

BRIDGED: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY EXPLORING HOW AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL
FOR “AT RISK” MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL YOUTH OVERCAME THE
ACHIEVEMENT GAP

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to discover how an alternative school for at risk students, bridged the achievement gap. It used autoethnographic approaches to examine the factors that have led to the successes of an urban school. In this study, 19 graduates of Eastend School (all participant and institutional names are replaced with pseudonyms), three parents and six current and former staff members participated in unstructured, individual interviews and shared their experiences. Autoethnographic field notes were composed. Documents and artifacts relating to Eastend School were collected and studied. The collected data were generally coded and specifically coded until themes emerged. The following research questions were addressed: What are the core values that provide the foundation of the culture at Eastend School, and how do students, teachers, administrators, and parents perceive their role and each other in that culture? What expectations do participants have for each role (student, teacher, administrator, and parent) within the school? How do the relationships between students and teachers, parents and teachers, and students and administrators impact student learning? What did Eastend do to create the culture of success at the school? How did the S.A.M.E. model, teaching the whole child and the providing the basic needs of students impact academic performance and contribute to school culture? This study found that Eastend School's culture is based on surrogate familial relationships that allow educators to emotionally support students while having high expectations for academic performance and behavior. Parents accept the school as a part of their extended family. These relationships resulted in the creation of a safe environment that provides for the basic needs of the students. Eastend staff members accepted their position as role models who provide a positive example for the student body. The school is a safe environment that provides students with social, academic and moral education that

provides them the foundation they need to be successful students. Suggested areas of future research include a study of what happened to the culture of Eastend since the study, how fundraisers for alternative inner-city schools impact students, how year round school schedules impact student – teacher relationships, and why many successful educators leave the field.

Keywords: achievement gap, at-risk, urban, inner-city, performance, relationships

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	3
Copyright Page.....	5
Table of Contents.....	6
List of Tables	9
List of Abbreviations	10
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	11
Overview.....	11
Background.....	11
Situation to Self.....	13
Problem Statement.....	15
Purpose Statement.....	15
Significance of the Study.....	16
Research Question	17
Research Plan.....	18
Delimitations and Limitations.....	20
Definitions.....	20
Summary.....	21
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	23
Overview.....	23
Theoretical Framework.....	24
Related Literature.....	27
Summary.....	57

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	59
Overview	59
Design	59
Research Questions	61
Setting	62
Participants	62
Procedures	63
The Researcher's Role	64
Data Collection	65
Data Analysis	76
Trustworthiness	78
Ethical Considerations	80
Summary	81
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	82
Overview	82
Participants	83
Results	102
Summary	131
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	133
Overview	133
Summary of Findings	133
Discussion	136
Implications	147

Limitations	154
Recommendations for Future Research	154
Summary	155
REFERENCES	159
APPENDIX A: Field Notes	175
APPENDIX B: IRB Approval Letter	196
APPENDIX C: IRB Consent Document	197
APPENDIX D: Participant Recruitment Email	200

List of Tables

Table 1	84
Table 2	103
Table 3	131

List of Abbreviations

Adequate yearly progress (AYP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP)

Limited English proficiency (LEP)

New Century Schools Initiative (NCSI)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

Social, academic, and moral education (S.A.M.E.)

Special education (SPED)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

American educators are fully cognizant of the pressures that No Child Left Behind legislation has placed on them in the classroom. Teachers in low income, urban areas are aware of the disparities in the performance of their students as compared to students in more affluent areas (Milner, 2012). Analysis of the “achievement gap” has become a national obsession, the problem is oftentimes discussed, but solutions are rarely offered. “Gap gazing” has led to a view that oftentimes equates ethnicity or economic status with academic ability. Politicians base campaigns around the idea that there is a solution found in legislation that can fix problems in inner-city schools. Documentary filmmakers highlight the failures of the American educational system and compare it to more successful systems in homogeneous societies (Carey, 2013). Yet there are schools that have successfully bridged the so-called achievement gap. What is it these schools are doing that other educational institutions are not? How are these schools able to reach students that educators in many schools struggle to reach?

Background

In 2001 the United States Congress overwhelmingly passed the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Entitled No Child Left Behind, it called for testing of all students at various grade levels (107th Congress, 2002). The implementation of the law required states to track the performance of student population subgroups. The mandated reporting shed light on the underperformance of minority and low income students, forcing school districts to look for solutions in overcoming the test performance gap (Lauen & Gaddis, 2012)

Study of the “achievement gap” and the factors contributing to it has become so prevalent some critics are referring to it as a “fetish” (Gutierrez, 2008, p. 357). Focusing on the gap itself and not the educational inequities that contributed to it, many consider it a disservice to inner-city students. Setting aside the analysis of the gap itself, there are multiple contributory factors that impact inner-city, low-income students. Schools that were desegregated decades ago have been re-segregated as income has dropped and the ethnic diversity of cities has changed (Michael-Luna & Marri, 2011). Environmental and familial factors including the education of the parents, household income, and exposure to the heavy metal lead are principle contributors to the disparity of test scores (Miranda, Kim, Reiter, Overstreet Galeano, & Maxson, 2009). Students who are raised in high crime neighborhoods are prone to put on a tough front to avoid conflict (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010) and are disproportionately suspended from school (Beck & Muschkin, 2012). These issues not only impact inner-city students, analysis of rural, low-income students reveals that there is a growing achievement gap that is beginning to look like the problem impacting urban students (Jordan & Konstandini, 2012). Historical bias on the part of staff members may also be a contributing factor. When inner-city students arrive at school they are likely to face educators who already have preconceived notions regarding their abilities (Natesan & Kieftenbeld, 2013) and who are not trusted by students (Shaunessy & Alvarez McHatton, 2008). The inner-city school population is largely poor and taught by White females. Many students often fail to see their teachers as role models or mentors (Logan, Minca, & Adar, 2012).

There have been remedies suggested to address the gap. Researchers have looked at the role of school counselors, suggesting they could play a role in overcoming the gap by implementing interventions that help students. The researchers suggest that until counselors are

trained to properly report data, their results are speculative (Hartline & Cobia, 2012). Smaller classroom size is often cited as a necessary adjustment and has been shown to be highly effective in primary grades. That effect is minimal by the time students reach high school (Atta, Jamil, Muhammad, Shah, & Shah, 2011). The New Century Schools Initiative in New York applied the idea of smaller class sizes and schools in their initiative, the idea being that students and teachers could develop relationships that would encourage students to be successful. The reported results were mixed; indicating that many staff members did not know what kind of relationship was needed to encourage students (Shiller, 2011).

The achievement gap persists, in spite of years of study, analysis, and suggested remedies. In 2012 the Virginia Department of Education reported that 75% of White students passed the mathematics standards of learning test compared to 52% of Black students and 54% of students considered being from low income homes. Districts in Virginia that specifically targeted Black male achievement levels have seen a reduction in the gap, yet it is still significant (Staples, 2014). Notwithstanding the earnest efforts of concerned educators, countless studies, and many suggestions, the achievement gap remains un-bridged at the expense of low income, inner-city students and American taxpayers.

Situation to Self

Over a decade ago, I was hired to teach inner-city students in a middle school (and later a high school) for “at-risk children.” I had no experience teaching children, I entered through alternative licensure, and was unprepared for what I faced. I struggled my first year. I read books about teaching “children of poverty,” but none of them helped me. Students ran roughshod over me. I barely controlled my classroom and I felt like an utter failure. That June, with school winding down, I prayed that God would guide me to my “true calling.” I was a first-

year teacher on a performance plan of action with a dark future in education. One morning I found a letter on my desk from a student who was one of the toughest I taught. He told me how much I meant to him and explained what a difference I had made in his life. I decided to stay one more year.

I came into the classroom the second year with a different approach. I decided to start working with parents immediately, calling home the first day if necessary. I taught using my own style; a mixture of tough love, mutual respect, and high expectations. I went to every sporting event, Church service, and family gathering my students invited me to attend. I called parents, grandparents, and extended family when their children exceeded my expectations and I allowed no excuses in the classroom. Midway through the year, I was asked to move to another grade level; one that took the Virginia Standards of Learning Test in Social Studies. Using the same tactics I used earlier in the year, and adding in a dose of “us against the world” attitude; I prepared my students for their test. That summer I learned that over 90% of my students had passed. Not only had my students succeeded, but they were also number one in the school district; scoring better than students from more affluent areas.

Bolstered by my experiences, I continued to refine my teaching style. I introduced concepts like “problem-based learning” and the “paperless classroom” to my students. With 96% of the school’s learners receiving free or reduced lunch, many outside of the school thought I was taking great risks. Yet student scores continued to improve peaking with a 100% pass rate in World History. Aspects of the program changed over the years, yet success continued. I began to look at the challenges of teaching inner-city students of poverty, reading articles about urban education, and reflecting on how the school I worked in was successful, while others failed. Inquiry-based education and the classroom management techniques popularized by

Robert Marzano were prevalent in my classroom, and contributed to my successes. My belief is it is the relationships that teachers have with students and parents, teacher expectations for students, and a willingness to spend time outside of school hours that has led to success.

Problem Statement

The achievement gap that exists between minority schools and schools that serve the majority population cannot be overcome by traditional education methods (Barton & Coley, 2010). Minority students in mainstream schools are not meeting state mandated standards. Yet there are schools that overcome this gap and whose students outperform their peers in predominantly middle class schools (Dobbie & Fryer, 2013). The problem of the study is that to date the factors that lead to success in alternative schools for minority students are not fully known, repeatable, or effectively replicated in minority – majority schools. Many schools are not meeting the government standards for adequate yearly progress and are failing to provide a minimal education to minority youth (Rowley & Wright, 2011). Adequate yearly progress is defined by each state educational agency but must be statistically based, use the same standards for all children, must result in substantial achievement for all students, must measure progress by assessments, and must include academic plans for educational subgroups (Thompson, Meyers, & Oshima, 2011).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to discover how one alternative public school for at-risk students, bridged the achievement gap. It used the autoethnographic approach to examine the factors that have led to the successes of an urban school. For the purposes of this research, “bridging the achievement gap” was defined as meeting all state standards of adequate

yearly progress, a 100% graduation rate, and at-risk students was defined as students on the free or reduced lunch program.

Significance of the Study

There have been multiple studies addressing the nature of the achievement gap and suggested remedies for it. There is a clear picture of the performance gap that exists in inner-city schools. It is time to move away from looking at the problem and towards the implementation of interventions. Humanizing students who suffer from inadequate education is imperative, and understanding what works for them culturally and educationally can lead to significant change (Carey, 2013).

The New Century Schools Initiative (NCSI) was designed to implement many of the interventions suggested by studies of the achievement gap. Focusing on student performance in meeting the goals of NCLB, yields mixed results. Performance on standardized tests improved, but not all students performed well. Students were generally required to perform at the minimum level, and were not asked to engage in critical thinking (Shiller, 2011). While improved test scores indicate some improvement, the NCSI provides only part of the answer in bridging the achievement gap.

The American educational system has failed Black males. Nearly 70% of Black males entering 9th grade will not graduate with their class. Black men who do not graduate from high school have a 52% incarceration rate before they are 30 years old. This problem contributes to lagging income in the Black community (Donner & Shockley, 2010). While this issue seems to be a problem confined to the inner city, recently Jordan and Konstandini (2012) found this problem is spreading to rural areas.

Eastend Middle and High School had a 100% graduation rate (Virginia 2010 - 2011 High School Graduates Data, 2011) and sent all of its students to college, the military, or trade school. Test performance was generally at the top of the district (Adequate Yearly Progress [AYP] Reports, 2011). Its methodology incorporates many of the initiatives implemented by the KIPP Academies, but its performance exceeds that program. What is being done to achieve high standards should be analyzed and understood.

Research Question

Eastend School (all participant and institutional names are replaced with pseudonyms unless otherwise indicated) is a unique culture, and its ability to overcome the performance challenge that inner-city schools face is documented. While the eighth grade mathematics achievement gap is 31 points nationally (“The nations report card: Have achievement gaps changed?,” 2014), Eastend School was frequently one of the top three performing schools in its district for several years (Adequate Yearly Progress [AYP] Reports, 2011). Some of the initiatives used at Eastend: after-school tutoring (Good, Burch, Stewart, Acosta, & Heinrich, 2014) and single-track, year-round schedules (Graves, 2011) have been shown to have a minimal or no impact on student performance. Successful charter and private school researchers speak about a school culture, but measures of school culture have not been collected. More importantly the measures used in charter schools have not been applied in a public school setting (Dobbie & Fryer, 2013).

Eastend uses the S.A.M.E. approach developed by the Urban Learning and Leadership Center. It proposes that if urban students are taught the skill sets that middle and upper income children are taught it will assist them in being successful. Classes in etiquette, code switching (speaking business English), conflict resolution, and financial awareness are taught. Students are

also taught a series of affirmations to remind them of the attitudes they need to be successful (Spencer, Perkins, Hodge, & Coleman, 2004). Are these the core values that are the basis of the culture at Eastend? Finally parental support and involvement is shown to have a positive impact on student performance (Sharma & Jha, 2014). Do Eastend parents participate in their children's education and how is their role seen by teacher and administrators? The overarching question of the study is:

- What are the core values that provide the foundation of the culture at Eastend School, and how do students, teachers, administrators, and parents perceive their role and each other in that culture?

Sub questions include:

- What expectations do participants have for each role (student, teacher, administrator, and parent) within the school?
- How do the relationships between students and teachers, parents and teachers, and students and administrators impact student learning?
- What does Eastend do to create the culture of success at the school?
- How does the S.A.M.E. model, teaching the whole child and the providing the basic needs of students impact academic performance and contribute to school culture?

Research Plan

This study used qualitative methods. It is an autoethnography based on my experiences as an inner-city teacher in a successful urban school. It also used historical documents from Eastend School and interviews of participants from different roles (students, staff, and parents) within the school community. It was conducted to determine how the culture in one alternative

public school encouraged student achievement leading to academic success. It is my contention that quantitative data alone does not explain what makes certain inner-city schools successful; the attitudes, culture and expectations in successful schools are not always measurable by statistical analysis. Eastend School has a unique culture that encourages student achievement. It is situated in a depressed, urban area in the mid-Atlantic region. It is a 6th-12th grade school that serves the city's poorest students. Approximately 96% of Eastend's students are on free or reduced lunch. It is a public school that receives some additional support from a private foundation. The support provided for an extended school day, a single-track, year-round schedule, school uniforms for 6th – 8th grade students, morning rotations that focus on social skills and morality, and some additional teachers (the school structure has changed after the scope of this study). The student body is 98% Black with some Hispanic, American Indian, and White students (School website, URL withheld to maintain anonymity). This study used field notes reflecting on my time as a teacher and academic coach at Eastend, documents and artifacts from my tenure at the school, and interviews of former students, staff members (current and former), and parents. Student and parent participants reflect the aforementioned ethnic groups, and teachers are balanced between Black and White, slightly more males than females, and range from age 30 to 65.

Field notes were recorded, documents collected from various sites, and unstructured interviews were conducted with participants from the three aforementioned groups. As interviews were completed they were sent to a professional transcription service. When returned they were verified for accuracy, and I proceeded using qualitative methods to code the data. Interview data and field notes were generally coded, specifically coded, and scrutinized for

patterns. Relationships between the data were established, structurally analyzed, and I began writing the narrative form of my research (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013).

Delimitations and Limitations

Only students who had reached the age of majority and adults were interviewed, this was to protect the privacy of minor children and to ensure that their academic achievement was not influenced or disrupted by the interviewer. This study looked at the period of time when the school was successful and when I was a member of the staff (2003 – 2013). Recent test data indicates that the school is no longer successfully bridging the gap. In order for the data to be relevant in autoethnographic writing, I must be able to reflect on and understand the shared experiences I have with the other participants (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). So, participants who were part of the culture I experienced were interviewed. Consequently, memories may not have been as accurate as they would have been for current students, staff members, and administrators. The study was restricted to the participants in the culture at Eastend, so the number of participants is limited, as are the number of former administrators. Sadly, in the last three years (2013 – 2016) Eastend School's academic performance has slipped, and it is currently accredited with warning. The research conducted in this study was a snapshot in time; one that covers the years when Eastend was the top or one of the top schools in its district. This development means that participants in the study were limited to those who served or attended during Eastend School's successful years.

Definitions

The following terms are used in this study and are defined as follows:

1. *Inner-city learners* – Students from urban areas who live in neighborhoods that have been affected by separation from the White population and middle class

Black families. Inner-city learners have little access to transportation, job opportunities, and have few positive role models (Land, Mixon, Butcher, & Harris, 2014).

2. *Re-segregation* – The segregation of schools by race and income that has been experienced since the conclusion of proactive desegregation of community schools. The stratification of neighborhoods by income has contributed to this phenomenon as has population migration from inner cities (Rushing, 2015).
3. *Reflexive dyadic interviews* - Interviews that are structured like traditional interviews, but have the added dimension of the interviewer sharing his personal experiences with the participant. This approach is used to encourage the participant to open up and share his or her own experiences. It also helps establish a peer relationship instead of a hierarchical one (Jones et al., 2013).
4. *Self-actualization* – An idea suggested in the work of Abraham Maslow that a person must reach their full potential before they can accomplish the goals that they have the potential to achieve (Maslow, 1954).

Summary

No Child Left Behind legislation has highlighted and exposed an underlying failure of the educational system to provide adequate learning experiences for inner-city learners (Anderson, 2012). Eastend School was highly successful school during my tenure there and was the basis of research conducted by the Urban Learning and Leadership Center (Spencer et al., 2004). There were many initiatives implemented while I taught there (year-round calendar, after-school tutoring, alternative discipline, etc.) and even when some were discontinued the performance of

the school did not falter. This study endeavored to capture what the administrators, staff, families, and students did to succeed in a challenging environment.

This study is a qualitative study that attempted to capture the cultural elements that contributed to the successful education of Black students through the creation of an autoethnography. In order to fully explore the culture, I recorded my own memories of my experiences as an educator and as a member of the Eastend School teaching staff. I reviewed documents related to the school. I also interviewed graduates, other teachers, administrators, and parents in order to discover their perceptions.

After the interviews, data were transcribed and analysis commenced using qualitative methods. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, generally coded, specifically coded, and scrutinized for patterns. Relationships between the data were established; I engaged in structural analysis, and then began writing the narrative form of my research (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). The use of participants and the Urban Learning and Leadership Center to corroborate or contradict my perceptions and memories was critical to the discovery of what cultural elements actually contributed to the successful bridging of the performance gap (J. Schensul & LeCompte, 2012) .

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Children of poverty in the urban environment face a series of challenges when they head off to school. Schools struggle to meet the needs of learners, unaware of the many challenges they face. While many programs have attempted to meet the needs of students, most have fallen short (Shiller, 2011). American educators and leaders have spent almost two decades trying to address a performance shortfall that exists in urban schools. This gap is further exacerbated by the achievement gap that exists between low and upper income children of all races (McGlynn, 2014). The federal government passed legislation to address this shortfall believing that an accountability system would provide parents with the information they needed to make the best academic choices for their children (Gaddis & Lauen, 2014). Almost a decade and a half later the gap persists (Carey, 2013).

Successful schools do exist. They use a wide variety of tactics to help bridge the performance gap. Ideas like year-round schooling (Graves, 2011) and after-school tutoring (Good et al., 2014) are implemented as part of a potential solution. Cultural factors are studied, as is the lack of cultural awareness on the part of professional educators (Goldenberg, 2014). When school discipline is analyzed, it is found that Black students are disproportionately suspended, meaning that many students are not in the classroom in order to learn (Gregory et al., 2010). Through all of this, schools like the KIPP Academies exceed expectations and seem to defy the odds (Boyd, Maranto, & Rose, 2014). Educators are left wondering what actually works and what does not.

Theoretical Framework

When new teachers report for their first day at Eastend School, they are encouraged to design their lesson plans and manage their classrooms using concepts found in three foundational theories: Robert Marzano's principles of whole child education, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and the Urban Learning and Leadership Center's (the research office of Eastend's foundation that partners with the public school system) principles of social, academic, and moral education (S.A.M.E.). These theories provide the framework that motivated me as a teacher and one that my peers encouraged me to study when I first started teaching. The frameworks also define the structure that my research will work within.

Dr. Robert Marzano's principles of whole child education were developed from his research regarding effective schools and classroom instruction. His observations led him to theorize that effective classroom instruction is based on three components: instructional strategies, management strategies, and curriculum design strategies (Marzano, 2007). Developed over years of observed implementation he has provided educators with guidelines that encourage the use of a connection to real world experience to make learning meaningful for students. He not only asks that teachers make learning experiences meaningful, but that they establish a relationship with their students in order to connect with them in the classroom. He advocates that learning be chunked into learnable units, better allowing students to retain information. Teachers are strongly encouraged to provide students with choices, empowering them to take charge of their education. Additionally, teachers are strongly urged to teach a unit until students have mastered it, promoting understanding (Marzano, 2007). Marzano's methodology is relevant in the urban setting. Urban students show increased academic mastery when they are taught in an environment that is supportive and relates to real world experiences (San Martin &

Calabrese, 2011). The idea that students must master one section before teachers move onto another was reinforced and encouraged during classroom evaluations at Eastend School. This standard was based on studies that indicate urban students perform better when they master a key concept before moving on to the next unit. This empowers educators by allowing them to own the process of learning by ensuring that students are performing to a standard instead of earning a class average (Burks & Hochbein, 2013).

The curriculum and structure of Eastend School was built to provide for the basic needs of students. Urban students are more likely to come to school hungry than their suburban peers (Hayes & Berdan, 2013). Additionally they live in neighborhoods that are more violent than that of the average citizen, and they are often in a state of distress (D. Y. Ford & Moore, 2013). Abraham Maslow studied the biographies of 18 successful people he determined were self-actualized. His hierarchy was then developed as a system of building blocks that would guide each person to self-actualization. His steps from most basic needs to actualization are: physiological, safety, friends, esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow theorizes that until a person's physical needs are met, they are unable to function. There is an active health clinic within the school and the facilities are run like a business office with subtle security in the building. The school also promotes an idea of family, providing parents with after-school care so they can attend classes. Social interaction and the exchange of contact information between staff and families is highly encouraged. These actions and initiatives are in place to project a safe and inclusive atmosphere that allows students to have their basic needs met, so they may focus on learning (Maslow, 1954).

The S.A.M.E. model suggests that children of poverty are not taught the same skills that middle and upper income children are taught in the home. Consequently, the school must

provide them not only with academic education, but moral and social education as well. Since most poor students are not taught etiquette, how to speak business English, or how to deal with conflict using peaceful means in the home, it falls on the school to teach these skills, as well as the academic skills students will need to be successful (Spencer et al., 2004). Use of this framework allows teachers to stop adhering to the lesson plan when teachable moments occur in the classroom. School administration encouraged this intervention and encouraged that life skills be reinforced. Additionally, students are taught etiquette, financial responsibility, proper business English (in a class called “Speaking Green,” because green is the color of money), conflict resolution, and ethics. While the S.A.M.E. model is a suggested basis for teaching at Eastend School, it is central to my teaching philosophy. I employed it throughout the school day, including during lunch when a group of male teachers would eat in the cafeteria with students.

Biblical Worldview

It is my view that all human beings are the children of God through Christ (Galatians 3:26). This belief guides my professional and research philosophies. If we are to come to God as little children (Matthew 18:3), then our students have as much to teach us as we do them. I see the value of all human life in that the Spirit resides in every one of us (1 Timothy 4:8), the potential for success exists regardless of where a person is born or who raises them. As an educator, I treat each student as a member of the Body of Christ and endeavor to provide them the respect they deserve as a part of that sacred family (1 Corinthians 12:27). Finally, I believe that teaching and learning is a calling from God and as His children we should work diligently to educate ourselves and others (2 Peter 1:10).

Related Literature

Climate before NCLB

The achievement gap between inner-city Black students and their White suburban counterparts led to several federal initiatives to narrow the performance differential between ethnic groups in the years prior to NCLB. When examining educational performance before the implementation of the law, there is evidence of either small changes in achievement gaps or no change at all (Gaddis & Lauen, 2014). In the 1990s, after spending billions of dollars on educational reform initiatives, there was no significant improvement in educational measures. Meanwhile Massachusetts, Texas, and North Carolina saw vast improvement in student achievement after implementing systems of accountability, standards, and assessment (Rhodes, 2012, p. 139).

The educational reform movement began to push for change in the 1990s, advocating for minority students by arguing that the federal government's failure to support standards based reform was a violation of student's civil rights. Lawmakers who did not support national standards were accused of being responsible for the low performance of disadvantaged students. The shortcomings of Title 1 students were also attributed to a lack of federally mandated performance-based standards (Rhodes, 2012, p. 141). Further the sentiment among scholars who studied the performance gap was that their work was unappreciated and that there was little understanding among legislators about what school interventions worked (Carey, 2013). The call for educational reform became so strong in the early 2000s, that in spite of a contentious presidential election, NCLB legislation enjoyed strong bipartisan support and easily passed through the House of Representatives and the Senate (McAndrews, 2013).

The intent of NCLB

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) became law on January 8, 2002. Its stated intent was “to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). Its passage was the result of a strong bipartisan effort; only 15 Democrats in the House of Representatives and Senate voted against the bill proposed by a Republican President (McAndrews, 2013). The newly passed law was seen by politicians as framework to unify the American educational system and was touted as a bipartisan solution to close the achievement gap (Waldow, 2015).

NCLB required all states to create a system of comprehensive standards and to administer testing to check those standards. An accountability system was also required that would provide a mechanism for local control and parental choice (Waldow, 2015). These strong standards were a response to what civil rights advocates and business leaders had been encouraging for over a decade. The law greatly expanded the federal role in education and provided some additional financial resources to troubled school systems. It also mandated that students’ progress be measured against statewide standards annually from third through eighth grade and that high school students be tested in reading and mathematics at least once during their four years of attendance by the 2005 – 2006 school year (Rhodes, 2012, p. 154).

The law strengthened accountability, standards, and choice but continued the federal government’s practice of adding more regulation and criteria to already existing standards. This meant that though it was intended to transform the current system it created a more layered bureaucracy built on existing laws that were felt to be ineffective. It also necessitated a punitive system for underperforming schools to encourage educational transformation in chronically failing institutions (Hamilton, Heilig, & Pazey, 2013). By 2008 – 2009 science was to be

assessed at least once in elementary, middle, and high school. All test scores were to be disaggregated by ethnicity, race, English proficiency, income, learning disabilities, and migration status. The data had to be made available to parents and the public. States had to have a plan in place to bring all schools to academic proficiency by 2014. In order to ensure state standards provided the rigor the law required, all schools had to administer the National Assessment of Educational Progress on a bi-annual basis. All teachers were required to be fully licensed and “highly qualified” (Rhodes, 2012, p. 154).

Innovative practices such as single-sex classrooms and after-school activities were encouraged through the use of federal grants, thereby encouraging schools to innovate at the local level (Terry, Flennaugh, Blackmon, & Howard, 2013). The accountability system established by NCLB was a tool to encourage the reform of chronically under-achieving schools (Hamilton et al., 2013). The notion that most of these schools served minority students evoked calls for reform in the name of civil rights for an underserved population of students (Waldow, 2015).

Impact of NCLB on schools

NCLB was intended to promote academic change in schools without requiring any additional financial resources from the federal system (Gaddis & Lauen, 2014). Yet schools were required to disaggregate assessment data according to student race, ethnicity, English proficiency, economic status, and disability and to measure that data against adequate yearly progress goals (Hamilton et al., 2013). Schools were also required to measure student attendance against the same criteria (Eslinger, 2014). Schools that were found to be failing received additional scrutiny instead of help. Vouchers that were intended to allow students and their parents to move to better schools were not offered. Instead, parents were offered enrollment in

charter schools, teachers were offered performance pay, and additional services were also used as incentives for better performance. (Bower, 2013).

Since the implementation of NCLB, many of the key provisions of the law have been overridden by a system of waivers and the option for states to opt out completely; yet the system of teacher accountability through mathematics and reading assessments still remains (Jennings, Deming, Jencks, Lopuch, & Schueler, 2015). Schools are the places that can dependably encourage high achievement so some experts feel that holding teachers and schools primarily accountable for increased performance is a reasonable expectation (Carey, 2013). This expectation, in spite of schools having to spend an additional \$600 per pupil of local and state funds, has led to a restructuring of classroom time; reducing science and social studies class hours and increasing mathematics and language study time (Dee, Jacob, & Schwartz, 2013).

Criticisms of NCLB

The criticisms of NCLB are well documented and the primary critiques are well publicized, the principle criticism being that punishing low performing schools and eventually closing them can only have a small effect on student performance (Logan et al., 2012). There are also concerns that NCLB places the primary responsibility of education on teachers; all but ignoring that parental intervention and the use of learning strategies in the home are where the greatest influences can be found (Robinson & Harris, 2013). Many also argue that inner-city and low income students are receiving a much narrower education than their more affluent peers because schools that serve minority students are focused on test-taking strategies, mathematics, and reading instead of the more comprehensive curriculum suburban students receive (Roach, 2014). All of these criticisms are of concern, but the most concerning is that over a decade since NCLB's implementation, any gains in student mathematics and language performance are

modest at best. Further, 39 states have received waivers from the Department of Education, releasing them from the proficiency requirements for 2014. In all, student performance has failed to meet the goals set in 2002 (Roach, 2014).

