

January 2013

A Case Study of Two Rural Elementary Schools: What Are The Identified Characteristics That Make School A Outperform School B In Reading?

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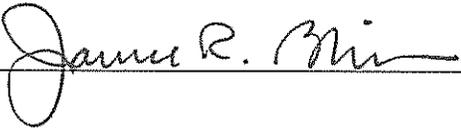
By

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A CASE STUDY OF TWO RURAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
WHAT ARE THE IDENTIFIED CHARACTERISTICS THAT MAKE SCHOOL A
OUTPERFORM SCHOOL B IN READING?

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August, 2013

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to
my loving husband Michael and my beautiful daughter Madeline.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my professor, Dr. James Bliss, for all of his guidance and understanding. I would also like to thank my other committee members and professors, Dr. Aaron Thompson and Dr. Jack Herlihy for their instruction and assistance of the past three years. I would also like to thank my husband Michael and my daughter Madeline. Your patience and support have been a blessing through this process. I also want to thank my parents Morris and Catherine, I am so thankful for their guidance. To my brothers and sister thank you for your unconditional love and encouragement. I am grateful to have you all in my life.

Abstract

The research objective was to gain a greater understanding of schools in rural Kentucky communities. Through interviews and surveys the investigator studied two schools with a similar populations facing many of the same obstacles, such as, a low socioeconomic status. The 2007-2008 Kentucky Performance Report stated that School A had an Academic Index of 105.7 in the area of reading and that School B had an Academic Index of 82.4.

Through the research, the investigator expected to better identify the gaps between lower performing and higher performing elementary schools in the region. My research question was, A Case study of two rural elementary schools: Why had one school outperformed the other?

The research project focused attention on school A and school B in rural Kentucky. The researcher attempted to identify some of the reasons as why school A appeared to have been more successful than the other school, while facing very similar economic and socio-economic struggles. The researcher analyzed reading scores from both school A and school B as a means of selecting these.

Table of Contents

	Page
I. Chapter I Problem Statement	1
II. Chapter II Literature Review	5
III. Chapter III Methodology	24
IV. Chapter IV Findings	29
V. Chapter V Discussion	38
References	40

List of Tables

Table	Page
I. Coded Responses from School A	30
II. Coded Responses from School B	30

CHAPTER I

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Committee on Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children of the National Research Council, reports that 25 to 40 percent of American students will have difficulty in school because of their diminished reading abilities (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that there has been no significant difference in the test scores of 4th grade students in 1992 to 2003. The United States Department of Education reports that since 1983, more than 10 million of America's students have reached the 12th grade with less than sufficient reading skills and that in the same estimated amount of time more than 6 million of our students have dropped out of school. There are widely publicized problems with the U.S. educational system. Most states have developed plans of action, and implemented strategies to assist schools in assisting students in the area of reading.

The Kentucky Department of Education has devised several programs to aid schools with students needing extra help, such as, the Reading First initiative and Reading Recovery, providing intense help for Title I schools, and creating the tier system for schools to be categorized for assistance. The school district in which this research occurred uses the reading program Reading Recovery in each of the elementary. Developed in the 1970s by New Zealand educator Marie Clay, Reading Recovery focuses on first grade students identified with difficulties in reading and writing. Reading First, a U.S. federal education program mandated in places under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, focuses attention on the students with the lowest reading scores and utilizes one

on one instruction. The Reading Recovery program works by allowing each identified first grade student to receive a thirty minute lesson consisting of one on one instruction each school day for 12 to 20 weeks. Each student in the Reading Recovery program is instructed by a trained Reading Recovery teacher. Each teacher in the program goes through a specialized training before teaching the program.

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze reasons behind the differences in reading scores between two rural elementary schools in the same school district. Both of the rural elementary schools chosen to participate in this research project also participated in the same standardized assessment, and the results were varied. The 2007-2008 Kentucky Performance Report states that School A had an Academic Index of 105.7 in the subject of reading and that School B had an Academic Index of 82.4. The reading Academic Index of these two schools in the same district is drastically different. This thesis will research and focus on interviews, surveys, and the standardized reading scores from the Kentucky Core Content Test for Assessment in two rural elementary schools. The interviews and surveys will serve to guide the research and give a greater insight as to why these two schools reading scores on the same test were drastically different.

In many of our nation's public schools, vast amounts of time, energy, and financial resources are spent yearly trying to identify and target weakness in schools so that they can overcome their obstacles and be can be deemed high performing schools. However, many of the remedies are merely “quick fixes” and do very little to foster high performing sustaining schools. The real problems are not being addressed. The intention

of this thesis is to analyze why two schools given similar resources and taking the same standardized test are performing at drastically different levels. The researcher wanted to be able target specific areas that are serving to make one school high performing in reading. In this thesis the researcher will look far beyond the labels of high performing and low performing schools and will analyze the critical factors of school performance. Through a series of interviews and surveys the researcher will closely identify positive characteristics that are associated with the high performing school. The researcher will ask the question, “In a case study of two rural elementary schools: What are the identified characteristics that make School A outperform School B in Reading?”

The central research question was answered through a series of interviews and surveys conducted in two rural elementary schools and county board of education, and by analyzing the reading scores between the two rural schools. It seems that if the educational system investigated the positive characteristics of effective schools that would be a more meaningful and sustaining problem solving remedy for assisting low performing schools.

