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# A CASE STUDY OF FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A HIGH-PERFORMING, HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOL

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By

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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of Creighton University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Interdisciplinary Leadership

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# Abstract

Research shows low-socioeconomic status (SES) students typically score lower than their mid- to high-income peers on academic standardized tests; consequently, high-poverty schools, which enroll 75 percent or more low-SES students, generally perform below proficiency standards. However, some high-poverty schools demonstrate high-performance defying the norm. The purpose of this qualitative, single case study was to explore faculty perspectives of the characteristics of a high-performing, high-poverty school. The study focused on one high-performing, high-poverty, metropolitan middle school in the Midwest. The aim of this study was to support practitioner research and inform school leaders of faculty perceptions of the characteristics of high-performance in high-poverty schools. The introduction begins with background on poverty and education. Then, the literature review examines research on the impact of poverty in child development and education as well as student achievement. The methodology outlines data collection of interviews, observations, and documents and analysis through manual, hand-coding. The findings present the themes which emerged from the study: student-centered education, professional relationship and professional growth, MLSS (multi-layered system of supports), cultural responsiveness, and transformational leadership. These themes defined four critical solutions to address practice, systems, culture, and leadership, and include recommendations for hiring and developing school leaders, principals' personal professional growth, and building capacity for shared leadership.

*Key words:* qualitative, case study, practitioner research, low-socioeconomic status (SES), high-poverty schools, high-performing schools, student-centered education, cultural responsiveness, multi-layered system of supports, transformational leadership

# Dedication

This dissertation in practice is dedicated to the people closest to me in my life, my beloved family. My husband, children, parents, siblings, nieces, nephews, and grand-nieces and nephews, each one of you offers unwavering love, loyalty, and support. You have all profoundly influenced who I am and have strengthened my determination.

For those who passed on and were taken too soon to fulfill their dreams;

For those not afforded opportunities to follow a path of their own choosing;

For those planning and anticipating the boundless future which lies ahead;

I dedicate my journey, my learning, and my work to you.

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"Leaders matter less for the ideas they possess and more for their ability to connect ideas (sometimes controversial) and people across their organizations." ~ Eric Sabel

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# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Research shows high-poverty schools, those which enroll 75 percent or more (NCES, 2019) of low-socioeconomic status (SES) students, typically perform below proficiency standards (Reardon, et al., 2019). High-poverty schools are challenged to support needs of low-SES students, who often exhibit learning difficulties associated with cognitive, psychological, and social behaviors (AAP Council on Community Pediatrics, 2016; Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health et al., 2016; Evans & Kim, 2007; Hair, et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2019; Luby et al., 2013; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). Studies indicate standardized tests scores of low-SES students are 8-10 percentage points below their mid- to high-income classmates (Hair, et al., 2015). Despite more than 50 years of federal legislation that provides funding to schools to address the achievement gap, high-poverty schools fail to meet proficiency standards (NCES, 2019).

Some high-poverty schools, however, defy the norm, meeting or exceeding state achievement standards. Research reveals these schools have developed programs to address student learning challenges and promote student achievement. These programs and practices share common attributes among high-performing, high-poverty schools. The characteristics include clear mission and vision, high standards and expectations for all students, a culturally responsive learning environment, family and community involvement, visionary leadership, collaboration among faculty, data-driven decision-making, standards-based learning, evidence-based instructional practices, and ongoing professional development, (Jacobson, et al., 2007; Jensen, 2009; Kannapel, et al., 2005; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007; Tilley et al., 2012). In 2017, the governing agency for education in the state where this study was conducted released a research-based framework for developing equitable support for all learners in all schools. Aligned with research of high-performing, high-poverty schools, the state agency's framework advocates schools commit to a vision of high-performance by demonstrating a positive culture of equity, high quality instruction, strategic use of data, collaboration, support for all learners, shared leadership, and evidence-based practices ("Framework," 2017). Collectively, these characteristics, identified through research, support efforts to address the challenges high-poverty schools face overcoming the cognitive, psychological, and behavioral implications impacting low-SES students. This research identifies common characteristics for high-performing, high-poverty schools which can be grouped into three general themes: culture, leadership, and instruction and learning.

This qualitative case study sought to assess faculty members' perspectives of the characteristics attributed to high-performance in one high-poverty middle school in a Midwest, metropolitan school district. The case study design provided for an exploration of data collected through interviews, observations, and an analysis of documents to identify themes related to the school's high performance. The purpose of the case study was to describe faculty perspectives of the characteristics of a high-performing, high-poverty school. To examine the lived experiences and gather the perspectives of faculty in a high-performing, high-poverty, this qualitative study was driven by the following question: What are the perceptions of faculty regarding the characteristics of school performance within high poverty, high performance schools?

The findings gathered from this single case study were developed through manual, hand coding of data and an iterative process for analysis which included member checking and peer debriefing. A detailed narrative of the data findings from this qualitative case study of a single high-performing, high-poverty school identified five prevalent themes: student-centered education, professional relationships and professional growth, MLSS (multi-layered system of supports), cultural responsiveness, and transformational leadership. These findings form the basis for four critical solutions to address the challenges facing high-poverty schools, advocating district administrators, principals, and teachers build their capacity to implement student-centered education through multi-layered system of supports (MLSS) and a culture of professional relationships and professional growth supported by transformational leadership to promote high-performance in high-poverty schools.

The aim of this dissertation in practice is to support practitioner research and inform school leaders of faculty perceptions of the characteristics of high-performance in high-poverty schools. The conclusions and recommendations fulfill the study's aim to support practitioner research and inform district administrators, principals, and teachers of the systems and practices faculty attribute to high-performance in a high-poverty school. The implementation of the solutions advocates recommendations for district administration hiring and development of principals; personal and professional growth of principals; and building faculty capacity in collaborative and shared leadership.

## Statement of the Problem

In the United States, approximately 39 percent of all children live in low-socioeconomic status (low-SES) households (NCCP, 2021). Studies have shown children from low-SES households experience greater challenges in academic achievement than their peers from mid- to high-income households (Hair, et al., 2015; Hernandez, 2011;

Hopson & Lee, 2011; Pascoe et al., 2016). Research reveals students living in poverty for any period of time, exhibit atypical neurological development in areas of the brain which support cognitive functioning (learning and problem solving) and executive functioning skills (attending to task, organization, emotional regulation, self-monitoring) (Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health et al., 2016; AAP Council on Community Pediatrics, 2016; Hair, et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2019; Evans & Kim, 2007; Luby et al., 2013; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). On average, low-SES students score 8-10 percentage points less on standardized tests their mid- to high-income counterparts (Hair, et al., 2015). In addition, 22 percent of children who have lived in poverty at some point in their childhood and 32 percent who have spent more than half their lives in poverty will not graduate from high school (Hernandez, 2011). Consequently, high-poverty schools, those with an enrollment of 75 percent or more low-SES students (NCES, 2019), face challenges to meet students' academic needs and typically perform below proficiency standards (Reardon et al., 2019).

## Federal Legislation and High-Poverty Schools

Research indicates school funding has a direct impact on student performance with higher school funding leading to better student performance (Turner, et al., 2016). Nearly 50 percent of funding for schools comes from property taxes (Biddle & Berlier, 2002); therefore, schools located in low-income areas receive less financial support from local taxation. A national political culture aimed at providing equal educational opportunities for all students has transformed public educational policy for more than 50 years but has done little to impact socioeconomic achievement gaps.

### ***Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)***

President Lyndon Johnson’s administration sought to provide financial support to those schools in areas with greatest financial need through legislation. In 1965, President Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (ESEA, 1965). The act was a response to the “War on Poverty” and was intended to provide educational support programs for low-income and at-risk students (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 2017). ESEA was comprised of provisions which designated funding for specific programs for low-SES students. Approximately 83% of the funding for ESEA programs is allocated to Title I, which is intended to support programs to improve reading, writing, and mathematics skills for low-SES students (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 2017). The remaining funds are allotted among Titles II – VI provisions, which provide for resources and programming, school libraries, textbooks, preschool, English Language Learners, students with disabilities, gifted students, instructional technology initiatives, and professional development (2017).

Since its inception, ESEA has been amended multiple times (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 2017). In 1969, President Nixon signed amendments to ESEA, which included funding for programs for refugee children and children in low-income housing (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 2017). In 1981, President Regan’s administration oversaw the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA) which reduced federal regulation of Chapter I (formerly Title I) funding and shifted responsibility to the states (ECIA, 1981). In 1994, under President Clinton’s administration, Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA) identified math and reading/language arts standards by which to assess student achievement and to evaluate school accountability (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 2017). IASA also "gave more local control overall so that federal officials and states could waive federal requirements that interfered with school improvements" (2017, para. 10).

### ***No Child Left Behind (NCLB)***

School accountability for federal funds received through ESEA changed dramatically with President George W. Bush's administration's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (NCLB, 2002). Under NCLB, Title I allocated the greatest portion of federal education funding to assist states in meeting the needs of low-SES students (Losen, 2004). NCLB set an expectation for 100 percent of students to meet or exceed standards with no adjustments or considerations for the diverse needs of learners (Muhammad, 2015). NCLB instituted requirements of standardized testing to measure student achievement, and schools were required to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) based on that standardized testing. Under NCLB, teachers who were hired under Title I funding were required to become *highly qualified* (NCLB, 2002). Schools not achieving AYP under NCLB ran the risk of corrective actions including sanctions and restructuring (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 2017). Critics of NCLB claim the expectations of 100 percent achievement were unattainable and the response to reform was insufficient to provide the support necessary to meet the needs all learners, including low-SES students (Losen, 2004; Muhammad, 2015; Murnane, 2007).

### ***Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)***

On December 10, 2015, President Barack Obama signed into law Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which restructured the punitive nature of NCLB (ESSA, 2015).

While NCLB focused on negative consequences for school districts falling short in school improvement, ESSA focused its efforts on preparing all students for success in college and careers (Department of Education, n.d.). ESSA requires states to consider more than test scores when evaluating a school (n.d.), taking into consideration high school graduation rates as a performance measure for schools, among other indicators (ESSA, 2015). ESSA also eliminates AYP and *highly qualified* teacher requirements. (2015). ESSA was signed into legislation in 2015 and implemented in the 2017-18 school year. In 2016, the Department of Education and other federal agencies defined expectations for state compliance to ESSA (NASCA, n.d.). ESSA is currently moving into its fourth year of implementation, and its success has yet to be determined.

### ***Socioeconomic Achievement Gap***

Despite more than 50 years of federal legislation focused on policy to address equity in funding, legislative action has been insufficient in narrowing achievement gaps for socioeconomic groups. NCES (2019) found no measurable difference in achievement gap scores for corresponding data extending back to 2005. Studies from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows achievement gaps associated with race and ethnicity have decreased, however, those gaps associated with socioeconomic status have persisted (NCES, 2019). Reardon et al. (2019) indicated the socioeconomic achievement gap increased 40 percent in the last 50 years. The impact of socioeconomic achievement gap is long-term:

> These gaps have far-reaching implications: in school completion, lifetime earnings, and the wide range of resulting societal outcomes. Gaps in achievement

> related to family background, therefore, persist into the school system, and the system itself does little to blunt their impact (Houk & Debray, 2015, p. 150).

Mandated legislation intended to address the socioeconomic inequities in education have had minimal impact on student achievement and may have perpetuated those achievement gaps (Muhammad, 2015). Muhammad (2015) argues the socioeconomic achievement gap has persevered because “a philosophical commitment to equity has not made a practical commitment to equality” (p. 35). In other words, in order for schools to address achievement gaps created by socioeconomic disparities, school personnel must commit to a change in practice. Therefore, research should examine practices in schools that address the needs of high-poverty students and support students to successfully meet or exceed state standards for student performance.

## High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools

Despite the challenges of poverty and the continued socioeconomic gap, there are some high-poverty schools which meet or exceed state standards, demonstrating high-performance. These schools design programs which support and promote student performance at or above proficiency. Identifying the characteristics which promote academic achievement for low-SES students offers a model for other high-poverty schools. Research of high-performing, high-poverty schools identifies programs, practices, and policies centered on common themes of culture, leadership, and instruction and learning (Jacobson, et al., 2007; Jensen, 2009; Kannapel, et al., 2005; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007; Tilley, Smith, & Claxton, 2012; “Framework,” 2017). Collectively, programming focused on these themes helps educators address the challenges low-SES children face overcoming academic challenges and support achievement of high performance in school. To examine the characteristics of a high-performing, high-poverty school, this case study explored the perspectives of faculty serving a high-poverty student population in a school which meets and exceeds standards.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, dissertation in practice case study was to explore faculty perspectives of the characteristics of a high-performing, high-poverty school. The study focused on one Midwest, metropolitan middle school identified as high-performing and high-poverty.

## Research Question

Examining and describing the experiences from the perspectives of faculty in a school with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students, this qualitative case study was guided by the following research question:

What are the perceptions of faculty regarding the characteristics of school performance within high poverty, high performance schools?

The research question was guided by the following sub questions:

Sub question #1: What professional practices do faculty describe as beneficial to support academic achievement of students and lead to school ratings which meet or exceed standards?

Sub question #2: What school systems or programs do faculty identify as beneficial to support the academic achievement of students and lead to school ratings which meet or exceed standards?

Sub question #3: What relational practices do faculty attribute to establish the school's culture?

Sub question #4: What leadership practices do faculty attribute to the school's high performance?

## Aim of the Dissertation in Practice

The aim of this dissertation in practice was to support practitioner research and inform school leaders of faculty perceptions of the characteristics of high-performance in high-poverty schools. The findings of the study built my skills with continued professional development as a practitioner researcher and a school leader. Practitioner research improves research competencies while strengthening the practice of continued analysis and application of findings to practice. The findings form the basis for evidence-based, school leadership training aligned with these characteristics and which informs high-poverty schools in practices and systems which support instruction and learning and to meet and exceed student achievement in high-poverty schools.

## Methodology Overview

This single case study examined the characteristics of a high-performing, high-poverty school from the perspective of faculty. The design focused on an individual case to explore the themes which may identify the school's strategies for success. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain a case study differs from other qualitative approaches with its focus less on methodology and more on the case to be studied. The authors define a case study as a qualitative approach which explores a case bounded by specific parameters. Case studies focus on a single case or multiple cases with data gathered from several sources, which may include interviews, observations, and documents. The findings of a case study are presented in a narrative description with case themes.

This qualitative case study sought to discover the characteristics of a high-performing, high-poverty school based on the perspectives of faculty, utilizing data from interviews, observations, and school documents. The method allowed for an exploratory approach to gather data from the perspectives of faculty members in the school and identify themes based on those perspectives. The parameters for this study were based on three factors: the school district, the school's poverty status, and the school's overall state accountability score. The specific parameters of this study explored a middle school in a Midwest, metropolitan school district with a high-poverty status and a high-performance rating based on state standards. This methodology supports the educational practice of practitioner research by gathering applied, relevant data to inform instructional practice and support professional growth (Hatch, 2002).

## Definition of Relevant Terms

For the purpose of this research of a high-performing, high-poverty school, several terms will be used to define the parameters of the study. The following terms were used operationally within this study.

*High-performing school:* A high-performing school is defined by the state agency governing education as one with an overall accountability rating of 63% or higher on the state report card (Report cards home, n.d.).

*High-poverty school:* A high-poverty school is defined as having a population with 75 percent or more students eligible for free or reduced lunch (Economically disadvantaged, 2019; NCES, 2019).

*Low-SES (low socioeconomic status)*: Low-SES is defined as households with low-income, families who are "near poor" with a household income of 100-199 percent and "poor" as a household income below 100 percent of the poverty threshold level (Koball & Jiang, 2018, p. 2).

*Metropolitan:* A metropolitan area is comprised by "one or more counties that contain a city of 50,000 or more inhabitants, or contain an urbanized area (UA), and have a total population of at least 100,000 people" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018, p. 13-1).

*Middle school:* An educational institution that provides instruction to students in grades 6-8.

These terms are key aspects of this research study. They outline the parameters for the specific case selected for research.

## Delimitations and Limitations

Researchers encounter restrictions with delimitations and limitations in studies (Simon, 2010). These restrictions constrain the findings or generalizability of the study. Simon (2010) describes delimitations as factors the researcher can control. In this qualitative case study, delimitations include time and the parameters established for the population of the case study. The author explains limitations in a study are those factors that the researcher cannot control. The limitations of this case study included time, resources, and design.

### Delimitations

The delimitations of this case study were associated with defining the population of research with specific parameters. For this dissertation in practice case study, the research focused on one high-performing, high-poverty middle school in a metropolitan area within a Midwestern state. The study concentrated on a school that is both high-poverty and high-performing to examine the attributes which have supported the school's achievement. In addition, specifically selecting a middle school narrowed the type of school, as middle schools have a different academic structure with teams of teachers within each grade level and with a different design of the school schedule; therefore, the results of the study may not reflect the practices in an elementary or high school. Furthermore, focusing on a metropolitan school centered the research on a large school district, which typically has more resources to provide support to staff and students. Studying a school in one Midwestern state also presented a delimitation for the case study. Each state has its own distinct legislative guidelines for schools. The state in which this study was conducted utilizes its own standardized tests for assessing student achievement and may define expectations of achievement differently than other states. These specific parameters defined the population of the study; however, they also presented delimitations in the generalization of the findings to other schools based on state performance, demographics of the student population, grade levels, and geographic region.

## Limitations

This case study examined a school at a point in which it has achieved high-performance status, in a sense providing a snapshot in time. This presented a limitation. While it was anticipated the study would reveal the narrative of the school's journey to high-performance, time constraints limited the study in following the school's path and faculty experiences in future years. Another limitation of this case study was resources. With only a single researcher conducting the study, the research was deficient of perspectives of other researchers and was limited to my viewpoint and background knowledge. Expanding the research to include multiple schools would have required additional time and collaboration of other researchers to accomplish adequate data collection. In an attempt to address that limitation, I invited participants to offer feedback in data analysis and debriefed with a third-party to examine interpretations.

Also, a limitation of case studies, as with most qualitative research, is the inability to generalize the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because case studies examine individual experiences, the findings cannot be generalized to other circumstances. Further research of additional cases would be necessary to gather more data, provide in-depth analysis and support the potential application of findings to support other high-poverty schools.

## School Leadership in High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools

Research indicates school leaders have a critical influence on student achievement (Hattie, 2009; Jacobson et al., 2007; Loeb, et al., 2005; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Tilley et al., 2012). School leaders impact student achievement through systems of collaborative and shared leadership, articulation of a clear school vision, hiring and retention of quality teachers, stewardship with resources, and establishing expectations of high standards of teaching and learning for all (DeWitt, 2017; Loeb, et al., 2010; Marzano, et al., 2005; Senge, et al., 2012). Therefore, understanding the role and responsibility of leadership is critical to achieve high performance in high-poverty schools.

Studies indicate high-poverty schools experience greater turnover with school leadership and are more likely to be led by less experienced principals (Branch, et al., 2008; Bétielle, et al., 2012; DeAngelis & White, 2011; Loeb, et al., 2010; Miller, 2013;

Muhammed, 2015). The instability of leadership in high-poverty schools impedes the development of systematic programs and practices necessary to meet the challenges low-SES students face in school. Further research is needed to understand the practices and programs in high-poverty schools to identify and develop training to support and retain school leaders.

Transformational leadership practices have the potential to positively impact student achievement (DeWitt, 2017; Marzano, et al., 2005; Muhammed & Cruz, 2019). Examining this case study through the lens of transformational leadership focused both on instructional and collaborative leadership. Leaders who empower their employees develop trust. These leaders motivate personnel to envision a purpose beyond their own benefit and engage employees in intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation which develops a culture of trust (Barbuto, 2005; Bass, 1990; Marzano, et al., 2005). Transformational school leaders develop systems of shared and collaborative leadership, data-driven decision making, professional learning, and implementation of research-based instructional practices to achieve higher student achievement and improved school performance (Danielson, 2006; Danielson, 2016). The transformational leadership necessary to achieve high-performance in a high-poverty school must be assessed from the perspective of the employees who share in and contribute to the established systems supporting student achievement.

School leaders serve as instructional leaders for their schools. As instructional leaders, school leaders model best practices and collaborate with teachers in professional growth and instructional practices. Danielson (2016) emphasizes ongoing learning is a professional obligation for educators, explaining, “Just as teachers have the responsibility to create a culture for learning in their classrooms, school leaders must establish a culture of professional inquiry" (p. 23). This case study will utilize practitioner research as a model of best practice in education and in the interest of informing professional growth of school leaders.

This qualitative case study drew on the perspectives of faculty to understand the established programs and systems as well as leadership practices, in their high-performing school. By exploring the characteristics of a high-performing, high-poverty school, this study sought to assess the systems of a learning organization, which research indicates should be supported by transformational leadership, both instructional and collaborative (Marzano, et al., 2005; Muhammed & Cruz, 2019; Senge et al, 2012; DeWitt, 2017). This study also provided practitioner research data to inform practice and support professional growth. With the findings of this research study, I utilized the research data as additional data points to assess practices and drive decision-making within the school as well as determine professional development opportunities. In addition, the research could support evidence-based leadership training to provide other school leaders of high-poverty schools a foundation for designing a systematic approach to effective transformational leadership which supports and addresses improvements in teaching and learning.

## Significance of the Study

### Contributions to Research

Poverty in the United States continues to impact a significant percentage of school-aged children. In addition, most high-poverty schools continually earn below expectations ratings, despite extensive research of leadership, programs, and practices which support improvement in student achievement and school improvement. Continued analysis of high-performing, high-poverty schools provides added data to contribute to the existing research. This research as well as existing research of high-performing, high-poverty schools provide examples of positive deviance and a model by which other school leaders and faculty should seek to align.

## Contributions to Practice

To support school improvement in high-poverty schools and shift to transformational leadership, which is inclusive of both instructional and collaborative leadership, school leaders foster learning organizations by developing research-based systems which build on teacher collective efficacy (Danielson, 2016; Hattie, 2009; Senge, et al., 2012). To improve instructional practice, educators are called to be practitioner researchers and utilize research "as a tool and procedure for generating practical contextual knowledge for improvement" (Anwar, 2016, p. 106). Practitioner research as a methodology is conducted by educators studying practices in their own schools (Caro-Bruce et al., 2007). When educators are empowered with research, resources, and training, they recognize new opportunities in schools and become leaders who work collaboratively to address school needs and concerns (Danielson, 2006). This qualitative case study served as practitioner research to inform me, as a school leader, of practices which support higher student achievement and school improvement.

## Contributions to Policy

The framework developed by the state agency governing education ascertains schools committed to a vision of high-performance demonstrate a positive culture of equity, high quality instruction, strategic use of data, collaboration, support for all learners, shared leadership, and evidence-based practices ("Framework," 2017). This case study examined the established practices of a Midwestern public school which has attained high-performance according to state measures. The research findings have the potential to provide insights to the recommendations outlined in the framework. The findings could support existing policy or direct future policy decisions in public schools, especially for schools with high rates of poverty.

## Summary

Children from low-socioeconomic status (SES) households demonstrate lower scores in academic achievement than their classmates from mid- to high-income households. Studies show high-poverty schools typically perform below proficiency standards (Reardon et al., 2019). Yet, some high-poverty schools demonstrate high-performance, meeting or exceeding state standards. A case study design to examine this case of positive deviance offered a qualitative approach to explore the research topic of high-performing, high-poverty schools. This qualitative, single case study assessed the characteristics attributed to high-performance through the perspectives of faculty members who serve in a Midwest, metropolitan, high-poverty school. The research in this case study sought to answer the question: What are the perceptions of faculty regarding the characteristics of school performance within high poverty, high performance schools? The use of a case study design allowed for an exploration of data collected through interviews and observations of faculty members and analysis of documents to identify themes. Delimitations of the study included the population selected for study with its focus on a single middle school in a metropolitan, Midwestern school district. Limitations of the study included time and resources of a single case study, as well as the design limitations of a case study. These delimitations and limitations hinder generalization of the study conclusions.

This case study sought to examine the characteristics of high-performing, high-poverty schools in the interest of contributing to the field of study, school leadership practice, and school policy. Leadership in high-poverty schools has been identified in research as unstable and inexperienced. The findings of this case study offer insights to support research-based training for district leaders to better prepare, sustain, and retain leaders. In addition, the study sought to identify the attributes which describe the practices, programs, and systems that help educators address the challenges low-SES students face overcoming academic challenges and support achievement of high performance in school. These findings, along with existing research, promote current policy and guide future policy aligned with the characteristics of high-performing schools and designed to support student achievement and school improvement in high-poverty schools. The next chapter of dissertation outlines the review of literature on the topic of high-performing, high-poverty schools.

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## Introduction

Studies indicate children from low-socioeconomic status (low SES) households encounter greater academic challenges and earn lower achievement scores than students from mid- to high-income households (Hair, et al., 2015; Hernandez, 2011; Koball & Jiang, 2018; NCES, 2019). Consequently, high-poverty schools, those with 75 percent or more of students eligible for free or reduced lunch (NCES, 2019), face challenges in meeting or exceeding academic expectations for low-SES students. And, despite more than 50 years of federal legislation to address socioeconomic inequities in education, the socioeconomic achievement gap for low-SES students has remained unchanged. There are, however, some high-poverty schools that have demonstrated high performance, meeting or exceeding standards. This dissertation in practice sought to examine the practices in place at high-poverty schools that have demonstrated high-performance and addressed the achievement gap, moving beyond philosophical commitment to practical actions.

This literature review outlines the research examining the implications of poverty for low-SES students and high-poverty schools. This examination begins with a review of studies which focus on the impact of poverty on children’s neurological and psychological development. The review then provides reference to the history of legislation intended to create equity in schools and address the socioeconomic gap. The continued socioeconomic achievement gap and the lack of change despite legislation provides justification for research of schools demonstrating positive deviance, meeting or exceeding standards despite economic obstacles. The review then assesses extensive studies which have examined the correlation between student SES and achievement with a specific focus on the themes of high-performing schools. The review provides an analysis of the research studies, methodologies, and findings based on the common themes of the research: leadership, culture, and instruction and learning.

## Poverty

Low-income is defined as household income levels at or above 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold (United States Department of Health & Human Services, 2019; Koball & Jiang, 2018). Low-income families include those who are "near poor," with a household income of 100-199 percent of the poverty threshold, and those who are "poor" with a household income below 100 percent of the poverty threshold level (Koball & Jiang, 2018, p. 2). Approximately 39 percent of all children living in the United States today are identified as low-income (NCCP, 2021). For low-SES children, poverty has a significant effect on their neurological and psychological development impacting their academic achievement (AAP Council on Community Pediatrics**,** 2016; Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health et al., 2016; Evans & Kim, 2007; Hair, et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2019; Luby et al., 2013; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). Existing studies guide and inform further research focused on the effects of poverty on children's academic achievement.

### Poverty and Neurological Development

In recent years, research has emerged linking the effects of poverty on the neurological development of children. Studies indicate children of poverty are at risk due to frequent and prolonged stress caused by stressors in the home, including child abuse or neglect, parental substance abuse, or maternal depression (The Committee on

Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health et al., 2012). Mounting scientific research indicates factors of poverty, such as parental stressors, neglect, and abuse cause toxic stress, resulting in atypical brain development. The Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health et al. (2012) released a report which provides a meta-analysis of research on the health implications of child poverty. The report analyzes the research relating to brain development and poverty, explaining this “ecobiodevelopment” (2012, p. e225) framework connects biology, ecology, and health and development in the study of pediatric medicine. Research indicates stress associated with chronic poverty adversely affects neurological development.

When the brain detects stress, the amygdala, the area of the brain that processes emotions, sends a signal to the hypothalamus to release hormones prompting the body to respond (Harvard Health Publishing, 2018). The hypothalamus sends signals to the nervous system, which produces adrenaline, norepinephrine, and cortisol to support the body’s response to stress (Pascoe et al, 2016). The hormonal responses to stress are typically temporary and are necessary to manage the body’s fight or flight response to threats; however, prolonged exposure to hormones are detrimental and toxic to the body (Pascoe et al., 2016).

This “toxic stress,” as defined by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), is “excessive or prolonged activation of the physiologic stress response systems in the absence of the buffering protection afforded by stable, responsive relationships” (Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health et al., 2012, p. e225). Toxic stress results in frequent and/or constant activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) axis stress system and chronic elevation of cortisol in the brain

(Pascoe et al., 2016). Pascoe et al. (2016) explains, “the dysregulation of this combination of physiologic mediators (e.g. too much or too little cortisol or inflammatory response) can create a ‘wear and tear’ effect on a number of organs, including the brain” (p. e3). Studies indicate toxic stress creates a “dysregulation” (Pascoe et al., 2016, p. e3) in hormones, which strains the body and may result in atypical neurological development (Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health et al., 2012; Pascoe et al, 2016).