Teachers are also critical of NCLB laws, citing a loss of professional freedom and a loss of classroom autonomy as their principle concerns. Many feel that they are not able to differentiate instruction, teach to multiple intelligences, or use alternative teaching techniques like exploratory learning and hands-on experiences in the classroom. There is also a feeling among some teachers that they do not have the time to make real world connections to what is being learned in the classroom. This has led to some complaining of increased anxiety and stress within the teaching profession (Eslinger, 2014). There are also critics who feel that the use of standardized assessments to measure teacher performance is misusing a diagnostic tool that has a very narrow purpose, leading to greater educational inequalities than existed before the passage of NCLB (Roach, 2014).

There is also criticism that NCLB has led to a greater drop-out rate in inner-city schools and that troublesome students are more likely to be suspended from school. In 2014, the drop-out rate for students from low-income homes was 7.4% versus 1.4% for affluent students. Inner-city learners are more likely to identify obstacles to academic achievement and leave school (Nitardy, Duke, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2014). The drop-out rate for White students was 5.3% in 1972 and fell to 4.5% in 1995 (dropping as low as 3.3% in 1990), while the drop-out rate was 9.5% for Black students in 1972. That rate fell to 5% in 1990 and increased to 6.4% in 1995. There has been no decrease in the drop-out rate for Black students since 1995. Had the trends continued, the Black-White drop-out rate should have narrowed by 2.62%, if all factors had remained consistent. Disciplinary incidents leading to suspension or expulsion have increased

11.4% for Black students since 1980, while the rate for White students has increased 0.9%. Some researchers suggest that schools are using disciplinary incidents to push low-achieving students out of school in order to make adequate yearly progress (Suh, Malchow, & Suh, 2014).

Positive aspects of NCLB

While many of the criticisms of NCLB are well known, what are oftentimes not mentioned are the positive aspects of the law. NCLB provided an avenue for the creation of charter schools, many of which are nonprofit and specifically designed to address the needs of urban learners. The law created motivation for states to remove caps on the number of charter schools in each district, allowed for contracted management of public schools, and linked budget increases to school performance. It also brought the struggles of inner-city schools into the spotlight, resulting in increased resources for those schools (Patterson & Silverman, 2013).

NCLB also exposed equitable funding and program issues within school districts and allowed administrators to close schools that were not able to make progress towards improvement (Waldow, 2015). Failing schools were often replaced with charter schools that were more effective learning environments while other failing schools were reorganized to better serve the community (Patterson & Silverman, 2013). Many critics see the law as an important step towards accountability in the classroom and to the community in spite of the singular focus on test results (Roach, 2014).

Parents have a tool under NCLB to assess the schools their children attend. Test data provides them a measure of their student's performance against that of their peers and allows them to compare schools in their district and state. It also creates an atmosphere of competition between schools and allows parents to move their children from failing schools. The

competition that is created by NCLB allows parents freedom of school choice that they did not have prior to the passage of the law (Aske, Connolly, & Corman, 2013).

Results since implementation of NCLB

Since the implementation of NCLB, the number of schools threatened with permanent closure has increased, as has the number of schools needing improvement. The number of schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress has tripled. These schools are typically the ones that serve minority populations (Hamilton et al., 2013). Integrated schools with a large population of both Black and White students who focus on reducing the achievement gap in mathematics are often able to do so without hurting the achievement levels of White students (Waldow, 2015), but the results thus far indicate that the reforms that were promised by NCLB have not been realized. In Texas, where high-stakes testing has been in place for over twenty years, there has been no evidence to indicate that historically low-performing schools have improved (Hamilton et al., 2013). A thorough analysis of much of the existing research indicates no overall improvement in the racial achievement gap and mixed results in other areas. There appears to be no change in the data trajectory since the implementation of NCLB (Gaddis & Lauen, 2014).

Achievement Gap

The achievement gap is a well-documented measure of educational disparity between White, Black, and other minority students. The gap has been attributed to several diverse factors including segregated schools, culture, child rearing practices, financial means, and ethnic differences (Condrón, Tope, Steidl, & Freeman, 2013). The gap has been measured between Black and White students as early as kindergarten. It must also be noted that there is an

achievement gap between all students when comparing socioeconomics; students from upper income families have higher test scores than middle class students (Gaddis & Lauen, 2014).

Historical Gap

In 1935, W.E.B. Du Bois posited that Black students required a different academic environment than their White peers. There are modern researchers who believe that the existing achievement gap is attributable to the failure of schools to provide a culturally sensitive environment for inner-city students (Terry et al., 2013). While this position is not universally held, proponents believe the data appears to support their position. National Assessment of Educational Progress data indicates that there has been a gap since they began testing in 1971. In 1971, nine-year-old White students scored 44 points higher in reading and 35 points higher in mathematics. There were similar gaps for thirteen and seventeen year olds. By 2004 that gap narrowed to 24 points in reading and math for nine-year-olds, with similar gaps for thirteen and seventeen-year-olds. The largest decreases in the achievement gap occurred in the 1970s and 80s (Barton & Coley, 2010).

Current Gap

The most recent NAEP was administered in 2013. That assessment indicates that the achievement gap in mathematics has held steady since 2005 at 26 points for fourth grade mathematics and has narrowed from 29 points to 26 points for fourth grade reading. The eighth grade mathematics gap was 34 points in 2005 and has narrowed to 31 points. Eighth grade reading scores also indicate a slight reduction in the gap of 2 points from 2005 to 2013. It should be noted that all scores were improving over time (“The nations report card: Have achievement gaps changed?,” 2014).

Economic Gap

Achievement gaps are not only based on cultural differences. An under-reported gap is the disparity in test scores between upper, middle, and low-income students. Students from families with the greatest financial means are more likely to enroll in prestigious colleges (15% of wealthy students in 2004 versus 5% of middle income students and 2% of low income students) and they are more likely to complete college. Students from upper-income families outperform middle-income students on standardized tests by the same margin that middle-income students outperform low-income students. The gap begins when children are infants and some researchers claim that it is measureable when children are one-year old (McGlynn, 2014). While race-based gaps are well publicized, data indicates that achievement gaps are based more on economic differences than ethnic disparity. Most academic performance issues affect all students of low-income families regardless of ethnicity (Ford & Moore, 2013).

Impact of the family on student achievement

A multitude of factors contribute to student achievement and the performance of children in schools. While many subgroups fail to perform at the level of Asian and White students, the performance of inner-city minority children is of great concern. The low performance of Black children-particularly males-is oftentimes ascribed to cultural values in the urban community. Many educators and sociologists suggest that minority students correlate academic achievement with “acting White” and that they do not see the value of performing their best in school. Attributing a negative impact on student achievement to cultural influences is not a universally held position, but evidence indicates that Black students do not recover from the universal slump that happens when children enter middle school the same way their peers of other ethnic groups do. Research does indicate that the value parents place on education and the priority it is given

in the home does positively impact student engagement and performance during adolescence. This indicates that parents can still effect the performance of their teenage children (Darensbourg & Blake, 2014).

When looking at the factors that contribute to student performance, the educational background of parents is often cited. One of the most important elements of predicting student performance and achievement is the educational background of their parents. Students whose academic performance was above average or better reported that their parents had higher education levels (Sharma & Jha, 2014). Conversely, research shows that the factor that most contributes to poor educational performance, after adjusting for risk and demographics, is the educational achievement of a student's mother. Schools with a high number of students whose mothers fail to finish high school report poor student attendance, as well as lower mathematics and reading scores (Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, & Rouse, 2013). When family income and educational levels are taken into account, the effects of racial and ethnic association are not a factor on school involvement (Park & Holloway, 2013).

Families from better economic circumstances are likely to be more involved in articulating their educational expectations to students as well as helping them plan for college than the parents of low income children. Studies indicate that children with higher educational aspirations who have a plan to get to college are more likely to come from homes where the mother has achieved more academically, as well as homes with a higher household income (Park & Holloway, 2013). There is a significant body of research that indicates poverty, more than any other factor, explains the achievement gap that exists for many minorities (Ullucci & Howard, 2014). This is buttressed by data that indicates there is an achievement gap in kindergarten between students from low income families and their peers and that this gap widens as they get

older (Morrissey, Hutchison, & Winsler, 2014). Schools whose students predominantly come from lower socioeconomic groups have poorer academic performance (Sun, 2014). This gap can be attributed to several factors. Children from poorer families have parents who are either unemployed or who work in low-income jobs. This correlates to more household moves and academic instability, resulting in fewer academic experiences and a narrower academic focus. Low-income situations sometimes lead to homelessness. Over one million American students are classified as homeless. These students do not have continuity in their academic careers, resulting in a lower quality education (Ullucci & Howard, 2014). These stressors may lead to other consequences that affect academic performance. Absenteeism and tardiness are more prevalent among low-income students; this inconsistent school attendance may contribute to the achievement gap. Studies show that decreased attendance directly accounted for lower mathematics and reading scores among a group of fourth and second grade students (Morrissey et al., 2014). One way to factor for family income is to look at the number of students participating in free or reduced lunch programs. Research comparing students who received free or reduced lunch to students who did not receive subsidies found a statistically significant difference in fourth grade mathematics test scores. Students who did not receive the benefits were more likely to receive a satisfactory grade on the test (Sun, 2014).

Factors: Health

Children who are raised in poverty suffer from more mental, physical, and behavioral health issues than their more affluent peers (Morrissey et al., 2014). Oftentimes dental, vision, hearing, and general health issues are left untreated because of lack of access to health care providers (Ullucci & Howard, 2014). These health problems are compounded by increased exposure to negative environmental factors including lead paint and other pollutants (Reyes,

2015), poor diet resulting in a higher body mass index, and lower levels of physical fitness (Srikanth, Petrie, Greenleaf, & Martin, 2014).

A startling discovery while researching causes of the achievement gap is the role lead exposure plays in exacerbating poor academic performance. Children who were found to have high levels of lead exposure at two years of age performed poorly on the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement eight years later (Strayhorn & Strayhorn, 2012). Many children from lower economic groups are raised in older, rundown homes; consequently, they are more likely to be exposed to lead paint. This exposure has been directly related to behavioral problems and reduced cognitive development (Ullucci & Howard, 2014). What is most troubling is the fact that early childhood exposure to lead directly impacts a child's intelligence. Drops of 1 to 5 IQ points for each 10- $\mu\text{g}/\text{dl}$ increase of lead in the blood have been measured (Strayhorn & Strayhorn, 2012).

It could be thought that lead exposure is only one factor that impacts the IQ of low-income children and that there is no direct correlation. It should be noted that middle and upper income children who are exposed to lead have seen similar impacts on measured intelligence and experience decreased academic performance as well. Studies in the Detroit Public Schools not only found reduced cognitive functions and increased behavioral issues, but that exposure to lead as low as 5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ had a negative impact on student performance. This indicates that even minimal exposure to lead is of concern (Zhang et al., 2013). Not only are cognitive functions impacted, there is a strong relationship between high lead levels and poor performance on third and fourth grade standardized test scores. Reducing lead exposure through urban renovation has seen a small increase in MCAS test scores (Reyes, 2015).

There have been numerous studies linking poor physical fitness, higher body mass index levels, and reduced physical activity with income and race. Low income and minority children are more likely to suffer from these problems (Bower, 2013). These factors may contribute to poorer test performance. Students with a higher level of cardio fitness were found to perform better on statewide reading and math tests (Srikanth et al., 2014). Students who engaged in moderate physical activity while learning in the classroom had improved performance on standardized tests. Their scores were 6% above the control group (Hayes, Spano, Donnelly, Hillman, & Kleinman, 2014). Further, students who are more physically fit have improved cognitive control, are better able to pay attention, have improved memory, are more intellectually flexible, and have better recall. Students with a healthier Body Mass Index (BMI) scored higher on reading tests (Srikanth et al., 2014).

Factors: Nutrition

Some inner-city children are not eating properly or eating enough on a daily basis. Almost 17 million live in homes that are defined as food-insecure. Many of those children are unsure that they will receive a daily meal (Hayes et al., 2014). It has been suggested that school meal programs could lead to better academic performance. If said programs not only focused on overweight students who were not eating properly but undernourished students; it is believed that improved academic performance would be realized (Capogrossi & You, 2013). This is borne out by data in school districts that have implemented such programs. Schools that have breakfast programs realize improved student test scores, a decrease in discipline incidents, and improved school attendance (Wright, 2015). A school breakfast program in Boston that provided a morning meal for all students without economic qualifications, resulted in higher participation in breakfast by all students including an increase in low-income students. Boston schools saw

lower absenteeism, fewer tardy students, and improved mathematics grades. They also saw a decrease in behavior problems (Hayes & Berdan, 2013). Schools can impact the dietary choices students make by creating an environment that supports healthy selections which may lead to increased consumption of vegetables, fruits, and other healthy foods by students (Cvjetan, Utter, Robinson, & Denny, 2014)

Factors: Parent involvement

Reducing parental involvement in their child's education was one of the initial goals of public schools. Yet mothers who create a learning environment in the home that goes beyond the routines of school, thereby expanding the educational opportunities presented to their children, have prepared their children better for academic success (Stitt & Brooks, 2014). If children think their parents want them to do well in school, they are more likely to believe that school is important and may lead to greater economic gain in life (Darensbourg & Blake, 2014). Parental expectations of college attendance and financial planning to achieve that goal are also an important factor in high school success. Parents of minority students are less involved in some aspects of their children's education, though they tend to be more likely to demand that children complete homework and out of school tasks. There have been few studies of parental involvement broken down by ethnic group, so there is currently an incomplete picture regarding how parental involvement contributes to the achievement gap (Park & Holloway, 2013).

Factors: Cultural factors

The American people demand that all children, regardless of socioeconomic or ethnic background, have access to a quality public education. Yet, there is a documented gap between White students and students of other cultural groups (Aske et al., 2013). In raising children, families teach them various practices that reinforce economic status. Consequently,

socioeconomic status is often a factor of culture. This results in a society where children from more affluent backgrounds are better prepared for integration into the dominant culture because they have many of the tools needed for a successful academic career (Shuffelton, 2013). The perceived lack of academic success of Black students has been ascribed to a cultural mindset that does not value traditional achievement and instead marginalizes such success as a betrayal of one's own race. Many educators express the idea that Black students value stereotypical activities including sports and hip-hop as more culturally significant than school. The problem with this mindset is that research does not support this viewpoint. Studies find that Black students' attitudes about education and its value are similar to those held by their White peers. Many Black students who are academically successful are seen by their peers as popular and are socially accepted within the non-dominant school culture. Black middle and high school students are far less influenced by their peers than White students are, and positive parental involvement is much more likely to negate the influence of underperforming friends. The achievement gap may not be attributable to cultural factors but environmental factors (Darensbourg & Blake, 2014). Several studies have found that all students want to learn. The factors that get in the way of learning are student perceptions that the dominant culture within the school is not amenable to the culture from which they come. Black students feel their values, methods of expressing themselves, and behaviors are not welcome in the dominant culture that school represents. Black students recognize that in order to be successful they must have a good education and while there may be resistance to the way classes are taught, it is not attributable to their devaluing of education (Goldenberg, 2014).

Even though most educators understand that Black children in the inner city largely have a different cultural identity, White teachers normally teach Black students. In the nation's largest

public school system (New York City), 80% of all high school teachers are White and 70% of students are members of various minority groups (Goldenberg, 2014). This disparity oftentimes leads to a cultural disconnect between teachers and students. It is important that teachers take steps to better serve their students. They should recognize that their position in the dominant culture is not shared with their students, that they are seen by their students as part of that dominant culture, that cultural differences are not resistance to learning, and that they must modify their classroom practices to engage students from another culture (Goldenberg, 2014). Importantly, White teachers should not try to emulate their Black peers. The methods used within a cultural group do not translate well cross-culturally. Therefore it is important that educators work within the common ground they share with students all the while remaining cognizant that they do not share a common culture with them (Ford & Sassi, 2012).

Most Black families understand and recognize the importance of education and the role it plays in a young person's success. Some parents lack the tools required to help their children in school, they do not understand the importance of the cultural tools given to children of more affluent families. Many inner-city students do not receive the beneficial educational experiences within the family construct that more economically advantaged students receive. This leads to students becoming discouraged and losing motivation (Ford & Moore, 2013). It becomes necessary that teachers working within the inner-city community recognize this disparity and provide their students with the tools they need to develop their talents and to gain the skills needed for academic success. These enriching activities are more important than formal assessment in ensuring the future success of at-risk youth (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2014).

It is problematic that minority students are compared with students from another culture and that the achievement gap is framed around a comparison of White students versus non-White students (Carey, 2013). This perception leads to the creation of schools that strive to give inner-city students the cultural tools that their families are unable to provide them. This creates a one-way flow of information from a predominantly White teaching staff to students and their families. This system fails to respect the cultural differences within society and tends to focus on the economic gains that students may access through the adoption of these skills (Shuffelton, 2013). This does not mean that educators are failing to increase efforts to meet the needs of inner-city students. Oftentimes educators are using improper methods for the culture they are serving. Additionally, there are other disparities within inner-city schools that will be addressed later. Compound the lack of a proper school structure designed to meet the needs of students from the non-dominant culture with the challenging home environment many students come from, and many researchers conclude that there is not an achievement gap but an educational gap; schools are simply failing to meet the educational needs of students (Goldenberg, 2014). While the focus of educators is predominantly on the disparity of standardized test scores between ethnic groups, there is data that indicates that the gap is not attributable to race but to poverty; all poor students are failing to academically achieve (Ford & Moore, 2013).

Factors: School segregation

The 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* ended state sponsored segregated schools in the United States. Sixty years later, the economic disparity between socioeconomic groups has created a de facto form of segregation, one where middle and upper income students attend different schools than students from low-income families (Rushing, 2015). States with larger numbers of schools that are segregated have greater numbers of

neighborhoods that are economically segregated (Condron et al., 2013). This economic segregation is the unintended consequence of neighborhood schools serving one socioeconomic class in one geographic area within school districts, or entire school districts that serve mostly students from one socioeconomic group. Schools assign students by neighborhood and as large-scale transportation becomes more cost prohibitive, students are attending school closer to home (Gaddis & Lauen, 2014). Academics have termed this trend as resegregation. The phenomenon of resegregation is largely understudied; subsequently it is largely ignored as a contributor to the education gap (Condron et al., 2013).

The problems of resegregation are multifold. Low income, minority students largely attend homogeneous schools that are more segregated than they were in the 1950s. Additionally students are not only economically segregated, but are ethnically segregated as well (Ullucci & Howard, 2014). Schools in low-income neighborhoods tend to be funded at lesser levels than schools in more affluent neighborhoods because of the inequality of incomes among the tax base. This leads to larger class sizes, older facilities, older curricula, and less funding per student (Condron et al., 2013). Students and their families are not oblivious to this inequality and it is cause for hostility in the inner-city community (Ispalanda & Conwell, 2015). Additionally, segregation results in schools with unequal parental resources; low-income schools are not provided the financial donations from families that more affluent schools receive (Condron et al., 2013).

A principle outcome of resegregation is its contributions to the educational gap. Not only does it impact student learning but it impacts teachers who work in the inner city by solely blaming them for the poor performance of students (Carey, 2013). The measured stall in the closing of the achievement gap in the 1990s is partially attributable to resegregation; minority

students who are exposed to the dominant American culture score better on standardized tests. The same exposure to students of other minority cultures has no measurable effect on student performance (Condrón et al., 2013). When at-risk students are educated in integrated classrooms, they have greater expectations, more ambitious educational plans, achieve more academically, and are more at ease interacting with peers of other socioeconomic groups (Voight, Geller, & Nation, 2013). Gaddis and Lauen (2014) found that economic segregation is the principle issue; minority students from middle and upper income families are academically and culturally more aligned with their economic peers than they are with low-income members of the same cultural group.

Factors: Teacher experience and qualifications

The argument is oftentimes made that inner-city schools are unable to hire high quality teachers to serve a community's most challenged learners. Evidence indicates that teachers with less than five years of teaching experience are more likely to teach in low income areas. Twenty-one percent of teachers in predominantly Black neighborhoods have less than three years of experience. In contrast, in communities with small Black populations, fewer than ten percent of educators have less than three years of experience (Ford & Moore, 2013). Educators in challenged communities have academic credentials that are inferior to their suburban counterparts, have less teaching experience, and do not have the content-specific knowledge that educators in more affluent schools have. Efforts to close this gap, including incentive pay and other benefits, have largely failed to affect change. Teachers without any certification, as well as those without advanced degrees, are more likely to teach at-risk students (Minor, Desimone, Phillips, & Spencer, 2015). Teacher turnover is higher in schools attended by minority students (Condrón et al., 2013). These factors lead to the hiring of inexperienced educators who may not

be culturally aware of the needs of their students leading to poor classroom performance. It has also been noted that teachers in urban schools have higher rates of absenteeism and are more likely to leave during the school year leading to students being taught by substitute teachers (D. Y. Ford & Moore, 2013).

However, there have been studies that challenge the notion that these factors lead to poorer student performance. One study found that teachers in inner-city schools are indeed less qualified and do not have as much teaching experience as other teachers, but these factors may not be a reliable predictor of student performance. Inner-city school teachers spent as much time on advanced mathematics concepts as their suburban peers and more time on actual instruction. Inner-city students were required to do more homework and were tested more often, yet their performance lags students in more affluent areas. The study did not see a correlation in years of experience, advanced degrees, and credentials to better performance (Minor et al., 2015). An analysis of what teacher factors impacted student performance found that schools that articulate school expectations during the interview process, provide teachers with detailed and more frequent feedback, allowed for more instructional time, and encouraged teachers to focus on student discipline and achievement realized increased test scores (Dobbie & Fryer, 2013).

Factors: Classroom expectations

Teacher influence in the classroom and how it impacts student performance is often overlooked when studying achievement gaps. Student performance is dependent on how teachers perceive student abilities and educator expectations have been shown to impact student success. Students who said their teachers held them to high standards had higher grades and better test performance (Allen, 2015). The impact of teacher perception on student achievement must therefore lead to the converse; low expectations result in lower levels of achievement

(Wiggan, 2014). Black males are overrepresented among special education students and are more likely to require remedial classes, but are less likely to be in gifted classes and college preparatory programs. Some researchers attribute this to the low expectations of classroom teachers (Allen, 2015). There have been few studies conducted regarding teacher bias but those that have been done indicate that inner-city middle school teachers are more likely to focus on basic subject matter and do not thoroughly cover advanced material (Minor et al., 2015).

Data indicates that some Black educators have higher expectations for inner-city students than White teachers do. Natesan & Kieftenbeld suggest that this is because they succeeded in the education system therefore they believe their students can do the same. But there are many Black teachers that have low expectations as well. This has been attributed to the influence of stereotypes on teacher expectations, as well as culturally insensitive teaching techniques (2013). Black teachers also tend to have higher expectations for White students, oftentimes they believe that White students come from a higher socioeconomic background and are better equipped to succeed (Minor et al., 2015). Successful male inner-city students report that unlike their teachers, their parents appeared to hold them to a higher standard and had greater expectations for them than the parents of their White peers (Allen, 2015).

The focus on teacher expectations is important. Ullucci and Howard found that curriculum, pedagogy, and expectations work together to define student's social class and standing before they enter the job market (2014). Additionally, low expectations provide teachers with an excuse for low student performance, this prevents them from taking responsibility for the classroom factors they do control (Francois, 2014). Black students are psychologically conflicted, believing they can perform at higher levels while lesser efforts are rewarded (McGee & Pearman, 2014). Studies also found that teachers who have high

expectations of students and provide them with an inclusive learning environment and encouragement have better results in the classroom. These teachers, dubbed “warm demanders” in one study, work to establish relationships with students and remind them that they are intelligent and well-equipped learners (Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Watson, 2014). The most successful inner-city schools demand that parents, teachers, and students work together to provide a disciplined, learning environment of high expectations, both in the classroom and at home (Stetson, 2013).

Factors: School infrastructure

The quality of infrastructure in inner-city schools is occasionally discussed when the achievement gap is analyzed. The shortfall that results in poor infrastructure is rooted in the income disparity that exists in the inner city. Urban areas have lower income residents in most cases and property values tend to be lower than in suburban areas. This results in a budget disparity between urban school districts and their more affluent suburban neighbors. There have been moves to reform school funding in several states but even leveling the budget disparity does not result in better quality teachers or facilities. The potential for violence in urban schools requires money be spent on security and policing, an expenditure many urban schools do not have the ability to lay out (Carey, 2013).

This economic disparity results in several challenges for urban schools. Class sizes tend to be larger; schools that are over 50% Black average 23 students per class, whereas schools that are less than 15% Black average 14 students per teacher. Urban schools are less likely to have computers in the classroom or have access to a high-speed Internet connection. As mentioned earlier, teachers in inner-city schools are less likely to be at the intermediate or advanced teaching level (Ford & Moore, 2013). This economic disparity is not only seen in inner-city

schools. It is also reflected in public parks, health care, and public transportation. This results in the perception that the services urban areas provide are second rate. This perpetuates a cycle of inner-city incomes dropping, leading to less tax revenue and an additional decrease in the quality of services provided residents (Carey, 2013).

Factors: Discipline climate and disparity

School discipline is a much-cited issue in discussions of inner-city educational shortfalls. Data supports the claim that Black students are more likely to be suspended (in school or out) than their White peers. Though suspension and expulsion are seen as the stiffest penalties an educational institution can impose, there are concerns that excluding students from the classroom environment is a direct contributor to the performance gap. Furthermore, there are concerns that leaving adolescent children home unsupervised leads to students getting into more trouble. Researchers point out that students who have been suspended are more likely to drop out and some have asserted that there are schools that use suspension to push underperforming students out of school altogether (Suh et al., 2014). An analysis of what leads to suspension found that some teachers are predisposed to using discipline referrals to control their classroom. Instead of using positive classroom management, establishing supportive relationships, or evenly enforcing classroom norms and expectations, coercive power is used to maintain order (Pane, Rocco, Miller, & Salmon, 2013). Trends indicate that the use of suspension significantly increased from 1980 to the 2000s. Suspension of Black students increased by 11.4% while the increase in the suspensions of White students increased 0.9%. While all standardized test scores have increased since the implementation of NCLB, it is suggested by some researchers that the increase in urban test scores is attributable to suspension of students who are expected to underperform on tests (Suh et al., 2014).

There has been a significant change in discipline policies in schools in the last two decades. Policies call for more punitive and sterner consequences than in the past. Additionally, school surveillance and law enforcement presence within schools has increased. School resource officers, who are active duty police officers and are often stationed within schools, are charged with helping maintain order and discipline. This leads to criminal charges being filed against students in some cases where matters would have been handled internally in prior years. Surveillance cameras monitor most common spaces within schools and random searches are frequently carried out. Many districts have established zero tolerance policies that require administrators suspend students. These policies not only result in more suspensions but also introduce the criminal justice system into the school environment. They also lead to more students being expelled or suspended from schools. More than 3 million students were suspended in the United States in 2010 and suspension rates have doubled since the 1970s (Perry & Morris, 2014)

Cultural disconnects between teachers and students may also lead to increased suspensions and expulsions. Black students in accelerated programs report that they have to distance themselves from peers because they are perceived as lacking discipline and as being unruly in the classroom (Ispa-landa & Conwell, 2015). The behavior of Black male students is interpreted by some teachers as intimidating, defiant, and disrespectful though they may not be intended as so by the student. Some researchers believe that a predominantly White female teaching workforce may be contributing to increased suspensions (Allen, 2015).

In spite of the negative consequences of suspension, there are researchers who believe that suspensions are essential in the promotion of school safety and provide a better learning environment for students whose classrooms are being disrupted. They also posit that by

suspending a few students they are improving classroom culture for most learners. There is also evidence that indicates restrained use of suspension is vital for high achievement and that when coupled with mentorship, high expectations, and trust students will perform better. If this model of classroom management is used, there need not be an institutional reliance on suspension to maintain order in schools (Perry & Morris, 2014).

Reducing the gap: Year round school

There are other proposals that are oftentimes mentioned when the performance gap is discussed in academic circles. While many of them have been addressed in previous sections, the idea of year-round schooling has not. Proposals calling for year-round schooling are based on the premise that students forget some of what they have learned during their extended summer break. This is a documented phenomenon and many researchers are calling for a more frequent short breaks spread out during the school year. Year-round schools are gaining traction in inner-city schools because studies show that minority and disadvantaged students disproportionately lose more knowledge during summer break than their White peers. This disproportionate loss is attributed to the home environment minority students live in and fewer learning opportunities encouraged by families. While there is no reduction of days spent outside of the classroom, restricting breaks to no more than 30 days allows students continuity and the ability to recall knowledge that has grown stale from disuse (Graves, 2011).

There are two types of year-round schools, single track and multi-track. A single track year-round school is one where all students in the school are in school on the same schedule and school is closed during breaks. A multi-track year round school allows students to be placed in a track that is out of school while other students are using the facilities. This ensures that there is

never a time when every student is scheduled to be in school. This allows schools to maximize the use of buildings, thereby reducing capital investment (Graves, 2011).