More specifically, the researcher attempted to address discriminating questions, such as, “What are some of the positive characteristics identified in the high performing school? “What are some of the factors attributing to the greater success of school A?” “Were both schools putting the same emphasis and resources into reading?” These questions guided the study and set the stage for additional probes in conversations with local subjects. In this research project I targeted the subject reading for my questions

because reading skill development may be implicated in nearly all dimensions of elementary education.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has shown that students in rural locations face possible barriers to a sound elementary education which are unique and specific, such as a high average level of poverty and limited educational opportunities (Bouck, 2004). The U.S. has a long history of addressing the deficits of children living in poverty. In 2001, the United States Education Department implemented the, “No Child Left Behind Act.” This program was designed as a Federal plan to close achievement gaps with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind by assisting students with curriculum and instruction, especially in the area of elementary literacy. Reading First was designed to be an initiative for students in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Title I category. The purpose behind “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001” and Reading First was to insure that every student enrolled in a public school could read at or above grade level at the end of their third grade in school. The focus of Reading First nationally has been to target elementary students in reading. The program insists that school districts implement data and scientifically proven reading programs and strategies in their elementary classrooms.

This research project focuses on two elementary schools in rural Appalachia. Both schools are located in the same district and have similar demographics. However, they are performing very differently on the state standardized assessment. The two schools involved in the study both suffer from high levels of poverty. To begin to understand the differences in the scores reported from both schools it is important to understand the

culture associated with rural schools and how high levels of poverty can hinder student achievement.

My review of literature revealed a dearth of studies in three areas: (a) how students of rural Appalachia and students of poverty have very specific and diverse educational needs, (b) how parental involvement affects the student achievement of students in rural communities, (c) how poverty affects the performance of students in rural areas in particular in the area of reading.

RURAL EDUCATION

“Research reveals that students in rural schools face many personal and educational hardships—from living in poverty to having less opportunity and sophistication in technology (Bouck, 2004; at p. 38).” Schools located in rural areas often times have many barriers to overcome, such as, poverty, lack of technology, and limited funding. These limiting factors often persist to hinder the education of students in rural areas, by not allowing these students the same educational experiences and opportunities as students of their suburban counterparts. Bouck also reported that “rural and urban schools have larger rates of poverty and more dire financial situations, which do impact the educational offerings, experiences, and outcomes of their students.” (Bouck 2004) The financial predicament that rural schools are facing is proving to limit the educational opportunities that rural schools are seeking to provide students. With the lack of funding comes a shortage of technology, qualified teachers, and resources. Research in rural education is in its infancy; however, rural schools educate over 40% of

the nation's students (NEA, 2003). Being that such a large proportion of students are served by rural schools, rural-school effectiveness should be a major priority for researchers. Poverty serves to be one of the primary limiting factors in educating students in rural areas. Studies reveal that 22.9% of rural students are currently living on poverty. Rural poverty outpaces poverty in the national as a whole with a national poverty statistic of 20.6% of all students (Sherman, 1992). Students from rural areas are proving to be a large percentage of the nation's students. Studies have shown that rural students are not being offered the same competitive and rigorous curriculum and elective offerings as that of their suburban counterpart. Capper found that the lower the income the level and more rural the community, the lower the expectations teachers had for students (Capper, 1990) In solving the problems of rural education it is imperative to identify areas of concern, such as, the high poverty rate, and a challenging curriculum in order for there to be equity among our nation's students.

To promote further research on rural education and the implications of change brought about by the No Child Left Behind Act, researchers from the *National Research Center on Rural Education Support* and the *Center for Developmental Science* investigated a randomly selected sample of school districts that were eligible for the *Rural Education Achievement Program*. Districts were also selected that qualified for the Small Rural Schools Achievement and the Rural and Low-income Schools. "The No Child Left Behind Act was established by the federal government to enhance academic proficiency by mandating that states and local education agencies develop accountability systems to assess student achievement and educational improvement" (No Child left

Behind Act of 2001; p. 1). One of the most influential aspects of the No Child Left Behind Act on rural schools might have been that the Act mandated that these low achieving schools be given a greater focus. (Smith, 2005) Researchers Hill and Kusler point out that a portion of the NCLB agenda was to provide rural school districts with added government funding in order to assist in helping with their distinctive educational needs through the *Rural Education Achievement Program* (Hill & Kusler, 2004; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). In the 2002_03 school year, rural schools served 4.5 million students which translates to 10% of our nations students. School district personal and agencies were concerned with the unique challenges and barriers that face rural schools (American Association of School Administrators, 2003; Coladarci, 2003; Jimerson, 2004; National Rural Education Association, 2004; United States Government Accountability Office, 2004). The outcome of the study put forth that the majority of Rural Education Achievement Programs are making Adequate Yearly Progress using the NCLB requirements. The researchers reported that 12% of Small Rural Schools Achievement schools failed as which was drastically different from the 31% of Rural Low-Income Schools. Rural schools are diverse and have very unique needs. When researching rural schools approaches and methodologies must be adaptable and specified to rural schools, in their specific areas of their weaknesses.

Studies show that rural school districts often face many unique challenges and barriers to school effectiveness in reading. Not surprisingly, researchers have observed common features across rural schools and urban schools. Researchers Harmon, Gordanier, Henry, and George (2007) investigated a five year program employed by the

National Science Foundation. The initiative was undertaken to improve mathematics and science instruction in rural Missouri. The focus of their research was the positive academic influence of having highly qualified teachers. Their premise is that advancing teacher professional practices might be the tool to better rural education. Some of the barriers that Harmon, Gordanier, Henry, and George identify are, “low fiscal capacity, fewer management support services, greater per pupil costs, higher numbers of teachers teaching outside their specialty area, less competitive salaries, and benefits, less specialized space and equipment, less availability of planning support services, and fewer evaluation support services (Harmon et al. , p. 8).” The study was conducted in 10 districts located in the Ozark Rural Systemic and each district had students that were eligible for free and reduced lunch that surpassed 40.7%. The school districts varied from 200-3,500 students. In these school districts and counties the investigators found that many of these areas consisted of small populations and thus limited tax resources. The inadequate fiscal resources were hindering schools capital, and with limited funds schools were not able to supply its schools with all of the necessary resources to be successful. Financial resources for professional development for teachers were an issue that the school districts had in common. One of the ideas that the districts helped classroom teachers with was to implement a standards based curriculum. The curriculum change served as a tool to assist teachers in analyzing their own practices and strategies.