Luby et al. (2013) conducted a longitudinal study examining the MRI scans of 145 children, ages 3-6, from various socioeconomic backgrounds. The authors found children who lived in poverty at one time or another were identified as having lower levels of white and gray matter in the hippocampus, which supports learning and recall; and in the amygdala, which supports emotions and motivation. Similarly, Hair et al. (2015) conducted a two-year longitudinal study with a larger population with 389 children from a wider age range of 4-22 years old and from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Hair et al. also found low-SES children display “atypical structural development in critical areas of the brain including total gray matter and the frontal lobe, temporal lobe, and hippocampus,” areas of the brain associated with learning and achievement (p. 8). Adding to the body of research examining the impact of poverty on neurological development, Kim et al. (2019) studied MRI scans of 144 children between the ages of 6-11. The authors utilized the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-IV) as an additional component in their methodology and delineated data to examine differences between genders. Kim et al.’s findings were consistent with those of Luby et al. and Hair et al. This collective body of research examining the brain scans of low-SES children presents scientific evidence of the significant correlation between poverty and neurological development. However, these studies are limited in identifying factors that define the causal relationship between poverty and neurological deficiencies.

## Poverty and Psychological Development

Studies examining physiological implications of toxic stress have led to research analyzing the psychological impact of atypical neurological development. Expanding on that context of research and considering causal relationships, Johnson et al. (2016) analyzed existing data from five years of research studies to summarize findings on poverty and neurological development. Johnson et al. posit "material deprivation," stressors, and environmental toxins as the causes of neurological deficiencies in brain development of children in poverty (2016, p. 9). To examine factors impacting brain development, Evans and Kim (2007) studied the effects of poverty and stress on 207 13-year olds. The authors assessed stress levels and regulation using blood pressure, cortisol levels, and cardiovascular responses. The study found the more years a child had spent in poverty directly correlated to higher hypothalamicpituitary-adrenocoritcal (HPA) activity with higher levels of cortisol indicating deficiencies in stress regulators. The authors concluded the longer a child is exposed to poverty the greater the incidence of stress dysregulation.

A 2016 American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) policy statement reiterated research linking toxic stress to atypical neurological development leading to impaired ability in stress regulation. Toxic stress hinders the ability of the prefrontal cortex to manage the amygdala, therefore limiting the regulation of stress response. As a result, children in poverty have greater difficulty with "self-regulation and executive function, such as inattention, impulsivity, defiance, and poor peer relationships" (AAP Council on Community Pediatrics, 2016, p. 2). To address the physiological and psychological needs of low-SES children, the AAP recommends pediatricians and all child advocates deepen their awareness and understanding of the impact of poverty on health and child development and work collaboratively with other resources to provide comprehensive support for children of poverty (AAP Council on Community Pediatrics, 2016; Pascoe et al., 2016). The 2016 AAP policy outlines recommendations advocating for public policy changes to address the implications. This analysis of existing research substantiates the need for further studies to understand and support the needs of low-SES children, including working in collaboration with education systems. The AAP advocates health professionals work in conjunction with education professionals in early education intervention programs and social services. However, the AAP's report falls short in identifying recommendations for collaboration with educators of elementary, middle, and high school students with regard to professional development and instructional practices developed with consideration of poverty and child health development.

Based on a meta-analysis of existing research, the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2014) concluded low-SES children experience toxic stress, due to unstable or inferior housing, violence, family conflict, and separation from family which can lead to increased susceptibility to mental health issues and difficulty in self-regulation. The authors posit caregivers and educators can moderate the psychological effects of toxic stress with responsive interventions. "All professionals who interact with children on a daily basis are best positioned to learn from—and inform—science-based strategies that prevent and address the impacts of toxic stress early in life" (p. 7). While the council's conclusions and other studies recommend interventions, future research is necessary to identify practices in education which incorporate those interventions.

## Education

### High-Poverty Schools

High-poverty schools, which have 75 percent or more low-SES students (NCES, 2019), encounter challenges to support student learning, social relationships, and executive functioning skills (attending to task, organization, emotional regulation, self-monitoring). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which publishes an annual report documenting trends in education in the United States, reported 24 percent of all public school students attend high-poverty schools. In metropolitan areas, that percentage increases with 40 percent of students in city schools attending a high-poverty school. In addition, NCES found achievement scores in high-poverty schools in 4th, 8th, and 12th grades were 35, 31, and 32 points lower, respectively, than their mid- to high-SES classmates. Mathematics achievement scores indicated a similar trend, with low-SES students in 4th, 8th, and 12th grades scoring 32, 39, and 36 points lower, respectively, than their peers from higher-SES. Hernandez (2011) indicated 22 percent of children who have lived in poverty at some point in their childhood and 32 percent who have spent more than half their lives in poverty will not graduate from high school. The academic challenges low-SES students face significantly impact the capacity of high-poverty schools to meet student needs.

### Federal Education Legislation and Poverty

Research identifies a direct correlation between school funding and student achievement, finding schools with greater funding achieve higher student performance

(Turner et al., 2016). Beginning in the 1960s, federal legislation was enacted to address socioeconomic discrepancies in school funding. With the initial act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the United States Department of Education allocated Title funds to provide for the needs of at-risk students from low-income households (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 2017). Since its inception in 1965, ESEA has been reauthorized eight times, (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 2017), with the most recent version Every Student Succeeds Act, signed in 2015 (ESSA, 2015). ESEA and its subsequent amendments have sought to create equity in educational opportunities through funding and programming. Despite more than 50 years of legislative policy established to provide school funding and create equitable opportunities for students, achievement gaps between socioeconomic groups have remained unchanged (NCES, 2019; Muhammad, 2015). Muhammad (2015) argues the socioeconomic achievement gap has remained unchanged because the efforts to establish equity in schools remains grounded in philosophy rather than practice. Therefore, research in education has sought to examine the practices in place at high-poverty schools that have demonstrated high-performance. The aim is to address inequity by moving beyond philosophical ideology to a change in practice. Extensive research of high-poverty schools has focused on the programs and practices in place in schools that have achieved high-performance.

## High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools

Despite the adversities facing low-SES students and the challenges high-poverty schools encounter supporting students’ academic needs, there are high-poverty schools performing at or above achievement expectations. Research of high-poverty, high-performing schools indicates consistent characteristics attributed to supporting student achievement. The studies found attributes of high-performing, high-poverty schools include clear mission and vision, high standards and expectations for all students, a culturally responsive learning environment, family and community involvement, visionary leadership, collaboration among faculty, data-driven decision-making, standards-based learning, evidence-based instruction, and on-going professional development (Jacobson, et al., 2007; Jensen, 2009; Kannapel, et al., 2005; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007; Tilley, et al., 2012). Collectively, the characteristics address the challenges low-SES children face overcoming the cognitive, psychological, and behavioral implications of poverty and achieving high performance in school. This research identifies common characteristics for high-performing, high-poverty schools which can be group into three general themes: leadership, culture, and instruction and learning. Each theme is linked with subthemes identified through research for a more granular examination of the characteristics of high-performing, high-poverty schools.

### ***Leadership***

Leadership is a prominent topic in research of high-performing, high-poverty schools. However, research on leadership and the principal's role in high-performing schools poses questions regarding leadership's direct influence on student achievement. Several studies attribute high-performance to principal behaviors, expectations, and practices. For example, Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009), Woods and Martin (2016), Tilley et al. (2012), and Jacobson et al. (2007) identified strong instructional and collaborative leadership as common attributes in high-performing, high-poverty schools. However, other research cited little significant difference in the influence of school leadership of low- and high-performing schools (Brown et al., 2017, Kannapel et al., 2005, and Lindahl, 2010). These studies found culture, programs, and practices, rather than leadership, as the driving factor impacting achievement in schools.

Jacobson et al. (2007) and Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009) both conducted multi-case studies examining school leadership of high-poverty, high-performing schools. Jacobson et al. performed a multi-case study of the leaders of three high-poverty, urban New York schools which improved performance. The authors evaluated leadership practices for the principals of high-poverty schools gathering data through interviews, observations, and documents. The authors found those principals focused on instructional leadership and established high expectations for all students. The principals also used collaborative practices and family and community engagement in their school leadership. In addition, Jacobson et al. identified principals in high-performing schools established safe, nurturing school environments and practiced fiscal responsibility. Similar to Jacobson et al., Masumoto and Brown-Welty used qualitative methodology to conduct a multi-case study of three high-performing, high-poverty schools in rural California. The authors in both studies used interviews, observations, and document analysis to evaluate leadership practices for the principals of high-poverty schools. The findings indicated the leaders were successful at implementing change in the interest of school improvement. School leaders focused efforts on instructional leadership and high expectations for all students. Masumoto and Brown-Welty found principals also utilized collaborative practices and engagement with family and community in leading the schools. These multi-case studies examined leadership practices influencing achievement, noting shared, instructional, and transformational leadership at all schools.

In a similar but single case study, Woods and Martin (2016) conducted a narrative case study of a high-performing, high-poverty elementary school in rural Missouri to examine the leadership behaviors attributed to the school's achievement. The authors utilized interviews, observations, focus groups, and documents to identify the themes of leadership as perceived by stakeholders. The study found the transformational leadership of the school principal could be described as focused on educating the whole child and upholding high expectations for all learners. The findings emphasized the principal's strength in building relationships with stakeholders in the school community. Woods and Martin's study provides a comprehensive model for a single case study. Woods and Martin's research, as with Jacobson et al.'s (2007) and Masumoto and Brown-Welty's (2009), concentrated on principals' leadership as the focus for high performance.

Tilley et al. (2012) conducted a mixed method study with both quantitative data analysis and qualitative grounded theory which examined leadership but also considered school culture and programs in their assessment of high-performing, high-poverty, rural Florida school. This methodology offered greater depth in data analysis. In terms of leadership, the authors found school and instructional leadership centered on high expectations for all students as well as a culture of compassion and support. Through their findings, the authors recommended leadership focused on collaboration and instructional best practices. Tilley et al.'s expanded view of research assessed school culture and programs, as well, which provides a more comprehensive examination of the factors contributing to high performance in high-poverty schools.

Other research of high-performing schools suggests little variance in leadership practices of high- and low-performing schools, regardless of SES level (Lindahl, 2010;

Brown et al. 2017; Kannapel et al., 2005). Lindahl (2010) and Brown et al. (2017) utilized quantitative studies to evaluate school leadership in high- and low-performing, high-poverty schools, finding little differences in shared leadership practices among the schools. Lindahl examined the roles of principals in elementary, middle, and junior high schools in high- and low-performing high-poverty schools. The researcher utilized data from Alabama's Take20 survey. Lindahl examined teachers' perceptions of school leaders in 19 high-poverty Alabama schools. Lindahl's study found principals of the high-performing schools were viewed as approachable, trustworthy, and collaborative. Based on teacher perspectives, the researcher found principals of high-performing, high-poverty schools focused on student and adult learning, high expectations for all students, instruction and learning aligned to common standards, professional development, and using data for decision making. Teachers stated principals involved them in some decision making but did not sufficiently demonstrate shared leadership.

In a similar but smaller study, Brown et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative survey of 158 primary teachers in six schools to gather teachers' perspectives of principal influence on student achievement in high-poverty schools. The research indicated no conclusive findings regarding the influence of the school principal on student achievement. The authors, however, noted teachers reported higher confidence in the principal's capacity to implement the school's vision and institute professional learning communities.

Kannapel et al.'s (2005) qualitative study of eight Kentucky schools also found no significant difference between principal leadership of high-performing and low-performing schools. However, the authors noted all the high-performing schools exhibited collaborative decision-making as a fundamental practice in leading the school, which may downplay the role the principal’s influence on student achievement. The authors suggest the research instrument used in the study may not have adequately identified the principals’ influence on student achievement. However, the authors also propose high-performance may be the result of culture, programs, and practices in place in the schools which facilitate change and support student achievement, suggesting shared and collaborative leadership may be a more descriptive example of the leadership model in place.

Despite the contradictions in research regarding school leadership’s direct influence on student achievement, all the studies emphasized the importance of instructional leadership, trust, vision, collaboration, and data-driven decision-making to facilitate change resulting high-performance in schools. These traits align with transformational leadership practices that define culture and inform instruction and learning to guide school improvement practices. Muhammad and Cruz (2019) define transformational school leaders as those who clearly communicate the purpose of the work, build trust with stakeholders, invest time and resources to develop skills of staff, and gain commitment from all staff. While a single school leader may be critical for guiding school vision and directing change, these studies indicate the need for further research of transformational leadership in high-poverty, high-performing schools from the perspective of shared and collaborative leadership practices.

### *Culture*

Research indicates school culture is a critical theme in the study of student and school performance. School culture has a significant impact on school achievement

(Hattie, 2009). DeWitt (2017) and Muhammad and Cruz (2019) point to Hattie's (2015) extensive and on-going meta-analysis of instruction and learning that indicates teacher expectations, collective teacher efficacy, and student perceptions of achievement as critical factors in school culture focused on high-performance.

Examining school culture through a racial and socioeconomic lens, Rumberger and Palary (2005) sought to determine whether segregation continues to contribute to achievement gaps 50 years after the United States Supreme Court deemed segregation unconstitutional. The data was taken from a longitudinal survey which included 14,217 low-, middle-, and high-SES students from 913 high school nationwide. Using standardized test scores and achievement growth, the authors concluded the SES of schools influences the achievement of students as much as the student's individual SES does. Rumberger and Palary posit school policies and practices influence achievement. The research indicated academic culture and teacher expectations contribute to student achievement and learning in all schools. The study found schools in which teachers hold higher expectations of students have higher rates of homework completion, more rigorous course offerings, and a school environment in which students indicate feeling safe. Similarly, Hopson and Lee (2011) examined the effects of individual students' SES on school climate. The study utilized a cross-sectional design to examine student backgrounds, grades, behavior, as well as student perspectives of school climate. The authors surveyed 485 middle and high schools from differing socioeconomic backgrounds, using a 217-item School Success Profile (SSP). Hopson and Lee's study did not indicate significant differences in the low-SES students' perceptions of school climate compared to their counterparts; however, the authors found a strong correlation between the negative perceptions of school climate and poor behavior of low-SES students, suggesting school climate has a significant influence for low-SES students. Based on those findings, low-SES schools would benefit from additional research on the characteristics of schools with similar SES which achieve high performance. While Rumberger and Palary's and Hopson and Lee's studies examined the influence of students' SES on school culture and student achievement, the studies did not specify the policies and practices implemented by teachers which support student achievement. A review of other studies is necessary to discover which practices guide the development of a culture of high expectations and with support for student achievement for high-poverty schools.

An examination of research specifically concentrated on high-performing, high-poverty schools indicates common characteristics associated with school culture. Kannapel et al. (2005) examined the common characteristics of eight high-performing, high-poverty schools through a qualitative study which included observations and interviews. The authors identified the common characteristics associated with school culture as high expectations for students and staff and nurturing relationships. Kannapel et al.'s study noted an observation not documented in the other studies. The authors found teachers in high-poverty schools did not focus on their students' poverty as a concern. The focus, instead, was on upholding the same expectations and providing support for all students. Tilley et al. (2012) used a mixed method to examine a high-performing, high-poverty school, using observations, interviews, and two quantitative surveys to collect data. Although Tilley et al.'s research was limited to one school, findings identified characteristics of culture similar to those of other studies of high-performing schools: a nurturing climate of pride, caring environment, high expectations for all students, and parent involvement. Tilley et al.'s comprehensive examination of a high-performing, high-poverty school provided both quantitative data to support the findings and qualitative data from observations and interviews to provide a thorough explanation of practices promoting culture.

Woods and Martin (2016) conducted a narrative case study examining the perspectives of a principal's leadership in a high-performing, high-poverty school. Although the research purpose for Woods and Martin's study centered on examining the leadership of the school, the conclusions summarized and supported existing research describing the culture of high-performing, high-poverty schools as focused on high expectations for all students and aimed at educating the whole child. In terms of educating the whole child, the authors explain the school principal recognized meeting children's basic needs was as much a priority as meeting academic needs. The principal also focused on building relationships with stakeholders to create an empathetic and compassionate culture. Woods and Martin's research, however, is specific to the principal's behaviors and does not include data regarding the faculty's contribution to developing culture.

These studies of high-performing, high-poverty schools describe school cultures focused on a vision of high expectations for all students, a nurturing environment, and parent and community involvement. However, these studies do not include an assessment of cultural responsiveness as a component of school culture. Jensen (2009) explains given the unique challenges facing low-SES students, teachers must be aware of and responsive to these challenges in order to build empathetic and supportive relationships. Hammond

(2015) cites research which validates culturally responsive education as essential to build relationships with students and enrich student learning. Hammond (2015) defines culturally responsive teaching as

> An educator's ability to recognize students' cultural displays of learning and meaning making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing. All the while, the educator understands the importance of being in a relationship and having a social-emotional connection to the student in order to create a safe space for learning. (p. 15)

In the interest of building relationships and supporting the academic needs of all learners, an examination of the characteristics of high-performing, high-poverty schools should include a focus on culturally responsive practices. Further research of the culture of high-performing, high-poverty schools may validate the need to examine culturally responsive teaching and the findings of the existing research.

### ***Instruction and Learning***

Research on high-performing, high-poverty schools includes consistent themes centered on instruction and learning. Kannapel et al.'s (2005) and Tilley et al.'s (2012) research found high-performing, high-poverty schools emphasized rigorous expectations for all students, collaboration among staff, faculty accountability and work ethic, alignment of curriculum to standards, and focus on instruction and learning. In addition, Kannapel et al. noted high-performing, high-poverty schools scored significantly higher in the area of evaluation and data analysis to guide and adjust instruction. Kannapel et al.'s research also linked ongoing professional development to academic achievement. Tilley et al.'s mixed method study found high-performing, high-poverty schools provide additional resources to support learning. The authors also discovered these schools provided supplemental academic support through after school tutoring, technology resources, small group instruction, and student recognition for academic achievement.

Moore & Kochan (2013) conducted a quantitative survey to evaluate principals' perceptions of professional development in high-performing and low-performing, high-poverty schools. The authors cite research that indicates professional development for teachers in high-poverty schools is essential to improve student achievement. The study included 88 participants, and the findings indicated a higher percentage of high-performing schools utilized educational research to facilitate professional development compared to those of low-performing schools. In addition, results indicated principals of high-performing schools used collaboration, shared leadership, and teachers as instructional leaders at a higher rate than those at low-performing schools. Moore & Kochan's study offers a comprehensive perspective with a comparison of both high-performing and low-performing schools. While this study, as well as the research of Kannapel et al. (2005) and Tilley et al. (2012), indicated a commitment to professional development in high-performing, high-poverty schools, further research is necessary to identify specific areas of focus for that professional training.

A review of literature of high-performing, high-poverty schools indicates similar characteristics in instruction and learning. Schools with high performance focus instruction on curriculum and assessments aligned with state standards, incorporate evidence-based instructional practices, and promote ongoing professional development to improve practice. Further research of instruction and learning in high-performing schools will build on the existing studies and support the ongoing development of improved instructional practice.

## Summary

Research indicates a significant correlation linking poverty with deficiencies in neurological and psychological development of children. These deficits can result in gaps in students' executive functioning (attention, organization, emotional regulation, self-monitoring) and cognitive abilities. For schools with high percentages of students from low-income households, supporting student achievement to meet or exceed expectations is a challenge. More than 50 years of federal legislation implementing policies and programs to address socioeconomic inequities in schools has neglected to narrow the academic achievement gap for low-SES students (Muhammad, 2015; NCES, 2019). Therefore, research of high-performing, high-poverty schools is necessary to reveal those characteristics and practices which promote student achievement. Despite the wealth of current studies, additional research is necessary to further examine the characteristics of high-performing, high-poverty schools to validate existing research and add to the depth of case studies nationwide. Future studies should build on current findings to provide data from continued educational research in a concerted effort to address the persistent socioeconomic achievement gap.

Researchers have examined high-performing, high-poverty schools identifying common attributes for meeting the academic needs of students. A review of literature identifies the attributes as leadership, culture, and instruction and learning. Extensive research of school leadership in high-performing schools examines the principal's influence on student achievement; however, the findings are not consistent. Research focusing on leadership examines an individual leader's influence on student achievement; however, based on his meta-analysis of extensive research on student learning, Hattie identified teachers as the greatest source of variance in student success and learning (Tedx Talks, 2013). Because teachers have the greatest influence on student learning, research should assess characteristics of high-performance in a high-poverty school from the perspective of faculty. While an examination of school culture in high-performing schools found a vision of high expectations and family and community involvement, the research is lacking in data regarding cultural responsiveness. Jensen (2009) and Hammond (2015) emphasized the importance of culturally responsive teaching as a critical component in educating low-SES students. Therefore, research of the culture of high-performing, high-poverty schools should include an assessment of cultural responsiveness. A review of literature indicates common characteristics in instruction and learning in high-performing, high-poverty schools. These characteristics identified through in-depth studies outline evidence-based practices which support instruction. Additional studies are needed to add to the body of research regarding instruction and learning in high-performing schools. Further research will add to the current findings and cultivate continued development of instructional practices.

This examination of existing research includes a greater portion of qualitative studies than quantitative with a majority of the qualitative research done through case study. Therefore, this case study approach examining a high-performing, high-poverty school aligned with existing methodologies. A case study analysis provides a "detailed description of the case and its setting" (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A single case study methodology for this dissertation in practice allowed for a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of a unique case. Chapter Three of this dissertation in practice will describe the methodology for this qualitative case study of high-performing, high-poverty schools.

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

High-poverty schools, those which enroll high percentages of low-socioeconomic status (SES) students (75 percent or more) (NCES, 2019), typically perform below achievement proficiency standards (Reardon et al., 2019). However, some high-poverty schools demonstrate positive deviance, meeting or exceeding state standards. This qualitative case study evaluated the characteristics attributed to high-performance in a high-poverty school from the perspectives of faculty members. The interview questions for this research study focused on a conceptual framework aligned with high-performing, high-poverty schools, as defined by research. The purpose of this dissertation in practice was to explore faculty perspectives of the characteristics of a high-performing, high-poverty school. This qualitative, single-case study focused on one Midwest, metropolitan middle school identified as both high-performing and high-poverty.

## Research Question

Studies have shown low-SES students may have deficiencies in neurological and psychological development which impact their cognitive (learning and problem solving) and executive functioning skills (attending to task, organization, emotional regulation, self-monitoring), resulting in lower academic achievement than their mid- to high-SES classmates. High-poverty schools face challenges serving the needs of these students in meeting or exceeding state standards. However, some high-poverty schools demonstrate positive deviance meeting or exceeding state achievement standards. Several studies have examined high-performing, high-poverty schools, identifying common characteristics in these schools. This research study examined faculty members’ perspectives of those characteristics which demonstrate significant correlation to student achievement in a high-performing, high-poverty school. Examining and describing the experiences from the perspectives of faculty in a school with a high percentage of low-SES students, this qualitative case study was guided by the following question: What are the perceptions of faculty regarding the characteristics of school performance within high poverty, high performance schools? The research question was guided by the following sub questions:

Sub question #1: What professional practices do faculty describe as beneficial to support academic achievement of students and lead to school ratings which meet or exceed standards?

Sub question #2: What school systems or programs do faculty identify as beneficial to support the academic achievement of students and lead to school ratings which meet or exceed standards?

Sub question #3: What relational practices do faculty attribute to establish the school's culture?

Sub question #4: What leadership practices do faculty attribute to the school's high performance?

## Qualitative Case Study Research Design

Qualitative research allows for the examination of complex cases or issues revealed through the narrative of the individuals directly involved (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study is different than other qualitative designs with its focus on the case or instance rather than the method of study (2018). This approach examines a social phenomenon bounded by specific parameters. Case studies focus on a single case or multiple cases with data gathered from several sources, which may include interviews, observations, and documents. The findings of a case study are presented in a description with case themes.

## Case Study Parameters

The case study approach was utilized to examine the phenomenon of a high-performing, high-poverty school. The design centered on an individual case to explore the attributes that may identify the school's strategies for success. The parameters for this study were based on three factors: the school district (located in a Midwest, metropolitan area as defined by the US Census Bureau), the school's high-poverty student population (75 percent or more of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch) (NCES, 2019), and the school's overall state accountability score (meeting or exceeding standards). This case study sought to discover the characteristics of a high-performing, high-poverty school based on the perspectives of faculty. The method allowed for an exploratory approach to gather data from the perspectives of faculty members in the school and identify themes based on those perspectives.

# Participants/Data Sources

In a qualitative case study, researchers focus on the participants' meaning of the phenomenon being explored (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, a case study must be formed from a strong sample of participants defined by the parameters of the study. With consideration for participants, researchers must attend to ethical considerations related to the research, establishing and maintaining a trusting relationship with participants, outlining the steps to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, and utilizing appropriate means to document and store data. To gather the perspectives of participants, this qualitative case study collected data through interviews, observations, and analysis of school documents. In addition, participants were involved in data analysis to ensure reliability and validity.

## Population

The population of this case study included faculty members who teach in a high-performing, high-poverty middle school in a Midwest, metropolitan school district. The sample selected for this study was based on three factors: the school district (located in a Midwest, metropolitan area), the school's high-poverty student population (75 percent or more of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch), and the school's overall state accountability score. As defined by the United States Census Bureau (2018), a metropolitan area is comprised by "one or more counties that contain a city of 50,000 or more inhabitants, or contain an urbanized area (UA), and have a total population of at least 100,000" (p. 13-1). A UA is an "area consisting of a central place(s) and adjacent urban fringe that together have a minimum residential population of at least 50,000 people and generally an overall population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile of land area" (2018, p. G-54). High-performing schools are defined as those schools that earn a score of meets or exceeds standards of achievement on the state-mandated examination. High-poverty schools are defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as schools with 75% or more of the student population qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch (NCES, 2019).

The case selected for this study was based on three factors: the school district, the school's high-poverty student population (75 percent or more of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch), and the school's overall state accountability score. Jane Doe Middle School, the pseudonym used for the school in this study, is one of five middle schools in its school district, which is the third largest school district in its state, with an enrollment of approximately 20,000 students (About, n.d.). Based on the school's 2018-19 state report, Jane Doe Middle School has a poverty rate of 73.9 percent (Report cards home, n.d.). The governing agency for education in the state where this study was conducted evaluates every school on a scale from 0 to 100, with schools performing at 63 or higher deemed as meets expectations (63-72.9), exceeds expectations (73-82.9), and significantly exceeds expectations 83-100). Since 2013-14, the current principal's first year in his role, the school has increased its state school rating (Figure 1) (Report cards home, n.d.). The principal's first year, the percentage of students in poverty was 61.9 percent and the school earned an overall accountability score and rating of 60.3, meets few expectations. The school's poverty rate increased 12 percentage points in five years. The most recent state report indicated the school received a rating of 83.1, a score of significantly exceeds standards. (In the 2014-15 school year, the state did not produce school report cards due to changes in federal legislation and in 2019-20, the state did not produce reports due to school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Report cards home, n.d.).

Figure 1. Jane Doe Middle State Report Card Data

| Year | Percentage of Students in Poverty | State Report Card Score |
|---|---|---|
| 2013-14 | 61.9 | 60.3 |
| 2014-15 | No Reports | |
| 2015-16 | 66.5 | 56.7 |
| 2016-17 | 72.1 | 72.3 |
| 2017-18 | 78.7 | 80.5 |
| 2018-19 | 73.9 | 83.1 |
| 2019-20 | No Reports | |

(Report cards, n.d.)

## Sample

Recommended sample sizes in qualitative studies vary depending upon the research design. For qualitative research, Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize the importance of selecting a sample size from those who participate in the phenomenon and can adequately enlighten the researcher about the research problem. Guest et al. (2006) conducted a methodological study to determine the purposive sample size to reach saturation in qualitative studies. The authors acknowledged researchers are expected to define sample size before beginning research describing the study sample in proposals and protocols. Conversely, experts recommend determining sample size in data collection through the course of research by continuing to collect data samples until themes are saturated. To remedy this contradiction, Guest et al. set out to determine a measure by which researchers could plan a sample size. Based on their study, the authors identified an adequate number of codes had developed after the analysis of 12 interviews. The researchers had reached data saturation after 12 interviews with 92% of codes developed in one study and 88% in another. Based on Guest et al.'s findings, I anticipated the sample for this case study may include approximately 12 faculty members from the school; however, I focused on interviewing faculty until I reached saturation of data, which resulted with interviews of 18 participants.