The impact of year-round schools on the achievement gap has been minimally studied. Studies have been conducted in California and North Carolina, states that implemented year-round schooling before other areas adopted the concept. The North Carolina study found that year-round schools do not benefit students. There is a small negative impact on achievement but the use of multi-track schedules does help with overcrowding (McMullen & Rouse, 2012a). Additionally, when test scores were analyzed in greater detail and adjusted for school and student characteristics, it was found that there was no change in achievement as measured in standardized test scores. (McMullen & Rouse, 2012b). The California study found that at-risk students' reading and math scores were negatively affected by multi-track year-round schedules. Single track year-round schools were found to have a small negative impact on math scores (Graves, 2011).

Reducing the gap: Single sex classrooms

In 2006, NCLB legislation was modified to allow single-sex education in schools that were attempting to bridge the performance gap. This modification stated that if classes were designed to meet the needs of at-risk students, the school had a plan to improve student performance through alternative and varied means, and curriculum was designed to meet the individual needs of learners that single-sex classes were authorized. Schools that received federal money could offer single-sex classes or schools were allowed to offer single-sex enrollment. This change has resulted in an increased presence of single-sex schools and classrooms in public education (Bowe, Desjardins, Clarkson, & Lawrenz, 2015). The idea of single-sex education is supported by current data regarding the differences in achievement

between girls and boys. Data from the 1970s and later indicated that the performance of boys in mathematics was better than that of girls, whereas female students had better literacy scores than boys. Efforts have been made over the last forty years to close the male/female mathematics gap and most studies report that the gap has closed or girls are now outperforming boys on mathematics tests. The literacy gap between male and female students has increased by two points to a 14-point difference in average scores of 17-year-old students. More females than males are graduating from high school, more females are attending and graduating from college and more females are earning graduate degrees. Scores on the ACT indicate parity between the sexes, but significantly more girls take the test than boys (Stotsky & Denny, 2012).

There is evidence to support that girls approach mathematics differently than boys. A 2012 study found that boys were more likely to use unconventional approaches to mathematical problem solving than their female peers while girls were more likely to try to apply the strategies they were taught in the classroom. This evidence indicates that varied approaches are needed when teaching mathematics (Che, Wiegert, & Threlkeld, 2012). The evidence regarding single-sex education is varied and oftentimes contradictory. One study not only looked at data from single-sex classrooms, but also interviewed teacher attitudes towards single-sex education. It found that boys who attended single-sex classes gained significantly more on standardized literacy tests when compared to their peers in regular classes, if their teacher indicated a positive attitude towards single-sex education. The researchers believe that trends indicate that single-sex classrooms could be effective and that there are no drawbacks to experimenting with the idea (Stotsky & Denny, 2012). Another researcher believes that single-sex mathematics classes have a deleterious effect on end-of-year test scores and that they are not impacting literacy scores at all. He does acknowledge that some schools are implementing single-sex education better than

others and that those who are doing it well are enhancing student education but believes that the overall impact is not positive (Strain, 2013). Finally, a third group of researchers believe that single-sex classrooms positively impact female students' math test scores and do not harm the scores of male students. They believe that single-sex classes positively impact the achievement of Black girls in particular and that the evidence does not show that Black boys are negatively impacted. They also believe that single-sex classes allowed girls to overcome the mathematics performance gap in less than two school years from fifth to sixth grade (Bowe et al., 2015).

Reducing the gap: After school tutoring

The passage of NCLB brought about funding for after-school programs in schools that failed to achieve adequate yearly progress for three or more years. Parents of students who are enrolled in these schools may opt into the programs at no cost. The programs are offered by a number of providers and may be run by companies, faith based organizations, non-profit companies, or other organizations. There is very little oversight or regulation provided by the government entities that fund after-school tutoring and there are almost no guidelines concerning the type of material and methods that may be used. Tutoring programs must apply and be approved by the school district (Good et al., 2014).

The effectiveness of these programs is questionable and varied. Schools that use the same classroom teachers during the school day to provide intense tutoring services are effectively delivering adequate interventions that will lead to improved performance (Dobbie & Fryer, 2013). Conversely, programs run by entities outside of the school struggle to get more than 12 to 17% of students who require intervention to attend. Since the programs are uneven and often do not align with the school's curriculum, they oftentimes do not meet student needs.

There have also been criticisms that the methodology used by some tutoring services does not meet the needs of urban learners (Good et al., 2014).

Successful Urban Schools

With 162 schools in twenty states and the District of Columbia serving over 58,000 students (“About KIPP,” 2014), Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) Academy (this is not a pseudonym) is considered a successful model of urban education. KIPP is a collection of primarily middle schools targeted to serve at risk youth and has been portrayed as consistently bridging the achievement gap since its inception (Kovacs, 2012). KIPP is a charter school program that receives money from local school districts in addition to private donations. It strives to help students who come from low income and minority families learn the work habits, study skills, character, and education it takes to succeed in highly respected high schools and colleges (Yeh, 2013). The first two schools were opened in New York City and Houston, Texas. KIPP began as alternative public schools and teachers were covered by the standard teacher pay structure (Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, Pathak, & Walters, 2012). Since then the KIPP network has grown tremendously, yet they are only two percent of the charter schools in the United States (Gleason, Tuttle, Gill, Nichols-Barrer, & Teh, 2014).

The network of schools that offer the KIPP concept use a standardized program of materials, teacher training, leadership development, and some administrative functions that are developed by the regional and central offices of the corporation. Schools license the program, paying one percent of their revenue the first year and three percent thereafter. All staff, students and parents or guardians sign a standard contract called the “KIPP Commitment to Excellence.” In the contract, all participants agree to be timely, work hard, and complete assignments (Angrist et al., 2012). Schools require students attend an extended day and Saturday sessions and

participate in a year-round schedule (Boyd et al., 2014). There are high expectations for discipline and scholastics (Gleason et al., 2014). Students who meet the expectations are provided small monetary rewards they can use for school supplies (Angrist et al., 2012). The schools endeavor to hire teachers who are willing to work much longer hours, be available to students during off hours on a school provided cell phone and are willing to participate in home visits with parents or guardians (Yeh, 2013). While local schools are able to exercise a great deal of autonomy (Angrist et al., 2012), these expectations are universal in the KIPP system. When KIPP teachers' working hours were examined in the San Francisco Bay area, it was found that KIPP teachers worked a median 65 hours a week, above the average of 52 hours urban school teachers work (Yeh, 2013).

Students who attend KIPP begin at a lower academic level than their fellow students in traditional schools (Gleason et al., 2014). In spite of this hurdle, an assessment of twenty-four KIPP schools on a nationally normed test found that their results exceeded the national sample. A study in Baltimore found the same results on a local level (Gleason et al., 2014). A study of twenty-two schools found significant progress in mathematics and reading (Yeh, 2013). A study of the KIPP school in Lynn, Massachusetts found that the greatest gains were among traditionally low achievers in the special education (SPED) and limited English proficiency (LEP) populations suggesting that the most challenged learners gained the most from the structure KIPP provides (Angrist et al., 2012). KIPP students outperform their peer groups in traditional community schools (Boyd et al., 2014).

There have been concerns raised about the advertised success of the KIPP schools. While students who attend KIPP have higher average standardized test scores than their peers at other schools, only 30 to 35 percent of the children that start in the KIPP program attend college.

It is reported that 50 to 52 percent of all urban students attend college soon after high school graduation (Kovacs, 2012). KIPP schools have also been accused of finding students who are more goal oriented and less disruptive in the classroom environment, as well as deselecting students who do not fit the KIPP model (Gleason et al., 2014). Additionally there are concerns that KIPP schools are selected by parents who may not have the knowledge to choose well for their children (Boyd et al., 2014). There are concerns that KIPP (and other programs using the same model) create an environment that is culturally insensitive to the needs of inner-city learners, that in ignoring cultural needs students are taught that economic advancement is the primary aim of education (Shuffelton, 2013).

While these criticisms are not without merit, the more compelling case is made concerning the tremendous commitment made by KIPP teachers, who work “long hours under exhausting conditions, resulting in high teacher attrition” (Yeh, 2013, p. 8). A study of the five San Francisco Bay area KIPP schools found that 49% of teachers left KIPP schools within one calendar year. This constant churn in staff results in a group of highly dedicated teachers who out perform their peers in mainstream schools (Yeh, 2013). There is also the question of whether KIPP schools are successful or if the mainstream schools to which they are compared are below average (Gleason et al., 2014).

Summary

The struggle to teach urban students is one that educators have been meeting head on with limited success. No Child Left Behind legislation not only ensured accountability for school performance but it provides parents with transparency, allowing them access to test results, and giving them limited choice regarding where their children are taught (Waldow, 2015).

There has been a performance gap in the United States for decades. NCLB only brought these concerns into the public eye. It should be noted that there have been slight reductions in the gap over time, a trend that goes back to the 1970s (Barton & Coley, 2010). Economics, family attitudes, health and nutrition, parent involvement, and facilities have been found to contribute to student performance. Ford and Sassi (2012) found that many teachers have low expectations of urban students, are more likely to resort to administrative discipline (Gregory et al., 2010), and do not work to have relationships with their students (Williams, 2011). Several initiatives including year-round calendars (Graves, 2011), after-school tutoring (Good et al., 2014), single-sex education (Herron, 2014), and others have met with mixed results. One of the nation's most successful urban schools has come under criticism for graduate students' failure to enroll in post high school education programs (Kovacs, 2012). In spite of heavy investment, legislative initiatives, and teacher accountability, the performance gap has not been bridged (Aske et al., 2013).

This literature review has looked at many of the factors that are thought to contribute to the performance gap and has addressed many of the proposals that are thought to bridge those problems. While it does reveal many of the contributors to underachievement by urban students, researchers find that many of the proposed solutions are not able to overcome the disparity in performance and some are actually deleterious. The success of Eastend School indicates there is some cultural element that contributes to its performance, something that is not captured in programs (tutoring, year-round calendar, etc.) that have come and gone in its history. This study is designed to try to capture that missing element.

CHAPER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Overview

The method used to conduct this study followed the guidelines of an autoethnography. Understanding the culture of a relatively small school required careful and methodical collection of data and an understanding of the climate that exists within the walls of the school. Eastend School is an interesting atmosphere; students are always in the building regardless of the time of year or if school is in session. Capturing this culture required an understanding of the students and teachers who work there, and the parents who enroll their children in the school. These three groups were interviewed along with former school administrators. I also recorded my own recollections of my time at Eastend and reviewed historical documents and artifacts.

Design

Qualitative Study

A qualitative study was chosen in order to report on the multiple realities and culture of a successful inner-city school. I understood that the reality envisioned by teachers at Eastend was not the same reality that administrators, parents or students experienced. Not only did qualitative research allow me to acknowledge my role within the culture, but it allowed me to build my conclusions from the foundation up as I performed my research (Creswell, 2013).

Ethnography

Ethnography is the narrative of a community of people. It may speak to that community's values, beliefs, networks, communications, rituals, or other elements of their culture (Lecompte & Schensul, 2010). It is unique in that its principle product is a description of cultural behavior (Schwandt, 2007). Typically it explains a culture's symbols, systems, patterns,

and how the culture interacts with mainstream culture (Fetterman, 2010). Ethnography as a research method was originally proposed in the early twentieth century as a methodology to explain the cultures of non-literate communities (Wolcott, 2008). While this method was originally used to study indigenous people, today it is used to study subcultures within contemporary society. Its specific use to study organizations began in the 1980s and it has been successfully utilized to promote change in programs and processes within corporate cultures (Patton, 2014).

As someone who spent nearly a decade participating within the culture of Eastend School, I believed I was uniquely qualified to explain it on its own terms and in its own language (Wolcott, 2008). By using autoethnographic research techniques (thereby revealing the influences on my research), I had an approach that not only allowed me to know what elements to study but a method by which to frame the results of my research (Wolcott, 2008).

Autoethnography

Initially, I recorded my reflections of the culture of Eastend School, following the criteria for an autoethnography. A reflexive autoethnography is a qualitative method that allows a researcher to use his personal experiences to analyze, critique, and comment on a culture in order to elicit a response from readers and fellow researchers as well as to describe a culture of which the researcher is a member (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015). Historically anthropologists used ethnographies to explain cultures they researched. Oftentimes they became immersed in the culture they were studying while observing and recording their field notes, in essence experiencing the culture. In the mid-1970s researchers began to recognize that they were inserting their story into their research. By combining ethnographic writing with elements of autobiography and reflecting on and sharing their personal experiences the autoethnography

became an accepted form of qualitative research (Denzin, 2013). The autoethnography is a qualitative method that allowed me to apply my experiences, emotions and actions to my research. It also allowed me to be more forthcoming with my recollections of my time at Eastend School as well as my feelings and experiences. Using reflexive methods permitted me to acknowledge how my experiences influenced my research and allowed me to advocate for the culture of Eastend School (Adams et al., 2015). Understanding that autoethnography is both a perspective and a method, it was imperative that I ensured that I keep my role as researcher at the center of my focus (Patton, 2014).

By gathering my experiences and insights about teaching at Eastend School (Patton, 2014), I began to understand the larger culture at the school (Creswell, 2013). As a former teacher and mentor to many of the students at the school, I was unable to remove myself from the culture. Additionally, I am passionate about inner-city students and believe that it is my role to advocate for them. It was not my intention to intrude on the story of the culture at Eastend School, but to take responsibility for capturing an accurate depiction of what it is so that it may be replicated (Wolcott, 2008).

Research Questions

Research focused on the school culture that existed at Eastend School. The principle question of the study is:

- What are the core values that provide the foundation of the culture at Eastend School, and how do students, teachers, administrators and parents perceive their role and each other in that culture?

Sub questions include:

- What expectations do participants have for each role (student, teacher, administrator, and parent)?
- How do the relationships between students and teachers, parents and teachers, and students and administrators impact student learning?

Setting

Eastend School is a public school and a magnet program for at-risk students in the Tidewater, Virginia area. The student body is 98% Black and 96% free or reduced lunch. Females comprise 53% of the student body, 47% are male. Students range from 11 to 19 years of age. Students generally (90%+) come from single-parent households. Eastend Middle and High School is specifically designed to help at-risk students achieve their goal of attending college. It has an extended day program for 6th through 10th grade students, uniforms for grades 6 – 8, has a summer program for four weeks, Saturday school, relatively small classroom sizes and an enhanced college preparatory curriculum. The program does not accept students who have been designated talented and gifted unless they are siblings of attending students.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants. The use of purposeful sampling helped me focus my research on information-rich cases. This selection process allowed me to focus on a small group who are likely to bring deeper understanding and more in depth recollection to the subject matter (Patton, 2014). The use of purposeful sampling, if done correctly, ensured more meaningful and important data were provided (Wolcott, 2008). There are many students and teachers that were at Eastend School who succeeded in spite of the circumstances they grew up in or the challenges they faced. While it would have been interesting to pick the best and brightest students, I was interested in average students whom

many people thought achieved beyond their abilities and are currently attending college or are in the workplace. There are also teachers that worked at school who were not successful in mainstream institutions but enjoyed great success in the Eastend environment.

The field of student and parent participants was culturally homogenous and from an economically depressed community. There was one former administrator and one former administrator - director, necessitating emergent sampling for that group. Initially, candidates were selected from each group and more were added until sufficient data were collected to achieve saturation (Lecompte & Schensul, 2010). Saturation is the point in research where no new data is being gathered from the interviews (Creswell, 2013). The upper limit of interview participants was set because of the considerable cost of transcription services; in order to stay on budget, I created a limit. Limiting studies because of budgetary concerns is not unprecedented (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Participants were approached and interviewed if they were willing. They had to have been affiliated with the school for at least five years. Participants were restricted to those who have reached the age of majority; consequently, students selected were graduates. Participants in the student and parent pool ranged from 18 to 65 years of age and there were a relatively equal number of males and females. Staff members represent multiple ethnic groups, are between 30 and 65 years of age, and men outnumber women. Teachers, administrators, students, and parents were contacted through personal connections and other participants.

Procedures

Once my proposal was approved, I submitted my proposal for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. After approval was obtained, I started my fieldwork. I acquired some historical documents; scanned, cataloged, and analyzed them. Interviews were arranged, conducted and

transcribed. I created field notes based on my experiences at Eastend School: consulted my own journals, notes, and documents. As data were collected, additional field notes were written after each interview and the audio recordings were transcribed.

Data were then placed in categories based on the research question, ideas, and theories that emerged during the analysis process. Once data were coded and patterns emerged, I engaged in structural analysis, linked components to theories, and explained how they are related. I then wrote a narrative form of my research and results (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013).

The Researcher's Role

I am a former Instructional Coach and Teacher at Eastend School. I am a retired military veteran with a technical background and experience in the field of Human Performance Technology and military education. I am a committed Christian. I taught at Eastend School, starting during the 2003-2004 school year as a substitute teacher. I accepted a contract the following school year and eventually became the Social Sciences and History department chair. The last two years I was affiliated with the school as a teacher coach. I am a National Board Certified Teacher, earned a Master's of Education in Instructional Technology, and am currently pursuing an Educational Doctorate in Educational Leadership. I have had extremely limited experience teaching students from middle and upper income households. I taught seven classes of students at the school and consider some of the staff members to be friends. I do not have off-site relationships with the staff there now and have not been affiliated with the school since 2012. My spouse is the librarian at Eastend School. My experiences as a successful educator at Eastend School allow insight into the culture that existed there. I have been told by several students that they see me as a "father figure," this may have influenced interviews with students. I have verified my own experiences with the experiences of other educators at the school.

Data Collection

Several data collection strategies were employed. I recorded my memories of my tenure at Eastend School as field notes. I reviewed some historical documents and artifacts, and I interviewed participants from four groups within the culture of Eastend School. The total number of interview participants is two to 15 in each group (administrators, teachers, students, and parents).

Data Triangulation

Data triangulation is a practice using different sources to crosscheck information that is collected. It ensures that data is corroborated from one source by another (Lecompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 153). It also ensured that as the researcher I was looking outward “to those sites where memory, history, structure, and performance intersect” (Jones et al., 2013, p. 130). In order to achieve data triangulation in the autoethnographic section of this study, three sources of data were used. Field notes were the principal source of autoethnographic data collection (Chang, 2008). Document analysis and interview data were used to corroborate and crosscheck my field notes and recollections for accuracy (Lecompte & Schensul, 2010). Data triangulation was accomplished by using four different pools of interview candidates: former administrators, teachers (both current and former), former students, and the parents of former students. The use of different types of participants reduces the risk of bias and chance associations (Maxwell, 2013, p. 127). Additionally, information gathered from these four sources was corroborated by the autoethnographic data collected from my field notes. The structure for crosschecking data allowed the quality of information to be tested and verified, ensured validity and eliminated alternative explanations (Fetterman, 2010, p. 113).

Field Notes

Autoethnographic field notes were constructed using my personal journals, memories, and other archived material from my tenure at Eastend School. They were organized chronologically and are the “primary data” used in autoethnography (Jones et al., 2013, p. 109). They were revisited and significant stories were reflected on and retold as other data collection strategies change my perspective (Jones et al., 2013). Using discernment, reflection, and the use of other data collection strategies to promote further recollections, I endeavored to portray an honest reflection of my time as a teacher at Eastend School. Admittedly, many of my experiences were negative, particularly in my first two years of teaching, so in order to maintain objectivity I continued to participate in reflexive analysis of my memories in an effort to be forthcoming (Chang, 2008).

The steps to capture my field notes began with a chronicle of my time at Eastend School. This chronicle was revisited from time to time and additional details were added as they were recollected throughout the data collection and analysis process. An autobiographical timeline was created and included major life events I experienced during my tenure. A self-inventory was conducted of my recollections and they were ranked by importance, prompting the emergence of additional memories and themes. It is normally understood that these themes are created during data analysis procedures. This method of reflection allowed me to understand what aspects of the Eastend School culture I acquired and enabled me to reflect on them resulting in more comprehensive field notes. I also identified mentors, collaborators, and other influences during my time at Eastend and added them to my participant list. The creation of this list is considered a method that may be used to categorize the social, cognitive, affective, and material dimensions of a culture (Chang, 2008). Reflecting on the influences of my mentors and collaborators not

only helped me identify potential participants but also allowed me to write about my interactions with them, and provided more detail for my field notes and reflections. The use of field notes to reflect on my time at Eastend School allowed me to provide a first-person account of a teacher in a successful inner-city school. Through this reflection I was able to define the culture of Eastend as I see it and described the role of a teacher within the culture, albeit the role of one particular teacher. I was also able to determine what my own expectations were for students, fellow teachers, administrators and parents in the school culture. My reflections allowed me to also determine how I felt those relationships impacted student learning. I then checked my own answers to the research questions with the answers of other members of the Eastend community. Through rigorous reflection and corroboration, the accuracy of my experiences were relatively assured.

Documents and Artifacts

In order to expand my understanding and to check recollections and memories for accuracy I studied historical, media, photographic, and administrative documents from my time at Eastend School. Interview participants were asked if they have documents they were willing to share (Chang, 2008). Not only were documents sought out in order to gain additional information, but they were also used to facilitate deeper reflection on my experiences and relationships with other members of the Eastend School community. Memorabilia, announcements, press releases, video interviews, and promotional materials were sought out and used to help connect my memories to documented events that occurred during my time at Eastend. Autoethographers use artifacts to stimulate memories and define their “primary identity” as a participant within a culture. I used them to help me remember the multiple facets of the culture of the school and to stimulate memories that allowed me to reflect on my role as an

educator in that culture. I also used some of the artifacts to prompt the memories of interview participants (Jones et al., 2013).

Interviews

Data from interviews was used to verify, supplement, or refute the data collected from my field notes (Chang, 2008). Interviews in autoethnography were used to attain a clearer understanding of the events and to fill gaps in memory. To help attain more accurate responses to interview questions, reflexive dyadic interview techniques was used. A reflexive dyadic interview is designed as a traditional unstructured interview. When it was appropriate during the interview I (as the researcher) shared the stories that influenced my desire to research inner-city schools. I shared some of my experiences with interview subjects during the process not only to prompt responses from the participants but to demonstrate that we were equals in the research process (Jones et al., 2013).

Unstructured interviews of four different participant pools were used. Unstructured interviews allowed me a great deal of flexibility and follow-up questions are based on earlier responses. This allowed the control of the interview to be shared between both the participants and the interviewer (Chang, 2008). It is an interview technique that encouraged the exchange to be more of a conversation and has been used in social anthropology for many years (Skinner, 2012). Unstructured interviewing does not mean unplanned and a list of potential interview questions follows (J. Schensul & LeCompte, 2012). Unstructured interviews enabled the reflexive dyadic techniques described earlier and allowed participants to partner in the ebb and flow of the conversation. Interviews also provided a way to verify and connect my field notes to the experiences and recollections of interview subjects. This provided part of the needed triangulation for this study (Adams et al., 2015).

Interviews were conducted in public places (restaurants, library meeting rooms, coffee shops, etc.) at locations convenient for the participants. They were scheduled at the interviewee's convenience. Participants were emailed the questions when they agreed to be interviewed. Some of my former peers (administrators and teachers) wanted to meet in their office or classroom and I accommodated that request. Interviews were conducted with one or two participants (whatever allows the participants to be comfortable) and the interviewer. They lasted 60 to 120 minutes and were recorded with two electronic recording devices, one digital audio recorder with lapel microphones and the audio recording feature on a smartphone. The redundancy in audio recording helped mitigate technical problems when electronic failure happened and it also allowed the interview to be captured without relying on memory. I kept notes during the interview and tried to record my thoughts and ideas immediately following the interview. Sometimes interviews were so closely scheduled that I was not able to capture my thoughts until later in the day or the following morning. A professional transcription service was used to convert the interviews to text shortly after they were recorded and I verified the transcriptions using the original recordings. All participants were emailed a copy of the transcription to check for accuracy.

Interviews of students, fellow teachers, former administrators, and parents who were part of the Eastend culture were used to help understand how that culture is defined, what the core values of the school were, how they saw their role within the school, and how they saw others' role within the school. Interviews were also used to define what expectations (if any) each group had for the others. Finally, interviewees were able to provide recollections of what they felt the impact was that each group had on student learning.

Student Interviews

Twenty former students participated in unstructured interviews. Current students were not used because in the last two years the performance of Eastend School has declined and the school is currently accredited with warning. This means that no minor children were interviewed.

Memories

1. What is your earliest memory of Eastend School?
2. Tell me your best memory of Eastend School?
3. What is your worst memory of Eastend School?

Teachers

4. Who was your favorite teacher? what is it he/she did that made him/her your favorite?
5. Which teacher or teachers demanded the most from you academically/socially/morally?
6. Which teacher was the least challenging?
7. Which teachers do you think cared about you and your success?
8. Were there any teachers you felt did not care and if so what was it they did to make you feel that way?

School Culture

9. Outside of the curriculum, what were the important skills you think you learned at Eastend?
10. What do you miss about Eastend School?
11. What don't you miss about Eastend School?
12. How did Eastend School help you academically and personally succeed?
13. In what way did Eastend fail to prepare you for college/trade school/ the military?

14. What is it about Eastend School that makes it different?
15. How did Eastend and the teachers there support your needs as a teenager?
16. If you could have gone to a different school, would you? Why or why not?
17. Is there anything else you'd like to mention about your time at Eastend School?

The memory questions (1-3) were icebreakers intended to get the interviewees to participate in the interview process. They were relatively nonthreatening and allowed for the exchange of stories and memories (Fetterman, 2010) setting the groundwork for the reflexive dyadic interview process. The teacher questions (4-8) were designed to elicit memories and data concerning the successful and unsuccessful relationships students had with teachers at Eastend. They were also designed to answer the research questions concerning roles and relationships. Additionally, they were used to identify the core values and teaching attributes that formed the culture at the school. Strong relationships with teachers are critical to the success of inner-city students (Suh et al., 2014). Successful teachers in inner-city schools were found to share attitudes concerning cultural sensitivity, flexibility, and the demands for success they placed on students (Calabrese, Goodvin, & Niles, 2005). The school culture questions (9-17) were there to determine if the theoretical framework connects to the culture of the school, to determine if there was a culture of success, and how students perceived their role within the school. Schools that defy the trends share some commonalities in that they teach students skills beyond core curriculum and create an environment of concern (Dobbie & Fryer, 2013).

Staff Interviews

Staff interviews were conducted using the same method as student interviews. Six staff members were interviewed including two former administrators.

Memories

1. What is your funniest memory of Eastend School?
2. Tell me your best memory of Eastend School?
3. What is your worst memory of Eastend School?

Professional Background

4. When did you start working at Eastend School?
5. Was teaching your first profession?
6. Would you mind sharing your teaching qualifications, if not which of them have you earned before/while you were at Eastend?

Eastend Students

7. Was Eastend your first teaching (administrative) assignment?
 - a. (Experienced teacher) If not, at what other types of schools had you taught?
 - b. (Experienced teacher) How did they compare to Eastend?
 - c. (Experienced teacher) How were Eastend students different from other students?
 - d. (Experienced teacher) Was discipline easier, the same, or harder at Eastend?
 - e. (Experienced teacher) What was your most rewarding experience your first year at Eastend?
 - f. (1st Assignment) Tell me about your first year of teaching?
 - g. (1st Assignment) What was the toughest challenge?
 - h. (1st Assignment) What was the most rewarding experience of your first year?
 - i. If the participant is teaching at another school, how are Eastend students different from your current students, how are they the same?

School Culture

8. How did the social, academic, and moral education model used at Eastend impact students (Spencer et al., 2004)?
9. Have you ever had to provide students with basic needs before you could teach them?
10. How did school administration assist you as a teacher?
 - a. (Administrator) How did you try to assist teachers in the classroom?
11. How did the parents of students assist you as a teacher (administrator)?
12. How did you prepare your students for academic success?
13. Is there something you wish you had done differently?
14. What is your greatest accomplishment at Eastend?
15. How do you describe your ideal relationship with your students?
16. Is there anything else you'd like to mention about your time at Eastend School?

The memory questions (1-3) were icebreakers intended to get the interviewees to participate in the interview process. They were relatively nonthreatening and allowed for the exchange of stories and memories (Fetterman, 2010), setting the groundwork for the reflexive dyadic interview process. The professional background questions (4-6) were designed to collect data concerning the qualification level of the teachers at Eastend to determine if teachers at the school possess the same qualifications as teachers in other inner-city schools. Harvey and Flavin (2013) found that inner-city teachers are less qualified than their suburban peers. The question about students (7 a-i) was designed to help clarify the role of students and administrators (regarding discipline) as perceived by teachers, to better understand teachers' view towards discipline and to understand more about the culture of the school. Teachers with strong positive relationships with students are more effective inner-city teachers (Suh et al., 2014). Different discipline styles affect the classroom environment in different ways impacting the quality of

teaching (Pane et al., 2013). The expectations teachers have of inner-city students have an impact on student performance (Castro, 2014). The culture questions (8-16) were designed to prompt further information about the core values and roles of the members of the Eastend School community. Questions eight and nine were specifically asking about how the theoretical framework impacts learning (Marzano, 2010; Maslow, 1954; Spencer et al., 2004). Question 11 was written to explore the level of parental involvement. Parental involvement is shown to have a large impact on student performance (Park & Holloway, 2013). Several studies have indicated that schools that have shared success with Eastend School also share some attributes with the school (Gleason et al., 2014). Yet there are some differences both in how the school is administered and in the success rates of students at the schools.

Parent Interviews

Parent interviews were conducted using the same method as student interviews. Three parents were interviewed. The parents of students who were interviewed were often not selected because their schedules did not allow them to meet with me. The three I was able to interview (two were parents of participants) provided the rich data needed for the study.