Researchers Egley and Jones (2004) further investigated the connections between urban and rural schools. The authors of this study inquired how public schools administrators view high-stakes testing in both rural and urban settings. The investigation

took place in rural Florida. According to their statistics 1.7 million students attend rural public schools in Florida. However, Florida has the fourth lowest rate of spending on instruction and student resources. After interviewing the administrators in the areas, studies showed half of them found Florida's high-stakes testing system to be defective. Some of the anxiety's that the administrators had with the Florida state high-stakes testing are as follows; "damaged developmentally appropriate practices; narrowed the definition of school success to increased test scores; increased the pressure on principals, teachers, and students; lowered teacher morale; and relied on rewards and punishments that were unfair (Egley & Jones, 2004, p. 30). In the findings there were differences between urban and rural schools, for example, the urban principals found that the Florida state test served to be an effective tool for evaluating teacher's strengths and weaknesses. The findings from both urban and rural schools found that the administrators used the data from the state test to make data driven decisions in their schools. Also, the study reported that in effective schools whether they are urban or rural the most powerful indicator is effective leadership (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979).

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

There is a dearth of research on elementary literacy and success and how that relates to rural education. However, there is sufficient research in the area of student achievement and success in the general area of education. Investigators from the Center on English Learning and Achievement conducted a study on beating the odds to increase student success. The purpose of this study was to report to the English education and

literacy communities about critical factors for student success. The three factors that researcher Langer found to be critical components for student successes were as follows: connections, conversation, and analysis. Investigator Langer found that in successful classrooms teachers were making daily connections the curriculum and the skills being taught. She also discovered that “conversation functions as a way for students to think about and learn concepts and broader substantive issues, as well as to gain ways to develop proficiency in the language rules that mark knowing in the particular subject area (Langer, 1998; p. 3). Exploration and analysis were found to be the final factors in student success in the area of literacy. The author of the study found that in high achieving classrooms, teachers were constantly encouraging students to explore their answers and findings and go deeper into the content being examined. These three critical factors for success were found to be valid factors for student success. In accordance with Langer’s research McMillan and Hearn added to the research in student achievement. McMillan and Hearn hold that the critical factor in student achievement is student motivation. To delve further, McMillan and Hearn believe that self-assessment is the key to student motivation. They divide self-assessment into two key areas, to monitor and evaluate success of their cognitive skills and behavior when learning, and to recognize strategies their understanding of the subject matter. In their research student motivation and self-assessment is a cyclic process self-monitoring, self-evaluation, identification, and implementation of instructional correctives (McMillan and Hearn, 2008).

Researcher Portes investigated student success and how it relates to cultural equity and closing the achievement gap. Portes wrote that equal opportunity for all

students is one of the keys to student success despite background or status. The article discusses poverty as being one of the cyclic issues that continually widens the achievement gap among students (Portes, 2008). Investigator Rothstein holds that the achievement gap is, “dialogical, a semiotic category that remains largely misunderstood by those who associated it with a cultural deficit that thrives in the thinking of influential policy writers (Rothstein, Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2004, p. 1).” The cultural bias that these researchers believe to be the reason for the achievement gap is dysfunctional parenting in the low class and needs to be more similar to that of the middle class and Asian population. Portes (2005) found that the environment for students needs to be structured, routine, be challenging and reinforcing to the developing areas of the child. These ability areas need to be united with the skills being taught in schools in order for the student to be most successful. Later in their education their particular skill set can be identified and nurtured to fit a particular skill set to find their career goals. Portes held that given the many differences that students face, such as, language and parents educational background preschool is invaluable in preparing the child with the social and educational skills to be successful. Also, afterschool programs and experiences are believed to be another great resource for preparing students to be successful.

STUDENT POVERTY

Students living in poverty have a propensity to be placed in under performing schools, served by ill-equipped teachers. These students are likely to exit from their public educational career with limited skills, and are unable to attain a living in the ever

changing economy in which they are placed (Murnane, 2007). Murnane proposed three initiatives that the government should employ to begin to advance America's educational system. The three initiatives are accountability, incentives, and capacity. The researcher proposes amending NCLB to make the goals set by schools districts to encourage student growth and their skills as opposed to focusing on standardized test scores. The belief is that Congress should reinforce state's incentives to better the education of students in poverty.

Project Aspire was a federal program funded by the Jacob K. Javits grant. The purpose of the grant was to answer the question as to why students in rural schools are not being successful. Studies show that gifted students in poverty many times may opt not to take advanced courses because they may longer fit in with their low socio-economic status friends and family (Slocumb & Payne, 2000). The investigators wanted to answer these queries by desiring to increase the population of rural students in intensive academic courses. Research shows that if students learn in a nurturing environment they are most apt to be successful. Research by Fasko and Fasko determined that an early intervention might enable students of poverty to have a more positive experience with success and self-efficacy. The researchers of this study hold that this is the key to breaking the chain of poverty that tends to be cyclic in rural areas (Fasko and Fasko, 1998).

The basis of this study was Cross and Coleman's conception of giftedness (Cross and Coleman, 2005). There were three criteria for labeling students as gifted, they are as follows: rapid learning, cognitive skills, and/or creativity. For students living in poverty it

is critical for school districts to provide accelerated curriculum and opportunities in grades K-12. It is thought that these are the critical years for gifted students in poverty to extend their talents. Reports show that students that did not take any accelerated classes finished a bachelor's degree on an average of 33%. However, students that took one accelerated class in school completed college at an average of 59%, and those students that took two accelerated class completed college at an average of 76%.