Creswell and Poth (2018) stress the importance of selecting participants who have participated in actions or processes being studied. The purposely selected faculty members chosen for this study included those who have worked at the middle school for three or more years. By limiting the sample to faculty with three or more years' experience at the school, the study focused on faculty members who have worked at the school long enough to gain adequate experience in teaching at the school and have had the opportunity to participate in activities or practices that impact student achievement scores. Because state report cards are based on the previous school year, first-year teachers were not included in the data, assessments, or instruction influencing the school's state accountability score. In addition, second-year teachers typically have not had an opportunity to participate in school leadership teams, which involve collective decision-making, and have had limited experiences in professional development activities while at the school, which would influence their instructional practices. Therefore, first- and second-year teachers were not included in the sample. The sample for this study were faculty members in the school who have at least three years' experience at the school, which totaled 46 educators.

For this case study, I interviewed 18 faculty members, which included 15 female and three male staff. Initially, 19 participants responded to the request for interviews; however, one participant opted out of the study due to a personal emergency. Of the 18 faculty members interviewed, 14 had master's degrees, and 4 had bachelor's degrees, with one of those participants currently enrolled in a master's program. The participants ranged in age from 26 to 63 with an average age of 37 years old. The teachers had between four and 25 years' experience at the school, and the average experience at the middle school was 12 years.

## Permissions

Creswell and Poth (2018) remind researchers to obtain necessary permissions, disclose the purpose of the study, obtain written consent from participants, and respect the participants' privacy. Before beginning the study, I requested permission from the selected school's district superintendent following the district's research study application process. After receiving district permission, I requested permission from Jane Doe Middle School's principal. Once I received permission and obtained letters of agreement from both the district and the school principal, I applied for permission to conduct research through the Institutional Review Board at Creighton University (IRB). Upon receiving approval to conduct the research study from Creighton's IRB, I began scheduling and planning data collection, which included a general time frame for interviews, observations, and document analysis. Creswell and Poth advise advocating for access to documents in advance to allow time to review the data; therefore, I submitted a request to the principal early in the study for the documents needed for data analysis. The documents included leadership team meeting agendas/minutes and professional development plans for the school years 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20, and the current year to date, 2020-21, as well as a random sampling of newsletters from the past three years and the current school year (years 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20, and 2020-21).

After obtaining those permissions and reviewing the schedule with the school principal, I solicited participants for the study sending an initial email request for volunteers to faculty members who met the study parameters. The initial email communication to faculty members included an introduction and a request for volunteers to participate. The email communication emphasized the voluntary nature of the study. I requested participants respond to schedule a time to speak directly with me to discuss the interview. The intention of that discussion was to fully explain the purpose of the research study, explain the parameters of the interview as well as subsequent communications to clarify data, answer questions, and identify a time and location for the interview. With each respondent, I scheduled a Zoom meeting or phone call to discuss the study and answer questions. When speaking with participants directly, I strived to build rapport before asking participants for their consent and scheduling the interview. Because of COVID-19 pandemic social distancing restrictions, I utilized Zoom to conduct all virtual interviews and conduct all classroom and meeting observations. Before interviewing any participant, I shared an information letter about the study and assured the interviewees that participation was voluntary. The letter included acknowledgment of voluntary participation, as well as explained the participants' rights to withdraw from the study, described the purpose and procedures, emphasized the procedures to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, and identified any risks and benefits.

## Data Sources

Data in qualitative case studies may include all four types of information: interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this qualitative case study, data was collected through interviews, observations, and archived documents. The triangulation of data sources corroborates and illuminates themes in the study (Campbell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). I conducted interviews with faculty participants, using an interview protocol to guide the discussion. After each interview, I emailed participants copies of the transcribed interviews to share their responses. In addition, after coding the data and describing the findings, I shared an overview of findings and themes as well as the coding chart (Appendix C) to review the findings with participants. I conducted observations over the course of two days (two half days and one full-day) observing classroom instruction and meetings. I examined historical documents, including leadership team meeting agendas and minutes, the annual professional development plan, school newsletters, school website, and state report cards.

Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend maintaining a master list of data collected and developing a matrix for ease in organizing the list. Therefore, I created a spreadsheet to maintain a record of all documents and data. The data from all interviews, observations, and documents were transferred to an Excel file titled, “Research Data Corpus.” I organized the corpus into worksheets with organizational charts with interview summaries, observation summaries, transcribed interviews, observation data, document data, and a code book. The participants were identified by pseudonyms, “P” for participant and a randomly assigned number from 1-19. Each participant pseudonym listed on the demographic data page was linked to the worksheet in the corpus with the participant’s transcribed interview. Each worksheet with the participant’s transcribed interview was titled by the participant’s pseudonym and was organized into paragraphs or sections of the transcription, the page number on which the quote was found on the Word file, the interview question that prompted the statement, as well as the memos, themes, categories, and codes. Other worksheets in the corpus included a master copy of all classroom observations, another for all meeting observations, and one each for each document type. The spreadsheet format provided a central location to store data with ease in searching for codes and quotes in analysis while writing of findings and conclusions.

## The COVID-19 Pandemic

In March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic reached the United States, schools in the state where this study was conducted as well as schools across the United States were mandated to close their buildings for the remainder of the school year. As schools planned for the opening of the 2020-2021 school year, districts were left to determine their own plans for providing instruction while meeting the guidelines of safety, disinfecting, and social distancing. The school district where this study was conducted opted to offer parents the choice of in-person or virtual learning, a hybrid model. When this study was conducted, however, the school district had shifted all schools to a full virtual model, beginning immediately after Thanksgiving through the second week of January. Therefore, all interviews and observations for this study were conducted through the virtual meeting platform, Zoom.

## Data Collection

### Conceptual Framework

In research, a conceptual framework explains the key concepts and describes the relationship of those ideas in the study (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The conceptual framework forms the theoretical lens through which researchers pose questions, collect and analyze data, and frame the research discussion (Creswell, 2014). For this examination of high-performing, high-poverty schools, the conceptual framework was developed based on the identified themes of culture, leadership, and instruction and learning, as identified in the review of literature.

### Interviews

Interviews are frequently used in all types of qualitative research designs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An interview allows a researcher to gain insights into the participant's view of the phenomenon being studied. The questions in the interview are formulated from the research question and are critical to drawing the perspective of the participants. Interviews should be structured by a protocol to guide the discussion but allow for open-ended responses to expose the participants' experiences, perspectives, and narratives.

### ***Interview Protocol***

In order to conduct interviews with participants, researchers must develop an interview protocol (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview protocol provides a guideline for a conversation between the researcher and participant. Before beginning with the semi-structured interview framed by the protocol, the authors advocate interviews commence with casual conversation to put the participant at ease before recording. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend piloting the interview questions to refine the protocol; therefore, two pilot interviews were conducted to test the questions before beginning the interviews for the study. I interviewed two faculty members from another high-performing school, utilizing the same protocol and format planned for the study. Based on the pilot interviews and feedback from those participants, no changes were made to the interview protocol.

The interview protocol developed for this qualitative case study (Appendix A) included initial questions to gain details about the participant's background. This also provided an opportunity to build trust with the participants and help ease the transition to content specific questions (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The protocol then included four questions framed by the research questions and the conceptual framework as identified in research of high-performing, high-poverty schools. Sample questions for each theme include the following questions:

- What professional practices do you believe are most beneficial to support academic achievement of students?

- Please describe the school's systems or programs which support student achievement.

As a closing question, the protocol included the following final question: Is there anything I did not ask you that you would like to discuss that relates to the topic of high-performing, high-poverty schools?

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol with open-ended questions and offered opportunities to probe areas of discussion for greater detail. Open-ended questions offer the participant an opportunity to provide additional information on concepts and perspectives the interviewee deems relevant, including those the interviewer may not have considered when developing the protocol (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Babbie (2017) recommends adjusting interviews with probes to encourage interviewees to delve into greater detail on a topic; therefore, probes were included in the protocol for reference to guide discussion. In addition, closing the interview with a general, open-ended question allows the participant an opportunity to provide additional information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These techniques utilized in the interview provided the participants opportunities to expand on their thoughts and describe their experiences with greater detail.

### ***Recording Procedures***

All interviews were digitally recorded using the Zoom virtual meeting recording option to collect the audio file for each interview. In the interest of transparency, I notified the interviewees the moment the recorded portion of the interview began as well as when the recording ended. After completing interviews, the audio files were submitted to Rev.com for transcription, then downloaded in Word and saved on the interviewer's laptop. All digital recordings and transcribed interviews were saved to the researcher's laptop and to an external hard drive as back up. I printed a copy of each transcribed interview for data analysis which were shredded after use.

## Observations

Babbie (2017) highlights the value of research observation in gathering data for studies. Observation allows the researcher to become immersed in the case and to gather first-hand detail of experiences. Before conducting observations, Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend several steps in preparation, including identifying the role of the observer; distinguishing what will be observed; developing an observation protocol; and establishing procedures and rapport with the participants. While documenting observations, researchers must record details of events and actions as well as the researcher's interpretation and reflection of the events (Babbie, 2017; Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

For this case study, I included observations in my data collection and analysis. Given social distancing restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, observations were conducted virtually, through teachers' Zoom class links and Zoom meetings of faculty teams. I spent two total days (one full day, and two half days) observing staff and students in classroom lessons and committee meetings as a nonparticipant observer. I coordinated with the school leadership to obtain permissions and schedule observation dates. In addition, an observation protocol document (Appendix B) was utilized to collect notes explicit, detailed notes and reflective interpretations of observed events and actions. For reflective notes, I documented assumptions, interpretations, feelings, and ideas. The protocol document included space to record date, time, and location as well.

## Documents

Creswell and Poth (2018) note data in qualitative research include both public and private documents. This case study involved the examination of various documents to support research and data collection. The documents included leadership team meeting agendas and minutes, school annual professional development plans, newsletters, and the school website. In addition, this study included an examination of the most recent and available five years of accountability data as a component of the narrative, historical description of the school's demographics, poverty rate, and overall state scores (Figure 1). The state agency which governs education produces an annual school report card which summarizes demographics and state-mandated, standardized test scores for every public school in the state. This data was included in analysis and narrative of findings. (The data for years 2014-15 was not available from the state due to a change in the exam in 2015 and 2019-20 because the test was administered in 2020 due to nationwide school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.) (Report cards home, n.d.).

## Reliability

Babbie (2017) explains reliability of a research instrument is determined when the tool can be used consistently to measure the same phenomenon and gather the same data with the same results. Creswell & Poth (2018) further explain qualitative reliability is "consistent across different researchers and different projects" (p. 201). The interview protocol developed for this dissertation in practice case study had not been utilized in other studies and, therefore, had not been tested for reliability. However, in qualitative research reliability can also be established through meticulous recording, transcription, and coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, in order to strengthen the interview protocol's reliability, I followed consistent and thoroughly-defined procedures with recording and transcription of interviews.

Creswell and Poth (2018) advocate engaging participants in evaluating the data interpretation and analysis for greater reliability of data. Therefore, to increase the reliability of the interview protocol, I utilized a defined data collection and iterative analysis structure. Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) recommend an iterative process in which reflective analysis is structure by the framework of critical questions in analysis. This structure is described in greater detail in the data collection section. In addition, after interviewing participants, I followed up with interviewees to seek participant feedback of interpretation and findings.

Creswell & Poth (2018) recommend debriefing with a third-party to seek external peer review of data coding and analysis. Therefore, as an additional component to build the reliability of this case study, I debriefed with members of my dissertation committee to discuss interpretations and findings. The third-party analysis and debrief provided an unbiased perspective on analyses of data and coding of themes. As I reviewed data, I shared themes and findings with the critical persons after coding data and before sharing interpretations with participants.

### Validity

A research instrument is deemed valid if it adequately evaluates the concept it is intended to assess (Babbie, 2017). Creswell and Poth (2018) explain validation in qualitative research is based on the accuracy of the findings. The authors emphasize validation in qualitative research involves considerable time spent at the location of study, detailed description of the case, and the researcher's intimacy and understanding of the participants and their experience. Creswell & Poth recommend "seeking participant feedback" (2018, p. 261) and collaborating with participants to validate qualitative research. To establish the instrument's validity, I employed Creswell and Poth's guidance in reflectively examining the researcher's lens and inviting the insights through the participant's lens incorporating member checking in the analysis data.

### ***Researcher's Lens***

The researcher's lens incorporates corroboration of evidence through interviews, observations, and documents; investigates evidence which presents deviance or contrary patterns; and divulges researcher experiences and bias to clarify the researcher's perspective for the reader (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The lens through which a researcher collects and analyzes data will guide how data is perceived, documented, and coded (Saldaña, 2016). The researcher's context defines the interview process, analysis of data, and conclusions; therefore, explicitly describing the researcher's background, education, practice, and implicit bias is necessary to validate research.

**Triangulation of Data.** For this case study dissertation in practice, I used triangulation of data to clarify the process of analysis. The researcher's lens frames the construct of interview questions as well as the responses in interviews and field notes in observation (Saldaña, 2016). In order to address the implicit bias in data, researchers utilize triangulation of different data sources to inform, confirm, and clarify the data findings (Campbell, 2013). For this case study, data gathered from documents added an additional layer of analysis to verify or elucidate interview and observation findings.

**Deviance or Contrary Patterns of Evidence.** Researcher's lens can be influenced by an expectation of anticipated outcomes. Contrary evidence may arise in examining data and must be included in findings to present a realistic assessment of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). In the examination of all data, I ensured the inclusion all findings in my analysis, including those which presented deviance from current theory or practice.

**Researcher Background.** Creswell (2014) recommends researchers share their background and clarify how that background may impact the interpretation of findings. The researcher's background may bias perspective and influence the researcher's analysis of data.

***Education Professional.*** As an educator with 28 years of experience in education, my current work, examination of literature, ongoing professional development, and current practice as a school leader of a high-performing, high-poverty school influences my analysis and researcher lens. As I gathered and analyzed data in this study, my interpretation was influenced by my background knowledge and experiences in education. Creswell (2014) suggests researchers reflect on how this knowledge and experience forms their experience in their research. To address my researcher background and its influence on my assumptions and bias, I maintained a journal throughout my study to reflect on my research experience and articulate my contemplations as an educator and a learner. This journal provided insight to my thinking process as a researcher and as a practitioner.

***Practitioner Researcher.*** In education, practitioner research is promoted practice with its capacity for collaborative inquiry to guide school improvement based on convergence of theory and practice rather than improvement plans based on the traditional reform model of educational policy (Manfra et al., 2018). Describing the professionalism of educators, Danielson (2007) explained “teaching, like other professions, occurs at the intersection of theoretical and practical considerations. That is, both the theory and practice of teaching inform each other” (p. 18). School leaders, as instructional leaders, are called to build their skills as practitioner researchers to inform instructional practices and “give voice in their profession” (Campbell, 2013, p. 7). Campbell (2013) posits practitioner research builds the capacity of educators as professionals who continually develop their craft, responding to and serving the needs of diverse learners through self-reflective inquiry. Practitioner research utilizes the researcher’s intimate knowledge of professional practice to inform and improve practice through inquiry, self-study, and reflection (Manfra et al., 2018).

As an educator and school leader, I analyzed this case study through the lens of a practitioner researcher. In the interest of addressing assumptions and bias, I journaled about my experiences as a practitioner research to remain cognizant of the influences of that perspective and reflect on the implications of that lens. A reflection of that experience and my journaling has been included in my final dissertation sharing my experiences as a practitioner researcher (Appendix G).

### ***Participant’s Lens***

Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize the importance of participant feedback to support reliability and validation of a study. To support the incorporation of the participant’s lens in data analysis in this qualitative case study, I utilized member checking, including participant feedback in analysis. After interviews, observations, and throughout the process of data analysis, I shared codes themes with participants and explained my interpretation of data based on participant's feedback in interviews. This open communication helped provide transparency in analysis, clarify understanding of participant responses, and ensure reliability and validity of data.

### Security of Interviews, Observations, and Document Data

Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend organizing digital files for data management. Digital files of recordings, transcribed interviews, notes and data files were saved on my computer, which is only accessible through a secured, password login. All documents were backed up on an external hard drive, which was stored in a secured location. Any printed versions of the transcribed documents were kept in the same secured location, locked in a file in my home office and shredded after use. The electronic files will be maintained for five years.

## Data Collection Procedures

### Participant Recruitment

This dissertation in practice utilized a qualitative case study to examine the characteristics of high-performing, high-poverty schools from the perspective of faculty working within the school. The school in this case study was selected based on the school district (located in a Midwest, metropolitan area), the school's high-poverty student population (75 percent or more of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch), and the school's overall state accountability score. The population of this case was comprised of faculty members from a high-performing, high-poverty middle school in a Midwest, metropolitan school district. Each faculty members selected for the study had a minimum of three years' experience at the school.

Once permissions were obtained from the school district superintendent and the school principal, I met with the principal to request a list of the names and emails of all faculty members with three or more years of experience in the school. I emailed the identified 46 faculty members, explaining the purpose of the study and requesting volunteers to participate in interviews. Prospective participants were asked to respond to the email if they were interested in volunteering to participate in the study. In total 19 faculty members responded, volunteering to be interviewed. I then contacted each participant to discuss the study in greater detail, share expectations for participants, answer questions, and share the information letter for the interview. If the participant was willing to volunteer for the interview, the participant and I collaborated to identify a time and date for the interview. Initially, 19 faculty members volunteered to participate in the interviews; however, one faculty member later declined due to a personal emergency. All 18 interviews were conducted via Zoom, a virtual meeting platform. I emphasized the voluntary nature of the interviews to ensure participants did not feel coerced to participate. Initial interviews took place over the course of a three-week period. Each interview was digitally recorded; therefore, after I completed each interview, I uploaded the audio file to Rev.com for transcription. Each transcription took less than a day to complete. I retrieved the transcribed files by downloading the files from Rev.com into Word .doc form. I then read through the transcription and redacted all names and identifying information. I also corrected any misinterpreted terms or any sections deemed “inaudible” by the transcriptionist. I emailed each participant with an attachment of the transcribed interview and asked for feedback within one week, providing a specific date for response. Of the 18 participants interviewed, four followed up with additional information, clarification, or corrections.

For observations, I emailed the school principal to request specific dates to observe classroom instruction and meetings. After receiving the principal's approval, I emailed classroom teachers with three or more years' experience, requesting volunteers to allow me to observe their classroom instruction for a period 20 minutes. A total of eight teachers responded. After explaining the plan for the observation, I requested the Zoom link for the teacher's class. For meetings, I notified committee members I would be observing and asked committee members to inform me of any concerns or requests to decline the observation. I received the Zoom links for those meetings from school administration. In total I conducted eight classroom observations and attended three meetings. The observations were conducted virtually through teachers' classroom Zoom links and meeting Zoom links. I participated in classroom observations at the school over the course of a total of two full school days (one full day and two half days). All observations were documented using the observation protocol.

Documents to be reviewed included the past three years of leadership team meeting agendas and minutes, annual professional development plans, newsletters, as well as analysis of the school website. The documents were used to understand the narrative of decision-making and practices in the school over the course of several years. The documents also provided insight in the actions and plans administered in the school which align to themes identified in the study. These documents provided an additional component in the triangulation of data to support or negate themes from interviews and observations.

## Data Analysis

In the data analysis process, I reviewed observation notes, analyzed interview transcripts, and examined documents to identify significant concepts and themes. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend researchers memo thoughts, phrases, and concepts in reviewing data. As I reviewed data and themes developed, I reexamined the observation notes and documents to consider evidence which supported the evolving themes. In the process of data analysis, I utilized manual, hand-coding of data through each stage of coding. In addition, I incorporated member checking and peer debriefing in validating data themes and findings.

### *Coding*

In this case study, I analyzed data using manual, hand-coding of data. Saldaña (2016) suggests novice qualitative researchers benefit from using manual coding and analysis in their initial studies. The author explains those with more experience may choose to use software programs to store and organize data. Creswell and Poth (2018) warn the use of software programs requires time to learn how to use the program. Therefore, this dissertation in practice research study supported the development of my skills in qualitative data analysis through manual coding and without the use of a specific software program.

Data analysis in this study began the process of hand-coding with initial, open-coding (Babbie, 2017; Saldaña, 2016). The first reading of the transcribed interviews, observation notes, and documents involved highlighting comments, memoing initial notes in the margins, and identifying initial codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As I read through each interview, I memoed in the right margin, using initial or open coding and in vivo coding. Saldaña (2016) describes initial coding as a "first cycle, open-ended approach" (p. 115) in a line-by-line analysis of the data. The method incorporates the use of process coding, using gerunds to indicate participant or case actions, as well as the use of in vivo coding or identifying direct quotes in data. The notes I added were key points, comments, or ideas the participant shared on topics. When the participants' words offered the clearest description of ideas, I documented the quote, then highlighted the quotation for easier, future reference. I added researcher reflections in the memos as well. Through open-coding, I identified 82 major codes in the data. I documented descriptive codes, summarized topics, and in vivo codes taken directly from the participants' words (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). Subsequent read-throughs involved axial coding in which common concepts were identified then codes were reorganized (Babbie, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through the analytical process of axial coding data are reorganized into categories, connecting and refining initial codes (Saldaña, 2016). In the initial and subsequent coding, I documented recurring codes, then, I arranged the codes into categories. To assist in organizing those codes, I created a code chart as a visual aid for the emerging categories and themes (Appendix C). The process of axial coding as well as selective coding were utilized in additional read-throughs to systematically refine codified themes into 21 categories aligned with research on high-performing, high-poverty schools. Finally, I again used axial and selective coding to restructure the data into codes, with five major codes emerging.

### *Iterative Process*

Data analysis was an iterative process with two-level verification in which I shared general themes with participants and asked for feedback on interpretations of themes through member checking. The critical component of the iterative process in data analysis is the researcher's practice to reflectively examine self-awareness, perspective, and bias. Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) explain the iterative process is not a systematic evaluation of data but rather a reflective, cyclical process of examining data, "progressively leading to refined focus and understandings" (p. 77). The authors emphasize the importance of reflective questioning based on a framework of three critical questions:

Q1: "What are the data telling me?"

Q2: "What is it I want to know?"; and

Q3: "What is the dialectal relationship between what the data are telling me and what I want to know?" (2009, p. 78).

The first question, Q1, refines the lens through which data is examined, engaging the researcher in explicit analysis of data. The second questions, Q2, seeks connect the data to the research question and purpose, pressing the researcher to consider whether the data is answering the research question. As the researcher cycles between Q1 and Q2, the third question, Q3, encourages the researcher to concentrate on the more granular aspects of the data aligned to research question (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). This cycle of reflective analysis of data drives the researcher to identify gaps in data which fosters the iterative cycle. The iterative process involves returning to interview participants to fill gaps, discuss interpretation of data, and gather feedback to develop of themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2016).

### *Member Checking*

Creswell (2014) explains member checking occurs when researchers share with participants the identified themes from interviews. In data analysis in this dissertation in practice, I engaged participants in member checking through email correspondence and follow up discussions to support data analysis and identify emerging themes. Member checking supports validity in research as participants provide clarity and offer additional insights into themes of the study. After I reviewed each transcribed interview, redacting names and correcting misinterpreted terms by the transcriptionist, I then emailed a copy of the transcribed interview to the participant. I requested each participant review the document and share with me any corrections, clarifications, or additional information they deemed pertinent to the study. Of the 18 participants, four responded with additional and/or corrected information. In a second round of member checking, I emailed all participants a summary of the findings and themes as well as a copy of the coding charts (Appendix C). I invited participants to offer feedback and further insights, which I subsequently incorporated in the iterative analysis of data. In qualitative collaborative studies, researchers invite participants to join in the research process, co-constructing “knowledge based on data” (Hatch, 2002, p. 32). Hatch (2002) explains collaborative studies bring “insider and outsider perspectives to the analysis of phenomena under investigation” (p. 23). Ongoing and authentic conversations with participants provide a rigorous method to gather quality and rich data. The inclusion of participants’ feedback in this case study ensured accuracy and validity in interpretation and analysis.

### *Peer Debriefing*

Creswell & Poth (2018) recommend debriefing with a third-party to review data analysis. Peer debriefing allows a peer review of the study in which researchers receive feedback, questions, and challenges regarding the analysis (2018). In the cycle of the iterative process, I shared themes and codes with my dissertation committee members after coding and before sharing findings with participants. I also shared my Research Data Corpus and coding chart (Appendix C) with members of my dissertation committee. In the coding chart graphics, I added comments in the margins with explanations of reasoning and challenges I faced in my analysis of data. Through this process, I invited these peers to offer feedback and recommendations on my analysis. These critical third-parties provided an unbiased perspective on my interpretations of data and coding of themes. In the final stages of analysis, after collecting participant feedback on the study findings, I then enlisted my dissertation committee members to debrief.

## Reporting Findings

A case study analysis results in a "detailed description of the case and its setting" (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell & Poth suggest beginning and closing the report with a vignette to help the reader connect with the experience, case, and setting. The authors recommend writing a case study with a description of the case and offer themes and interpretations of the study. This dissertation in practice case study has been organized by theme and subthemes aligned with the research sub questions, with explanations, examples, and reasoning for each to help describe the case and findings. With developing naturalistic generalizations, the researcher also provides the reader with findings from the study which may be applied to other cases (2018). The interpretations and reflections of the data and themes in this dissertation in practice offer naturalistic generalizations to help make the case logical for the reader.

## Data Management

To manage data, I used an Excel spreadsheet to house a master file of all interview transcripts, observation data, and document data examined in the study. The spreadsheet titled, “Research Data Corpus” was utilized to organize the data collection as well as document memos and notes attained in the study. The spreadsheet was organized with individual worksheets which included an overview of participant demographics, observation summary, observations, as well as codes. Each participant was identified by a pseudonym (“P” for participant and a randomly assigned number). The pseudonym listed on the overview of participant demographics was linked to the worksheet within the file with the participant’s transcribed interview. Each interview page, titled by the participant’s pseudonym, was organized with paragraphs or sections of the transcription, the page number on which the quote was found on the Word file, the question related to the statement, the memos, themes, categories, and codes. The format allowed me to maintain a central location for data and provided ease in searching notes. Within the Corpus, I also created a codebook which will include code names, detailed descriptions, categories, associated themes, theme descriptions, inclusion criteria/exemplars, exclusion criteria, and atypical exemplars to support the analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). Each code was color-coded for ease in visual recognition while analyzing data and presenting findings.

This research dissertation in practice took three months from the initial steps in obtaining permissions to data collection, analysis, and reporting of findings. This timeline provided me time to return to communicate with participants for member checking and discuss emerging themes through peer debriefing.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations must ensure the respect and privacy of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize the importance of planning and addressing potential ethical concerns with consideration of "respect for persons (i.e. privacy and consent), concern for welfare (i.e. minimize harm and augment reciprocity), and justice (i.e. equitable treatment and enhance inclusivity)" (p. 151). As a school leader conducting educational research with teachers as participants, I ensured my positional authority did not compel or intimidate participants. From the onset of this study, I ensured all participants were aware the study was voluntary. As a school administrator, it was essential that I repeatedly reminded them participation was not required and any information shared with me would remain confidential. In order to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of participants in this research, the study used pseudonyms to mask the identities of participants and the school. In order to gather participants' perspectives, I established trust with participants, disclosed the purpose of the study, maintained the privacy of participants, and protected any sensitive information shared through the course of interviews and observations. Through the course of interviews and data analysis, interpretations and themes were shared with the participants, seeking their input to clarify themes and further explain data. In addition, all participants were treated with respect and offered equal consideration in interviews and subsequent discussions. Finally, all results and findings were shared with participants in the interest of transparency.

## Bias

Examining bias through self-reflection and transparency is an essential component of quality research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers are obligated to share educational and professional background as it relates to the study as well as any relationship with the participants or case. In order to address bias in this dissertation in practice case study, I utilized reflection through journaling. The researcher journal provided insights on my thinking and decision-making throughout the research process. In addition, during the data analysis, I shared themes and findings with participants to ensure accuracy in interpretation. I also shared data with critical persons, members of my dissertation committee, to debrief and discuss interpretations.