Memories

1. How many of your children have attended Eastend?
2. Do you have any children who did not attend?
3. Tell me your funniest memory of Eastend?
4. Tell me your best memory of Eastend School?
5. What is your worst memory of Eastend School?

Staff

6. Describe the average Eastend teacher? What do most of them have in common?

7. How often did you communicate with your student's teachers?
8. Which teachers do you feel did the most for your student?
9. Which teachers do you think demanded the most from your student?
10. Which teacher was the least challenging?
11. Which teachers do you think cared about your child's success?
12. Were there any teachers you felt did not care about their students?
13. Describe your interactions with the school administration.
14. How did the school administrators impact you and your child?

School Culture

15. Outside of the curriculum, what were the important skills your child learned at Eastend?
16. How did Eastend School help your child academically and personally succeed?
17. In what way did Eastend fail to prepare your child for college/trade school/ the military?
18. What is it (if there is anything) about Eastend School that makes it different?
19. If you could have sent your child to a different school, would you? Why or why not?
20. Is there anything else you'd like to mention about your time at Eastend School?

The memory questions (1-5) were icebreakers intended to get the interviewees to participate in the interview process. They were relatively nonthreatening and allowed for the exchange of stories and memories (Fetterman, 2010), setting the groundwork for the reflexive dyadic interview process. Question one was also a way to measure how many teachers the parent interacted with over their children's time at Eastend. The staff questions (6-14) were designed to measure the parent's view of the culture of Eastend and to determine the relationships that existed between parents and staff members. They also helped define the roles within the culture and how parents perceived them. Parental involvement (communicating with

the staff, assisting children with studies, and collaborating with the school) has a direct impact on student learning and is a determining factor in success (Park & Holloway, 2013). The school culture questions were designed to help determine the effectiveness of whole child learning and the S.A.M.E program. The S.A.M.E. program purports to prepare students by teaching them real-world skills that their more affluent peers receive in the home (Spencer et al., 2004). An affirming and disciplined school culture requires the input of parents to be effective. It also empowers teachers to create a learning environment that improves student performance (Stetson, 2013).

Data Analysis

All data collected was analyzed using LeCompte and Schensul's ethnographic mechanical/cognitive data analysis process. While the following steps are ethnographic in nature, I also consulted Chang's Autoethnography as Method and the steps were essentially the same. During data collection I engaged in the following procedure. At the conclusion of each interview or while reviewing documents I recorded my thoughts and reflections in the field using scratch notes. Scratch notes are a form of inscription used to capture data while the researcher's mind is fresh (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). Scratch notes were written before the next interview began whenever possible.

Using scratch notes, I wrote more detailed field notes. These notes were a record of thoughts, field interpretations, noted behaviors, and possible explanations that came to mind during the interview. These thick descriptions were used in conjunction with the transcribed interviews (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). A professional transcription service was used to create a verbatim record of the interview. The written transcription was then compared to the audio transcription for accuracy. The audio recordings were then stored on a password protected

USB flash drive in a secure safe in case the transcription was lost or further clarification was needed. An electronic ledger was kept in a spreadsheet so that the transcriptions can be tracked and their status recorded (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). Keeping close track of what stage of data interpretation was essential when collecting 28 interviews.

All documents were electronically scanned, converted to text, and indexed. This allowed data to be located and accessed quickly (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). As data were collected, I engaged in the practice of recursive analysis and reflection. Recursive analysis is a method where questions are raised, collected data is used to answer the question, the data is analyzed, then questions are reformulated or new questions are created based on the analysis (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). Data were organized into categories initially created using the research questions. Once general coding was completed, specific coding was used to organize data into categories that aided in analysis and interpretation of the data. While data were coded, phrases and ideas began to emerge related to the research questions. Emergence revealed variables that described a range of possibilities, subfactors that explained themes, groupings of subfactors called factors that explained substantive theories, and domains that are groupings of factors describing how participants and the researcher make sense of the world (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013).

During data analysis I engaged in analytic induction, a practice where the researcher looks to disprove his theories, research questions, and ideas. This was an effort to critically think through the process and not allow myself to get caught up in the enthusiasm of proving my ideas correct (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). A computer program called Dedoose™ was used to apply codes to the data. Coding was revisited throughout this process and codes were added or

combined as needed. I had a thorough coding set prior to using the software. Software allowed for the rapid creation of data sets once proper coding was applied (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013).

As the study progressed patterns gained complexity and new ones emerged. They were added as the study continued until they were identified and relationships between data were established. I then engaged in structural analysis, linking theories to components of the study and explained how they are related. A summary of the interview data were created for each candidate pool and they were reviewed to see if there were any further trends, themes, ideas, or variables (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). The conceptual framework of the study was then refined and I began writing the narrative form of research, using my autoethnographic field notes as a guide (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). My results were shared with the Urban Learning and Research Center for peer review and with select participants so they could provide feedback. Member checks and peer debriefing were conducted throughout the research process (J. Schensul & LeCompte, 2012).

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure that the findings of the study were valid, I endeavored to ensure the study achieved confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability using multiple methods. Throughout the process memoing, recording ideas, and analysis as data was collected (Creswell, 2013) was used. Data were also coded, reflecting on the codes and analysis while memoing allowed me to capture my thoughts as I collected it. The memos helped me interpret data later in the process (Schwandt, 2007).

Credibility

Credibility ensures that the researcher's interpretation of the culture represents the participants' views (Schwandt, 2007). To maintain credibility I triangulated data sources

(Creswell, 2013). Multiple sources (students, teachers and administrators, and parents) for interviews were used along with autoethnographic field notes and documents that were gathered from my private collection, the collections of other staff members, the school corporate offices and the Urban Learning and Research Center. Using multiple data sources ensured that the researcher or a closed group of participants did not skew research. By seeking corroborating resources outside of the local geographic area (other successful urban schools), initial findings were verified or questioned (Creswell, 2013).

Dependability

Dependability is the assurance that the researcher's role is documented, traceable, and is logical (Schwandt, 2007). Dependability can be established using an auditing or peer review process (Creswell, 2013). To ensure dependability I asked members of the Urban Learning and Leadership Center to review my research and work. Peer review is a check outside of the researcher and participants and ensures the veracity of the study through questioning and interpretation of the findings (Creswell, 2013). Asking the Urban Learning and Leadership Center to provide a peer review allowed data to be questioned and analyzed by experts in the area of inner-city teaching.

Transferability

Ample information will be included in my study in order to ensure transferability (Schwandt, 2007). By providing rich detail about the school, culture, and the participants, readers may be able to determine if my findings can be applied to other settings (Creswell, 2013).

Confirmability

Confirmability ensures that the researcher's interpretations are valid through participant validation (Schwandt, 2007). To ensure that the findings of the study are confirmable, member checking and peer debriefing was used. Member checking affirms that participants agree with the researchers findings and interpretations (Creswell, 2013). Member checks also provided evidence that my interpretations are correct (Maxwell, 2012).

Ethical Considerations

Student and staff privacy could be violated and the focus of the school could be distracted from unwanted publicity. All participants and institutions were given pseudonyms and the city was not identified. Underage student privacy could be violated, consequently graduates who are adults, age 18 or older, were the only students interviewed. The privacy of participants is extremely important (Patton, 2014). In order to protect participants, the study used informed consent forms signed by all participants. All participants were informed and reminded that their participation was fully voluntary; participants were told and reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and the researcher used ethical procedures and policies. IRB approval was obtained before any participants were contacted and before research began. Consent forms were electronically scanned and kept on a USB flash drive that was password protected. All computer-based data and digital audio recordings were kept in a secure, password protected USB device that is locked in a safe in my home when it was not being used. Professional transcription services were required to provide me with a confidentiality agreement. All physical data (paper consent forms and other documents) was kept in a locked safe in my home when not being used.

Summary

This study uses various data collection methods based on autoethnographic methodology. The three used were researcher field notes, document and artifact review, and interviews from three different sources: staff, students, and parents. LeCompte and Schensul's ethnographic mechanical/cognitive data analysis process was followed. Ethical procedures were followed and the security of participants was my primary concern as the researcher.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this autoethnographic study is to discover how alternative public schools for at-risk students bridge the achievement gap. It uses the autoethnographic approach to examine the factors that have led to the successes of an urban school. For the purposes of this research, “bridging the achievement gap” is defined as meeting all state standards of adequate yearly progress, a 100% graduation rate, and at-risk students is defined as students on the free or reduced lunch program. Within the autoethnographic design, the researcher shares his experiences and advocates for the members of a community he is representing (Jones et al., 2013). The data collection methods used within this study includes interviews with former students, staff members, and parents of students. Researcher recollections are also included as are the texts collected in a document review. I used an online software program called Dedoose™ to code and organize data from the sources.

This chapter serves as a review of the findings of the analysis conducted through coding and the emergence of identifying themes from transcripts of the interviews, my field notes and recollections, and the artifacts collected. I approached data analysis using LeCompte and Schensul’s ethnographic mechanical/cognitive data analysis process. I began data analysis during the interview process and worked on it for four months. I identified three themes with subthemes from this data analysis. Themes included (a) relationships, (b) expectations, and (c) modeling.

This research question served as a framework for the study:

1. What are the core values that provide the foundation of the culture at Eastend School, and how do students, teachers, administrators, and parents perceive their role and each other in that culture?
 - a. What expectations do participants have for each role (student, teacher and administrators, and parent) within the school?
 - b. How do the relationships between students and teachers, parents and teachers, and students and administrators impact student learning?
 - c. What does Eastend do to create the culture of success at the school?
 - d. How does the S.A.M.E. model, teaching the whole child, and providing the basic needs of students impact academic performance and contribute to school culture?

Participants

I assigned all participants a pseudonym to protect their identity. There are three groups of participants in this study. Additionally, my autoethnographic component is included. All participants were affiliated with Eastend School during my time as a teacher and instructional coach and met the criteria for the study. The interview process was a rewarding one; all participants were eager to share their experiences and to recommend other candidates. Oftentimes at the end of my interview the participant would be on the phone calling a former classmate and would arrange an interview time for me. Since a lot of my research happened during university breaks the pace was intense. The three groups of participants are former students (19), parents of former students (3), staff members (6). Unless noted otherwise, all participants are Black Americans. They range from 18 to 65 years of age. There were 14 females and 14 males. There were 24 Black participants, three White participants, and one

White Hispanic participant. Additionally, my field notes and diaries from my time teaching have been converted into a narrative of my time at Eastend.

Some of the quotes used in this study are not grammatically correct or contain local colloquialisms and slang. In order to convey the voice of the participants I allowed their language to remain largely unchanged. Thomas Schwandt addressed this practice in his explanation of the emic versus etic voice. The emic voice is the voice of the participant and is used to describe their experiences whereas the etic voice is that of the researcher. The use of the emic voice allowed me to convey the perspective of the participants in this study and to distinguish their experiences from my own (Schwandt, 2007).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Group	Sex	Race
Adriel	Student	Female	Black
Aednah	Student	Female	Black
Barabbas	Student	Male	Black
Barnabas	Student	Male	Black
Baruch	Student	Male	Black
Bashemath	Student	Female	Black
Benjamin	Student	Male	Black
Berea	Student	Female	Black
Berechiah	Student	Male	Black
Boaz	Student	Male	Black
Carshena	Student	Female	Black
Clement	Student	Male	White
Coniah	Student	Male	Black
Damara	Student	Female	Black
Darda	Student	Female	Black
Darius	Student	Male	Black
Dathan	Student	Male	Black
Dinah	Student	Female	Black

Elisheba	Student	Female	Black
Enoch	Teacher	Male	Black
Jeriah	Teacher	Male	Black
Job	Administrator	Male	Black
Mishal	Parent	Female	Black
Myra	Parent	Female	Black
Ruth	Parent	Female	Black
Samuel	Administrator	Male	White
Sarah	Teacher	Female	White
Sophia	Teacher	Female	White

Adriel - Student

My interview with Adriel was a positive and affirming one. Adriel is a committed and hardworking Christian woman. She graduated from a major mid-Atlantic university and is studying for the LSAT while working as a custodian at a local hospital. Adriel and I spent a long time catching up. She was a dedicated and diligent student in high school and I was proud to hear that she continued that tradition in college, graduating with high honors. Adriel is the student that possesses the background that Eastend School targets. She reminded me that when she was in the school her family “lived in section eight housing” (Interview, March 15, 2016). She also told me that she and her father recently reconciled, “although he wasn't there, you can't live your life on grudges; I just forgave him for abandoning us. I only get one mom and one dad” (Interview, March 15, 2016). When I asked about her relationship with her teachers, she told me, “I guess not having my father in my life, the teachers kind of filled that void” (Interview, March 15, 2016). There were many times during the interview when I felt like a proud parent but never more so than when she told me, “I remember that day you told me ‘never be ashamed of asking questions’” (Interview, March 15, 2016).

Aednah – Student

Aednah was in the first class I taught at Eastend and is a college graduate and counselor working with drug users in the prison system. She was late for her interview because she had to deal with a crisis incident. Getting her to speak about the school was tough. Oftentimes when I asked her a question, she responded with, “high school was a blur” (Interview, March 16, 2016). While a bit short on specifics, she did communicate some overarching thoughts that were important. Regarding some of her classmates she said,

Looking at everyone I went to school with and seeing the stats, it's totally different.

[When] people . . . [took] the time and ha[d] patience with them . . . [they succeeded], if someone hadn't had patience with them, they wouldn't be where they are (Interview, March 16, 2016).

Aednah did provide thoughtful answers regarding the importance of teacher dedication and the importance of student – teacher trust. Aednah stressed that successful teachers at Eastend School were able to be flexible and provide students with enough “leeway so they can trust you. If they don't trust you and they sense your fear, they're going to run over you” (Interview, March 16, 2016). Aednah had an appointment so the interview was cut a bit short, but her professionalism and dedication to her profession came through. She did tell me that she was changing jobs and moving to the Atlanta area.

Barabbas and Baruch - Students

Barabbas and Baruch were two young men I first taught in my second year at Eastend School. Initially the interview was scheduled with Barabbas. His work schedule required that we meet on a Saturday evening. He and I were very close when he was in school but lost touch over the last three or four years. He is an art student attending a local fine arts college. He is

also a talented cartoonist and a soft-spoken but articulate young man. He and Baruch have been friends since elementary school, and they along with another participant (Benjamin) are generally together when they are not at work or in school. When I met Barabbas I was pleasantly surprised to see that Baruch was there. Barabbas asked if it was okay if the two of them did the interview together.

Baruch works for a local car dealership as a parts manager. He has always wanted to be an auto mechanic and first expressed that desire when I taught him in sixth grade. He still wants to return to school to become a certified mechanic. He is also soft spoken and articulate. He is also very thoughtful and inquisitive. Oftentimes during the interview, he would ask me a series of questions. Both of these young men were not always the best of students, but they were very honest. My recollections of both of them were that they would always tell me the truth, even if they had not behaved appropriately. They still appear to be that way.

This is the only interview I did with two participants and it was a different experience. Barabbas, Baruch, and I spent several hours together and the two of them moved the microphone back and forth. Logistically it was very easy. The hard part was the emotional impact the interview would have on me. In the middle of the interview Barabbas said,

You came into my life and it was like a breath of fresh air. . . you spoke to me like I was being talked to by my dad. A lot of what you said stuck with me. Having you leave after 6th grade hurt (Interview, March 17, 2016).

At that point three grown men were sitting at a table in a restaurant weeping. I was not prepared for that moment. By the end of the interview Baruch and Barabbas had given me a vivid picture of how they saw the school during the time on which I am focusing, and how they see the school now.

Barnabas – Student

Barnabas is in his early twenties attending a major university. He stopped going to college after his freshman year when his son was born and returned after working for several years to earn money to go back to school. He is a single father with full custody of his child. Darius arranged this interview and I was tentative about it. I never really felt Barnabas and I connected; we did not keep in touch after he graduated and he was a tough student to motivate. Barnabas works several jobs to support his small family and had limited time to spend with me. In the time we had, he answered each question thoroughly and from the heart, he also shared his feelings about my role as one of his teachers. He told me,

I think you [were] the rock and [a] solid figure. Once we got to smell. . . ourselves, you [were] reality. . . how weird is it [we ran] into the rock? [We had to] understand the fear of authority. . . we knew it was serious (Interview, March 11, 2016).

Barnabas' deep thought and profound answers helped me refine my interview process and also helped me start to frame some thoughts about the success of Eastend School.

Bashemath - Student

Bashemath is a fifth year architecture student. She was in the second group of students I taught. She is the daughter of a single mother who later returned to school and is now an educator. We had a lot of fun during the interview and she reminded me that I used to always pick on her for forgetting her glasses. She was working on a major project and I was grateful for the time she allowed me. Bashemath is an introverted young lady, yet she is also very poised and self-assured. She provided a unique perspective when I asked her how Eastend prepared her for college. She shared a recent experience she had with her God sister,

[She] was getting prepared for college, I was asking if she got registered for everything and she said no. I said, why not? She said she didn't know how. And this was someone who went to HHS and she knew nothing about college applications, and I was thinking dang if I didn't go there, maybe I wouldn't know either (Interview, March 31, 2016).

Bashemath is the only former student who mentioned it. She was very engaged but it was obvious she had a lot of work to do, so I tried to keep the interview to less than one hour. We parted when my next participant met me.

Benjamin - Student

Benjamin was also in the second group of students I taught and is a forestry major at a mid-Atlantic land grant university. I travelled to his school to meet him and we had a very interesting discussion. In some cases, his answers were terse and I accepted that and moved on. Having known him for some time, I know his answers were complete to the best of his ability, but questions about negative things (e.g. “Which teacher was the least challenging?”) were not going to get a detailed answer because he is a positive person. Benjamin is of West Indian descent and had a different perspective of the school. His perspective as someone who did not fit into the crowd was interesting. When I asked him about that he said, “you were one of the teachers that helped me get out of my shell. Me being the rocker that liked Anime that was so different apart from everyone. You helped me be comfortable being into that and expressing it” (Interview, March 31, 2016). Benjamin had a lab he had to attend so our interview was shorter than most, but his perspective helped me capture some very interesting ideas.

Berea - Student

Berea was in the second class I taught at Eastend School and was always a very engaged and interested student. She graduated from college in May and is planning to pursue

her Master's Degree in the autumn term. My conversation with her was emotionally moving and we spoke far longer than I had planned on speaking. I have always felt my strength was in teaching male students. Berea reminded me of the impact I had on her and her friends. She told me that by encouraging students to share their thoughts and opinions I became the teacher that students could "talk to about things we couldn't talk about [with] other people" (Interview, March 14, 2016). She proceeded to tell me about several life lessons I taught her that she still carried with her regarding purity and faithfulness. The conversation also reminded me of several other incidents that I had forgotten. Berea was always an inquisitive student who not only wanted to express her opinions, but also wanted to know what others thought. During the interview she asked me several questions regarding the school and how it was performing now as well as questions about investing and other subjects I taught in school.

Berechiah – Student

Berechiah was in the second class I taught at Eastend. He works in retail while attending night school. He attended college full-time for one year and did not feel he was ready to pick a major so he withdrew from school. During the interview he was engaged and upbeat. We did a lot of catching up on life events and he asked me about teachers he missed. He also spent some time contacting other potential participants for me. The discussion about Eastend centered on the life skills he felt he gained while attending the school. When he was asked about his favorite teachers he immediately brought up an educator who "taught us to play chess, I can still play to this day. He took us on a chess trip [and] widen[ed] our horizons. Black kids don't play chess" (Interview, March 14, 2016). We discussed my time at the school when I worked as a substitute, I found it interesting that he remembered me as "the gym teacher" (Interview, March 14, 2016), a substitute job I had forgotten about and only had for a week. Berechiah was more interested in

talking with me than answering questions at times so a lot of our interview was spent talking about other subjects but in all it was a good interview.

Boaz – Student

Meeting with Boaz was another affirming interview. Boaz was in the second class I taught and he graduated from a major university with a double major. In his junior year of high school his mother was incarcerated, leaving him and his two older sisters to live on their own. The staff at Eastend School helped find the three of them a low-cost housing solution after he told his teachers what was going on. My earliest memory of Boaz was in sixth grade when I asked him why he worked so hard and he replied, “I hear gun shots every night, and I will not live in that kind of place when I’m grown up” (Interview, March 15, 2016). He was a driven student and I vividly recall him asking his neighbors in the classroom to keep it down. When I mentioned it in the interview he said, “I still do to this day! I’m trying to focus” (Interview, March 15, 2016)! Boaz was very open, willing to share his feelings about the program and he gives a lot of credit to his male teachers. He has some strong opinions about what does not work as well. Boaz stressed the importance of teachers who had emotionally invested themselves in their students when he said, there is “this white female that doesn’t know about an inner-city neighborhood but expects us to come to her classroom and take what she’s doing and relate to her when all we’re taught is to resist people that look like her” (Interview, March 15, 2016). Conversely when speaking about the teachers whom he did respect and relate to (three who are White) he said, “I learned I didn’t really need my family to be there. I had the all-star teachers” (Interview, March 15, 2016). Reconnecting with Boaz was not only affirming, but his focus helped me realize how important this work is.

Carshena - Student

Carshena is a funny and very positive student from the third class (fifth year) I taught. She is majoring in Animal Science at a land grant college. We had a very long exchange. She had very strong opinions about how the school helped her succeed. When I asked her what she missed in the school she replied, “I miss a lot. Walking to a room with your favorite teacher when they don't have a class” (Interview, March 26, 2016). She went on to tell me that I was “really funny and easy to talk to. Easy to open up and I guess be ourselves. We didn't have to be afraid” (Interview, March 26, 2016). I found that interesting after hearing former students tell me that I used tough love in the classroom. Carshena and I spoke a lot about the struggles of transitioning from high school to college and what it was like going from an inner-city school to college. She said, “I don't know any life outside of [Eastend]. College isn't like that. You go there, and the prof doesn't know your name. That didn't really prepare me. . . we were really spoon-fed at [Eastend]” (Interview, March 26, 2016). Carshena and I recounted a few funny stories and laughed, discussed the tragedies that touched us at the school and had a very good time during the interview. We have since kept in touch and speak to each other when we are able to.

Clement - Student

Clement was in the third class I taught at Eastend School (in my fifth year with the school). He is a White Hispanic young man who works in the retail industry. He was not interested in going to college though his grades would have allowed him to do so. He enjoyed laughing and discussing issues when I taught him and he still likes to talk about history and life. Our conversation was very enjoyable, we met at 3:30 PM and parted at about 7:30 PM. What was interesting during this interview was that while Clement was a strong history student, what

he remembered were the life lessons I taught. During our discussion he told me, “You didn’t just teach us stuff in school. You taught us about life. That’s the important thing. Teachers are supposed to teach you about adult life” (Interview, March 16, 2016). Clement focused a lot on what he thought were important skills teachers should have

Coniah - Student

Coniah and I met at the local library. He is normally very quiet and does not say more than he has to in any situation. Interestingly he reached out to me and asked to be interviewed. We spoke for about 90 minutes and had an in-depth conversation concerning his time in college and at Eastend School. Academically Coniah was an average student, but he was always a gentleman. He is still well mannered and soft spoken. Many times he was thoughtful and reflective, not answering a question until he pondered for a few moments. As an athlete, he was unhappy that Eastend School did not have sports teams, and he expressed his feelings when I asked him about his happiest memories. Eastend School did have a basketball team that participated in a church league, Coniah mentioned that the team winning the league championship was a great memory because “it was all our students against other students from the other high schools and we won” (Interview, March 15, 2016). On another topic he mentioned that I was one of his favorite teachers because I “saw the potential and w[as] trying to get it out of [students]” (Interview, March 15, 2016). We spoke in the parking lot after the interview for another 20 to 30 minutes and agreed to stay in touch.

Damara - Student

Damara was the first female student I interviewed and is attending a major university on a full scholarship. She is a very positive person and wanted to make sure I got the information I needed for my research. We spoke about her school experience and discussed bullying for a

while. As an educator I was always concerned about students who were being bullied, Damara does not fit into mainstream culture and would be a target for bullying in a mainstream school. Unfortunately, Damara did experience some bullying in her early years at the school. The discussion about her troubles with bullies allowed her to open up on other topics. When I asked her about who demanded the most from her in school she reminded me that “you were really cool and eye opening. Different from what we were used to as far as using technology and matching what grade we were in to the number of sentences” (Interview, March 11, 2016). I had forgotten that when I taught middle school students I had a classroom policy that the number of sentences in a paragraph should match the grade a student was in. It was affirming to hear that I taught students how to use technology to capture information. Unfortunately, a lot of Damara’s interview was not recorded due to a series of technical glitches, so the last thirty minutes was summarized in my notes.

Darda - Student

Darda is a student from the last class I taught and has struggled in college. She is not academically struggling, but is finding it challenging to balance work with life. She was the same type of student in high school and we discussed her challenges for a while before I started interviewing her. During the interview we laughed about several incidents that were brought up in conversation. Darda was a member of a club I sponsored for students who were interested in Rock music. This led to discussion about what it was like to be different in an inner-city school and why Eastend School was important in her life. We also discussed how music allowed her to have friends in several of the classes ahead of her. She was forthcoming and honest about her love of the school and the way she felt supported when she struggled. When asked what it was about the teaching staff that she liked she replied that,

[The teachers] actually show[ed] a dedication to . . . students. Kids pick up on whether you're there to help them or a paycheck. They'll treat you based off what you're feeling. That entails getting to know your students and how they need to learn, you have a curriculum and I think you have to tailor that to the students and the way they need to learn it (Interview, March 14, 2016).

We spent considerable time discussing the interview questions; later we discussed music and other mutual interests. It was a very pleasant exchange with an interesting, well-spoken former student.

Darius – Student

Darius was in the last class I taught before leaving to become a teacher coach. He grew up in a close and loving family. His father is a big part of his life and was an active parent in the school. Darius was a quiet and studious learner whose beliefs were non-conventional in his own community and in the community at large. He came to the interview wanting to discuss some of his disappointments in the program, as well as what he saw as the positive aspects. In our discussion about Darius's time in the school I asked why he was such a devoted student, he said "I just wanted to get to college and succeed. That's what my mom told me to do. Do better than what she did. She went to [a local community college] while we were still in middle school. Even after that, she wanted us to do better than her" (Interview, March 11, 2016). Darius enjoyed the interview and recruited several participants for me including his older brother. He surprised me by telling me he scheduled my next interview and I had 30 minutes to get there.

Dathan – Student

Dathan was a classmate of Darius and also received a full scholarship to a major university. He was orphaned just prior to attending my class and could be a challenging student.

Dathan grew up a few blocks from Eastend School. He is also very intelligent and graduated near the top of his class in high school. Dathan was a student who kept teachers on their toes asking insightful and probing questions and was quick to have an answer if you challenged his assertions. He was mentioned in the interviews I conducted with other staff members. He and I have maintained contact since I left the classroom. When he started college, he asked that I take him to school on his first day and also asked me to attend parents weekend later that autumn. The closeness of our relationship made him an ideal candidate to interview first. He is not comfortable talking about himself and is much more at home discussing philosophy or faith. It took a while to get him to interact until I asked him what his favorite memory of the school was, he replied, “the scolding we had.” When I asked what made the scolding memorable he replied, “because I know at the time I needed it. So it was like if you didn’t do it, I don’t know who else would have done it and it wasn’t a good memory at the time but if I think back on it, [it was]” (Interview, March 10, 2016). His recollection of me demanding his best allowed him to open up and tell me about his experiences as an Eastend student.

Dinah - Student

Dinah is a very strong young lady who is unafraid to share her opinion. She is at a private university in the mid-Atlantic region. The only child of a single mother, Dinah has been focused on her goal to work in the medical profession since middle school. Very early in the interview she told me, “you weren't easy on us, you made us do it and see our potential” (Interview, March 26, 2016). We went on to talk about teachers that she did not feel challenged her. She said, “you [have] to be really passionate. You have. . . kids, coming from all types of situations. If you're not passionate about it, you're not going to invest the time. None of them invested the time” (Interview, March 26, 2016). Dinah was my last student interview and we

spent a lot of time discussing the challenges of teaching in the inner city. The word passion is one she used a lot. She also reminded me that she liked to challenge teachers to see if they really cared and told me about an interaction she had with her favorite English teacher, “she just called me out on my [stuff]. . . she saw when I was being lazy and was like, ‘no, you're not going to be like that.’” (Interview, March 26, 2016).

Elishba - Student

Elishba is a student I never taught, though I knew her from clubs and other activities in the school. She was raised by her grandmother who made her move out of the home when she turned 18 during her senior year of high school. She related that her grandmother was very strict and did not allow her to go to the movies or the local skating rink. Elishba is a very positive individual with a ready smile. I asked her how she stayed so happy and she stated, “I try to look at the bright side, because [it’s] always there” (Interview, March 31, 2016). She shared some of the changes she saw happening, but was not critical of them. While we had a good interview, she is the only student I did not teach that I interviewed. I found that a lack of a personal relationship led to short professional answers. She did mention the importance of the social education Eastend School provided her, “etiquette, how to carry myself, what to do and what not to do. No one at home was telling me that. I went to school to learn all of that. I just sat back and observed what not to do and what to do and carry myself” (Interview, March 31, 2016). Elishba had to go to class and the interview ended, she gave me a unique perspective of the school from someone I did not teach.

