless the education was used in the interest of the White slave owner reinforcing the lack of trust. Consistent with CRT (Critical Race Theory), “interest convergence theory posits that substantive legal gains for racial minorities seldom occur unless they converge or are perceived as converging with the interests of White elites” (Carter, 2011, p. 23). If a slave accessed reading or writing, it was to complete the work of the plantation, promote Christianity, or benefit the slave master or his wife and children in some way (Levine & Levine, 2014). Instead, the primary focus of education was vocational in nature promoting the development of laborious skills taught by force. Using fear and maltreatment to educate enslaved Blacks, education for Black people consisted primarily of vocational skills vital to the success of Whites, detrimental to the lives of Blacks (Thomas, 1979).

Post slavery, the nation became more industrious and vocational education continued to be key to the growth of the nation and its economy. With slavery now illegal, there were answers on both sides of the question of how to educate newly freed Black people and their children. There was an opportunity for Black people to have increased access to academic education, although historical actions had conditioned them for more vocational and technical education. Dissenting opinions emerged with Booker T. Washington advocating for more vocational and industrial education, W.E.B. Du Bois seeking a more academic route, and Nathan B. Young seeking a combination of both.

Booker T. Washington believed an industrial education for freed Black Americans in the South benefitted economic growth for both Black and White Americans. Referencing the plight of the slave fighting for survival, he urged Black Americans towards self-preservation, not

advocating for too many rights. This meant continuing as free individuals and supporting the growth of the nation, in order to gain the same rights and opportunities as Whites (Rucker & Jubilee, 2007). However, that also meant accepting they would continue as a lower class of citizens with the hopes of one day achieving equality (Rucker & Jubilee, 2007). The push for vocational education was intended to keep Blacks as a lower class of people and limiting their ability to progress as equal citizens and maintaining the White supremacy of the era (Levine & Levine, 2014).

Contrastingly, W.E. B. Du Bois believed in “the education of youth according to ability” (Dubois, 1909, p. 53). Blacks would have increased access to academia, with opportunities to attend high schools and universities. Access to higher learning would create Black leaders with political rank leading to societal equality for Black people (Rucker & Jubilee, 2007). Equal access to academic educational opportunities would put Black people in a position to become upwardly mobile in American society.

Nathan B. Young, a friend and colleague of Booker T. Washington, saw the value in both educational opportunities, vocational and academic. He believed in a combination of the beliefs of Washington and Dubois called “dovetailing” which simply meant learning by doing (Holland, 2006). By combining vocational and academic education, Young proposed to implement both educational methods based on the cultural needs of the students. As a school leader, Young designed an instructional day to incorporate a balanced education created to address the educational needs of Black children (Holland, 2006).

Motivation to improve the educational experiences for Black children developed in communities across the south, as the nation shifted its economic focus post-slavery. School leadership was an essential part of making Black student learning and achievement a priority



(Rousmaniere, 2007, p. 20). Kafka (2009) explains how the role of the Black school principal developed over time to include community representation, management, discipline, advocacy, and instructional leadership, all to support Black student achievement. Kafka (2009) asserts:

He gave orders and enforced them. He directed, advised, and instructed teachers. He classified pupils, disciplined them, and enforced safeguards designed to protect their health and morals. He supervised and rated janitors. He requisitioned all educational, and frequently all maintenance, supplies. Parents sought his advice and respected his regulations. Such supervisors, general and special, as visited his school usually made requests of teachers only with the consent, or through the medium, of the principal. (p. 321)

This was true in the segregated Black schools, as the principal was typically a part of the local community and held in high regard (Kafka, 2009). Being a part of and leveraging the community was an important strategy in segregated schools. Leaders knew how to rally students and families in the community. Julia Anna Cooper, born a slave and advocate for both academic and vocational education, recognized the importance of the community to inform teaching and learning based on the needs and lived experiences of Black students. The principal of the school learned to do that well. If a student were to struggle, he served as the advocate of an understanding support system to uplift, redirect, to intervene. Successful segregated schools exhibited these qualities resulting in academic rigor and culturally competent students. This structure is aligned with the Experiential Knowledge tenet of Critical Race Theory in Education. Black principals in the integration era knew how to incorporate the lived experiences of Black students and tailor their education to their learning needs. Kafka describes this support system

the principal created as reflecting positive relationships with families and the community by using autonomy to create programming and structures conducive to learning and success.

The relationship between the principal, the community, families and students shifted when Black principals with connections to families and their community were replaced with White principals in the all Black schools (Rucker & Jubilee, 2007). The results of this shift meant the connections and influence Black school principals had on Black student achievement became lost as their leadership positions were replaced. This change in leadership significantly reduced the number of leaders who leveraged authority and connection to the community, which was used to increase Black student achievement. Broken connections between leadership and the community also affected teacher recruitment and teacher voice in the classroom (Rousmaniere, 2007). Black teachers from the classroom who had firsthand knowledge of effective strategies and had been previously considered for leadership were excluded from that path. In addition, funding for predominantly Black schools became scarce as public policies diverted funding to White schools (Holland, 2006) leading to an unsustainability model for predominantly Black schools.

Topeka, Kansas, in 1954 offered a pivotal point of education access and equality for Black people through the court case *Brown v. the Board of Education*. In this case, the Supreme Court overruled *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling it unconstitutional to have separate facilities for Black and White citizens because separate did not always mean equal. The victory in *Brown v. the Board of Education* made provisions for Black students to attend school in the same facility as White students. School integration provided Black students access to the same school buildings as White students, but the access to student learning based on individual, cultural, and community needs was not available for many Black students as it had been in the past.

Post-slavery and during the development of educational institutions for Black people, advocates and theorists have expressed a desire for educational and societal equity in the U.S.. Educational leaders like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois prioritized Black student achievement post-slavery, and today educational leaders continue to investigate best approaches to Black student achievement. Taking the racial and educational history of into consideration, modern-day theorists Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings advocate for Black students to be educated and graduate culturally competent and prepared to navigate the global environment in which they live (Mahari de Silva et al., 2018). This is the introduction of culturally relevant strategies into the educational structure and best practices and the efforts educational leaders can take for improving teaching and learning leading to Black student Achievement.

### **Approaches to Improving Teaching and Learning for Black Students**

Guiding Research Question #2 investigated the various ways K-12 school principals of low-performing schools report they lead efforts to increase student achievement. It is important for principals to know what effective interventions are, what the impact on Black student achievement is, and how to implement these interventions effectively. Research-based strategies infused with racial and cultural influences are essential to this research and have been shown to increase academic achievement for Black students. Identifying and implementing culturally relevant strategies and practices counters the historical model of education that positioned White, middle-class learning styles and approaches as the norm for all students (Schmeichel, 2012) and acknowledges the varying needs of diverse populations in schools.

Ladson-Billings (1995) links culture and academics to create culturally relevant pedagogy in efforts to promote Black student achievement. Ladson-Billings' (1995) research is used as a foundation to explain culturally relevant strategies grounded in Critical Race Theory in

Education to predicate the responsibilities of K-12 Principals. Along with Ladson-Billings, Gay (2000) and Howard & Navarro (2016) also contributed to building a foundational understanding of Critical Race Theory in Education and culturally relevant strategies used to increase Black student achievement. The strategies focus on impactful classroom and school-based practices and were framed using the work of Robbins and Alvy (2004) which focuses on the principal as the instructional leader.

The research-based efforts to increase student achievement investigated in this research were centered on staff, student and family relationships and professional practices within the school community. This included but was not limited to the experience of instructional staff, relationships with students and families, and instructional practices and resources used to support rigorous instruction. It also encompassed the policies and practices within the school building to support academic achievement. These and any other direct and/or indirect supports to instruction were guided and led by the instructional leader, the school principal. The next section identifies culturally relevant strategies and demonstrates how principals can prioritize implementation to increase Black student achievement.

### **Culturally Relevant Instruction**

Reflecting on lessons of the past is essential when creating instructional plans to increase Black student achievement. It is imperative to take into consideration the historical context of Black education and students' cultural needs to integrate effective instructional practices. Culturally relevant instruction uses instructional content that is culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, and culturally compatible (Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, n.d) to teach Black children in ways that build understanding while also developing cultural competence.

Culturally appropriate environments accurately depict and respect a student's culture in the classroom or school setting. Culturally appropriate classrooms reflect student cultures in a positive light and respect all students as equal and valid contributors to the learning experience. This validates Black students as learners, making the student, the classroom, and the instruction culturally congruent. Culturally congruent classrooms reflect all students as equal partners in the learning experience. When the depiction of a student's culture and aligned instruction does not conflict with the student's culture, there is cultural compatibility in the classroom and with the learning experience for Black students. A culturally compatible learning environment allows students to learn and process information based on their schematic knowledge and understand it in a more global context. When schools and classrooms foster culturally relevant environments, increased literacy and math scores for Black students result (Rouland et al., 2014).

Culturally relevant strategies can build academic skills in the areas of literacy and math. To meet students' instructional needs, educators must know what the academic needs are by identifying the gaps in learning for Black students (Mahari de Silva et al., 2018). Desegregating achievement data to define areas of learning is the beginning of creating an effective instructional plan for students based on cultural relevancy. It is important to identify the learning standards and the instructional content needed for the student to achieve based on assessment data. Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff (n.d.) urge educators to desegregate data using a culturally relevant lens and use data points to identify areas to strengthen using culturally relevant strategies to reach academic achievement. Once educators understand the data points and learning needs, they could use that information and leverage cultural identity to approach learning objectives. This makes learning compatible with their everyday understanding, thus increasing achievement.

According to Gay, culturally relevant teaching uses student experiences and beliefs as a manner for instruction, connecting an individual's perspective with the curricular content (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade,-2015). In this manner, teachers deliver instruction beginning with the student's schematic knowledge and personal experience and use that to engage students when learning unfamiliar content. Culturally relevant teaching allows the students to make sense of new curricular content, how that content relates to their personal lives, therefore seeing themselves as part of the global community. When students are able to see their place in the world, it legitimizes and validates their cultural heritage helping to develop their cultural competence and desire to continue learning. In this way, teachers instruct students on curriculum content by building on their experiences, extending their thinking, and fostering cultural competence, regardless of their instructional starting point (Ladson-Billings 2009). Culturally relevant instruction places a positive valuation on cultural background knowledge and experiences to undo the effects of a White dominated education prevalent in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

The integration of culturally relevant instructional in the classroom is vital to the academic success of Black students. Ladson-Billings denounces the inequality of educational experiences challenging the educational system to repay the educational debt to Black people created by a historically biased educational system (Mahari de Silva et al., 2018). Being intentional and implementing culturally relevant strategies in the classroom is a step in paying down the debt and making shifts to create relevant educational experiences for the Black student and subsequently increasing Black student achievement.

Ladson-Billings' pedagogy describes what culturally relevant instruction looks like using three tenets for students to achieve academic success and positive self-efficacy. These three

tenets are: “(a) students must experience academic success; (b) Students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the social order” (Ladson Billings, 1995, p. 160). The connection between academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness “is built on a particular ideology about diversity, meaningful relationships between students and teachers, and the role of culture in the learning process” (Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, n.d., p. 9). How these three tenets appear in culturally relevant classrooms is a function of the relationship between the teacher, the student, and the teachers’ ability to link instruction with a student’s culture. Mahari de Silva et al. (2018) summarize Ladson-Billings' point that in order to effectively implement culturally relevant strategies, teachers must know their students, which includes knowing their families and the cultures from which the students come from. If a student has a culture and perspective different from the teachers’, the teacher must be able and willing to integrate perspectives different from their own into the classroom. This method allows teachers to connect with their students, creating relevant learning experiences that deepen their thought processes and connect their cultural knowledge and background experiences with educational content (Mahari de Silva et al., 2018). Connecting cultural and educational content fosters success within the Black student, not just academically to increase achievement, but also socially by building cultural competency (Ladson Billings, 2009).

In linking instruction and culture, the teacher builds a community of learners in the classroom with respect for and connections to all cultures present in the room. This goes beyond the connections that share like or similar cultures, but also those that have a different culture from the classroom teacher (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Building a culturally respectful community of learners leverages each student’s culture and individual strength, augmenting the collective

learning that takes place in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Culturally induced strategies build on the strengths of students leading them closer to academic achievement. When teachers use instructional strategies that allow students to use their strengths to make sense of and understand instructional content, they have built efficacy within the student, resulting in their seeing themselves as successful Black students and maintaining their cultural competence.

In the community of learners, teachers build on the efficacy of students and hold high expectations using culturally relevant strategies and cultural competence to help them meet the expectations (Williams, 2018). To hold high expectations for students also means creating short-term goals to help students reach the expectation. Holding high expectations and setting goals to meet them require the teacher to give consistent and timely feedback to students leading to higher achievement. In this process, the student and the teacher collaborate to decide on the goals and the support needed to reach those goals. Collective goal-setting has been shown to increase buy-in and proficiency for the student (Moeller et al., 2012). It is important to note that goal-setting is not just for high-achieving students or students needing to increase achievement; it is for all students (Moeller et al., 2012). Goal-setting reinforces the importance of teachers and instructional staff relying on data points to inform learning needs including what students know, how they know it and how they process it.

Knowledge and recalling facts and information is the first level of cognition (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Teachers can build on the knowledge of students using culturally relevant instruction to build metacognition, understanding the way students learn and process new information (Wall, 2008). Knowing the progression of cognition to metacognition in student processing allows the teacher to know what students know and how they know it in order to extend student thinking and gain knowledge. Ladson-Billings (2009) explains how teachers can



move students from cognition to metacognition by supporting students to organize their thoughts and how they think about a problem to be able to come up with their own solution (Ladson-Billings, 2009). When choosing instructional strategies, teachers must know what students know coupled with their experiences to understand and extend their thinking process. This combination is what leads students to academic success (Ladson Billings, 2009).

Understanding what students know and the diverse ways in which they process that knowledge comes from providing differentiated assessment methods, such as project-based learning and portfolio assessments directly connected to varied learning styles. Using multiple perspectives within the content and presenting instruction and assessment through varied modalities and differentiated strategies provides increased opportunities for students to grasp concepts. Maximizing learning opportunities for the child by creating “multiple entry points to important concepts” (Gardner, 1995, p. 16). Implementing culturally relevant strategies minimizes the implicit bias present in much of today’s curriculum by allowing students to present a more accurate picture of their understanding based on their individual perspectives and strengths.

Knowing student strengths and areas for growth inform goal-setting and instructional resources to meet their academic need. These resources should reflect positive aspects of student cultures in the school. Schools are full of outdated resources and curriculum “designed to maintain a White supremacist master script” that “silences multiple voices and perspectives” (Mahari de Silva et al., 2018, p.27). To counter the inherent narrative that outdated resources and materials promote and build academic success and cultural competence, “multicultural education must permeate school climate, culture, and practice—that it must be visible everywhere,

including in decision-making processes such as textbook adoption, behavior policies, and program assessment” (Landsman & Lewis, 2011, p. 80).

In low-performing schools where racial demographics often reflect students of color, using resources and materials reflecting the student population is important for the student to grasp concepts in ways relevant to their lives. This relevance helps students to develop “the ability to examine critically and challenge knowledge” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 101) and “participate fully and meaningfully in the construction of knowledge” (p. 104). Using instructional resources to connect to student lives is a strategy that builds “bridges or a scaffolding that meets students where they are (intellectually and functionally)” (p. 104).

Understanding academic content and developing cultural competence is insufficient according to Ladson-Billings (2009). In addition to understanding current issues and how they relate to students’ individual lives, Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests educating the Black student should include the development of sociopolitical consciousness so students can “engage the world and others critically” (p. 162). This allows students to “choose academic excellence and remain culturally grounded” (p. 162) and “critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (p. 162).

Family and community resources can support the school with enhancements to the curriculum through fields of inquiry, field trips, and work-study and/or volunteer opportunities. These activities include providing students with insight and interaction with social order and impactful ways to challenge the status quo. Community supports can also help families and students with physical and emotional needs. This can include resources for food insecurity and trauma-informed care, as well as other services that speak to the needs of the whole child. Collectively this reinforces “teacher knowledge about students' home culture and community”

(Bryk, 2009, p. 58) and builds partnerships to foster student achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness.

Familiarity with students' academic and social needs that foster and potentially impede learning and appropriately addressing those needs mitigates barriers to learning. For Black students experiencing a cultural disconnect with the school, it is important to acknowledge strategies and supports designed for their success. The responsibility for building partnerships to foster academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness is guided by the vision of the school principal.

### **The Role of School Leadership to Improve Teaching and Learning**

School leaders guide the formation of the school's vision for academic success and provide continued guidance through completion. GRQ #2 examines the various ways K-12 school principals of low-performing schools report they lead efforts to increase Black student achievement. Robbins and Alvy (2004) inform the research concerning the instructional responsibilities of principals. This popular handbook for principals, used by school districts, is an essential playbook for principal strategies. These twelve shifts featured in Robbins and Alvy (2004) are the practices principals must put in place to create the instructional framework of the school. The shifts are:

1. There is a shift toward observing quality, meaningful, and engaging student work; previously, supervisors concentrated primarily on the teacher delivery system.
2. Supervisors and teachers are addressing the notion that quality, meaningful, and engaging work must be offered to all students— with success for all as the goal.
3. Formative teacher supervision is focusing more on state standards, benchmarks, and frameworks. Summative evaluation practices need to follow a similar path.

4. The clinical supervision process, traditionally focused on teacher behaviors, is now refocusing around quality, meaningful, and engaging student behaviors during class, and pre-observation and post-observation conferences on student work samples, state curriculum standards, data-driven decisions, and traditional and alternative assessments.
5. Data-driven assessment decisions are influencing supervision and evaluation.
6. State-level assessments and alternative assessments, including portfolios, performances, and exhibitions, are increasingly valued by educators and the general public.
7. Schools are addressing the “best practices” instructional strategies and curriculum standards.
8. Differentiated supervision is customized for novice, experienced, and at-risk teachers needing intensive assistance.
9. Continuous teacher growth, in contrast to mastery, is a more suitable approach for addressing the complexities of teaching, learning, and assessment.
10. Teachers are initiating and directing collaborative professional development practices such as peer-coaching teams, mentoring, critical friends and lesson study groups, teacher curricular and instructional breakfasts, and action research projects.
11. Supervisors are supporting teachers engaged in individual reflection, self-evaluation, and goal-setting.
12. Building-level teacher leadership is expanding regarding instructional, curricular, and assessment decisions (p. 89).

As schools become more culturally relevant, school leadership at the local level becomes more important as principals have gained more authority, responsibility, and autonomy for academic achievement. The evolution of the school principal is directly connected to the work of integrating CRT into education to support Black students to build academic knowledge and cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995). While the work of Robbins and Alvy (2004) is geared towards whole school and not exclusive to Black student achievement, combining this research with CRT in education research creates impactful strategies geared towards Black student success.

In addition to these shifts, the responsibility of ensuring the learning environment is culturally responsive and academic content is available for all students also belongs to the instructional leader of the school, the principal. Through culturally relevant instruction, students develop a powerful sense of self and in the same way, principals must be aware of their actions, beliefs, and biases when serving Black students (Khalifa et al., n.d.). As a school leader, being unaware or not incorporating culturally relevant strategies to support Black student achievement inherently promotes racism and White dominant education in schools (Khalifa et al., 2013). Instead, principals can choose and implement strategies to support academic success and cultural competence. Cultural competency in leadership has a trickledown effect on the school environment (Clayton & Goodwin, 2015) and the ability to facilitate learning for all students among all stakeholders. Cultural competency in school leadership includes creating a culturally responsive school environment inclusive of all student backgrounds, culturally responsive instruction in classrooms, and family and community engagement (Khalifa et al, n.d.).

To help principals connect their instructional leadership responsibilities with culturally relevant strategies to support Black student achievement, four core beliefs combine the shifts

featured in Robbins and Alvy (2004) with CRT in education to highlight how the actions of principals can positively affect Black student achievement. The core beliefs are:

- Belief #1: Principals drive educational programming for Black students inclusive of rigorous, relevant content using state standards;
- Belief #2: Principals ensure the instruction happening in the classroom is conducive to Black student achievement;
- Belief #3: Principals provide coaching and support for teachers to ensure all teachers instruct Black students enabling them to learn and pass state-mandated tests; and
- Belief #4: Principals use data for ongoing improvement.

Belief #1 states that principals must promote educational programming for Black students inclusive of rigorous, relevant content using state standards. This belief encompasses the first three shifts as outlined by Robbins and Alvy (2004). Shifts one and two focus on access to meaningful and engaging student work for all students. Student work would entail the provision of relevant content and materials with access for all students based on state standards and benchmark assessments (Robbins & Alvy, 2004). Combining these three shifts promotes teachers engaging students with content students can relate to wrapped within state standards and learning expectations. (Kohn, 2010). As the instructional leader, the principal takes responsibility for framing the instruction of the K-12 classroom.

All students should have access to a rigorous curriculum based on state standards delivered using relevant and engaging content. That rigorous curriculum should include culturally relevant strategies with content and materials being relevant and engaging for Black students. When Black student achievement data show low rates of achievement, students are typically placed in remedial courses. Remedial classes help students by re-teaching and retesting

(Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, & Levy, 2007); however, that does not exempt the classes from being engaging and relevant to student experiences. Therefore, the voice and culture of the Black student must be included in curriculum and instruction in order for them to be successful.

As a resource provider, it is the responsibility of the school principal to supply relevant books and resource materials, facilitate proper instruction derived from these materials, and coach the teachers delivering this instruction (Andrews & Soder, 1987). The materials must have an “accurate portrayal of the perspectives, attitudes, and feelings of the groups being studied, inclusion of strong ethnic characters in fictional works; ethnic materials devoid of racist concepts, clichés, phrases, or words; historically accurate factual materials” (Jackson, 1994). The referred resources are specific to the people and items within a school building and are conducive to positive student achievement. The resources used in a school then must also be conducive to “student learning, developing cultural competence, and cultivating a sociopolitical awareness in students” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, pp. x-xi).

Black students must also have access to Advanced Placement and Honors courses that also have their voice and culture woven into the fabric of instruction as they are nationally the least likely to be enrolled (Jeffries & Silvernail, 2017). The reasons for the lack of participation can vary from inadequate preparation by tracking students into lower classes or exclusion because Black students do not want to attend classes made up of predominantly White middle and higher socioeconomic students (Jeffries & Silvernail, 2017). Regardless of the reasoning, principals must make the shift from Advance Placement and Honors courses from being exclusive to inclusive.

Although the instructional leader is primarily not delivering instruction in the classroom, they must know and be able to lead the instructional processes from class placement to

instructional delivery. Belief #2, that principals should ensure the instruction happening in the classroom is conducive to Black student achievement, speaks to the choosing of academic content and instructional pedagogy in the classroom and the ability to ensure those things are happening for students. Robbins and Alvy's Shifts 4 and 7 address what and how principals know what is happening in the classroom. Shift 4 aligns with teacher observations and feedback to ensure the learning climate reflects students having access to rigorous, relevant, and engaging content aligned with state standards. Shift 7 uses observations and other methodologies to ensure research-based best practices are happening in the classroom. With the support of their instructional team, the principal sets and guides what those instructional practices are and provide feedback to teachers as they implement them

When providing materials and coaching teachers with instruction, the principal "sets expectations for continual improvement of the instructional program and actively engages in staff development" (Andrews & Soder, 1987, p. 9). This requires the role of the principal to move from resource provider to one who incorporates being an instructional resource and communicator as well as being physically present (Andrews & Soder, 1987). In CRT, this work begins with self-awareness and cultural competence of the principal. "This idea implies that school leaders who have a clear and consistent ideology on the broader sociopolitical issues facing schools may be better able to reconcile multiple perspectives and challenge status quo structures in schools" (Evans, 2007, p. 163). Thus, principals' involvement in classroom improvements comes through their ability to communicate the vision and core values for learning in the school. Student learning should foster the development of cultural competence for students, the first two constructs of Ladson-Billings' ideals of CRT in education. Brown et al. state, "School leaders need to shift from a manager to a socio-cognitive leader, which is a school



leader who puts student learning first and courageously exposes inequities or inadequate student learning outcomes” (2017, p. 68). Infusing the role of principal with CRT in education directly impacts Black student academic achievement. Using CRT to frame the role of the principal to address systemic causes of low academic achievement with Black students is essential in mitigating the factors and conditions impeding access to learning for all students (DeMatthews, 2018).