Burney and Cross's research showed that students who took accelerated classes to be a greater predictor of college completion than socio-economic status. The study showed that the students in the lowest socio-economic status who took accelerate classes in school had a greater completion rate than their higher socio-economic counterpart. In education there are many factors of which educators have no control; however, a challenging curriculum is a component to student success of which educators have total control.

The research study conducted by Burney and Cross resulted in ten separate findings; (a) the rural population is difficult to define and is not homogenous, (b) much remains unknown about poverty in rural areas and the gifted children it affects, (c) small schools, small towns, or rural areas have both advantages and disadvantages for students, including the gifted, (d) identifying and serving gifted rural students from poverty requires consideration of their differing circumstances and values, (e) rural high-ability students may lack the foundation for success in advanced courses, (f) school climate and policies may inhibit academic advancement, (g) Students from poverty who have no family members experienced with higher education require exceptional levels of

support in order to successfully graduate from college, (h) Rural high-ability students from low-income families frequently require support to help overcome problems of inadequate self-efficacy, low self-esteem, and self-concept, (i) Students need to develop good study skills in order to be successful in rigorous courses, and (j) developing a personal relationship with students of poverty is of key importance (Burney and Corss, 2006).

Dishman and Martin extended the study of educating students living in poverty. Rather than studying accelerated courses being the key to a student's success in school they discovered that effective school leadership can also be the key that unlocks the door to achievement (Davis, 2003; Furman, 2003; Spears & Lawrence, 2004). The research question was how are some of the schools in rural Missouri educating students of poverty being so successful? The principals that were selected to be in the study were administrators in rural Missouri. Research shows that one of the greatest challenges to educate students in rural areas is the ever growing population of students coming from poverty that have very distinctive educational needs (Citizens for Missouri Children, 2005). Administrators charged with the job of educating students of poverty gave many stumbling blocks to overcome, such as, limited funding, isolation, and community support (Collins, 2001). One of the most difficult things that principals from rural and impoverished areas have to deal with is assuming many roles unlike their larger urban counterparts (Buckingham, 2001). These administrators were also suffering from isolation and low salaries (Beeson, 2001). Research shows that low salaries and stress associated with these working conditions to be significant in rural schools (Abel &

Sewell, 1999). Conversely, there are positive aspects in dealing with schools in poverty in rural areas, such as, close staff, student, and community relationships. Researcher Cotton believes that effective change within a school community can only come through the effective leadership of the principal (Cotton, 2003).

Investigator Hopkins conducted a study in Tennessee about students living in poverty that despite all odds are performing at high levels in mathematics (Hopkins, 2004). Researcher Winters found that rural schools were out performing non rural schools in three of Tennessee's state tests, the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program, the Gateway Algebra Test, and the ACT (Winters, 2003). In a research study performed in rural Ohio investigators found that when allowing for socio-economic status of schools rural Appalachian school districts mathematics performance levels were at the same level as other non-rural districts in the state (Howley, Howley, & Hopkins, 2003). There have been discrepancies in rural education. However, there are several factors that are considered to be unanimous factors considered to be barriers, such as, lack of funding, lack of varied curriculum, lower scores on achievement tests, and higher dropout rates (Campbell & Silver, 1999; Barker, 1985). Roscigno and Crowley reported that students living in poverty have lower levels of educational performance and of dropping out of school as opposed to their non-rural counterparts (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). However, more recent studies show that rural education is not in as dire a condition as many previously thought (Edington & Koehler, 1987; Howley & Gunn; Lee & McIntire, 1999; Winters, 2003). Winters study of 8th and 12th grade students in Tennessee found that the mean scores of rural schools were greater than those of their non-rural

counterparts. In the state of Tennessee over two million individuals live in rural areas and 14.7% of the students in rural areas are living in poverty. There has been found to be a linkage between low socio-economic status and lower performance on assessments at the state and national level (Caldas & Bankston, 1997; Campbell & Silver, 1999).

Coldarci reported that, “The percentage of variance in student achievement that is explained by student socio-economic status, “poverty’s power rating,” tends to be less among smaller schools than among larger schools. Smaller schools, we are told, are able to somehow disrupt the association between SES and student achievement” (Coldarci, 2006, p. 1). The strong correlation between SES and achievement is determined by the size of the school itself. Sirin reports that higher SES student are, on average, higher achieving than their lower SES counterparts. Studies show that SES accounts for the variance in school achievement in smaller schools than it does in larger schools.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Studies have shown that students that have parents that are an integral part of their education tend to perform better in school. A study conducted by researcher Caskey centered around parents’ relationships and their involvement in their children’s lives and the positive effects on their child’s student engagement and school performance. The study was conducted using seventh and eighth grade students as a research sample. They were used to analyze student’s school and family experiences. The research query focused on the effects of parents’ relationship and involvement on their child’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement and their performance in school. Reports indicate

that parental involvement in adolescent education has been identified as a vital key to student success (Henderson & Berla, 1996; Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993). The parental involvement researcher Caskey was studying was first initiated by the parents as thought to be their responsibility for their child's psychological and emotional growth and was known to influence student's educational engagement and performance. There are several know parenting styles in which a parent can be effective in the education of their child (Mayseless, Scharf, & Sholt, 2003). Researcher Downs reported that parents of middle school students are half as willing to be present at school conferences as their counterparts of elementary parents (Downs, 2001). Due to their unwillingness to attend school functions and conferences middle school parents know little about their child's adjustment, engagement, performance, and behavior.