Mr. Enoch – Teacher

Mr. Enoch and I had a very intimate and long interview involving a lot of soul searching and self-reflection. He is a longtime second-career teacher with well over 20 years of experience

in the classroom. He is from the same neighborhood as the students at Eastend School. We spent about three hours together, about two and a half were recorded. Mr. Enoch and I quickly fell into our old collegial and friendly ways. He has left Eastend School and is teaching students who are on long-term school suspension. During the interview he shared his belief that his job was to empower students. He said, “the kids began to believe, ‘I can do this, I can achieve, I can go to college’” (Interview, March 12, 2016). Mr. Enoch and I shared a lot of thoughts on what worked and why it worked. In the end he believed that the core was “a founder who not only had a vision, but believed that the vision had to grow every year and become more comprehensive” (Interview, March 12, 2016).

Mr. Jeriah – Teacher

Mr. Jeriah was my early mentor and a friend from my first days as a substitute. He spent a lot of time teaching me about the realities of inner-city teaching and when I asked him about the suggested tomes regarding teaching at-risk students; he rejected most of them. His feeling being that the situation at Eastend was so unique that you had to learn on the fly. The interview was a wonderful experience; he was obviously happy to see me. We had not spoken in over a year and took some time catching up. Once the interview started it was clear that he was working hard to ensure I was successful. When I mentioned some successful tactic I used in my classroom, he reinforced the idea that I had indeed been successful with it.

I think it should be noted that Mr. Jeriah and I are both very emotional about the investments we made in students. Several times during the interview we were both wiping tears from our eyes. Mr. Jeriah is not boastful, when he spoke about his students, he was like a proud father, excited that his children had exceeded his expectations. When I asked about his

relationship with students he told me, “students don’t remember what you taught them, they remember how you made them feel” (Interview, March 7, 2016).

Mr. Job – Administrator

Mr. Job was my last interview and it was an important one. He is currently working for a school-consulting firm. He was a second-career teacher and a former administrator at Eastend School. He is from a major metropolitan city and is a military combat veteran. He was the man who hired me and took a risk on me during my second year, moving me to a grade level with an SOL test. When I asked him why he moved me he said, “I knew that you were hungry and out to prove some things. Someone who makes connections with kids in a classroom environment, they're doing things” (Interview, April 5, 2016). Our interview was initially scheduled for 45 minutes and we spoke for almost two hours.

Mrs. Mishal – Parent

Mrs. Mishal is the parent of one of the student participants. I have known her for several years and she was representative of many of the parents I worked with as a classroom teacher. She and her husband live in an apartment near the school and were always easy to reach via telephone. She has had two children attend Eastend and has been involved in the program for over 14 years. Mrs. Mishal is a firm believer in the program and when I asked her why she felt her children needed it she said, “I feel like [Eastend School] targets the population that really needs it. Lower income, at-risk. Sometimes I'd feel almost kind of guilty. I knew I had strongly academic kids. I knew I didn't have the money” (Interview, March 14, 2016). She has encouraged her children to take advantage of all the programs offered at the school and was a welcome visitor to my classroom when I taught at the school. Mrs. Mishal was certain that the

school made a difference because “teachers care a lot and want to see [their students] succeed” (Interview, March 14, 2016). We spoke for approximately two hours.

Ms. Myra – Parent

Ms. Myra is the parent of three students who attended Eastend School. Her oldest son died during his junior year at the school. Her children were not model students, but she was an involved and concerned parent. She lives in public housing in the heart of the city. It was a very difficult interview and I wondered if I reminded her of the relationship her son and I had; I was one of his mentors. We spoke more about old times after the interview than we did during the interview. She believed that Eastend teachers were different and said, “It was not an easy job. If you were going to be at [Eastend], you had to be a concerned, caring teacher. . . the average bear can[’t] handle that” (Interview, March 16, 2016).

Ms. Ruth - Parent

Ms. Ruth sent her two children to Eastend School. She came and introduced herself to me the first week I was in the classroom. What made her different from many parents is she never assumed that her children were telling her the whole story. She was always willing to come by and help out in the classroom and she was supportive of teachers. When we met at the local library for the interview I was greeted with a warm smile and an embrace. We chatted for a while and when the interview started she was quick to tell me why she loved the school. I asked her for her best memory and she replied, “teachers, yes, they were awesome. The teachers really cared about the kids. It wasn't about the paychecks. They wanted the kids to succeed. They wanted them to have a better life” (Interview, March 28, 2016). Her positive attitude towards the school and her support of teachers was woven through the entire interview. I asked her about several teachers and she was quick to add, “you didn't sugar coat anything. I loved that about

you. I could communicate with you. . .that's what I loved about you” (Interview, March 28, 2016). Ms. Ruth and I spoke as long as we were able to until she had to leave for work. At the end of the interview we parted the same way we met, with a warm embrace and a big smile.

Mr. Samuel – Administrator

Mr. Samuel was a huge influence on my teaching career and me. He is a White male with over 30 years in education, the Dean at a regional college, and a well-respected administrator. This interview involved laughter, a lot of deep discussion, and a few tears. He left Eastend wondering if he had impacted anyone. After the interview he thanked me. He told me, “somehow I lost myself [and] the true passion and love I had for the students and faculty. I actually felt I left as a failure” (Interview, April 1, 2016). Mr. Samuel was an innovator, encouraging, down-to-earth, and a risk taker. He believed in his teachers and encouraged each of us to make teaching our vocation. Talking with him, hearing how positive he was reminded me why he was so successful. He made me as a professional want to be the best, to have my students perform above and beyond. He was a leader in every way.

Mrs. Sarah – Teacher

Mrs. Sarah was my mentee her first year of teaching. This was an interesting exchange. She now holds the department chair I formerly occupied and is an experienced inner-city teacher. She is a White female from a nearby community. It was interesting to hear how her philosophies had evolved from where she started and how she took the best of her influences and made them her own. I was able to observe her classroom style for a short period of time and it seems to be more relaxed than mine was. She is witty and funny and likes to laugh. She has a refreshing approach to education and shared a little of what she thought it took to succeed in an inner-city

school. She believed students had to want to succeed, she said, “If you didn't work hard for it, it's not worth having” (Interview, March 25, 2016).

Mrs. Sophia – Teacher

Mrs. Sophia and I started at Eastend School together. She is a White female and is an outstanding teacher, her students are typically number one in the city even though the overall performance of the school has declined. She is a divorced mother of two who started teaching students in jails and has been with the school for over 12 years. She shared that she felt it was her duty to provide “education in areas that [students] weren't getting at home” (Interview, March 24, 2016). This attitude explains her approach in the classroom. She shared that she felt the trial by fire all new teachers experience at Eastend School is “a trust thing. Can we drive them off and prove that's another one gone or are they going to show back up and be part of our family” (Interview, March 24, 2016)? Our interview was shorter than I wanted it to be because Mrs. Sophia had another class to teach, but at the end I realized how much I missed my teammates and how much they were like family.

Michael Koeniger – Researcher

I initially recounted my time as a teacher and teacher coach during a transcontinental train trip. I revisited my memories from time to time, updating them, and adding information and memories to them. They were then checked for accuracy against the interview data. I am a White male in my early 50s. I taught at Eastend School from 2003 through 2013.

Results

After the interviews were completed and transcribed, I read through them multiple times and looked for phrases, words, ideas, and thoughts that appeared in the interviews. Using the

data, I created from this first pass a set of general codes to use on my subsequent passes. I also removed identifying information from the interview transcripts. I then imported the transcripts and codes into Dedoose™, an online qualitative data analysis program. I went through the transcripts multiple times, codes were modified and changed, some were merged and others were split into different codes. The general codes led to refinement and the emergence of specific codes as I progressed through the coding process. I then created a codebook. After multiple passes through the transcripts I began to see emerging themes. I identified three themes in the data with supporting subthemes. The themes I identified provided answers to the research questions. I proceeded to attempt to disprove my themes using the data collected. Finding I was unable to do so, I created a summary of the collected data and created the narrative (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013).

Table 2

Codes

Code	Instances	Description
Family	37	Family was any reference to another member of the school community as a brother, sister, sibling or the use of the word family itself.
Safe environment	34	The perception of the school or classroom as a safe space, an environment where students felt they could be open and honest, and where basic needs were offered and accepted
Personal interactions	100	Participants discussed the approachability of staff members and the openness staff members had to discussing personal matters with students. Students relying on staff members as a sounding board, for advice and guidance.
Moral education	13	Staff members teaching morality normally taught in a religious setting and/or by parents
Social education	61	Staff members teaching the social skills that are normally taught to children by their

		parents.
Surrogate parent	49	The perception that a teacher fulfilled the role of a parent in a student's life either in a specific situation or on a regular basis
Focus on outcomes	22	The perception that staff members were focused on and/or desired student success.
No excuses	58	The use of tough love as a way of expressing the concept that students were required to participate in a classroom where there are no excuses for failures to perform academically, behaviorally, socially and morally.
Student to teacher	9	The use of tough love by students in their interactions with teachers.
Classroom skills	40	Real classroom management and academic skills taught to students as expressed by all participants in regards to school staff.
Non-conventional teaching	25	The use of non-conventional methods to reach students in the classroom.
Behavior	20	The use of no nonsense classroom management, classroom control, and the setting of high behavior expectations by staff members. Staff members discussing their expectations of the behavior of students.
Personal bearing and morality	31	Staff members seen as or who felt they were an example of social and moral values.
Engaged Teaching	23	Teachers whom were perceived as being academically prepared and as subject matter experts by participants thereby providing an academic role model for students.

Theme One: Relationships

The first identified theme provides answers to part of the overarching question of the study; what are the core values that provide the foundation of the culture, and how do students, teachers, administrators and parents perceive their role and each other in the culture of the school? It also addresses the subquestions; what expectations do participants have for each role, how do relationships impact student learning, what does Eastend do to create the culture of success at the school, and how does the S.A.M.E. model impact academic performance and contribute to school culture? The theme of relationships was defined by the specific codes;

family, safe environment, personal interactions, moral education, social education, surrogate parents. The subthemes discussed are; family, safe environment, personal interactions, and parental role. These subthemes help define the roles each participant had at Eastend School and what the expectations were by the members of the school community.

In my own recollections of Eastend School I wrote, “I believe I gave students the full measure of my heart and was successful because they believed I loved them and that I was truly disappointed when they failed to meet my expectations” (Researcher recollections, autoethnographic field notes, 2016). Multiple participants confirmed these thoughts. Barabbas stated,

Getting to know you, you’ve been a big part of my life. A lot of the things you’ve said have stuck in my head to this day. Like I said in the letter I wrote, you were like a second father to me (Interview, March 17, 2016).

During the same interview Baruch went on to add that when I was not happy with a student’s academic performance or behavior, “it felt like [you were] a parent disappointed in your child” (Interview, March 17, 2016). While relationships with students were the main focus, they were not the only important relationships for staff members at Eastend School. Mr. Job, a staff member and my former principal recounted a story where he and a friend were “driving from [one school building] to [another] and there are [people saying], ‘Hey Mr. [Job]!’ I [turned to my friend and] said, ‘I’m really not that popular, I’m just doing my job.’ It’s important to have that relationship when you’re at a successful school” (Interview, April 5, 2016). In my field notes I said, “my entire teaching career was built on relationships, with students, other teachers, administrators, parents, and families of my students” (Researcher recollections, autoethnographic field notes, 2016). Mr. Job, when speaking about my career at Eastend School stated, “you made

the relationships with the parents. They knew. . . who you were and how you behaved. If [a student] came home and said, ‘Mr. Koeniger told me this,’ they’d say, ‘well you better do it!’” (Interview, April 5, 2016). Mrs. Mishal, the parent of a former student said, “you put your heart out there and d[id] things, you didn't have to do that” (Interview, March 14, 2016). The system of relationships between students, parents, and staff members is a system with several integral parts: the sense of family shared by the school community, the environment of the school, the personal interactions that happened on a regular basis, and the paternal roles that staff members filled were all integral in the lives of the students attending Eastend School.

Family

A subtheme that quickly became apparent during interviews was the feeling students, staff and parents had of the school community as family. Former students when talking about the school would mention the number of years they spent in the classroom with the same students, seeing the same staff members year after year. With small class sizes it is possible for every student and staff member in the school to know each other. In an early interview Boaz said that attending Eastend School was like “going to school with my family” (Interview, March 15, 2016). Barnabas stated that going to Eastend was like attending with your “brothers and you [have] different parents” (Interview, March 11, 2016). Berea, another student in Boaz’s class said, “I have to say the family environment. It really felt like a family” (Interview, March 14, 2016). Mrs. Sarah, a teacher in the school said, “So you have to make family. [You] live with these people every day. So we do have a strong family sense” (Interview, March 25, 2016).

The importance of the family environment and how it impacts relationships within the building was discussed. Parents enjoyed the family atmosphere and it encouraged them to come into the school building. Mrs. Mishal said, “I always lived across from school. [I enjoyed]

going in, seeing the teachers, getting hugs, feeling like family, [and it feeling] like home”

(Interview, March 14, 2016). Another parent Ms. Ruth said, “that was the thing. . . I loved the atmosphere so much. It was a big family atmosphere” (Interview, March 28, 2016). Students also appreciated the family environment when things were not going well; Bashemath recounted an incident that happened to her,

I remember I was taking a class with [a male teacher]. One day I wasn't having a good day. . . and I guess he was having a bad day too. We got in an argument and. . . he cried and I cried and he hugged me and it was just too much! . . . [It] wasn't a student-teacher relationship because it was like family (Interview, March 31, 2016).

Mrs. Sophia, a very successful teacher considers her acceptance into the school family her “greatest accomplishment professionally. . . as silly as that sounds. . . they don't see me as a white female teacher. . . they see me as they see themselves. . . being accepted by the student community made it easier” (Interview, March 24, 2016). When discussing the importance of family within the school and my relationships with students as a teacher, Clement said, “you broke a boundary that teachers don't usually break. . . you were going to know us for 30 years, that's why we were able to learn so easily from you” (Interview, March 16, 2016).

My own experiences reflect the recollections of the participants. The school day at Eastend School was eight and a half hours, add in morning preparations and end of day work and most teachers spend nine or more hours a day in the school. Saturday school was scheduled for 28 weeks of the year. School attendance was 36 weeks a year and there were five weeks of intersession when teachers worked with students in a more casual atmosphere, oftentimes on enrichment activities that expanded the curriculum. Eastend School is a year-round job and the staff and students are very close. As I said elsewhere, students are in the school building when

teachers are there, whether school is in session or not. Spending longer days and a much longer school year with students and other staff members contributes to the family environment. The administrators of Eastend School also encouraged extracurricular activities out of the classroom. My wife and I took students to hockey games, had dinner with them, took them on shopping trips, and even invited some of them into our home. When I interviewed all participants I realized how much I missed them and what an important part of my life they were. The sense of family is more pronounced than I realized when I started this research.

Safe environment

The concept of school being a safe environment in the inner city is another subtheme that came up in discussions with participants. Students felt that they could share their problems and dilemmas with staff members. Boaz shared his experiences when his grandmother died after being told to call his sister, “I called and she’d had a stroke and I went to your class and broke down” (Interview, March 16, 2016). Boaz is a tough and driven student, knowing that he could express his sadness in school is important. Berea said it directly; Eastend School “was like a safe space. [There is] a lot of support” (Interview, March 14, 2016). Damara also spoke directly about it, “I miss the teachers. . . going to the library as a safe haven” (Interview, March 11, 2016). Mr. Job who is now a consultant for at-risk schools said, the students “felt they had a support system, . . . a family that cared about them. I d[on’t] see that in many other schools” (Interview, April 5, 2016). Ms. Ruth, a parent shared how a staff member ensured her children felt safe,

My kids. . . were the outcasts. He took them under his wings and made a promise to me that he'd stick with [Eastend] till my kids graduated. . . That touched [my daughter]. . .

he worked with her for six years and she ended up being all state and made the Dean's list (Interview, March 28, 2016).

There was a transition year when Eastend School students shared space with another school in the city. Adriel remembers that she felt the school provided, [It was] a stable environment. The other public schools don't have that. The one year we were at [that school] was an eye-opener. We were able to see the difference between our schools and others. The teachers cared [and we had] smaller class sizes (Interview, March 15, 2016).

Another way the school provided students a safe haven was by supplying them with basic necessities. Students were provided food, clothing, and sometimes shelter by the school. Berechiah discussed staff members taking him shopping for clothing and receiving groceries before breaks in the school year. Bashemath said, “[Teachers would] take you on the weekend to get you a coat” (Interview, March 31, 2016). Mr. Jeriah recounts a time when the school had to help provide shelter for a student,

[Boaz], I taught all of his sisters. I know his family. The mom has always wanted what was best for them, but always doing something to get herself into trouble. [Boaz] was another one that came to school [when it was not in session]. . . [He] was crying because his mom had been arrested and the police had broken the door down. They couldn't tell anyone because now there was no supervision, and the older sister had just left for [college]. [Boaz] was worried about foster care and what was [he] going to do. . . We called around trying to get him put somewhere nearby but everyone said he's too young. So we had to call the [founder of the school]. Within five minutes he had this kid an apartment and said, “Send me the bill for their rent every month. Let them pay \$50 so

that they're paying something and I'll pay the rest." So for the rest of his senior year and for two years after that, he lived right across the street [from the school]. And every time I saw him, he'd say that when his mom got out of jail she wants to thank you (Interview, March 7, 2016).

I discussed this incident with Boaz and he added these thoughts,

Going to senior year was difficult, my mother was incarcerated, and me and my sister on our own apartment across the street from school. . . That was hard for me. It was just, I had so much pride at the time, I was the man in my family (Interview, March 15, 2016).

The school staff universally embraced the idea that students had to have their basic needs met before they could learn. My family provided Christmas presents and food for Thanksgiving and Christmas many times over the years. Every teacher I interviewed indicated they did the same. The sensitive nature of this subject kept me from discussing it with parents and students.

The idea of the school as a safe space was one intentionally created by the administration and staff at the school. At the beginning of each school year the staff of the school boarded buses and they were taken to the neighborhoods where the students lived. Statistics for each neighborhood were discussed. This is not an attempt to garner pity for students; it is a way of impressing how important it is that the classroom and the halls of the school reflect a culture of achievement and business. Staff members wear business attire; male staff members were required to wear a tie most of the year and many wear sport coats or suits. My classroom was always open to students before school and during my planning period. This allowed many of them to speak with me outside of class where I could lend a sympathetic ear or give them advice if they asked for it.

Personal interactions

The interactions between the staff and students are integral to the success of Eastend and that is heard in the voices of the participants. Former administrator, Mr. Samuel saw his role “to protect the faculty, they were very important [in] the students’ success. . . if I didn’t have a happy faculty or one that didn’t believe in our mission, it’d be the kids that suffered” (Interview, April 1, 2016). His leadership impacted the staff and students. In telling the story of the founding of a school club, I began by explaining, “the small size of the school allowed students to know all of the teachers. . . a group of eighth and ninth grade students approached me. . . and asked to speak with me. I invited them in and they sat around my desk” (Researcher recollections, autoethnographic field notes, 2016). The ability for the members of the Eastend School community to interact personally was mentioned 100 times by the participants. “You understood me. You put yourself in my shoes,” was the memory Boaz had (Interview, March 15, 2016). Adriel recalls, “looking from the outside, a lot of people would probably say, ‘how do all these black kids get along with someone that looks different from them?’ . . . It is not as easy for someone that looks different. You were the one teacher that [I] could relate to” (Interview, March 15, 2016). When discussing my efforts to know my students, Carshena said, “You were really funny and easy to talk to. [It was] easy to open up and. . . be ourselves. We didn’t have to be afraid” (March 26, 2016). Ms. Myra as a parent saw that the staff were “good guy[s] that looked out for [her son] . . . Unless I was at work, I’d be there. [The staff] was so helpful, especially with boys. I felt like I was a student” (March 16, 2016). The approachability of the staff was shared by Dathan who said, “the teachers I named, they always treated me not like I was beneath them, but [like] I was right on their level” (March 10, 2016). Coniah, an unlikely source of compliments said, “you gave us respect. . . we knew we could come to you. It’s not

hard to respect somebody when you know that [when] we [come] to you for a problem it w[ill] be alright” (Interview, March 15, 2016). Aednah succinctly communicated the value of the personal interactions when she said, “so it was kind of like, we have trust with [the staff]” (Interview, March 16, 2016).

Just as the school was a safe space, teachers had to be willing to allow their relationships to go beyond the normal teacher – student dynamic. Not every student saw me as a surrogate parent, but many knew I cared about them and that they could talk to me anytime they needed to. If a student could not relate to me personally, there was another staff member they could speak with. The ability to have personal interactions with students allowed me to tailor my teaching to the needs of the students and to the culture of the school.

Paternal role: Surrogate parent

Some students and members brought up the importance of filling in for missing parents in students’ lives. Mr. Enoch, a long-time career teacher who spent over 12 years at Eastend School felt that the importance of the four male department chairs in the school could not be overstated. He and I often combined classes to discuss issues of the day. We would take opposing views in hopes that students would see that it was okay to debate and disagree. But more importantly, we provided an example of strong male role models that students could see as inspiration. He remembers:

Between the four of us, we filled gaps. We were who[m] they needed—uncles, fathers, big brothers. . . they got all the roles that men play in children’s lives. . . especially the boys, the girls loved it too, some of them didn't know who their fathers were. . . When they got to us. . . they saw stable men who loved and cared and could have fun. [They saw the] respect that we had for one another, the collegiality. They knew we were

intelligent, and that it's okay to be intelligent. You can be cool and smart. . . They could say anything to us, ask a question, we'd go off on a tangent. . . We'd go into the room and start discussing things. . . sometimes they thought we were arguing, but we weren't. . .

We also taught them compromise. To see things were gray and you didn't have to believe in either or, it could be both (Interview, March 12, 2016).

Mr. Jeriah recalls that “Every Fathers’ Day [a female student] bought me a tie. Fantastic. . . I filled that place in her eyes. Her mom was fantastic” (March 7, 2016). I have my own memories but really felt it when Barabbas told me, “having you leave after 10th grade hurt. (Crying) I’m sorry” (Interview, March 17, 2016). I later wrote, “I have been struggling with my dissertation from day one. . . I have been avoiding research, because it is painful. Kids, even ones about to turn 25, do not understand. . . now I feel like a deadbeat dad” (Researcher recollections, autoethnographic field notes, 2016). While the pain of old memories does hurt, the positive comments of other former students were affirming. Adriel said, “I guess not having my father in my life, the teachers kind of filled that void” (Interview, March 15, 2016). Berechiah shared, “I felt like I could always count on my teachers more than my own dad” (Interview, March 14, 2016). “A lot of guys didn’t have a father. That’s why they had a connection to [the male teachers],” said Clement (Interview, March 16, 2016). Mrs. Sophia articulated that while it may not have been conscious, it was what the student body needed, “ideal relationship, I respect you, you respect me and I’ll be able to do what I need to and you’ll perform on your level. I’ll treat you the way I treat my kids. That’s the right type of relationship” (Interview, March 14, 2016).

Like Mr. Jeriah, I too received Father’s Day gifts and cards. Those cards and gifts are still cherished. There are many strong men in the inner-city community and the male staff was

not trying to supplant them, but a combination of factors at the school led to very close relationships between staff members and students and there were times when teachers filled the important role of a missing parent in a child's life. My experience shows that this role was not only important for the development of the student but also academically; a teacher who acted as a surrogate parent could be the correction a student needed or could have academic, moral, and social expectations that other teachers could not.

Paternal role: Moral education

The S.A.M.E. model used at Eastend School posits that to properly educate inner-city children, the whole child must be educated. Most middle and upper income families teach skills to their children that children of poverty do not receive in the home. It is the job of educators to fill that void (Spencer et al., 2004). When asked about teaching morality in the classroom, Mr. Jeriah said,

For a lot of the students, it's as close to church as they'll get to learn right from wrong. It seems like everyone should know [morality], but they have to be taught. We use all of those things that build character, and to have that part of the day to just focus on life lessons and not necessarily teach content. It makes it easier when you get to the content because now they have a reason to believe it (Interview, March 7, 2016).

Damara said about Mr. Jeriah, "it was about succeeding in life, passing in life. Especially being black, in today's world, how we're perceived. He tried to make sure we were better than how people thought (Interview, March 11, 2016). Ms. Myra said that from the parent's perspective, it was "mostly about being a better man. If not for you, they'd have killed each other" (Interview, March 16, 2016). Baruch shared that, "once we stepped off that school bus, you were life teachers" (Interview, March 17, 2016). Finally, I was stunned when Berea remembered that I

had shared Godly advice with her, “there was something you told me in the 9th grade that still sticks with me to this day. You said, ‘when you have sex with someone, your spirits connect. So you have to be very careful who[m] you do that with. . . my own father would have never told me that” (Interview, March 14, 2016).

Paternal role: Social education

Eastend School focuses on teaching students the social skills that their wealthier peers learn at home. When I asked parents whether they thought their children had learned social skills at the school, Ms. Ruth replied;

Quite a few skills. . . anything that you want out of life, they have to work for it. . . they were given fake money and they had to manage it. . . how to write checks. . . how to be tight wads. I love the fact that it's a family-oriented school. They learned to watch out for one another. [When] they both went off to college; they took other kids under their wings to look out for them. . . [those are the] things that [Eastend] gave them and I definitely appreciate it. (Interview, March 24, 2016).

Benjamin shared that “we had an image to uphold and how to conduct ourselves. I don't think people have that in other schools. . . It was easier to have a personal relationship with your teachers here than other places” (March 31, 2016). Dinah, who was a passionate student in school said, “conflict resolution paid off in the end” (Interview, March 16, 2016). There were also trips that were conducted outside of the school as Darda explains, “[a teacher] took us to an opera, we went to a few plays throughout. [Another teacher] took us to a ballet. . . Seeing the first Hunger Games and the Divergent movies. . . [We had] different opportunities for college tours” (Interview, March 14, 2016). Elishba recalls that she learned most of her social skills at Eastend School,

[The school taught me] etiquette, how to carry myself, what to do and what not to do. No one at home was telling me that. I went to school to learn all of that. I just sat back and observed what not to do and what to do and how to carry myself. If I saw someone do something and they got in trouble, I knew not to do that (Interview, March 31, 2016).

Darius summed it up by saying, “Mr. [Jeriah], even though he taught a math class, he was teaching you life” (Interview, March 11, 2016).

Theme Two: Expectations

The second identified theme provides answers to part of the overarching question of the study; what are the core values that provide the foundation of the culture at Eastend School, and how do students, teachers, administrators and parents perceive their role and each other in that culture? It also addresses the subquestions; what expectations do participants have for each role, and how do relationships impact student learning? The theme of expectations was defined by the specific codes: focus on outcomes, no excuses, student to teacher, classroom skills, non-conventional teaching, and behavior. The subthemes discussed are: tough love, academics, and behavior. These subthemes help define the roles each participant had at Eastend School and what the expectations were by the members of the school community.

Teachers who demand the best work that a student is able to provide, who are encouraging, and who create a suitable learning environment have better results in the classroom (Jackson et al., 2014). In my time at Eastend School my students scored higher on their SOL tests than any other school in the district and were often near the top in the state (Adequate Yearly Progress [AYP] Reports, 2011). As the subthemes in this section will show, a combination of tough love and high academic and behavior expectations contributed to my success and the success of the school. Participants also explained the same methods were used

in many other classrooms at the school. While I described my role at Eastend School as being a strict disciplinarian and as a demanding teacher, I did not realize that many students understood that I wanted their best because I was interested in their future success. Several students asked me during the interview why I was strict when I taught them, I explained that when I studied books on inner-city students, I read a litany of reasons explaining why the behavior expectations for Black students could not be the same as the behavior expectations for White students. I found the characterization appallingly racist, and felt that once I mastered classroom management I could disprove that notion. That idea drove me to be the demanding teacher I was. I was also very proud that on most days, when students were working you could hear a pin drop in my classroom.

Tough love

The subtheme of tough love emerged early when several students attributed it to my interactions with them during my time as their teacher. Tough love for the purpose of this discussion is defined by the modern understanding of Proverbs 27:17, “iron sharpens iron,” whereby members of the Eastend community challenge, question, and coach one another (Giese, 2016).

Early in my teaching career I experienced a form of tough love from the students at Eastend. In my field notes I glossed over this experience when I wrote “the students gave me a hard time like they did any new teacher” (Researcher recollections, autoethnographic field notes, 2016). It was not until I was interviewing Mr. Enoch that I realized how it impacted me. I asked Mr. Enoch who was an experienced teacher when he arrived at Eastend School about his first year of teaching there, he replied:

[It was] difficult for me. [Jeriah] and I laughed about it after. From. . . July to late September, I was looking at the truck-driving catalog. Maybe [my former school] would take me back. It was just tough. The kids weren't bad; they were just unruly, joked a lot. Gave me the toughest time I've had as a teacher. What was this about? I expected something totally different. The same kid that tore up in my class is very engaged in yours and [Jeriah's] class. "Where's that matchbox again?" What is this about (Interview, March 12, 2016)?