Belief #3, that principals provide coaching and support for teachers to ensure all teachers instruct Black students enabling them to learn and pass state-mandated tests, speaks to the accountability teachers have to the profession and the responsibility of principals to support them. Robbins and Alvy’s Shifts 8, 9, 10, and 11 refer to the identification and differentiated response to teacher effectiveness, fostering teacher reflection and growth, and the professional development methods used to attain positive results in this area.

Knowing the instructional needs of teachers in the school requires principals to have a strong presence in the school among students, teachers, and staff, according to Andrews and Soder (1987). The physical and professional presence of the principal throughout the school exemplifies to all members of the school community the focus and importance of instruction in the school and student outcomes (Goldring et al., 2019). It is important “to increase the way a principal spends their time so that it’s more systematically on instructional areas” (p. 26). The more time a principal has to dedicate to instructional leadership, leads to building the capacity of teachers and the instructional practices in the classroom, which is critical to improve achievement (p. 21).

Range et al. (2011) argue that “principals must create a vision for supervisory practice before they can effectively take on the role of instructional leaders” (p. 246). In order to develop

a vision, the principal must have an understanding of what occurs in the classroom. Teacher observations for the purpose of feedback, guidance, and improvement are essential for instructional leaders

Many school districts mandate observational cycles that fluctuate between two to four observations a year. Observation protocols to increase teacher effectiveness should include the state accountability evaluation tool as well as informal feedback via a school-based observation tool. Informal feedback to gauge effectiveness can include classroom walkthroughs, teacher portfolios, student feedback, and other instructional artifacts (Range et al., 2011). Based on the collection of these artifacts, school principals develop an understanding of the instruction happening in the classroom and provide the needed support. Research shows, however, that mandated observations alone cannot identify or improve teacher instructional capacity ability, or efficiency.

Observation results and feedback must be frequent and paired with meaningful professional development. Shaha et al. (2015) found that when teachers were “observed more frequently as part of a coordinated undertaking and in conjunction with accessibility of an online, on-demand PD (Professional Development) offering, teachers collectively had greater gains in the performance of their students than those who had fewer observations” (p. 60). DeMatthews’ (2018) study chronicles an effective principal who was able to create a climate of teacher growth positively impacting student growth through tailored professional development opportunities specifically designed for the individual teacher.

Since “professional development (PD) remains a widespread approach aimed at improving teacher efficacy and impacts on students” (Shaha et al., 2015 p. 55), coupling observations and feedback with additional learning promotes teacher growth. By being a

presence, spending time in classrooms, and acquainting themselves with the strengths and capacity of the teachers in the school, principals are better positioned to guide the direction of student learning through professional development.

The first three Beliefs are useless for Black student achievement if there is no system of measurement to determine effectiveness. To recap, Belief #1, Belief #2, and Belief #3 address the principal as instructional leader by driving, observing, and fostering educational programming to promote Black student achievement. Alvin and Alvy's Shifts #5 and #6 speak to how principals create an environment of reflection by valuing and using data to be the force behind decision-making processes in schools. Shift #5, "Data-driven assessment decisions are influencing supervision and evaluation" (Robbins & Alvy, 2004, p. 89), and Shift #6, "State-level assessments and alternative assessments, including portfolios, performances, and exhibitions, are increasingly valued by educators and the general public" (p. 89), place value on the state assessments and use state assessment data and evaluation to make decisions to positively impact the school. This system of measurement and decision-making should not be done in isolation but incorporate the varied perspectives of building-level leaders and used for school improvement. Adding Shift #12, "Building-level teacher leadership is expanding regarding instructional, curricular, and assessment decisions" (Robbins & Alvy, 2004, p. 90), to Shifts #5 and #6 allows for voice from stakeholders in and outside of the building to have a voice in the decision-making. Allowing stakeholders to assess data points and have voice in the decisions made as a result is the root of Belief #4, "Principals use Data for Ongoing Improvement with Stakeholders."

Knowing and understanding student and teacher demographics give insight into the needs of the students and strategies the schools must employ as these factors can positively or

negatively impact student achievement. Digging down into the data to assess trends in race, gender, ability, socioeconomics, language, attendance, and behavior can also reveal disparities not apparent in the everyday workings of the school. Collecting and valuing various data points, bringing stakeholders together to disaggregate the data, and then coming to agreements on programming needed for school improvement can ensure appropriate efforts go to the areas of need.

The ability to recognize disparities in achievement based on racial lines is an important first step for the principal to implement CRT in their school. Principals must acknowledge the racial dynamics of the school, identify where inequities are present, and determine how to address each problem. Creating a team to support school leadership helps the principal look beyond their own ideals when identifying and addressing the needs of the school. As instructional leaders, principals must include site-based management using leaders to help with the decision-making of the school (Robbins & Alvy, 2004). Utilizing the experiences and perspectives of teachers, school staff, students, parents, community members, and all stakeholders in decision-making and support for student achievement creates support, buy-in, and movement with the decisions. By acknowledging, valuing, and being transparent with school data, and seeking input from stakeholders, principals will not be able to ignore or dismiss Black student achievement. Using collected data, principals must “determine the manner in which racial meanings and identities provide the basis for action, that being educational decision making for students of color” (Evans, 2007, p. 166). By including the site-based management team, the decisions and actions made to support Black student achievement then permeate everything that happens in the school.

By addressing these four Beliefs, the instructional leader guides, observes, supports, and assesses the instructional program of a school to ensure Black students are achieving. It is imperative the principal takes the lead, along with site-based leadership to design instructional processes and protocols for Black students in order to increase achievement

Application of CRT in education thus transforming the American educational system will not occur without willing leadership having knowledge of the issues, authority, and autonomy to make decisions based on the best interest of students as a reflection of community needs. Cultural introspection to assess beliefs and biases one may have that may influence their leadership can have far-reaching and lasting effects on students and teaching staff. The leader must be knowledgeable of curricular content centralized around race and be “willing to guide teachers into having courageous conversations where they interrogate their assumptions about race and culture and their impact on the classroom” (Khalifa et al., n.d., p. 1281). To accomplish this, the school leader must reflect on the gradations of engagements, experiences, and encounters they have had with race over the course of their lives and career, assess “to what extent they acknowledge and engage race and racism in their schools” (Milligan, & Howley, 2015 p. 49), and understand how racial and cultural relations impact the larger school community.

Connecting cultural beliefs and values in the school should not be isolated to the classrooms but include the entire school environment. Creating a “welcoming, inclusive, and accepting of minoritized students” (Khalifa et al., n.d., p. 1275) school environment brings a cultural relevance, including an acceptance and positive valuation for the people of the community (Auerbach, 2007). This extends from the student to family dynamics to meet the needs of the whole child. When schools are not responsive to student, parent, and families, the

partnership suffers and student success is compromised. With lags in achievement present in schools, it is important to place an increased focus on marginalized populations to address family engagement as a strategy to increase achievement. Family engagement strategies should include teachers familiarizing themselves with students' backgrounds and cultures as well as building trust between the family and the teacher (Bryk, 2009). Using community partnerships and resources, schools build understanding and trust with families that establish a foundation for student growth, achievement, and success.

Combining these elements of leadership with the theories of CRT in education creates responsibility on all levels, positively impacting achievement for Black students. Leadership support of culturally relevant instruction is imperative if we want to see disparities reduced in our nation because separating “teaching and learning from the ethnicities and cultures of students minimizes the chances that their achievement potential will ever be fully realized” (Gay, 2000, p. 23).

While this research shares what principals can do to improve academic achievement in their schools, there are conditions that impede implementation of those research-based practices. The next section outlines the factors and conditions that impeded a principal's ability to target student achievement.

### **Factors and Conditions in Low-performing Schools**

To gain a greater understanding of the efforts of K-12 principals as instructional leaders, this study presented factors and conditions circumferential to academic achievement in low-performing schools. Guiding Research Question #3, *What are the factors and conditions in low-performing schools that K-12 principals say inhibit and promote their efforts to increase achievement for the Black student population?* is intended to detail factors in low-performing

schools. The work of Duke et al. (2007) highlights factors and conditions in low-performing schools. While many low-performing schools have high percentages of Black students, this fact does not imply these students are the sole reason for the overall low performance of the school. This study also identifies factors present that could potentially contribute to achievement rates in low-performing schools.

While principals act as instructional leaders promoting, guiding, coaching, and assessing the instructional plan of the school, there may be factors and conditions mitigating the course of academic achievement. Analyzing and addressing these factors as accountability measures require schools to improve subgroup achievement levels regardless of whole school performance. Subgroups include but are not limited to Black students, as nationally they are the lowest performing subgroup in Grades 4 and 8 reading and math scores. By addressing the needs of the lowest performing group and increasing scores, other subgroups will benefit and the school will increase as a whole (Housman & Martinez, 2001). Low-performing schools can relieve themselves of their performance status by emphasizing Black student achievement. Implementation of effective strategies directly impacts the achievement of all students, including other subgroups lagging in achievement. All students should “have the opportunity to show what they have understood—and not understood—in ways that are comfortable to them” (Gardner 1995 p. 17). As instructional leaders, K-12 principals can implement culturally relevant strategies in low-performing schools to increase academic achievement.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) definition of “Low-performing schools are those that receive a school performance grade of D or F and a school growth score of “met expected growth” or “not met expected growth” as defined by G.S. 115C-83.15. Though the technical definition is in specific relation to low math and reading scores, this

study addressed the factors and conditions reported by principals present in low-performing schools that contributed to the low performance. The issues in low-performing schools may be consistent across schools, such as low reading scores and inexperienced staff with high turnover, but their low-performance status is identified uniquely by the individual school's history and community context (Duke, 2014).

Consistent with the 2007 findings of Duke et al., principals polled across elementary and middle schools report challenges are directly traced to three conditions: student readiness skills, cultures of low expectations, and teacher capacity or preparedness to teach. Regarding student readiness skills, Duke et al. (2007) write, "Outcomes include performance in reading and mathematics, conduct in school, and attendance" (p. 9). The second condition contributing to low performance, according to Duke et al. (2007), is that "schools have been described as having cultures of low expectations and defeatism, cultures in which educators devote more time to making excuses for inadequate student achievement than to finding ways to improve the situation" (p. 13). Staffing issues are the last reported common condition low-performing schools often face. Teachers and staff in low-performing schools often lack experience, certification, and preparation for the task (Ford & Moore, 2013). The pervasiveness of these factors and conditions among schools could indicate a relationship between the three although they require independent handling.

According to the 2018-2019 N. Carolina End-of-Grade Statewide English Language Arts (ELA) general test, Black students ranked lowest in reading proficiency among all racial groups. Tables 1 and Table 2 shows pre COVID-19 pandemic proficiency rates for English Language Arts (ELA) and Math respectfully. The tables compare statewide proficiency rates for Black/African American students.



Table 1

*2018-19 North Carolina End of Grade Statewide English Language Arts (ELA)*

<u>ELA General Testing Results</u>			
Grade	State % Proficient at or above Level 3	Black % Proficient at or above Level 3	Place among all racial subgroups
3	56.8	40.8	lowest
4	57.3	40.5	lowest
5	54.6	36.3	lowest
6	60.0	42.8	lowest
7	58.8	41.4	lowest
8	55.6	38.7	lowest
English II	59.7	41.5	lowest

Table 2

*2018-19 North Carolina End of Grade Statewide Math*

<u>Math General Testing Results</u>			
Grade	State % Proficient at or above Level 3	Black % Proficient at or above Level 3	Place among all racial subgroups
3	64.3	47.0	lowest
4	57.3	37.0	lowest
5	60.2	41.3	lowest
6	58.8	38.9	lowest
7	58.4	38.0	lowest
8	35.6	33.7	lowest
Math I	56.1	27.3	lowest

North Carolina General Test questions are based on curriculum standards. Each question is directly connected to a reading or math standard and designed to assess the student on that standard. When test results are released, instructional staff can assess the data to pinpoint

standards students displayed mastery. “Most principals generalized about reading problems, rather than singling out particular aspects of reading, such as comprehension, word recognition, vocabulary, and decoding” (Duke et al., 2007, p. 9) making it difficult to design appropriate interventions for students. The lack of specificity on the issues Black students demonstrate in reading can lead to ineffective measures to increase achievement in that area.

When culturally relevant strategies are not in place and students are not achieving at or above proficient levels, many teachers and school staff develop a “deficit mindset” paradigm as it pertains to the lowest performing students. The ideology of the deficit mindset uses data, such as that in Table 1 and Table 2, to reinforce the false notion that Black students are intellectually inferior, a notion that also impacts curriculum development and school policies impacting academic achievement for Black students (Lewis et al., 2008). This internalized mindset can also dictate behaviors and actions contradictory to academic achievement. Staff “often reinforce this deficit thinking onto their students and have low expectations, give low-level assignments, and speak in ways that are demeaning and demoralizing” (p. 141).

Mayer and Tucker (2010) write, “Teachers with low expectations, teachers with a low sense of efficacy, teachers’ beliefs that counter new reform ideas, lack of teachers’ knowledge in content areas, and school administration that does not support reform efforts” (p. 470) perpetuate low expectations, oppose academic success, and is contrary to culturally relevant instruction. Being lenient by providing less challenging work gives students a false sense of success and maintains a trajectory of academic failure. Instead, research demonstrates that not only that students’ academic achievement depends extensively upon the academic rigor of the curriculum” (Ford & Moore, 2013, p. 405) but also that culturally relevant instruction dictates that “teachers must pair high expectations with loving relationships” and “that teachers can learn much by

tapping into characteristics of caring in Black communities” (Williams, 2018, p. 2). Teachers must care enough about students to challenge and support them to meet high expectations.

To design an effective instructional plan targeting the needs of students and holding high expectations, principals must hold teachers accountable for planning and implementing grade-level learning standards for students in reading and math. African Americans (and other racial minorities) “were always expected to perform poorly (and these expectations have a direct relationship with their achievement)” (Khalifa et al., 2013, p. 500). If students are unable to reach proficiency with grade-level standards, support must be put in place, as there is a direct correlation between low expectations and low achievement.

In the community of Black learners, schools must hold “high expectations for students and taking action to teach and support in ways that make it possible for students to meet those expectations” (Williams, 2018 p. 3). The mindset and actions of the teacher are critical to Black student achievement, and the principal must provide coaching and support as “ill qualified teachers tend to have difficulty teaching and challenging African American males” (Ford & Moore, 2013, p. 406). The instructional mindset that places “blame on students, their background, families, and/or communities effectively negates the impact of structural inequality on students of color and their schools and communities” (Evans, 2007, p. 176) and does not address the professional needs of the teacher unable to reach and teach all students. “Teachers with low expectations, teachers with a low sense of efficacy, teachers’ beliefs that counter new reform ideas, lack of teachers’ knowledge in content areas” (Mayer & Tucker, 2010, p. 470) speaks more to an issue with the teacher and not the student.

Balancing the factors and conditions of the school and the effective strategies that support Black student achievement can depend on the beliefs of those supporting the implementation

process. When instructional leaders examine data and begin addressing the needs of students, there will often be multiple subgroups lagging in achievement. Black students, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, and English learners often score below average proficiency. When students belong to one or more of these subgroups, the emphasis on learning can become displaced and attributed to other factors, leading schools to default to a subscription to colorblindness. Schools may begin combining like groups, “Black and Brown” or “People of Color” or collaborating with the community to provide basic welfare needs rather than address the impact of racism on the school. The next section identifies an area of consensus and dispute when schools address the circumstances of the Black learner as opposed to the Black student as an individual.

### **Area of Consensus and Dispute**

An alternative theory of approaching academic achievement in low-performing schools eliminates considerations based solely on race. Research on colorblind ideology using the work of Castro-Atwater (2016) is presented in this literature review to provide an alternate perspective on culturally relevant strategies. A belief contrary to CRT in education is the concept of “color-blind racial ideology (CBRI) in which race-based decision-making is seen as antithetical to the goal of an ideal ‘color-blind’ world” (Castro-Atwater, 2016, p. 207). The purpose of introducing colorblind theory is to understand how the perspective of school principals as instructional leaders can impact their efforts to address Black student achievement in low-performing schools. To espouse that we need to treat everyone as equals because we are all equal (Castro-Atwater, 2016) negates the need to apply CRT in education, implying all students have the same needs and respond to education in like ways. In this area of consensus and dispute the foundational

tenets of colorblind ideology are examined, how colorblind ideology manifests in schools, and the responsibility of principals to ensure all students receive a fair education.

One of the main tenets of colorblind ideology is “the attitude adopted by educators who believe strongly that by simply ignoring racial group membership or skin color, all resulting decisions and practices will be fair” (Castro-Atwater, 2016, p. 208). Related, other tenets include “the interconnected U.S. historical ideas of merit (hard work will objectively earn one’s rewards, regardless of historical constructs), and individualism (personal characteristics, rather than group membership, are the sole determinant in one’s life outcomes)” (Castro-Atwater, 2016, p. 209). As well, “the idea of equating “White” with “normal” encourages a monolithic racial worldview in which other racial worldviews are judged as “less than” or “different” (Castro-Atwater, 2016, p. 209). Collectively, these three tenets are in direct conflict with the changes CRT in education intends to carry out to improve Black student achievement.

Creating an educational environment that is “fair” under the tenets of colorblind ideology implies fair means everyone receives the same level of treatment and services. Schools following colorblind ideology typically do not teach using different perspectives, especially as it pertains to historical events or social studies curriculum (Castro-Atwater, 2016) and the impact race has on U.S. history. Historical practices rooted in racism have impacted current educational practices because they ignore the historical contexts that created educational inequities in schools that have led to disproportionate access and low proficiency rates for Black students. Eradicating the history of race relations suggests that “race problems are a thing of the past and “no longer important,” (Castro-Atwater, 2016, p. 213), implying schools should not focus on the impact race had on historical and current practices.

Ignoring and disengaging with the historical context of race relations in the U. S. places an increased focus on the “individualistic” nature of colorblind ideology, rendering the individual as the cause of their own fate. “Educators who adopt a CBRI perspective do not acknowledge the structures, policies, and racial beliefs that unfairly discriminate against students of color” (Castro-Atwater, 2016, p. 209) and perpetuate teacher biases that negatively impact academic achievement for Black students. How a teacher feels or what a teacher assumes about a student’s ability directly impacts the student’s performance for that teacher.

When adhering to colorblind ideology, “students from stigmatized ethnic groups were found to be more susceptible to teacher underestimates of ability than their non-stigmatized peers” (Castro-Atwater, 2016, p. 211). Known as a deficit mindset, “the deficit paradigm creates, justifies, and maintains unequal education experiences for African American learners by blaming students, not schools or the society, for the Black–White achievement gap” (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 141). This view posits that a student’s race has no impact on their achievement, that the student is responsible for the mindset of the teacher, and that the instructional methods of the teacher bear no responsibility for student achievement or lack thereof.

When a student is taught through a deficit lens, a student’s sense of self is diminished, both academically and socially. Academic self-concepts in students develop early in a student’s academic career. The timing of the development of a student’s self-concept aligns “more closely with external indicators, and this is often thought to be due to their greater reliance on social comparison processes (Cvencek et al., 2018, p. 1100). The deficit mindset connected to colorblind ideology can be devastating for marginalized students and communities. Such thinking is contrary to the development of a student’s cultural competency, and devastating to academic achievement. When students are not performing on grade level, “the negative effects

are brought about, for example, by not seeing one's history, culture, or background represented in the textbook or curriculum or by seeing that history, culture, or background distorted" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 45).

Through colorblind ideology, the abbreviated knowledge of Black history and the diminished sense of self also positions "Whiteness" as the ideal in schools and diminishes the cultural identity of Black students (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020). Diminishing the cultural identity of Black students can lead to a negative sense of self both when Black children do not see themselves portrayed at all or portrayed negatively in history or experience the dismissal of acts of racism and discrimination in the present (Castro-Atwater, 2016).

Colorblind ideology dismisses and/or gives a dismal portrayal of the history of race relations in the U.S., leading to students having a diminished sense of self, often resulting in lowered academic performance. Schools must investigate the presence of this ideology where there are low rates of Black student achievement. As the school's instructional leader, the principal must understand how these practices impact all students and address them accordingly. The school principal must be prepared to be transparent and address the issues of low performance and the relationship it has with race in their school. Colorblind ideology in schools "reluctantly acknowledged racism and made race insignificant in part because they aimed to project a 'positive image' of themselves and their school to their school community" (Evans, 2007, p. 164), perpetuating Whiteness and low Black student achievement.

According to Khalifa et al. (2013), transformational leadership practices "have shown tremendous benefit and promise addressing student achievement" (p. 497). When school leaders do not or are not equipped to address and handle the social and/or political issues of their schools, especially as it pertains to race and demographic changes, their actions (or inaction)

revert the school setting into colorblind ideology. Leaders who “defined racism and racial conflict in terms of overt actions and behaviors, without the recognition of underlying or subtle racial tensions” (Evans, 2007, p. 164) promote an ideology in their school that significantly limits Black student achievement. Principals proactively addressing issues of race and the effects of colorblindness and perpetuating CRT in education can yield positive effects for Black students. By providing coaching, professional development, and accountability, “school principals can affect student success by helping teachers be the best they can be” (Robbins & Alvy, 2004, p. 89), thus promoting achievement for all students.

Using CRT in education to “dispel the myths of color blindness, neutrality, and meritocracy, which ignore the histories, perspectives, and—in some cases—the very presence of people of color” (Evans, 2007, p. 166) can yield positive results for Black students. “The deficit paradigm becomes problematic in schools when school agents and students come from different cultures and have difficulty relating to each other” (Lewis et al., p. 141). Naming areas of colorblindness in schools and addressing them is the responsibility of the school leader. For “to be immersed in an educational system that fails to recognize the history, culture, and needs of Black students is far worse than being totally excluded” (Mahari de Silva et al., 2018, p.25).

### **Summary**

Educating Black students in the U.S. has changed over time. From the denial of academic instruction to the present with attempts to integrate the culture and identity into the curriculum, school leaders are tasked with ensuring Black student achievement. Using data to assess needs when choosing pedagogy to drive academic learning is a decision not to be taken lightly by the school principal. It is important that “leaders must have the time, the knowledge, and the consultative skills needed to provide teachers in all the relevant grade levels and subject areas



with valid, useful advice about their instructional practices” (Leithwood & Louis, 2011, p. 6).

The ethical responsibility of the school leader to ensure all students are positioned to learn and achieve regardless of their racial identity is not debatable (Robbins & Alvy, 2004).

Given the history of racism in the U.S. and the impact it has on the educational system, Guiding Research Question #1 of this study assessed the degree to which principals believed leading efforts to increase Black student achievement is important. The research shows that throughout history, school leadership has had a strong impact on the direction of education for Black students. This education began with slave owners deciding how and when Black slaves should be educated then moved to Black leaders like W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington leading the educational charge post emancipation. The more education was available to Black people, the greater the importance for their having a voice in that education. The ESEA of 1965 placed an increased focus on Black student achievement, and 30 years later, Ladson-Billings provided the educational world a blueprint for Black student achievement. There is an historical aspect as well as contemporary context for focusing on Black student achievement, as they are still our nation’s lowest-performing students.