My professional experience and background knowledge as an educator and school administrator may present bias in this study. I have 28 years of experience in the field of education with 11 years in educational leadership. I have recently focused my studies on culturally responsive teaching practices and addressing the achievement gap. The passion for my studies in serving low-SES students and my experiences as an educator may present bias in the researcher's lens in conducting interviews and observations as well as in examining data.

Researcher reflection or journaling provides insight to the researcher's journey throughout a study (Janesick, 1998). Journals create a documented narrative of the researcher's learning, thinking, and understanding of the case and findings. A journal also provides transparency in acknowledging any implicit bias a researcher has. In addition, reflection is a fundamental component of inquiry for practitioner research. In this case study, I maintained a research journal to document my personal perspective and journey in research. This supported my data analysis and reflection in my research as well as my growth as a social science researcher. A critical consideration to address bias is transparency in all aspects of the research study in describing that background, discussing bias, and reflection through the iterative process of analysis and interpretation of data. As an additional component of this research case study, I included a reflection based on my journal as an addendum to my dissertation in practice (Appendix G).

## Anonymity and Confidentiality

Researchers have an ethical obligation to uphold confidentiality in studies to protect the identity of participants. To maintain the anonymity of the school district, school, and participants in the publishing of this case study, I removed any identifiers within the study which may indicate the state, district, or school. According to American Psychological Association (APA) (2020) sources should not be cited in the reference list if the source compromises the confidentiality or anonymity of the subject. In addition, any discussion of the state, school district, and school in the study has been “suitably disguised” (2020, p. 278). The documents from which state accountability scores are derived, for example, are cited or listed in the references list using the author name “anonymous” and with redacted hyperlinks. Any reference to the case does not include the name of the school, district, or state. In addition, with regard to confidentiality of individual participants, I informed participants of the way in which data will be collected and stored, as well as how participants will be identified in the study through the use of pseudonyms. All information concerning participants are kept confidential and identities have not been revealed. All personal information, including names, contact information, position, years of employment, obtained in the interview process remained confidential.

Through the process of data analysis and sharing interpretation and results with individual participants, I discussed confidentiality with each participant and sought input regarding any confidentiality concerns with sharing direct quotes or summarized comments.

Because research was conducted in a school, minors were observed. Anonymity for all students is essential. All student names and identifying characteristics were removed from all interviews and documents. Notes taken during observation did not include student names or identifying characteristics. When documenting information about students or including information about students in reporting findings, no specific or identifying information was described and generalizations were used for explanations, narratives, and descriptions.

### IRB Approval

Before seeking IRB approval through Creighton University, the proposal for this research dissertation in practice was approved (Appendix G). For IRB approval, a research plan was approved by the dissertation chair for this research study. All research protocols, plans, and documentation were submitted and approved by Creighton University IRB before beginning any aspects of research for this study.

## Summary

This chapter of this dissertation in practice outlines the methodology for a qualitative case study of a high-performing, high-poverty school. The case study design for this research provided for an examination of the phenomenon of high-performance at a high-poverty school and was bounded by specific parameters: the school district, the school's high-poverty student population, and the school's overall state accountability score. Utilizing a conceptual framework formed by an analysis of existing research, I examined the characteristics of the school based on culture, leadership, and instruction and learning. I adhered to protocols to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, secured all documents and data, and clearly defined bias. I sought permissions from the school district superintendent and school principal to conduct research then obtained permission to conduct research from Creighton University’s IRB. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview protocol with faculty member participants. In addition, I used observations and an examination of school documents to gather data to describe faculty’s perspectives of high-performance at the high-poverty school. All digital files and documents were maintained in a secure location and confidentiality of all participants upheld through clearly defined procedures and protocols. Analysis of data involved an iterative process, returning to participants to discuss interpretations and seek feedback on findings. I requested peer debriefing with members of my dissertation committee to evaluate analysis of data. Coding of data was completed through manual, hand-coding of data through initial, open and in vivo coding to classify and label concepts then axial and selective coding to reorganize codes. In addition, I maintained a journal of thoughts and experiences throughout this study as a reflective analysis of my research. This case study spanned three months from requests for research permissions then initial interviews and observations to a final written report of findings and conclusions.

# CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Schools designated as high-poverty, with an enrollment of high percentages of 75 percent or more low-socioeconomic status (SES) students (NCES, 2019), face challenges serving the needs of low-SES students and typically perform below achievement proficiency standards (Reardon et al., 2019). Research indicates low-SES students earn lower academic achievement scores than their mid- to high-SES classmates. However, some high-poverty schools defy the norm, implementing practices and systems which support low-SES students and meeting or exceeding state standards. The purpose of this qualitative case study of a high-poverty school was to explore faculty perspectives of the characteristics of a high-performing, high-poverty school. The interview questions for this research study focused on a conceptual framework aligned with high-performing, high-poverty schools, as defined by research. The study focused on one Midwest, metropolitan middle school identified as both high-performing and high-poverty. To examine the lived experiences and gather the perspectives of faculty in a high-performing, high-poverty, this qualitative study was driven by the following question: What are the perceptions of faculty regarding the characteristics of school performance within high poverty, high performance schools? The research question was guided by the following sub questions:

Sub question #1: What professional practices do faculty describe as beneficial to support academic achievement of students and lead to school ratings which meet or exceed standards?

Sub question #2: What school systems or programs do faculty identify as beneficial to support the academic achievement of students and lead to school ratings which meet or exceed standards?

Sub question #3: What relational practices do faculty attribute to establish the school's culture?

Sub question #4: What leadership practices do faculty attribute to the school's high performance?

This chapter will describe the findings gathered from this single case study, first, outlining the data organization and analysis then providing a detailed narrative of the data findings. The findings from this qualitative case study of a single high-performing, high-poverty school identified five prevalent themes: student-centered education, professional relationships and professional growth, MLSS (multi-layered system of supports), cultural responsiveness, and transformational leadership. These themes are further defined by sub-themes, based on the categories identified in the data analysis.

## Presentation of the Findings

The presentation of findings offers a description of the data organization and analysis followed by an explanation of the resulting findings from that analysis. The coding process for this study included initial, hand coding using initial coding with memoing, open coding, and in vivo coding followed by axial and selective coding in the subsequent stages. In the analysis process, I initially identified codes which were narrowed to categories then refined to four themes. The case study findings revealed the themes of student-centered education, professional relationship and professional growth, MLSS (multi-layered system of supports), cultural responsiveness, and transformational leadership. These themes are presented with sub themes based on the analysis categories which add depth to the descriptions. The themes are presented and organized in order of the research sub questions to which they align.

## Data Organization and Analysis

The data in this qualitative case study was collected from interviews, observations, and documents. The data was analyzed through manual, hand-coding. Through initial coding I used open coding, in vivo coding, and memoing. As I moved into additional cycles of coding, I utilized axial coding and selective coding. As I began the work of coding, I made my notations on hard copies of interview transcripts, interview protocols, and observation protocols. The content from those hard copies as well as the memos, notes, and codes were transferred to an Excel file titled, “Research Data Corpus,” which housed all data allowing for ease in tracking and searching for codes during analysis and for reference in writing.

As I read through each interview transcript, I memoed in the right margin, using initial or open coding, documenting key ideas, and in vivo coding, identifying participant words as codes. Saldaña (2016) describes initial coding as a “first cycle, open-ended approach” (p. 115) in a line-by-line analysis of the data. The notes I added were key points, comments, or ideas the participant shared on topics. When the participants’ words offered the clearest description of ideas, I documented the quote, then highlighted the quotation for easier, future reference. I added researcher reflections in the memos as well. After reading through each transcribed interview three times and adding or changing memos, I copied each transcribed interview into the master spreadsheet Excel file titled, “Research Data Corpus.” The corpus was organized into worksheets with organizational charts of the interview summaries, observation summaries, transcribed interviews, observation data, document data, and a code book. The participants were identified by pseudonyms, “P” for participant and a randomly assigned number from 1-19. The participant data worksheet included the demographic data for each participant, including gender, age, and years at the school. Each participant pseudonym was linked to the worksheet within the file with the participant’s transcribed interview. Each transcribed interview worksheet was titled by the participant’s pseudonym and was organized with paragraphs or sections of the transcription, the page number on which the quote was found on the Word file, the interview question that prompted the statement, as well as the memos, themes, categories, and codes. After all data was coded, additional worksheets were added, titled by research themes with all data coded by that theme included within the sheets. The spreadsheet format allowed for ease in grouping data and searching for codes and quotes during coding as well as during analysis and writing of findings and conclusions.

As I began a second cycle of coding, I utilized axial coding to identify themes then categories then final codes. Axial coding is an analytical process through which data is restructured to link categories with themes, narrowing the initial codes (Saldaña, 2016). As I read through the data, I began documenting a list of recurring codes. Initially, as I organized codes into categories, I developed a chart to provide a visual aid for the developing categories and themes (Appendix C). The items to the far left are the codes I noted in my initial, open coding. The middle boxes are categories by which codes are grouped. Finally, the far right boxes contained the final themes developed from the categories. Within the Research Data Corpus, as I developed codes, then categories, and themes, I created drop down lists in those columns for ease in organization and to ensure consistency in the names for those terms. I also developed a Code Book (Appendix D) within the Data Corpus to clarify and define the themes. The Code Book was organized by codebook themes, each with columns of detailed descriptions, categories, associated codes, category descriptions, inclusion criteria/exemplars, exclusion criteria, and atypical exemplars to support the analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). I color-coded each code for ease in visual recognition while analyzing data and writing about findings. The color-coding matched the code chart and the code book.

Throughout the analysis process and as I began writing my findings, I continued to refine my coding, the Code Book, and adjust the organization of data. At times, insights I explored in writing my findings prompted me to return to the Code Book and the themes, categories, and codes graphic to enhance clarity, enrich and align themes, and ensure the descriptions accurately represented the data and the findings.

## Qualitative Case Study Findings

This qualitative case study sought to gather data which would identify the characteristics of a high-performing, high-poverty school from the perspective of faculty. In order to gather those perspectives, four sub questions guided the interviews and data analysis. Creswell and Poth (2018) advocate the development of sub questions in qualitative research to divide the central research question into components for gathering details through inquiry. As I analyzed the emerging themes of the study, I reflected on how the themes aligned with the research sub questions. The final five codes identified in this analysis resulted in the following themes: student-centered education, multi-layered system of supports, cultural responsiveness, professional relationships and professional growth, and transformational leadership. The themes aligned with each of the research sub questions and are presented accordingly.

### *Sub Question #1: Professional Practices*

The first sub question for this qualitative research study was "what professional practices do faculty describe as beneficial to support academic achievement of students and lead to school ratings which meet or exceed standards?" Faculty responses outlined a theme of student-centered education supported primarily by relationship building, along with empathy, high expectations for all students, and individualized instruction.

**Student-Centered Education.** A student-centered education emerged as a prominent theme in this case study as a recurring response to the question regarding which professional practices support achievement. The concept of a student-centered approach is an educational focus on understanding and adapting practices to the individualized needs of each student to support learning and overall development. Dix (2012) defines student-centered education as follows:

> Student-centered education is a set of attitudes, skills, and considerations that affect the way an educator or school approaches learners. It recognizes the individuality of each student and, by extension, the primary importance of the relationship between learners and teachers. The very nature of learning is deeply affected by relationship at the fundamental level of brain development" (p. 5).

Teachers consistently expressed the value of relationship building with students as a fundamental practice in establishing trust and preparing students for instruction. Teachers discussed the significance of understanding student needs and "meeting students where they are" to evaluate individual student's academic, social, and emotional needs as critical professional practices which support achievement. Within the theme of student-centered education, several subthemes emerged, including relationship building, empathy, high-expectations for all learners, and instruction.

***Relationship Building.*** Relationship building, for this research study, is defined as relationship building with students and colleagues in the interest of establishing a positive, welcoming, and safe environment for learning and for engaging in difficult discussions. For the theme of student-centered education, this category specifically focuses on relationships built between students and staff.

In the interviews, 11 of the 18 participants described relationship building as an essential practice in supporting student achievement. The data from the research interviews revealed relationship building as a primary professional practice to support both academic achievement and classroom management. One teacher summarized,

> . . . it doesn't sound like a professional practice, but . . . the relationship building to me is a key. It should be number one, because you need those students to trust you. And, to know that you're going to be there and support them and give them that ability to . . .feel safe in the environment. So, they're willing to ask questions when they're struggling. That they're not going to be like, "Well, I'm too afraid to ask the teacher." They know that teacher cares about them and wants what's best for them and is there to help them.

Teachers emphasized the significance of prioritizing relationship building and supporting students before academic expectations, explaining relationship building is necessary to support achievement. Teachers explained building positive and supportive relationships with students promotes a sense of safety and security when engaging in new and challenging curriculum.

One faculty member reflected on her classroom experience early in her teaching career. She explained, initially, she focused primarily on academics; however, her students' test scores remained low.

> My first couple years were rough because I was all about trying to teach the curriculum. It wasn't until later on in my career as a teacher I realized that once I started building those relationships, the kids were more apt to learn from me. My test scores shot up.

Reflecting on similar experiences, multiple teachers explained students need to know the teacher cares about them before they are willing and ready to learn. With that understand, one teacher described shifting her primary focus to develop relationships with students. She explained the next time her students took the standardized test their scores rose significantly.

> That the next time we took it, every student had made growth because I really focused on building those relationships, getting to know the kids, finding out individually what do they need? . . . Just building that relationship so that they were more interested. When you build that relationship, I think they are more willing to learn the subject matter.

Teachers explained the practice of relationship building demonstrates support and builds a positive, trusting relationship with students, so they feel safe engaging in learning new concepts and supported in taking risks and making mistakes. One faculty member clarified,

> Once you establish a relationship with a student, and if it's a positive one, they tend to want to work harder. They tend to enjoy learning more. . . . It really has to do with how they feel when they're in that class, how they feel when they're challenged to learn whether or not they're being supported and that they can be successful.”

Throughout the interviews, participants emphasized the importance of relationship building with students as a fundamental practice in order to hold students to high expectations for achievement. Once a positive and supportive relationship is built, teachers explained students are mentally prepared to engage with challenges aligned with high academic expectations. One faculty member clarified, “we remind them that they're our family, but you can do it and setting those expectations . . . . I think a matter of our school as high-performing [is] because we care.”

The practice of relationship building was evident in classroom observations as well. Of the eight classroom observations I conducted for this study, six included teacher-led conversations and activities welcoming students to class, calling students by name, and engaging in discussions about students’ families and personal lives. Three teachers began classroom lessons with questions about weekend plans, holiday plans, and what students like to do on snow days. Each day, teachers begin their Advisory class, a class period in which social-emotional lessons and PBIS lessons are taught. One teacher, leading an Advisory class, welcomed students to share stories or experiences under the theme of “Brags and Bummers.” Student participation in these classes included nearly every student. Teachers responded to the students with personal comments which demonstrated teachers’ familiarity with the students’ lives outside of school. In addition, in an observation of a PBIS Tier 2 meeting, faculty team members discussed adjustments to interventions as the school moved to full virtual learning in the weeks preceding winter break. At one point, the team discussed the importance of reminding staff of the focus on relationship building in a virtual learning environment as well as with mentoring or supporting students in check-in/check-out interventions.

Participants also discussed the impact of relationship building on classroom management and student behavior. One teacher shared his perspective of relationship building and the impact it has on classroom behavior. He stated, “you'll hear another teacher complain about a student or their behavior. . ., and I'll be like, ‘Oh, I've never had that.’ But then it's like, ‘Oh wait. I spend a lot of time with that kid. I talk with that kid.’” Explaining the impact of relationships on classroom management and student behavior, another faculty member summarized, “making sure that you've built those relationships, so kids feel safe, and good, and trusted in your classroom, keeps them in there.”

While participants noted relationship building is a critical practice in promoting effective classroom management and positive student behavior, they acknowledged there are also areas in which the practice needs improvement. For example, one teacher described concern with students defiantly leaving class in frustration.

> There has to be a reason, compelling reason to them to stay in class more than whatever is making them want to get out. . . . But we need to figure out what's not making the room the place they want to be on a more regular basis. . . .You don't often hear about a kid leaving these teachers' rooms, but these other teachers’- it's constant.

The faculty stressed the importance of first focusing on relationships to develop a safe learning environment before challenging students academically, acknowledging those relationships create a trusting bond, so students trust the teacher and feel safe embracing challenge and taking risks.

In addition, in order to push students to achieve academically and maintain high expectations, teachers share individual test scores with students and provide strategies to help them grow and attain higher levels. Reflecting on student achievement, one teacher stated,

> When we started goal setting, their scores, I mean, two, three, four or five more points on average, were growing. . . and their mindset about the test grew and their own abilities. . . . I think we're high achieving because we give them that skill first, that self-confidence skill first, and then . . . some real academic skills."

Participants in this study emphasized the value of relationship building to support student participation in classroom instruction and to guide positive student behavior. The faculty demonstrated the practice of relationship building in class instruction and in conversations during planning meetings. The theme of relationship building was prevalent in all aspects of planning, instruction, and student support.

***Empathy.*** The subtheme of empathy in this study is aligned with student-centered education and focuses on understanding and acknowledging another's perspective. Participants in this study emphasized the necessity to understand students, to be trauma sensitive, and to "meet students where they are" as critical skills in student-centered education. Acknowledging the impact of poverty, the trauma associated with living in poverty, and the challenges facing students in their personal lives, in their homes, and in their communities, participants explained the teachers' primary responsibility is to offer compassionate understanding for individual students and recognize the impact those difficult life experiences have on student learning, behavior, and social relationships. Faculty explained extending empathy to students creates a welcoming, trusting, and safe school environment and develops a foundation for holding students to high standards. One teacher stated,

> I think that that's the biggest thing when looking at high poverty, high success schools, it's not having that victim mindset. And saying, "yeah, you know what? You might've been dealt a crap hand in life, but at the same time, that's just going to make us love you even more and support you even more and hold you to an even higher standard."

Faculty members explained the importance of acknowledging the difficult circumstances their students face, being patient when students are struggling emotionally, and giving students space to process emotions and discuss problems. However, faculty explain they do not pity students or view them as victims. Instead, the faculty supports the needs students have and continue to hold them to high standards of expectations. One teacher summarized,

> If we notice say a student is really struggling, but they're really down and they're not working, we can talk about that and come up with solutions. And it's not just about complaining about it, but, okay, so this is the issue, now what are we going to do to help that student? So I think having that student-centered viewpoint and knowing that what our role is is [*sic*] to help our students succeed and have all of them do that I think is a big part of why we really do honestly help our kids achieve academically.

***High Expectations for All Students.*** The school's mission statement, posted on the school website, written in the weekly school newsletter, and shared in faculty meetings and professional development presentations throughout the school year, “ensures every child receives high levels of academic, behavioral, and social emotional growth.” That vision was repeatedly discussed by faculty members who focus on making decisions in students' best interests. One teacher described the primary purpose and focus in ensuring high-performance in a high-poverty school:

> I guess the word that comes to mind is “every.” We talk about our own mission statement here at [redacted school name], and it's about every child, and it's about all of the aspects of the child. It's not just hoping that a child's going to actually do it, it's having a specific purpose and a specific plan for how we are going to get those students to achieve these specific skills. I think that message of we're not going to quit on a kid, we're going to keep trying, we're not going to let them fail. That every child matters and every teacher can reach a child, is exactly what can make the difference in those students' lives.

The faculty accepts the responsibility to ensure every student receives high level of instruction. One teacher explained, “our culture is based on the growth mindset and on nurturing and encouraging the children . . . and the determination of the teacher to continue to ask for more where we push the kids to excel.”

***Individualized Instruction.*** With student-centered education, instruction is differentiated to meet the diverse needs of learners (Dix, 2012). At Jane Doe Middle School, instructional practices are adjusted to meet the individual needs of students. Teachers referenced, “meeting students where they are,” to gauge students’ level of understanding then adjusting lessons and incorporating strategies to meet those needs. Teachers emphasized the significance of establishing relationships with students and getting to know their individual strengths and challenges allows a teacher to “tailor lessons” to fit the students. One teacher explained,

> My responsibility is to figure out each one of them, get to know them and try to provide them with the environment and the support that is going to allow them to excel to whatever level they can get to. And that means figuring out where they're at, where do I start with them? And every student is different, every student has different learning styles. I have specific teaching styles and strengths and the entire list of responsibilities.

Teachers described first providing general instruction for the whole group, then working with individual groups, in the classroom or in break out rooms in virtual settings, to hone in on individual needs and provide individualized instruction for students. This practice was also demonstrated in several classroom lessons I observed with teachers providing individualized feedback and meeting with students in small groups to address specific needs.

### ***Sub Question #2: School Systems and Programs***

The second sub question for this study posed the question, “what school systems or programs do faculty identify as beneficial to support the academic achievement of students and lead to school ratings which meet or exceed standards?” Throughout the interviews, teachers identified the school’s response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) as systemic programs which support student achievement. These systems, collectively described as Multi-Layered System of Supports

(MLSS), provide academic, behavioral, and social emotional curriculum, instruction, interventions, and support for all students in the school. RTI is supported by collaboration and shared decision-making in essential standards, CORE intervention time, and intervention strategies. PBIS is supported by instruction, tiered support, interventions, incentives, and social emotional learning.

**Multi-Layered System of Supports (MLSS).** Multi-Layered System of Supports (MLSS) is a structured framework for academic, behavior, and social emotional instruction and intervention to meet student needs (“Framework,” n.d.). Schools implement this multi-tiered system with a basis in high quality instruction school-wide. Faculty utilize data-driven decision-making and effective collaboration to identify and implement a variety of supports to cultivate students’ academic, behavioral, and social emotional skills. MLSS at Jane Doe Middle School is structured by two components: response to intervention (RTI), which promotes academic growth, and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), which supports behavioral and social emotional development (Appendix E). RTI is “a systematic process to ensure every student receives: The additional time and support needed to learn at high levels” (Buffum et al., 2018, p. 1). RTI is the academic component of MLSS, focusing on universal expectations for curriculum, instruction, and learning with intervention strategies for addressing gaps in learning. PBIS is a systematic process to provide universal instruction in behavior expectations and social emotional learning, which also provides curriculum, instruction, and interventions to support student learning. Jane Doe Middle School has established systematic structures for MLSS

***Response to Intervention (RTI).*** Jane Doe Middle School's Response to Intervention (RTI) system an approach to provide consistency school-wide in academic expectations supported by structured interventions, remediation, and enrichment to support student learning. When discussing the impact of RTI, one teacher explained, "I think RTI is very important with, especially our model. I think a lot of the success that we have had in the past five years or so has been that direct response to having intervention for those students that get left behind." The school's RTI system is founded in teacher-identified essential standards; a modified schedule structured with CORE time for pre-teaching, remediation, and enrichment within the school daily schedule; and tiered interventions to address the needs of learners. RTI is supported by grade level teams and content area teams, in which faculty collaborate on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and interventions.

*Essential standards.* Essential standards are grade-level standards students must master for success in the next level of instruction or the next grade level (Buffum et al., 2018). At Jane Doe Middle School, faculty collaborate to identify essential standards in the curriculum, then utilize RTI to define what students will know, how they will assess student learning, what responses they will use when students do not learn, and what the next steps will be if students have learned the standard. Throughout the interviews, teachers stated essential standards provide clarity in learning targets and a focus on instruction to support student success. One faculty member described essential standards as a critical component in the school's success.

> I would say just a consistent curriculum to an extent or consistent learning targets to where you are identifying those skills that you want them to work through and

> then hitting them to proficiency to mastery. Once you've identified those essential standards, we need these kids to know A, B, and C before they can move on, and then just continuing to hit that until you hit proficiency . . . . I think just that proficiency of essential standards and then identifying the correct standards in that building blocks of their skills.

Teachers meet with their collaborative teams to discuss assessments and individual students' progress and identify which students need remediation, additional practice, or enrichment.

*CORE.* Approximately seven years ago, in order to provide the support students need in RTI, the school, led by the Guiding Coalition leadership team, redeveloped the daily schedule to provide time during the school day to provide intervention support. The Guiding Coalition titled the universal intervention time as CORE. In 2016-17, the Guiding Coalition led professional development to clarify the purpose of CORE:

> The nature of [redacted school name]'s Core intervention needs to be specific so that teachers are not just seeing their own students to help them complete their *missing work*, but rather students are receiving **direct instruction** based on their need for support on a **specific skill**.

Each day of the week is identified for different subject area which takes priority over other subjects, allowing each teacher in each subject area dedicated time to work with students. To support the scheduling demands of CORE, the school utilizes a software program in which teachers flag students who need to attend that teacher's CORE for additional support. One teacher discussed the significant benefits students and teachers have experienced with the consistent, scheduled time for CORE:

> I really think our CORE, which is a time devoted to students for, . . . pullout enrichment, further lessons. Some teachers are able to expand on lessons at that time. And the fact that it's building wide all at the same time, meaning everybody's on the same page. There's nobody not working at that time. And you have devoted days to those subjects. I think that makes a big difference.

A few of the staff interviewed expressed concern that a small number of teachers do not utilize CORE time consistently or effectively. One teacher explained, “you can tell that some teachers are using it [CORE] very well and are very focused on what it should be and some are more, ‘Oh, this is another buzzword, waste of time.’ I don't think we have a lot of those [teachers] at [redacted school name] though. In honesty, I think there's a couple that maybe either don't care or don't understand. But I think for the most part, teachers are using it well.”

*Tiered Interventions.* The RTI model in place at Jane Doe Middle School includes three tiers. Tier 1 is structured by essential standards with clarify for learning targets all students must achieve and school wide intervention time with CORE. Students identified by teachers needing Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions are scheduled for regular, periodic support from support staff, including English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and/or interventionists, who focus specifically on mathematics and reading. Teachers explained the interventionists work with students on targeted areas in mathematics and reading to build students skills, so they can be more successful in the general classroom setting. Students are identified for specific Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions based on standardized assessment scores and grade level performance with the collaborative support of counselors, the school psychologist, and intervention teachers.

***Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).*** Jane Doe Middle School faculty also cited the school's established a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system as a critical component to the school's success. PBIS is a multi-tiered program which provides instruction, interventions, and individualized student support for social emotional and behavioral needs (Center on PBIS, n.d.). PBIS at Jane Doe Middle School is led by teams which provide guidance for Tier 1 and Tier 2 systems of support. The PBIS tier teams have defined essential standards for each grade level based on the CASEL (The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) competencies, which address five areas of social emotional learning to support student learning in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2021). Jane Doe Middle School's PBIS Tier 1 team oversees the school wide curriculum and lessons focused on behavior and social emotional learning (SEL). During their Advisory class periods, teachers deliver detailed and structured weekly SEL lessons aligned to the CASEL competencies. Throughout the school year, the tier teams provide supports to teachers with prepared lessons, faculty presentations, and coordinated activities to support the school's focus on behavioral expectations and social emotional learning.

Teachers use their Advisory period at the start of the school day to teach lessons provided by the Tier 1 team. The lessons focus on behavior expectations for the school, including hallway, classroom, and cafeteria behavior. Other lessons focus on social emotional learning, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Faculty expressed the significance in understanding teachers must teach students behavioral expectations if they are going to hold students accountable for their behavior. One faculty member described discipline from the perspective of instruction and learning, not punishment:

> I am a big proponent in instructional discipline. So obviously, kids are not going to come to us perfectly. So for me, I always wanted to keep kids in my classroom. So whatever I could do to keep kids in my classroom, and teaching them, and working through what's going on. Getting to their individual strengths. Figuring out how we could work that into them being successful academically, is what I like to do in my classroom.

*Social emotional learning (SEL).* Social emotional learning is defined as the acquisition and application of the understanding, skills, and behaviors which promote positive self-awareness, emotional management, goal setting, empathy, positive relationships as well as positive and productive decision making (CASEL, n.d.). At Jane Doe Middle School, teachers described several strategies to support social emotional learning, including mindfulness practices, targeted instruction in emotional regulation, and SEL curriculum and lessons developed through a third-party. Two years ago, the school piloted the SEL program with structured, grade-level lessons aligned to the CASEL competences, then adopted and integrated the program school wide the past two school years. In discussing the benefits of the program and the impact on students, one teacher explained,

> it [SEL instruction] helps kids with goal setting, just talking about their emotions. And for some kids, it was like a whole new experience to them, thinking about how they're feeling because they might be feeling one way, this is why they're acting or not necessarily the acting, but their action as a result of it.