After he shared his experience I responded, "For me that didn't end until March. . . they knew I was a new teacher, they were going to make me quit. They'd done it" (Interview, March 12, 2016). Mr. Jeriah and I also discussed this phenomena, he shared that the school had recruited him. When he was convinced to teach there:

I decided, "well, maybe I'll give it a shot." I had gotten teacher of the year; how hard could this be? I went and thought, "What in the bleep have I done?" The kids wouldn't listen! I thought I had made the worst decision in my life. I had some [Enders] that summer for [math] class there. At open house, some of my students came and looked at my roster and told me that I was about to find out. . . But I got through it and contemplated and decided to come back and it got better. . . It's a hazing process you have to survive (Interview, March 7, 2016).

Mrs. Sarah, whose first year of full time teaching was at Eastend shared:

I thought I knew what I was getting myself into, because I've been in school, but not in this school. I've been in multiple schools, all different types and still it wasn't the same when I got here. It was a whole new ball game. I've never been in such intense situations. . . I remember people asking me do you have any good kids or tough kids? I

was like; “you know how you have a few tough kids every now and then? I have a few good kids” (Interview, March 25, 2016).

Every teacher interviewed shared this experience, as did I. When I would ask former students about it, most could not remember doing it. I did have two students address it. Berea explains it this way, “[Eastend] is like a family environment. We give you a hard time when you first get there. Got to break you in. Mr. [Samuel] said we gave him a hard time, too (Interview, March 14, 2016). The hazing process appears to be a form of initiation. Clement believes it was also a test to see how tough teachers are:

A lot of kids were, but there were teachers that would fight back. When you’re a teacher, you know you’re going to fight back. That’s the job; you’re going to have a lot of students like that. It’s not going to be one; it’s going to be multiple (Interview, March 16, 2016)

Another explanation and the one I find accurate in light of my personal experiences at the school are from former principal, Mr. Samuel:

Before you can capture a student's mind, you've got to capture their heart. That's what [Eastend] was about. You have to capture their hearts. They lack trust. They've been burned so many times by different people and family. If they couldn't trust you, why would they try to perform and be a good student academically (Interview, April 1, 2016)?

Mr. Jeriah confirms this idea; “you have to go through it while they haze you and test whether you’re for real. Once they find out you are real. . . I haven’t written a [discipline] referral in years (March 7, 2016). Finally, Mrs. Sophia explains it, “I have figured it out after 12 years that it's a trust thing. Can we drive them off and prove that's another one gone or are they going to show back up and be part of our family (Interview, March 24, 2016)?

Teachers who pass the test given by students in turn become very demanding, requiring performance academically and behaviorally. While I will address those two areas specifically, I would like to focus on the two teachers most often mentioned in participant interviews. The first, an English teacher who taught early high school students who will be called Mrs. Red and the other teacher who was tagged by many participants as a practitioner of tough love, me. Mr. Samuel mentioned both of us when he said:

You and [Mrs. Red], you made them be . . . accountable for their actions in a teachable way. I used to tell them they might not like what's going on right now but in the end you're going to look back and wish you had Mike Koeniger and [Mrs. Red] teaching them. Now, telling them that when they're going through it? But they would come back later and tell me I was right (Interview, April 1, 2016).

Coniah said this, “you saw the potential and were trying to get it out of us. You weren’t just going to be mean every day . . . you’d seen us do it before, but ‘I need to see you do it on a consistent basis’” (Interview, March 15, 2016). When asked about her most demanding teacher Darda spoke about Mrs. Red, “She really demanded from us what she knew we could do, even if we didn't want to do it, she knew what we could do” (Interview, March 14, 2016). Bashemath also spoke about Mrs. Red when she said:

She got under my skin because what she expected from us! How are we supposed to do all this? She was so particular and didn't play about research papers. She'd meet us at the door. She'd take it and sign us off. She prepared us for college. I wasn't worried about it in college because just the length got longer. As a creative writer, we didn't really focus on it. I think she was more about college style writing (Interview, March 31, 2016).

Barnabas spoke about how he felt students connected with me as a teacher,

We knew what the love was from home but not everyone would get ‘the Rock.’ Everyone kind of embraced it. You’d get this, but you [aren’t] going to get ‘the Rock.’ Like you going to take it or not? . . . It was a life lesson. . . [when] you run into ‘the Rock,’ so it’s not like everyone was aggressively scared but you have to understand the fear of authority. So if [it] seemed like it was funny, we knew it was serious (Interview, March 11, 2016).

Dathan a student who had no structure at home said,

With you, it was always tough love. I didn’t have that. Knowing I was at home and I d[id] something wrong and it was okay, but with you it was like [I] did something wrong and [I] need to fix it but [you] still love [me]. You need tough love and soft love but I didn’t have either. So someone was there to give me that, and with [you], you felt me with things outside of being black (Interview, March 10, 2016).

While students saw my love as being tough, they also knew it was because I (along with Mrs. Red and many other teachers) only wanted what was best for them. Darius said, “You kept it real. I never got in trouble for you to bring me to the side and do better. It was always like, you wanted us to succeed and I could feel that” (Interview, March 11, 2016). Damara agreed, “You used tough love to better us” (Interview, March 11, 2016).

Academics

Academics are the focus of any school and are the criteria by which schools are judged. Participants focused on relationships and expectations much more than other areas, yet academic expectations were brought up, usually in connection with another subtheme. Two administrators whose focus was outside of the regular realm of academics, led Eastend School during the period

this research focuses on, and the school was very successful. In my own field notes I address my non-conventional approach to teaching:

When I met with the principal I explained my concerns and told him my solution. I showed him some of the materials and also explained that I would need to use a laptop cart every day for the rest of the school year. I dubbed my idea “the paperless classroom” after a government initiative called the paperless office. I also explained that I was losing sleep over the possibility that this experiment would blow up in my face and our students would perform very poorly on the SOL in January. He stated, “I have been a principal for almost thirty years, if this goes poorly I will take the heat for it, don’t worry about it” (Researcher recollections, autoethnographic field notes, 2016).

I asked Mr. Samuel about this during our interview and he shared his thoughts:

You were willing to go outside the box. I thought that was cutting edge. I was always looking for someone among our faculty ranks to come up with different types of teaching. The model of public schools has not been successful for so long. There are so many different types of learning. And they'd done all that brain research. We had to do something. I didn't have the answer. I wasn't the expert teacher. When you came up with that, I was inspired. I didn't want to be surrounded by people that came in at eight and punched out at three. When you went with that paperless, you know what? Even if it wasn't successful with test scores—which we were—the kids were so engaged with it, they were on target! That was one of the best things I ever saw as a high school principal. Innovative, and taking a chance, we both took a chance and it played out. Even if it didn't, I'd have said, “We tried it” (Interview, April 1, 2016).

Later in the discussion Mr. Samuel addressed why he was willing to take chances and allow teachers to try nonconventional teaching methods.

As a coach, you wanted to bring the team along. I wanted them to have the feeling that they could try different things as an instructor without someone saying “You can't do that.” I wanted to protect them from the testing era. I felt strongly there was more to students than a test score. One of the things I wanted the teachers to know was they weren't just a test to me. To brag about the skill level that my teachers had. The word support is probably a weak word, but I wanted them to have every resource to be successful and to find the money and financial resources for that. That was one of the real blessings about that model. It's important to know that as a principal with the business side of the thing, we did have the ability to have state of the art technology. That was great to be able to find smart boards or laptops (Interview, April 1, 2016).

Mr. Job, the administrator prior to Mr. Samuel said this when we discussed the non-conventional move of changing teachers for a classroom in the middle of the year:

I don't remember why we made the move, but [a department chair's] response would be to say, that's not a good idea. And I'd say I'm willing to take a risk. Honestly, from the leadership on down, you had to take a risk (Interview, April 5, 2016).

The idea of risk taking and innovation at Eastend School was pervasive; Mrs. Sophia said this about her approach to education:

I keep it real. Every year I have to think about it for a second. I don't know. I switch up how I'm teaching so it doesn't become the same for me. I should be able to answer this, it's that whole “How much more do you want it than I want it?” I sat and watched the entire season of Coach and in season 3, I said, I need to become Coach and motivate from

that. I need to draw the plan and execute it. Clipboard and down on my knee. . . You have to be competitive. In this, you're very safe, but in the real world, you have to be competitive, you're fighting for everything you do. There's always someone fighting for your things and you have to be that much better. Last year. . . [I] had the highest scores in the eighth grade [citywide] (Interview, March 24, 2016).

While students were not aware that many of their teachers were nonconventional, some did speak to the results. Adriel commented, “it prepared us in ways to be a grade ahead [of] what our peers were. That helped a lot. Going into college, I had a math course. . . I passed that class with flying colors because of the skills I learned” (Interview, March 15, 2016). Clement noted, “you actually built confidence for a lot of kids. We knew we were going to pass. . . if [we] took your class, [we] only failed if [we] wanted to. That answer is going to pop in the back of my head” (Interview, March 16, 2016). Elishiba stated that Eastend School “made me a book smart person” (Interview, March 31, 2016). Benjamin recalled, the school “helped me accept myself. Push myself academically. [It] showed me what I'd be dealing with in AP classes what I'd be dealing with in college” (Interview, March 31, 2016).

Behavior

Interestingly, in spite of the tough love teachers experience their first year of teaching, behavior issues are a rare occurrence in the classroom. Teachers at Eastend School are encouraged to handle their own discipline and to work with parents to keep students in school. Mr. Samuel the school principal for most of my time at the school saw the role of teachers as a part of a discipline team with parents:

Once it got out of the classroom, it was turned over for the principal to handle that student. I felt strongly that a parent—they had to commit to the program for the kids to

stay in - [teachers] had the ability to get the parent and team up with them. That could be more powerful. . . when it gets to the office, the parent would become the adversary.

They'd have to defend their child and you were stuck. The key was to get the parent and the teacher on the same team. The parents saw the Administration as someone to be feared—they're going to get kicked out of the program, all negative thoughts—I tried to keep it from being that way, but for the parents and grandparents and guardians went to the old way. The principal was the heavy hand and I really felt strongly that if you got the parent on your side [you won] (Interview, April 1, 2016).

Ms. Ruth, when asked about working with me regarding her children said, “You didn't sugar coat anything. I loved that about you. I could communicate with you. When something came up, I knew you were going to give me straight forward what went on. That's what I loved about you” (Interview, March 24, 2016). Every adult at Eastend is seen as a part of the discipline team, Ms. Myra stated, “even the janitors cared. They'd tell me when the boys acted up” (Interview, March 16, 2016). Mrs. Sarah (a teacher) believes that the key to discipline is respect, “before you can get anyone to do anything, you have to respect them. . . If they don't feel respected, how are they going to respect you” (Interview, March 25, 2016)? In my interview with Mr. Jeriah we spoke about behavior and we each discussed how rarely we wrote discipline referrals. In the interview I said, “I only used referrals for things I had to write them for. No one believes me when I tell them [I never used referrals]. [Students] rise to your expectations.” Mr. Jeriah replied, “I'm a witness” (Interview, March 7, 2016). Aednah a student in the first class I taught said that I did not have behavior problems in my classroom “because you had patience, the teachers with patience were good” (Interview, March 16, 2016). When I did have to deal with discipline issues, Darius said, “you seemed disappointed, not mad, because you knew they could do better”

(Interview, March 11, 2016). Mr. Job an administrator in the school said, “I wanted [students] to know they had to follow the rules and we can't reward people for not doing what they're supposed to” (Interview, April 5, 2016). Clement a student I taught twice summed up why teachers dealt with issues with parents, he said, “It showed you cared, more than writing [discipline referrals]. They’re not going to learn anything down in the office” (Interview, March 16, 2016).

Theme Three: Modeling

The third identified theme that emerged was modeling. Modeling is the term I used to describe the behavior that students saw in a positive way among staff members. Staff members in turn act as role models for the student population. Inner-city students often lack the positive role models that suburban students have access to (Newton & Sandoval, 2015). The theme of modeling partially answers the overarching question of the study, what are the core values that provide the foundation of the culture at Eastend School and how do the members of the community perceive their role? It also answers the subquestions, what expectations do participants have for each role, how do relationships impact student learning, and what does Eastend do to create the culture of success at the school? The theme of modeling was defined by the specific codes; personal bearing and morality, and engaged teaching. The subthemes discussed are personal bearing and morality and engaged teaching. These subthemes help define the roles each participant had at Eastend School, how they impacted student learning, and what the expectations were by the members of the school community.

The idea of teacher as a role model was one that my early mentors, including Mr. Jeriah stressed when I entered the profession. I wore a tie and jacket or suit every day I taught except on Friday when the staff was required to wear a school polo shirt. I did not use inappropriate

language and endeavored to treat everyone from the custodian, students, parents, and school visitors with great respect. I also made sure that I knew everything about the subjects I taught, I took classes online, read books, attended lectures and workshops, and researched all of the areas that I taught. Mr. Jeriah shared his thoughts on the idea of being a role model,

I had to prepare myself. I had to be the best-not out of arrogance, but always be willing to learn more, explain it better, give good answers. To do that you have to study. You have to be a master of the curriculum and your discipline. When you do that, [students] know [you] know what [your] talking about. You snatch the brain and hold it. I'd like to think maybe I inspired some of them to get degrees in Math. [It] took a lot of study and nights where stuff is all over my table but I had to make it understandable. The more you get it, the more your kids will understand it (Interview, March 7, 2016).

Personal bearing

How the staff carried themselves and their duty to be a role model came up in interviews with participants. Mr. Samuel mentioned it early in his interview when he said, "The [Eastend] model, it's more than just a job it's a vocational calling. That's meaningful" (Interview, April 1, 2016). Later in the interview Mr. Samuel again addressed the issue more directly:

[The students] were different. They had a lot of social areas that they needed to be taught or be modeled. I thought that's what the school did really well: how to be a good citizen and be good to each other. They needed that more than a lot of other schools because there was always a good mixture of students at the other places. They needed that role model for how to be a good student, a good volunteer, or a student that treats other students with civility and dignity. You had that peer model at the other places, but at [Eastend], it was only the adults (Interview, April 1, 2016).

Barnabas, a student also addressed the need for role models in inner-city schools,

The lack of direction, without pointing is what [students] are lacking. So with that small circle [of male teachers] it's like you have no choice but to look up to someone, no choice but to see the footsteps of someone. So there's always something positive, regardless of the negative light. . . trouble was a different place. We got in trouble but [we could] come back and do homework, next day it was over (Interview, March 11, 2016).

Berea agreed, "The teachers really cared and made sure we were successful in life. You guys told us stuff that we could use in life. . . things like that are important" (Interview, March 14, 2016). Berechiah specifically mentioned "Jeriah had to be one my biggest role models" (Interview, March 14, 2016). Elisheba specifically mentioned the importance of male role models when she said, "they were someone you could look up to. 'I want my son or husband to be like that'" (Interview, March 31, 2016). Boaz addressed a specific skill that he admired, "The way you guys speak made me want to elevate my vocabulary" (Interview, March 15, 2016). Ms. Ruth, a parent at the school admired teachers and said about them, "Loving, caring, put the kids first, sacrificed their Saturdays, and did it with joy" (Interview, March 24, 2016).

Mr. Enoch and I discussed the importance of male teachers understanding that they had to model appropriate behavior if we were going to have a real impact in the community. He said, I always wanted them to see clearly that I was a family man, a good husband and father, and my beliefs were most important to me. Everything else stemmed from that. That's what keeps me doing what I do. My manager, everything to do with my belief in the family and its importance, of doing the right thing and being fair and helping [those] who need help. . . that's what the Lord tells us to do. Love the other person as much as yourself. Love yourself and treat [others] as if they are Him. I wanted [the students] to

see clearly that whatever good they saw in me was because of my faith. . . I worked real hard to be a good dad, a good man, role model and father (Interview, March 12, 2016).

Mr. Enoch summed up the reasons why many men took their role at Eastend very seriously. The importance of role models in inner-city schools is vital, and a key element in the success of Eastend School.

Engaged teaching

The idea of the teacher as the subject matter expert is an important element of being a role model. As Mr. Enoch said in his interview, it was important that teachers show students “you can be cool and smart” (Interview, March 12, 2016). In communities where many role models are school drop-outs it is vital that students see their teachers as educated and as role models (Newton & Sandoval, 2015). In the classroom I used my experience in technology and as a history enthusiast to create engaging learning experiences for my students. I wanted students to see my passion for history, economics, and government in the hopes that some of them would be inspired to study. Classroom discussion went where the students took it, that allowed them to study the issues and formulate their own opinions. During my third year of teaching I changed my approach and wrote about it in my recollections:

My previous year’s experience had taught me that preparing students for standardized testing could be done in a matter of weeks. That allowed me the freedom to try different things in the classroom. We had “mock trials” where students had to explain the judicial system (putting fairy tale characters on the stand), we held a session of Congress, researched an issue and wrote a letter to an elected representative (including determining if it was a local, state, or national issue) and participated in several online activities including a stock market game. What I verified was that students always loved to be on

computers and were engaged in learning when they were on them and properly supervised. (Researcher recollections, autoethnographic field notes, 2016).

As Adriel said, students want “someone that's knowledgeable in their content [area] (Interview, March 15, 2016). Berea echoed her thoughts when she said she wants a teacher who “knows what they're talking about. . . with the ability to teach” (Interview, March 14, 2016). Bashemath appreciated teachers who went beyond the textbooks and “always had interactive, strange stories” (Interview, March 31, 2016). Darius appreciated the opportunity to learn his own way, “you would give us this subject, want us to learn about it and then formulate our own opinion. You gave us the creativity to do that” (Interview, March 11, 2016). Boaz, a college graduate, when speaking about Mr. Jeriah said, “Best math teacher in the world. . . He was able to put math into terms we could understand as youth. He always saw something in me that I didn't. . . a lot of y'all did. He was always in my corner (Interview, March 15, 2016). Bashemath echoed Boaz's sentiments, “[Mr. Jeriah] made me think of math in ways I wouldn't usually” (Interview, March 31, 2016). Students also appreciated that teachers who had mastered their content area could prepare them for standardized tests. Clement shared that he appreciated that I “broke down the test. Which is hard because I hate taking the test” (Interview, March 16, 2016). Barnabas also voiced his appreciation for techniques that allowed him to learn valuable information and be creative while preparing for the SOL, he stated, “It was an indirect teaching” (Interview, March 11, 2016). Benjamin when speaking about a science teacher in the school said, “He got me into science. His classes were funny and interesting. He'd do experiments with labs and what not” (Interview, March 31, 2016).

Parents also appreciated the professionalism of the teaching staff at Eastend. Mrs. Mishal said, “The rigor of some of the classes, and you know, getting in there with them when they

needed extra help. Saturday school, year-round school. If you're not succeeding, teachers giving of themselves” (Interview, March 14, 2016). Ms. Ruth agreed and said, “[The teacher] took the time out when my kids were struggling, he would even stay later than the after-school program to make sure they were understanding. He was an awesome teacher” (Interview, March 24, 2016). According to the Eastend School community, teachers who are seen as subject matter experts and are supported by parents are better able to effectively teach in the classroom environment.

Table 3

Themes

Theme	Subtheme
Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tough love • Academics • Behavior
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family • Safe environment • Personal interactions • Parental role
Modeling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal bearing and morality • Engaged teaching

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the results of the research I did with members who were part of the Eastend School community from 2003 until 2013, as well as from the documents and artifacts I collected. From the analysis of data, three themes emerged with subthemes that define the school community, as it existed and in answer to the research questions that framed this study.

Theme One: Relationships emerged from all data sets and all participants addressed this theme and provided answers to the research question and subquestions. Theme Two: Expectations allowed staff members to voice what they expected from their fellow staff members, students, and parents. It also allowed parents and students to explain what they expected from staff members. Theme Three: Modeling allowed staff members, parents, and students to explain the importance of role models within the school community. Of all of the themes and subthemes, data indicates the importance of relationships is the key to the achievements that Eastend School has experienced.

Results suggest that while students are hesitant to allow new staff members into the school community, once they are accepted and a part of the community they bond with them and rely on them to provide guidance, a positive example, academic knowledge, social and moral education, and emotional support. Students also see many staff members as important role models whose life lessons they still rely on in adult life. Carshena sums up many of the results of the study with her definition of an ideal Eastend teacher:

I guess being likable. While being able to be that teacher that takes control when needed. Put the student first, don't let them walk over you. Hold up your ground. Being approachable. Students can talk to you about anything, even non-school. Being a good teacher, of course. . . working with the ways of your students' learning. If they get it with visual, do hands-on stuff. Engage in the whole learning process. Don't just leave it up to us. Make it fun. When you actually. . . are doing it, [students] like you, they come to you for other stuff too. . . Being able to do that with your teacher. Feeling comfortable (Interview, March 26, 2016).

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The success of schools in depressed, inner-city neighborhoods contradicts explanations that are rooted in race and income status (Mattison & Aber, 2007). The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to discover how one alternative public school for at-risk students, bridged the achievement gap. In this chapter, the findings of the study are summarized. How this study answers the research question and subquestions are addressed. The results are connected to the current literature and theoretical constructs. The themes and subthemes that I discussed in chapter four frame the discussion of conclusions of this research. I address specific recommendations for stakeholders and suggest areas of further research. I addressed the framework of the research question through interviews of students, parents, and staff members of Eastend School. I also used my own recollections of my time at the school to provide the autoethnographic component. I also acquired, read, and scanned several artifacts and documents relating to the school. Data were collected, transcribed, and analyzed using codes with an online qualitative analysis software, Dedoose™. From these codes I derived themes and subthemes that provided answers to the research question.

Summary of Findings

Autoethnography allows a researcher to understand and explore a culture that he was a part of in relation to the experiences of other members of the culture (Adams et al., 2015). It is the tool I used to explain the practices and beliefs of the culture at Eastend School. I belonged to the school culture for a decade and in that time I developed my own ideas about why the school worked. In order to fully understand the culture in which I was immersed, I needed to examine the ideas of the other participants in the culture. As Adams explains, interviewing and the

exploration of artifacts allowed me to connect my experiences with the experiences of others (2015).

After the interview process was completed, I engaged in coding and revising my field notes. After several passes I identified themes and subthemes that allowed me to develop a theoretical construct that described the culture of the school (J. J. Schensul & Lecompte, 2012). The school culture that my research described was one based in relationships that were akin to familial relationships. Many student participants saw staff members as surrogate parents or family members. Staff participants saw students and students' parents as members of an extended family. Parent participants described the school culture as a big family. The nature of these relationships was so strong that educators were empowered to be behaviorally and academically demanding. Students rose to the expectations of staff members. Staff members also understood that the students in the school viewed their personal behavior and academic mastery as an example to follow.

Woven throughout the results section of my study are my personal experiences and reflections. Use of personal experiences that examine culture are appropriate in autoethnography if they are used to comment on the culture, they contribute to research, they have a purpose, and they evoke a response from the reader (Jones et al., 2013).

The Research Question (and the three subquestions) provided the framework of this study.

1. What are the core values that provide the foundation of the culture at Eastend School, and how do students, teachers, administrators, and parents perceive their role and each other in that culture?

- a. What expectations do participants have for each role (student, teacher and administrators, and parent) within the school?
- b. How do the relationships between students and teachers, parents and teachers, and students and administrators impact student learning?
- c. What does Eastend do to create the culture of success at the school?
- d. How does the S.A.M.E. model, teaching the whole child, and providing for the basic needs of students impact academic performance and contribute to school culture?

The research question (1) and the first two subquestions (1a, 1b) were addressed across all datasets and by the three themes of the study. Participants described an environment that embodied the ideals of family, love, trust, honesty and respect. They also described the roles that they felt each member of the community filled as a member of their extended family. Teachers approached the students in their classroom as surrogate children and felt it was their vocation to inculcate values and knowledge. Students viewed some teachers as surrogate parents and most teachers as members of their family. Parents saw the school population as family. Values like trust and honesty were discussed by participants and were addressed in discussions about the environment of Eastend School and the personal interactions they experienced.

The third and fourth subquestions (1c and 1d) are specifically answered in the modeling theme and the subthemes: paternal role and academics. Eastend School's dedication to social, academic, and moral education emerged when students spoke about their interactions with teachers. Parents and staff members credit it with providing a framework that contributed to the learning culture within the school. Students credit S.A.M.E. education with their success after

leaving the school, most saying it prepared them for the business world. Teachers to a large degree also discussed how providing basic needs was an essential part of their role as educators.

Discussion

Theoretical Framework

Robert Marzano's theories regarding whole child education using a threefold approach of instructional strategies, management strategies, and curriculum-design strategies provide educators with a way to make learning meaningful and effective for students. He encourages teachers to allow students choice and believes that by giving students a voice in what they learn they will be empowered to own the educational process (Marzano, 2007). This framework has been shown in previous studies to help schools serving minority communities and as an essential part of effective teaching (Gray, 2010). Marzano's theory is connected to this research because many teachers at Eastend School embrace this idea and student participants noted it during interviews. Marzano's book also influenced my innovations in the classroom. Clement commented that at first "the projects want too much, [but] because we can learn. . . one part, we can learn the whole chapter" (Interview, March 16, 2016). Student participants liked the idea of projects; Baruch said when he worked on them, "I really felt like I was learning in those classes" (Interview, March 17, 2016). Many of the participants realized that the type of learning they engaged in provided them more than the facts they needed to pass the test; they believe projects and choice "gave us a chance to express our opinions. Through that it filled a lot of critical thinking and [we were able] to talk about things we couldn't talk about to other people (Berea interview, March 14, 2016). Clement also recognized the value and said, "It was interactive. Which is missing now with some teachers. . . You didn't just teach us stuff in school. You taught us about life (Interview, March 31, 2016). The Marzano model in practice allowed

students to work at their own speed, gave them choice, and allowed teachers to work with students individually. This result is not surprising; a Kentucky school implemented instruction based around Marzano's model and saw improvements in standardized test scores. While the results were preliminary and the improvements were not as significant as the performance of Eastend School, they do indicate that the Marzano model contributes to improved academic performance (Burks & Hochbein, 2013). Several participants credit it with helping them develop critical thinking skills.

Abraham Maslow posited that people are unable to function until their basic needs are met (Maslow, 1954). Today almost 17 million students are not eating enough or eating properly on a daily basis (Hayes et al., 2014). The failure of students to be prepared for the school day nutritionally and without having their other basic needs fulfilled leads to problems with the perceptions teachers have of their learners (Calabrese, Hummel, & Martin, 2007). With that information Eastend School took action to ensure that the basic needs of students were met while they were in school and on the weekends. By meeting these basic needs, students were better able to focus on learning and did not have to worry about when they were going to eat next. Maslow's theories were alluded to in several interviews. Mr. Jeriah recalled a time when a new member of the administrative team decided that the students were talking and would not have breakfast, "A lot of our kids, the only meal [they] got was. . . at school. . . but the administrator said that everyone was. . . not getting breakfast. I got upset and argued in front of everyone saying, 'no you guys will get breakfast'" (Interview, March 7, 2016). This was an aberration and during my time at Eastend I observed the opposite behavior, the staff was dedicated to fulfilling the needs of students. This study confirms that dedication. In creating a safe environment Eastend ensured that teachers can "provide for basic needs. Food, [affection]. . . a coat because

it's chilly, . . . papers, folder, . . . it's not their fault they don't have everything' (Sarah interview, March 25, 2016). Teachers interviewed "always had money [for a student lunch] or . . . kept granola bars or fruit snacks so they had something to eat" (Sophia interview, March 24, 2016). The school also ensured students were fed during holidays by giving the students "sacks of groceries for [the] break" (Berechiah interview, March 14, 2016). Occasionally when a parent would not apply for free or reduced lunch, staff members would take matters into their own hands. Mr. Jeriah remembers, "I talked to the owner [of the local barber shop] who said tell him to come in and sweep up and I'll give him a little money. . . so he could buy things" (Interview, March 7, 2016). Participant responses suggest that this part of the culture was as important as any other facet of the school.

The S.A.M.E. model was a cornerstone of the creation of Eastend School and was referred to specifically by almost all participants. The S.A.M.E. model specifically calls for the creation of a school culture that provides social and moral education through classroom instruction, everyday practice, modeling, and school rituals (Spencer et al., 2004). The data from this study indicates the S.A.M.E. model was mentioned by almost all student participants. Adriel stated, "In the classroom and outside the classroom, you could learn so much more than just English—Social skills [and] character" (Interview, March 15, 2016). It was also extensively mentioned and discussed by Darda who said, "social skills. . . definitely speaking [business English]. . . etiquette" (Interview, March 14, 2016). Carshena also spoke about the S.A.M.E. model extensively,

Every time I write a check, I thank them so much. I liked how they did it. Something so small. . . You don't use checks often, but my rental place that's all they took. I think if I didn't learn them, I wouldn't have known. Even though we were so young, we just

started doing it. Setting a table, of course, etiquette. That really helped because I worked at the country club and I needed to know what side to set the cheese or to pour water (Interview, March 26, 2016).

Ruth, a parent said, “I like the program. . . for the young ladies. Made sure. . . to teach them how a lady should be” (Interview, March 24, 2016). The program gave students “the soft skills in life” (Samuel interview, April 1, 2016) and many felt that was more important than the academics they learned.

Empirical Literature

The literature regarding inner-city schools is extensive and there are many factors that educators cannot control. I covered multiple factors in the literature review, all that seriously impact the education of students in urban areas. This section will focus on the factors that the results of this study indicate Eastend School successfully impacted.