To reach educational equality for Black students, Guiding Research Question #2 asked for the various ways principals report they led efforts to increase Black student achievement. The literature promoting the integration of culturally relevant strategies in schools is an effective way to emphasize the importance of Black student achievement in the curriculum and school practices. The work of Robbins and Alvy (2004) and the tenets of CRT in Education can inform the work of principals in creating environments conducive to promoting Black student achievement. As instructional leaders, principals’ use of data to implement instructional practices

meant to create equal opportunities and to support and hold teachers accountable for student learning is vital to the implementation of CRT in education and Black student achievement.

Although there are factors and conditions in schools that inhibit and promote Black student achievement, the principal's responsibility is to develop data points to design an instructional plan for students. Guiding Research Question #3 was designed to identify the circumstances that allow K-12 principals to address all needs of students in the school. The literature reviewed in this chapter suggested that deficit mindset and teacher attitude were pervasive issues among low-performing schools and contributed to low reading and math proficiency among Black students. To investigate the GRQs beyond the literature, Chapter Three outlines the methodology, including the participants, setting and data collecting processes of the study.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research method used in this study. The approach outlined assessed the strategies and opportunities used in schools by collecting quantitative data through questionnaire and through anecdotal data collected from principals sharing their experiences. Using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach, this study asked principals for details using a questionnaire on the importance, frequency, and efficacy of the strategies used to increase Black student achievement. These details are confirmed with explanations of these strategies through the K-12 principal's voice using an interview protocol.

This chapter begins with an overview of the method and research design, including an in-depth explanation of the participants and setting, the reasoning behind the development of instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis processes. Offered throughout this chapter are connections to the three guiding research questions used to build an understanding of the efforts of K-12 principals. Also included in this chapter is an overview of the perspective and role of the researcher, the delimitations and limitations of the study, and a chapter summary.

#### **Type of Study**

Garcia and Mayorga (2018) noted, "Statistics more than often frame Communities of Color in a deficit lens within the United States educational system" (p. 232). Hence, a sequential mixed-methods approach was chosen to best offer a true depiction of efforts to increase Black student achievement. Using a sequential explanatory mixed-method design consisting "of first collecting quantitative data and then collecting qualitative data to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results" (Dhanapati, 2016 p. 574) allows principals to give voice to their efforts and roadblocks and instructional leaders.

Because the study is grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), a sequential explanatory method was used to provide “a platform in acknowledging the study of race as it applies to statistical methods and practices” (Garcia & Mayorga, 2018, p. 232). By using the narrative of the qualitative data to inform the data collected using quantitative measures, themes and practices were developed to provide answers to the guiding research questions centered on Black student achievement in low-performing schools. The three guiding research questions used to develop the tools were:

GRQ #1: To what degree do principals believe leading efforts to improve Black student achievement is a priority?

GRQ #2: What are the various ways K-12 school principals of low-performing schools report they lead efforts to increase student achievement?

GRQ #3: What are the factors and conditions in low-performing schools that inhibit and promote Black student achievement?

Quantitative and qualitative data from the questionnaire and interview protocol sought to inform all three questions.

The data collected from the questionnaire and interview protocol satisfied the structure of the sequential mixed-methods approach used to conduct a collective case study. Pearson et al. (2015) noted, “Case study methodology should be considered when the goal is to investigate ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions about contemporary events and where there are many variables of interest and limited ability to exercise control in the setting” (p. 1). A collective case study is a study in which “one issue or concern is again selected, but the inquirer selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue” (Creswell & Poth, 2016 p. 99). The methodology of a collective case study was selected to feature the varied avenues illustrating the “how and why” principals

target Black student achievement in low-performing schools. Five principals were selected for a collective case study to identify factors and conditions such as cultures, practices, and policies implemented and supported by the K-12 school principals in low-performing schools, showing “different perspectives on the same issue” (Creswell & Poth, 2016 p. 99). These five principals implemented strategies to improve student achievement at their schools, which also included approaches specific to Black student achievement.

An integrated approach was used when analyzing the data in an effort to capture themes from each principal. Analyzing both the qualitative and quantitative data provided a holistic analysis examining what was reported to capture a full picture of the efforts of K-12 school principals. Findings included a within-case analysis that described each case individually and then collectively. Each interview was analyzed to derive themes used in establishing findings. Analyzing the data individually and then collectively allowed each case to highlight their efforts that were then measured against the success of those efforts against their own data and not a standard growth measure (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

### **Participants and Setting**

K-12 principals in the northeast central region of North Carolina, also known as the Research Triangle Park (RTP), were targeted for this study. Schools were chosen for participation based on population demographics, equivalence in performance expectations, and proximity to the researcher. RTP at this time reflected a densely populated area of the state in which Blacks make up 22% of the population according to 2019 census data, 10 percentage points higher than the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The State of North Carolina used a universal rating scale for school performance giving “grades” to schools and school districts in the areas of “student performance and academic growth, school and student

characteristics, and many other details” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [www.dpi.nc.gov/data-reports/school-report-cards](http://www.dpi.nc.gov/data-reports/school-report-cards)) including school safety, attendance, and class size data.

There were 12 completed responses to the questionnaire from principals, two of whom were principals from low-performing schools and ten from schools not considered low performing. Of the two schools designated as low performing, one school was a middle school with 25%-50% of the population being Black/African American. The principal of that school identified as White with 4 to 9 years of experience with 6 to 10 of those years at his current school. He had served as principal at one to two schools. Of the second low-performing school, the principal chose not to disclose their gender or race but served at the elementary school with 51%-75% of the population identifying as Black/African American. They had 4 to 9 years of experience with 1 to 2 years at their current school; they had served at two to three schools.

Although 10 schools were not considered low performing, demographic information was collected. Of these 10 schools, four serve populations less than 25%, and the remaining six had a population of 25%-50% identifying as Black/African American. Two participants were in their first year as principals, with one serving between 1 to 3 years and two serving between 4 and 9 years. The remaining five principals had served between 10 and 20 years as school principals. These participants all served at fewer than three schools except for one who had served for more than five schools as principal. Three were in their first year as principal at their current school, two had served 1 to 2 years at their current school, two had served 3 to 5 years at their current school, and three had served 6 to 10 years at their current school. Principal participants who completed the questionnaire were selected for participation in the comparative case study based

on their responses to the questionnaire in conjunction with their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview.

Five principal participants opted to participate in the interview, three who identified as male and two who identified as female. Of the three males, two identified as Black and one as White. Of the two females, one identified as Black and one as White. Two participants were in their first year as principal, two in their third year, and one in his tenth year as principal. Of the five schools represented, one was in Wake County while the other four were located in Durham County. One school was a Kindergarten through Grade 5 elementary school and four were middle schools with students attending in Grades 6 through 8. The principals who were willing to participate were the ones selected for comparison in the findings. There were no identified ethical considerations as all principals opted to participate willingly with the option to remove themselves from the process at any time.

To obtain the quantitative data from the research to inform the guiding research questions, a questionnaire (see Appendix A) designed to assess the frequency, efficacy, and importance of the use of targeted research-based strategies effective resulting in the growth of academic achievement for Black student was sent to principals in Wake and Durham counties in North Carolina. The quantitative data obtained from the participants through the questionnaire related to the questions used during the interview process in the qualitative portion of the study. The next section contains more in-depth descriptions of the instruments used, the data collected, and their connection to the guiding research questions.

Of the twelve participating schools in the study, three schools were low-performing schools at some point during recent years. Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, school ratings and performances have shifted school accountability measures. In North Carolina, End-

of-Grade and End-of-Course assessments were cancelled during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. Consequently, assessment of school performance grades was based upon the 2018-2019 school year accountability measures. In addition, a lack of responses from schools with this designation prompted the researcher to cast a wider net for responses. Although this study was initially intended to focus on low-performing schools, the focus of the study evolved to include the academic achievement of Black students in urban public schools in the RTP (Research Triangle Park) area. Because the profiles of low-performing schools can vary due to the context and make-up of the school, this study considered two reported factors and conditions inhibiting and promoting academic achievement for Black students.

### **Development of Instruments**

The methods and instruments employed were designed to answer the following guiding research questions:

GRQ #1: To what degree do principals believe leading efforts to improve Black student achievement is a priority?

GRQ #2: What are the various ways K-12 school principals of low-performing schools report they lead efforts to increase student achievement?

GRQ #3: What are the factors and conditions in low-performing schools that inhibit and promote Black student achievement?

Using a sequential mixed-methods design, a questionnaire was developed to assess the quantitative piece of the study and was followed by interviews with K-12 principals for qualitative validation. This method provided participating principals an opportunity to add and/or clarify the data they provided on their strategies grounded in Critical Race Theory. Each guiding research question had a quantitative and a qualitative component provided by principals.



The instruments used in this study were developed using criteria based on CRT in education. The strategies outlined by researchers of CRT in education are essential to the academic achievement of Black students. “According to the cultural capital theory, the mismatch between teachers and students in cultural misunderstandings and misinterpretations which complicate teacher-student interactions” (Milligan & Howley, 2015 p. 44) are dire to academic and social success for Black students. To include cultural capital theory, principals must employ strategies and practices considering teacher characteristics, qualifications, support, and data-driven instruction in the classroom. These are strategies and practices that principals can promote by holding instructional staff accountable for establishing a learning environment conducive to student learning specific to Black students.

### **Questionnaire Development**

Questions focused on who the principal hired for instruction, how the principal upheld expectations for instruction, and what opportunities for growth the principal provided for improved instructional practices with regard to Black student achievement. The questionnaire solicited data on hiring a diverse and experienced staff, accountability for staff (including the use of instructional practices and resources to promote Black student achievement), and professional development for staff. Ladson-Billings (2009) suggests principals recruit “teacher candidates who have expressed an interest and a desire to work with African American students” (p. 143) and “provide educational experiences that help teachers understand the central role of culture” (p.143). How and if a principal can impact any cultural misunderstandings and misinterpretations and the practices of the teachers impacting Black student achievement is dependent on their efficacy to do so.

Knowledgeable implementation of culturally relevant strategies is crucial in promoting Black student achievement. Providing support for instructional staff that “models commitment to school goals, articulates a vision of instructional goals and the means for integrating instructional planning and goal attainment, and sets and adheres to clear performance standards for instruction and teacher behavior” is essential (Andrews & Soder, 1987. p. 9). Creating a professional development plan for the school based on demonstrated needs can include but are not exclusive to “observations of teachers, and reorganizing the master schedule and planning time to allow for professional learning communities” (DeMatthews, 2018 p. 416). Using a professional development plan, principals can tier support to teachers based on the individual teacher’s needs and efficacy in supporting Black student achievement. Questions regarding the principal’s level of importance for teacher professional development and their role in making provisions for teacher growth were included in the questionnaire, as well.

Aligned with teacher and instructional staff professional growth, student growth must be included in the promotion as well. When all stakeholders are included in the promotion of growth, the culture of low expectations for students is negated, removing the excuses prevalent in low-performing schools (Duke et al., 2007). Addressing the needs of Black students through staff also includes changing school culture. Questions about the efforts and efficacy of principals specific to school culture change as well as the use of data, goal-setting, growth mindset, and family and community engagement were included.

Data-driven leadership is rooted in CRT in education. When schools disaggregate data based on race, they can identify the areas of need for subgroups and provide the appropriate interventions leading to success. Usage of disaggregated school and student data by race highlights disparities and informs instructional leadership on potential allocation of resources

and materials, strategies, and interventions needed to support a specific population. Then, the principal, along with instructional staff, can set goals and learning expectations for individual students and the whole school. Professional Learning Communities can use the data for effective planning and instructional strategies that are aligned with goals targeted at increasing achievement. Using data to set goals and expectations for learning creates a shared responsibility between students and teachers for academic improvement, thus decreasing race-based predictors of academic achievement (Howard, & Rodriguez-Minkoff, n.d.).

Data-driven goal-setting, growth mindset, and family and community engagement were notions incorporated into the questionnaire. The questionnaire also solicited strategies that take a strengths-based approach to increase academic achievement for Black students. These strategies use instructional scaffolding to create relevant and higher-order thinking opportunities using varied learning styles and differentiated assessment methods. The strategies that are rooted in CRT are “more suitable means to provide students of color with equitable opportunities for success in the classroom” (Howard, & Rodriguez-Minkoff, n.d. p. 6).

The questionnaire began to gauge the level of parent, family, and community engagement, the importance the principal placed on parent, family, and community engagement, and the efficacy of the principal’s efforts to impact engagement. According to Bryk (2009), the second Essential Support for school reform is to strengthen family, community, and school ties. By “supporting parents to support learning” (p. 57), “enhancing parent-teacher trust” (p. 58), reinforcing “teacher knowledge about students’ home culture and community” (p. 58), and building partnerships with community resources, schools establish essential supports for student growth, achievement, and success. When schools are not responsive to parent and family needs when engaging with schools, the partnership suffers, and student success is compromised. With

achievement gaps present in schools and districts in mind, the questionnaire included questions regarding family engagement because of its demonstrated positive impact on academic achievement and school culture.

The questionnaire also gauged principals' perceptions of the factors and conditions causing a negative impact on Black student achievement. Perceptions of these factors were explored during the interview process. Howard and Rodriguez-Minkoff (n.d.) suggested that even when instructional staff are using "strategies and classroom environments that help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups attain the knowledge, skills and attitudes to function effectively within and help create and perpetuate a just, human and democratic society" (p. 6), there could be factors and conditions that mitigate these efforts if not addressed.

Guiding Research Question #3 explored the factors and conditions in schools that inhibit and promote Black student achievement. While the presence of the previously mentioned research-based strategies has been demonstrated effective, there could also be factors and conditions present in low-performing schools that can inhibit those efforts.

### **Interview Protocol**

"Effective school leaders must foster a rich learning environment, open avenues for sharing expertise, and build a shared sense of responsibility across classroom and community" (Singh & Al-Fadhli, 2011 p. 753); therefore, it is important to ensure a detailed account of what occurs in schools. Because "quantitative approaches often encode particular assumptions about the nature of social processes and the generation of educational inequality reflect a generally superficial understanding of racism' and perpetuate white supremacy" (Garcia & Mayorga 2018 p. 232), it was important to pair the questionnaire with an interview to gather additional qualitative data. The interview process consisted of open-ended questions, giving principals an

opportunity to elaborate on what they reported in the questionnaire. While the questionnaire was designed to assess the levels of importance, frequency, and efficacy of principals' efforts, qualitative data from the interview protocol sought to provide additional details to these questions.

During the interview process, principals were asked open-ended questions about the strategies and practices at their schools and their actions to support Black student achievement. The interview questions correlated with the topics on the questionnaire but sought information specific to the school. GRQ #2 was designed to assess the various ways principals lead efforts in their schools to increase Black student achievement. Throughout the interview process, principals shared specifics of their experiences including their level of focus ~~on~~ and actions to increase Black student achievement as well as their implementation of strategies at the school level. To address GRQ #3, principals were given the opportunity to speak freely about the factors and conditions at their schools promoting or inhibiting Black student achievement and the courses of action they have taken in response.

The design of the questionnaire and interview protocol asked questions to assess the level of importance to the principal, the frequency of use, and the principal's efficacy in implementing research-based instructional strategies to improve Black student achievement. Prior to the start of the data collection, a pilot study was conducted with the help of a fellow doctoral student to test the efficacy of the instruments. The pilot study was used to gauge the approximate time needed to complete the questionnaire and assess the clarity of the questions. As a result of the pilot, adjustments were made to the questionnaire format to reduce the time needed for completion. Adjustments were made to the structure of the questions and their presentation in Qualtrics to

reduce the time needed to complete the questionnaire. Neither the integrity of the questions nor the data sought from the questions were compromised by the adjustments.

During the pilot of the interview process, feedback was sought on the clarity of the questions, the sequence of the questions, and the time it took to answer all the questions. Results from the pilot interview confirmed the clarity of the questions. Discussion regarding the sequence of the questions and whether to group like questions or keep the order randomized resulted in the decision to maintain the randomized order to ensure the consistency of the data provided by the interviewee. The pilot interview took approximately 35 minutes to complete. Since the pilot interviewee was not a K-12 school principal, an additional 10 to 25 minutes was added for the principal participants as they may have additional data to provide on their schools.

Designed to focus on the efficacy of research-based strategies outlined in Chapter Two, the questionnaire focused on staffing and professional development, school culture, and instructional practices. The questionnaire was intentionally structured using these themes as they have a direct correlation with CRT in education. Principal responses detailing the importance, efficacy, and frequency of use of the targeted strategies as well as the degree to which principals believe leading efforts to support Black student achievement is important were sought. The data collected provided quantitative data to correlate with the qualitative data provided by the subsequent principal interviews. This section outlines the data collected to gauge the level of importance, frequency of use, and perceived efficacy when implementing research-based strategies. If the instructional leader considers the practices important enough and has the skillset for implementation, those practices will be implemented frequently throughout the school building. However, there are factors and conditions within the school building that could

potentially mitigate these efforts. The questionnaire collected initial data on these mitigating factors and allowed principals to elaborate creating a deeper understanding of their experiences.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Using the sequential mixed-methods approach, data were collected sequentially in two phases using a questionnaire followed by an interview. Quantitative data collected by the questionnaire was used to assess the importance, frequency, and efficacy of principals in their approach to improving Black student achievement. The goal was to compare participants' responses to the topic in both written and oral forms to assess if responses were similar thus allowing the researcher to triangulate the information and assess trends in a follow-up interview if necessary. Some qualitative data were collected through the questionnaire, but most came from the interviews. The qualitative data collection allowed participants to speak openly about their efforts without being constrained to a selected set of responses provided by the researcher. Data from the interviews were in the participants' own words and, coupled with the data from the questionnaire, provided a way to check and recheck the validity of the quantitative and qualitative data.

The quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed by assessing the mode of the responses for trends in participant responses. The researcher used multiple Qualtrics data reports to isolate data sets and to analyze quantitative data and responses from participants. Data were analyzed using the responses of both individual principals as well as the whole group to determine the importance, frequency, and efficacy of this set of culturally relevant strategies. Individual responses were used to assess gaps and mitigating factors to implementation, and whole group responses were used to assess trends, themes, and potential gaps to implementation. The qualitative data were used to develop themes derived from reported efforts

of principals to increase Black student achievement. Because the questionnaire and interview protocols were aligned, there was minimal challenge in integrating the data.

### **Collection Procedures**

The questionnaire was distributed via email to the professional email addresses of principals serving in the Wake and Durham County public school systems in North Carolina. Due to school district research protocols, solicitation for completion of the questionnaire could only occur using one email and one phone call. Once the questionnaire was distributed via email, no other reminder email solicitations were sent, limiting the potential for responses.

Thirteen principals began the questionnaire, and of those thirteen, twelve completed it. As participants completed the questionnaire, they were able to indicate interest in moving forward with the interview portion of the research. Seven principals indicated interest in further participation in the study. Those seven principals were contacted via email within 3 days to schedule a Zoom meeting for the interview. Email exchanges included a brief overview of the study and the consent form for review. Of the seven, five responded to the follow-up email and scheduled a time to interview with the researcher. Due to the unrelenting spread of COVID-19 in the communities targeted, Zoom was the preferred method of assembly for both the participants and the researcher.

Participants Zoomed in from their school location at the agreed-upon time. Before beginning the interview, introductions were made and appreciation for participation was shared. A review of the consent form took place immediately before the start of each interview reassuring the participant their identity would remain anonymous in the study and all notes and recordings from the interview were stored on a password-protected electronic device, including my phone, a digital recorder, and a personal computer. Permission to record the interview was



solicited to allow a transcript of the conversation for further analysis. Participants were given the option of turning their cameras off before both giving verbal consent and answering the first question. From consent to conclusion, all five interviews took between 29 and 59 minutes and were completed during working hours as requested by the participants. After the interview was completed, participants were asked to provide any supplemental information or evidence to the questions to increase the “flexibility offered in terms of data collection methods” (Pearson, Albon, & Hubball, 2015. p. 3).

### **Organization and Analysis**

The organization and analysis of the research was centered on three guiding research questions:

GRQ #1: To what degree do principals believe leading efforts to improve Black student achievement is a priority?

GRQ #2: What are the various ways K-12 school principals of low-performing schools report they lead efforts to increase student achievement?

GRQ #3: What are the factors and conditions in low-performing schools that K-12 principals say inhibit and promote their efforts to increase achievement for the Black student population?

### **Questionnaire**

The questions were organized to address all three research questions. They assessed the level of importance, frequency, and efficacy principals indicated regarding their efforts to increase Black student achievement and address the factors and conditions in low-performing schools. The start of the questionnaire was used to gather demographic information about the participants and their schools before delving into their perceptions regarding race and academic

achievement. Participants then answered questions using a 4-point Likert scale to assess their perception of the importance of implementing specific strategies connected to improving Black student achievement. To assess the importance, participants were asked to rate a set of culturally relevant strategies on a scale ranging from *very important*, *important*, *somewhat important*, and *not important*.

Continuing with the same culturally relevant strategies, participants were asked to rate their knowledge of and ability to implement strategies as well as the frequency of implementation. Assessment of knowledge and ability was used to determine efficacy in implementing the set of culturally relevant strategies. Participant efficacy was assessed using a Likert scale with *excellent*, *good*, *fair*, and *poor* as responses. To rate the frequency of implementation, participants rated the strategies on a different 4-point Likert scale with the possible responses being *never*, *sometimes*, *mostly*, and *always*.

Assessing the mode of the responses was used to analyze the importance, efficacy, and frequency of the set of strategies. By examining the most frequent responses of the principals, inferences were made about the strategies principals presume to be important to increase Black student achievement, how frequently they used the strategy, and their ability to implement the strategy effectively. Each strategy was assessed by the level of importance, the frequency of implementation and the ability or knowledge used in implementation. Using the mode, analysis of responses determined the strategies principals deemed effective and the level at which they were able to implement usage in their schools.

Principal participants also ranked factors that supported those factors they believed had a negative impact on Black student achievement in their schools. The ranked factors were aligned with the set of culturally relevant strategies assessed and common factors and conditions in low-

performing schools. The purpose of having the structure and questions was to triangulate the common factors in schools that support or inhibit black student achievement and the efforts principals can put forth in addressing the issue using culturally relevant strategies.

Lastly, included in the questionnaire were three open-ended questions in which participants were able to give additional information about strategies and other information they may have used that were not included in the questionnaire. Responses were limited to 250 words or less to facilitate clarity of thought and gauge the level of importance to the participant. Once the responses from the questionnaire were collected, the information was triangulated to draw conclusions regarding the priorities of principals backed by their actions.

### **Interviews**

Following the data collected from the questionnaire, the interviews served to inform the responses. The interviews were transcribed within a week using speech-to-text technology with the researcher comparing the transcripts and audio for accuracy. The content provided by the interviewees was used to inform all three research questions. The process of data collection, analysis, and reporting are not successive in nature, but typically occur simultaneously in a research project (Creswell & Poth, 2017, explaining that the coding process is constant and is a combination of “data collection, data analysis, and report writing” (p. 185). Saldana describes coding as “recoding” because there is a building, dissecting, and rebuilding nature to coding all the data collected. To identify and organize themes derived from the interviews for this research, initial codes were created before dissecting them by actions and evidential information into expanded codes. Then, the expanded codes were rebuilt into final codes to allow the researcher to develop the themes describing principal efforts and factors that potentially mitigate their efforts. Once the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim, themes were developed by

coding and re-coding the responses. All collected data were kept confidential and have not been shared except for this document.

Throughout the administration of the research, the role of the researcher remained as a neutral party seeking to learn from and understand the role of the K-12 principal as an instructional leader in low-performing schools.

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

The original intent of this study was to research the efforts of K-12 principals to improve Black student achievement in low-performing schools. Due to a lack of statewide accountability measures for the 2019-2020 school year and virtual learning settings due to the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic during the 2020-2021 school year, accurate and conclusive low-performing status is not available. With statewide accountability measures skewed and school principal changes during this unsettled period of schooling, participation was solicited from all schools in the Wake and Durham public school districts regardless of prior or current status. In addition, the delimitations outside the bounded system include the instructional leadership of principals to improve Black student achievement in public schools regardless of achievement status and additional school-based instructional support.