Another teacher explained the program helped build a community of trust in the classroom as students become more comfortable discussing their emotions and developing a sense of emotional safety with their teachers and classmates.

*Tiered Interventions*. The school's PBIS tier teams meet regularly to continually develop and support school wide instruction in behavioral expectations and social emotional learning. The Tier 1 team develops school-wide expectations for behavior and provides scripted lessons aligned to the CASEL (The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) competencies. The Tier 2 team meets weekly to evaluate student attendance and behavior data and identify students for targeted interventions. The team follows a consistent, structured agenda and uses data to determine student needs and intervention plans. The interventions include mentoring, daily check-in/check-out plans, and small group support. One teacher stated this school system which student achievement, describing the benefits,

> PBIS and the check-in check out where there's a routine of self-monitoring or encouraging or teaching children how to take a look at their progress in the day and then reflect on it to internalize the good parts of the day.

The Tier 2 team emphasizes the importance of teacher-student relationships in interventions to develop student's capacity in decision-making and success. Throughout interviews, observations, and the examination of school documents, MLSS presented as a prominent, systemic program to provide student support.

*Incentives.* Jane Doe Middle School integrates multiple incentive programs to acknowledge students for positive behavior. The Tier 1 PBIS team oversees school wide incentive activities throughout the school year as well as the database program which teachers use to document in-class behavior rewards and minor referral points for students. PBIS utilized throughout the school year were valued as positive reinforcement for building positive behavior among students.

### *Sub Question #3: Relational Practices*

The third question this case study sought to answer was “what relational practices do faculty attribute to establish the school’s culture?” Throughout the interviews, relationship building was identified as a critical practice to support student achievement. Relationship building also emerged as a significant theme among staff, as faculty described the school’s culture.

**Professional Relationships and Professional Growth.** The theme of professional relationships and professional growth focuses specifically on the relationships and development of the faculty and staff. As I began coding and identifying themes, relationship building emerged as a consistent theme among the staff. Staff repeatedly referred to the school culture as a family and explained the supportive and positive relationships staff members have with one another. Several teachers talked about the comradery which develops through intentional, planned activities, as well as informal conversations during the school day and at after-school gatherings. At the same time the reoccurring theme of professional growth and professional development emerged. Throughout the interviews, teachers discussed their desires to continue learning to improve professional practice and to better serve students. Faculty discussed the training provided by colleagues in during faculty meetings or professional development sessions within the school day. They also discussed the conferences and training outside the school district which teachers attend.

Initially, I separated the themes of professional relationships from professional growth; however, as I continued to read through interviews and code data, I came to see relationship building among staff as a critical component supporting both the collaborative work of teams and the collective professional growth of the staff, much like the relationship building between teachers and students supports student learning. In addition, I witnessed interplay of staff relationships and professional learning in collaboration during team meetings. Thus, the theme of professional relationships and professional growth merged into one. This theme is defined by the subthemes of family culture and comradery, individual professional learning, collective professional development, and collaboration.

***Family Culture and Comradery.*** Much like the relationship building that is intentionally cultivated between staff and students, there is purposeful relationship building among staff. Participants discussed a family culture among the staff, describing activities both within and outside the school day. Faculty members discussed the natural tendency and unspoken expectation to support one another when anyone experiences difficult circumstances or in times of need. When asked to describe the school’s culture, one teacher stated,

> If you're talking about the staff to staff, it is very family oriented. I know many schools claim that, but to actually see people rally around each other, to see people realize that if a staff member is gone, somebody just steps in and fills in for them. We don't always ask questions, we just do. That culture of positive amongst all the chaos is something that just doesn't happen, it's something that has to be cultivated.

As teachers talked about actions that cultivate those relationships, they discussed celebratory or fun activities during school days and informal gatherings outside of school. An analysis of school faculty newsletters provides evidence of the planned activities for faculty engagement, including trips to a haunted house, a local high school football game, brunch, dinners, and staff spirit weeks.

This practice of relationship building among staff parallels the relationship building teachers are doing in the classrooms with their students for the purpose of setting a safe and welcoming environment before engaging in challenging academic work. Similarly, the relationships that teachers build among themselves lends to welcoming and safe environments for their own learning, for collaboration, and for more serious conversations on difficult topics, such as racism, cultural awareness, and instructional practices.

***Individual Professional Learning.*** The theme of individual professional learning specifically focuses on the learning experiences for individual teachers, which occur through coursework, continued education, and reflective practices. Teachers describe having a growth mindset focused on continued self-improvement in the interest of supporting student learning. Faculty described being “co-learners” and “lifelong learners” in a school culture that advocates high expectations for teachers’ growth, similar to the expectations for students. One staff member explained that culture has supported her personal desire for continued professional growth,

> . . . either you're open to continue growing as an educator professionally, or maybe this isn't the right setting for you. And I think having that has kept things

> feeling fresh and . . . it's kept us on our toes. And I think for me as an educator, at least that's what I need from the school.

***Collective Professional Development.*** Collective professional development emerged as a subtheme of professional growth. The “collective” nature of the professional development speaks to the concerted effort to remain focused on consistent messages, common language, and a shared experience for faculty. Leaders who promote a culture of organizational learning create environments in which employees better understand complex issues, clarity in mission and vision and improve collective thought processes (Evans & Kivell, 2015).

The professional development at Jane Doe Middle School includes national conferences led by educational experts and professional training led by school staff and administration. School leadership intentionally selects specific staff each year to attend the same national conferences focused on professional learning communities to develop collaboration skills, response to intervention (RTI) training, and addressing the achievement gap. Staff are sent in groups and experience the same training as teachers from previous years for a shared experience and the development of common language for collaborative discussion. One faculty member described the clear focus on consistent professional development supports a collective mindset for staff.

> I have appreciated how our school has also sent staff to the very same conferences, whether it's over... it's been different years, but it's still been the same information, the same presenters that are getting the information. So all of your staff are hearing the same message and able to understand the purpose and what the focus is that you're trying to accomplish. I think that really does help

> those high poverty schools by gearing them in to what's important and where those students are at, and what will most benefit the students. So everybody's talking a common language, everybody's talking a common purpose.

That message is then carried forth in training led by the principal, assistant principal, instructional coach, as well as other staff who lead various sessions throughout the school year. Conferences outside the school are coupled with staff-led training within the school day focused on the same topics as well as other connected topics, such as cultural responsiveness, technology tools, PBIS, and instructional strategies to support different learners. The school's annual professional development plans maintain a common focus year-to-year, with planning surrounding the common vision and message of supporting every student to achieve at high levels. Teachers attend professional development sessions every Tuesday during their professional time in the school day as well as in faculty meetings scheduled twice each month.

> I think the practices that can help the most are being able to reach the teachers where they're at, and also being able to have a consistent, repetitive professional development that continually stays focused on specific topics, rather than randomly hitting all different pieces. . . . Being very focused and pinpoint exactly what you wish to accomplish for that year. Similar to our teachers who have essential standards or have learning targets, as far as training staff and training students, you need to be very focused in what you're trying to target and what you want them to develop as part of an overall plan.

The school's professional development plans are documented in detail, with each session's topic for every year, dating back to 2014, the start of the principal's tenure. The sessions focus on consistent themes of RTI, PBIS, cultural awareness, and collaborative teams, and are supported by presentations, book studies, and small group activities.

***Collaboration.*** Collaboration is the practice of partnering with other staff in discussion, planning, and decision-making in the interest of student learning and staff learning. As a subtheme of professional relationships and professional growth, collaboration is specifically intended to focus on the partnership of staff. (Collaborative leadership, conversely, is a subtheme discussed under the theme of transformational leadership). At Jane Doe Middle School, collaboration is an embedded practice with time set aside during the school day for teamwork. In addition, the school's professional development plan outlines specific sessions focused on training to support the work of collaborative teams. The commitment to collaboration in the interest of personal and professional growth was evident throughout interviews as teachers discussed working with grade level and content area teams, planning and evaluating assessment, as well as informally collaborating in an effort to improve practice. One teacher explained, “the teachers are given the autonomy to take what they've learned and work in collaborative groups and develop it for the sake of the success of the students.”

Additionally, another faculty member described that collaboration in professional growth as based on the professional relationships established among staff.

> And I think the school is really open. It feels like, like [*sic*] a community. I know that I can touch base with any of the seventh grade teachers and be like, "Hey, what's going on in your classroom? This is what's happening in my classroom. Are we seeing similar patterns and behaviors or skills?" And I'm always

> comfortable doing that. I'm comfortable going to sixth grade and eighth grade and doing that.

The professional development at Jane Doe Middle School is formed from a collective mindset of relationship building and comradery supporting professional learning and growth. The interplay of collegiality and professional learning was evident throughout interview discussions, designed in professional development plans, and demonstrated in observations of team meetings as well as documented in faculty newsletters.

**Cultural Responsiveness.** The theme of cultural responsiveness in this study is defined as understanding and acknowledging the perspective of students and families and intentionally relationship building and developing instructional practices to meet the needs of students while supporting learning and growth. Cultural responsiveness has been an ongoing focus in professional development at Jane Doe Middle School throughout the tenure of the current principal's tenure. As a continuation of that growth and search for understanding, this school year, Jane Doe Middle School administration and faculty collaboratively developed the following definition: "At [redacted school name], cultural awareness means we actively work to understand our students' unique perspectives, while practicing empathy to connect those viewpoints and our own so that we relentlessly pursue an equitable learning environment."

Several teachers noted ongoing professional development training and collegial discussions have led to their own, personal improved understanding of cultural responsiveness but there is room for continued, collective growth as a staff and as a school. These teachers emphasized the importance of having open, honest, and difficult conversations in order to move forward in the faculty’s collective professional growth and understanding. One teacher explained,

> I think that being open to those conversations is also really important, especially when you're in a school that's as diverse as ours. You have to be open to those conversations. You have to be okay with having uncomfortable conversations.
>
> And I just think that . . . having a lot of resources on those topics has been another piece to our strong culture. I think that we're on the right path. We're not there, but we're really on the right path.

Faculty members cited the critical nature of cultural responsiveness with the heightened needs of low-SES families during the current pandemic and given the increased attention and media coverage spotlighting racism and injustice in our country. Those perspectives fostered the development of the subthemes: cultural awareness, student and family support, parent involvement, and community.

***Cultural Awareness.*** According to Hammond (2015) culture is not defined by race or ethnicity; instead, culture is the way in which the brain processes information, based on our individual life experiences. Therefore, the subtheme of cultural awareness is described as understanding, acknowledging, and respecting the unique and individual needs of learners, as well as issues and concerns surrounding implicit bias, systemic racism, and inequities. Faculty advocated for opportunities for students to provide their perspective and inviting that perspective in analysis and decision-making. Throughout the interviews, faculty members expressed a desire to grow in their own cultural awareness, a need to address bias, and a hope for developing avenues for engaging student voice.

Teachers discussed professional development within the school as well as conferences staff have attended to address system racism, cultural awareness, and underserved populations. School documents outline the efforts to engage in collective professional growth in understanding cultural awareness. And, Guiding Coalition (the school's leadership team) meeting minutes, the school's annual professional development plans, and faculty newsletters reference topics of cultural competency, equity conversations, cultural awareness, teacher mindsets and culturally responsive teaching.

While staff acknowledged and express appreciation for the ongoing work to improve cultural awareness at Jane Doe Middle School, several staff expressed the need continued growth. Describing the cultural awareness training and discussions at the school, one teacher explained, ". . .we are moving in the right direction culturally. But I do think we have a lot of still growth especially when it comes to ethnic background, race and then even for students in special education."

*Race and racism.* While discussing cultural responsiveness, faculty shared concern regarding racial bias in the school, in the community, and the country, specifically mentioning racial injustice and social unrest highlighted in the United States over the course of the 2020-21 school year. (The school's most recent demographic report from the state report card shows the school has a student population of 20.3% African American, 40.8% Hispanic/Latino, 32.9% white, and 5.3% two or more races.) Teachers discussed the school's behavior referral data which indicates a disproportionate number of African American males receive major discipline referrals. The data has been a topic of discussion, led by administration and documented in Guiding Coalition meeting minutes as well as faculty meetings and professional development sessions.

Expressing the importance of continued study and self-reflection on the topic of cultural awareness, one faculty member stated,

> In some ways I think our culture represents what is happening in the community, or has happened in the [redacted city name] community from underlying tones of discussions unheard or unspoken or . . . I think of our students of color. . . . how many discipline referrals we have, and how disproportionate. . . .That just causes me. . . it's a cause for us to take a look at us, all of us.

*Student voice.* Teachers advocated the need for continued growth in cultural responsiveness and the value of incorporating student voice in decision-making. Teachers acknowledged student voice as an untapped resource that needs to be cultivated to help identify and understand student perspective and student needs. Participants advocated for opportunities for students to be heard, in order to effectively support students and truly gain cultural awareness. One teacher explained, “to keep a high performing, low poverty school, we must include and empower our students of color, and give them access to being able to use their voice.” Describing the need for continued growth in cultural awareness at the school and the need to address bias and racism, one faculty member summarized, “I feel like until those things change, the school can't move forward in closing the achievement gap and becoming more high-performing.”

The ideas of surrounding a program to gather student perspectives was identified in an analysis of school documents. Guiding Coalition meeting agendas and minutes from 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years indicated discussions regarding the development of a student voices program. The purpose focused on gathering student perspective on school programs and practices to develop plans for school improvement.

***Student and Family Support.*** Student and family support at Jane Doe Middle School was a collaborative effort voluntarily organized and facilitated by staff. This sub theme is defined as developing and implementing plans to provide for the basic needs of children and their families, independent of school systems or programs. At Jane Doe Middle School, staff have voluntarily coordinated food drives, Christmas gift shopping, and clothing drives. During the pandemic, those efforts shifted to school staff grocery shopping for food and delivering meals to families during the school shut down, as well as providing sports equipment and games for families isolated at home. While these activities are not formalized programs within the school structure, faculty identified student and family support as another layer in their success as a high-performing, high-poverty school. Describing the family culture of the school and the importance of understanding the needs of students and their families living in poverty, one teacher explained,

> Just in the way through this whole pandemic that the staff has stepped up to help our families in need. . . . Nobody thought twice about. . . we went. . . ,"Okay, these kids aren't going to have food because we're not at school for lunches anymore, [or] at breakfast." And, everybody just chipping in and donating money or going out and buying food.

***Family and Community.*** Family and community was a subtheme of cultural responsiveness explicitly mentioned by a few teachers but was also a topic embedded in other discussions relating to trauma, empathy, and relationship building. Faculty recognize the influential role families and the community play in students’ social, emotional, and behavioral wellbeing. Concurrently, teachers expressed the need to develop opportunities to increase parent involvement and improve community networks.

A few teachers discussed the value of parent involvement and the need to build connections with families in the interest of student growth and achievement. One teacher advocated improving the work with the parent group to grow the involvement of more parents. At the same time, teachers recognize the limited availability parents may have with balancing work and family schedules and providing for their families' needs. Despite those challenges, teachers expressed a desire to draw on family engagement and build relationships with families to support students. "To continue to be a high-poverty, high-performing school we have to continue to find creative ways to engage, connect, and communicate with our [redacted school name] families, especially our underserved families."

In addition to building school to family connections in the interest of cultural responsiveness, faculty stressed the significance of developing connections with the community in order to understand student culture. Teachers advocated bringing in people from the community to build relationships and help students connect what they are learning in the school building to the community in which they live. One teacher explained, "I feel like there needs to be more people of color from the neighborhood working in the school that kids can relate to and go to. . . . There needs to be more people of color in the school that basically students can relate to."

### ***Sub Question #4: Leadership Practices***

The fourth sub question for this case study asked, "what leadership practices do faculty attribute to the school's high performance?" This sub question was utilized to draw faculty perspective on the leadership characteristics of the school administrators. However, the interviews, observations, and document analysis revealed leadership exhibited by staff and teams as well.

**Transformational Leadership.** The theme of transformational leadership is defined as incorporating a clear vision shared among staff and guided by collaborative and shared decision making. Transformational leaders empower staff through professional development, shared decision-making, and create a culture of respect and autonomy which promotes trust and encourages risk-taking (Barbuto, 2005; Demir, 2013). Muhammad and Cruz (2019) define the theme of transformational leadership based in data, empathy, professional empowerment, and collective problem solving led by a school administrator. This definition describes the faculty’s shared narrative of the school’s principal, describing him as open, knowledgeable, visionary, trustworthy, and supportive. In this study, evidence of transformational leadership was established through subthemes of shared and collaborative leadership; clear, shared vision; trust; and staffing.

***Shared and Collaborative Leadership.*** As faculty discussed leadership at Jane Doe Middle School, they described the school’s administration as open, supportive, and collaborative. The administration encourages professional growth through the power of collaborative teams and provides teachers opportunities to lead teams or programs. The use of data in driving decisions was mentioned briefly by a few participants, but the use of data was prevalent in observations of PBIS Tier teams and the Guiding Coalition, as well as in an examination of school documents, including newsletters, meeting minutes, and professional development plans. Over the course of the interviews, every faculty member discussed leadership framed by open communication, collaborative discussion, and shared decision-making.

*Shared leadership.* Staff at Jane Doe Middle school utilize collaborative practices and systems of support in their work toward a collective vision of ensuring high expectations for all learners. An examination of professional development plans over the past four years indicates specific, targeted training on professional learning communities and collaborative teams to support faculty in their shared leadership work. One faculty member explained the purpose of professional development and training in shared leadership, “so it's not always just one person as the expert, but a group of people that can share that similar message and share that purpose.”

Teachers discussed feeling empowered and having autonomy, working collaboratively with colleagues. The faculty explained the administration has created a system of leaders given the independence to make decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, and assessments. One teacher described the influence that autonomy has her grade level’s student achievement scores,

> The fact that [administration] allow . . . the [grade level] English team to be as flexible as we want to with the curriculum, as long as we're teaching the same skills and hitting the same measures at the same time, I think that that's really been what has allowed us to flourish as educators. And I think that that's also translated over into our students. . . . it's because [teacher name redacted] and I have molded our curriculum to fit the needs of our students. We read our students and we figure out what they need and what works for them and we adjust to them.

The administration has also advocated teacher leadership in leading RTI discussions and PBIS Tier teams as well as in fostering new ideas and programs. Another staff member described the shared leadership as the development of leaders throughout the building. That system of leaders or shared leadership was described by one participant as a powerful practice supporting the overall success of the school.

> It starts from the top, and because we have such a strong leadership at [redacted school name], I really believe our leadership at [redacted school name] has placed people in roles that they feel good at, and confident at, and that they want to be in. That lends itself to good work. Our leadership, at the top, has built a system of leaders and are building a system of leaders.

Shared leadership is supported by open communication with teachers willingly sharing ideas and engaging in collaborative discussions with administration and colleagues.

*Open communication.* Faculty repeatedly described administration's open door policy as a valuable asset at the school. The staff expressed appreciation for the opportunity to meet with administration and openly express concerns or ask questions. They described feeling heard and feeling validated. One teacher summarized, "I've felt so liberated and listened to and acknowledged as a valuable part of the whole unit of educators in the building."

Faculty acknowledge there are some decisions which must be made by administration and cannot be shared decisions, and, at times, they question the decisions. Each of those staff members explained they are comfortable addressing those concerns with leadership to gain clarity and understanding. Staff credit the school administration's “open door policy,” which has established a culture of welcoming open discussion and providing transparency in decision-making, when possible.

> I don't feel like I've ever felt like, oh, that decision was made and I absolutely have to do it. If a decision is made, and maybe a staff member doesn't like it, I think that most people feel pretty comfortable coming to our administration and saying, "Can we talk about this? Can we rethink this?" I think that there's some decisions that just absolutely have to be made by administration, and you have to go with it. That's just part of leadership too.

*Collaborative discussion.* Collaborative discussions at Jane Doe Middle are framed by the open discussions between administration and faculty as well as conversations among staff. Teachers describe having opportunities to share ideas and discuss plans for change, feeling validated sharing their voice and being heard. Describing the open nature of discussions at Jane Doe Middle School, one teacher stated,

> I've never felt as if I could not approach any administration at any time whenever I wanted to, always feel the doors are open and constantly being asked, "What do you think? How is this working? Where do you think we should go from here?"

Those collaborative discussions are evident in team and content area meetings, as well as in PBIS Tier teams and the school’s leadership group, Guiding Coalition. In PBIS Tier teams, teacher leaders facilitated meeting discussions, and collectively, the team made decisions regarding plans and adjustments in program supports. In the Guiding Coalition meeting, the school principal shared data and asked the team for recommendations for decisions. Archived documents from the past four years of Guiding Coalition meeting minutes supported the observed practice of collaborative discussion as well.

*Shared decision-making.* The teachers described collaborative leadership demonstrated through shared decision-making and facilitated by the school’s Guiding Coalition, a group comprised of faculty members and administrators. The leadership team examines the needs of the school, introduces initiatives, collaborates on decisions, and supports the school’s organizational systems. The Guiding Coalition includes a balanced representation of the staff and maintains an interactive dialogue with the entire faculty, gathering input, sharing ideas, and collectively engaging in decisions for a “united” vision for students. One staff member described the discussion and decision making.

> What can be is brought back to the staff, allowing that ownership in the staff so that way, when we present it to the students, it's a united group together. It's not this top-down, somebody made a decision, we have to find a way to do it. It's the, we all made this decision together and therefore we believe that this is what's best for the students.

Shared and collaborative leadership was evident throughout the study interviews, team meetings, and in school documents. One participant reached out in the first round of member checking in this study and shared feedback to clarify his perspective on the school’s leadership. That faculty member summarized the leadership as one which sets the example for relationship building, open discussions, and empowering faculty in decision-making. He explained those leadership practices are directly aligned to the personality of the school’s administration and are mirrored by faculty through interactions with students – relationship building, welcoming discussion, and empowering students. As an example, he stated, “if a staff member feels they have a voice with administration, they are willing for students to share their voice.”

***Clear, Shared Vision.*** The school's mission statement and the leadership's vision for the school was regularly articulated and acknowledged by all staff. The school's mission statement advocates, "every child receives high levels of academic, behavioral, and social emotional growth." Teachers who have worked at Jane Doe Middle for many years and have worked for several school leaders expressed appreciation for the clarity of that vision.

> One thing that I've gotten to witness, especially in the last seven years, is a set purpose, a set target, a something that wanted to be accomplished and then bringing in a small group of people and getting them to understand that vision. Not teaching it to them, but helping them to see it for themselves. . . .

The school leadership's clarity in mission and vision supports a central focus for collective thought and collaborative discussion (Evans & Kivell, 2015).

***Trust.*** The school's leadership models positive relationships with staff by maintaining open communication, a willingness to collaborate, and demonstrative responsive action based on that communication. Those actions frame a subtheme of trust, a central leadership practice at Jane Doe Middle School. Throughout the interviews, faculty expressed a mutual trust with administration, describing the sense of confidence administration provides teachers and, in turn, the trust teachers have with administration. One teacher explained,

> I feel like when I have an issue. . . I can go to my leadership, I can ask. When there isn't an answer, we can find a solution, we collaborate. I have an idea, "Sure, let's try it out." I don't know where in a job, or in a place where you can go and get that feeling of, when people trust in you to do that, and I think a lot of people

> feel that way, and I think that's why a lot of people stay and have stayed and are so committed, because they see that [administrators] both see the value in us.

Teachers discussed the autonomy the school administration offers, allowing teachers the liberty to take risks without fear of retribution for failure. That experience has cultivated the trust staff have in administration, supporting decisions, communicating concerns, and a willingness to follow and trust leadership vision.

***Staffing.*** The theme of staffing is defined for this study as hiring, assigning, training, and leading staff with the school's vision as a central focus. At Jane Doe Middle School, faculty shared an expectation that educators who work at the school must support the school's vision and commit to collaborative work focused on students' best interests.

> If you're in a high poverty school or any school, but high poverty, probably higher, you have to have a staff that's going to work and understand that part. . . . I think that that's something that the administration has to look at when putting together a staff. That's so important because we have to work not only together, but we have to work with the students. It can't be an "us/them" mentality. It has to be an "us team" mentality and from leadership down through staff . . . .

Another teacher explained the critical aspect for staff is the common vision and collective commitment which supports the challenging work at the school and creates a sense of family among the staff. "It's just a really tough job, but when you are with people that you respect and appreciate, and have that same mindset, and that really care about kids." The trust among staff was described as an essential component to collaboration. Another described the faculty as open and collaborative.

> There are no closed door conversations. Everybody is working together side by side. And in the years that I've been here at [school name redacted], I don't know that it's ever been so. . . I've felt so liberated and listened to and acknowledged as a valuable part of the whole unit of educators in the building.

## Analysis and Synthesis of Findings

This qualitative case study of a high-performing, high-poverty school resulted in findings which supported existing research advocating multi-layered system of supports (MLSS), professional growth, and transformational leadership. MLSS is described by the state’s governing agency for education as work by collaborative teams to utilize data to provide evidence-based support, monitor progress, and accommodate the supports as needed to support academic, behavioral, and social-emotional learning needs (“Framework,” 2017). That practice was discussed by faculty as an established school practice and was evident throughout observations and school documents. That work, as well as work to promote teachers’ professional growth in collaboration and shared leadership, was guided by transformational leadership. Research of transformational leadership advocates leaders engage employees in intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation to develop a culture of trust (Barbuto, 2005). By motivating teachers, supporting their professional development, encouraging participation in decision-making, and demonstrating respect for them, leaders gain teachers’ trust. (Demir, 2013). In addition, school leaders who promote a culture of organizational learning create environments in which faculty better understand complex issues, gain clarity in mission and vision and improve collective thought process (Evans & Kivell, 2015). The faculty identified those practices as critical aspects in their own growth as well as in the effectiveness of their instructional practice and, subsequently leading to high-performance in student achievement.

Cultural responsiveness, a more recent emphasis in educational reform and practice, was another theme which evolved as evident in the school's work toward improvement. Hammond (2015) describes the necessity for culturally responsive practices, advocating, "teachers must build relationships and make social emotional connections to ensure students feel safe learning" (p. 15). This perspective of understanding student culture aligns with the student-centered education theme found at Jane Doe Middle School. Teachers discussed the importance of empathy and "meeting students where they are" to support student growth. Documents support the faculty's work with evidence of professional development on cultural awareness and meeting minutes indicating the staff's work to develop a working definition of cultural responsiveness as they continue to build their own capacity for understanding and identify strategies to improve practice.

The unique findings of this case study were the extensive discussions focused on the theme of relationship building. Relationship building was a focus with students and supported the theme of student-centered education. The theme was also evident in discussions of professional relationships among staff, supporting collaboration and professional growth. Existing research of high-performing schools does not focus on relationship building as a significant or necessary practice; however, this school faculty repeatedly advocated the practice as a primary and necessary basis to provide challenging instruction and holding students to high expectations, as well as an essential foundation in engaging in collaborative work with colleagues.

## Summary

This qualitative single case study examined the characteristics of a high-performing school from the perspectives of faculty. Data gathered through interviews, observations, and document unearthed the themes of student-centered education, professional relationships and professional growth, MLSS (multi-layered system of supports), cultural responsiveness, and transformational leadership. Woven throughout the data and the themes were the subthemes of relationship building, systems for supporting learning, and high expectations. These subthemes were prevalent throughout discussions about students as well as conversations about staff. These findings inform proposed recommendations, outlined in Chapter Five of this dissertation in practice study.

# CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite more than fifty years of federally legislated funding directed at reducing the socioeconomic achievement gap, high–poverty schools continue to face challenges to meet the needs of low-socioeconomic (SES) students, who typically performing below standards (NCES, 2019; Reardon et al., 2019). This qualitative, single case study sought to ascertain the characteristics which faculty identify as critical to high-performance at one high-poverty school. The conclusions and recommendations developed as a result of this study are based on the findings and are supported by existing research (Bennet et al., 2004; Buffam et al., 2018; Dix, 2012; Dufour et al., 2016; “Framework,” 2017; Hammond, 2015; Muhammad & Cruz, 2019; NISCE, 2012; Senge et al., 2012). In addition, the conclusions fulfill the study’s aim to support practitioner research and inform district administrators, principals, and teachers of the systems and practices faculty attribute to high-performance in a high-poverty school. The findings form the basis for four critical solutions focused on practice, systems, culture, and leadership. The solutions address the challenges facing high-poverty schools, advocating district administrators, principals, and teachers build their capacity to implement student-centered education, cultural responsiveness, and multi-layered system of supports (MLSS) through a culture of professional relationships and professional growth as well as through transformational leadership. This chapter outlines the implementation of the solutions with recommendations for district administration hiring and development of principals; personal and professional growth of principals; and building faculty capacity in collaborative and shared leadership. The chapter includes practical implications for implementation, as well as implications for future research and for leadership theory and practice. This dissertation in practice concludes with a final summary of the study and conclusions.