Impact of the family on student achievement and parent involvement

Many sociologists and educators attribute the poor academic performance of urban students to cultural factors and suggest that academic achievement is ridiculed in urban communities (Darensbourg & Blake, 2014). Schools that have been successful in urban areas intervene culturally and encourage academic performance (Shuffelton, 2013). My first experience at Eastend School with this phenomenon was indicated in my field notes, I wrote:

My first awards ceremony was an eye opener. Students, teachers, and parents (who had been invited by their children) raucously cheered for every achievement. The ceremony started with those students who had a B average and progressed to those with an A average. As the grades got better, the cheers got louder. Fellow students were cheering their peers, yelling their names and screaming. I remember thinking that it was a surprise

to see that the efforts of their peers were important to the student body (Researcher recollections, autoethnographic field notes, 2016).

The experience I had was not unique to my first year of teaching. As time progressed I saw incidents where students who had to work very hard made honor roll and their peers cheered even harder for them. There are several factors mentioned by participants that contribute to this phenomenon. First, students are together from an early age, usually third grade on, and as Baruch stated in his interview, they “creat[e] [their] own extended family, [their] ideal family” (Interview, March 17, 2016). I experienced this same feeling when I had two students succeed after academic struggles:

I remember two of my female students who had never passed any SOL on the first try, jumping for joy and crying when they passed the World History SOL, I cried with them. I had established such strong relationships with my students and their families that they knew what my expectations were for them and they strived to meet those expectations. They also knew I was invested in their success (Researcher recollections, autoethnographic field notes, 2016).

So when students cheer for a peer, they are cheering for a family member. The support and approval of peers begins to become a major factor in the development of students beginning in middle school (Darensbourg & Blake, 2014). The school’s ability to create a culture where fellow students are cheering for their classmates contributes to the community of achievement in the school.

Parents of urban students are less likely to be involved in some aspects of their child’s education (Park & Holloway, 2013). While that may be the case at many urban schools, parents at Eastend School are required to sign a contract saying they will be involved. While many do

not honor their contract, others do. Biological parents and guardians are more involved in the school. Enoch alludes to the requirement of the school and also believes that starting students in the program at an early age was crucial:

[The founder] told them they could achieve what they dreamed. The teachers reinforced that, the kids began to believe, “I can do this, I can achieve, I can go to college.” We didn't make it easy for them, we demanded achievement, parent involvement, and we gave them [the] structure they needed, what they needed most. By the time they went from third [grade] to us [in middle and high school], they were used to being good students. They knew what it took to be good. They believed in us, we were there for them; they knew we cared for them. With all the men, we all knew them. We saw them. To teach them effectively, you have to see past what they're wearing and what they project to who they really are as a person (Interview, March 12, 2016).

The third factor that contributes to this is that many students see a teacher or several teachers as surrogate parents. So even if a biological family member was not involved, the student had the benefit of having an adult who was “like an actual father to [him]” (Berechiah interview, March 14, 2016) reinforcing and encouraging his or her academic achievements. Since teachers are known by the student body, are seen as approachable and spend significant time with students, there are able to “pressure [students] to do better than what [they] were doing. . . mak[ing them] look [to] the future and plan for that” (Benjamin interview, March 31, 2016). This perception allows students who do not have an involved guardian to benefit from the positive relationship that parental involvement has on academic achievement (Goodman & Burton, 2012). It also means that the involved surrogate has achieved academic success and is able to articulate academic goals for the student (Park & Holloway, 2013). Finally the surrogate

parent can also articulate that greater academic success leads to greater economic success (Darensbourg & Blake, 2014). The program at Eastend School intentionally links academic success and economic success.

Factors: School segregation

Economic factors have led to de facto segregation in many areas of the United States (Rushing, 2015). Consequently, minority students attend homogenous schools that are ethnically and economically segregated (Condron et al., 2013). In my ten years at Eastend School I taught five non-Black students. Eastend is a segregated school in practice. Voight, Geller, and Nation found that when at-risk students are integrated into schools populated by middle and upper income students they are subject to greater expectations, greater rigor, and they achieve more academically (2013). The cited studies are advocating school integration as a way to improve the achievement gap, and this study does not dispute their conclusions. Instead, the results of this study indicate that creating a school culture that encourages academic achievement and provides many of the same services more affluent schools do is another approach in solving the problem of school integration. Since teachers are accepted as part of the Eastend family regardless of race, they are able to be the warm demanders that Ford and Stassi found to be successful in inner-city schools (2012). Eastend teachers are encouraged to differentiate instruction that meets the needs of individual learners, therefore allowing instruction that is responsive to the culture of students. This results in teaching practices that do not denigrate the community from where Eastend students come. It also permits students to overcome their initial perceptions of their teachers and permits educators to take advantage of the cultural capital inner-city students bring to the classroom (Goldenberg, 2014). This methodology provides for the greater rigor, higher expectations and the academic achievement that is experienced by minority

students in integrated schools, while attending a school that provides culturally relevant pedagogy. As mentioned previously, Eastend School is provided additional funding by the private entity created to help in the founding of the school. These funds mitigate the issues that Condrón et al. found many inner-city schools have with inadequate funding and a lack of parental donations (2013). The high expectations of staff members lead to the rigor students would receive in schools that reflect the dominant culture. Eastend School's academic performance, including a 100% graduation rate (Virginia 2010 - 2011 High School Graduates Data, 2011) and test performance that was generally at the top of the district (Adequate Yearly Progress [AYP] Reports, 2011) indicates that segregation is not a hindrance when students are provided a culture that encourages success and provides culturally relevant instruction.

Factors: Cultural

The Eastend School culture is a unique one where the roles of staff members require they provide students more than academic knowledge and education. As mentioned in the theoretical framework section, staff members are expected to provide social and moral education as well as academics. Many students treat staff members as surrogate parents and come to them for advice. This culture allows teachers to teach impromptu lessons about life issues. Students from more affluent homes receive much of the social education that Eastend students receive in their homes. Many of the participants spoke about the family environment at Eastend and how it allowed them to thrive. Clement shares his experiences about being different and how he was able to be comfortable within the school culture. Several of the male student participants spoke about how the school took them from being "boy to a man" (Boaz interview, March 15, 2016). Another referred to the school as the "starting point of being a man or woman" (Barnabas interview, March 11, 2016). Providing students with the cultural tools they need to succeed, the enriched

learning experiences that more affluent families deliver, and beneficial field trips and activities keeps students motivated and learning. This mitigates many of the recognized deficits that inner-city students struggle to overcome (Ford & Moore, 2013).

While Ford and Sassi caution White teachers to avoid emulating their Black peers (2012), that was not a concern at Eastend because the school had developed its own culture. Once the staff member was accepted into the culture he or she was then able to provide students with the tools they needed to succeed after school. Also student perceptions that teachers are from a different cultural background are overcome by the shared culture of the school. This allows educators to adapt curriculum to meet the cultural needs of students (Goldenberg, 2014).

Factors: Classroom expectations and discipline

Students whose teachers hold them to higher standards and have greater expectations of them, academically perform at higher levels (Allen, 2015). Regarding inner-city students, teacher expectations and beliefs are shown to affect their educational performance and attainment (Newton & Sandoval, 2015). The participants in this study confirm that teacher expectations led to better performance. Bashemath attributes the demanding nature of her teachers for her readiness to attend college. Dinah made it clear that demanding teachers made her see her potential. Speaking directly about this positive influence, Berechiah said that about one teacher, “If you got a C in his class, he’d drop you” (Interview, March 14, 2016). Stetson states that the most successful inner-city schools require parents, students, and teachers to work together to create an environment of high expectations (2013). The Eastend culture created the very atmosphere that Stetson describes. Coniah confirms this when discussing a teacher, “Paper after paper, book after book. She wasn’t bad, but she demanded a lot. Always on your case, and you couldn’t miss an assignment” (Interview, March 15, 2016). Several students remarked that

teachers would call parents if they were not doing well in school. Berechiah said, “if we acted up at all, he’d call the parents” (Interview, March 14, 2016). Ms. Myra a parent of three former Eastend students said, “the kids didn’t like [the teacher], but I thought she was great. They clashed but she’s not there to be her friend. You’ve got to be tough. You’re going to meet people meaner than [her]” (Interview, March 16, 2016).

These expectations impacted the discipline climate of the school. Teachers who have earned the trust of students are able to handle discipline incidents in the classroom themselves (Pane et al., 2013). The experienced teachers at Eastend School handled discipline themselves and encouraged and helped less experienced teachers do the same. As Mr. Samuel said in his interview, he encouraged a teacher - parent discipline team that was cooperative instead of confrontational. That relationship allowed teachers to work with parents and keep students in the classroom and out of school suspensions. Exclusionary discipline leads to declining academic performance (Perry & Morris, 2014), since teachers at Eastend avoided out-of-school suspensions, the negative impact of the practice was mitigated. All of the teachers interviewed stated that they did not write discipline referrals and handled issues with parents or guardians. That reflects my own experience in the classroom. After my first independent year in the classroom, I wrote seven discipline referrals, averaging about one a year. This approach to discipline is a common theme in most successful inner-city schools (Stetson, 2013).

New Contributions to the Field

This study looks at how one inner-city school overcame the achievement gap and competed with the highest performing schools in its district and its state. While Eastend School used many of the policies discussed in the literature review to improve student performance,

there are two areas where the school met student needs to overcome the challenges of inner-city education that are not currently referenced in the literature reviewed.

The school's adoption of the S.A.M.E. model allowed staff members the latitude to teach morality and social skills that enabled students to learn many of the societal norms that they are not taught at home. Additionally, students were taught the behaviors that are expected of well-functioning members of society while being allowed to maintain their cultural identity. Male staff members, who filled a paternal role in the lives of many students, often delivered lessons in morality. While Eastend School is a public school, it is following the precepts given Christians when we are told,

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates
Deuteronomy (6:6-9).

Since parents are expected to be active in the school and must apply to have their student enrolled at Eastend, they are endorsing this approach.

Students are involved in the school culture from an early age, some as early as kindergarten and most by third grade. Students are immersed in an environment of high expectations, high support, and high involvement for the bulk of their school experience. Eastend School oftentimes is the only school a student knows until he or she attends college. The Eastend culture of achievement is a steadying force for at-risk students, providing many of the same needs and preparation as more affluent children receive in their family homes. The success of Eastend School suggests that inner-city schools should adopt the policies that are

shown to be successful, design a program around the same values that Eastend embraces, and use that model for students from kindergarten through 12th grade in a unified school. Moving children out of a loving environment for social reasons may not be in their best interests. This is not to suggest that one building or one campus should serve all grades. Eastend School occupies two campuses: an elementary and a middle/high school campus. Students move back and forth between the two campuses when they attend functions with their siblings. Older students help out at the elementary school, students share the same buses, and some elective teachers work at both campuses, so there is a connection between the two sites. The continuity allows students to know each other and the staff members. Most students are known by name by the adults on campus. It also means that older students tell younger ones what to expect from teachers and staff members. Most new high school students already knew the discipline norms and expectations I had for them when they walked into my classroom. The oft repeated phrase was, “Mr. K. don’t play,” when new students asked about me. Understanding the needs that inner-city students have, that dominant culture students have fulfilled through other means indicates that the traditional model that works for middle and upper income students contributes to the failure of most inner-city schools. This research indicates that by breaking the rules in the classroom and in the structure of the school, the gap can be bridged.

Implications

The empirical and theoretical implications of this study have already been discussed. In this section I will outline several practical applications and recommendations for the stakeholders involved in inner-city education. This research gives voice to at risk students who successfully navigated the educational challenges they faced, parents whose children were successful

learners, and successful inner-city educators who were able to positively impact the lives of students.

Implications for school districts

The idea of public schools overtly teaching social and moral skills to inner-city students may seem to be a political problem on the surface, but public education was initially conceived as a way to pass on the accepted societal norms regarding morality and social interactions (Spencer et al., 2004). While I am a Christian, I am not advocating for a return to religious education in the schools; I am advocating for education regarding universally held concepts. The idea that we should “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31) is a universally held belief among almost all members of society. Lessons regarding honesty, fair play, integrity, compassion, and other character traits all spring from this one simple idea. Ideally these are lessons that would be taught in the home, but single parents working multiple jobs to try to provide for their families are raising many inner -city children. There is not enough time to teach them life’s lessons. With an additional hour each day, Saturday school and intersessions between academic quarters, Eastend School teachers found the time to teach these lessons and many more. The guidelines for this kind of education can be simple and clear, a list of character traits with universally held definitions is a starting point, from there teachers and students may develop the conversation on their own. Since students see multiple teachers, administrators, and other staff members throughout the school day, students hear different viewpoints so they may develop their own moral code over several years of education.

In addition to moral values, inner-city students need to have an extensive knowledge of the social knowledge potential employers and other members of society expect them to have when they enter the workforce. As Bashemath shared in her interview, “we learned about life

things. . . how interviews should go, how to eat, etiquette, ‘speaking green.’” (Interview, March 31, 2016). “Speaking green” is the Eastend School term for using proper business English when at work or in professional situations. The school is not belittling local dialects and speech patterns but is encouraging students to code switch when they are working (green being the color of money). This idea allows students to embrace their own culture while having the skills to meet employer expectations. Adriel, one of the oldest former students I interviewed addressed this idea,

Etiquette! Yes, that and “speaking green” are two things we never would have learned at another school. From third to eighth grade, we were [practicing] etiquette. The [school] took us all to [a restaurant] in eighth grade to watch us. I remember going to a country club and everyone was practicing their etiquette. . . My mom was sitting beside me and asking if we learned these skills at school. I [said], “Yes we did!” I learned all that: which fork to use, which spoon, how to put my napkin in my lap. Speaking green is very important. I remember one thing we were told a lot. “If you want to make money, you have to speak green.” A lot of my friends when we were in college, you know you're with your friends and you're using slang and I would say, “Okay, guys, we gotta start speaking green!” They would [say], “what?” “You know; you've got to speak proper!” You can't speak slang, “Axe,” I used to have a problem with that word a lot. Speaking green is very important in interviews or speaking to someone you've never met, that is a very important skill to have. When they hear the way you speak, that tells a lot about yourself (Interview, March 15, 2016).

Students were also taught “how to show up to a job interview, how to dress properly” (Aednah interview, March 16, 2016). These skills allow inner-city students to know the

expectations potential employers have for them before graduating. The school also gives students the opportunities to practice these skills in real situations, as the participants indicated. School districts have to take the lead on this initiative, the political ramifications of a school principal leading this change in our litigious society may legally expose him or her. Eastend is a magnet school that requires applications for entry, making this part of the school curriculum known to applicants would prevent potential legal problems.

Implications for schools

Schools and the administrators running them can take several lessons away from this study. First, it takes time for teachers to develop a rapport with students and to gain a good reputation, in an inner-city school this process takes much longer. The universal “student initiation” that all of the staff participants in this study experienced may be the extreme, but the reasons for it may explain one facet of the high attrition, inner-city schools experience in regards to the teaching staff (Ford & Moore, 2013). Patience, honest mentorship, and a positive desire for a new teacher’s success is helpful. I recounted the struggle I had to remain in the teaching profession in my own recollections,

I received my employee evaluation in May and was placed on a plan of action; almost all of my evaluations were in the “Needs Improvement” category. I had not had a formal observation since October. I was ready to move to another occupation, I felt teaching was not for me. While I truly loved my students and had a great appreciation for their parents, I was not prepared to deal with the other professionals in the educational world (Researcher recollections, autoethnographic field notes, 2016).

It was not the students or the parents that encouraged me to leave the profession; it was the interim administration that supervised my first two years in the classroom. Five years later I

was a National Board Certified Teacher and had won numerous awards for my work in the school. The next principal for whom I worked said this about my struggles with the former administration (I spent my second year on a plan of action and was not taken off until the administration changed),

That was pretty ridiculous. Especially after two years of teaching. You can't become decent until three years, and you can't be good until five years. You have to give people time to fall and get back up, you know, "I'm not going to do that again" (Samuel interview, April 1, 2016).

The lesson all school administrators should take away from this study, new teachers in inner-city schools need to be encouraged to focus on relationships with students, parents, and with their peers. Experienced teachers should be open about the difficulties of their first year in inner-city schools.

Administrations should allow teachers the latitude to try new approaches to education in the classroom. The achievement gap indicates that the traditional methods do not work, while the success of Eastend School indicates that non-conventional methods work well. Protecting staff members that are willing to take a chance and try new ways to reach students is one of the keys to success. Mr. Samuel shared his philosophy regarding his role as a school administrator,

I felt strongly there was more to students than a test score. One of the things I wanted the teacher to know was they weren't just a test to me. . . The word "support" is probably a weak word, but I wanted them to have every resource to be successful and to find the money and financial resources for that (Interview, April 1, 2016).

Allowing staff to be innovative and experiment in the classroom could potentially lead to a successful method that works but may also lead to failure. Educators need to know that they

are protected in the age of testing if they are going to find the method that works for their students.

Implications for educators

Educators must focus on relationships if they are going to be successful teachers in the inner city. Relationships with students and their parents may mitigate many of the behavior issues in the classroom, but they will not alleviate conflict or dissent. As Mrs. Sarah said,

[You should] not tak[e] things personally. Making sure that I realized [my students] weren't really angry at me. They're just angry. They're not mad at how I'm delivering things, they're not mad at how I get on them for things. They really want me to get on them for that. They appreciate the discipline. When you don't, that's when they really get mad. They would tell me I didn't care about them for not getting on them for stuff. So [they]'re acting out, just to get me started today. . . I have high expectations. It's a daily thing (Interview, March 25, 2016).

A solid relationship with students allows a dialogue to happen and many problems can be worked out before the administration has to intervene. Relationships take time and do not happen overnight and sometimes not for several weeks. Teachers should attend every event a student invites them to attend, if they are able. I attended sporting events, concerts, Church services, baptisms, funerals, family events, and awards ceremonies. Mr. Samuel explained why, “You go to a family's house, that made an impact in the community” (Interview, April 1, 2016). Working with parents requires trust; they must know that you care about their child and when you give of your free time, parents know that their child is important to you. When I asked Aednah what the ideal Eastend School educator looked like, she said,

One that isn't there for a paycheck. . .and can relate, who knows it's okay to have fun in the classroom, to build a relationship with a student, to bridge that gap between student, parent, [and] teacher. A teacher with communication skills, both verbal and physical. Because you can tell a teacher doesn't like you just by body language (Interview, March 16, 2016).

The success I had in the classroom was based on relationships. Bridging the gap between students and parents, having relationships with both is an important part of the educational process.

Teachers should explore the ways children in their community learn. Allowing students choice and self-direction empowers them and they are likely to be more engaged in their assignments. Marzano's theories were put into practice in many of the classrooms at Eastend School. Students were allowed choices and latitude in how they showed their mastery of the subject matter. As the principle educator in the classroom, students will rise to the expectations teachers have for them. Bashemath recounted a time when her mathematics teacher pushed her, "He was just so smart and it was like, "You can really do that!" There were multiple ways of doing things" (Interview, March 31, 2016). Barnabas speaking about his English teacher said, "He pulled the talent out of me that I didn't want to use" (Interview, March 11, 2016). A willingness to push students to achieve beyond what they believe to be their capabilities is in the best interests of students. Teachers should remember this advice from Mr. Jeriah, "Students don't remember what you taught them, they remember how you made them feel" (Interview, March 7, 2016). That is confirmed in this study.

Limitations

I was an active member of the Eastend School community for 10 years. As an autoethnographer, I was a fully invested participant in the culture this study describes. An ethnographer cannot transcend his biases and become an untarnished observer (Wolcott, 2008). My involvement in the school community could be seen as a limitation of the study. This study is a snapshot in time and cannot report on the current culture or climate at Eastend School. Since Eastend School is one school in one city and its population is homogenous, the lack of diversity among the student population is a limitation. Eastend School serves a population that is over 98% Black American (Adequate Yearly Progress [AYP] Reports, 2011). Additionally, financial limitations had to be considered when conducting research. I interviewed 28 participants throughout the mid-Atlantic region and traveled considerably to interview them. Considering finances when selecting participants is an allowable consideration (Lecompte & Schensul, 2010). Participants were self-reporting and may have misreported their experiences, memories, and emotions.

Recommendations for Future Research

Since 2013, Eastend School has gone from being a fully accredited school to being accredited with warning. A comprehensive study focused on finding out if aspects of the culture have changed and whether they led to the loss of full accreditation. Some of my interview participants broached the subject and addressed it specifically at the end of their interview.

Another area of research that could be insightful would be the impact of fundraising efforts on the student bodies of magnet schools that work with inner-city students. Many of my former student participants addressed a major fundraiser that students were required to attend and how they found an auction demeaning. Several students were also upset about television

advertising they had seen where they were portrayed as not knowing what fresh fruit is or where they were portrayed as not having knowledge about the world outside of their neighborhood.

While the effectiveness of year-round schooling is questionable, a study that looks at impacts of year-round schooling on student-teacher relationships would be noteworthy. This research indicates that positive relationships are the key to success in inner-city schools. While Eastend is no longer a year-round school, during most of the years from 2003 until 2013 it was, did the school schedule allow teachers and students to interact and maintain positive relationships? Only one participant (a parent) broached the topic.

This study highlighted the non-conventional leadership of two administrators, but particularly that of Mr. Samuel. Mr. Samuel left Eastend School after several years of success and full accreditation without the ceremony and honor that many participants felt he deserved. Several staff members related that the corporate side of the school was not happy with his leadership and he also addressed this at the end of his interview. A study of the careers of leaders that push the boundaries of education, while being highly effective, could provide insight as to what it was they did, but why they leave schools with little fanfare.

Finally, a handful of student participants spoke about not adhering to the cultural norms of their local community and specifically mentioned the Black Rock Coalition Club that I sponsored as being instrumental in their development as young adults. A study of how to foster and encourage individualism and its affect on academic achievement could be an important aid in the development of inner-city schools.

Summary

This study filled a gap in current research concerning inner-city schools and the achievement gap. There have been many studies concerning the crisis faced by inner-city

schools and the challenges they face. Pundits are busy gap gazing while ignoring successful inner-city schools. This chapter included discussion of the key findings of this study and the theoretical and practical implications of them. Ideas for additional research were suggested.

The school culture at Eastend was based on familial relationships and a community of caring, concern, and safety. Former students identified staff members as part of their extended family or in some cases as surrogate parents. Parents of students thought of the school as a big, happy family. The staff members of the school were charged by the school charter to teach social norms and morality to the students as well as academic subjects, this contributed to an atmosphere that empowered educators to have high expectations for students and to collaborate with parents to deal with behavior issues. Students rose to the expectations of staff members in both their behavior and academics. Staff members modeled appropriate personal behavior and dedication to academic mastery to inspire students to achieve beyond what they felt were their limits. Positive personal relationships were the key to the success of Eastend School.

The culture created at Eastend School was built intentionally, the founder of the school had a vision and the teachers and administration had the tools to build a surrogate family that supported the needs of students from some of the most impoverished areas in the city it served. In my time as a teacher at Eastend I enjoyed incredible success. I still remember the emotional high of having every student I taught in a semester pass their SOL test and the class with a C or better. I remember the looks on students' faces who were suspended from school when I showed up on their doorstep during my planning period, ready to go over the day's material with them. I enjoyed reading the school district's reports and finding that my students' performance exceeded that of all of the more affluent schools in the district. I also experienced incredible lows; the struggle to be an effective teacher in my first year and a half was tough, I have never experienced

as deep a sense of failure as I did in that time. Burying students, one to suicide and another to a seizure eventually led to my leaving the school. The young man (I will call him Caleb) who died of a seizure was very close to me. I took him to sporting events and we would have lunch outside of the school on scheduled half days. Caleb was not the best of students, but he was loyal, honest, and a young Christian. I did not understand the depth of his loyalty until I had to correct him after a planned absence. I knew I was going to be out and let my students know that I expected their best behavior while I was gone. Students at Eastend School are especially hard on substitutes. I told them that if there was a problem, I would not be happy when I returned on Thursday. On my return, I saw one discipline referral on my desk and it was for Caleb. I told Caleb to meet me in the hallway and we would speak after I got the class started. When I walked out into the hall I said, “[Caleb] I expect better from you.” He replied, “Let me explain, Mr. K, please let me explain.” I told him to go ahead and said something to the effect of, “it better be good.” He responded, “That sub disrespected you.” I said, “[Caleb], she can’t disrespect me, she doesn’t even know me.” He said, “I promise she did. I admit we were cutting a fool, and she said ‘if you all can’t behave you need to get out of my classroom.’ I looked at her and said, ‘unless you’re a baldheaded, white guy named Mike, this sure as **** ain’t your classroom.’” I told Caleb he got an F for common sense, an A for loyalty, and to get to work. When he died, it was as if I lost one of my sons, I have never gotten over the pain.

It is my hope that this research will encourage inner-city educators to establish positive, cooperative and supportive relationships with their students and the families of students. My research indicates that it takes extraordinary relationships to succeed in the inner-city classroom. On Father’s Day, I get text messages from former students and colleagues wishing me a happy day. If I did not reach a particular student, I reached his or her friend or sibling. That led to

loyalty from students who did not see me as a paternal figure. During the interview process I noticed a particular trend when I was parting ways with my students, I mentioned it in the interview I did with Mr. Samuel. I said, “I told all my students someday they'd never see me again, but wouldn't it be great if the last words they heard come out of my mouth were, ‘I love you.’ You know what the last thing they all said to me at the end of their interviews?”

(Interview, April 1, 2016). The vocation of inner-city teaching is honorable and vital in the current social and political climate. We need men and women who are willing to stand in the gap, provide positive role models for young people, and to teach them morals and how to behave. When we have those teachers, the achievement gap will no longer exist.

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APPENDIX A: Field Notes

These are recollections of my time at Eastend School. They are organized by school year.

2003-2004

I left the military in October 2003 and was pretty unsure of my direction or future. I knew I wanted to enter the teaching profession but was not quite set on whether it would be in middle, high school, or even community college. I knew that further education would be required to attain my goals but without a certain destination, I was not willing to take classes that might not help me with a career choice. Understanding that I would soon be living on a military retirement, I decided to attend a job fair for a local school system to get into the substitute-teaching program. After signing up, the human resources representative encouraged me to interview with the different middle and high schools that were at the job fair. I remember interviewing with every secondary school in the system. My last interview was with Eastend School. The principal and assistant principal both conducted the interview and we hit it off immediately. They were both military veterans and understood the challenges I faced transitioning into the civilian world.

The interview went well and lasted for well over an hour. During the course of the meeting, they told me about their school and its culture. Eastend was a Kindergarten through Eighth grade program (at the time) designed for children who were growing up subject to multiple risk factors. All students qualified for free or reduced lunch when entering the program. Most came from single parent households or were being raised by relatives (siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents). Some students' parents were incarcerated and homelessness was a condition for some students. Students were brought into the program based on a score assigned

by risk factors. Gifted and talented students (unless they had an older sibling who attended the school) were not allowed entrance; the reason given was those students had many programs available to them to ensure success. I was asked to visit the school the following week.

When I visited the school I was asked to observe some classes, watch a class change and speak to some students. I visited several classrooms and was pretty astounded to see that the students were well behaved and orderly. Teachers were not traditional by any means, but they had their students' attention. Class change was a different experience. It was pure pandemonium. While the halls were noisy and the students animated, they were respectful of the adults. Many greeted me as they walked by and several stopped and introduced themselves to me, shaking my hand and making eye contact. I also noticed that the teachers stood at their doors, shaking the hand of each student as they came into the classroom and speaking to them.

Interestingly, the students I spoke with were not the children who were stars but young men and women who were in trouble for various infractions. I asked them about their goals and the school. I wanted to know what they wanted from their teachers and how they liked them. None of the students had anything negative to say about the adults in the school. I found it interesting because an adult had written an incident referral to send them to the Assistant Principal to begin with. It was obvious to me that the students at the school liked it there.

After meeting with the students and getting a snapshot of what the culture was like I met with the principal who asked me many questions about what I had seen and my thoughts based on those observations. He then scheduled another interview with me at the end of that week. Prior to the interview, he explained that all staff additions were a two-part process. While he was a representative of the local public school system, there was a corporate entity that had to approve all new employees. I went into an interview with the founder of the school, the board of

directors and the principal. At the beginning of the interview, the principal explained that he was guilty of meeting new teaching candidates and “falling in love with them,” oftentimes missing important details that may prevent them from being successful. From that point the school’s founder conducted the interview. He was direct and his questions were probing. He asked about my experiences in the military, what I experienced as a senior enlisted man in the military and what I thought about the educational levels of incoming recruits. I shared my disappointment in the reading and logic abilities of young military members and told him that the drop off between college students and incoming military members was inexcusable. We discussed the role of public education in the community and he asked about my spiritual life and health. I was asked about my family, my goals and my future in the educational profession. It was a shocking interview in light of the public school connections I knew were in place. I never expected to be asked about my spiritual life. At the end of the interview I noted that everyone in the room shook my hand and made eye contact. I was beginning to get a feeling for the culture of the school. Monday morning, I attended an orientation for new substitute teachers. That afternoon I had my first job. The principal of Eastend scheduled a meeting with me on Tuesday morning.