While there is a significant amount of literature on parental involvement there is a dearth of literature on parental involvement of students living in poverty. Researcher Smith conducted a case study at a public elementary school in the Pacific Northwest. The study centers around building a new school to replace on outdated building. Rather than simply constructing the new school according to the districts wants and needs the district sought the advice and comments of the community, parents, educators, school agencies, and students in the decision making process. In trying to determine the wants and needs of the new school the school district used qualitative research through conducting interviews, observations, and reviewing documents. Research indicates that in order to advance academic achievement parents and policies to promote involvement must be implemented (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002). Further, teachers and principals must

encourage parents to be involved in the education of their child at home and in the classroom. Lareau reports that parental involvement is an incorporation of the home and school (Lareau, 1987). This process encourages parents to be a present force in the lives of their children in the school and in the home (Epstein, Snaders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002). Educator and school personnel hold that by creating a community of families, students, teachers, and school administrators provide further support and resources for the student. Further research in this area shows that academic achievement can be predicted of the effectiveness of these factors (Booth & Dunn, 1996). Research also indicates that parental involvement is lower in low income schools and higher in higher income schools (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Epstein, 1995; Lareau, 2000; O'Connor, 2001), and that students of low SES are at a greater risk for lower academic success (McLloyd, 1990).

Strong communication is found to be a critical factor in creating a sense of community in a school. Teachers are an integral part of building relationships in these school communities, through consistent communication with parents. Schussler holds that developing the teacher and parent relationship is critical to the development of schools as learning communities (Schussler, 2003). It has been suggested that in teacher preparatory programs learning how to communicate with parents and community be taught. These programs would teach teachers to develop communication skills. One of the most influential ways that teachers can communicate with parents is thorough written communication (William & Cartledge, 1997). In this written communication with parents it is critical that it be accurate and written in parent friendly language. Newsletters are

suggested to be the best means of parent and teacher communication. This new relationship between the parent and teacher will develop from a flourishing trust, a shared concern for the student, and the acceptance of differing opinions (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). To further communication to parents besides written communication, communication through technology is also an ever increasing means of communication with parents (Ramirez, 2001). Communication between teachers and parents is necessary for students to be successful in school. It is vital for parents to be aware of their child learning community.

READING

There is a wealth of research on childhood literacy; however, there is a dearth of literacy research in rural schools. In research concerning rural education it is accepted that teachers in rural areas need additional support and training, because many rural teachers are teaching out of their areas of specialty. In an article by Smith about teaching in rural areas, the author reports that teachers in rural areas need further training in teaching literacy, teaching outside of their specialty, behavior management, community resources, and student diagnostics. The article also reports that it is vital that teachers and administrators in rural areas should create a network of resources, take advantage of professional organizations and small class sizes; and be conscious of their role in literacy scope and sequence (Smith, 1983). Literacy teachers reported that they need further training than teachers in non-rural areas. Middle and High school teachers in the study

also reported that they needed extra training and support, because many of the teachers reported that they were teaching outside of their certified area in two or more areas.

In a study completed by Sharratt and Sharratt, authors focused on leadership being a key to student achievement in literacy. There were two independent studies conducted within the same research project. Both were held in Ontario, Canada. Both of the schools in the study were undergoing a high rate of external alteration. Each of the schools in the study had similar levels of effective leadership, supportive culture, positive decision making frameworks, and shared common values and beliefs. The two independent schools had a different definition of what they believe leadership to be; however, both leadership definitions were categorized as transformational leadership. The researchers identified eight diminutions of transformational leadership, “identifying and articulating a vision, fostering acceptance of group goals, providing individualized support for staff members, providing role modeling holding high performance expectations, aligning resources, strengthening culture, and altering structures to permit broad, participation in staff decision-making (Sharratt & Sharratt, 2006; p. 2). Study A focused on teacher’s levels opinions of integrating technology into the literacy classroom and study B focused on utilizing the Literacy Coach and professional development as a means of gauging student achievement. The population for study A was 50,000 students and the population for study B was 130,000 students. The outcome for study A reported that there was a significant influence that leadership had on being effective in literacy achievement. Study B reported that the school administration had a positive impact on the

school climate and culture and that fostered a positive environment for literacy achievement.

Studies have shown many ways for students to be successful in reading. Researchers Fisher, Lewis, and Davis (2000) found that a reading hour can ensure students success. Their research shows the benefits that a reading hour can have on students in small schools. However, they do address many of the potential complicated issues associated with them. They are, mixed grade levels of students in a classroom and not challenging all students when dealing with mixed grade levels. However, with the difficulties that they encountered the study found there to be positive indications for success. The results showed success in reading and the researchers also found there to be more students were successful in reading than in writing. There was also positive feedback from the teachers charged with initiating the program. The teachers reported that the literacy hour was easier to implement than they had previously expected. However, Langer (1998) focused her efforts on an interesting concept of successfully teaching reading. In her research she addressed many strategies that successful teachers can employ to achieve success with their students. She targeted four areas to address when teaching reading connections, conversation, exploration, and analysis. Langer analyzed and studied several classrooms and she discovered that in successful classrooms teachers are making connections to other content areas and that reading can have a greater impact on student achievement. In conversations targeting the language in student friendly terms and connecting the material to other situations that might be encountered in the future are strategies being used by successful teachers. She discovered

that the more the students were exposed to reading in other content areas, the more it connected reading in other content areas, the more it connected to reading having a greater impact on student achievement.