## Aim of the Study

The aim of this dissertation in practice was to support practitioner research and inform school leaders of faculty perceptions of the characteristics of high-performance in high-poverty schools. As a practitioner researcher, the findings of the study developed my skills with continued professional growth as a doctoral student, a school leader, and a practitioner researcher. The findings of this qualitative case study also form the basis for evidence-based, school leadership training aligned with the study's identified themes and characteristics, to inform educators of the practices and systems that support instruction and learning leading to student achievement and high-performance in high-poverty schools.

## Proposed Solutions

This research study revealed multiple characteristics defining the success of high-performing, high-poverty schools; therefore, school leadership training should be aligned to these findings:

1. student-centered education;
2. multi-layered system of supports (MLSS);
3. professional relationships and professional growth;
4. cultural responsiveness;
5. transformational leadership.

Based on the study's findings and aligned with existing research, I propose four critical solutions (Appendix F) for training and development of school district administrators, principals, and teachers. The solutions achieve high-performance in high-poverty schools focus on a change in practice implemented through systems, supported by a culture professional learning, and guided by transformational leadership. The critical solutions on which leadership training should be developed are as follows:

1. Prioritize student-centered education with a focus on teacher-student relationship building, high expectations for students, and cultural responsiveness.
2. Implement multi-layered system of supports (MLSS) to promote student academic, behavioral, and social-emotional growth.
3. Foster a culture of professional relationships and professional growth for faculty to build collective capacity to implement these solutions and lead collaboratively.
4. Employ transformational leadership practices framed by a clear vision and trusting relationships, as well as collaborative and shared leadership.

### Evidence that Supports the Solutions

The proposed solutions described in this dissertation in practice focus on student-centered education with consideration to relationship building, high expectations for all students, and cultural responsiveness; multi-layered system of supports (MLSS) which includes Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS); a culture of professional relationships and professional growth; and transformational leadership exhibited through a clear, common vision, trusting relationships, as well as collaborative and shared leadership. The findings from this case study as well as existing research (Bennet et al., 2004; Buffam et al., 2018; Dix, 2012; Dufour et al., 2016; “Framework,” 2017; Hammond, 2015; Muhammad & Cruz, 2019;

Senge et al., 2012) inform the proposed solutions targeted at training and ongoing development of school leaders in high-poverty schools.

### *Student-Centered Education*

Through the course of this qualitative case study, student-centered education emerged as a prominent theme to describe the faculty's instructional practices and philosophy. Student-centered education recognizes the individual needs of each student and places the teacher-student relationship as a central focus (NISCE, 2012). The findings of the study at Jane Doe Middle School support the proposed solution that training should edify school leaders to prioritize student-centered education with a focus on teacher-student relationship building, high expectations for students, and cultural responsiveness as essential practices.

**Teacher-Student Relationship Building.** This case study provided overwhelming evidence of the significance of relationship building with students in the interest of establishing trust and preparing students to engage with learning. Teachers at Jane Doe Middle School described the value of teacher-student relationship building to provide students with a sense of safety and security to grapple with new learning. The intentional practice of teacher-student relationship building is the primary characteristic of student-centered schools (Dix, 2012; Parker, 2019). Teachers who build relationships with students establish trust and create a safe learning environment in which students are equipped to cognitively engage with challenging concepts and take risks (Dix, 2012; Hammond, 2015; Jensen, 2009; NISCE, 2012; Parker, 2019). In defining a student-centered approach, NISCE (2012) cites research by Perry and Szalavitz (2010) indicating, "the ability of a child to access higher level problem solving, executive functioning and thinking skills ultimately depends on the learned ability to self-regulate and these capacities are developed through consistent and reliable connection with safe and caring adults" (p. 15).

Specific practices that promote teacher-student relationship building emphasize developing empathy, providing positive feedback, and building self-esteem to create a caring learning environment. Therefore, training for school leaders and teachers must target an understanding of the neuroscience of relationship building and learning to clarify the purpose of forming such bonds to support student-centered instruction.

***Understanding Neuroscience.*** This case study found faculty prioritized empathy and understanding the impact of trauma to support learning for low-SES students. These findings align with existing research which advocates understanding the neuroscience of student trauma in order to build trusting relationships and nurture safe learning environments (AAP Council on Community Pediatrics, 2016; Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health et al., 2012; Hair et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2019; Luby et al., 2013; Pascoe et al, 2016). Students may experience a neurological response to threat and release of cortisol if they do not feel safe or welcome in a classroom or when they encounter challenging academic content (Hammond, 2015; Jensen, 2005; Pascoe et al, 2016). This neurological response may be heightened for students of poverty due to atypical brain development caused by trauma or toxic stress (Pascoe et al, 2016). In contrast, positive relationships trigger the brain to release dopamine and oxytocin, causing the brain to relax and process new information (Sprenger, 2020). In other words, when teachers build relationships with students, they set the neurological stage for learning. For that reason and to truly realize the significance of relationship building as a professional practice, it is critical for school leaders and teachers in high-poverty schools to participate in training to understand the neuroscience associated with learning, with special consideration for the research examining the impact of poverty on neurological development.

**High Expectations for All Students**. The findings of this study emphasized the practice of teacher-student relationship building coupled with high expectations for all learners. The teachers at Jane Doe Middle School recognized the challenges students of poverty face, but they also clarified those challenges are the reason they support student needs while continuing to hold them to high standards of expectations. Research indicates teacher estimates of achievement have a significant impact on student growth, with an effect size three times the average (Hammond, 2015; Hattie, 2009; Waack, 2015). However, research shows students from underserved populations are not typically provided instruction with cognitive challenge. Hammond (2015) cites research studies which indicate underserved students are not taught to grapple with cognitively challenging learning, which is necessary to build critical thinking skills. Educators typically underestimate the intellectual ability of underserved students (African American, linguistically diverse, low-SES) and instead, focus on lower level thinking processes. Holding students to high expectations requires educators to develop lessons and adapt instructional practices to meet students' present levels while supporting their intellective capacity for cognitive challenge (Hammond, 2015). Educators must hold higher standards of expectations their students, building students' intellective capacity by providing instruction embedded with critical thinking and active engagement to increase student capacity to process complex information and become independent learners (Hammond, 2015; Muhammad, 2015).

School leaders must emphasize a vision of high expectations for all students from the point of hiring faculty, through monitoring instruction and learning, and with ongoing teacher training. “Students in the most high-need situations require teachers who believe in their ability to learn but who also can deliver the rigorous content and experience that undergird the development of intellective competence” (Bennett et al., 2004, p. 31). School leaders who understand the significance of high expectations for all learners and build the capacity of teachers to uphold those expectations in the classroom guide schools to higher levels of achievement (Muhammad & Cruz, 2019).

**Cultural Responsiveness**. The findings of this study indicate cultural responsiveness aligns with student-centered education with its focus on understanding and acknowledging the perspective of students and families. It is supported by intentional relationship building and developing instructional practices to meet the needs of students, supporting learning and growth. Research supports culturally responsive practices advocating teachers build their own awareness to adequately serve the needs of learners (Hammond, 2015). To improve and practice culturally responsive teaching educators must seek to foster their cultural awareness.

***Cultural Awareness.*** To adequately build relationships with students and meet the needs of learners, especially those in high-poverty schools with larger underserved populations, it is essential for teachers to develop their cultural awareness and examine implicit bias. To accomplish this, educators must participate in professional development focused on cultural awareness. Because culture is unique for every individual and is formed by one's lived experiences, educators must begin by examining their own cultural lens through which they process lived experiences to build their understanding of culture and identify implicit bias (Hammond, 2015). Thereafter, educators can begin to consider the interplay of their cultural perspective and those of students in their classrooms, building an appreciation for diverse experiences.

***Race and Racism.*** Although this case study did not initially identify race and racism as an area of emphasis, the topic of racism and its impact on students emerged as a point of discussion. Systemic racism in the United States has led to disproportionate percentage of people of color living in poverty (Creamer, 2020); therefore, the subtheme of race and racism is a relevant and significant component of research of high-poverty schools. In addition, at the time of this study, media attention focused on social injustices in low-SES communities, including the community in which this case study was conducted, and the disparities for people of color became a point of discussion during faculty interviews. Faculty emphasized the need to prioritize discussions of race and racism in the interest of addressing education gaps. Muhammad (2015) argues inequalities in education will continue to perpetuate the achievement gap unless educators understand and acknowledge racism and prioritize a "major shift in thinking and behavior" (p. 49).

Education data shows disparities between student and faculty demographics in high-poverty schools. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2019) reported in 2017-18, 45 percent of students in high-poverty public schools were Black, 45 percent were Hispanic, and eight percent were White. Conversely, 13 percent of teachers in high-poverty schools were Black, 16 percent were Hispanic, and 65.8 percent of teachers were White (NCES, 2017). These differences indicate student lived experiences may be unlike those of their teachers, leading to barriers in cultural awareness. Therefore, the disparities must be acknowledged and affirmed through ongoing conversations and addressed through the practice of cultural responsiveness. School leaders, especially those in high-poverty schools, must acknowledge issues of race and racism and address implicit bias in education through professional learning based on research-based practices which foster cultural responsiveness.

***Student Voice.*** Although not currently an established practice at Jane Doe Middle School, faculty acknowledged the need for incorporating student voice in decision-making as an essential practice in building the faculty's collective cultural responsiveness. Research substantiates the value of student voice in encouraging students to critically examine experiences of racial inequality in schools and foster their cultural consciousness (Davis & Hall, 2020; Nojan, 2020). Studies show students are seven times more likely to be academically motivated in school if they believe their voice is heard (Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations, 2016). The practice of gathering student voice empowers students in the critical consciousness of examining their experiences in schools and teaches students strategies to share their perspective and advocate for change.

As a critical component to student-centered education, school leaders should seek to establish a process by which student voice is cultivated to empower students and improve culturally responsive practices within schools. That process must be defined by clear expectations and clear vision for students and faculty, developing trusting relationships between students and teachers involved in the discussions, and committing to responsive action to address identified areas of improvement (Benner et al., 2019). By developing and implementing methods to draw on student voice and incorporate student perspectives in school decision-making, school faculty strengthen the teacher-student relationship while building student capacity to advocate and influence change.

### ***Multi-Layered System of Supports (MLSS)***

This dissertation in practice revealed the importance for school leaders to implement multi-layered system of supports (MLSS) to promote student academic, behavioral, and social-emotional growth. This work requires school principals to collaborate with faculty to develop school systems and programs based on multi-layered system of supports (MLSS) with shared leadership practices for sustainability. As demonstrated at Jane Doe Middle School, MLSS was targeted to support the school's mission through MLSS's two systems, Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) (Appendix E). RTI focuses on the academic growth for students, and PBIS supports the behavioral and social emotional learning. Together, RTI and PBIS offer systemic approaches to implement sustainable practices through collaborative teams, clear expectations in the form of essential standards, and interventions guided by data-driven decision-making (Buffum et al., 2015; "Framework," 2017).

**Response to Intervention (RTI).** Research of high-performing, high-poverty schools indicates rigorous expectations for all students, collaboration among staff, alignment of curriculum to standards, and focus on instruction and learning as key characteristics to support student achievement (Kannapel et al., 2005; Tilley et al., 2012). To effectively execute those practices, school leaders should implement a systematic process to support instruction and learning. Response to Intervention (RTI) offers a systematic approach to ensure all learners have access to grade level instruction and receive timely and targeted interventions when they struggle with concepts (Buffum et al., 2018). This research study as well as existing research identify collaborative teams, essential standards, and common intervention time as essential aspects of RTI (Buffum et al., 2018; “Framework,” 2017; Hattie, 2009; Waack, 2015)

***Collaborative Teams.*** Through collaborative teamwork, teachers examine student progress, discuss instructional practices, and utilize assessment data to determine steps for intervention. Collaborative teams utilize common language aimed at a clear and unified purpose to improve practice and support learning for all students (Buffam et al., 2018; Dufour et al., 2016). Because collaborative teams support the implementation of RTI, school leaders must support professional development for teachers to build their collective capacity for understanding and supporting a system which ensures all students have access to quality instruction and targeted standards of achievement. In addition, to sustain and foster collaborative teams, principals should provide established meeting times as well as structured formats to guide discussion and build capacity for decision-making.

***Essential Standards.*** At Jane Doe Middle School, teachers emphasized the value of identifying essential standards for clarity in instruction and helping students to meet and exceed standards. Research indicates having clear standards and a definitive curriculum supports teachers in the development of instruction and enhances student learning (Buffum et al., 2018; Marzano, 2007). To clarify RTI work, educators must identify the standards which are most critical for students to master for continued student growth. Buffum et al. (2018) advocate teachers collaboratively identify those standards which are essential and which will become the focus for targeted interventions. With that clarity in purpose, teachers then collaborate on instructional strategies to teach the essential standards and develop assessments to gather data and evaluate student progress and interventions.

C***ommon Intervention Time.*** Another critical aspect of RTI is building a common intervention time within the school schedule. Research of high-performing, high-poverty schools indicated supplemental support for struggling learners was vital for student success (Tilley, et al., 2012). As an essential component to support student achievement, teachers at Jane Doe Middle School credited the value of their daily, common intervention class period in which teachers schedule identified students for additional instruction. Buffum et al. (2018) recommend developing common intervention time within the school day to ensure access for all students. “If a school’s mission is to ensure all students learn at high levels, then Tier 2 time must be scheduled when all students can attend” (2018, p. 187). Therefore, school leaders in high-poverty schools must understand the value and support the development of a school-wide common intervention time built into the daily school schedule to protect the regular academic periods, to prevent students from missing critical, grade-level instruction and to provide opportunities to intervene and reteach content to students who need additional support.

**Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS).** This case study aligned with existing research that identifies Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) as a systematic approach to promote positive student behavior and social-emotional growth as well as to provide clarity in school-wide expectations and instruction

(Durlak et al., 2016; Center on PBIS, n.d.). Durlak et al. (2016) found social-emotional learning (SEL) and interventions have the potential to improve student achievement by an average of 11 percentile points while also promoting positive social-emotional behaviors. The tiered support systems of PBIS offer levels of intervention support for students with identified needs. As a model for implementation, Jane Doe Middle School's collaborative tier teams created and shared lessons aligned to essential standards and developed interventions to promote positive student behavior and social-emotional growth.

***Tier Teams.*** Collaborative teams drive leadership and decision-making for PBIS by determining the essential learning for all students and identifying interventions for support (Buffum et al., 2015). As with RTI, PBIS Tier 1 attends to the universal expectations and instruction provided for all students. The Tier 2 and 3 teams examine data to determine which students may need additional, targeted interventions aligned with those essential standards in an effort to support student behavioral and social-emotional growth. For example, at Jane Doe Middle School, the PBIS Tier 1 and Tier 2 teams have identified essential standards based on The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) competencies for all students at all grade levels and identify the interventions aligned to those competencies for support and instruction. Like RTI, PBIS tier teams identify individual students in need of more intensive and customized support to support behavioral and social-emotional growth (Center on PBIS, n.d.). To promote the fidelity and effectiveness of PBIS, school leaders should progressively implement tiered systems through collaborative teams to develop school-wide essential standards, monitor student needs, and provide supportive interventions (Center on PBIS, n.d.).

***Essential Standards (Competencies)***. At Jane Doe Middle School, the faculty recognized the value of clear learning targets in supporting systems of support and student achievement, so they aligned their expectations and learning targets to The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) competencies. The CASEL competencies address five areas of social emotional learning to support student learning in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2021). As a model of PBIS implementation, the teams identified essential competencies to clarify targeted instruction and learning as well as provide a focus for interventions. Teams in high-poverty schools should align school behavioral expectations, PBIS rewards and interventions, and weekly social-emotional lessons with the CASEL competencies then identify the essential competencies which are deemed critical in promoting students' behavioral and social-emotional development. The essential competencies provide clarity in learning targets as well as specificity for strategic interventions to address gaps in learning.

***Interventions.*** PBIS teams identify interventions to foster student behavioral and social-emotional needs (Center on PBIS, n.d.). Interventions should be aligned with the standards or competencies for clarity in determining specific strategies for support. Tier teams support the implementation of interventions through school-wide instruction for behavior and social-emotional learning taught during an identified daily class period within the school day. Teams support individualized interventions through analysis of student behavior data and then identify appropriate interventions to meet students' unique needs.

To effectively implement MLSS, school leaders should empower teachers by building their capacity in collaboration, pedagogy, and decision-making centered on a common vision and enabled with common language in the interest of collective efficacy. To sustain MLSS, school leaders cultivate collaborative and shared leadership, so teachers are empowered to make critical decisions regarding essential standards, instruction, and interventions.

### *Culture of Professional Relationships and Professional Growth*

Similar to the relationship building and high expectations framing a student-centered education, this study found high-performing schools benefit from school administrators who foster a culture of professional relationships with and among faculty as well as uphold high expectations for professional growth for themselves and faculty. School leaders must attend to the care and development of teachers, acknowledging teacher needs and accomplishments, while also supporting teachers' growth as life-long learners (Marzano, et al., 2005; Senge et al., 2012). To accomplish this, school leaders should promote a culture of collaboration, professional learning and growth, and shared leadership. School leaders who prioritize the professional growth of faculty build on the individual strengths and capacity of teachers, improving the collective competency of the school community (Sergiovanni, 2005). Jane Doe Middle School demonstrated intentional relationship building among staff which supported the collaboration of teams. In addition, the school leadership planned targeted professional development with a common vision and common messages aligned with the student-centered education and MLSS. To build collective efficacy of faculty, school leaders in high-performing, high-poverty schools must collaborate with teachers to develop and implement systems and practices focused on collegial relationship building and supporting professional growth.

**Relationship Building and Rapport.** This case study indicated practices to intentionally promote the development of relationships with and among staff were fundamental in cultivating a collaborative culture. In addition, the faculty expressed the administration at Jane Doe Middle School created a welcoming, engaging, and supportive professional relationships with open door policies and responsiveness to staff needs. School administrators should foster relationships with teachers, gaining familiarity of the teachers' personal and professional lives to better understand teachers and build relationships (Sergiovanni, 2005).

**Professional Development and Growth.** As evidenced in this dissertation in practice, leaders must build their own as well as faculty capacity in pedagogy, decision-making, and collaborative leadership to promote student achievement and school improvement. Leaders who promote a culture of organizational learning create environments in which employees better understand complex issues, gain clarity in mission and vision, and improve collective thought process (Evans & Kivell, 2015). This case study demonstrated professional development should be aligned to a common vision and utilize common language in the interest of collective efficacy. Teachers at Jane Doe Middle School participated in research-based training conferences focused on collaboration, multi-layered system of supports (MLSS), and instructional practices. The administration also developed an annual professional development plan in which ongoing professional development sessions supported continued learning for faculty through presentations, research, book studies, and collaborative discussions. School leaders who foster the professional growth of teachers build the collective capacity of a school (Waack, 2018; Dufour et al., 2016; Marzano, et al., 2005). Effective and transformative school leaders recognize the significant influence of collective teacher efficacy on student achievement (Waack, 2018), and attend to the professional growth of teachers to support that student achievement and school improvement.

### ***Transformational Leadership***

This dissertation in practice affirms transformational leadership is critical for high-poverty schools to achieve high-performance. As exemplified in this case study, transformational leaders who engage employees in intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation develop a culture of trust (Barbuto, 2005; Bass, 1990; Marzano, et al., 2005). To achieve high-performance in high-poverty schools, transformational school leaders must focus on relationship building with faculty, while also cultivating teachers' professional capacities and developing a learning community with a clear vision focused on high expectations of achievement for all learners (Jacobson et al., 2007; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Tilley et al., 2012; Woods & Martin, 2016). As transformational leaders, school leaders promote student achievement and school improvement through a clear, common vision, open communication and trust, as well as shared and collaborative leadership.

**Clear, Common Vision.** Just as teachers advocate clarity in identifying learning targets for effective instruction and to support student achievement, school leaders must cultivate a collective commitment to a clear, common vision (Dufour et al., 2016; Senge et al., 2012). In this case study, the school principal's clear, common vision, filtered into clarity in purpose for professional development, instructional practice, as well as school systems and programs. To build and maintain a collective commitment to a clear vision requires transformational leaders establish open communication and trust with faculty.

**Open Communication and Trust.** At Jane Doe Middle School, faculty continually described school leadership as being open to discussions, listening for understanding, and proactively responding to needs. School leaders seeking to employ transformational leadership practices, engage in meaningful conversations and reflective practice to promote open communication concerning professional practice, student achievement, and learning (Danielson, 2008; Dufour et al., 2016; Muhammad & Cruz, 2019. These practices build trust and genuine commitment to better serve faculty and students. By motivating teachers, transformational school leaders support teachers' professional development, encourage participation in decision-making, and demonstrate support and respect which results in trusting relationships (Demir, 2015).

**Shared and Collaborative Leadership.** This case study supports research which indicates school administrators in high-poverty schools foster faculty participation in shared and collaborative leadership. To accomplish that, school leaders focus on creating learning organizations to empower faculty through collaboration, promote professional learning, and develop leadership among staff (Senge, et al., 2012). School leaders must purposefully and systematically "build up the capacities of teachers and others, so that direct leadership will no longer be needed. This is achieved through team building, leadership development, shared decision making, and striving to establish the value of collegiality" (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 123).

This study demonstrated shared leadership through collaborative teams and the school's leadership team. Shannon and Bylsma (2009) described the leadership in high-performing schools as distributive to draw on the knowledge, expertise, and experience of those instructing. For the sustainability of effective practices and systems in high-performing schools, school leaders must develop shared leadership opportunities distributed among faculty (Moore & Kochan, 2013). That requires knowing and understanding the skills of each faculty member and engaging in purposeful practices which build teachers' capacity to lead. Faculty at Jane Doe Middle School described shared leadership as empowering them to make critical decisions in instruction and interventions to support student growth. To improve student achievement and reach high-performance, leaders of high-poverty schools strive to develop shared leadership with faculty to collaboratively develop schools' systems and programs based on student-centered education supported by multi-layered system of supports (MLSS) and professional growth and development.

## Evidence that Challenges the Solutions

It is essential to note this case study examined only one high-performing, high-poverty school, limiting the generalizability of the solutions. Although the solutions in this dissertation in practice are substantiated by existing research, additional case studies should be conducted at other high-performing, high-poverty schools using the same methodologies and protocols to substantiate the study findings and solutions.

Another critical challenge to these solutions lies with the tenure of school leadership. Research shows high-poverty schools experience greater rates of turnover in leadership and are more likely to be led by less experienced administrators (Branch, et al., 2008; Bétielle, et al., 2012; DeAngelis & White, 2011; Loeb, et al., 2010; Miller, 2013; Muhammed, 2015). The solutions outlined in this study require methodical and strategic implementation as well as time to integrate strategies over several years. For example, Chitivo & May (2018) explain research indicates PBIS models take a minimum of three years to effectively implement. The principal at Jane Doe Middle School is in his eighth year at the school which has provided the time to foster a collective, clear vision and promote teacher capacity through professional development to understand and implement student-centered education and MLSS. That time has also afforded the principal opportunities to hire new staff, with approximately two-thirds of the current faculty at Jane Doe Middle School hired since the principal began his tenure. This majority may account for the collective support of the leadership mission, vision, and collaborative work.

Findings from this study also indicate challenges in sustaining the fidelity and implementation of MLSS. Faculty interviewed during this research indicated frustration with some faculty members' commitment to the effective use of collaboration time or the execution of interventions. Horner, Sugai, & Anderson (2010) cite research by Doolitte (2006) which showed only 65 percent of 285 schools implementing school-wide positive behavior systems were sustaining fidelity. The authors explain Doolittle's research showed support from the school principal as a critical factor of distinction for those schools that were able to effectively sustain PBIS models. Therefore, continuity in leadership is essential for effective implementation of MLSS.

## Implementation of the Proposed Solutions

The aim of this dissertation in practice was to inform school leaders of the characteristics faculty identify as critical to promote to high-performance in high-poverty schools. The findings from this case study aligned with existing research and provide solutions to support leadership development. Implementation of these solutions requires three pathways: hiring and developing school leaders, advocating school leaders' personal professional growth, and building capacity for collaborative and shared leadership. The critical factors for implementing the proposed solutions require clarity in systematic structures for implementation and funding.

1. The findings of this case study along with existing research as well as future research in the area of high-performing schools should inform the district leadership in hiring and ongoing development of school leaders.
2. School leaders should continually examine current research, seek professional development, and engage in practitioner research to evaluate student achievement and foster school improvement as well as to inform practice for their own personal and professional growth.
3. School leaders should seek opportunities to provide research-based professional development for their school faculty to develop the faculty's collective capacity to employ best pedagogical practices and to empower the staff in active participation in collaborative and shared leadership.

### *Hiring and Developing School Leaders*

The solutions from this dissertation in practice should be utilized by district leadership to inform hiring and development of school leaders. As school district administrators seek to fill leadership roles and provide ongoing training for principals, district leadership should consider the findings from this study as well as existing research of high-performing, high-poverty schools. Job descriptions and interview protocols should be aligned to student-centered education, MLSS, and a culture of professional relationships and professional growth. The solutions also ought to be used as a guide in staffing decisions for high-performing, high-poverty schools. District leadership should consider the attributes of transformational leaders as they pursue and consult with potential principals.

Districts must strategically and systematically develop ongoing leadership training aligned with research-based practices to build school principals’ capacity in implementing the solutions outlined in this dissertation in practice. Therefore, through annual and ongoing training, districts should train principals to implement and support student-centered education practices including relationship building, high expectations for all students, and cultural responsiveness. In addition, training should support principals’ capacity to develop and continually support MLSS and to implement systems for professional development and collaboration. Principals should receive ongoing training to foster a learning organization, cultivate growth, and distribute instructional leadership among the faculty. By building the capacity of school leaders in transformational leadership practices based on research, districts provide legitimate models for sustaining effective leadership within schools.

### ***Advocating School Leaders’ Personal Professional Growth***

The solutions outlined in this dissertation in practice inform school leaders and support the expectation that principals must participate in continued personal and professional growth aligned with current research. School leaders have a responsibility to continually examine current research, seek professional development, and engage in practitioner research to address student achievement and school improvement. Principals must seek school improvement training programs that are framed in research findings and utilize new research of high-performing schools to validate, improve, and inform current training on leadership practice and strategies.

In order to gather data to inform school improvement, school leaders should continually study current research and conduct analyses of their own schools to determine the school's alignment to evidence-based practices and areas of needed improvement. As practitioner researchers, school leaders should seek to continue to grow their capacity in quantitative and qualitative data analysis to examine current practices and systems as well as assess areas for improvement. Practitioner research not only edifies research competencies but also supports the practice of continued analysis and application of findings to practice. Through analyses of their own schools, principals gain understanding of faculty perspectives on current programs, practices, and systems as well as identify potential areas for improvement. It is the school leaders' responsibility to delve into research, remain abreast of best practices for school improvement, and bring research-based practices into the principal's own school as a guiding force for improvement.

### *Building Capacity for Shared Leadership*

School leaders must act as transformational leaders fostering collaborative and shared leadership to empower faculty and sustain evidence-based practices that promote student achievement and school improvement. School principals must cultivate their schools to be learning organizations that enable teachers to share reflections, collaborate in learning, and collectively develop actions to achieve common goals (Senge et al., 2012). School leaders should develop annual professional development plans focused on a clear vision to provide research-based professional development for their school faculty and develop the collective capacity of the staff to employ best pedagogical practices and to empower the staff in active participation in shared leadership. The plans should encompass student-centered education, MLSS, as well as skills in collaboration and shared leadership. The scope of the professional development plan should include opportunities to develop professional relationships among staff as well.

To support student achievement and school improvement, school principals must recognize and leverage the extensive knowledge and expertise of the school faculty to utilize a school faculty's human capital to foster improvement (Buta, 2015; Muhammad & Cruz, 2019; Sergiovanni, 2005). School administrators must "work hard to build up the capacities of teachers and others, so that direct leadership will no longer be needed. This is achieved through team building, leadership development, shared decision making, and striving to establish the value of collegiality" (Sergiovanni,1992, p. 123). Principals should develop leadership teams to advise and guide decision-making. In addition, RTI and PBIS Tier teams should be developed to support MLSS through development and implementation. By building the capacity of shared leadership within high-performing, high-poverty schools, school principals strengthen the systemic structures for continued student achievement and school improvement.

## Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of the Solutions

To implement solutions outlined in this dissertation in practice, leaders should engage stakeholders and define action steps aligned with transformational change for school improvement. To begin, leaders should build collective investment with stakeholders by clearly communicating the rationale for change (Muhammad & Cruz, 2019). Educators must understand the moral imperative to address the socioeconomic gap. For high-poverty schools, that requires educating district administrators, school principals, and faculty to understand the research illustrating the challenges low-SES students face and to embrace solutions to meet address those challenges, including research-based practices that lead to high-performance. Muhammad and Cruz (2019) explain successful transformation requires a collective commitment to believing all students can achieve at high levels and a willingness to change or adjust practice to support student growth.

In addition, leaders of high-poverty schools should cultivate professional relationships to establish safe, open, and trusting environments to engage in discussion and take risks. Coupled with professional relationships, leaders must develop annual plans for ongoing professional development of faculty aligned to an articulated clear vision of high expectations for all students. To build the collective capacity of all educators, the professional development plan must include training with common language and focus on collaborative teams, systems of support, and student-centered education. This training empowers faculty to make decisions through collaborative teams.

Finally, continued evaluation is necessary to ensure fidelity in implementing solutions as well as identify areas for improvement. Leaders, as practitioner researchers, must develop and employ protocols to gather data, both quantitative and qualitative, from faculty and students to assess progress of practices and systems. From a transformational leadership perspective, this work requires an unwavering commitment to vision, a willingness to commit to continued personal professional growth, and cultivating a collaborative and shared leadership model in the interest of sustaining change.

## Funding

High-poverty schools are eligible for Title funds through the federal government. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) the most recent amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), allocates Title funds from the United States Department of Education to provide for the needs of at-risk students from low-income households (ESSA, 2015; Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 2017). Schools receiving these funds should align spending with the solutions outlined in this dissertation in practice to support implementation of research-based practices which promote student achievement and school improvement. The funds can be utilized to support professional development training as well as implementation of MLSS and hiring of additional staff. Each school's allocation and needs vary; therefore, school leaders must act as responsible stewards for the Title funds and utilize allocations based on identified needs. Working collaboratively with the school's leadership team, principals must decide which solutions are highest priority each year and allocate the funds according to those decisions. An analysis of need and the determinations for spending should be reviewed annually with the school's mission as the guiding principle.

## Timeline for Implementation of the Solutions

A timeline for implementation of the solutions must be continual, as modeled by learning organizations focused on continual growth. As a primary starting point, school leaders should begin by creating a guiding coalition leadership team to support decision-making based on professional learning and assessed areas of need. In order for district administrators, school leaders, and faculty to effectively implement these solutions, they must participate in ongoing, research-based training for continued professional growth. In addition, school leaders must regularly assess progress in implementing solutions using quantitative and qualitative data and collaboratively work with school leadership teams to evaluate and determine each year’s plan for implementation.

## Evaluating the Outcome of Implementing the Solutions

The solutions described in this dissertation in practice are themselves systems which require continual evaluation to assess progress of implementation and identify areas for growth and improvement. Critical to evaluating each solution is the use of data analyses. As practitioner researchers, leaders incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data in recurring analysis of practice and systems to identify effectiveness of existing programs as well as areas for improvement. Quantitative data from standardized testing, grades, behavior referrals, and attendance will guide evaluations of student-centered education and MLSS. Qualitative data, exemplified in this research study, should be drawn from faculty interviews, class and meeting observations, and documents. In addition, the implementation of a student voices program will provide qualitative data to inform implementation of student-centered education focused on instruction, relationships, and cultural responsiveness. As data is collected, it should be shared with the leadership team to analyze and discuss next steps for implementation and areas of needed improvement.

## Implications

### Practical Implications

The findings of this qualitative case study of high-performing, high-poverty schools and the subsequent solutions developed from those findings offer practical implications to address the nearly 50-year, socioeconomic achievement gaps in education. As proposed in the initial chapters of this dissertation in practice, to address achievement gaps created by socioeconomic disparities, educators must commit to a change in practice. This study found educational practices which first prioritize teacher-student relationship building to best understand individual students' academic, social emotional, and behavioral needs opened opportunities to develop individualized instruction to meet those needs. Educators who center their pedagogy, instructional practice, multi-layered systems for support, and professional development on practices which support high expectations for all students and building cultural responsiveness will be better equipped to serve the needs of all learners.

Additionally, in the current climate of heightened awareness of racism and social injustice, the findings of this study and identified solutions advocate educators build their capacities in cultural responsiveness. Through professional development focused on cultural awareness and race and racism, educators have the opportunity to cultivate deeper understanding and develop practices to better support students, especially students of color and low-SES students. In addition, educators can create opportunities to engage student voice in the interest of deepening cultural understanding and building relationships for improved practice. These practical implications have the potential to address culture gaps between staff and students and empower students through critical conversations.

## Implications for Future Research

To expand this case study in particular, I would be interested to conduct further research at Jane Doe Middle School in the next few years. My interest would be to compare results to see if the faculty identify the same characteristics revealed in this case study as faculty members change and as teachers engage in ongoing professional development. For example, some teachers expressed concern with fidelity of implementation of multi-layered system of supports (MLSS) throughout the school. I would like to examine the progress of implementation and any strategies used to address fidelity. I would also want to gather data on programs not yet implemented but discussed during the interviews, including student voices. A follow up study would allow me to examine school's established programs, new programs, and review the school's progress in achievement as defined by state achievement scores. This longitudinal study may strengthen findings from this case study with additional data to support or it may indicate new findings.

In addition, it is critical to acknowledge this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The restrictions of the pandemic led to the school district in this study creating a hybrid learning environment offering parents the choice of in-person or virtual learning. A hybrid learning environment is not the norm for Jane Doe Middle School; consequently, current practices and programs may have been functioning differently at the time of this study, which may have impacted the research findings. Therefore, future research at the school may be necessary to examine perspectives and practices in a traditional learning environment.

It is essential to note this qualitative case study was limited to a single case; therefore, it is necessary to gather more data from other high-performing schools to add to the findings and to generalize results. In addition, this case study examined practices at a middle school. Because each level of school offers unique schedules, instruction formats, and team structures, future research should examine faculty perspectives of characteristics at high-performing, high-poverty elementary and high schools. Another consideration in research may be to examine high-performing schools with middle to high socio-economic statuses. The research would reveal whether similar characteristics are in place at those schools or if the characteristics identified in this case study are unique to high-poverty schools.

Finally, additional research may be advantageous to examine faculty perspectives of low-performing schools. Research of these schools may offer insights in differences between high- and low-performing schools. Additional studies may also challenge the findings of this study if the themes of this study are identified in existence at low-performing schools as well. Differences and similarities would provide additional considerations for ongoing study.

## Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice

This dissertation in practice employed faculty perspectives to assess the characteristics of high-performing, high-poverty schools, inviting discussion on leadership practices. Studies of high-performing, high-poverty school indicate leadership's vital role in student achievement (Hattie, 2009; Jacobson et al., 2007; Loeb, et al., 2005; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Tilley et al., 2012). The findings of this study support existing research of transformational school leadership practices structured by collaborative and shared leadership, clear, common vision, and high expectations of learning for students and teachers (DeWitt, 2017; Loeb, et al., 2010; Marzano, et al., 2005; Senge, et al., 2012). The solutions for this dissertation in practice advocate implementation of leadership development, not only for school principals but for faculty to build capacity through collaborative and shared leadership as well. The research findings and solutions guide district and school leaders to seek ongoing professional training and strive to develop collaborative and shared leadership to sustain evidence-based practices, programs, and systems for student achievement and school improvement.

Research shows high-poverty schools are prone to greater principal turnover and often have less experienced administrators than low-poverty schools (Branch, et al., 2008; Bétielle, et al., 2012; DeAngelis & White, 2011; Loeb, et al., 2010; Miller, 2013; Muhammed, 2015). The leadership instability in high-poverty schools presents challenges with implementing systemic change. To address these challenges, principals who accept leadership roles in high-poverty schools would benefit from training in clearly-defined, research-based practices. Ongoing professional development for school leaders would support inexperienced principals with evidence-based practices and systems to support school improvement while building collective capacity of the faculty as well. Building the collective capacity of faculty fosters shared leadership within high-poverty schools to sustain practices, programs, and systems through transitions in administration when principals leave and new leaders begin their tenure.

Finally, this case study utilized practitioner research as an exemplar for educational practice and to inform my own professional growth as an educator and school leader. To build capacity in school leadership, school leaders should study current research and gather data within their schools to inform school improvement. Evaluation of their own schools will help analyze the school’s current practices and identify areas of improvement. Practitioner research improves research competencies and supports practices and systems of continued analysis and application of findings. As practitioner researchers, principals utilize quantitative and qualitative research to gather and analyze data on current school programs, practices, and systems to build on effective strategies and address areas of need. As transformational leaders, school principals can utilize practitioner research to inform practice and seek opportunities for improvement.

## Summary of the Study

This qualitative, single case study of a Midwest, metropolitan, high-poverty school middle school sought to explore faculty perspectives of the characteristics of a high-performance. To examine and describe the experiences from perspectives of faculty in a school with a high percentage of low-socio economic (SES) students, this qualitative case study was guided by the following research question: What are the perceptions of faculty regarding the characteristics of school performance within high poverty, high performance schools? The aim of this dissertation in practice was to support practitioner research and inform school leaders of characteristics which faculty believe promotes high-performance in high-poverty schools. The findings form the basis for an evidence-based, school leadership training aligned with these characteristics and which informs high-poverty schools in practices and systems which support instruction and learning and to meet and exceed student achievement in high-poverty schools.

The study utilized triangulated data from interviews with faculty, class and meeting observations, and school documents. The data was manually coded through initial, hand coding using memoing, open coding, and in vivo coding followed by axial and selective coding in the subsequent stages. All data was transferred to a spreadsheet file for organization and ease in analysis. In the analysis process, identified codes were narrowed to categories then refined to the final five themes of student-centered education, professional relationship and professional growth, MLSS (multi-layered system of supports), cultural responsiveness, and transformational leadership.

As a result of the findings and coupled with existing research, four solutions were identified (Appendix F). These critical solutions that provide a basis for leadership training are as follows:

1. Prioritize student-centered education with a focus on teacher-student relationship building, high expectations for students, and cultural responsiveness.
2. Implement multi-layered system of supports (MLSS) to promote student academic, behavioral, and social-emotional growth.
3. Foster a culture of professional relationships and professional growth for faculty to build collective capacity to implement these solutions and lead collaboratively.
4. Employ transformational leadership practices framed by a clear vision and trusting relationships, as well as collaborative and shared leadership.

Implementation of these solutions requires three pathways, including hiring and developing school leaders, advocating school leaders' personal professional growth, and building capacity for shared leadership. The critical factors for implementing the proposed solutions outlined in this dissertation in practice require building the capacity of district leaders, school leaders, and teachers to understand the characteristics of high-performing, high-poverty schools.

The strategies for transformational change for school improvement focus on building collective investment with stakeholders, cultivating trusting professional relationships, building collective capacity of stakeholders, and implementing continued evaluation for fidelity. The implementation may be supported by effectively allocating federal Title funding to evidence-based practices and systems which lead to high-performance in high-poverty schools. The timeline for implementation is continual with work led by shared leadership teams focused on frequent analysis of practices and systems for ongoing school improvement.

The solutions of this research study (Appendix F) offer practical implications to address the socioeconomic achievement gap in education with student-centered educational practices, multi-layered systems of support (MLSS), and cultural responsiveness framed by professional learning and professional growth as well as transformational leadership. With student-centered education, educators have an opportunity to utilize relationship building, high expectations for all learners, and cultural responsiveness to support student growth in academic, social emotional, and behavior development. In addition, solutions aligned with cultural responsiveness provide opportunities for educators to build their understanding of racism and develop opportunities to invite student voice in decision-making. Future implications for research of high-performing, high-poverty schools should seek to address methodology limitations of this case study, including gathering data from additional case studies of similar schools as well as schools with different grade levels, different socio economic status, and low-achieving status.

In consideration of implications of leadership theory and practice, the findings from this case study identified practices aligned with transformational leadership at this high-performing, high-poverty school. The solutions advocate implementation of leadership development focused on the research findings to guide district hiring and development of school principals, promote personal and professional growth for school leaders, as well as professional development and implementation of collaborative and shared leadership to sustain effective practices, programs, and systems to support student achievement and to achieve high-performance in high-poverty schools.

Finally, this dissertation in practice utilized practitioner research as an exemplar for educational leadership practice. Practitioner research edifies research competencies while supporting the practice of continued analysis and application of evidence-based practices and systems. To build capacity in school leadership in high-poverty schools, school principals should remain abreast of current research and gather both quantitative and qualitative data within their schools to identify, assess, and address evidence-based practices and systems which promote student achievement.

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# APPENDIX A
## Faculty Member Interview
## Interview Protocol

| |
|---|
| Interviewee: |
| Position of Interviewee: |
| Age: |
| Time of Interview: |

| |
|---|
| Date: |
| Place: |
| Gender: |
| Interviewer: |

**Introduction:**

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this research project on high-performing, high-poverty schools. I want to remind you that your comments will remain confidential and anonymous. I would like to know your perspective regarding the questions I will be asking, so please feel free to discuss your personal ideas and thoughts.

While we talk, I will be recording our conversation in order to adequately transcribe your answers. In addition, I will take notes throughout the interview. Are you comfortable with that? Please let me know if you would like to take a break at any time. Do you have any questions?

**Faculty Background Questions:**

I'd like to begin by asking you some questions about your background.

1. Would you mind sharing your age?
2. What is your education background, including your highest degree and any certifications?
3. How many years have you been in education?
4. Can you share with me your history and experiences as an educator here at this school?
5. How would you describe yourself as an educator?
6. What are your responsibilities in your current role?

**High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools**

1. What professional practices do you believe are most beneficial to support academic achievement of students?
2. Please describe the school's systems or programs which support student achievement.
3. How would you describe your school's culture and how that culture is cultivated?
4. Please describe leadership and decision-making in your school.

**Final question**

Is there anything I did not ask you that you would like to discuss that relates to the topic of high-performing, high-poverty schools?

Prompts to add depth and breadth to the above questions:

- Can you please tell me more about that?
- Can you share an example with me?
- What was the effect of that incident?
- What was your reaction to that behavior?
- Can you take me through your thought process during that time?

**Closing:**

Thank you for your willingness to share your perspective and insights with me. I appreciate your time and your commitment to education. I was excited to meet with you to gather information about your school and your work. As we move forward, the recording from this interview will be transcribed then deleted. The transcription will be coded to identify themes among the interviews. In my dissertation, your identity will remain anonymous. With your permission, I may use direct quotations in the dissertation in explaining the data results and analysis. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. Thank you again.

# APPENDIX B

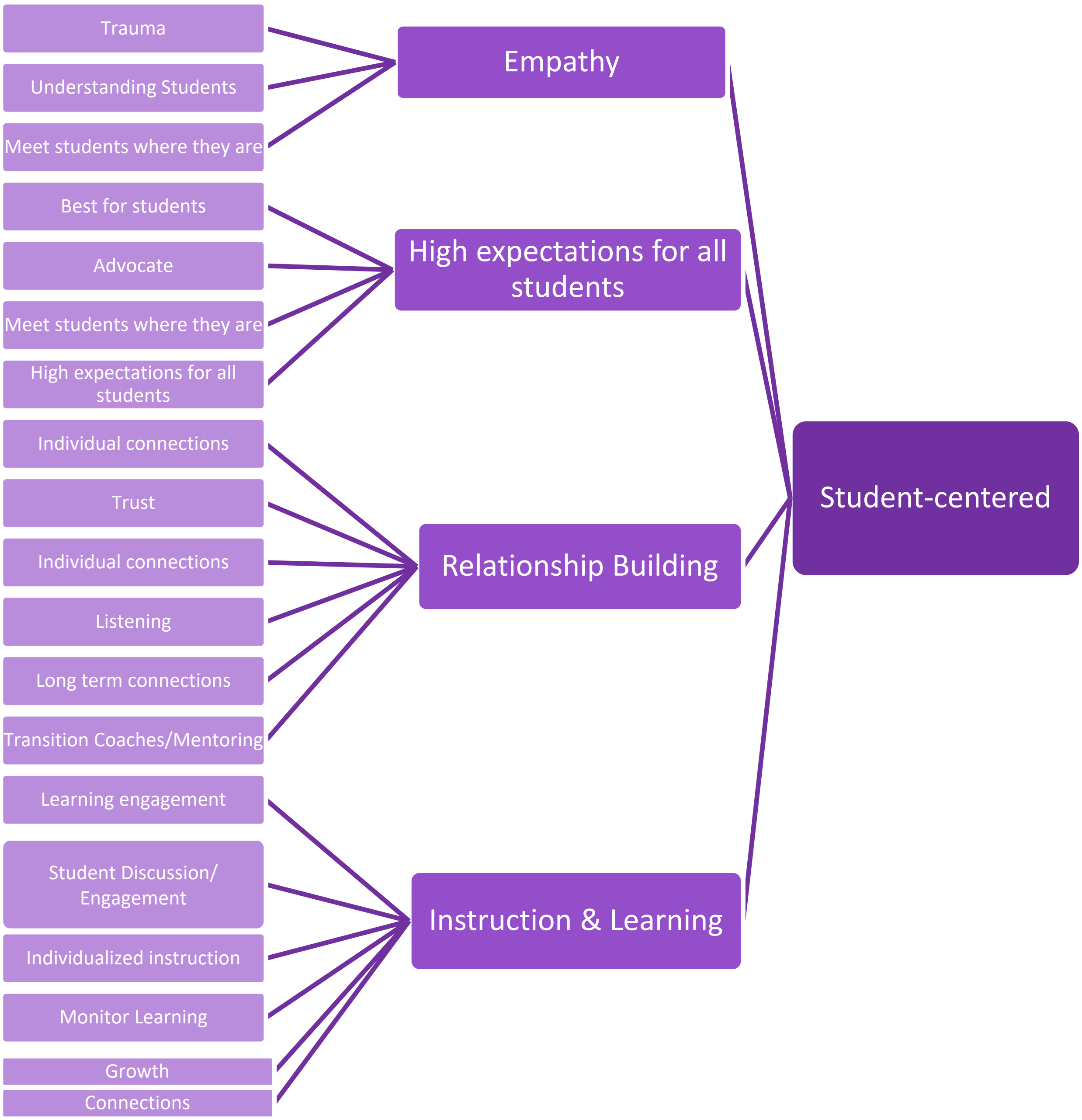
## Classroom Observation

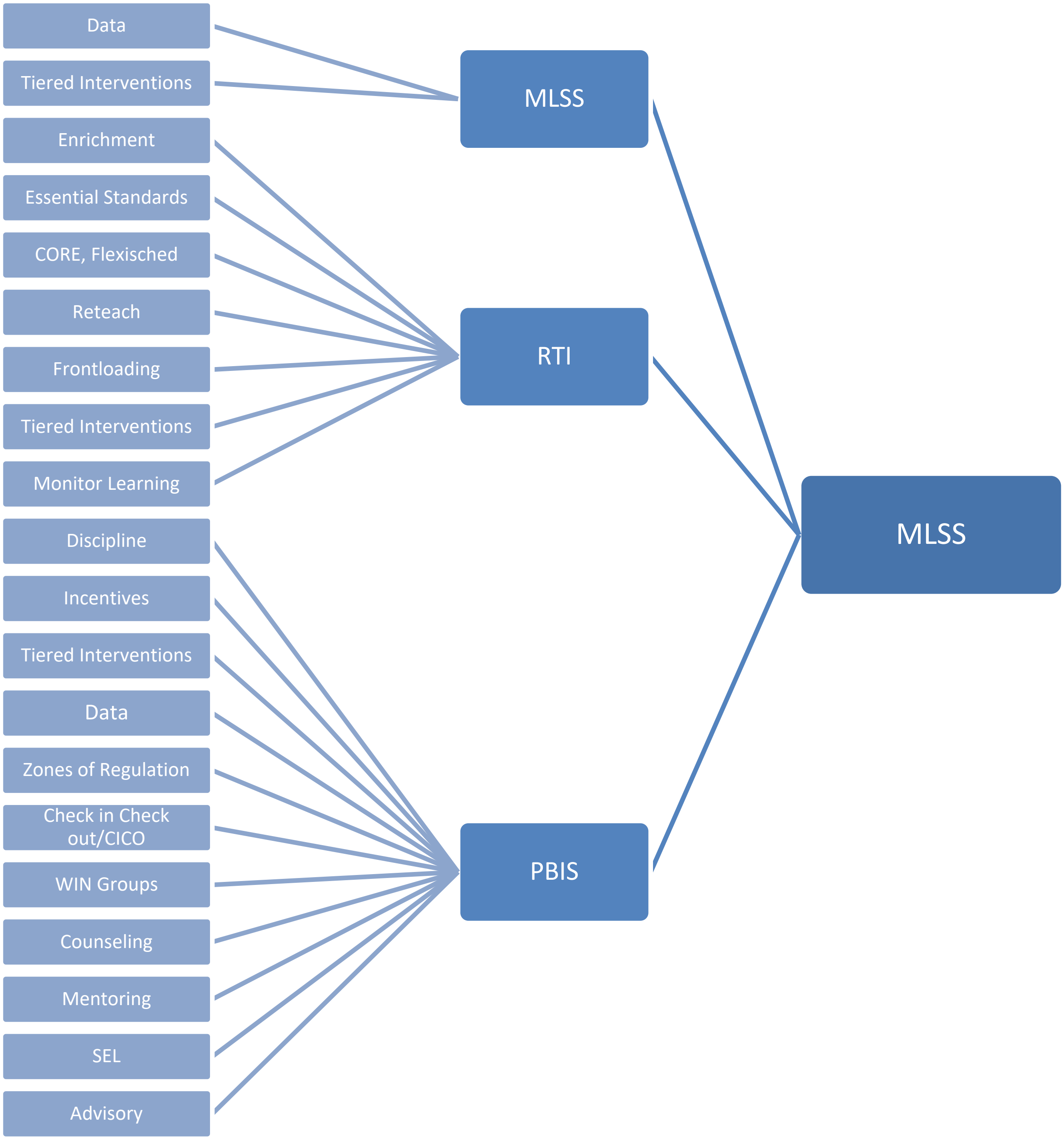
| | |
|---|---|
| **Date:** | **Time:** |
| **Classroom/Location:** | **Length:** |
| **Teacher:** | **Observer**: |

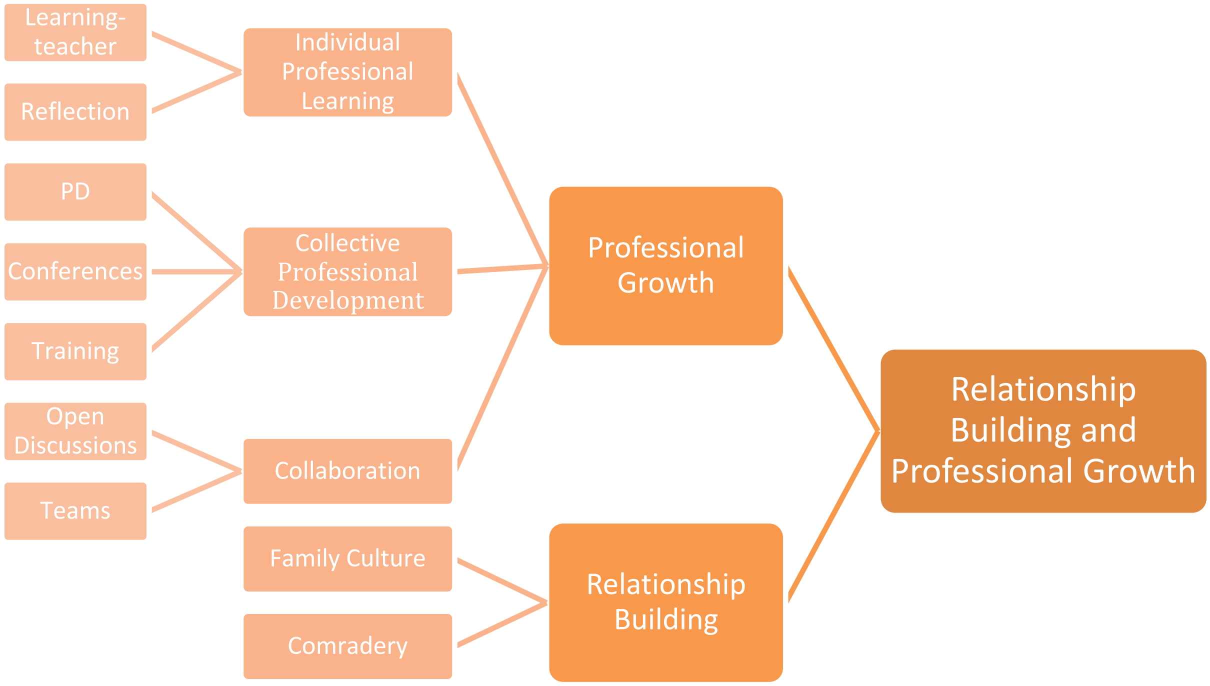
| DESCRIPTIVE NOTES | REFLECTIVE NOTES |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