Effective leadership encompasses instructional and transformational leadership, with priorities, actions, and approaches having a profound impact on student achievement. In low-performing schools where Black students are not achieving at high rates, principal actions impact both this subgroup and whole school achievement rates. Although principals are primarily responsible for student learning, the breadth and depth of their responsibilities may lead them to rely on other staff for support. The delimitation of the school principal implies that the principal is the instructional leader of the school and makes decisions about instruction in isolation. The

efforts of classroom teachers and other instructional support staff to address Black student achievement were omitted from this study as well as efforts to address the academic needs of other student subgroups.

The study took place in two urban counties in North Carolina and was confined to the principal's role as instructional leader in the public school system. Putting this delimitation in place allowed for a whole school perspective and was not limited to implementation of strategies to deal with isolated occurrences. Of the five interviewed principal participants, four were new to the current school, and three of the five schools had previously been considered low performing. One principal led the efforts of that school to move out of low-performing status, while the other two principals began after the prior designation. Of the two schools not experiencing low-performing status, one was in its second year of existence and the other maintained a 'C' grade or above for the previous 6 years of assessment data.

Disaggregating assessment data of subgroups targeted in ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act), and ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) show the need for specific and targeted interventions similar to and/or different from the strategies targeting the learning styles of Black students. While the need for interventions for all students not reaching academic achievement remains, race as a social construct in the U.S. continues to have a devastating impact on academic achievement for Black students. Delimitations of this study include non-Black student groups as the study isolates Black student achievement. Although other subgroups are lagging in achievement, such as English Language Learners (ELLs), economically disadvantaged students, and students identified with disabilities, these groups do not always reflect the role of race as a factor in academic achievement.

Black student achievement is not only an issue in low-performing schools but is also problematic in schools across the nation. In this study, private and charter schools were omitted. Data from public schools located in the designated setting not considered low performing were included in this study as Black student achievement data from these schools reflected the need for intervention.

Finally, the methods used in this study were a delimitation based on the type of research and the data collected. Neither community, family, nor teacher demographic data were collected or addressed in this study, although these components may have impacted achievement in low-performing schools. The open-ended nature of the interview questions for principals provided an opportunity to add any additional quantitative or qualitative data such as family, school, or community demographic information, teacher observations or coaching reflections.

As a former parent, educator, and leader in the public school system, I have not served as a primary instructional leader in the the role of principal. Although I have assisted in many ways in my more than 25 years of experience in a public school system in a similar capacity, I was aware that limited my bias was required to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. Having limited experience as a researcher and as a K-12 school principal, I am hopeful that my analysis the data from this study will give me a “prescription for sizing things up and figuring out what’s really going on” (Bolman and Deal, 2014 p. 9) in schools. My goal was to assess the implementation of culturally relevant strategies as well as study the mitigating factors in schools that have an impact on academic achievement. It is only once we address the impact race and culture have on students, we can achieve the realization of Horace Mann’s famous quote from 1848, “Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery”.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the efforts of K-12 principals in improving the academic achievement of Black students. Quantitative data collected through a questionnaire and anecdotal data collected through interviews provided insight into the experiences of principals in low-performing and non-low-performing schools when advancing Black student achievement.

This chapter uses the guiding research questions to organize and present the data from the questionnaire, themes derived from the interviews, and findings. The three questions that guided this research were:

GRQ #1: To what degree do principals believe leading efforts to improve Black student achievement is a priority?

GRQ #2: What are the various ways K-12 school principals of low-performing schools report they lead efforts to increase student achievement?

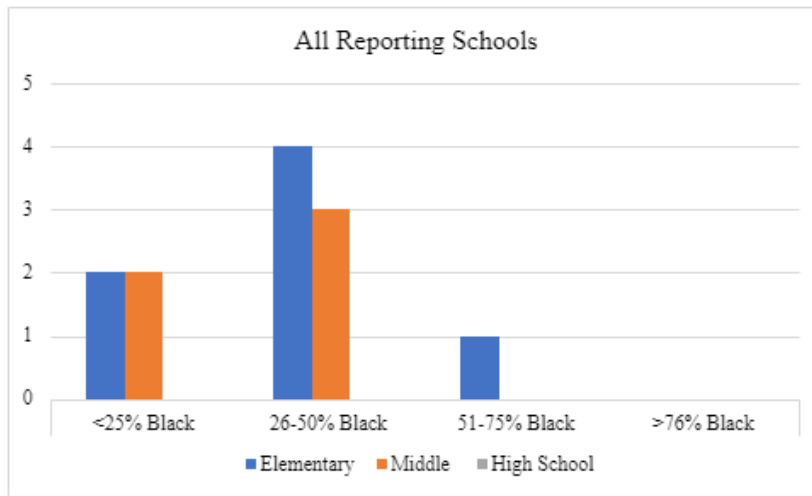
GRQ #3: What are the factors and conditions in low-performing schools that inhibit and promote Black student achievement?

### **Demographic Data**

Twelve K-12 school principals from both low-performing and schools not designated as low performing completed the questionnaire and provided qualitative data through the interview process. Questions 1-10 of the questionnaire gathered demographic data from the principals, qualitative information about their experiences, and demographic data related to the school. Figures 1, 2, and 3 depict the Black student populations in correlation to their performance status according to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI).

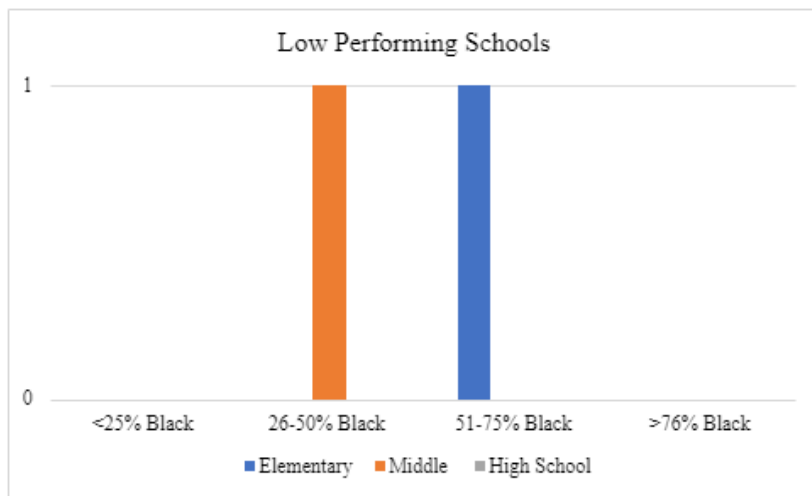
**Figure 1**

*Percentage of Black Students in All Reporting Schools*



**Figure 2**

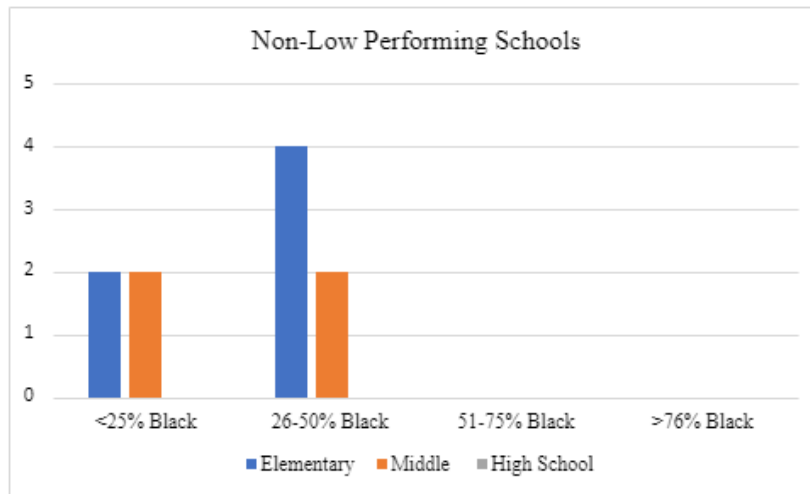
*Percentage of Black Students in Low-Performing Schools*





**Figure 3**

*Percentage of Black Students in Non-Low Performing Schools*



Despite the small sample and the mixture of demographics, there was consistency among the themes generated by the questionnaire and interviews.

**Data Collected for Guided Research Question #1 -- To what degree do principals believe leading efforts to improve Black student achievement is a priority?**

Guiding Research Question #1 assessed the degree to which principals in low-performing schools believed leading efforts to improve Black student achievement was important. Questions 11-16 gauged principal perspectives on academic achievement and issues of race pertaining to academic achievement. Principals were asked to rate the following statements using a four-point Likert scale with 1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *disagree*, and 4 = *strongly disagree*:

11. Academic achievement is the top priority at my school.
12. I encourage the staff at my school to use effective strategies regardless of race.
13. When discussing academic achievement, I specify for different racial groups.
14. I hold my staff accountable for implementing strategies for different racial groups.

15. I am comfortable having individual conversations with my staff around race and academic achievement.

16. There are other factors prioritized at my school over race and academic achievement.

Next, the questionnaire asked principal participants to rate the level of importance of the 21 research-based strategies linked to culturally relevant instructional leadership. Principals rated the following 21 strategies using a four-point Likert scale with 1 = *very important*, 2 = *important*, 3 = *somewhat important*, and 4 = *not important*. The numbering of the strategies coincided with the question number on the questionnaire:

18. Hiring a diverse staff to reflect my student population is...

21. Having experienced staff in a low-performing school is...

24. Positive student, family, and staff relationships are...

27. Encouraging my staff to hold high expectations for students is...

30. Creating time in the school schedule for PLCs is...

33. Protecting time in the school schedule for staff to attend PLCs is

36. Protecting my time to attend PLCs is...

39. Resources that reflect the cultures in my school are...

42. A strengths-based approach to instruction is...

45. Extending student thinking is...

48. Instructional scaffolding is...

51. Relevant and real-world connections are...

54. Using various learning styles during instruction is...

57. Differentiated assessment methods are...

60. Data-driven instruction is...

- 63. Setting student goals to increase student achievement is...
- 68. Professional development targeting student achievement is...
- 71. Professional development targeting diverse populations is...
- 74. School & community agency partnerships providing resources to students and families are...
- 77. School and community agency partnerships providing academic support are...
- 80. Using family engagement to support academic success is...

Question #86 asked principals to gauge the importance they placed on strategies and their intentionality in using strategies to increase Black student achievement:

86. Choose one: Do you intentionally target differentiated strategies for Black students in your school?

- Yes, I think it is important to differentiate strategies specifically for Black students.
- Somewhat, it depends on the strategies.
- No, I do not think it is important to differentiate strategies

Question #90 assessed the frequency of conversations principals had with their staff about race. The frequency of the conversations suggested the importance principals placed on the ability of staff to discuss race:

90. The staff at my school have conversations around race
- at least once per month
  - at least once per week
  - daily

- ❑ The staff at my school do not have conversations around race and academic achievement

To gauge how principals differentiated their instructional leadership to account for Black student achievement question #91, an open-ended question, asked *What specific strategies do you use to increase Black student achievement and how do they differ from academic achievement for all students?*

Qualitative data were collected for GRQ #1 during the interview process via questions 1, 2, 5, and 8:

1. Tell me some of the things you do that would indicate increasing the achievement of Black students is a priority for you as a leader.
2. Do you feel comfortable leading efforts to improve Black student achievement?
5. To what degree do you believe it is your role and responsibility to lead efforts to improve Black student achievement?
8. How do you use data support student achievement?

### **GRQ #1 Data Analysis**

To gauge how principals thought about Black student achievement, participants scaled their agreements with the statements of Questions 11-16. Of the principals who responded to Question 11, 92% agreed or strongly agreed that academic achievement was top priority at their school. All principals who responded to Question 12 agreed or strongly agreed that they prioritized effective strategies over race. With all participants agreeing they promoted effective strategies regardless of race, 75% responding to Question 13 *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that race was discussed when addressing academic achievement. Question 14 asked principals the degree to which they hold staff accountable for implementing strategies for different racial groups.

Twelve participants responded and 75% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they hold staff accountable for implementing different strategies based on race. One principal who chose not to answer this question also was noted as not having conversations with their staff about race as indicated in question #90.

To hold instructional staff accountable, twelve responding principals *agreed* or *strongly agreed* to being comfortable having conversations around race and academic achievement. Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis reflected this. Eight participants shared that they engaged in conversations about race at least one time per month, two principals admitted to having weekly conversations, one principal had daily conversations, and one principal admitted to not having conversations at all.

When asked if there were other factors prioritized over race and academic achievement at their schools, 58% of principals *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with that statement, while 42% agreed that there were other factors prioritized over race and academic achievement.

Questions used to assess which effective strategies principals deemed important were categorized using relationships of students, staff, and families, implementing instructional strategies, professional development, and engaging stakeholders as the overarching themes. Table 3 shows how principals rated the importance of these research-based strategies in their efforts to improve Black student achievement.

Table 3

*Importance of School-Based Instructional Strategies*

Strategy	NI	SI	I	VI
Hiring a diverse staff to reflect my student population is...	0	8.3	0	91.7
Having experienced staff in a low-performing school is...	0	8.3	50.0	41.7
Positive student, family, and staff relationships are...	0	0	0	100
Encouraging my staff to hold high expectations for students is...	0	0	0	100
Creating time in the school schedule for PLCs is...	0	0	0	100
Protecting time in the school schedule for staff to attend PLCs is...	0	0	8.3	91.7
Protecting my time to attend PLCs is...	0	0	50.0	50.0
Resources that reflect the cultures in my school are...	0	0	16.7	83.3
A strengths-based approach to instruction is...	0	0	66.6	33.3
Extending student thinking is...	0	0	7	3
Instructional scaffolding is...	0	0	50.0	50.0
Relevant and real-world connections are...	0	0	25.0	75.0
Using various learning styles during instruction is...	0	8.3	33.3	58.3
Differentiated assessment methods are...	0	3	3	3
Data-driven instruction is...	0	8.3	25.0	66.6
Setting student goals to increase student achievement is...	0	3	7	7
Professional development targeting student achievement is...	0	0	8.33	91.6
Professional development targeting diverse populations is...	0	0	41.6	58.3
School & community agency partnerships providing resources to students and families are...	0	0	7	3
School and community agency partnerships providing academic support are...	0	0	25.0	75
Using family engagement to support academic success is...	0	0	33.3	67.6
			3	7
		8.3	41.6	50.0
	0	3	7	
	0	8.3	75.0	16.6
	0	3	7	7
	0	0	58.3	41.6
			3	7

*Note:* NI = not important, SI = somewhat important, I = important, and VI = very important

Of the 21 strategies listed, 71.42% of the responses were rated as *important* or *very important* by all responding principals. Of those rated *important* or *very important* in the questionnaire, 100% of K-12 principals rated positive student, staff, and family relationships, staff holding high expectations, and creating time in the school schedule for PLCs as *very*

*important* for increasing Black student achievement. Four strategies were rated as *somewhat important* and there were no strategies rated *not important*. Both low-performing schools and non-low-performing schools' principals believed these strategies were critical to increasing Black student achievement.

During the interview process, principal responses also reiterated what was a priority for their instructional leadership and whether Black student achievement was a priority. The first question of the interview asked respondents to describe some of the things they do that indicated that increasing the achievement of Black students was a priority for them as a leader. All principals who responded to this question acknowledged the need to prioritize Black student achievement referenced their schools' demographic data and test scores. Principal F reported that of the 841 students enrolled at his school, 32 were White, and of the 811 students remaining, 50% were Black. Having such a large population of Black students, Principal F recognized there was no choice but to focus on Black student achievement. Likewise, Principal L completed his doctoral program with a focus on Black males and intentionally chose a school where the focus would be on Black student achievement.

Question 5 of the interview protocol asked principals the degree to which they believed it was their role and responsibility to lead efforts to improve Black student achievement. Based on the population, Principal F believed it was 100% his responsibility. Because most of the student body was Black, he believed everything he did must be for the good of the population. The goals of the school included instructional and academic support for Black students.

At her previous school, Principal A saw a greater percentage of Black students enrolled arriving on grade level. As the school became more diverse, however, she saw Black student proficiency decline. Carrying that experience into the current school, she made sure she used

data to determine her priorities as the instructional leader. Serving in a high-performing school, Principal A assessed the data when she began her tenure as principal. Overall performance data showed all students in this high-performing school were not high performing. Principal A stated, “I look at the data and one of the things that was apparent is that while the school is great on paper, everybody is not doing well.” Principal A also noted a strong belief among the staff and families that the whole school was doing well. Although she has a smaller percentage of Black students in comparison to other schools in the study, Principal A’s student population was roughly 25% Black. There were alarming disparities reflecting Black students as the lowest-performing students, indicating a need to prioritize the learning of this group of students. Principal A saw the stark differences in performance data and made Black student achievement a priority for her and the teachers.

Principal A used the available data to determine the areas of the school needing support, noting that “when you look at our Black and Hispanic students, particularly by subgroup... the lowest, I think was Grade 8 math for Black males.” Principal A used the data to highlight the disparities and push “data informed decision-making” across the school. The push for more data-informed decision-making and a revised focus was counter to the narrative of this high-performing school that everybody touted as doing well.

North Carolina utilized the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) to assess teacher efficiency by using Beginning, Middle and End of Grade assessment data to measure growth of individual students tied to a specific teacher. These data were used by Principal L to provide support to teachers and by Principal C to see how teachers were teaching and how students were growing by subgroups. Principal C shared that the growth data at her school showed “middle of the road students were doing great, but our highest students and our



lowest students were not...both of which happened to be groups of color.” The data from Principal C’s school showed the highest-performing students were Asian students, but they were not making growth. The lowest performing, Black and Latino students, were not making growth, either. The disaggregation of the data forced Principal C and the instructional staff to realize there was a dire need “to focus on our students of color.” Using the EVAAS data put the onus for achievement on the adults of the school. Principal C reflected on the work instructional staff needed to do by realizing “this is an adult issue...that makes us not like the data even more and want to do something about it.”

Question 8 of the interview protocol asked principals to use data to support student achievement. After becoming a new principal during the COVID-19 pandemic, Principal W. exclaimed, “data drives everything!” when he spoke of his approach to designing the instructional focus for the year. Principal W expressed frustration with the lack of available baseline data during the pandemic. “We always want to have a baseline for what we are doing and work towards those goals,” he explained. The lack of baseline data combined with the immediate needs of the school during the pandemic required him to pivot and recreate the baseline to determine the school’s priorities. Recently out of low-performing status, the school was heavily impacted by the learning loss and lack of data available due to by virtual learning.

Similarly, Principal F was known by his staff for his reliance on data. “If you go into our Coaching Office, you’ll see data everywhere from discipline to student achievement,” he noted. Principal F boasted about his use of data, noting that data was reflective of the school improvement initiatives outlined in the School Improvement Plan (SIP). The school received a state grant for school improvement, and the data he collected was central to the SIP stating, “We do look at proficiency. We do look at all that stuff, but we’re also looking at are their base needs

met.” He shared how the staff engaged with the data, including attendance and discipline data, to find how those things affected student achievement. With a high percentage of Black students in his school, the staff needed to “expose the data points” to understand what they mean, move to get students to understand their own data, track the progress of students, and take responsibility for student learning.

Data supplied an avenue for Principal L to get into classrooms to support instruction with a reduction in disciplinary actions. He shared how he used the data for planning and implementation of effective strategies. These efforts included designing the structure for interventions by intentionally targeting students on the cusp of proficiency. Part of this design was tiered support for instructional staff to provide targeted interventions to students. Interventions included coaching to implement effective instructional strategies in the classroom to increase student achievement and teacher evaluation ratings.

When identifying and organizing themes for the Findings associated with GRQ #1, the researcher used the data from Qualtrics software to disaggregate the data and create reports from the questions related to the importance of implementing culturally relevant strategies. Qualtrics reporting on importance was also used to identify the mode of responses indicating the degree to which Black student achievement was a priority. The researcher also developed initial codes based on principal responses to questions 1, 5, and 8 of the interview protocol. These questions, aligned to GRQ #1 took evidential information, coded and recoded the information, and then rebuilt into final codes to develop three findings. All schools, regardless of their percentage of Black students, shared how they implemented school-wide and instructional research-based practices shown to increase Black student achievement.

**Finding #1**

*Principals believed race was not the driving factor for addressing academic achievement.*

Although Black student achievement was important to principals as they acknowledged the issues surrounding race and academic achievement, principals did not deem it as the driving factor of their instructional leadership. Principal responses indicated academic achievement was a top priority in schools and used effective strategies to promote it, regardless of race. Not ignoring issues of race, principals reported a high level of comfort when having conversations with staff regarding race and academic achievement. When necessary, principals had conversations around race to remove barriers and increase academic achievement for all students.

Principals contended there were other factors requiring attention above race and academic achievement in schools. Although data showed Black students lagging in achievement, principals did not perceive race as the sole factor or condition affecting academic achievement. Quantitative analysis showed principals chose to prioritize other factors and conditions in schools over race and academic achievement. GRQ #3 further addresses the factors and conditions present in schools as principals moved towards improving student achievement.

In contrast, principals also reported that the use of effective strategies was preferred over considerations for race, although further findings indicated the effective strategies used and culturally relevant strategies were congruent. This result posits the notion that race may not be the overarching theme for a lack of academic achievement for Black students but may be a major factor.

**Finding #2**

*Principals believed Black student achievement was a priority in both low-performing schools and non-low-performing schools.*

Principals from both low-performing and non-low-performing schools believed that supporting Black student achievement was important and a priority, although they did not believe it to be the driving factor. The initial purpose of this study was to identify strategies in low-performing schools; however, principals of varying school performance levels intentionally made Black student achievement a priority. Student demographics and achievement levels were the primary reasons behind the efforts to increase Black student achievement in participating schools. In low-performing schools, principals led efforts to increase Black student achievement because the demographics of the school reflected the need and achievement levels dictated the priority. In non-low-performing schools, disaggregating data by race led principal leaders to see achievement disparities among racial groups.

All reporting principals demonstrated an intentional focus on Black student achievement. The qualitative data in Table 1 showed all 12 reporting principals believed strategies to improve Black student achievement were *Important* or *Very Important* to implement. Quantitative data from principals of three low-performing schools and two non-low-performing schools implemented research-based strategies, indicating Black student achievement is a widespread, extending beyond low-performing schools.

**Finding #3**

*Principals believed it was important to disaggregate all available data to identify and dictate priorities for student learning.*

Using all available data, principals determined the priorities of the school. This included demographic and achievement data, behavioral data, and instructional staff data. All five principals reflected on their use of data to identify priority areas in their schools to increase student achievement. In their analysis, Black student achievement bubbled to the top of the list of priorities supporting the need to implement Critical Race Theory in Education. Once principals determined priorities, they then decided how they would respond to the need as instructional leaders. The data provided guidance for principals when determining which high-yielding strategies would be most effective at their schools.

Finding #3 informs and justifies Finding #1 and Finding #2. Principals shared that they did not automatically determine the learning priorities based on race or school performance levels. Instead, they looked at the priorities indicated by the data determining their steps and priorities for improving student achievement in their schools.

#### **Finding #4**

*Principals believed it was their responsibility to lead efforts to increase Black student achievement.*

As the instructional leader of their schools, principals believed it was their responsibility to lead the efforts to make achievement a priority of the school. Principals led in disaggregating the data, creating goals, designing the instruction plan, and supporting classroom instruction to move towards proficiency. Principals used all available data to identify areas in the school needing improvement and focused their efforts based on those decisions. With data indicating Black student achievement should be a priority in all schools, all principals believed instructional leadership to increase Black student achievement was their responsibility.