CONCLUSION

Several factors must be taken into consideration when addressing student achievement. This literature review gave an in depth review of the literature associated with student achievement. Research shows that in the successful schools there is a great deal of parental involvement and collaboration with the community in which the school is a part. It should also be noted that communication between teachers and parents must be fluid and constant in order for there to be increased student success. Also, this literature review focused a great deal on poverty and rural schools and the barriers associated them. Research indicated that often time's rural areas and poverty are synonymous with one another. The literature studied reported there to be many negative educational factors associated with rural schools, such as, low socio-economic status, low teacher pay, teachers practicing outside of their specialized areas, and low teacher morale. These factors are also barriers in areas of poverty. Students in impoverished areas are not given the resources and tools to be as successful as their non-rural counterparts.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Interviews were taken from elementary school classroom teachers, principals, and school district central office staff. In addition, surveys were also given to the elementary teachers chosen to participate in the study. The rationale behind this approach to this research was to establish a means of gaining a greater understanding as to why two elementary schools in the same school district in Kentucky are performing differently on state tests given similar demographics.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher in a naturalistic setting. This methodology increased the likelihood that the participants would feel comfortable and safe in their own surroundings. Each teacher was interviewed in their own classroom, each principal was interviewed in their office, and each central office staff member was interviewed in their own office. Ethnographic research procedures were used to collect data on the premises and supplemented by interpreting the data at the location of school A, school B, and central office, by conducting interviews in the teachers, principal's, and central office staff's naturalistic setting. Historical information was used as an initial means of determining schools in the district to research. The historical information was gained through the Kentucky Performance Report to determine the reading scores for all of the elementary schools in the district. A theoretical perspective, as part of qualitative research, was used in how the researcher viewed the high performing and low performing schools.

Data were obtained a careful study of Kentucky Performance Reports and No Child Left Behind reports from School A and School B. Demographic information was gathered through the use of the Kentucky Performance Report. Two teachers from school A and two teachers from school B were selected to be interviewed with a wide variety of years of experience. The two principals from school A and school B were also selected to take part in the research study. The investigator thought it pertinent to the study to interview teachers at the school and also to interview the two principals. The researcher thought that the combination of interviewing teachers and principals would give her the best understanding of the school, its schedule, culture, and how each functions as a cohesive unit. Out of the four teachers interviewed three were female and one was male. Out of the principals interviewed both were male. The investigator also interviewed three central office staff, all of which were female. Each of the central office staff members that were interviewed held jobs that dealt with either reading or curriculum in the district. Shared characteristics among both schools were examined and analyzed. The researcher conducted a survey given to eight elementary school teachers. Four teachers from each elementary school were asked to take part in the survey. The surveys were proctored electronically via email and returned to the researcher via email. After the interviews were completed the researcher transcribed the answers to the questions as stated by the interviewees. The interviews of the teachers, principals, and central office staff were all conducted on the same day. The surveys were conducted at a later date via email.

The grounded theory approach was used because there was truly a lack of direction as to what were the characteristics of a successful school and characteristics of

an underperforming school, but rather let their statements and responses answer her questions. The researcher used narrative coding and process coding in coding the results from the interviews. The investigator used process coding in coding the surveys. At the beginning of every interview the researcher asked if it was alright with the interviewee if she audio recorded their interview. Once they granted permission the interviewer told each person being interviewed that everything that they said would be kept as confidential and that their names would not be released. She told them that when the data was released that everything that they said would still be kept confidential. She told them that they would be referred to as “teacher 1” or “teacher 2” at “school A” or “school B”. A general interview guide approach was the primary data collection strategy deployed in the research design of interviewing the classroom teachers, principals, and central office staff. The researcher had a general set of questions she desired to have answered, but according to the responses given by the teachers, principals, or central office staff she asked her questions accordingly in order to gain the most in depth and thorough information. Transcripts were notated of each interview in the teacher’s, principal’s, or central office staff’s naturalistic setting, with data gathered to make inferences to support or reject the theoretical orientation. At a later date the researcher used narrative and process coding to analyze and interpret the data collected from the notated transcripts. Data was coded and sorted based on regularities and patterns noticed in the teachers, principals, and central office staff’s responses. Results of the interviews conducted were coded and summarized, and later placed in a table.

The sample was derived from two different schools, school A and school B in rural Kentucky. A purposeful sampling of schools was conducted to select school A and school B. School A was the highest performing elementary school in the rural district and school B was the lowest performing elementary school in the district. Each school had a similar population size and similar demographics. The research procedure of purposeful sampling was chosen by analytic induction of particular subjects that facilitated the overall picture of the study concerning high performing and low performing schools. After purposeful sampling was performed then a random sample of two teachers at school A were selected to participate in the interview process and two teachers from school B were selected to participate in the interviews as well for a total of four classroom teachers. The sampling of teachers was also purposeful, and the principals from each purposefully selected school were chosen to participate in the interviews.

The researcher independently interviewed each teacher, principal and central office staff member, as well as, independently surveyed each of the eight classroom teachers. Reliability was established through consistency in the subjects interviewed and surveyed. The researcher used the same grounded theory approach. She notated each of the teachers, principals, and central office staff's interviews and coded them in the same manner using narrative and process coding. Validity was enhanced by interpretation of the interview data within the context of established literature. Trustworthiness was met by reporting the findings gained through the accurately, which produced credible research.