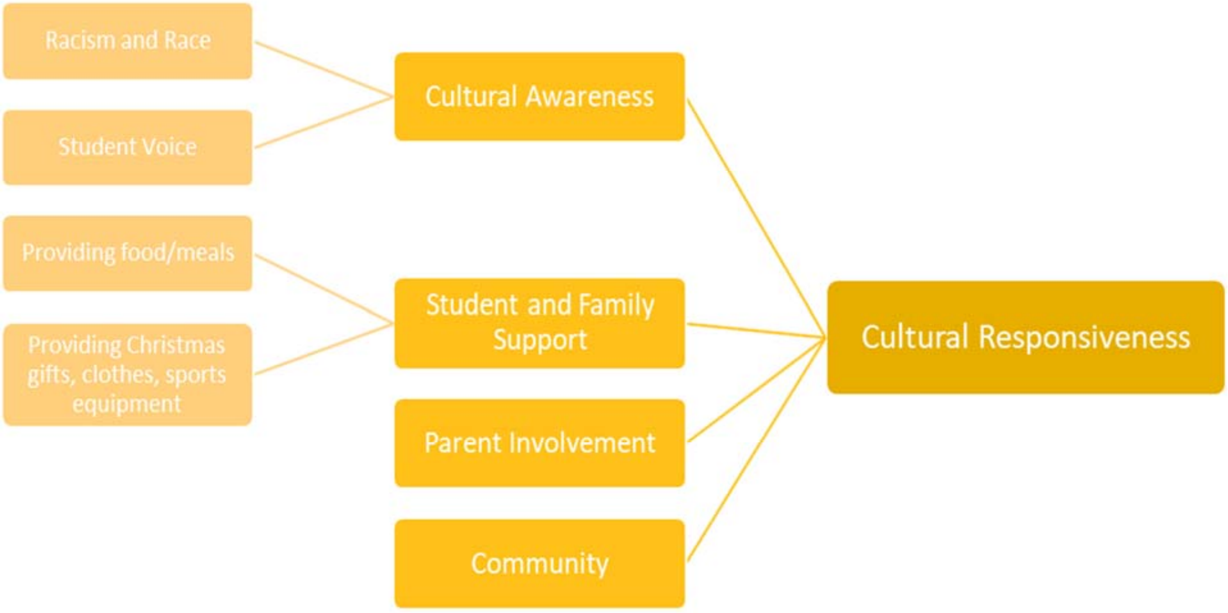
# APPENDIX C

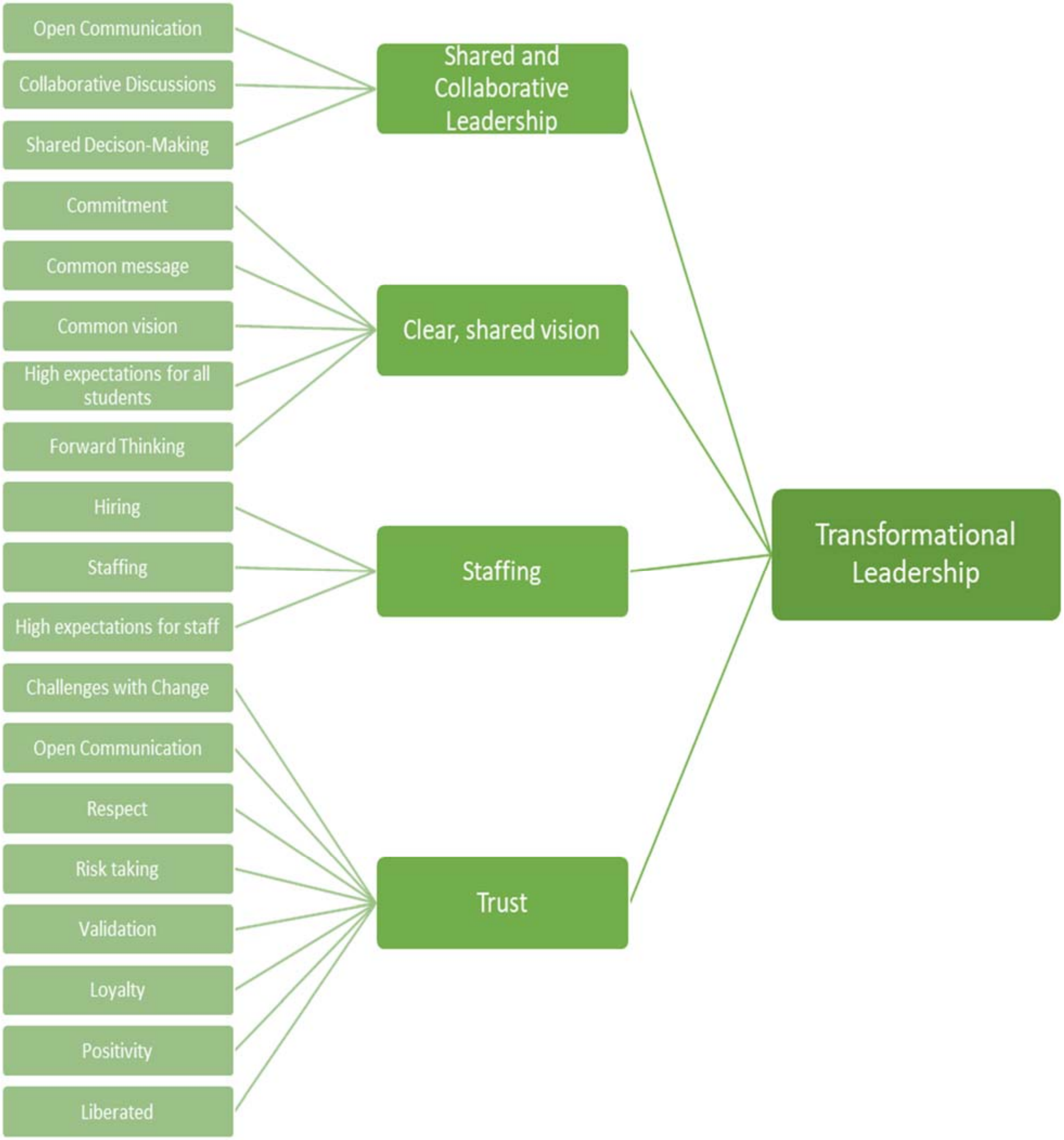
## Themes, Categories, and Codes


Trauma
Understanding Students
Meet students where they are
Empathy
Best for students
Advocate
Meet students where they are
High expectations for all students
High expectations for all students
Individual connections
Trust
Individual connections
Listening
Long term connections
Transition Coaches/Mentoring
Relationship Building
Student-centered
Learning engagement
Student Discussion/ Engagement
Individualized instruction
Monitor Learning
Growth
Connections
Instruction & Learning


Data
Tiered Interventions
Enrichment
Essential Standards
CORE, Flexisched
Reteach
Frontloading
Tiered Interventions
Monitor Learning
Discipline
Incentives
Tiered Interventions
Data
Zones of Regulation
Check in Check out/CICO
WIN Groups
Counseling
Mentoring
SEL
Advisory
MLSS
RTI
PBIS
MLSS

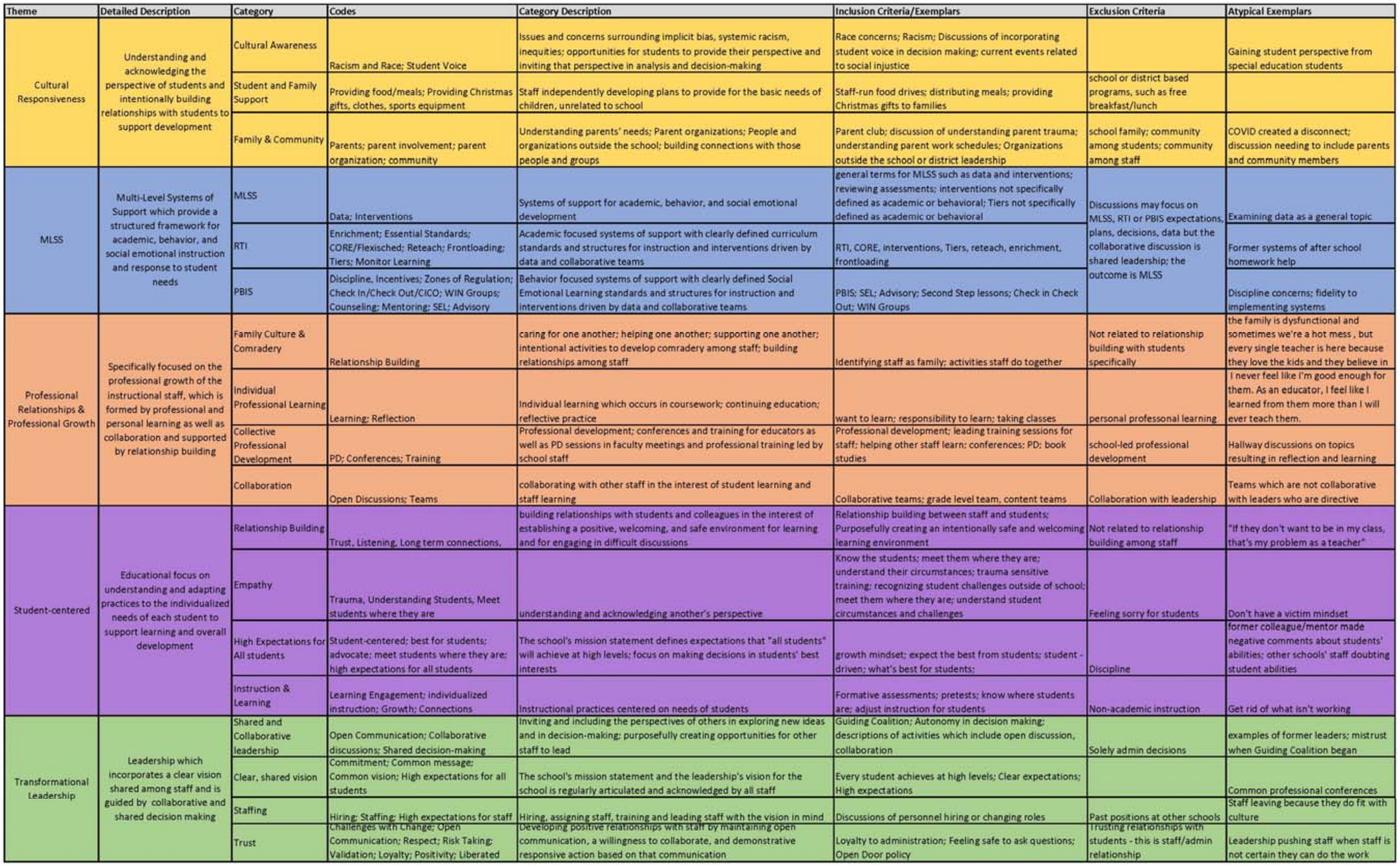

Learning-teacher
Reflection
Individual Professional Learning
PD
Conferences
Training
Collective Professional Development
Open Discussions
Teams
Collaboration
Professional Growth
Family Culture
Comradery
Relationship Building
Relationship Building and Professional Growth


Racism and Race
Student Voice
Cultural Awareness
Providing food/meals
Providing Christmas gifts, clothes, sports equipment
Student and Family Support
Parent Involvement
Community
Cultural Responsiveness


Open Communication
Collaborative Discussions
Shared Decison-Making
Commitment
Common message
Common vision
High expectations for all students
Forward Thinking
Hiring
Staffing
High expectations for staff
Challenges with Change
Open Communication
Respect
Risk taking
Validation
Loyalty
Positivity
Liberated
Shared and Collaborative Leadership
Clear, shared vision
Staffing
Trust
Transformational Leadership

# APPENDIX D

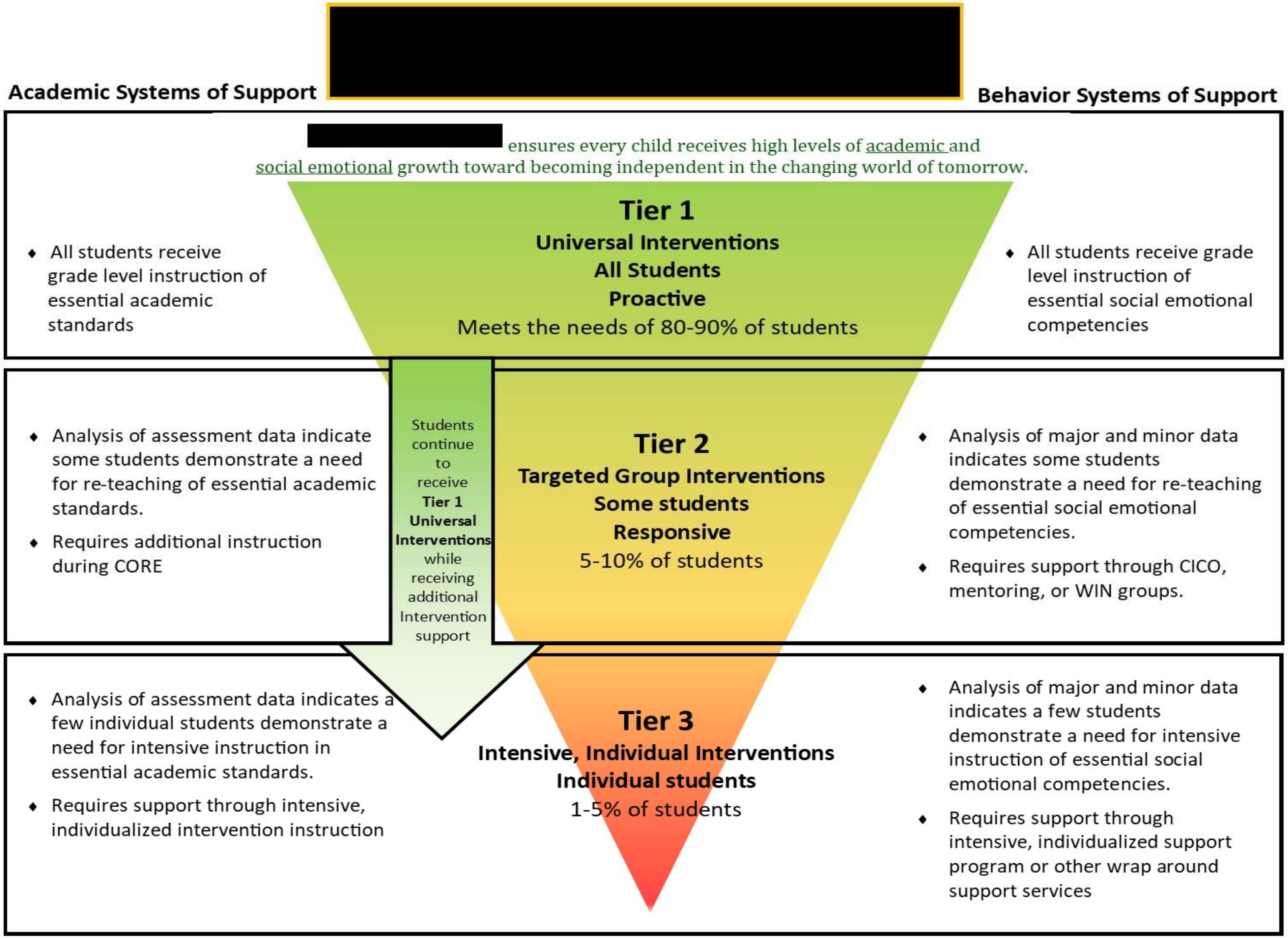
## Code Book



| Theme | Detailed Description | Category | Codes | Category Description | Inclusion Criteria/Exemplars | Exclusion Criteria | Atypical Exemplars |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cultural Responsiveness | Understanding and acknowledging the perspective of students and intentionally building relationships with students to support development | Cultural Awareness | Racism and Race; Student Voice | Issues and concerns surrounding implicit bias, systemic racism, inequities; opportunities for students to provide their perspective and inviting that perspective in analysis and decision-making | Race concerns; Racism; Discussions of incorporating student voice in decision making; current events related to social injustice | | Gaining student perspective from special education students |
| | | Student and Family Support | Providing food/meals; Providing Christmas gifts, clothes, sports equipment | Staff independently developing plans to provide for the basic needs of children, unrelated to school | Staff-run food drives; distributing meals; providing Christmas gifts to families | school or district based programs, such as free breakfast/lunch | |
| | | Family & Community | Parents; parent involvement; parent organization; community | Understanding parents' needs; Parent organizations; People and organizations outside the school; building connections with those people and groups | Parent club; discussion of understanding parent trauma; understanding parent work schedules; Organizations outside the school or district leadership | school family; community among students; community among staff | COVID created a disconnect; discussion needing to include parents and community members |
| MLSS | Multi-Level Systems of Support which provide a structured framework for academic, behavior, and social emotional instruction and response to student needs | MLSS | Data; Interventions | Systems of support for academic, behavior, and social emotional development | general terms for MLSS such as data and interventions; reviewing assessments; interventions not specifically defined as academic or behavioral; Tiers not specifically defined as academic or behavioral | Discussions may focus on MLSS, RTI or PBIS expectations, plans, decisions, data but the collaborative discussion is shared leadership; the outcome is MLSS | Examining data as a general topic |
| | | RTI | Enrichment; Essential Standards; CORE/Flexisched; Reteach; Frontloading; Tiers; Monitor Learning | Academic focused systems of support with clearly defined curriculum standards and structures for instruction and interventions driven by data and collaborative teams | RTI, CORE, interventions, Tiers, reteach, enrichment, frontloading | | Former systems of after school homework help |
| | | PBIS | Discipline, Incentives; Zones of Regulation; Check In/Check Out/CICO; WIN Groups; Counseling; Mentoring; SEL; Advisory | Behavior focused systems of support with clearly defined Social Emotional Learning standards and structures for instruction and interventions driven by data and collaborative teams | PBIS; SEL; Advisory; Second Step lessons; Check in Check Out; WIN Groups | | Discipline concerns; fidelity to implementing systems |
| Professional Relationships & Professional Growth | Specifically focused on the professional growth of the instructional staff, which is formed by professional and personal learning as well as collaboration and supported by relationship building | Family Culture & Comradery | Relationship Building | caring for one another; helping one another; supporting one another; intentional activities to develop comradery among staff; building relationships among staff | Identifying staff as family; activities staff do together | Not related to relationship building with students specifically | the family is dysfunctional and sometimes we're a hot mess , but every single teacher is here because they love the kids and they believe in |
| | | Individual Professional Learning | Learning; Reflection | Individual learning which occurs in coursework; continuing education; reflective practice | want to learn; responsibility to learn; taking classes | personal professonal learning | I never feel like I'm good enough for them. As an educator, I feel like I learned from them more than I will ever teach them. |
| | | Collective Professional Development | PD; Conferences; Training | Professional development; conferences and training for educators as well as PD sessions in faculty meetings and professional training led by school staff | Professional development; leading training sessions for staff; helping other staff learn; conferences; PD; book studies | school-led professional development | Hallway discussions on topics resulting in reflection and learning |
| | | Collaboration | Open Discussions; Teams | collaborating with other staff in the interest of student learning and staff learning | Collaborative teams; grade level team, content teams | Collaboration with leadership | Teams which are not collaborative with leaders who are directive |
| Student-centered | Educational focus on understanding and adapting practices to the individualized needs of each student to support learning and overall development | Relationship Building | Trust, Listening, Long term connections, | building relationships with students and colleagues in the interest of establishing a positive, welcoming, and safe environment for learning and for engaging in difficult discussions | Relationship building between staff and students; Purposefully creating an intentionally safe and welcoming learning environment | Not related to relationship building among staff | "If they don't want to be in my class, that's my problem as a teacher" |
| | | Empathy | Trauma, Understanding Students, Meet students where they are | understanding and acknowledging another's perspective | Know the students; meet them where they are; understand their circumstances; trauma sensitive training; recognizing student challenges outside of school; meet them where they are; understand student circumstances and challenges | Feeling sorry for students | Don't have a victim mindset |
| | | High Expectations for All students | Student-centered; best for students; advocate; meet students where they are; high expectations for all students | The school's mission statement defines expectations that "all students" will achieve at high levels; focus on making decisions in students' best interests | growth mindset; expect the best from students; student - driven; what's best for students; | Discipline | former colleague/mentor made negative comments about students' abilities; other schools' staff doubting student abilities |
| | | Instruction & Learning | Learning Engagement; individualized instruction; Growth; Connections | Instructional practices centered on needs of students | Formative assessments; pretests; know where students are; adjust instruction for students | Non-academic instruction | Get rid of what isn't working |
| Transformational Leadership | Leadership which incorporates a clear vision shared among staff and is guided by collaborative and shared decision making | Shared and Collaborative leadership | Open Communication; Collaborative discussions; Shared decision-making | Inviting and including the perspectives of others in exploring new ideas and in decision-making; purposefully creating opportunities for other staff to lead | Guiding Coalition; Autonomy in decision making; descriptions of activities which include open discussion, collaboration | Solely admin decisions | examples of former leaders; mistrust when Guiding Coalition began |
| | | Clear, shared vision | Commitment; Common message; Common vision; High expectations for all students | The school's mission statement and the leadership's vision for the school is regularly articulated and acknowledged by all staff | Every student achieves at high levels; Clear expectations; High expectations | | Common professional conferences |
| | | Staffing | Hiring; Staffing; High expectations for staff | Hiring, assigning staff, training and leading staff with the vision in mind | Discussions of personnel hiring or changing roles | Past positions at other schools | Staff leaving because they do fit with culture |
| | | Trust | Challenges with Change; Open Communication; Respect; Risk Taking; Validation; Loyalty; Positivity; Liberated | Developing positive relationships with staff by maintaining open communication, a willingness to collaborate, and demonstrative responsive action based on that communication | Loyalty to administration; Feeling safe to ask questions; Open Door policy | Trusting relationships with students - this is staff/admin relationship | Leadership pushing staff when staff is not certain they can do the work |

## APPENDIX E

## Jane Doe Middle School MLSS Structure



[redacted]

**Academic Systems of Support**

**Behavior Systems of Support**

[redacted] ensures every child receives high levels of academic and social emotional growth toward becoming independent in the changing world of tomorrow.

**Tier 1**

**Universal Interventions**
**All Students**
**Proactive**
Meets the needs of 80-90% of students

- All students receive grade level instruction of essential academic standards

- All students receive grade level instruction of essential social emotional competencies

**Tier 2**

**Targeted Group Interventions**
**Some students**
**Responsive**
5-10% of students

- Analysis of assessment data indicate some students demonstrate a need for re-teaching of essential academic standards.
- Requires additional instruction during CORE

Students continue to receive **Tier 1 Universal Interventions** while receiving additional Intervention support

- Analysis of major and minor data indicates some students demonstrate a need for re-teaching of essential social emotional competencies.
- Requires support through CICO, mentoring, or WIN groups.

**Tier 3**

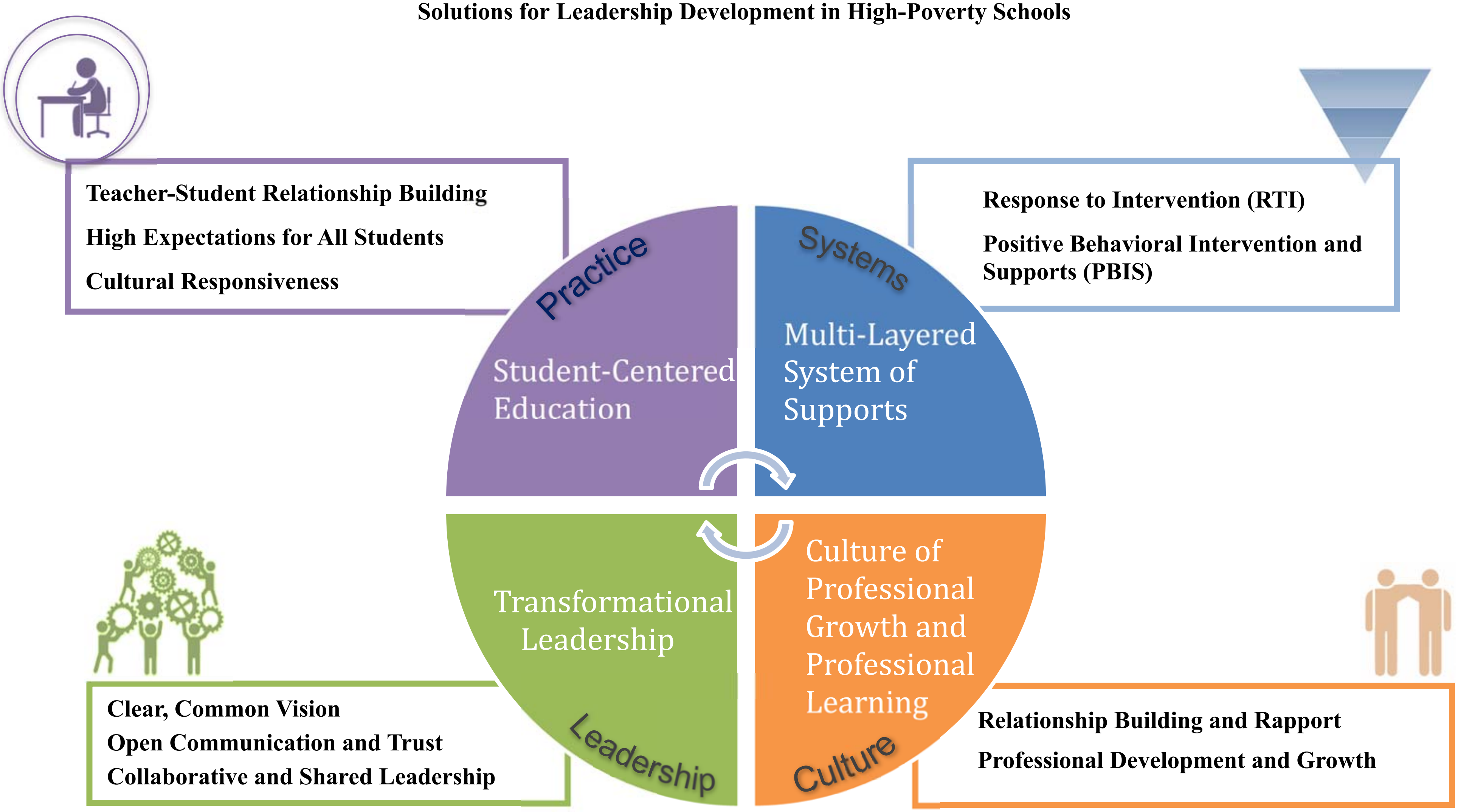
**Intensive, Individual Interventions**
**Individual students**
1-5% of students

- Analysis of assessment data indicates a few individual students demonstrate a need for intensive instruction in essential academic standards.
- Requires support through intensive, individualized intervention instruction

- Analysis of major and minor data indicates a few students demonstrate a need for intensive instruction of essential social emotional competencies.
- Requires support through intensive, individualized support program or other wrap around support services

# APPENDIX F

## Solutions for Leadership Development in High-Poverty Schools



**Teacher-Student Relationship Building**

**High Expectations for All Students**

**Cultural Responsiveness**

Practice
Student-Centered Education
Systems
Multi-Layered System of Supports
Transformational Leadership
Leadership
Culture of Professional Growth and Professional Learning
Culture

**Response to Intervention (RTI)**

**Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS)**

**Clear, Common Vision**
**Open Communication and Trust**
**Collaborative and Shared Leadership**

**Relationship Building and Rapport**

**Professional Development and Growth**

## Appendix G

## IRB Approval

Creighton
UNIVERSITY
Office of the Provost
Research Compliance

| | |
|---|---|
| DATE: | 16-Nov-2020 |
| TO: | Villont, Barbara |
| FROM: | Social / Behavioral IRB Board |
| PROJECT TITLE: | A Case Study of the Faculty Perceptions of the Characteristics of a High-Performing, High-Poverty School |
| REFERENCE #: | 2001499-01 |
| SUBMISSION TYPE: | Initial Application |
| REVIEW TYPE | Exempt |
| ACTION: | APPROVED |
| EFFECTIVE DATE: | 16-Nov-2020 |

Thank you for your Initial Application submission materials for this project. The following items were reviewed with this submission:

- Creighton University HS eForm~
    - Kenosha Unified School District Letter of Agreement
    - Bullen Middle School Principal Letter of Agreement
    - Villont Research Protocol for IRB
    - Participant Recruitment Message – Interview
    - Participant Recruitment Message – Observation
    - Interview Protocol
    - Observation Protocol
    - Information Letter

This project has been determined to be exempt from Federal Policy for Protection of Human Subjects as per 45CFR46.101 (b) 2.

All protocol amendments and changes are to be submitted to the IRB and may not be implemented until approved by the IRB. Please use the modification form when submitting changes.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 402-280-2126 or irb@creighton.edu. Please include your project title and number in all correspondence with this committee.

**Institutional Review Board**
T 402.280.2126 | T 402.280.3200
Dr. C.C. and Mabel L. Criss Health Sciences Complex I
2500 California Plaza Omaha, NE 68178

creighton.edu
creighton.edu/researchservices/rcocommittees/irb

# Appendix H

## Research Journal Reflections

In the interest of practitioner research, I maintained a research journal throughout this case study. I chose to approach this research through the lens of a practitioner researcher recognizing the impossibility of separating my experiences as a doctoral student, an educator, a school leader, and a researcher. Therefore, as I progressed through this case study and dissertation in practice, I reflected on how my experiences in this study linked with my knowledge and my practice, and I considered how that learning informed my research.

As a doctoral student learning and applying social research, I acknowledged my responsibility to edify my practice as a researcher and as an educator. I read Saldaña's (2016) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* to build my skills in coding qualitative data. The content offered information to explain various types of coding and the author offered valuable advice based throughout the process of coding. Initially, in coding, I was concerned about my lack of experience and was overwhelmed as I began coding. Saldaña emphasizes coding is in an interpretive process with unique variances for each researcher. With that support, as well as my previous coursework and readings, I felt much more confident in the coding process.

As themes developed and I categorized codes and identified themes, I continued my own professional growth as a school leader, reading research articles and books on emerging themes, including student-centered education and cultural responsiveness. From those published works, I acquired a deeper understanding of the significance of relationship building to support instruction for individual students. I also delved deeper to understand the neurology of relationship building and of learning. I learned about the variances in the brain's capacity to process information under stress compared to a relaxed mental state. The readings explained the implications of oxytocin and dopamine released in positive interactions, setting the stage for learning. I also read more about the connection between neuroscience and culture, explaining the way in which the human brain processes new information by connecting to existing knowledge or experiences to link information in learning. That research emphasized the significance of understanding neurology to meet the needs of low-SES students and to support students while challenging their learning.

The benefit of practitioner research is the convergence of the perspectives of student, educator, leader, and a researcher. These perspectives collectively contributed to my growth on this journey. In my daily work, for example, I collaborated with colleagues in discussing and examining our practice as educators. In leadership team meetings, I engaged in conversations regarding cultural awareness and responsiveness to support the diverse perspectives of students. These discussions had direct application in my daily practice as an educator and a school leader as well as implication in this study through my own learning from readings, interviews, and research as well as in my reflections detailed in my journal. My experiences as a practitioner researcher not only elevated my skills as a social researcher but also as an educator and school leader, building my aptitude and appreciation for qualitative research and data analysis while also developing my expertise in practices, systems, culture, and leadership to lead high-poverty schools to levels of high-performance.