The quantitative data from Table 3 corroborated what principals ranked as important with staff and student relationships, instructional staff, and professional learning communities respectively ranking highest as factors that support Black student achievement. Data-driven instruction and instruction were also indicated as two important strategies to employ. With data indicating Black student achievement was a priority in schools, all principals believed instructional leadership to increase Black student achievement was part of their responsibility as instructional leader.

**Data Collected for Guided Research Question #2-- What are the various ways K-12 school principals of low-performing schools report they lead efforts to increase student achievement?**

Qualitative and quantitative data analysis determined that principals are responsible for prioritizing their efforts to increase Black student achievement based on the available data of their school. GRQ #2 builds on the responsibility of principals to increase Black student achievement and push the instructional vision of the school by identifying the efforts they put towards achievement.

The 21 research-based strategies were also used to assess frequency of implementation for GRQ #2. In the questionnaire, principals were asked to rate the following strategies using a four-point Likert scale N = *never*, S = *sometimes*, M = *most of the time*, and A = *always*. The numbering of the strategies coincided with the question number on the questionnaire:

17. I intentionally seek to hire a diverse staff to reflect my student population.

20. I intentionally seek to hire experienced staff (with a proficient or higher standard rating on the NCEES (North Carolina Educator Effectiveness System) for three or more years).

23. I promote positive relationships with instructional staff, students, and families in my school.
26. I hold instructional staff accountable for high expectations for students in my school.
29. I intentionally create time in the school schedule for instructional staff to attend Professional Learning Communities.
32. I protect time in the school schedule for instructional staff to attend Professional Learning Communities.
35. I protect time in the school schedule for me to attend Professional Learning Communities.
38. I provide and encourage instructional staff to use resources that reflect the cultures in my school.
41. I hold instructional staff accountable for using a strengths-based approach to instruction.
44. I hold instructional staff accountable for extending student thinking.
47. I hold staff accountable for instructional scaffolding.
50. I hold instructional staff accountable for making relevant and real-world connections with students.
53. I hold instructional staff accountable for using various learning styles.
56. I hold instructional staff accountable for using differentiated assessment methods (portfolios, tests, project-based learning, etc.).
59. I hold instructional staff accountable for data-driven instruction.
62. I hold instructional staff accountable for setting student goals to increase student achievement.

66. I execute my professional development plan with fidelity.
67. The professional development plan for my staff targets student achievement.
70. The professional development plan for my staff targets diverse populations.
73. I invite community partners into my school to support students and families with resources.
76. I invite community partners into my school to support student achievement.
79. I provide opportunities for family engagement in my school.
89. Do you have an organizational plan to address the factors promoting and impeding academic success in your school?

- Yes, and it is effective
- Yes, but it is not effective
- I am currently developing a plan
- No, I do not have a plan

65. I have a Professional Development plan for staff.

- Yes
- No

92. What are the top three strategies you have implemented in your school? What are the resultant outcomes?

The researcher also used questions 6, 7, 9, and 15 of the interview protocol to inform

GRQ#2.

4. What percentage of your time do you spend leading efforts to improve Black student achievement?



6. Describe a day or a time you felt particularly successful at leading efforts to improve Black student achievement. Describe your actions and the reactions of the person or persons you were working with.
7. What are your coaching methods when staff do are not responsive to the academic needs or achievement of students?
9. What professional development opportunities have you led or provided for your staff specifically targeting student achievement?
11. Since you have been principal, to what degree have you increased or decreased efforts to improve the achievement of Black students? Please provide a rationale.
14. Describe a day or a time when things blew up and you felt particularly unsuccessful at leading efforts to improve Black student achievement. Describe your actions and the reactions of the person or persons you were working with.
15. What degree are your efforts to improve academic achievement successful in improving Black student achievement?

### **GRQ #2 Data Analysis**

The quantitative and qualitative data from the questionnaire corroborated the qualitative data from the interviews around the factors that promoted Black student achievement at their schools. Principals ranked staff and student relationships, instructional staff, and PLCs as important and the top-ranking factors as marked in Table 3. Data-Driven Instruction and Instruction ranked high in the top two important strategies to employ, as well. Data taken from question 92, reflected in Table 4, reported what principals believed were factors that supported academic success leading towards Black student achievement, essentially guiding their efforts. Staff and student relationships, instructional staff, and PLCs respectively ranking highest as

factors that support Black student achievement. Data-driven instruction and instruction were also indicated as two important strategies to employ.

Table 4

*Factors Supporting Academic Success*

Factors supporting academic success	#1	#2	#3
Community resources to support social issues	0	0	0
Community resources to support academic success	0	0	0
Staff and student relationships	80.0	10.0	10.0
Professional learning communities	28.6	42.9	28.6
Instructional staff	0	80.0	20.0
Family engagement	0	0	100
Instruction	33.3	16.7	50
Professional development	0	0	100
Data-driven instruction	0	60.0	40.0
Other	0	0	0

Having assessed their knowledge and experiences of the factors that promoted Black student achievement, Table 5 provides selected responses of the 21 strategies documenting the frequency of implementation. The select strategies are aligned to the mode of strategies K-12 principals considered as important to increase Black student achievement indicated in Table 5.

Table 5

*Frequency of Implementation of School-Based Instructional Strategies*

Strategy	N	S	M	A
I intentionally seek to hire a diverse staff to reflect the student population.	0	0	25.0	75.0
I promote positive relationships with instructional staff, students, and families in my school.	0	0	16.7	83.3
I hold instructional staff accountable for high expectations for students in my school.	0	0	25.0	75.0
I intentionally create time in the school schedule for instructional staff to attend PLCs.	0	0	0	100
I protect time in the school schedule for instructional staff to attend PLCs.	0	0	8.3	91.7
I protect time in the school schedule for me to attend PLCs	0	8.3	33.3	58.3
I hold instructional staff accountable for using a strengths-based approach to instruction.	0	8.3	58.3	33.3
The professional development plan for my staff targets student achievement.	0	0	41.7	58.3
The professional development plan for my staff targets diverse populations.	0	8.3	33.3	58.3
I provide opportunities for family engagement in my school.	0	0	66.7	33.3

*Note:* N = never, S = sometimes, M = most of the time, and A = always

All of the principals rated having positive relationships with instructional staff, students, and families in my school as *very important*; however, only 83.33% of principals always promoted these positive relationships, and 6.67% promoted positive relationships most of the time. The gap, albeit small, indicated something served as a hindrance between positive relationships principals understand as very important to the promotion of positive relationships.

Creating time in the master schedule for instructional staff to participate in PLCs was rated 100% *very important* and facilitated 100% of the time. There was, however, a small

disconnect for protecting the time of instructional staff to attend and an even larger disconnect for the principals to attend. Fifty-eight percent of principals reported they always attended PLCs, followed by 33.33% of principals reporting they attended most of the time, and 8.33% stating they sometimes attended.

Comparing what principals believed was important with the frequency in which they implement strategies to increase Black student achievement, creating time in the school schedule for PLCs was the only strategy matching importance and 100% implementation. Overall, the reported rates of frequency of implementation were lower than their reported importance. This showed the strategies deemed *very important* by principals to increase Black student achievement were not always implemented with 100% frequency.

Staff using a strengths-based approach to instruction was rated *very important* for 33.33% of principals, while 66.67% of principals rated this approach as *important*. Holding instructional staff accountable for using a strengths-based approach to instruction was reported as *always* 33.33% of the time, 58.33% *most of the time*, and 8.33% *sometimes*.

The Professional Development plan principals had for staff was split into two categories, one that addressed student achievement and another that addressed diverse populations. Seventy-five percent of principals reported having a professional development plan that addressed student achievement was *very important* and 25% reported it being *important*. However, 58.33% of principals reported that they always connected their plan to student achievement and 41.67% reported using their professional development plan for student achievement *most of the time*. A professional development plan addressing diverse populations was reported by 67.67% of principals as *very important* with 33.33% reporting it being *important*. When creating the professional development plan, 58.33% of principals reported they always connected their plan

to diverse populations, 33.33% reported using their professional development plan for student achievement *most of the time*, and 8.33% reported connecting their professional development to diverse populations only *sometimes*.

Comparing what principals believed was important and the frequency with which they implement strategies to increase Black student achievement, the study revealed that creating time in the school schedule for PLCs was the only strategy matching importance and 100% implementation. Overall, the reported rates of frequency of implementation were lower than their reported importance. This showed the strategies deemed *very important* by principals to increase Black student achievement were not always implemented with 100% frequency.

Qualitative data from the questionnaire indicated fostering positive student, staff, and family relationships, creating time in the master schedule for PLCs, facilitating a strengths-based approach to instruction, providing and professional development were the most frequently used efforts to increase Black student achievement. In addition to soliciting the importance and frequency of implementation in the questionnaire, interviews provided opportunity to ask principals direct questions regarding the factors that promote and inhibit Black student achievement at their schools. Interview questions 6, 7, 9, 13, and 15 from the interview protocol asked participating principals for direct examples of the efforts they used to increase student achievement at their schools. These questions permitted principals to speak about their efforts, successes, and responses to staff to increase Black student achievement. These questions, aligned to GRQ #2, took anecdotal information on the reported efforts, coded and recoded the information, and then rebuilt into final codes to develop two findings related to GRQ #2.

When asked directly about their efforts during the interview protocol, positive student, staff, and family relationships emerged as a major theme based on principal responses. When

making decisions about hiring staff, Principal F intentionally hired teachers who also believed in the importance of building relationships. He shared, “I can honestly say that we don’t have one staff member that I’m concerned about that they’re not able to connect with our kids.” He understood and believed “any demographic can educate any kid” but also confirmed, “there is something to be said for having someone who looks like you educate you.” Shifting the teaching staff from 37% to 74% Black in 5 years, Principal F intentionally invested in teachers able to build relationships with students and that matched the demographic of the school.

Principal W created opportunities for staff to build relationships outside of the classroom through interest-based clubs and activities. Using staff and student interests as a basis for the clubs, Principal W, hoping to strengthen relationships, carved out time in the week and provided incentives for staff to engage with students through extracurricular activities. Principal W agreed with having a diverse staff that represented the population served. He stated that hiring and programming were a priority, noting “I think Black people, Black kids, should have Black people in front of them.”

Principal A used incentives for students to build relationships, especially when students experienced a lack of relational connection with the teacher and were not motivated to perform in the classroom. Many of the teachers at Principal A’s school were White and found making connections and building relationships challenging. Along with student incentives, Principal A used staff within the building and student volunteers from local colleges to serve as mentors, increasing the diversity of adults interacting with the students daily.

Family engagement, also noted to have a positive impact on Black student achievement, can be difficult to navigate at some schools. Principal F recalled how when he took over as principal of a low-performing school, the PTA had been non-existent for 20 years. Although the

PTA was not as large or impactful as he had seen in other schools, he supported their fundraising events to help teachers and the school community obtain the essentials to promote academic achievement. Principal F used federal funding received to host after-school events like Black History Night and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) Night activities to get families to come to the school building and engage with student learning.

In their efforts to build trusting relationships with families, both Principal C and Principal A used transparency with the school's data to let the smaller populations of Black families of their school know their intentions and dedication to Black student achievement. With only 32 Black families in the school, Principal C took the time to meet "one-on-one with every family and shared the data with them." Similarly, Principal A was open in talking with the Black families about the "data and disparities" at the high-performing school. The transparency helped her build trust with families that she will address the data and academic performance of Black students. Principal W also discussed the importance of communicating with families to put them in a position to be successful in leading their child, stating "I wish I had 100% of our families engaged... just because they are not supporting in the way we think they should, it doesn't mean they don't care." He was adamant about increasing avenues of communication to continue building partnerships between families and the school.

Relationship building with families was slightly different for Principal L, as he had to build different relationships with different parent communities at his school. He noted, "We gave our cells [phone numbers] to some of the parents because we built relationships with them" and that they hosted school-based events with free food. However, at this school in particular, there was another dynamic at play with the Parent/Teacher Association (PTA), given its lack of diversity and imbalanced power in decision-making. Principal L stated that the PTA represented

“10% that I’m sitting with, but there is 90% of them that have voices that are not being spoken.”

He knew he needed to “introduce them [the PTA] to the whole concept of cultural responsiveness” and strive to make the PTA more inclusive and reflective of the school community. In efforts to bridge the school and provide equitable experiences for all students, Principal L built relationships with students and began the culturally relevant work with all parents and families of the school through programming, events, and meetings.

In addition to building positive student, staff, and family relationships, creating time in the master schedule for PLCs was another strategy participants identified that focused on increasing Black student achievement. PLCs support Black student achievement by creating an opportunity to share and implement effective instructional practices across the building. As a starting point, Principal L described the work of the PLC as grounded in data, stating, “It’s not a PLC unless you have data...unless you have common, formative assessments, common summative assessments outside of a district CDA (Common District Assessment).” Along with the coaching team, Principal L’s PLCs looked at and identified needs and interventions based on tracking student data from assessments. The PLC made instructional decisions and problem-solved around the student achievement data. Principal L believed part of his job was to support those initiatives and help the PLCs design the instruction for students. Principal W shared, as well, how using the data in PLCs could help teachers when collaborating, planning, and sharing resources and methods. As an added layer, Principal C used PLCs to have “equity-based conversations, to look at and address the data of their subgroups” and support one another with effective instruction.

Principals shared how the PLC created the opportunity to share and implement effective instructional practices across the building, including effective student interventions. Principal C



believed in implementing effective interventions to use a strengths-based approach to instruction and included student voice and student connection to academic content to promote achievement, specifically at the elementary level. Her efforts included placing a heavier focus on targeted interventions and assessments that included student choice and voice in classrooms. Through different experiences, she found that she was able to support teachers in uncovering areas needed to reach proficiency for Black students that were not readily evident because students were not connecting to curriculum content. Principal C stated, “the teacher realized she had never asked him what he wanted to read and that he could care less about the books we were making him read.” While working through the issue, the teacher realized the biases “allowed her to believe he could not do” the work when in fact he could.

Principals found that many teachers did not understand the needs of Black students in reaching proficiency and used PLCs and professional development for staff collaboration and learning about the needs of students. Both Principal W and Principal A engaged staff in trauma-informed learning to help staff understand what a subset of Black students are going through and “how best to teach them” to get the desired results of high student achievement. This training was critical for both low-performing and high-performing schools to help teachers form a deeper understanding of the students and families they serve and to move them towards proficiency.

Principal L began as a principal with an existing passion and drive for supporting Black student achievement and carried an expectation for his staff to do the same. He lamented on the importance to make “your vision their vision” and “your work their work.” Principal L also engaged stakeholders to push forward efforts. He used data from formal teacher observations, classroom walkthroughs, and testing to identify the needs of his teachers and coordinate with instructional coaches for coaching and professional development. The culturally responsive

professional development and feedback to teachers, revised over the year, helped meet the need of teachers to increase their effectiveness.

Principal F was very intentional about whom he hired, believing the school “community has made progress based on the building of a team,” a team that is willing to learn together and approach the work collaboratively. He hosted optional professional development on Wednesdays, wanting all staff to be prepared to do the work. Professional development on topics such as student engagement, culturally responsive teaching, and data notebooks were regular built-in supports for the staff to increase student achievement. The work the school did together as a team prepared staff to move onto promotional positions in and outside of the district. Promoting effective strategies as well as mitigating the factors that inhibited achievement for Black students was a collective work and imperative to changing the trajectory of Black student achievement. To conclude, Principal F and all the participating principals created opportunities for the collective work of the instructional leadership team to increase Black student achievement in their schools and within their respective districts.

Most of the professional development described by principals focused more on culturally relevant strategies to understand student and family dynamics to increase student learning for individual students and the school. Professional development ranked as the third most important factor in supporting Black student achievement by all principals. Qualitative data analysis revealed professional development opportunities were tailored to the individual teacher and school needs. “Walking in, we had to be intentional about the work that we did to serve the population we serve,” reported Principal F who held training opportunities on cultural sensitivity and related topics well received by staff. He also offered professional development on student engagement and data notebooks with a culturally responsive lens. He noted that being very

purposeful about the professional development opportunities he provided for teachers to “be more culturally responsive in the practices they are doing when they are planning lessons.” For teachers not able to connect with students, he said he would “always try to attack the why” and find out “what is the disconnect?” to provide the proper support for that teacher. Principal F recognized you “can teach people how to teach” but relationships are the “innate baseline of what we do... to meet their [students] social, emotional, and academic needs”

Professional development along with her own cultural competency journey highlighted for Principal C how the teachers taught in a culture of low expectations and reduced understanding of the students’ needs. Using her own cultural competency journey to build teacher capacity and help teachers see how they may be “blinded by their bias,” Principal C used virtual and in-person professional development sessions, individual coaching, and sometimes book studies. Professional development sessions on interpreting data to provide data-driven instruction also helped Principal C’s staff drill down the data points to identify and intentionally target students needing to reach proficiency. She engaged her staff in professional development to learn how to disaggregate data effectively to assess where students are academically and to identify the story behind the data.

When identifying and organizing themes for the findings associated with GRQ #2, the researcher used the data from Qualtrics software to disaggregate the data and create reports from the questions related to the importance of implementing culturally relevant strategies. Independent and comparative Qualtrics reports on the importance of strategies principals reported (Table 3) and the frequency in which the strategies were implemented (Table 5) assess efforts and inform GRQ #2. Table 4 reported the factors supporting student success and the frequency of implementation of school-based strategies.

The data produced themes related to the efforts of K-12 principals to increase Black student achievement. Principals were asked to share strategies they felt were important to implement in this endeavor. Based on the results of the questionnaire and principal interviews, there was a strong emphasis on culturally relevant strategies rooted in Critical Race Theory in Education. The strategies included in the questionnaire were based on research completed by scholars in the field and categorized by staffing practices, student, staff, and teacher relationships, teacher collaboration and professional development, instructional practices, and parent/family and community engagement. The interviews provided additional insight to inform the research on more specific strategies.

As principals identified the strategies considered most important to positively affect Black student achievement and the inhibiting factors, they also planned for consistent implementation across the school. Positive student, staff, and family relationships, holding high expectations, and time for Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were the strategies principals reported as most important to increase Black student achievement. Finding #4 and Finding #5 explain the most frequently implemented efforts put forth by principals and how they were implemented school wide.

#### **Finding #5**

*Principals believed positive student, staff, and family relationships, high expectations, and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were strategies that will increase Black student achievement.*

Ranked collectively as the most important and most frequently implemented, positive student, staff, and family relationships, holding high expectations, and facilitating effective PLCs were the greatest efforts principals can employ to positively impact Black student achievement.

Quantitative and qualitative data confirmed the research of scholars in the field that building relationships with Black students is an effective way to improve Black student achievement. Principals spoke extensively about relationships with students and families, and leveraging them to increase Black student achievement.

Positive student, staff, and family relationships, high expectations, and effective PLCs are independent strategies that are more impactful when used collectively. As indicated by principals, effective PLCs led to having a strengths-based approach to instruction, sharing strategies and developing relationships with high expectations for students. Combining efforts was an important strategy for principals. Examples of merging positive relationships between students, staff, and families and other efforts included using extracurricular activities to build connection, various family engagement activities, and building trust through transparency with the data. When a positive relationship or connection was present, that served as the foundation for instruction and building relevance between home and school. When teachers knew the strengths of their students, including their capabilities, they instructed from that place. Then teachers believed students were capable of the task and leveraged the students' background and voice to help students reach the expectation.

If student and teacher demographics did not match, building relationships and understanding became even more important. Through PLCs, teachers were able to collaborate with colleagues to assess data, strengths, and effective strategies to move students towards proficiency. Principal efforts included assessing the strengths and areas for growth in the instructional staff at the school. If the skill set to implement culturally responsive instruction was not present in the school or the PLC, professional development was a way to establish school-wide practices.

**Finding #6**

*Principals employed distributive leadership for coaching, PLC support, and professional development opportunities for teachers and staff unable to implement culturally relevant strategies.*

The use of staff to coach, support PLCs, and provide professional development opportunities was shared as a method to build teacher capacity, implement culturally relevant instruction, and shift mindsets enabling teachers to see student potential and hold high expectations. Principals have instructional, managerial, and political responsibilities in the school. Therefore, they lean on instructional staff, coaching staff, and professional development to support teachers in the classroom and move students towards proficiency. When discussing professional development and support for teachers in the classroom, some principals alluded to and some principals said outright that the work is not theirs to be done in isolation. Instead, ~~in~~ order to move the school forward, it was their responsibility to set the vision, and the responsibility of stakeholders in the school to carry that vision into every area of the school.

Recognizing not every teacher will arrive at school ready to teach and instructionally move Black students towards proficiency, all principals indicated the use of professional development and coaching to ensure teachers were implementing culturally relevant strategies in the classroom. Principals used professional development topics, such as trauma-informed and culturally relevant instruction, to provide teachers with the knowledge and information to instruct Black students successfully. The use of staff professional development was reportedly based on the needs of individual teachers and sometimes blanket support for all staff.

**Finding #7**

*Efforts to increase Black student achievement were reliant on the principals' response to them but contingent on stakeholder agreement.*

Regardless of whether principals consider Black student achievement as a priority and the efforts they put towards it, it was reliant on school stakeholder collaboration. Principals created the vision, but if teachers, instructional staff, and school members were not supporting these efforts, then student achievement suffered, especially for Black students. To build stakeholder agreement, principals utilized modeling, coaching, and professional development to promote research-based strategies. After continuous promotion of strategies, it was up to the stakeholders to align with the vision of the school.

Participating principals ranked staff and student relationships and instructional staff capacity as the highest-ranking factors supporting academic success. The importance of relationships within schools reinforced the need for all school stakeholders to agree and align their practices to efforts shown to improve Black student achievement. This included families and engagement with the community. Most principals reported family and community engagement as *Important* or *Very Important*. All principals rated family engagement as the third most important factor supporting academic success. Schools and outside agencies may combine families and communities as a means for support for students. This research separated them and concluded family support outweighed community support, but community support may also be used to support Black student achievement.

It is important for schools to leverage stakeholders inside the school and those connected to the school to support efforts to increase Black student achievement. To maximize

effectiveness of efforts, principals must capitalize on participation from these groups and stakeholder influence for school improvement efforts.

**Data Collected for Guided Research Question #3-- What are the factors and conditions in low-performing schools that K-12 principals say inhibit and promote their efforts to increase achievement for the Black student population?**

To be effective, principals recognized the need to use data to determine priorities, implement researched-based strategies, and mitigate factors inhibiting their efforts. Despite the acknowledged importance to implement strategies to increase Black student achievement, there were also factors and conditions that inhibited the efforts of K-12 principals. The data presented for GRQ #3 identified the factors and conditions in low-performing and non-low-performing schools that inhibited and promoted Black student achievement.

The questionnaire assessed the efficacy of principals to implement culturally relevant strategies as outlined for GRQ #1 and GRQ #2. The following questions assessed efficacy and the principals' ability to implement strategies they deemed important. In the questionnaire, principals were asked to rate the following strategies using a four-point Likert scale with *1 being excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*. The numbering of the strategies coincided with the question number on the questionnaire:

- 19. My ability and the availability to hire a diverse staff to reflect my student population is...
- 25. My knowledge and practice of building a positive school community is...
- 28. My ability to hold staff accountable for high student expectations is...
- 31. My ability to create time in the school schedule for instructional staff to attend Professional Learning Communities is...



34. My ability to protect time in the school schedule for instructional staff to attend Professional Learning Communities is...
37. My ability to protect the time in the school schedule for me to attend Professional Learning Communities is...
40. My practice of providing and encouraging instructional staff to use resources that reflect the cultures in my school is...
43. My knowledge of strengths-based instruction is...
46. My knowledge of extending student thinking is...
49. My knowledge of instructional scaffolding is...
52. My knowledge of relevant and real-world instruction is...
55. My knowledge of varied learning styles is...
58. My knowledge of differentiated assessment methods is...
61. My knowledge of data driven instruction is...
64. My knowledge of student goal setting to increase achievement is...
69. My ability to deliver professional development targeting student achievement is...
72. My ability to deliver professional development targeting diverse populations is...
75. My knowledge and ability to acquire community partners for student and family resources is...
78. My knowledge of and ability to acquire community partners to support student achievement is...
81. My knowledge of and my ability to implement family engagement strategies is...