LIMITATIONS

There were a few limitations to note in this study. The first of which was that counselors were not interviewed, because neither school had a counselor. Limitations were in the area of restricted sample size and sample selections. Sample size was selected based on availability and consent of the participants in the study. The final limitation was that not all teachers that were given a survey via email responded. Three surveys out of the eight sent out were returned and used in data reporting.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researcher conducting the study was given consent to perform the study by the superintendent, both schools principals, and by each person surveyed or interviewed. Each person in the study was given a consent form given by the investigator. Each was signed and returned with consent to use their feedback or information in the study. The informants were told by the researcher that their personal information would not be published and that they would not be exposed to situations that would be harmful to them.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Triangulation of the data was performed through analyzing the reading scores between the two rural elementary schools, and conducting surveys of the classroom teachers at both school A and school B. Triangulation was also accomplished through interviewing four classroom teachers, two at school A and two at school B, the principals of both schools, and three central office staff members at the school district. The data were collected to gain a better understanding of why school A was out-performing school B. Interviews were the primary source of data collection employed in the research design. Interviews were conducted in their naturalistic setting, with data of their reading scores collected. Surveys were conducted via email. Four teachers at school A and school B were emailed the same survey and each classroom teacher responded back via email. Analysis and interpretation of the data collected from the interview field notes was transcribed, and process and narrative coding was performed. Data were coded and sorted based on regularities and patterns noticed in the interviews of the classroom teachers, principals, and central office staff. Process coding was also performed in the surveys completed by the classroom teachers of the school A and school B. A preliminary interpretation of the research question involved (1) triangulating quantitative and qualitative data to investigate the participants in the study and through (2) interpreting ethnographic data within the context of the literature review. The researcher used the exact transcriptions of the interviews as a means of synthesizing the data collected of both school A and school B, and Narrative and Process coding was performed. The

interviews were coded as a means of establishing reoccurring patterns among school A and school B. From this coding, the researcher was able to speculate particular characteristics of the rural schools. The researcher coded the dialogue spoken by each of the classroom teachers, principals, and central office staff members. Below are two tables that show the information gathered from the classroom teachers surveyed from both rural elementary school. Table 1 represents the information gathered from school A and table 2 depicts the information gathered from school B.

Table I

Coded Responses from School A

	Teacher #1	Teacher #2
Is reading incorporated into other content areas?	Responded yes	Responded yes
Do they believe that reading is important at their school?	Responded yes	Responded yes
Do they have a positive school climate at their school?	Responded yes	Responded yes

Table II

Coded Responses from School B

	Teacher # 1	Teacher # 2	Teacher # 3
Is reading incorporated into other content areas?	Responded yes	Responded yes	Responded yes
Do they believe that reading is important at their school?	Responded yes	Responded yes	Responded yes
Do they have a positive school climate at their school?	Responded yes	Responded yes	Responded yes

Common themes identified among the participants included the following: (a) that reading is incorporated into other content areas, (b) that reading is viewed to be important at their school, (c) and that they hold that teachers held a positive view school climate. The data collected from the surveys did not give the researcher the detailed information as to why school A was outperforming school B. The information was utilized and analyzed, but it did not prove to be the most valuable source of information collected.

The researcher used the detailed descriptive and reflective transcriptions as a means of synthesizing the data collected from the teachers, principals, and central office staff interviewed. Narrative and Process coding of the interview transcriptions was directed at establishing reoccurring patterns among the teachers, principals, and central office staff.

During the coding process, the researcher was able to learn rich details about School A and School B. However, she limited this paper to the significant common or distinguishing characteristics of the schools. She analyzed the patterns or characteristics common among teachers, principals, and central office staff to the characteristics that were stated by them that would seemingly be the most significant to the success of a school A. Through interviewing the teachers from both schools the researcher was able to gain further information that would aid her in her research findings. Each interview was conducted in each teacher's naturalistic setting of their classroom. The first finding from the teachers was that similar amounts of time were spent on the subject reading in both schools. The scheduling was different, but the time and approach were very similar. Both school A and school B spent at least one and a half hours on reading instruction

daily. All of the teachers from both schools except one said that they had a ninety minute reading block and that reading was done in other areas throughout the day. The teacher that was unsure of the daily schedule was an elective teacher and did not conduct a reading block.

The third variable that the researcher identified as a potentially distinguishing feature was school climate. There was a consensus among the teachers from school A but a lack of consensus among the teachers in school B on this topic. Teachers from school A described the morale as follows, “I think that it is great. Our principal has high expectations set for the kids, and he has high expectations for the teachers. Everyone around here is basically is like family, and I think that makes for a good school when everyone can get along and likes each other, and helps each other.” The other teacher interviewed from school A described the school as, “Very high, the kids have confidence and the teachers feel that they get things accomplished. It is just a really good working environment.” Both teachers from school A felt that the school had positive school morale. However, teachers from school B did not agree on the school morale. Teacher number one from school B reported, “It has always been really good. This year we have had a lot of changes by the board and several teachers have been very upset, so it has not been that well.” Through conducting the interviews the researcher was able to determine that the morale and attitudes were vastly different between school A and school B. School A had employees that seemed to be happy to be in their school and school B had an environment of frustration. In order to do this she interviews the principals from both schools. These interviews were also conducted in each principal’s own office. The

researcher identified and coded four characteristics that she felt to be significant among the two principals from school A and B. The first significant finding was that both principals emphasized reading in their schools. Both principals interviewed said that each student daily received no less than ninety minutes of reading instruction daily. Both principals also alluded to similar schedules with the same or similar time devoted to reading, and that grades other than primary were departmentalized, and that students from both school shared the same of similar electives. In other areas of the two schools, however, such as leadership, expectations, and morale there were discrepancies. When the researcher asked the principal from school A about the culture of the school he responded as follows, "I believe here that we have a family atmosphere." He also stated the following, "The culture of a school is one of the most important things that you can have, because if the people that work here are dreading to come I don't think you are going to get a lot out of them. That is one of my main goals." When the researcher asked the principal from school B about the morale of school be he responded with the following statement, "I feel like it is pretty good. I consciously work on it, morale and school culture." He also had the next statement, "It hurt morale this year when we did not meet the Annual Yearly Process." The researcher also noted discrepancies in the area of teacher expectations from the principals. The principal from school A stated specific strategies that he employed with his teachers to emphasis he expectations. He stated the following, "I will have a very good in depth conversation with them what can they do to get this child up. I have plugged every teacher that I have got according to this book that we are reading." "But now I do it in a way that is not threatening. I have them do it in