On Tuesday, I met with the assistant principal and he explained that they were going to offer me a contract. He was not sure whether I would be a history teacher, teach another subject area or whether I would be a school based substitute, but they wanted to give me a job. In the meantime, they would try to give me as many substituting opportunities as possible so I could learn the culture and so the students would get to know me. I taught every school day until the end of the school year. Oftentimes I was at Eastend, but when I was not my absence was noted and I always welcomed back. I vividly remember that a teacher appreciation day was held on a Wednesday (a half day for students). At the end of dismissal, I was headed for my car when one

of the teachers raced up behind me and asked where I was going. I told her I was headed home. She asked me to please attend their meeting. It was a dinner celebration for all of the adults on staff. The first thing that caught my attention was that a staff member led a prayer asking for God to bless their meal. There was music and gifts for everyone in attendance. My sons were visiting and several of the people on staff asked if they could “make a plate for [my] boys?” I remember leaving and wondering if this was one of the few places that really was a family.

That summer I had to take classes in order to attain certification. Two history vacancies were available; I was slated to teach sixth grade history. Eastend was a year-round extended day school, my contract started on August 01, 2004, that meant I was supposed to report for work in late July.

2004-2005

The school year started with a set back before the first student came into my classroom. The principal who hired me had accepted the Director’s position of the corporate side of Eastend School and would no longer be involved in the day-to-day operation of the school. I took solace in the fact that the Assistant Principal remained. Additionally, my certification program ran into the first part of the year-round schedule, so a substitute had to be hired to cover my classes. I was too inexperienced to realize the future problems this would create. After my certification classes were done, I started teaching. I was the only educator teaching sixth grade history. Consequently, I was on my own to design my lesson plans and curriculum. I used the Virginia Standards of Learning blueprint and took many of their suggested activities, modifying them for my student population. Like many new teachers, I was struggling to maintain order in my classroom but I remained optimistic. In early September, the Assistant Principal was promoted to a Principal position in another school system. A former elementary school administrator

replaced him. Two days after her arrival, she called me into her office prior to the start of the school day. During our conversation, she told me that she had fired every “military guy” who had ever worked for her. I was taken aback; her comment came out of the blue and was unexpected. I went back to my classroom shaken. That evening I had a long discussion with my fiancé’s father, a former school administrator. He suggested I write her a letter explaining how I felt about our interaction. I followed his advice. No comment was made about the letter until months after the fact and then it was a denial, I was told I must have misunderstood what she said. In October I had a formal observation. My performance was poor and my review was scathing. I was asked to submit daily lesson plans to the Assistant Principal. I asked my mentor and department chair to help me improve my lesson plans and classroom delivery. They both came in and observed me regularly and helped me with my lesson plans. In spite of their help, all of my lesson plans were returned as poorly written and not meeting the lesson objectives. I was reading as many books as I could about teaching inner-city students and was using every available resource. By December, I was spending twelve hours a day in my classroom trying to improve my performance. My students were unruly and I knew that any discipline referral I wrote would be ignored. I started talking to parents instead of relying on administrators to help me with behavioral issues.

I do recall the first awards ceremony I attended at the school. I had attended a few during my time as a substitute in other schools the previous year. They were generally lackluster affairs punctuated by polite applause. When I substituted at Eastend School during the 2003-2004 school year, I was directed to cover classes in the elementary school so resource teachers could attend the ceremony. I had not had the opportunity to attend prior to my first year as a teacher. My first awards ceremony was an eye opener. Students, teachers, and parents (who had been

invited by their children) raucously cheered for every achievement. The ceremony started with those students who had a B average and progressed to those with an A average. As the grades got better, the cheers got louder. Fellow students were cheering their peers, yelling their names and screaming. I remember thinking that it was a surprise to see that the efforts of their peers were important to the student body.

Right before Christmas, the student who gave me the most trouble in class came in and handed me a present. He said “here,” and turned around and left. I was stunned. Over Christmas break I engaged in a lot of prayer and reflection. I needed to figure out what I was going to do and whether teaching was my calling. I returned to the classroom determined to see the year through.

I believed I was making strides in the classroom and I felt confident that I was improving. Administrators did not come into my classroom and I was receiving a tremendous amount of criticism but I persevered. My mentor and department chair were very supportive of my efforts. I received my employee evaluation in May and was placed on a plan of action; almost all of my evaluations were in the “Needs Improvement” category. I had not had a formal observation since October. I was ready to move to another occupation; I felt teaching was not for me. While I truly loved my students and had a great appreciation for their parents, I was not prepared to deal with the other professionals in the educational world. Two events changed my future and I believe they were an answer to my prayers.

In late May the father of one of my students came by to see me in the afternoon. While we were discussing his son, the Principal walked into my room and asked the father to come to his office. The father agreed but said, “I would like to bring Mr. K with me.” I do not remember all the details of our conversation but I vividly remember the father saying that the teacher that

had the greatest impact on his son was his “brother of the heart, Mr. K.” I was stunned and looked at the Principal to see if there would be any reaction. There was not.

In June, with school almost over and with me still contemplating my future, I received a second affirmation that I should not give up on my vocation. When returning to my classroom after dropping off my students for lunch, I found an envelope on my desk. In it was a letter from the young man who gave me the Christmas gift. He explained to me how much I meant to him and told me he was thankful I was there for him. He knew I was struggling but he wanted to know if I would be back the following year. That afternoon I told him I was not done yet.

On the last day of school, I paid the Director a visit and asked him if he wanted me back the following school year. He told me that he would be thrilled to have me back and I assured him I would see him in July.

2005-2006

I spent my four-week summer break looking at ways to improve my performance in the classroom. I spent a week at Montpelier studying the Constitution. I read several classroom management books and outlined a new course of action. I decided that I would start calling the parents of unruly students immediately, on the first day of school if I had to. The students in my homeroom had obviously spoken to the previous year’s class. I worked with a fellow “alternative licensure” teacher to develop lesson plans. Five minutes into the first day of school I had my first challenge, I turned to the student and told him to meet me “in the hall, we are calling your Mom.” The class sat in stunned silence. Word quickly spread and the previous year’s class quickly started the rumor that they “made Mr. K mean.” I have to say those first weeks of teaching were reaffirming. I wrote no behavior referrals that year and worked hard to establish relationships with my students and their parents. I partnered with the veteran teacher across the

hall and he told me that I had a knack for getting parents on my side. He encouraged me to use that skill.

I was also promoted to department chair. My department was very young in age and teaching experience. In spite of my trying first year, I was awarded the position. The year was uneventful until March of 2006. I was asked to proctor a test for the eighth grade students. At that time, the only middle school class that had to take a Virginia Standards of Learning history test was eighth grade. When I gave the Director the results of the test (they were not good) he was stunned. He asked me what I would do. I outlined a comprehensive program on a scrap piece of paper that I thought would allow us to prepare our students for the test. That afternoon the Principal came to me and said, "Mike, I need you to teach eighth grade, if we can help you, please let me know."

I vividly remember walking into the classroom that first morning after the practice test, I wrote a three feet tall number on the board. I pointed to it and I said, "that is how many days we have until the test, no one believes in you and no one believes in me. I say we stick it to the man and prove him wrong. If you promise to work hard, I promise to work ten times harder than you do so we can all be successful." Every class that day cheered.

We hit the street running. I used PowerPoints and videos to get the material to the students quickly. We had discussions about the theory of government and the history of America. I also promised them that after the SOLs, I would teach them the history of Rock and Roll. Students were taking notes and studying between classes. During my planning and lunch, we played Jeopardy. It was a lot of work but the students stuck with me. In June they took their SOLs. I attended their eighth grade graduation ceremony and I will never forget stepping up to the podium and saying, "say it loud!" In unison they responded, "I'm Black and I'm proud!"

Their parents and grandparents went crazy. In mid-July, the Principal called me and said “your SOL scores came in, Mike over 90% of your students passed the test, you were number one in the district.” I thanked him profusely; I also remember weeping as I heard the results. I turned to my wife and said, “I can teach,” she replied, “I always believed in you.”

When I reflect on that year I see it as a turning point in my life. After the trying year before, it solidified me as an educator. I saw it as an answer to my prayers and an affirmation of my vocation. I decided that the only way I could be successful was if I smashed the walls and went beyond the textbooks. I had to do my best to ensure I was an innovator. If I was not challenging my students to be the best in the city, I would fail as a teacher. My job was about to change.

2006-2007

The new school year began in late July and things had dramatically changed. The school was expanding, adding an additional grade each year until it was a K-12 school. In order to get the room for the additional students, a new school was being built for grades 6 through 12. For one year we would be in a borrowed space in a historically significant school building. Since I had been moved to eighth grade, I would see the familiar faces of my class from my first year of teaching. Additionally, a new principal had been hired to supervise the new school. The Assistant Principal from the previous year had been asked to leave and all new leadership was in place. I returned as the department chair. During my first meeting with the new Principal he and I discussed my previous year’s SOL scores and the performance of my department. I told him my plans and he encouraged me to continue doing things the way I had been. At the conclusion of the meeting he asked me if there was anything else, I said, “Yes, can I be taken off of plan of action?” He looked at me like I had lost my mind and said, “of course.”

It may have been my finest year of teaching. I saw all of my classes every day and worked hard to build relationships with my teammates and the families of my students. I also started experimenting in the classroom. My previous year's experience taught me that preparing students for standardized testing could be done in a matter of weeks. That allowed me the freedom to try different things in the classroom. We had "mock trials" where students had to explain the judicial system (putting fairy tale characters on the stand), we held a session of Congress, researched an issue and wrote a letter to an elected representative (including determining if it was a local, state or national issue) and participated in several online activities including a stock market game. What I verified was that students always loved to be on computers and were engaged in learning when they were on them and properly supervised. The architecture of the school (it was an 80-year-old building) prohibited effective use of computers for a lot of things, but the kernels of an idea were being formed.

At the end of that school year, my students participated in the Civics and Economics Standards of Learning tests and finished first in the city. With a 96% pass rate, I had affirmed that my unorthodox methods were a new way to educate children of extreme poverty.

2007-2008

We opened a new middle and high school in a completely remodeled building that looked nothing like a school. The rooms were sponsored by local businesses, and we had ample access to laptop computers in the classrooms. Every room had an interactive White board, a projector and a set of classroom response system remotes. I wired my classroom for 5.1-surround sound and started the year with a laptop cart in my room. This was my first year teaching World Geography, a ninth grade subject that most school systems in the state did not teach (most opted for World History and Geography). I had been warned that it was a difficult subject for ninth

grade students and my Principal gave me the contact information for a teacher in the district who had taught it for several years. The teacher generously shared all of his resources and I was off and running. There were two major changes that year though that stymied me. One, I would be teaching two new high school subjects that year, World Geography and World History. Two, I was teaching the subjects on a 4X4 schedule. My students would take their first Standards of Learning Test in January (World Geography) and their second (World History) in May. Even though block schedules had been extended, I was losing a third of my student contact hours. To say I was highly concerned would be an understatement. I lost sleep over this challenge. Additionally, all students in the school were on track for advanced diplomas, meaning that passing the SOL was not only good for the school but ensured students received verified credit.

About two weeks into the school year, I was desperately struggling for a way to get information to the students. I was at the mid-term point of the first quarter and my students' test scores were nowhere near what they normally were. I had taught these students two previous school years and was fully aware of their capabilities. I was reading a lot of articles about teaching at-risk youth and was trying to figure out what my options were. I read an interesting article (that I can no longer locate) that speculated that if you required students to create, they would learn the lower order thinking skills that would be required when they took a test. This idea hit me hard and caused me to reflect on my classroom practices. It was a Friday when I read the article and I spent almost 40 hours that weekend designing activities that would give students choice, an opportunity to create something, allow them some self-expression, and would require that they master the learning objectives they needed to pass the Standards of Learning test. I introduced the first activity to my students on Monday morning and scheduled a meeting with the principal.

The students started working hard on their first activity and the morning went well. When I met with the principal I explained my concerns and told him my solution. I showed him some of the materials and also explained that I would need to use a laptop cart every day for the rest of the school year. I dubbed my idea “the paperless classroom” after a government initiative called the paperless office. I also explained that I was losing sleep over the possibility that this experiment would blow up in my face and our students would perform very poorly on the SOL in January. He stated, “I have been a principal for almost thirty years, if this goes poorly I will take the heat for it, don’t worry about it.” I will never forget that statement of support. As our year progressed and we fine-tuned the program, students started to work harder and harder. The classroom was typically so quiet you could hear a pin drop, not the stereotypical inner-city classroom.

We were a high profile school and oftentimes government officials, celebrities, and donors to the program would come into the classroom and stand in the back, watching my students busily clicking and typing. The desks were arranged so the students’ backs were to my desk (it was easier for me to monitor what they were doing with a quick glance) and there was usually some jazz or classical music playing in the classroom. I was oftentimes text chatting (using a classroom monitoring software program) with a student or helping them find information on the Internet. I was certain that it was not the most impressive atmosphere to observe. In order to remedy this, I appointed student ambassadors who would explain what was going on to visitors and who would answer any questions they might have. Occasionally, ambassadors would give me a prearranged signal and I would answer any questions that the students could not answer (usually regarding test score improvements and overall grades) in the hallway so I did not disrupt the learning environment. I encouraged visitors to interact with my

students and ask them questions. The Director of the program came into the classroom and was met at the door with a firm handshake and a smile by one of my student ambassadors.

Everything was explained to him and he left. Thirty minutes later, I received an email from the principal asking me to meet with him during my planning.

When I met with the principal he asked where I had come up with the idea of student ambassadors. I explained that I had visitors throughout the day and did not want to steal time from my students and I felt students should be the focus of our visitors, not teachers. He stood up, shook my hand and thanked me. He proceeded to tell me that the Director spoke highly of me and wanted the student ambassador program implemented school wide. High school students would conduct all tours with donors, visitors and government officials. I realized after the fact that many affluent schools do this as regular practice but apparently it was a new idea in our city.

The first series of SOL tests in January went well, with 96% of the students receiving verified credit in World Geography. With re-takes, eventually 100% of the class passed the SOL. The paperless classroom model was deemed a preliminary success. During winter break (for students, teachers were required to work that week) I designed the paperless curriculum for the next class. I had an interesting conversation with my school administration. They were unaware that I was designing curriculum from the ground up, using the state guidelines as my direction. They had been under the impression that I was collecting resources from teachers in the city. This revelation would factor into my career years later.

During the second semester, the class worked on the curriculum for World History and Geography. In May, 100% of World History students passed the SOL. Reflecting on the successes of that year, many things come to mind. I had established relationships with the families of my students. After succeeding with them on two previous occasions, students went

into the test believing they would pass, it was a given. I remember two of my female students who had never passed any SOL on the first try, jumping for joy and crying when they passed the World History SOL, I cried with them. I had established such strong relationships with my students and their families that they knew what my expectations were for them and they strived to meet those expectations. They also knew I was invested in their success. As proud as I am of their SOL performance, I also believe it is noteworthy that every student passed the class with a C or better. While the advanced scores did not meet my personal goal of 33%, I attributed that to the very short time (4 months) students had to prepare. Roughly 20% of my students passed advanced. I also believe that knowing I was proud of them motivated some of my students. I only said it when I meant it and oftentimes I was critical of what I saw as less than stellar efforts. The following school year was going to be different; I was going to be teaching eighth grade students again.

2008-2009

The year started on a high note. I had taught my new World Geography students before, so I did not have to establish relationships. The small size of the school allowed me to interact with most students the previous year and many went out of their way to speak to me before and after school. That meant I had relationships with most of my students and reestablishing contact with families was not hard. Teaching freshmen high school students is always a bit of a challenge. Many students are not used to the difficulty of the curriculum and the freedom they have in 9th grade. In order to guide them through the first few weeks of school, I started sending home a syllabus for each unit. I counted it as a homework extra credit grade if parents signed it and it also allowed me to encourage parents to go over the syllabus with their child. I also sent home grade reports every week. Again, I counted it as extra credit if the student returned it in

three days. I was also working on my National Board Certification, an intensive process that required a lot of time.

I continued using the curriculum designed for the paperless classroom and after some coaching most students understood the process. My goals for the year were to have over 90% of my students pass their World Geography SOL the first time they took it; I also wanted 100% to pass the class, and I was hoping for an increase in the pass advanced scores. In order to facilitate student needs, I started staying an hour and half after dismissal on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday. This allowed students to work on the computers in my classroom and to receive tutoring if they needed it. It was voluntary at the beginning of the year but in October it was mandatory for students who had a D or F. I also required all students who were in danger of failing the SOL in January to attend for tutoring. Oftentimes students tried to avoid the Geography Lab (as I dubbed it) but a quick call home usually remedied that. Parents banded together to get students home. We did not have an activity bus because we were an extended day school. Participation level was pretty good though occasionally I would have to track down students and remind them that they were missing Geography Lab.

As January approached I was concerned about the SOL scores, but my tracking tools told me I was going to meet my goals. The requirements for verified credit and the 4X4 schedule made it essential that students pass the test the first time they took it. I had too many students who appeared to fall short. Consequently, I developed a game that allowed students to play online from home or during study periods. Participation was very high because the games were engaging and some were humorous. When students took the SOL, they exceeded my goals. All of the students passed the class and the advanced scores did increase. I was slightly upset that some students did not pass the test, but most did pass the retake.

I had an interesting conversation with a group of students right before the Christmas break. The small size of the school allowed students to know all of the teachers whether they had them or not. A group of 8th and 9th grade students approached me during my lunch break and asked to speak with me. I invited them in and they sat around my desk. They started by asking me what kind of music I liked and wanted me to play them some of my favorite songs. As the conversation progressed they explained their dilemma. The school served the urban community and hip-hop was the music of choice at school dances and activities. The students who were in my room were fans of rock music. While their tastes ranged from alternative to heavy metal, their tastes were not being addressed. What they wanted was a club that served their needs. I agreed to sponsor a new club named after a musical consortium in New York called The Black Rock Coalition. Clubs at the school were held on Friday mornings. Traditionally, I had sponsored the Stock Market Club or a computer gaming club. This club was very different. Students brought in their music and shared it. I had to approve everything played in my classroom, I wanted to ensure the music was positive and the language was appropriate for school. The club was a huge hit with over 30 members. I found it very rewarding because it allowed students to express their individuality in a culture that did not always encourage that. One project my students took on that still has an impact was the “White Music?” project. They created a series of posters with pictures of Black rock musicians, both modern and historical underneath the caption “White Music?” It was a way to get their classmates to think about the arts and the impact the Black community had on them. The club and project were successful enough that it remained active for several years after I left the classroom.

The incoming 8th grade students were studying Civics and Economics. That required that I create a new curriculum for that class that was computer based. During the semester I

continued with the initiatives I had started with my World Geography students. The parents were even more supportive and would often bring pizza or snacks for the students who stayed after school. I also filmed several of my lessons for my National Board Certification package and worked with parent and teacher groups as part of that process. That spring the students met my SOL and academic goals. The advanced pass rate was close to 35%, the highest I had ever attained using the 4X4 schedule. Unknown to me at the end of the school year, I would narrowly miss National Board Certification and would have to retry the following year.

2009-2010

This school year was a relatively quiet one. I continued to refine my curriculum and improve the tools that I was using to deliver material to my students. I was generating five to ten minute videos students could download and watch. I also had audio lectures they could use; a practice I had started a few years before. It was encouraging to see students studying for a test by watching my videos. I was assigned a student teacher that would join me in the winter. The World Geography scores in January were good, over 90% of my students passed. One tool I had relied on extensively to determine who should be in Geography Lab did backfire. I never planned on a student cheating so she (or he) would not have to stay after school. I had a series of pretests I started administering about two months before the SOL. Having collected data over the years, I could predict student scores (+ or – five points) pretty reliably. The pretests also indicated what areas I had to review prior to the test. One student was consistently scoring in the 500s on the pretest (an advanced score). When she took the actual SOL she scored in the low 300s, the score was too low to qualify her for an expedited retake, this meant she had to attend summer school or pass the test at a later date without the benefit of intervention. I was shocked and it took me a while to figure out that she was copying from the student in front of her. After

that incident, I put my tests on the computer with a randomizer that drew from a bank of test questions. I discussed it with the student and her parent, explaining what her options were.

After the SOL test in January, I taught eighth grade Civics and Economics. My largest class was a group of advanced students that would prove to be my most trying. I started the class off and after two weeks co-taught them with the student teacher. After that she was supposed to spend six weeks teaching them, developing her lessons with my guidance, and delivering the material to the students. While I wanted to keep my curriculum in place, I had to allow her to develop lessons that would enable her to teach and be observed. A lot of what I had done was set aside or adapted to allow her to teach traditionally. While I encouraged her not to take that path, she was directed by her advisors to use their framework. I did encourage her to keep a large amount of technology in her lessons, advice she did follow. After the first week of student teaching, I was told some students in the advanced class were very combative towards the student teacher. I would come into the classroom unannounced and did not observe the behavior but it continued. I tried speaking with the class and it did not help. While the student teacher was not complaining, some of the students were concerned. I finally asked that the children who were misbehaving be sent to me. I was shocked that the best students in the class were the ones causing the most problems. I sat down with the student teacher and helped her call family members to get students in line. It took a while but she persevered. When the students took their SOL in early June, over 85% of them passed, while it was not the best year I had, I was pleased with their success and my student teacher's abilities. I redid several sections of my National Board Certification package and submitted them. I would be certified the following autumn. At the end of the school year, I applied to become an Instructional Technology Coach and was offered the position. My time as a full time classroom instructor was over.

2010-2013

At the beginning of the 2010 school year, I was recognized as one of the “21 to Watch,” it was an inaugural program that was used to commend educators and other school employees who were using technology and other innovations to change the face of teaching. It was a great honor and was a great start to the year. The one drawback to taking the new position was that I was no longer interacting with students and was now there to help teachers. I was also assigned to two schools, Eastend and an elementary school. So the relationships that I had worked so hard to establish were being broken. Several parents were very upset and expressed their displeasure. I had initiated an Advanced Placement Program for incoming high school freshmen. My replacement was not qualified to teach the class so it had to be abandoned for the year (it did get implemented in 2011-2012). Parents were not only upset that their child had lost their opportunity for college credit but that I would not be teaching them. The administration did their best to explain that I had received a promotion, but even the director of the school expressed his disappointment. Later in 2010, I received my National Board Certification in History and Social Studies. I enjoyed my job and believed it to be one of the best in the school system, but I missed my students and their families.

On February 17, 2012, I was informed that one of my former students had died of a brain seizure. I was devastated. He was the second student I had lost; the first was lost to suicide over summer break two years earlier. This one had a greater impact on me personally. I was the victim’s mentor for several years and he went out of his way to speak with me when he knew I was in the building. The day before he died we spoke in the hallway, I teased him about getting prepared to graduate the following year and reminded him he had to work hard to get to college. When we parted I gave him a hug and told him I loved him, he responded, “I love you too, Mr.

K.” The next day he was gone and while I knew he was with God, it was a very emotional time for me. I went to his Going Home Celebration and his mother came up to me, hugged me and told me, “It’s gonna be okay Mr. K, he is with God now.” I wept. I realized at that time that I would never have students in my life again, like I did as a teacher. At the end of 2012, I was transferred from Eastend School. My wife still works there and I occasionally see students from the school, but my contacts are slowly slipping away. In 2014 the last class I taught graduated from the school.

Reflections

When I look back on my years in the classroom, I believe what happened was unique but can be replicated. My entire teaching career was built on relationships, with students, other teachers, administrators, parents, and families of my students. Those relationships allowed me to reach students who may not have engaged otherwise. In my career I wrote very few discipline referrals, most of those were for fighting and were required by school policy. I looked at discipline referrals as a failure of my leadership in the classroom and in the hallways. When students had disputes with each other or me, I commanded respect. I wanted my students to be treated with dignity and respect by their peers, by visitors and me. I started every “hall way” conversation with a student with the question, “have I done something to disrespect you?” They always said no, I then asked, “Why are you disrespecting me?” That almost always resulted in a de-escalation of emotions and a rational conversation. I had two fights in my classroom in all my years of teaching. The first one was my first week in the classroom and the other was several years later and was the result of a disagreement before school. I vividly remember the principal good naturedly teasing me about it. He told me he was honestly shocked it happened because I

controlled my classroom so well. My duty stations, the location of my classroom and my status in the school was determined by where I could most greatly impact student behavior.

There were failures in my career. I look back at the students who did not pass SOLs as my failures. The only times I was not disappointed in the results were the times I had a 100% pass rate. I had the misfortune of losing a student to suicide. I also lost a student to the juvenile justice program. I stayed in his life and a few years later spoke at his Church's baccalaureate service honoring his high school graduation. Today he is a US Marine. In my heart I knew he had the aptitude to go to college, so I will always second-guess myself. There were a small number of students I could not reach. Sometimes I lose sleep over them, wondering what I could have done differently. I remember them much more vividly than I remember the successes. I will not propose that all of my students liked me. I was strict and demanding. I am sure I exasperated many students who turned in work that they thought was their best and I gave them a C, knowing they could do better. Finally, I told all of the new teachers when they came into my department or started teaching at the school, that it was their job to build relationships. If I could drive from one end of the community to the other and no one waved to me or said hello I had failed to establish the relationships I needed to be a successful teacher. I was not a perfect teacher, but I believe I gave students the full measure of my heart and was successful because they believed I loved them and that I was truly disappointed when they failed to meet my expectations. It is my hope and prayer that I was the kind of teacher God wanted me to be.

APPENDIX B: IRB Approval Letter**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 17, 2016

Michael T. Koeniger, Sr.
IRB Approval 2430.021716: Bridged: An Autoethnography Exploring How an Alternative School for "At Risk" Middle and High School Youth Overcomes the Achievement Gap

Dear Michael,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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APPENDIX C: IRB Consent Document

CONSENT FORM

Bridged: An Autoethnography Exploring How an Alternative School for “At Risk” Middle and High School Youth Overcomes The Achievement Gap □ Michael T. Koeniger, Sr. □ Liberty University □ School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study to learn about the experiences of students who attended an alternative public school for inner city students. You were selected as a possible participant because you were a member of the school community between 2003 and 2013. Please read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

Michael Koeniger, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand how alternative public schools for at risk students bridge the achievement gap, what defines the culture of the school and how the administrators, teachers, students and parents interact within the school. There have been many studies conducted about the performance gap and how it applies to inner city students, but very few successful programs have been studied.

Procedures:

First, you will read this informed consent information. If you choose to proceed, please sign the form.

Next, you will participate in an individual or small group interview. Interviews should last about 60- 90 minutes. The interview will be done in person and audio recorded. You may stop the interview at any time or ask that the recording be turned off if you would like to ask a question “off of the record.” The recording may be started again if you agree.

After the interview, you may be asked to read over the transcript from your interview to check for accuracy. The transcript will be emailed to you. If you have any follow-up comments or questions, you may discuss them over a recorded telephone conversation. At that time, your participation in the study will be concluded.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The study has minimal risk for participants, which are no more than you would encounter in everyday life. During the study, the researcher may offer academic, spiritual, or counseling resource information if it is believed to be needed by participants.

There are no direct benefits for participation in this research study.

Compensation:

There is no direct compensation offered. The researcher may pay for your meal if the interview is conducted in a restaurant or coffee house.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private and secured when not in use. In any report or article I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify an individual or the school. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. All participants will be assigned a pseudonym for the final reporting of my findings. The findings will only be used for educational purposes. The recordings and transcripts will be stored in a locked safe in the researcher's office or on a password protected and encrypted USB drive.

There are some limits to the confidentiality. Participants may be interacting with another interview subject if they agree to be in a group interview. It is not possible to assure that all participants will maintain the confidentiality or privacy of others, however I want to emphasize the importance of confidentiality and will remind all participants at the beginning and end of the interview. I encourage everyone in the interview to respect the privacy of their fellow participants. However, all students enrolled in the focus group were a part of the school community and are aware of the challenges members face within the community.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University, the school, or me. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study:

If you decide to withdraw from the study, notify the researcher in person, by email, or by phone, and you will be withdrawn from the study, and your data will not be used in the dissertation. Any data collected from participants who withdraw from the study prior to completion will be destroyed. Audio will be deleted from the recording device and transcripts will be shredded and securely destroyed.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Michael T Koeniger. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at [phone number redacted] or [email redacted] or contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Russ Yocum, at [email redacted].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [email redacted].

You will be provided a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

____ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me for this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 2/17/16 to 2/16/17 Protocol # 2430.021716

APPENDIX D: Participant Recruitment Email

Subject: Research Study

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for an Educational Doctorate degree. The purpose of my research is to discover how alternative public schools for inner city students bridge the achievement gap. I am writing to invite you to voluntarily participate in my study focusing on our time at (real school name here).

If you are 18 years of age or older, attended/worked/or were the guardian of a student who attended (real school name here) between 2003 and 2013, were part of the community there for at least five years and are willing to participate, you will be asked to sit down for a face to face interview at a place of your choosing. It should take approximately 90 minutes for the interview. You will then receive an email with a transcript of the interview attached for your verification. If you feel the transcript is accurate, you have nothing further you would like to add, and I do not have any additional questions, the process is through. If there is anything further to discuss, we will follow up with either a 30-minute face-to-face interview or phone call. Your participation will be completely confidential, and no personal, identifying information will be required.

A consent document is attached to this email. I will also bring a blank copy to the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you are interested in participating, please provide me with a time, date and location that is convenient for you. If you choose to participate, please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Mike Koeniger