Not directly connected to the efficacy of the principal but speaking to the conditions at the school, Question #82 assessed family engagement at the school.

82. The level of family engagement in my school is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

Question #22 assessed efficacy in addition to the previous questions but required a different scale.

22. As a principal, I have autonomy with whom I hire...

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

In addition, the questionnaire asked two questions regarding factors and conditions that inhibit Black student achievement using quantitative analysis of the factors and conditions impacting academic success in schools. Questions #87 and #88 gauged principal perspectives:

87. What are the top three factors supporting academic success in your school?

- Community resources to support social issues
- Community resources to support academic success
- Staff and student relationships
- Professional Learning Communities
- Instructional staff
- Family engagement
- Instruction
- Professional development
- Data-driven instruction
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

88. Please rank in order of negative impact on academic achievement in your school; 1 being the strongest negative impact and 8 having the least negative impact.

- Poverty

- Race
- School Readiness
- Literacy skills
- Teacher efficacy
- Professional development
- Resource allocation
- Discipline
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

To provide quantitative data for GRQ #3, the researcher used Question 93 from the questionnaire and Questions 3, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, and 18 from the interview protocol. From the questionnaire:

**In 250 words or less, please answer the following questions:**

93. What are factors that inhibit your effectiveness using your top three strategies?

From the interview protocol:

3. Do you feel effective leading efforts to improve Black student achievement?

10. What role do families play in your school to address students' academic achievement?

12. How did you know/learn to implement the strategies to increase student achievement?

13. What professional development have you participated in to support implementation of strategies to support student achievement?

15. What degree are your efforts to improve academic achievement successful in improving Black student achievement?

16. What factors or conditions in your school contribute to low student achievement and specifically Black student achievement? Have you tried to eliminate any of the mitigating factors? What was the result?

17. To what degree do you have an organizational plan to address the factors and conditions promoting and impeding Black student achievement? Please explain.

18. Who was involved in the development of your plan? How often do you revisit your plan? How effective has your plan been? How do you promote academic success in the face of factors and conditions that impede academic success?

### **GRQ #3 Data Analysis**

Before assessing the efficacy of principals to implement strategies and lead efforts to increase Black student achievement, it was important to first decipher if principals had knowledge of strategies and were able to lead efforts. As follow-up to their efficacy, qualitative data extracted the factors and conditions that promoted or inhibited their ability to do so.

Qualitative and quantitative data provided showed all principals were readily equipped to lead research-based strategies. No principals rendered a *Poor* rating of their efficacy to lead any strategy shown to improve academic achievement. However, some principals rendered a *Fair* rating with strategies connected to teacher and instructional staff professional growth, instructional strategies, and family and community engagement.

Of the 21 strategies assessed, two principals rendered a *fair* rating of their ability to protect time for them to attend PLCs (Question 37) and their ability to deliver professional development for diverse populations (Question 72). One principal rendered a *fair* rating of their ability to professional development for student achievement (Question 69). One principal rendered a *fair* rating for their knowledge of the following instructional strategies: strengths-

based instruction (Question 43), extending student thinking (Question 44), and instructional scaffolding (Question 45). Two principals rendered a *fair* rating for their ability to acquire community partners to provide family resources (Question 75), and one principals rendered a *fair* rating for their ability to acquire community partners to provide support for student academic achievement (Question 78). Three principals rendered a *fair* rating for family engagement at their school.

Questions #88 (quantitative) and #93 (qualitative) respectfully asked principals to rank factors and conditions that inhibit Black student achievement and to provide a narrative of the factors that inhibit their top three strategies. Table 6 shows how principals ranked factors impeding Black student achievement from question #88, with 1 being the strongest negative impact and 8 having the least negative impact.

Table 6

*Factors impeding Academic Success*

Factors impeding Academic Success	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Poverty	25.0	8.3	8.3	8.3	16.7	8.3	8.3	16.7
Race	8.3	16.7	8.3	0	0	8.3	8.3	33.3
School Readiness	0	33.3	16.7	16.7	16.7	0	16.7	0
Literacy	16.7	8.3	25	25	16.7	8.3		
Teacher Efficacy	8.3	8.3	16.7	8.3	0	25.00	8.3	16.7
PD	8.3	8.3	8.3	8.3	8.3	8.3	41.7	8.3
Resource Allocation	0	16.7	0	16.7	8.3	16.7	8.3	16.7
Discipline	0	0	0	16.7	33.3	25.0	8.3	8.3
Other	33.3	0	16.7	0	0	0	0	0

Fifty percent of principals ranked school readiness, literacy skills, and other factors not identified as the top three factors having a negative impact on Black student achievement.

Although no principals indicated school readiness as the number one factor, 33.33% and 16.67% ranked it number two and three respectfully as factors inhibiting student achievement. In

addition, 50% of principals attributed literacy skillset in the top three factors having a negative impact on student achievement.

The quantitative data informing school readiness and literacy skills as factors that negatively impact Black student achievement were corroborated by principal narratives when asked about factors negatively impacting student achievement during the interview part of the study. During the interview protocol, two direct Questions, 14 and 16, were asked to inform the researcher of the factors and conditions that inhibit student achievement. Throughout the interview protocols, all principals shared stories of students arriving to school with needs that go beyond academics, labeling students, a lack of appropriate interventions and support for Black students, and teachers underestimating abilities implicating low academic function and teacher mindset as inhibitors of Black student achievement.

When asked, Principal F discussed students showing up to middle school 2 to 3 years behind, noting, “I think it starts with the elementary schools. I’m not blaming the elementary school; I’m saying it starts at that age.” He recognized that needs are not just about food, clothing, and water, but were also the social-emotional needs of families. “That puts these students on a track that they are behind early, and the ball just starts rolling downhill and collects,” he noted. Seeing the gaps as a middle school principal, he felt it was his responsibility to interject “small things, to try and bridge the gap.” His wish would be for early intervention and social-emotional pieces to fill in the gaps earlier so when students arrive at middle school, “the gaps aren’t so big.”

When basic welfare needs go unmet, academic achievement can suffer. The four middle school principals discussed Black students entering middle school already years behind and academically unprepared for the curriculum. The elementary school principal discussed being

able to pinpoint student academic issues and addressing them at the root. Providing academic interventions was another way principals addressed student academic learning needs. Although highly ranked, Principal A “had to implement an intervention program” as the school did not have one in place despite the data that all students were not performing at proficient rates. The dive into student data revealed disparities in proficiency rates prompting the staff to ask, “What can we do to support all of our students?” Without the intentional dive into the data to uncover the disparities, the academic need was not previously evident. As a result, Black parents fundraised to support tutoring initiatives to help their students reach proficiency. Though the tutoring profited results, Principal A retorted, “That is the school’s responsibility first” and instituted school-based tutoring for Black students to increase academic proficiency.

Holding instructional staff accountable, Principal C began having “conversation(s) about how we were talking about our students.” Staff at Principal C’s school regularly labeled students in a negative light when students did not reach expectations. Staff labeling students who tested not proficient on an assessment as “the red kids” was an issue when the gap in proficiency was “easily identifiable, and you know, you do a quick intervention, and you move them on” towards proficiency. Principal C recognized that “by labeling them (students), the whole child becomes non-proficient” and that reflected how the teachers were thinking and feeling about students’ academic statuses impacting the work. Principal C shared an account of a teacher convinced a student was behind on their reading level based on assessment scores. Contradictory information was later uncovered showing the student could read above grade level when reading material of interest, a reflection of culturally relevant practices. Principal C began to look more intently at the data and the labels teachers placed on students designating them as non-proficient. Labeling

students as non-proficient led to low expectations instead of implementing effective, culturally relevant strategies.

When Principal L began at his school, he assessed the intervention block and found the need to restructure it to provide equitable access for students. Using the data to pinpoint the academic needs for students, he then tailored the intervention block to meet the needs of individual students. In the beginning, he found a large population of Black students scheduled for academic remediation and a large population of White students in academic enrichment classes. Immediately, he sought to change that dynamic to ensure students were receiving the direct instruction they needed to make sure all students were being enriched to grow academically.

Similarly, Principal W had experiences of low expectations and denial of access to enrichment. Because the PLC was not working together, there was one side of the hallway providing instruction that challenged the students, and the other side littered with low expectations and remediation. In a reflective conversation with the teacher having little success, Principal W was explicit in telling her, “You set low expectations for them, and you didn’t challenge them, and these are the results that are yielded” referring to the test scores. The lack of collaboration across the hallway did not serve the students and could have been avoided through PLC collaboration.

Dedicated to ensuring students “have a fair shot to be able to do it (succeed) and a fair opportunity,” Principal W also spoke about increasing student engagement and experiences. He worked to ensure students had access to the type of education they needed to be successful. When running a club called “Community Achievers,” Principal W took a group of students to a courthouse to learn more about law and its systems. Students, he said, “were able to go and have



an experience and they were able to project who they were” and “not sacrifice who they were as a people.”

While not indicated in the questionnaire, principals spoke in-depth regarding professional development opportunities they provided for teachers regarding culturally relevant instruction to increase Black student achievement and to shift teacher attitudes towards Black students. Negative teacher attitudes towards Black students are thought to contribute to the lack of achievement among Black students. As Principal A reported, “the factors I needed to mitigate that were negatively impacting Black student achievement were the adults.” Regardless of the entry point for students in schools, the attitudes and actions of the adults were reported to directly impact Black student achievement.

The stifling or denial of access to academically intelligent or gifted (AIG) course offerings and higher-level courses for Black students is another example of low expectations of Black students. “I needed to dispel that myth that Black and Brown children could not learn because of this and because of that. That’s simply not true,” reported Principal L. Determined not to allow student proficiency level or ability to get in the way of high expectations, Principal L emphasized the need to teach students what they needed to know and not assume they should have learned it previously. “If you expect the child to take notes, then you need to take the time to teach them how to take notes.” In this, Principal L believed the need to teach a student a particular skill did not take away from having high expectations for that student and that students’ ability to learn.

The culture of low expectations for Black students was also apparent when looking at numbers of Black students in Advanced or AIG courses. Rated as a B school by NCDPI, the student population where Principal A is principal had 45% identified as AIG. Most of those

students were White or Asian and very few Black students despite their making up 25% of the school population. In addition to the percentages of AIG student populations and Black student population misaligned, Principal A also experienced staff denying access to Math 1 courses to Black students. Indeed, he related, as well, that a School Magnet Coordinator told Black parents the school did not have any advanced classes and countless other experiences of denied access to advanced coursework and exhibiting low expectations for Black students.

While Principal F did not believe he had encountered teachers that were willfully “malicious or purposefully not responsive,” he was intentional about hiring teachers with the willingness to believe all students can learn. He recognized people who served in a school community like his that is between 50% and 75% Black may have perspectives about the student body population that can hinder Black student achievement.

Conversely, Principal A had a “lot of teachers who are White women and they can’t seem to make that connection” with Black students, putting her, as a principal, in a position where she worked to fill the relational gaps between the teachers and their students. To mitigate the disconnect between teachers and students, she put efforts behind shifting the mindset of teachers in her building. She pressed them to think critically about their perspective and knowledge of the students failing in her class, helping teachers to see the impact of their actions through professional development opportunities. At the same time, not wanting to see students suffer academically or socially, Principal A took immediate action to build relationships with students and provide incentives for academic success. Principal A led the school in the district’s equity professional development, as she saw the importance of “chipping away at some of these thought patterns that just aren’t accurate”.

Changing teacher mindset was at the forefront of responsibilities for Principal L. He quickly realized he needed to “dispel the myth of the only thing Black and Brown children want to do is come in here and do this,” suggesting negative teacher assumptions about student actions and motives. When addressing mindset, he was clear about not “blaming teachers for student behaviors” but reminded them they were the imperative adults in this situation and it was for them to do all they could do to formulate success for students in their care. Principal L utilized the School Improvement Team to look at and address the goals of the school, develop an instructional framework, and solicit buy-in from the staff to move student success forward.

This study also demonstrated that principals use culturally relevant strategies they deem *Very Important* but were not always able to implement them with fidelity leaving cohorts of Black students still not reaching proficiency at high rates. Finding #6 begins to address the disconnect between the importance of and the frequency of high-yielding strategies and addressing the factors and conditions that inhibit Black student achievement. Quantitative and qualitative data from the questionnaire and principal interviews revealed Black students were arriving at school academically below grade level, a factor inhibiting Black student achievement.

### **Finding #8**

*Principals regarded themselves adept at instructional leadership.*

Principal knowledge of culturally relevant instruction was not lacking according to the responses of these principals. Of the 21 strategies rated by principals, there were very few principals who believed they were not able to implement or address the academic needs of Black students. Principals remained confident in their knowledge of strategies and considered themselves prepared to address and implement strategies proven to increase Black student achievement. The majority of principals believed they were equipped to be instructional leaders

and lead efforts to increase Black student achievement. This belief led to an assessment of the factors and conditions that promote and inhibit Black student achievement.

**Finding #9**

*Principals reported teacher attitudes about Black students, school readiness, and literacy, as the leading factors inhibiting Black student achievement.*

Data has shown that Black children attending public schools are consistently behind academically in comparison to their counterparts. It is probable that teacher attitudes are a direct reflection of that data linking low performance in literacy and math for Black students. School readiness encompasses literacy and math skills, as well as functional behavior. The interconnectedness of these elements negatively affect Black student achievement.

Principals recounted repeated examples of how teacher attitudes and perspectives negatively affected student achievement. Principals were reluctant to blame students or families for a lack of achievement, instead putting the onus back on instructional staff to employ effective strategies and glean from one another ways to improve Black student achievement. Coaching and professional development, as described in Finding #5, are essential to help teachers take responsibility, ownership, and accountability for the academic growth of Black children.

**Finding #10**

*Principals set goals and activities to address the factors and conditions that promoted and inhibited Black student achievement using their School Improvement Plan (SIP).*

All schools in the state of North Carolina are required to create a SIP. The SIP is where ~~you find~~ the vision and mission of the school along with specific strategies, activities, and progress monitoring of the goals principals set to support student achievement can be found. The School Improvement Team (SIT), made up of school stakeholders (staff, families, community

members, and students if appropriate), to monitor the progress of the goals and activities to improve student achievement. Within the SIP, stakeholders should be able to identify the implementation of specific strategies that support Black student achievement.

Principals used school data to create this plan to establish goals for student improvement. Based on the disaggregation of data as referenced in Finding #3, the principal, along with the SIT, set the goals and monitored their progress by creating school-based activities. These activities were created by collaborating with stakeholder representation to focus on the ideal strategies to promote student achievement and to mitigate ones that inhibit student achievement.

Principals referenced the goals and activities of the SIP in their responses. The goals of the school held the school and principals accountable to ensure student academic growth remained a focus. Finding #9 told of the factors and conditions negatively affecting Black student achievement. In response, principals reported that they use the SIP to document how they prioritize Black student achievement and mitigate the factors and conditions that impede black student achievement.

### **Summary**

Chapter Four outlined the data collected from this research and corresponds it with the importance, frequency, and efficacy of principals to increase Black student achievement. Themes developed from the data aligned with the strategies principals deemed important and the efforts to improve Black student achievement in their schools. These themes included the belief that relationships with students, staff, and families, a strong instructional plan, data analysis, and the work of PLCs in their school to support instruction. The quantitative data provided from the questionnaire corroborated the narrative derived from the questionnaire and the interviews around the factors that promote Black student achievement at their school. The collected and

analyzed responses and experiences of principals, organized into the 10 findings, informs the three guiding research questions of this study: GRQ #1: To what degree do principals believe leading efforts to improve Black student achievement is a priority? GRQ #2: What are the various ways K-12 school principals of low-performing schools report they lead efforts to increase student achievement? GRQ #3: What are the factors and conditions in low-performing schools that inhibit and promote Black student achievement?

The purpose of this study was to identify the efforts of K-12 principals to increase Black student achievement. When principals considered and planned for Black student achievement, race influenced their decision-making on strategies, professional development and resources, but they did not overtly consider it as the driving factor for a lack of achievement. Directly and indirectly, principals emphasized the importance of Black student achievement and reflected their efforts with implementation of school-based strategies. Strategies were determined using school data and assessing the needs of the school. In both low-performing schools and schools that are not low-performing schools, principals reported that they have used the strategies reflected in the findings collectively to determine the best plan of action when addressing the needs of Black students in their schools. Chapter Five looks deeper into the implications of these efforts to discuss further practices and efforts for principals to increase Black student achievement.

The findings of Chapter Four are:

*Finding #1: Principals believed race is not the driving factor for addressing academic achievement.*

*Finding #2: Principals believed Black student achievement was a priority in both low-performing schools and non-low-performing schools.*

Finding #3: *Principals believed it was important to disaggregate all available data to identify and dictate priorities for student learning.*

Finding #4: *Principals believed it was their responsibility to lead efforts to increase Black student achievement.*

Finding #5: *Principals believed positive student, staff, and family relationships, high expectations, and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were strategies that will increase Black student achievement.*

Finding #6: *Principals employed distributive leadership for coaching, PLC support, and professional development opportunities for teachers and staff unable to implement culturally relevant strategies.*

Finding #7: *Efforts to increase Black student achievement were reliant on the principals' response to them, but contingent on stakeholder agreement.*

Finding #8: *Principals regarded themselves adept at instructional leadership.*

Finding #9: *Principals reported teacher attitudes about Black students, school readiness, and literacy, as the leading factors inhibiting Black student achievement.*

Finding #10: *Principals set goals and activities to address the factors and conditions that promoted and inhibited Black student achievement using their School Improvement Plan (SIP).*

## CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND FINAL REFLECTIONS

This chapter serves to summarize the first four chapters regarding the efforts of K-12 principals to increase Black student achievement. This chapter restates the problem, the purpose of the study advanced in Chapter One using Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Education as a foundation for improvement. Chapter One also includes the three research questions that guided the study and summarizes the review of the literature in Chapter Two. The Summary in this chapter also outlines the methodology (i.e., how the study was conducted and the reasoning behind the methodology selected) presented in Chapter Three and the data from the questionnaire and interviews and the four Findings presented in Chapter Four. Chapter Five focuses on the implications of the findings for principal practice and future research and is organized using the following titled sections: Summary, Discussion, Future Research, and Final Reflections.

### **Study Summary**

Since desegregation, legislation has been in place to ensure learning for all students regardless of racial background or socioeconomic status. This includes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which was designed to increase accountability for student achievement. Student achievement accountability at state and national levels requires school leaders to ensure all student groups are making advances in academic achievement. Unfortunately, even with legislature in place, the achievement of Black students has not increased above the lowest in the nation. This study fast-forwards to the present and under a revised version of that act assesses what K-12 school principals are doing to increase Black



student achievement. K-12 school principals are instructional leaders responsible for student achievement, and this study examined their efforts to improve Black student achievement.

Chapter One identified the problem and proposed implementation of culturally relevant strategies to support K-12 school principals in their efforts to increase Black student achievement through adherence to CRT as an accountability measure. Beginning with outlining the history of public education reform to focus on and increase Black student achievement, Chapter One introduces the problem, the lack of achievement of Black students in the areas of reading and math and the efforts of K-12 principals to address this need. Guiding research questions were developed to identify instructional strategies rooted in CRT in Education that principals deemed important, their efforts to implement them, and the factors and conditions impacting their efforts to help others implement strategies to increase Black student achievement. The three research questions that guided this study were:

GRQ #1: To what degree do principals believe leading efforts to improve Black student achievement is a priority?

GRQ #2: What are the various ways K-12 school principals of low- performing schools report they lead efforts to increase student achievement?

GRQ #3: What are the factors and conditions in low-performing schools that K-12 principals say inhibit and promote their efforts to increase achievement for the Black student population?

The review of literature in Chapter Two began with the historical context and reasons for lack of Black student achievement and continued with the evolution of the role of the principal and the present-day responsibilities they have in increasing the achievement of Black students. Next, the literature examined the most effective strategies to improve student learning with a

particular emphasis on people of color. Ladson-Billings' (2009) work served as a foundation to glean effective strategies that support Black student achievement. To supplement and corroborate the findings of Dr. Ladson Billings, the work of Gay (2000), Howard and Rodriguez-Minkoff (n.d.), and Landsman and Lewis (2011) were used in creating a collection of strategies found effective in increasing Black student achievement.

To look at principals as instructional leaders addressing academic achievement, Robbins and Alvy (2004) reviewed the roles and responsibilities of the K-12 school principal. This, along with the works of Wagner et al. (2006), Evans (2007), and Khalifa et al. (2013) contributed to the various ways principals improve student achievement in general and specifically with Black students.

Chapter Three describes the sequential explanatory method used to design this study assessing the various ways principals increase Black student achievement. Twelve principals from both low-performing and non-low-performing schools completed the questionnaire and five principals took part in separate follow-up interviews. The participants ranged from new to experienced principals of K-12 public schools located in the north-central region of North Carolina. Initially, the study was subjected only to low-performing schools; however, based on outdated and inconsistent data caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the study was opened for non-low-performing schools to participate as well.

Organized according to the guiding research questions, the quantitative and qualitative data from the questionnaire and principal interviews were analyzed and presented in Chapter Four. Ten findings lifted from the data analysis determined the degree to which improving Black student learning was a priority, described the various ways principals increased Black student

achievement and the identified factors and conditions that inhibited and promoted their efforts to improve learning and achievement for Black students. The Findings were as follows:

*Finding #1: Principals believed race is not the driving factor for addressing academic achievement.*

*Finding #2: Principals believed Black student achievement was a priority in both low-performing schools and non-low-performing schools.*

*Finding #3: Principals believed it was important to disaggregate all available data to identify and dictate priorities for student learning.*

*Finding #4: Principals believed it was their responsibility to lead efforts to increase Black student achievement.*

*Finding #5: Principals believed positive student, staff, and family relationships, high expectations, and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were strategies that will increase Black student achievement.*

*Finding #6: Principals employed distributive leadership for coaching, PLC support, and professional development opportunities for teachers and staff unable to implement culturally relevant strategies.*

*Finding #7: Efforts to increase Black student achievement were reliant on the principals' response to them, but contingent on stakeholder agreement.*

*Finding #8: Principals regarded themselves adept at instructional leadership.*

*Finding #9: Principals reported teacher attitudes about Black students, school readiness, and literacy, as the leading factors inhibiting Black student achievement.*

*Finding #10: Principals set goals and activities to address the factors and conditions that promoted and inhibited Black student achievement using their School Improvement Plan (SIP).*

The importance of this study is to describe how principals, as instructional leaders, change the trajectory and increase Black student achievement. Principal focus, leadership, and guidance leads to building the capacity of teachers and the instruction that leads to positive changes in student achievement (Goldring et al., 2019). This study was designed to look at the instructional strategies principals believed were important, their frequency of implementation, and the factors and conditions that promoted and inhibited Black student achievement to shed light on how principals ensure their efforts advance Black student achievement. The next section takes a deeper look into the findings, connecting the literature of Critical Race Theory in Education and the efforts of K-12 school principals to highlight progressive efforts to improve Black student achievement.

### **Discussion**

The research in the study sought to understand the efforts principals deemed important and made a priority (Guiding Research Question #1) and the frequency of implementation of those efforts (Guiding Research Question #2). Based on the ~~ten~~ 10 findings from this study, there are theoretical implications drawn out by Guiding Research Question #3, which identify the factors and conditions in schools reported by principals that inhibit and promote Black student achievement. Synthesizing the literature from Chapter Two and the findings from Chapter Four, there were no disagreements or conflicts pertaining to the responsibilities of principals to increase Black student achievement. Instead, this discussion and the following recommendations combine to serve as a blueprint for principals and their instructional leadership. This section

discusses the findings, looks at the implications, and makes recommendations for K-12 school principals in their efforts to increase Black student achievement.