October and again right before the test in March. Well, you are going to feel kind of strange coming in here in March and telling me that Jonnie went backwards after you have had him for a year. But, that little Bettie that we talked about in March, it is not going to look too good if Bettie is still an apprentice. But, now sometimes Bettie still is an apprentice, but they have to convince me why that is. But this is one of my secrets that I think has been one of the keys to our success on the CAT's test. It makes the teacher look at each child individually. It is good pressure." The principal from school B did not allude to any teacher expectation or practice such as this. Through the transcriptions conducted the researcher was lead to believe from both principals' statements that school A has a higher morale and teacher expectations. Through the interviews conducted the researchers was able to conclude that the principal in school A had a higher standard set for the teachers in his building. He held them accountable for each student that was in their classroom for the year and in a non-threatening way they were personally responsible for each student's success. Through the interviews conducted the researcher was able to establish that the principal in school A placed more emphasis on student performance data, goal setting, and teacher accountability. The principal of school B was not happy about the morale and the reading scores of his school, but there was no plan in place to change it. The initiatives that were in place were being mandated by the district and not on the school level.

The researcher also interviewed three central office staff in their own offices. Each central office employee dealt with curriculum or reading. The investigator observed four common themes among the central office staff; leadership, common reading

strategies or materials, school culture and climate and teacher expectations. Central office staff member number one said that, “They both are a part of the read to achieve [program], they [children] each have a Reading Recovery teacher, and save the children. Save the children is another grant in and of itself it is also literacy based.” However, she also stated that, “I think that School A uses the Scott Foresman Basil Series and School B they use the literacy first process, but I am not sure what it is.” This aided the researcher in understanding that both schools had not only a similar time devoted to reading, but also used similar reading programs. However, the researcher notes the discrepancy of the different textbooks used in school A and school B. The central office staff member interviewed also stated that both schools have a literacy coach. When asked why school B did not meet their Annual Yearly Progress goal she alluded to the leadership aspect between the schools. She stated that, “I also think that the leadership is also a key component. That drives every component. Whether it is instructional or cultural, and even curriculum based.”

The second central office staff member expressed strong thematic explanations for the differences between School A and School B. When asked if both schools had a common reading program she responded as follows, “No, because school A has not bought a research based reading program that use the Basil reader. School B has reading first.” Central office staff touched on the aspect of high teacher expectations in the following statement, “The principal at school A has told me that at the beginning of the year he calls down every teacher and the go down the list, is this kid going to be distinguished, apprentice, novice whatever, calls them in the middle of the year.” When

asked if there was anything else that she wanted to add she stated the following, “Because of how the principal reports that he has his teachers come in the school B, “There is not that degree of accountability beyond the state testing system.”

When asked about commonalities that both school A and school B had in common the third member of the central office reports that, “They all have a reading block.” This supports the findings from the previous central office staff, principals, and teachers interviewed. When asked about one of the key differences between school A and school B she states is, “The principal’s leadership. School A has stronger leadership. She also states, “Evidently he knows what he is doing, because his test scores are well documented.” The researcher used the guided interview approach in each of her interviews, thus, the variance in some of the answers of the principals and central office staff. In order to provide reliability she identified key common identifiers. The identifiers for the principals interviewed were leadership, teacher expectations, reading emphasis, and the culture or climate of their school, and the identifiers for the central office staff members were common reading components, leadership, culture/climate, and teacher expectations.

Common themes identified among the participants included the following: (a) that reading is incorporated into other content areas, (b) that they expressed a view that reading was considered by all teachers to be important at their school, (c) and that they school climate and morale mattered to both teachers and students.

Further research considerations would be to replicate this case study using different elementary schools in another rural school district. The case study could also be

replicated in different areas of the state utilizing the same criterion of selecting the highest performing and lowest performing schools in the district. The data from these studies could be used to answer the question, “What are the three areas of strength in high performing schools?”

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In this study, the research methodology of triangulation was used. Triangulation was conducted through a series of interviews, survey's, and an analysis of the Kentucky Core Content Test for assessment. The methodology of using purposeful sampling, interviews, surveys, naturalistic research, official testing documents, field notes, and coding assisted in conducting the research on the two rural elementary schools. A review of the literature on rural schools, student achievement, students in poverty, reading in elementary schools, and parent involvement was used to assist in the research design and analysis of the study. Through a comparison of the of the literature on rural schools, student achievement, students in poverty, reading in elementary schools, and parent involvement and data analyzed and collected from the study of the two rural elementary schools, conclusions were given that supported the research findings.

Continued research involving rural elementary schools would enhance the minimal educational resources in this area. Based on the data gathered from the interviews and surveys from the two rural elementary schools, the researcher concluded that there are three main characteristics of successful schools, (a) strong leadership, (b) high teacher expectations, (c) and a positive school climate.

The district in which the study was performed can use this research and its findings to begin a valuable dialogue between the district administrative employees, superintendent, and school leadership. The dialogue should include conversations about data, student performance, teacher expectations, leadership, and school climate and

culture. In this research study the researcher discovered one of the main reasons that School A was experiencing such immense success in the area of reading might have been the quality of conversations about student achievement that was developed between the principal and teachers.

The positive climate related to reading instruction was the main distinguishing feature and advantage of School A compared with School B. Whereas teachers and staff in both schools offered that reading as a subject had been well incorporated into various content areas and whereas teachers and staff expressed a belief that reading as a subject had been given high rhetorical importance at their school, teachers and staff in School A, over and above the formal features of their curricula appeared to approach their teaching and service with a sense of enthusiasm and optimism. School A had managed even to create a family atmosphere. School B, by contrast, was perceived by teachers as comparatively lacking in leadership for raising teacher expectations with regard to elementary students' reading achievement as teachers were unaware of specific use of reading achievement results and lack of planning to improve reading achievement in School B.

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