From the inception of Black education in America, Black students have maintained a low-performing status. The denial of education, lack of funding, and cultural incongruence have played and continue to play a part in predictors of achievement by race. Slaves were denied education, funding was redirected to White schools during segregation, and then Black students in integrated schools of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were subjected to an education misaligned to their experiences. Unfortunately, the same issues are occurring more than 50 years after integration. Advanced courses and other enrichment measures continue to be withheld from Black students, district and school funding is still reliant on the taxpayers of the state or county, and culturally relevant instruction is not widely accepted as a means to increase Black student achievement.

The highest courts recognize there is a problem as they have put legislation in place to ensure all students are learning and making academic progress. Legislation mandates passed to superintendents hold principals accountable for what happens in schools. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act prohibits race-based discrimination in schools receiving federal funds and Title I provides federal funding to increase achievement of subgroups. However, culturally relevant instruction in schools and classrooms remains a choice. The instructional leader of a school, the principal, can require and support implementation if they deem it important.

The moral and ethical responsibility of principals combined with the prevalence of low Black student achievement has motivated principals to prioritize an inclusive school culture to promote learning for all students. An inclusive school culture accommodates an instructional plan with strategies rooted in Critical Race Theory in Education to intentionally increase Black

student achievement. Findings #1, #2, #3, and #4 provide insight into GRQ #1, contending principals believe leading efforts to improve Black student achievement is important, but the genesis for addressing the need was not race. This reflects the Permanence of Racism, one of the tenets of Critical Race Theory. The Permanence of Racism presents racism as woven into the fabric of our educational system, blinding the minds of educators to believe race is not a driving factor. Rather, principals use data to assess the needs of their school, and not automatically assume low achievement is synonymous with Black students even though Black students have the lowest rate of proficiency. Critical Race scholars would contend the data reflects racism present in schools and are not isolated entities.

While stating race is not the driving factor of their efforts, principals consistently implemented structures and strategies in schools to positively influence Black student achievement knowing all students will benefit. To determine effective strategies, Finding #3 highlights the use of data by principals to determine the priorities and strategies needed to increase Black student achievement. The use of data pinpoints the specific areas within the school requiring attention and support for growth. Aligned with the research of Howard and Minkoff (n.d.), principals reported they used data to determine the needs of the school and the factors and conditions in schools promoting and inhibiting Black student achievement.

Data points principals used to identify and address the instructional needs of the school stretched beyond test scores to include behavioral data, teacher evaluation ratings, teacher working conditions survey results, and other quantitative or qualitative data found at the school level. Data serves as the driving force of principals when determining their actions and taking instructional responsibility for learning and increasing Black student achievement. Of the data collected by principals, the need for positive staff and student relationships, instructional staff,

and the work of PLCs rose as the top-ranking factors that positively influence Black student achievement and where principals place intentional efforts. These strategies, along with the others from the questionnaire, are based on research completed by scholars in the field and are confirmed as the efforts implemented by principals informing GRQ #2.

The use of data is one of the strategies shown to increase Black student achievement. To use culturally relevant strategies, principals and teachers must know and understand the demographics of the students they serve. The term “Black” in this study refers to students considered African Americans, West Indian, Haitian, students from African nations, students of mixed race, or anyone identifying as such. Any group of individuals who identify as Black can have similar or different cultural attributes and narratives expressing their experiences in the educational system. Experiential Knowledge, another tenet of Critical Race Theory in Education, explains how the experiences and stories of Black people impact how they are seen and how they experience education in the United States. To increase achievement for Black students, personal stories that may counter the majority narrative and reflect the perspective of Black students should be taken into consideration in schools and classrooms. Therefore, principals, teachers, and school staff must know the demographics of families they serve and connect their education to their lived experiences in order to implement culturally relevant strategies effectively.

Demographic information is important data to inform the educator on how to connect with the student and the family. In addition to cultural responsiveness, demographic information provides the principal and school staff of language needs, socioeconomics, and community information. This information can help the instructional program especially when there is a cultural mismatch. Using this information can help when designing the master schedule, staffing, and programming. Based on the data, there may be a need for English as Second Language

(ESL) teachers or intentional recruitment of staff to match the demographic. Socioeconomics and community information can help when designing the school lunch program to assess the need for Free or Reduced Lunch, community resources to support the academic and social-emotional well-being of students, and parent and family engagement. All school data, including demographic, discipline, attendance, and test score data provide pertinent information that can lead to the improvement or detriment of Black student achievement. School staff must understand what the various data points reveal, how to address the inhibiting factors and conditions, and what they can do to increase proficiency.

Considering the data, Finding #4 revealed that responsibility to lead efforts leading to an increase in Black student achievement resides with the principal. This finding has implications for principals and preparation programs for individuals who desire to take on the role of principal. Principals must be aware of the importance of their roles and be prepared to move forward in the work of improving Black student achievement. The responsibility to ensure that principals know and understand the importance of this work lies with principal and administrator preparation programs.

If principals lead schools knowing and understanding key data-driven strategies that support Black student achievement, they can begin to implement change. The literature presented in Chapter Two discussed principals creating positive school culture with students, staff, families and all stakeholders within and directly connected to the school. Findings #5 and #6 explain how principals report they lead their staff in building positive student, staff, and family relationships, hold high expectations for students, and facilitate PLCs as efforts to increase student achievement. These three fundamental strategies serve as a foundation for the work of schools to increase Black student achievement and indicate principals inherently adhere to and integrate



Critical Race Theory into their practice to improve Black student achievement. Positive student, staff, and family relationships and high expectations are directly aligned with Ladson-Billings' (1995) decree of students experiencing success and developing cultural competence and critical consciousness as the foundation for culturally responsive education. All principals reported how they engaged students, staff, and families with positive relationships and implemented culturally relevant strategies to improve the academic achievement of Black students. Behavioral data and teacher evaluation ratings informed the principals' assessments regarding how students and teachers were relating to one another. Teachers who have numerous behavioral referrals for Black students may be experiencing a cultural disconnect in the classroom and need strategies and intervention to mitigate and build an effective instructional program. Positive student, staff, and family relationships are reliant upon a mutual respect for the background and experiences of the individual to support the educational program. If there are high discipline rates and low teacher ratings for classroom climates, principals must intervene with efforts to improve classroom climate and support academic achievement.

Academic achievement is cultivated when principals and teachers have positive relationships with Black students and their families and hold high expectations for them. When this cannot happen organically, the assembly of an effective PLC can help. Using The PLC platform to build relationships among staff and students, to share and use data, to target instructional strategies, and to plan academic interventions builds teacher mindset to believe all students can learn. Having teachers support one another using common planning and common assessments highlights the strengths of the group to support students and adhere to the responsibility for the learning and the academic achievement of Black students. PLCs are a platform for teachers to share and glean from each other's experiences in the classroom to

improve learning experiences for students. In PLCs, teachers collaborate and discuss students and effective strategies that foster growth, socially and academically. Teachers share knowledge and interests of students from different perspectives and plan for instruction. Principals must create time in the master schedule for teachers to have common planning time to engage in PLCs. The time during PLCs builds the capacity of teachers to disaggregate their own data and receive support from their colleagues to increase student learning. This builds community within the building to have a sound, cohesive, instructional plan led by the principal. During this time, teachers can assess student work and set high expectations for students while being held accountable in this arena of support.

The responsibility of the principals for PLCs can range from creating the platform for PLC meetings to take place, to being a regular presence actively engaging with teachers, or to sending a designee to support teachers. In addition, principals report using coaching and professional development opportunities to increase teacher capacity to effectively instruct Black students and increase academic achievement. Funneling the support through PLCs and individualized coaching opportunities increases stakeholder buy-in as the principal cannot carry out these efforts in isolation. Finding #5 *Principals employed distributive leadership for coaching, PLC support, and professional development opportunities for teachers and staff unable to implement culturally relevant strategies* is a reflection of the flexibility of the principal to utilize school-based leadership. When principals are not able to be a regular presence in the PLC, they may elect teacher leaders or use instructional coaches to facilitate the PLC or during professional development. Robbins and Alvy (2004) speak to principals guiding professional development, but it is not essential for them to lead all the time. Knowing the strengths of individuals in the school is a benefit to principals as they can use individuals to advance the

instructional plan of the principal. This model of distributive leadership not only elevates the knowledge of teachers but also deepens the understanding of the individual facilitating the PLC or delivering the professional development.

To remove subjectivity and provide a neutral space for adult learning, schools can also utilize outside community agencies or education consulting firms for professional development. Community agencies and educational consulting firms who provide professional development to schools wanting to increase Black student achievement must build knowledge and understanding of culturally relevant instruction and provide the necessary resources. This includes being mindful of the materials used and the portrayal of Black people during the learning and modeling for educators how to use resources provided. Having the ability to navigate questions and conversations of those who may not have a strong grasp on what cultural relevance looks like in the classroom and creating a safe space for these conversations is key for teachers to implement this learning in the classroom.

PLCs and professional development can be instrumental in promoting the vision of the school principal to increase Black student achievement. The collective efforts of principals and all stakeholders can shift the trajectory of Black student achievement. Finding #7 denotes how crucial collaborative efforts are to address the learning needs of all students, especially Black students. Although principals regard themselves as effective instructional leaders (Finding #8) and maintain the responsibility of instructional leadership (Finding #4), distributive leadership provides a platform for their efforts to have influence school wide. Distributive leadership is one way principals mitigate the factors and conditions that inhibit Black student achievement. Even with a heightened focus and structures for accountability in place, there is still the potential to have factors and conditions that inhibit Black student achievement.

GRQ #3 assesses the reported factors and conditions in low-performing schools that inhibit and promote Black student achievement. Research indicated a deficit mindset, staffing concerns and perpetual low scores as factors and conditions hindering Black student achievement. Principal beliefs, reflected in Finding #9, confirm the research reporting school readiness, literacy skills, and teacher mindset are the leading factors inhibiting Black student achievement. Students coming to school not having met proficiency on benchmark assessments feeds negative teacher mindsets and a cycle of perpetual low performance. Principals use the principles of Findings #5 and #6 to mitigate these factors and conditions, and Finding #10 to monitor their progress by setting goals to focus on and increase Black student achievement.

Negative teacher attitudes about Black students negate a teacher's ability to invoke culturally relevant strategies in the classroom. If a student is to feel good about their cultural identity, they should see themselves in a positive light as well as the other Black students around them. Teachers may not consciously communicate negative attitudes about Black students but when this happens, principals are responsible for having critical conversations with instructional staff to mitigate future misunderstandings. To preempt negative attitudes, principals should evaluate their hiring practices to ensure they recruit and retain teachers effective in implementing culturally relevant strategies. In addition, they can provide professional development opportunities to remain current with culturally relevant strategies for student demographics and ensure the vision of cultural relevance permeates the school.

Research has shown that negative teacher attitudes impact how well a student performs in the classroom. Duke et al (2007) described the effects of low expectations, negative teacher attitudes, and lack of preparedness in low-performing schools. When these three elements are

present, it is difficult to determine the genesis of low-performance, thus requiring principals to put forth effort to challenge these notions in schools.

This study examined the efforts of K-12 principals to increase Black student achievement. To monitor the effectiveness of their efforts, principals must set goals to determine if the implemented strategies were effective and if there was progress that led to changes that needed to occur at the school level. The goals and progress monitoring occur at the school level using the SIP. The SIP is used to document the results of the data, to acknowledge the areas for growth in the school, and to evaluate how the school is moving forward to promote academic achievement. The final Finding #10 culminates the efforts of principals by creating accountability at the school level to increase Black student achievement. Finding #10 states that *Principals set goals based on the factors and conditions that promote and inhibit Black student achievement*. The importance of this finding is to hold the principal accountable for student learning as laid out in the ESEA of 1965 for an increased focus on Black student achievement.

Principals have an external responsibility to focus on Black student achievement. Many principals also have an internal responsibility to address the learning needs of their schools, as well. Regardless of the motivation, the efforts of K-12 principals to increase Black student achievement should be monitored with accountability if progress is to be made. This study produced recommendations based on the implications of K-12 principals to use transformational leadership to inform their instructional leadership. The implications for instructional leadership influence what happens in the classroom and the entire school community (Leithwood & Louis, 2011). Transformational leaders motivate others to change and do things differently based on the current practices not yielding positive results (Menon & Lefteri, 2021). Finally, transformational

leadership collectively devises the vision of the school with a focus on setting and reaching goals (Khalifa et al., 2013).

To be a transformational instructional leader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means shifting the emphasis from whole-school academic achievement to planning, monitoring, and ensuring growth and academic achievement for individual students and student groups considering race and the impact it has on student learning. When the principal applies the qualities of a transformational leader to their instructional leadership using the appropriate tenets of Critical Race Theory, their leadership can change the trajectory of Black student achievement in any school designation.

### **Recommendations**

The four recommendations that follow inform the transformational instructional leader of what data to collect, how to disaggregate it, and what to do with the information once revealed.

The recommendations, based on the literature and findings, elaborate on how transformational instructional leaders create opportunities to improve academic outcomes for Black students.

*Recommendation #1: Principals should collect and disaggregate all data points to find overlap and gaps when creating an instructional plan for students.*

*Recommendation #2: Principals should identify the academic needs of Black students and employ culturally relevant strategies to support their achievement.*

*Recommendation #3: Principals should build capacity of faculty and staff to instruct Black students.*

*Recommendation #4: Principals should review the effectiveness of instructional and classroom practices.*

**Recommendation #1**

*Principals should collect and disaggregate all data points to find overlap and gaps when creating an instructional plan for students.*

The first recommendation for principal practice is a direct reflection of Finding #3, the use of data to determine priorities. Participating principals relied heavily on data to decide school priorities and initiatives. The data they reported using went beyond student achievement data to include student behavior and teacher effectiveness data. Finding #3, extracted through repeated references by all principals who used available data to determine and set goals, guides the strategies principals use and monitors the school's performance and achievement levels. Recommendation #1 proposes for principals to collect and disaggregate all data points to find overlap and gaps when creating an instructional plan for students. It informs the transformational instructional leader on what data to collect, how to disaggregate it, and what to do with the information once revealed.

For this recommendation, principals assess academic and student behavior data, data from classroom walkthroughs, formal observations, teacher working conditions survey data, school improvement team feedback, and any other formal or informal data available at the school level to cultivate and increase Black student achievement.

Collecting, disaggregating, and cross-referencing available data to define areas for learning and school improvement is the beginning of creating an effective instructional plan. The devising of the instructional plan begins with assessing the social and academic needs of students and the instructional needs of teachers (Robbins & Alvy, 2004). For educational decision-making intended to increase Black student achievement, principals must include in their analysis "the

manner in which racial meanings and identities provide the basis for action” (Evans, 2007, p. 166).

Although suggested in Guiding Research Question #1, it is not solely the beliefs of the school principal that determines if Black student achievement is the instructional priority of the school. Instead, school focus is determined by collectively assessing the data informing the needs. After detailing the needs, interventions that correlate with the need should be implemented (Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, n.d.). This would require the principal to analyze the data and prioritize efforts based on the analysis. When this process of racialized data analysis stresses the need to improve Black student achievement, prioritization is evidenced by the data. Finding #3 and Recommendation #1 prompt principals to rely on the data as opposed to beliefs or assumptions.

Although achievement data decides the performance level of a school, achievement data is not the only data point principals indicated using to determine priorities of Finding #3. Principals reported looking at additional data available in the school context to highlight other areas in the school impacting Black student achievement. Finding #3 advocates for principals to use student achievement and behavioral data, data from classroom walkthroughs, formal observations, teacher working conditions survey data, school improvement team feedback, and any other formal or informal data and feedback to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the school when addressing achievement levels of Black students. By cross-referencing student achievement and behavioral data, along with instructional staff data, principals can identify the school’s cultural, instructional, classroom, and whole school needs. When principals dive this deeply into the data and make connections, they are positioned to create goals and plan for change.



Although principals did not explicitly reference setting goals, the goal-setting process is a major part of accountability measures set by the state. The process of sharing the data and setting goals begins with being transparent, sharing the data with all members of the school community, and receiving input on addressing issues impeding growth. Transparency with the data is not always an easy task, especially when the data points to a specific group of students as the focal point. It is, however, important for principals to “figure out how to share the data with the public, what to do about “good and bad” results and how to analyze the data to help students” (Robbins & Alvy, 2004, p. 102).

Being transparent with school achievement data holds the principal and the whole school community accountable for student success. Transparent sharing leads to “a shared school/organizational vision and empowering teachers toward collective educational goals” (Khalifa et al., 2013 p. 497) for student achievement. Data reflects classroom practices and stands as a springboard towards supporting instructional staff reaching classroom and school goals facilitating proficiency. As a shared responsibility for all members of the school community, the goal-setting process starts school-wide and drills down to classrooms where teachers are making proficiency goals for their classrooms and individual students. Goals should be developed collaboratively and drive the actions and decision-making of the school.

Analyzing the data and setting goals for the school informs Guiding Research Question #2, which seeks to understand the efforts of K-12 school principals to increase Black student achievement. The second recommendation is to identify and implement strategies that promote academic success in safe, inviting, and respectful environments. This is important as “students are more likely to succeed academically, actively participate in school, and feel confidence in themselves as students when they feel they are part of a supportive classroom” (Cramer &

Bennett2015 p.20). Transformational instructional leaders use the data to set goals for achievement and then plan for how they will reach those goals.

### **Recommendation #2**

*Principals should identify the academic needs of Black students and employ culturally relevant strategies to support their achievement.*

Recommendation #1 requires principals to rely on data analysis to substantiate the need to increase Black student achievement is important and set goals to do so. Recommendation #2 builds on that practice by using Critical Race Theory in Education to identify and implement research-based strategies proven to increase Black student achievement. In this study, the qualitative and quantitative data analysis of principal efforts drawn from Guiding Research Question #2 and the factors and conditions promoting and inhibiting Black student achievement from Guiding Research Question #3 led to coordinated Findings #2 and #3 and inform this recommendation. Principals believe Finding #2, positive student, staff, and family relationships, holding high expectations for students, and professional learning communities (PLCs) are high-yielding strategies that will increase Black student achievement. These efforts could be thwarted by Finding #3, school readiness, literacy, and teacher attitudes as the leading factors inhibiting Black student achievement. This dichotomy has led to low expectations and negative teacher attitudes about the Black student population inhibiting Black student achievement.

The ability to hold high expectations while acknowledging a lack of proficiency in school readiness and literacy skills requires principals to select strategies that change the perspective of school staff and the performance of Black students. With chronic low performance, teachers may not see the skills and abilities of Black students that tap into their cognitive abilities. PLCs and professional development opportunities are widely used strategies employed by principals to

counter the factors that inhibit Black student achievement. Implementing effective PLCs and applicable professional development would help instructional staff develop high expectations for students and provide discourse bringing varied perspectives to a collective understanding.

To bolster proficiency and achievement for Black students, culturally relevant instruction uses “student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge” (Ladson-Billings, 1992 p. 314). To facilitate increasing Black student achievement, principals must support teachers in implementing culturally relevant practices. This cannot be done in isolation; instead, principals must create “structured, formal opportunities for collaboration” (Duke et al., 2007 p. 12), referring to the use of PLCs and professional development. The collaboration or “connectivity is about focused professional development and creating a learning community for educators within the school and across school lines” (Housman & Martinez, 2001 p. 7) to enable implementation of culturally relevant practices with confidence to yield positive results. If after disaggregating the data, the need to build a positive culture in the school with high expectations and collaboration is present, then principals can use these strategies to increase Black student achievement.

Promoting positive student, staff, and family relationships, high expectations for students, and collaboration within the school translates to principals ensuring the school and its classrooms encompass “a safe, learning-focused environment, high expectations for student success and staff learning, and a climate of joyfulness, a recognition of teaching as a calling” (Robbins & Alvy, 2004 p. x). School climate, instructional practices, and classroom management are strong indicators for student proficiency. It is the responsibility of the principal to ensure all staff can implement these and other strategies based on the data to support student learning and hold them

accountable for doing so. The third recommendation is for principals is to build capacity within the school to improve proficiency of Black students.

### **Recommendation #3**

*Principals should build capacity of faculty and staff to instruct Black students.*

The impetus for collaborative settings within the school is to discuss the data, plan for student learning, and build teacher capacity. As reported in Finding #4, principals use distributive leadership for coaching, PLC support, and professional development promoting a flow of expectations throughout the school. Distributed leadership ensures that no one person is solely responsible for the achievement or lack thereof. Instead, it is a collective effort that builds understanding and sharing of the work that needs doing (Elmore, 2002). Distributive leadership creates influence throughout the school “where everybody has a right and responsibility to contribute” (Western 2008 p. 47) with the intention of spreading the culture of high expectations and the drive for academic success throughout the school. However, it is the responsibility of the principal to create schedules providing opportunities for staff engagement and collaboration to occur, or “school improvement efforts may be jeopardized” (Duke et al., 2007 p. 12).

Spending time in PLCs or professional development opportunities helps faculty and staff members not well versed in culturally relevant practices glean support from one another to spread implementation across the school. Finding #2 highlighted principal efforts using PLCs and professional development sessions to build the capacity of faculty and staff to implement research-based strategies effective in increasing Black student achievement. Creating these opportunities for staff to collaborate and learn from each other is essential for instructional planning and addressing whole-school and classroom needs. During PLC meetings and

professional development sessions, faculty and staff engage with one another to build understanding and plan for the identified school and classroom needs based on the data.

Time spent in PLCs and professional development sessions can be used to engage in discourse and helps everyone understand and support the importance of implementing culturally relevant practices. Collaboration in PLCs and professional development opportunities can provide teachers with support to build relationships, receive instructional support, and build their capacity in the classroom to effectively instruct all students. Principals can also host “mandatory trainings and resources to develop cultural competence, enhance empathy and respect, defense management, and classroom management” (Toldson 2016 p.1).

To ensure faculty and staff members are equipped with the knowledge and ability to execute effective instruction, North Carolina’s evaluations are done primarily using the North Carolina Educator Effectiveness System (NCEES) and summarized through the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS). NCEES uses five standards for teachers and certified staff: Standard I Teachers Demonstrate Leadership, Standard II Teachers Establish a Respectful Environment for a Diverse Population of Students, Standard III Teachers Know the Content They Teach, Standard IV Teachers Facilitate Learning for their Students, and Standard V Teachers Reflect on Their Practice (NC State Board of Education, 2015).

Standard II is essential for assessing teachers in the classroom and their ability to effectively instruct Black students. Principals evaluate teachers for their ability to provide a caring environment, embrace diversity, individualize, and hold high expectations for students with and without special needs, and teachers’ ability connect with student families and support systems for the benefit of educating students. This standard connects directly to Finding #2 in which principals promote positive student, staff, and family relationships.

In conjunction, Standard IV assesses how teachers facilitate learning for students looking at instructional practices teachers use in the classroom. These practices seek to evaluate how teachers plan and execute instruction for the class and how they differentiate for individual students. This standard allows principals to evaluate how teachers teach, individualize, and differentiate learning to support Black student achievement. Evaluation using this standard can be utilized to counter low school readiness and literacy skills, factors that contribute to low student achievement for Black students from Finding #3.

To summarize the growth over the course of the year for student academic achievement, principals can use EVAAS data to assess how teachers have grown students academically towards proficiency. Able to be disaggregated by race, EVAAS data can be used to determine the efficiency of a teacher instructing Black students. Growth measurements consider a student's academic proficiency over time using diagnostic data from benchmark assessments. EVAAS scores determine how much growth a student has achieved over the course of a year and are attached to the instruction of their specific teacher(s).

Data pulled from Standard II, Standard IV, and EVAAS gives principals vital information to assess the schools' response to their promotion of positive student, staff, and family relationships and instructional strategies teachers use to increase Black student achievement. Classroom walkthroughs can also be used to provide formal or informal feedback to teachers on respectful environments and instructional practices. This helps principals in developing their instructional plan and deciding how specifically they need to tailor support to individual teachers. For faculty and staff not able to grow and shift towards making improvements for Black student achievement, principals must drill down to the root of the why and have crucial

conversations regarding their data, instructional practices, the goals of the school, and the demand to increase Black student achievement.

Building the capacity of teachers is a combination of formative and summative supervision (Range et al., 2011). Through collaborative and collective efforts, growth must be evident. Principals must maintain a constant state of data review and assessment of practices to assess growth and continue in a cycle of improvement. The final recommendation circles back to the data to determine the effectiveness of the efforts principal put forth to increase Black student achievement.

#### **Recommendation #4**

*Principals should review the effectiveness of instructional and classroom practices.*

The use of data is woven into the fabric of transformational instructional leadership. It begins with principals collecting data, assessing needs from the data, then collectively deciding on effective practices, and then building teacher capacity to implement the practices shown to build Black student achievement. The final recommendation is to review the effectiveness of instructional and classroom practices, thus creating a cycle of data-driven leadership. This step is the connector designed to shift the culture of the school to a cycle of continuous improvement by using data to highlight areas of need and celebrate areas of growth. To do this, principals must maintain their focus on the data, direct the implementation of effective strategies, and be able to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. The purpose of this recommendation is to close the cycle to see “what must be done differently in order to develop students’ capacities and motivation to learn” (Wagner, 2000 p. 63). This cycle should impact every student, staff, and faculty member in the school, with the priority being all students reaching proficiency.

Principals along with stakeholders in the school should complete a data analysis multiple times during the year and use the results to assess the effectiveness of strategies and mark where they are in reaching their goals. Regular data talks and discussion of the effectiveness of classroom practices is essential for teachers, staff, and the instructional leader as well as students and families (Wagner, 2000). Working with all stakeholders to assess the progress of the goals creates more buy-in and support for addressing the goals. Instructional coaches and PLC partners will identify the areas in the data to create a plan of support aligned with the principal's vision to increase achievement for Black students. This recommendation connects to Finding #4. Distributive leadership serves to share the responsibility and support of increasing Black student achievement by not making it the primary responsibility of the principal but instead a part of the shared vision among the staff. This cycle should be used to shift school culture, building trust and positive relationships with students, staff, families, and communities represented in the school.

Part of shifting and building a positive culture is celebrating success. When students succeed, their success should be celebrated. When teachers succeed, their success should be celebrated. These celebrations positively impact the culture within the school for individuals as well as the collective (DuFour, 1998). Celebrate and recognize the value in the process and positive movement, especially as it pertains to Black student achievement. The celebration should include rewarding students for putting in the work and rewarding teachers for moving the needle of Black student achievement. As schools increase and celebrate Black student achievement, the culture, level of expectations, and the trajectory of overall achievement for Black students shifts. The time is now for us to lead with our eyes open and fixed on the data, steadily making changes to the status of Black student learning and achievement.



The responsibility of the principal to maintain the cycle of continuous improvement for Black students is paramount now more than ever. The influence of the leader and their vision for continuous improvement is important, especially in schools with students who have been marginalized because of their race (Khalifa et al., n.d.). If the efforts of school principals across the nation reflected this cycle of improvement, including required implementation of culturally relevant strategies, the possibility for Black students to move out of the lowest-performing subgroup would increase. After more than five decades of integration, research on the effectiveness of culturally responsive instruction and technology enhancements, there is no acceptable reason for Black students to languish at the bottom of achievement measures. The time is past due for principals, districts, and lawmakers to raise the ante, disrupt the status quo, and create safe and effective learning environments for Black students. The next section focuses on future research opportunities to identify supplementary pathways to increase Black student achievement.

### **Future Research**

Focusing on federal policies and the expansion of the delimitations of the study, future research opportunities include federal and local school policies to enhance Black student achievement, the impact of expanded instructional leadership, and efforts from the community and teachers to increase Black student achievement. Exploring the expansion of federal policies would allow the researcher to drill down the specifics of Black student achievement in K-12 public schools. The delimitations in Chapter Three include performance status, the setting (North Carolina and K-12 public schools), instructional leadership limited to principals, comparisons to other subgroup data, and the impact of community, family, or teacher demographics on Black student achievement. Further research would add layers to factors and conditions that inhibit and

promote Black student achievement as noted in Guiding Research Question #3. Additional research questions would be developed to determine the impact varied delimitations play on the efforts to increase Black student achievement.

The research in this study focused on the principal's responsibility to increase student achievement at the local level. Future research can address federal policies related specifically to Black student achievement and accountability. While we do have federal legislation to address the learning and achievement of subgroups, future research can look specifically at the support and the accountability for schools with Black students as their lowest performers on standardized assessments. Federal programs such as Title 1 and Comprehensive School Improvement fall under ESEA provide funding and support for schools to increase student achievement. These two major sources of funding and support are determined based on Free and Reduced lunch percentages and not specific to Black students. Future research would investigate the possibility of legislation for a free and public education for Black students that included mandated implementation of culturally relevant practices in schools. This would hold schools accountable for curriculum, instructional support, and subsequently achievement in line with their non-Black peers.

The initial purpose of the study focusing on school accountability solely for low-performing schools and was overridden by including non-low-performing schools in the study. Non-low-performing schools were included because of the performance statuses of schools being skewed due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Standardized testing and academic data were impacted by the academic and social shift in learning when students attended school virtually. Accountability testing was suspended and there was an increased focus on student mental health. Students with limited access to technology, distractions in the home environment, and teachers'

ability to teach virtually shifted what teaching and learning looked like for the 2020-2021 school year in the state of North Carolina where this study took place.

Participating K-12 public school principals were solicited from the north-central region of North Carolina in the Wake County and Durham County public school systems. The exclusion of private and charter schools located in this area was to minimize any purposefully designed school focus which could have impacted intentional efforts of principals. Principals in private or charter school settings base their responsibility for student learning primarily on the North Carolina Division of Non-Public Education or on the specific charter approved by the North Carolina Division of Public Instruction. Their goals and efforts are not always required to align with those in public schools, making it difficult to compare with K-12 public school instruction.

As instructional leaders, principals are held responsible for the instructional leadership of the school, but as described in Finding #4, principals do not approach the work in isolation. As the only participants in the study, K-12 public school principals spoke candidly about the collective and collaborative efforts to address Black student achievement with other school staff, making instructional leadership limited to only principals a delimitation in the study. This study was intentional about not including data from staff providing instructional leadership support. However, Finding #4 exemplifies how principals work in collaboration with instructional leadership to enhance the instructional vision of the school. The principals established instructional leadership teams to support coaching, PLC support, and professional development opportunities for teachers and staff to implement culturally relevant strategies and improve academic achievement in schools.

The efforts of K-12 public school principals can vary as these schools have a wide range of developmental, social, and academic needs at elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Isolating the needs at these levels could enhance the practices of principals and their efforts to increase Black student achievement. Future research would assess the data and address the social-emotional and instructional practices based on the developmental levels and needs of students. This research would identify and assess data points, effective practices, and results of Black student achievement at the various school levels. By differentiating and identifying practices at the varying school levels, principals would have more specified tools for their schools to address Black student achievement.

In addition to variants of grade levels, the racial demographics of a school can impact the instructional needs of that school. Future research would look at the population of Black students to the school in comparison to other racial groups to address the need and level to which culturally relevant strategies need to be addressed and implemented. In some K-12 schools, Black student achievement may not be the overarching need based on the data. If that is the case, future research can look at strategies designed to support academic achievement for all student subgroups and the impact those strategies have on Black student achievement. This research would take into consideration the total school population, including students and staff, and the capacity to support whole-school student achievement.

Finding #2 of this study revealed positive student, staff, and family relationships, holding high expectations for students, and professional learning communities (PLCs) are high-yielding strategies that will increase Black student achievement. In addition, Finding #4 expressed school readiness, literacy skills, and negative teacher attitudes are reported as the leading factors inhibiting achievement Black students. As the study suggests, when culturally relevant instruction and interventions are put in place, Black students have a higher rate of achievement. The final opportunity for future research based on this study is to assess the structure and

practices of PLCs that support Black student achievement and the professional development that support instructional strategies to increase school readiness, literacy skills, and shifts in teacher attitude that support the continuous improvement process. By highlighting the practices that promote and inhibit Black student achievement and the qualities of teacher attitudes, this research can further define effective practices to promote a shift towards Black student achievement.

Although principals use proficiency data and teacher evaluations to denote the issue of Black student achievement and professional development to address the concern in North Carolina Public schools, academic achievement for Black students is still low and long-standing change has not yet been actualized. Based on the results of this study, uncovering the effective practices principals employ to increase Black student achievement can inform opportunities for future research. In summation, future research can include:

- refinement of policies that are specific to and support Black student achievement
- inclusion of faculty and staff as instructional leaders in K-12 public schools
- exploration of Black student achievement strategies based on grade levels and the developmental needs of students
- comparison of effective strategies geared towards Black students and those of other subgroups, and
- assessment of strategies on the impact of culturally relevant strategies.

This study scratched the surface of the efforts of K-12 principals to find out what they were doing to address Black student achievement. Future research would dissect the Findings and Recommendations provided in this study to help educators discover more answers as to how they can positively impact the state of Black student achievement in America.

### **Final Reflections**

The state of our American public school system was a major takeaway for me in this study. Although Black student achievement has made progress over the past 50 years, it is arguably not enough. School, district, and national data indicate there is still a strong need for efforts to increase Black student achievement. Policies must expand, K-12 public school principals must respond, and schools must shift to develop a plan of continuous improvement in our schools across the nation.

The principal's role as transformational instructional leader is critical now more than ever if we are to collectively shift the trajectory. This study stressed to me the importance of the principal role, how it will inform me of my effectiveness in my current role, and how it will shape my future career goals. Black students from an early age are recognized as non-proficient and "educational leadership practice has served primarily to reproduce these conditions rather than challenge them" (Khalifa et al., 2013 p. 500). I seek to change that dynamic. As a Black female educator, I have a personal and professional responsibility to uphold high expectations for Black students and challenge the status quo.

As an advocate, I will push for change and vote for policies that positively impact Black students in America. I will not ignore the state of our American public school system and its failure to educate Black students to a level in comparison to their non-Black peers. I will challenge the status quo and demand specificity and attention as it pertains to Black students and their education.

As an educator, I will impart change by dissecting available data to figure out the priorities of the school and build capacity to address the needs of Black students. I will uplift the

students I serve, the teachers under my supervision, and my colleagues in and entering the profession to shift the trajectory of Black student achievement.

As a leader, I will exert and spread transformational instructional leadership and lead the charge for effective change. I will share what I have gleaned from this research to disseminate in my practice by sharing with my colleagues and future principals tasked with improving the state of Black student learning and achievement.

I challenge all school principals to also adhere to their professional responsibilities and continuously put forth efforts to increase their focus on Black student achievement. Advocate unapologetically to create and maintain a space for culturally relevant instruction in schools. Create a positive school culture focusing on the data and the effective strategies to increase Black student achievement. Challenge the status quo and do not let it challenge you. Although we have made progress, it is not good enough. “Ladson-Billings’ cornerstone of belief is that all children are capable of learning given the right support” (Mahari de Silva et al., 2018 p.25) and that support begins in schools with the principal as a transformational instructional leader.

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*Appendix A: Questionnaire*

Dear Colleague,

I am a doctoral student and I need the benefit of your experience and perspective regarding the importance of effective strategies in increasing the improvement of Black student achievement. If you consent to participate in this study data from the questionnaire you complete will be used to inform and develop practices for school principals. Your responses will be kept confidential, and my research will not include your name or any other individual information by which you could be identified. This questionnaire should take between 15-20 minutes to complete.

Participation in this questionnaire is completely voluntary and you can stop taking the questionnaire at any point in the process. Any questions regarding this questionnaire can be directed to the researcher, Kerry Moore via email at [kmoore33@lesley.edu](mailto:kmoore33@lesley.edu) and/or the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Stephen Gould, Ph.D., at [sgould2@lesley.edu](mailto:sgould2@lesley.edu).

**Clicking the “yes” button below indicates that you consent to having the data from this questionnaire used in my research on the efforts of principals to increase Black student achievement.**

- Yes, I understand that my participation is voluntary and that data from this questionnaire will be used for scholarly research on instructional leadership of school principals.
- No, I would not like to participate in this questionnaire.

**Questionnaire**

## 1. Current school level

- Elementary School (K-5)
- Middle School (6-8 grade)
- High School (9-12 grade)

2. Is it a public school?

Yes

No

3. Is the school where you are principal considered a low performing school through the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction?

Yes

No

4. School demographics: The school where you are principal is...

less than 25 Black/African American

25 to 50 Black/African American

51 to 75 Black/African American

76 to 95 Black/African American

more than 96 Black/African American

5. How many years have you been a principal?

1-3

4-9

10-20

More than 20 years

6. How many years have you been a principal at your current school?

1-2

3-5

6-10

More than 10 years

7. How many K-12 schools have you served as principal?

- This is my first year as principal
- 1-2 schools as principal
- 2-3 schools as principal
- 4-5 schools as principal
- More than 5 schools as principal

8. Education: What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate degree

9. Gender: Please specify your gender.

- Female
- Male
- Gender Nonconforming and/or transgendered

10. Ethnicity Origin (or Race): Please specify your ethnicity.

- White
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Please answer the following questions using the indicated scales**

11. Academic achievement is the top priority at my school.

*1- strongly agree, 2- agree, 3- disagree, 4-strongly disagree*

12. I encourage the staff at my school to use effective strategies regardless of race.

*1- strongly agree, 2- agree, 3- disagree, 4-strongly disagree*

13. When discussing academic achievement, I specify for different racial groups.

*1- strongly agree, 2- agree, 3- disagree, 4-strongly disagree*

14. I hold my staff accountable for implementing strategies for different racial groups.

*1- strongly agree, 2- agree, 3- disagree, 4-strongly disagree*

15. I am comfortable having individual conversations with my staff around race and academic achievement.

*1- strongly agree, 2- agree, 3- disagree, 4-strongly disagree*

16. There are other factors prioritized at my school over race and academic achievement.

*1- strongly agree, 2- agree, 3- disagree, 4-strongly disagree*

17. I intentionally seek to hire a diverse staff to reflect my student population.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

18. Hiring a diverse staff to reflect my student population is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

19. My ability and the availability to hire a diverse staff to reflect my student population is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

20. I intentionally seek to hire experienced staff (with a proficient or higher standard rating on the NCEES (North Carolina Educator Effectiveness System) for three or more years).

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

21. Having experienced staff in a low performing school is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

22. As a principal, I have autonomy with who I hire...

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

23. I promote positive relationships with instructional staff, students, and families in my school.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

24. Positive student, family, and staff relationships are...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

25. My knowledge and practice of building a positive school community is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

26. I hold instructional staff accountable for high expectations for students in my school.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

27. Encouraging my staff to hold high expectations for students is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

28. My ability to hold staff accountable for high student expectations is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

29. I intentionally create time in the school schedule for instructional staff to attend Professional Learning Communities.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

30. Creating time in the school schedule for Professional Learning Communities is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

31. My ability to create time in the school schedule for instructional staff to attend Professional Learning Communities is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*



32. I protect time in the school schedule for instructional staff to attend Professional Learning Communities.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

33. Time is protected in the school schedule for instructional staff to attend Professional Learning Communities is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

34. My ability to protect time in the school schedule for instructional staff to attend Professional Learning Communities is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

35. I protect time in the school schedule for me to attend Professional Learning Communities.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

36. Protecting my time to attend Professional Learning Communities is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

37. My ability to protect the time in the school schedule for me to attend Professional Learning Communities is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

38. I provide and encourage instructional staff to use resources that reflect the cultures in my school.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

39. Resources that reflect the cultures in my school is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

40. My practice of providing and encouraging instructional staff to use resources that reflect the cultures in my school is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

41. I hold instructional staff accountable for using a strengths-based approach to instruction.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

42. A strengths-based approach to instruction is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

43. My knowledge of strengths-based instruction is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

44. I hold instructional staff accountable for extending student thinking.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

45. Extending student thinking is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important 4- not important*

46. My knowledge of extending student thinking is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

47. I hold staff accountable for instructional scaffolding.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

48. Instructional scaffolding is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

49. My knowledge of instructional scaffolding is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

50. I hold instructional staff accountable for making relevant and real-world connections with students.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

51. Relevant and real-world connections are...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

52. My knowledge of relevant and real-world instruction is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

53. I hold instructional staff accountable for using various learning styles.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

54. Using various learning styles during instruction is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

55. My knowledge of varied learning styles is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

56. I hold instructional staff accountable for using differentiated assessment methods (portfolios, tests, project-based learning, etc.).

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

57. Differentiated assessment methods are...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

58. My knowledge of differentiated assessment methods is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

59. I hold instructional staff accountable for data driven instruction.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

60. Data driven instruction is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

61. My knowledge of data driven instruction is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

62. I hold instructional staff accountable for setting student goals to increase student achievement.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

63. Setting student goals to increase student achievement is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

64. My knowledge of student goal setting to increase achievement is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

65. I have a Professional Development plan for staff.

Yes No

66. I execute my professional development plan with fidelity.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

67. The professional development plan for my staff targets student achievement.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

68. Professional development targeting student achievement is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

69. My ability to deliver professional development targeting student achievement is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

70. The professional development plan for my staff targets diverse populations.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

71. Professional development targeting diverse populations is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

72. My ability to deliver professional development targeting diverse populations is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

73. I invite community partners into my school to support students and families with resources.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

74. School and community agency partnerships providing resources to students and families are...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

75. My knowledge and ability to acquire community partners for student and family resources is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

76. I invite community partners into my school to support student achievement.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

77. School and community agency partnerships providing academic support are...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

78. My knowledge of and ability to acquire community partners to support student achievement is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

79. I provide opportunities for family engagement in my school.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

80. Using family engagement to support academic success in my school is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

81. My knowledge of and my ability to implement family engagement strategies is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

82. The level of family engagement in my school is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

83. The strategy not listed I most use to increase Black student achievement is

\_\_\_\_\_.

*1- always, 2- mostly, 3-sometimes, 4-never*

84. <<insert strategy>> is...

*1- very important, 2- important, 3- somewhat important, 4- not important*

85. My ability to <<insert strategy>> is...

*1- excellent, 2- good, 3- fair, 4-poor*

86. Choose one: Do you intentionally target differentiated strategies for Black students in your school?

- Yes, I think it is important to differentiate strategies specifically for Black students.
- Somewhat, it depends on the strategies.
- No, I do not think it is important to differentiate strategies
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

87. What are the top three factors supporting academic success in your school?

- Community resources to support social issues
- Community resources to support academic success
- Staff and student relationships
- Professional Learning Communities
- Instructional staff
- Family engagement
- Instruction
- Professional development
- Data driven instruction

Other \_\_\_\_\_

88. Please rank in order of negative impact on academic achievement in your school; 1 being the strongest negative impact and 8 having the least negative impact.

Poverty

Race

School Readiness

Literacy skills

Teacher efficacy

Professional development

Resource allocation

Discipline

Other \_\_\_\_\_

89. Do you have an organizational plan to address the factors promoting and impeding academic success in your school?

Yes, and it is effective

Yes, but it is not effective

I am currently developing a plan

No, I do not have a plan

90. The staff at my school have conversations around race

at least once per month

at least once per week

daily

The staff at my school do not have conversations around race and academic achievement

**In 250 words or less, please answer the following questions:**

91. What specific strategies do you use to increase Black student achievement and how do they differ from academic achievement for all students?

92. What are the top three strategies you have implemented in your school? What are the resultant outcomes?

93. What are factors that inhibit your effectiveness using your top three strategies?

94. Do you wish to be considered for the interview phase of the study? The interviews can be conducted in person, via phone, or through videoconferencing. Interviews will be scheduled at your convenience. All information from the interview will be confidential and data presented in any published material will remain anonymous.

Yes, I am willing to participate in a follow-up interview.

Name and email

No, I am not willing to participate in a follow-up interview.

Optional: Name and email



*Appendix B: Interview Protocol*

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. As you know, I am a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at Lesley University. I am interested in identifying efforts of K-12 school principals to support Black student achievement. I am also interested in learning the various ways K-12 principals lead efforts to improve Black student achievement and the factors and conditions that inhibit and promote efforts to increase achievement for the Black student population. With academic achievement for subgroups a mandatory aspect of your School Improvement Plan, I am looking for ways K-12 principals work towards their goals, and specifically for Black students.

On the questionnaire I recently administered, you indicated that you would be willing to be considered for the interview phase my doctoral research. This interview will last between 45-60 minutes.

Today I will be asking you to tell me about your own experience or experiences leading efforts to improve Black student achievement in your current school. All the information that you provide through this interview will be anonymous in my dissertation. I will also keep all notes and recordings from this interview on a password protected electronic device, including my phone and computer.

With your permission, I will record this interview in order to create a transcript of our conversation for further analysis. I will also write and take notes during the interview to capture my impressions and understanding of our conversation. I have a list of questions that I intend to ask you, but I want to make sure that you are aware that you may refuse to answer any question. You may also request to stop our interview at any time. This interview is entirely voluntary, and the interview will serve as one source of data for my dissertation. I will send you a transcript of

our conversation in the next week. This will provide you an opportunity to clarify, add, or change any part of the interview that occurs today. Once I have transcribed the interview, gained your approval of the transcript and subsequently passed my dissertation, I will permanently delete the audio file of the interview.

Do you have any questions about what I just described?

If everything I have described is agreeable, please provide verbal consent and we can proceed with the interview? Thank You.

### **Interview**

1. Tell me some of the things you do that would indicate increasing the achievement of Black students is a priority for you as a leader.
2. Do you feel comfortable leading efforts to improve Black student achievement?
3. Do you feel effective leading efforts to improve Black student achievement?
4. What percentage of your time do you spend leading efforts to improve Black student achievement?
5. To what degree do you believe it is your role and responsibility to lead efforts to improve Black student achievement?
6. Describe a day or a time you felt particularly successful at leading efforts to improve Black student achievement? Describe your actions and the reactions of the person or persons you were working with?
7. What are your coaching methods when staff do are not responsive to the academic needs or achievement of students?
8. How do you use data support student achievement?

9. What professional development opportunities have you led or provided for your staff specifically targeting student achievement?
10. What role do families play in your school to address students' academic achievement?
11. Since you have been principal, to what degree have you increased or decreased efforts to improve the achievement of Black students? Please provide a rationale.
12. How did you know/learn to implement the strategies to increase student achievement?
13. What professional development have you participated in to support implementation of strategies to support student achievement?
14. Describe a day or a time when things blew up and you felt particularly unsuccessful at leading efforts to improve Black student achievement? Describe your actions and the reactions of the person or persons you were working with?
15. What degree are your efforts to improve academic achievement successful in improving Black student achievement?
16. What factors or conditions in your school contribute to low student achievement and specifically Black student achievement? Have you tried to eliminate any of the mitigating factors? What was the result?
17. To what degree do you have an organizational plan to address the factors and conditions promoting and impeding Black student achievement? Please explain.
18. Who was involved in the development of your plan? How often do you revisit your plan? How effective has your plan been? How do you promote academic success in the face of factors and conditions that impede academic success?

Are you willing to share any documents, meeting agendas, or any artifacts exhibiting your efforts to support achievement in your school? Is there a teacher meeting I can attend to observe your efforts?

Is there anything I have not asked that could give additional insight to your efforts to increase Black student achievement?

Thank you for your time. Your answers have been invaluable in helping me to study the achievement of Black students.